

**THOUGHTS ON POSITIONING UNIVERSITIES AND THINK TANKS IN AN  
EMERGING DEMOCRATISING STATE**

**BY**

**PROFESSOR SIBUSISO VIL-NKOMO**

**10 December 2010**

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT THE LAUNCH OF A NEW ORGANIZATION:FRIENDS OF  
THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION (FONIHE) IN KIMBERLEY**

**NOTE WELL: THESE ARE MY INDIVIDUAL THOUGHTS AND TAKE FULL  
RESPONSIBLE FOR THEM**

## **THOUGHTS ON POSITIONING UNIVERSITIES AND THINK TANKS IN AN EMERGING DEMOCRACY**

The multi-party and bilateral negotiations which were the precursor to the establishment of democracy in South Africa were not effective in the consolidation of one of the key vehicles that facilitate the development and survival of a nation state, i.e. higher education and its institutions. Higher education is a commanding height for an emerging nation or a developed one. It is for these reasons that the broader South African public still battles to understand why universities exist.

The matter became more complex with the mergers and incorporations of universities with universities and in some cases with technikons. Part of South African society that had begun to understand the existence of universities in their neighborhoods, were confused again by the fact that some of these institutions began to focus on areas that were not directly academic, as understood in a typical university context, such as small business development, community engagement, bridging programs and high school homework support. We must remember that perceptions go a long way and certain characteristics of a university must be visible for the observer to recognize it as such. At the same time, it must be understood that the achievement of academic success by students at a university is also based on observation and mentoring by professors. Lessons abound on this experience as demonstrated in the achievements of Historically Black Universities and Colleges (HBCU's) in the USA that are located in African-American communities. An example of such success is Lincoln University in Pennsylvania that produced persons like Langston Hughes, a world-acclaimed poet, Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American Justice of Supreme Court of the United States of America, Hildrus A Poindexter the internationally known authority on tropical diseases, Roscoe Lee Browne, the author and widely acclaimed actor of stage and screen, Jacqueline Allen, who distinguished herself as judge for the Court of Common Pleas, Nnamdi Azikiwe, who became Nigeria's first President and Kwame Nkrumah, who was the first President of Ghana (Education for Freedom: The History of Lincoln University by Horace Mann Bond).

This important example of what can be achieved by universities where they are located is further described by Dr Niara Sudarkasa, the first female President of

Lincoln University, which is also known as the “Black Princeton.” She indicates that “during the first one hundred years of its existence, Lincoln graduated approximately 20 percent of the Black physicians and more than 10 percent of the Black attorneys in the United States. Its alumni have headed over 35 colleges and universities and scores of prominent churches. At least 10 of its alumni have been United States ambassadors or mission chiefs. Many are federal, state and municipal judges, and several have served as mayors or city managers”. The important issue here is that universities must make an impact on the community and the society surrounding them.

In the South African case, there is a major lesson to be learned about how Fort Hare University became relevant for the survival of a community and a group of people who had been condemned to fail by a destructive political system. Out of Fort Hare University would emerge two Nobel Laureates, namely, Mr Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and nationally as well as internationally renowned academics like Professors ZK Mathews, and TJ Jabavu. More on these accomplished South Africans is published in the Africa Yearly Register that was edited by TD Mveli Skota.

There are fundamental questions that must be asked and answered about institutions of higher learning. These are:

1. What is a university in the context of an emerging democratic state like South Africa?
2. Are universities making a contribution to the outcomes expected from the investment in human capital? and
3. Can our universities emerge as relevant knowledge generators to advance a fledgling democratic state?

### **What is a University in the Context of an Emerging Democratic State?**

To answer this questions, it is important to refer back to the main question of “Why a university?”. One hundred and fifty years ago, John Henry Newman raised the question about the nature and scope of a university. He postulated that a university “is a place where inquiry is verified”. Interestingly, during the apartheid era the same question emerged out of a famous prison. On Robben Island, in the Book of Letters, Ahmad Kathrada, a political prisoner, wrote to a

friend during those trying times and said: “Tell my family, I am not in prison but in a University.” It is stated that an analyst after reading the statement concluded that “this was not a hyperbole or illusion ... after all a university is where people learn from one another, communicate, and think and can exist even as part of a chain gang chipping away at a rock”. Even more important from the observation made by the analyst was “And just as a prison can be a university, so can a university be a prison whose bars can be orthodoxy or indifference”. The conclusion about these two postulations is that, as an emerging nation state we do not need so-called brilliant people, doctors, scientists, lawyers, scholars, etc. who only push their narrow agenda but, rather, we need intellectuals and scientists who address through effective teaching (based on research) the challenges that face an emerging nation state such as ours. If this is achieved, we can then begin to argue that universities do belong in our society and our emerging nation state or polity.

The success of the establishment of a nation state is the first step for global competitiveness. A nation state exists when people have matured to accept their system of governing; understand their responsibility by voting; are guided by shared norms and values; defend their political economy; are committed to developing their country; and refrain from the destruction of what their country has accomplished. In simple terms, being a nation state is to know who I am, to live who I am, to die who I am, and to be South African with no ambiguities.

It is incumbent upon transcendent leaders of universities to open up these important resources, funded by taxpayers’ money, to allow academics and students to contribute to the larger society, as well as issues in our country. Since 1994, South African society has been changing rapidly. It is a society that is battling to find its soul in a globalized world and there is no doubt that this country is constantly trying to invent itself. So too should our universities rather than being frozen in “orthodoxy and indifference”. These two words also suggest the inability to open up the doors of learning in the true sense. For example, if our universities can pursue, with so much vigour, collaborations with international institutions of higher learning, why can they not visibly do the same domestically to use and build a human capital that is second-to-none

by sharing and exchanging researchers and scholars of significance to build our fledgling democratic state?

Even with some of the most elaborate visions and missions and well articulated explanations of teaching, learning and research our universities will battle to explain to the broader South African society the purpose of their existence in an environment that demands solutions rather than mere pontification. As Thomas Kuhn in his book Structures of a Scientific Revolution and VV Nalimov in his book titled Faces of Science concluded, a paradigmatic change is critical for development and unfortunately some external force must expose the anomaly because internally the paradigm is blindly pursued.

New paradigms of intellectualism are necessary in our emerging democratic state. This is also imperative for a society like ours that is currently confronted with a global economic and financial crisis.

The latest challenge to advance our society is community engagement. Our universities are expected to make significant contributions to community engagement. This particular aspect is critical and must be linked to the economic development of the country. Some of our universities are positioning themselves by making sure that community engagement is part of the educational development of their students and are creating opportunities for some of their academics to advance this development imperative from teaching, learning and research perspectives.

South African universities are mostly urban and have a tremendous impact on urban areas, some of which are in fact large megalopolis. These institutions must continue to do so but must also strive to use their intellectual brain power as well as innovativeness to create a valuable dynamic that is mutually beneficial to the University and the broader community. As highlighted by Richard Palm and J Douglas Toma, “the role of a metropolitan university is not just to be in the city but to be in a partnership with the city”. One of the greatest advantages for students (the consumers of knowledge and education) at an urban location, in particular, is the opportunity to expand academic learning by bridging the gap between theoretical work in the classroom and practical real world issues and the challenges that South African cities present to them. This is how South Africa can strive to “produce Nobel Laureates”.

In this regard, as competitive cities like the new Cradle City and Sandton emerge, with the successful renewal of Cape Town, and as Johannesburg continues its slow revival, universities must fully participate in these initiatives. It is an imperative that academics and students must be seen to be visible. The scholarly imaginations of academics must be used as a competitive advantage to demonstrate to the broader society that universities have a purpose and are advancing an emerging democratic state. It must be clear to the public that excellent teaching enables students to contribute to South African society and emerge as transcendent leaders of the future. According to Lester Thurow in his book titled Fortune Favors the Bold: “The second industrial revolution required societies willing to commit to universal education and make a social investment in research and development based upon academic science. Universal, compulsory education was a bold move. Similarly, societies and individuals will have to decide whether they are willing to jump into the third industrial revolution and globalization” (p 299). A nation state and its institutions of higher learning must make such a commitment.

The emphasis in this discussion is on having universities truly make use of their discoveries. These discoveries are the ones that, for example, save lives, contribute to a healthy and growing economy, positively link humans to their environment, and protect the natural environment, etc. Such relevance to an emerging democratic state goes together with academic freedom and enables students to view themselves as members of the larger social fabric in which they must take appropriate action when called upon through practice and research.

### **Are Universities Making a Contribution to the Outcomes Expected from the Investment in Human Capital?**

Our universities are either strong or weak because of their historical origins and yet all of them depend on the state as their source of financial survival. They all enter into international collaboration agreements, request grants from international foundations and pursue bilateral and multilateral organizations for financial contributions. All of them seem to be under the impression that they will attain a certain amount of international status that can make them internationally competitive. With this noble pursuit as their strategic endeavor, we are aware as the people of South Africa that the real,

international competitive and world renowned universities are outside of the South African borders. It is for this reason that our universities must become real in utilizing the successful development of a nation state or polity to position them in the international competitive scene. There is no doubt that world renowned universities tend to be associated with the successes achieved by their nation states as in the case, for example, of such countries as Singapore, the United States of America, Japan, and others. Furthermore, political and economic stability are essential for the evolution of high caliber academic institutions.

My exposure to some of the world's powerful think tanks like the Brookings Institution, The Council on Foreign Relations and the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton raises questions about whether South Africa can have a strong and focused think industry. I am convinced that our universities can make a significant contribution to the development and maintenance of a viable and dynamic think industry. The above think tanks are populated by a significant number of outstanding academic researchers.

If South African universities cannot emerge as think tanks, they must at least collaborate with independent think tanks. The relationship must be driven by the desire to produce outstanding research that allows participating academics to use this opportunity for their tenure and promotion. This is a culture that must evolve within our institutions of knowledge generation. A university and think tank collaboration example is the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced and International Studies Bologna Center that is described in their website as follows: " One of the distinguished characteristics of the Bologna Center is its resident faculty complemented by nearly 40 visiting and adjunct professors drawn from leading universities, institutes,, think tanks, international NGOs, consulting firms and financial institutions in Europe and beyond". This is the hallmark of excellence and relevance in collaborations.

It was no accident that in the 1970's and 1980's the Universities of Dar-Es-Salaam and Makerere fulfilled the role of being the homes of diaspora intellectual discourse. For a period, after independence, the University of Zimbabwe offered this opportunity.

The think industry has become even more important with the emergence of the knowledge economy. It has become key for the survival of any nation that wants to succeed in a globally competitive world whilst addressing important internal national dynamics. It is now required of nations that they must create their own competitive knowledge *niche* that can be embraced by the world because they add value to global development.

The engine of growth for any successful society is well developed human capital that has the ability to think and effectively implement. The success of any society lies in entrenching itself in the competitive business of knowledge and thinking. This kind of thinking is not only about the present but also about the future. It is also about the sustainability of knowledge and the continuous discovery of better ways to advance society(ies).

What drives leading nations and thinking are two logics that have been embraced by leading universities throughout the world and are also relevant for South Africa. These are the logics of discovery and invention. The logic of discovery is about suddenly finding out about the existence of that which one had not previously been aware of. An example is the recent espousing or discovery of the notion of a developmental state and at some point the two economies discussion, re-inventing government, etc. In this particular case, thinking and knowledge generation must be seen to its final conclusion through sustained in-depth research. In our society we have become accustomed to notions that come and go. Some institutions must play a critical role to prevent the latter from taking place. We must interrogate why we do not take notions to their final conclusion, with the intention of benefiting societal development and advancement. Instead, we tend to re-invent ideas before they mature into outstanding research outcomes and usable knowledge.

The more challenging notion is the logic of invention. This approach instantly creates a competitive advantage for a nation. This logic is based on the creation of new knowledge and thinking that transforms the lives of the citizens and puts them at a different level. It is for this reason that the think tanks collaborating with universities will raise appropriate researchable questions like: Why did the Mapungubwe civilization disappear? This seems like a simple question. Upon close scrutiny and analysis, however, the issue

requires in-depth thinking and research. Lessons from Paul Kennedy's research titled The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict 1500 to 2000 open up an opportunity to gain an understanding of how nations rise and fall.

### **Can our Universities Emerge as Relevant Knowledge Generators to Advance a Fledgling Democratic State?**

The collaboration of think tanks and universities is aimed at contributing towards the sustainability of South Africa. It is to preserve our country for future generations and for them to continue the tradition of knowledge generation and thinking in order for their children to inherit a wealthy society. Future generations must not struggle and be taken by surprise by human made eventualities as the Romans were. As stated in William Ebenstein's Great Political Thinkers: Plato to the Present: "When Rome was ravaged in 410, a wave of shock and horror swept through the world. For eight centuries Rome had proudly remained inviolate, growing from a small municipality into the center of a vast empire. The ease and speed with which this empire was broken up took everyone by surprise. The pagans, we have said, ascribed the catastrophe to betrayal of the old Roman deities under which Rome had risen to the position of dominant world power, but Christians, too, were perplexed: it was hard to understand how Rome could be so shamed just after Christianity had become the religion of state, and many Christians began to wonder whether the official alliance of church and empire was such an advantage after all". The relationship between think tanks and universities, as being espoused, is motivated by the logic of inquiry to advance South Africa's development.

History teaches us that people like the late John Langalibalele Dube viewed thinking and knowledge as being an integral part of human existence and it was for this reason that he established Ohlange Institute which was modelled on the Tuskegee Institute. The former subsequently developed into a high school and the other became a university. Dube had been educated at this University and learned from Booker T Washington about the importance of educating the "talented tenth". Though the notion emphasized industrial skills, it opened up a new way of thinking that would eventually culminate with Tuskegee emerging as a university that was advancing thinking and knowledge generation for a people who had been enslaved and Ohlange High School

opened up the doors of learning for victims of the apartheid system. There are lessons to be learned from this brave thinking about the importance of establishing knowledge institutions, and a legacy that provides an education for present and future generations. The latter will then cherish those who came before because they left a lasting legacy for them.

The presentation would be incomplete if the following observations on John Langalibalele Dube, by his contemporaries, are not cited verbatim: “B.W. Vilakazi, a poet and author, wrote in 1946 that Dube was “a great, if not the greatest, black man of the missionary epoch in South Africa” and earlier A.S. Vil-Nkomo had written in the same vein (in *Umteteli wa Bantu*): Dube was “one who comes once in many centuries – No one else in his education generation has accomplished so much with such meager economic means. He was scholar, gentleman, leader, farmer, politician, patriot and philanthropist”. With the current discussions on universities and think tanks, does it mean that we are entering a new era of knowledge generation and educating current and future young people?

The use of our scarce human capital to create a competitive advantage for South Africa must certainly be the focus of think tanks and universities. Recently, the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA) hosted a number of dialogues that unveiled (unintentionally) the existence of an identifiable number of South African scientists, academics, representatives of labour, business persons, public sector representatives, actuaries, mathematicians, economists, political scientists, etc. What was demonstrated at these gatherings was that there is viable and usable knowledge and thinking that resides within South Africa, although it may not be in abundance. The poor and under utilization of this brain power will be done at the peril of South African society.

South Africans must not be afraid to pronounce that we are a nation of thinkers and persons who generate new knowledge. Globally, empirical evidence demonstrates that most countries that are achieving significant development have established independent and transparent think tanks with the following objectives:

- To promote independent but relevant research on policy and scientific issues;
- To advance technical and scientific research;
- To identify and analyze critical domestic and international issues that may impede a society's development processes;
- To extrapolate from current issues future trends and challenges;
- To place targeted policy issues in longer-term perspectives;
- To develop models and scenarios that enhance transdisciplinary understanding of our rapidly changing environment and the world;
- To pursue research that is experimental and innovative and which leads to effective problem solving; and
- To advance research that consolidates the understanding of society within the context of development strategies and their sustainability.

This is based on the understanding of the continuity of knowledge generation and thinking, the importance of research and the desire to break into new frontiers for South Africa's development. Furthermore, the purpose of the think industry is to clearly advance South Africa's development, to change the world and make it more stable for future generations as well as to promote prosperity that is fair and just. Leaders of the future, whilst being national citizens, also function on the global stage. If their actions are underpinned by excellent knowledge they will be destined to fulfill their important mission.

In the final analysis, think tanks and universities must strive to be excellent knowledge and thinking generators for those who are committed to the understanding of the challenges and opportunities that will position South Africa among the leading nations. There is no doubt that relevant and usable knowledge can contribute to South Africa achieving this critical position. A successful South African polity depends entirely on how efficiently we utilize our human capital and brainpower. The creation and institutionalization of opportunities for our thinkers is non-negotiable, especially for an emerging democratic state like ours.

## Conclusion

Democracy is learned and responsible behavior. Education in whatever form or level is not only the pillar of scientific achievements, but a catalyst both for the establishment and development of a mature nation state. Our institutions of higher learning must continue to pursue their moral obligation to buttress a fledgling democracy that is beset with structural features of an emerging nation state. This is where the challenge lies as to whether South Africa will grow into a viable competitive nation state or exist at the margins as a depository of raw materials and a dumping ground for imports. These are some of the choices our institutions of higher learning will have to make sooner rather than later.

Finally, the notion of a nation that never was and ought to be looms large in a country that is struggling with its own soul to rise and become a nation state. The country is divided racially (not in the context of the apartheid era), ethnically, according to gender, class, and the quality of education. It has five educational systems, though not legally so defined, namely, the private, public, good formerly model C, bad formerly model C, township schools, and rural schools. Higher education is divided in terms of higher quality and lower quality education. At the same time, while South Africa is a fledgling democracy, it is torn apart by ideological battles and the fear of the “tyranny of the majority” (based on class rather than race) and the perception of the dominance of the minority (associated with the institutionalization of apartheid or an internal colonial situation). Analysts could therefore conclude that South Africa is afflicted with extreme contradictions in its nation building attempts.

The question is whether think tanks and universities in South Africa can rise to the occasion and facilitate the existence of a true nation state or polity that can meet the development challenges and the impact of globalization. The time has come for our universities to emerge as relevant institutions of learning and be sources of knowledge for the emerging nation state. If this can be achieved, the perennial question of the relevance of South African universities will be answered and understood by the broader population. In this way, South Africa will have gone beyond the systemic limitations that had

been imposed by the apartheid system to the benefit of all and be able to compete in the world as a nation state.