



# Higher Education and Development in South Africa: **An Introduction**

One mission of university education could be the preparation of students for an unpredictable, ambivalent and sometimes unjust life, and to strengthen their self-criticism and capacity for critical thinking, as well as their sense of responsibility and tolerance of difference. In short, universities should prepare students to cope with permanent change (Kivinen & Ristela: 2002).

As the globe emerges, with some difficulty, from the recession and the 'long tail' of the credit crunch, it is important to heed the wisdom that a university education prepares us for an uncertain world. What began as a sub-prime crisis on the other side of the world soon infected international economies. What was unthinkable a year ago is a harsh reality today. And if all challenges are increasingly becoming global, then the solutions likewise need to harness the best thinking, especially from our universities, via international collaborations. Each and every South African university understands the importance of internationalisation simply because our difficult history has meant that for many years we were deprived of contact with the rest of the world.

Even after the birth of democracy, South African higher education (students, academics and management) has had to "cope with permanent change". The renowned educational theorist, Frans van Vught, described the merger process in South Africa as one of the most ambitious ever attempted. To reduce the amount of institutions in the country from 32 to 23 within the space of three years was, to many, inconceivable. However, not only did it take place, but the process was completed with far less disruption than was ever foreseen. This is not to say that higher education in South Africa doesn't have its challenges, but rather to acknowledge that there is an immense resilience within our institutions in the face of the unforeseen.

And it will need all that resilience as universities have undergone another change. Not this time at the level of policy but recent changes will still have huge governance consequences for the sector. The post-election government has made some wide-ranging changes since it has assumed power in April 2009. Perhaps the biggest change has been the restructuring of state departments in order to make them more responsive to the developmental needs of the country. The former Department of Education has been split into a primary and secondary (schooling) department and the Department of Higher Education and Training. This split has also occurred in many other countries internationally as it becomes clear that higher education needs special focus because of the many different tasks that are required of it – from producing teachers in order to sustain education and the economy, to producing world-class researchers that allow countries to compete internationally.

In the strategic plan of the new departments that was presented to Parliament on 30 June 2009, the higher education department focussed specifically on providing increased academic and research support, the internationalisation of higher education, especially within Africa and the production of quality graduates who are "relevant for socio-economic development". It is fitting then that the theme of the 9<sup>th</sup> edition of *Study South Africa* focuses on development.

However 'development' is not a value-free term and has been used by countries in the past and present to dragoon a population into meeting the economic targets of the state. Often at the price of personal autonomy. While a focus on development is crucial to a country like South Africa, as an emerging economy, it must be achieved with an emphasis of improving the economic and social conditions of every person in the country. Rather than a narrow sense of development which simply sees the entire population slaving towards the meeting of a range of economic indicators, we need to understand development as the maximising of personal potential that will, as a by-product of that process, lead to the advancement of neighbours, communities and the population as a whole.

As suggested in the opening lines, it is this sense of development that occurs most intensively within the university setting. The questioning of beliefs, the dismantling of prejudices, the assuming of responsibility and the treasuring of difference is at the core of

higher learning. This edition of *Study South Africa* will examine very different facets of our developmental agenda, ranging from the responsibilities and opportunities for higher education in relation to our neighbours in Africa, to the role of the university within the community in which it is located, and to the impact that our teaching and research is having on the people of this country.

The present global conditions make for uncertainty and unpredictability. It however remains true that in these conditions a university education, irrespective of the discipline, with the

possibility of debating and understanding different cultures and nations, is crucial for the development, not only of the self but of the entire global village.

#### Reference

Kivinen, O. & Ristela, P. 2002. *Even Higher Learning Takes Place by Doing: From postmodern critique to pragmatic action. Studies in Higher Education* Volume 27, No. 4. p.428.

