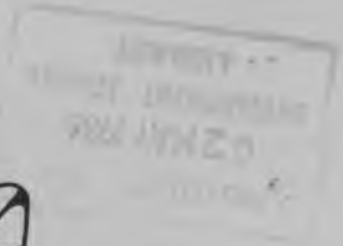


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**INSTITUTE OF SOUTHERN AFRICAN STUDIES
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF LESOTHO**

OCCASIONAL PAPER NO. 2

**“The Response Of Institutions Of Higher Learning To Africa’s
Rapidly Deteriorating Social And Economic Conditions”.**

Monday 30th September, 1985.

By:

**Prof. Walter Kamba
Vice-Chancellor
University of Zimbabwe.**

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"THE RESPONSE OF INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING TO AFRICA'S RAPIDLY
DETERIORATING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS".

"Universities in Times of Change"

- (a) In my speech to the graduants of the National University of Lesotho last Saturday, I addressed myself to the question of the need for African Universities to see themselves as developmental institutions - institutions which are singularly animated and concerned, rhetorically and practically, with the solution of the concrete problems of societal development.
- (b) In Zimbabwe, I have made it a point to remind my colleagues of the fact that as a developmental University, its primary overall objective, in its teaching, research, and public service and the provision of high level manpower, is to play an active, meaningful and effective role in the development of Zimbabwe. Its role must be central and not be peripheral to national development.

Let me at the outset dispel any misunderstanding that may occur. I have just said (quote (B)). I wish to underline the words "... in its teaching, research, public service and the provision of high-level manpower", because these words encapsulate the essence of a University, that is, the elements that distinguish a university from other institutions. In academic parlance, the imparting or dissemination of knowledge and its discovery entail:

Intellectual training (the ability to think)
the development of a critical mind (critical thought)
the inculcation of objectivity
the pursuit of truth
the incitement of insatiable curiosity
the stimulation of the urge to creativity (the
generating of new ideas).

My argument for a developmental university does not in any way suggest the abandonment of these elements nor question their validity. If anything my argument propels them to a higher level of intensity. To depart from them would be to deny the essence of a university.

My plea is for the integration of the essence of a University and the realities of the particular circumstances, the particular social context, in which the university exists and operates.

At various periods in the historical evolution of universities - particularly in the western world - the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake has been prevalent. Such pursuit of knowledge for its own sake irrespective of the use to which that knowledge may be put is a luxury that, particularly, one-university countries like our own, and the Third World generally, cannot afford.

Even in the industrialized (the so-called "developed") countries, the gigantic, rapid and intensive socio-economic and political changes over the last half century or so have led to a shift of emphasis and re-ordering of priorities. In Britain eg. the universities are in a state of crisis. The need to justify what they do by reference to the developmental needs of the country has come to the fore in a way that has never happened before. It is important to note that our universities - NUL, UZ - are trying to do what in Britain is done by at least 44 universities.

- (c) But in many respects, the reorientation that I urge entails a process of transformation, process of change on the part of the University. Too often, Universities have been accused, and rightly so, of having their heads in the clouds, forgetting that they are part and parcel of the fabric of society which supports and sustains them, and in which they exist and operate.

- (d) I should like to discuss with you this whole idea of institutional change, and the whole notion of institutional relevance.

1. CHANGE AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

- (a) Through the ages, mankind has attempted to cope with its awareness that change constitutes the essence of the Universe. Heraclitus of Ancient Greece in the fourth century B.C. maintained that even those things that appeared to be stable were actually in a constant 'state of flux'. Plato examined what he perceived to be ever-changing appearances; Aristotle saw change, interestingly, as the transaction of potentiality to actuality. Augustine in the fourth century and Aquinas in the 13th century tried to understand how change fitted into the divine plan. Machiavelli, Galileo, Bacon, Newton, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, among other metaphysicians, all spent their lives trying to unravel the mysteries of changing matter, the relationship between change and the human condition, and most importantly, the way individuals were able to deal with constant state of flux that was their Universe.

Literature is full of examples of how man has grappled with the question of change, how man has resolved to master the physical, social, and psychological conditions that cause our environment to change. It is clear that since the dawn of civilization, man has tried to come to terms with change in different ways - and that presently, our concern with change remains unabated. It has been said that in life's equation the only constant variable is change.

2. Change in Higher Education:

- (a) The idea of change - to make something different - is greeted with mixed enthusiasm.
- (b) Ironically, higher education as a Social System, because of its very missions, must respond to pressures for change while at the same time resisting change. Universities have been described as the curators, critics and creators of our culture. As curators, their responsibility is to preserve our culture. As critics, they should identify that which needs changing in our culture. As creators, they must play an active role in the development of the nation. All this must surely challenge our intellectual ability, tax on critical thought, incite own curiosity, test our ability to generate new ideas. Universities have also been described as a mirror of society. As such they must automatically reflect and accommodate the changes of society as a whole.
- (c) Regrettably, the forces for change in Universities are external to them. These forces vary widely in their intensity and direction. Many are predicatable but more often than not, they catch the academy by surprise. For example: enrolment patterns
available revenue
students' expectations
parents and employers
Government, etc.

These are examples of forces that Universities have little or no control over, but that greatly influence the make-up of an institution.

- (d) If external forces dictate the need for change, then it can be said that it is the internal forces that dictate its magnitude and direction. How Academic Staff, Administrators, and Students perceive the necessity for change and then exhibit a willingness to work for it, will ultimately dictate the final outcome of the change (transformation) process.
- (e) To paraphrase Henry Bragdon in Woodrow Wilson: The Academic Years, it is an academic truism that to change Universities is harder than trying to move a graveyard, and yet as Millard Upton, former president of Beloit College in the United States once observed, "When a University is on the verge of oblivion, there is no problem in its achieving instant curriculum revision".

University dons are often too well known for their conservatism, etc. And yet it is a fact that the Universities are there not for their own sake but for the sake of the nation. Whilst there is no virtue in changing for the sake of changing, there is equally no virtue in resisting change for the sake of resisting it.

There must be a middle ground between absolute permanence and instant change.

4. Change: The University of Zimbabwe Experience: A Case Study

- (a) Historical Background, the Royal Charter: was not an integral part of the country. The nature of the social and political environment in which it existed and operated distorted its role and inhibited the forging of a close relationship between the University and the community. It was an anachronism, an institution which

developed at best, a working misunderstanding with the society at large.

The dramatic attainment of independence in 1980 immediately created an urgent need for the University to play a more active and meaningful role in the development of Zimbabwe.

Development embraces those challenges posed by the need to meet people's or national aspirations - challenges posed by the search for national and cultural identity, by the problems of poverty and the need for social adjustment, the problems of economic progress.

Zimbabwe inherited an imbalanced though diversified economy. Alongside what is a relatively small and highly sophisticated sector is a large underdeveloped rural and peasant sector. In order to rectify the imbalance the focus of Government policy is on rural development.

As a result Zimbabwe desperately needs not only high-level and highly skilled manpower to man the civil service, industry, and commerce, but also men and women who are well-equipped to contribute to the integration of the two sectors of the economy. Needless to say that the University has a major role in this exercise.

In the area of research, the University should provide leadership and should aim to place more emphasis on applied research; research directed at issues that affect ordinary men and women. The University should take a more active role in identifying and investigating development problems.

Need for closer communication and understanding between the University and Government - for better understanding of national development, manpower and other needs of the country.

- (b) For the University of Zimbabwe to be an integral part of the nation, for University of Zimbabwe to play its central role, it was necessary to effect certain changes. Let me emphasise, and emphasise very strongly, that it was absolutely vital for the changes to emanate from, and be effected from within the University, transformation had to come from within.

It was necessary to effect reforms aimed at putting the University into tune, into gear with the rest of the nation:

- democratization of the university's governance structures;
- curriculum reviews (eg. Agriculture, Education, etc.); particularly to establish relevance and integrate theory and practice;
- research orientation towards applied research;
- staff development programme; - conditions of service review;
- massive increase in student numbers in response to the needs of the country
- improving, university - government relationship.

Let me point out that the University of Zimbabwe Act of 1982 which replaced the Royal Charter, consolidated the transformation that had been set in motion and provided a framework for future progress of the University.

But this is only the beginning. We have set the tone, we have charted the course. The idea of a developmental university is becoming a reality.

(d) Autonomy Question

The development of the University is dependent on the support of those who work in it and on the availability of resources from Government. If the University accepts that University autonomy and academic freedom can only be perceived in the socio-economic context in which it operates, and that it depends on the goodwill of the nation and the sense of responsibility of the academic staff; if the government accepts that the University needs a certain amount of autonomy to carry out its mission effectively and efficiently, then there need not be a conflict between national aspirations and academic integrity.

- (e) Any unbridled provincialism on the part of the university is as threatening to public and national interest, as is the desire of the state to police the University for the sake of control itself. Put differently, some state control is inescapable just as some substantial degree of institutional autonomy is indispensable. This is a balance which needs to be worked at, all the time. The task is to develop consultative relationship that bring the legitimate concerns of the university and the legitimate concerns of government into shared perspectives.

5. Summation:

Our universities must be at the forefront of development in our countries. But to do so might entail changing the universities themselves from their erstwhile slumber of conservatism to active participants in the national programme of development.



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