**SOME THOUGHTS ON THE MAJOR CHALLENGES FACING**

**HIGHER EDUCATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA**

1. It gives me great pleasure to be here at the OER Africa Convening. Catherine’s invitation was *déjà vu* and reminded me very much of a similar convening in Addis Ababa some time in 2002-2003. As I began to think about this event and what I would say here, I quickly understood that the issues were all quite a lot the same but that there was a different discourse underway.

2. This meeting also comes at a time when, in South Africa, we are being forced to revisit higher education in all of its aspects – its funding, it curricula, its articulation with the needs of society, issues of access and success, its research capacity and its affordability. Student activism in the last year has very nearly led to a paralysis in the system and the key issues – once again – are the issue of access (and especially for those who cannot afford to be in universities because of rising costs), the transformation of the curriculum (often spoken about as the decolonization of the curriculum and university more generally) and perhaps more macroscopically, what is being perceived as a struggle over the imagination of the university in a society such as South Africa.

3. If one takes a cursory look at the most recent issue of *World University News* – the Africa edition, what one quickly realises is the replication of exactly these issues all over the continent – everything from the funding of universities through to the pledge to create a united front to wage a more effective open access debate. This issue also covers student actions and activism in a number of countries from Japan to China to Germany to Chile.

4. What is common throughout our region is that while there has been (in some cases spectacular) economic growth, the majority of these societies are increasingly unequal with growing wealth gaps between the rich and the middle and underclasses. This is not prevalent just in South Africa but is an international phenomenon. South Africa however, is a leader in inequality with a Gini coefficient of about 0.71. At the same time enrolments in higher education have grown, while funding is severely curtailed even as access is growing. The key question then is just how do must we think about the role of universities in societies such as ours.

Thomas Piketty reminds us that in unequal societies the one way for inequality to be addressed is through strong social investment in education. And of course we remember Nelson Mandela’s deeply moving statement “*Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of mineworker can become the head of a mine, that the child of farmworkers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another”*.

5. Clearly we must think of differentiated roles of institutions within our higher education systems but we must begin to think of ways in which to imagine our higher education systems to address these burning issues of socioeconomic inequality and the challenge of building societies that are more socially just.

6. To address these issues we must focus on two centrepieces. The first is student centredness – trying to understand how best to galvanise the resources of our universities to provide our students with the greatest chance to succeed intellectually, emotionally and socially.

There are two major projects here. The fundamental challenge is to understand who our students are so that we are designing a university that meets our students where they are in terms of their academic preparedness, their socioeconomic condition, what it is that they’ve read and what not, etc. In other words lets be clear that we are designing the university for the students we have and not for imagined students.

The second centrepiece is Engagement – that our universities are tightly bound to their local contexts and that they are geared to address the challenges of local communities, industry, local government, local activist bodies, local NGOs and so on. The key issue here is the knowledge project of our system, that it afford respect and commitment to generating knowledge about the local context and then embedding that knowledge into the global knowledge system.

These centrepieces will allow our universities to gain the trust and commitment of local constituencies. I am always amazed that when there is turmoil at our universities there is no defence of them.

7. What are some of the key issues? As we broaden access to higher education we must ask *Access for what?* Discussions about access must be linked to discussions about success at the outset, rather than as an afterthought.

We must ensure better graduation rates and reduce dramatically the dropout rates. These are both addressed through academic quality issues but also through student support issues.

* Students who do not have to worry about funding and have no concerns about where their next meal is coming from are much more likely to succeed.
* The quality of learning and teaching must keep up with the times and be continuously worked on.
* The use of data and data analytics is going to be the next most important development in improving the success rate of students.
* Much progress has been made in infusing technology into learning and teaching but this has to be extended.
* One of our largest challenges is to ensure that while it is of vital importance that graduates are given the best possible opportunity to enter the labour market, that they are also schooled in critical skills, that they are active participants in shaping the future of democracy in each society.
* It is of vital importance that curricula begin to include the local, that students and their parents begin to see their lives, cultures and physical ecosystems represented in the core of the institution.
* Curricula have to take into account what the labour market will be like in 2035 with the enormous advances of artificial intelligence and machine learning.
* What will the role of indigenous languages be in higher education?
* How are we to ensure that access to the labour market and the creation of entrepreneurship are seen as core elements of the learning outcomes?

8. The size and shape of the post-school education and training system needs serious attention if we are to meet our access challenges and meet the needs of the human resource development needs of our societies.

9. And finally attention has to be given to the growing gap between women and men students in terms of their enrolment statistics and trends. In South Africa that figure is 58% women to 42% men and if one takes into account the graduation rates, that figure is even more highly skewed. “What’s happening to the boys?”

Once again, I feel highly privileged to have been invited here to make this presentation and say a large thank you.

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