

Challenges Facing the New Minister in Higher Education

Proposal



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Context

Bringing about change in higher education is a complex interaction between global pressures, government policy, institutional behaviour and social (market) influences. In reality, the ability of the new minister to effect change is more limited than what they anticipate. In higher education it is commonly believed that the minister can more easily bring about harm than good. Despite this somewhat 'limited' perception of the role of a new minister for higher education, it is vitally important that the minister be as well as possible prepared for the daunting task. It is from this understanding, plus the promotion of individual and group interests, that a new minister is showered with advice.

What the Minister Hears

Whenever a new Minister comes to office, she or he is faced with a plethora of competing interests. Firstly there is the bureaucratic; the bureaucracy that will serve the minister and its own interests. During the change of minister, the bureaucracy typically has three types of policies; defending existing policies, resubmitting proposed policies that the previous minister rejected and the demand for new policies by the new minister. Since the minister has to work with this group on a daily basis, they have an inside track and even when the minister declares publicly that he is sceptical of his bureaucracy and will change them, the outcome is often much less dramatic – as Minister Asmal learnt.

Secondly, organised constituencies such as the South African Association of Vice-chancellors (SAUVCA) collectively represent a sector. In higher education the sectoral interest is seldom unified, the only agreement is usually around more money and more autonomy. The minister will often be confronted by both a sector and sub-sector, not to mention intuitional groups. In a sector such as higher education, as opposed to sectors with organised labour, sector organisations are often rather un-influential – which is also the case in South Africa.

Thirdly, the minister is inundated with individual intellectuals and consultants who each have an issue or a policy in the back pocket. The most successful of this group are those individuals with personal or political patronage. The previous minister was heavily influenced by a combination of the bureaucracy and specific individuals, who partially represented particular institutional interests, but presented it to the minister on an individual basis.

This Babel of interests is a crucial part of democracy and one of the main challenges of governing in a democracy. In authoritarian states the number of interests heard shrinks, till the great dictator only hears himself.

What the Minister Seldom Hears

New ministers seldom have the opportunity, particularly during the early part of their tenure, to hear informed voices in discussion or debate with each other. While both the organised and individual voices express and promote particular positions, the minister is not often provided with different voices in dialogue with each other.

In certain countries such as the USA groups of individual experts organise themselves into 'think-tanks'. Unfortunately, and because most these 'bodies' require ongoing funding, they become attached to political parties or social movements and the get labelled conservative or liberal – thus making them more or less useful for the new minister, depending on the persuasion of the minister.

What the minister less often hears are a group of expert opinion who publicly discuss and debate their views, informed both by research (local and international) and experience. If a sufficiently diverse group of experts are put together it could provide the Minister with a sense of what are important issues for the sector and what are some of the arguments for and against.

Project Proposal

This limited project, which could be re-constituted on a annual or biannual basis depending on interest by the minister and participants, will aim to put together a diverse group of established intellectuals who will identify and debate key issues confronting higher education at this moment. While some attention can be given to the effects, mainly unintended, of the restructuring, the main aim will be to focus on non structural issues such as the perception of higher education in the society, staff morale in higher education, research, skills (both the need for high level skills and the link between higher and further education) and how can enthusiasm and confidence in higher education be built. While the seminar can point to key issues that require urgent attention, it must also be more of a sociological, pedagogical and philosophical reflection.

Key to success for such a seminar will be the composition of the group, which should not be more than 20 people to ensure maximum participation. South Africa is blessed with a wide range of intellectuals who have diverse views; from the controversial Jonathan Jansen at University of Pretoria to an equally incisive but less public intellectual like Jo Muller at UCT. There are also less often heard, but emerging voices such as Cheryl de la Rey, Deputy Vice-chancellor for research at UCT, and Nthabiseng Ogude, Deputy Vice-chancellor for academic affairs at the University of Port Elizabeth. These people are in leadership positions but still publish in their areas of expertise.

During the 1994 to 1999 period South Africa was flooded by international experts and consultants. However, the post 1999 period saw almost the opposite, resulting in a very inward looking period with government in higher education talking to a few selected bureaucrats, mainly from the UK and Australia. The proposed seminar could reopen the door to selected, well informed higher education experts such as:

- Mahmood Mamdani, ex UDW, UCT and now from Columbia and chair of the UNESCO Global Forum on higher education
- Jon File, ex UCT and member of the National Commission on Higher Education and now co-director of CHEPS, the largest higher education research centre in the world
- Teboho Moja, member of the NCHE, advisor to Minister Bengu and now professor of higher education at NYU
- Peter Maassen, co-ordinator of the European consortium of higher education research centres

It may also be very interesting to throw into this mix one or two exceptional people who started their careers in higher education but now has much wider experiences that they write about. One such person that readily comes to mind is Vincent Maphai, formerly professor of philosophy, and now chair of the SABC and in charge of a division of South African Breweries.