

# Centre for Policy Studies High-Level Seminar Series

## *Bringing Together High-Level Thinkers and Leaders for Policy Dialogue on South Africa's Future*

Seminar Policy Brief no. 1, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2009

Seminar Policy Brief on a presentation by  
Minister for Higher Education & Training  
Dr. Blade Nzimande:

### **'BREAKING OUR SEMI-COLONIAL PATTERNS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION'**

#### **Introduction**

As part of its High-Level Seminar Series, the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) hosted a presentation by South Africa's Minister for Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, on the 30<sup>th</sup> November 2009. The seminar was held at the 'Summer Place' Conference Centre in Hydepark, Johannesburg. The Minister's presentation was on the new government's vision and agenda for transforming post-schooling education in South Africa.

#### **Key Points in the Presentation**

Before addressing key aspects of the new department's policy agenda for post-schooling education in South Africa, the Minister started by making a number of critical comments directed against several targets, including what appeared to be a thinly veiled criticism of the previous government's perceived inability to engage in public policy debates with local intellectuals, NGOs, activists and other role players. This, the Minister sought to contrast with what he sees as the new government's willingness to 'implicitly and explicitly' recognize this gap, and its preparedness to engage and listen. The tone of the presentation was both emphatic and conciliatory on the one hand, and critical and exasperated on the other – emphatic and conciliatory about the new government's openness to honest engagements with role players in public policy debates and willingness to accept constructive criticism, but also exasperated and critical of what he saw as negative attacks on government, the president and the tri-partite alliance from several sources including the commercialised media and independent political analysts who tend to 'imprison and vulgarise' important debates on key national issues such as calls for the nationalisation of industries in South Africa. In fact the Minister questioned the notion of an 'independent analyst', suggesting that analysts have "taken negative criticism of government as a virtue and a hallmark of 'independent analysis'", adding that "we have largely expunged critique (meaning both negative and positive appraisal) of government and policies, and replaced it, if not equalled it, with negative criticism".

The Minister then went on to identify a number of key challenges for the education sector in South Africa:

- Building an integrated system of education and training,
- The skills revolution required in the country,
- Issues of university autonomy and public accountability,
- Differentiation of universities,
- Building a vibrant college sector and its articulation with the university system
- Funding of higher education.

This is a daunting list, and it was not immediately clear which of these issues is an urgent priority for the government, given that the department is a newly established entity seeking to set its new agenda. The Minister went on to touch briefly on each of these key policy

challenges, without prioritising them but only raising broad policy issues and without going into details. The broad emphasis was on building a post-schooling system that seeks to address the skills needs of the country, whilst not neglecting the importance of knowledge acquisition. This is yet another potential choice posed by the Minister between two important policy ideas – the skills needs versus the task of building the country's intellectual base. The Minister sought to balance the need for using education as a tool to address the practical needs of the economy and industry on the one hand, while signalling that the broader need for creating the right kind of citizen with a deep understanding and knowledge of the country's history and the contradictions of class, gender and racial inequality is also a priority. Clearly, the Minister was speaking to two sets of organised interests – those concerned with the needs of the economy and industry, and those concerned about using the system of education for engineering a new post-apartheid society. The Minister stated that these contradictions have to be addressed through the current education system which continues to reproduce the same contradictions.

The Minister expressed concerns about the current economic transformation strategy of the country, particularly the balance between the need for black economic empowerment (BEE) on the one hand, and on the other hand creating a globally competitive economy through the acceleration of certain critical skills (ostensibly those that have seen the growth of South Africa's services and financial sector). This, the Minister argued, has failed to address increasing levels of inequality among the African majority, and a structural failure to absorb the country's increasing labour surplus, thereby keeping the unequal racial and class structure of the South African economy largely intact. Therefore it would appear that the slant of the department's agenda would be towards addressing the needs of the economy and industry. But this appears to imply a serious tension between the need for developing hard skills (vocational skills training for the unemployed, school dropouts and the youth; training of artisans and improving reading, writing and general literacy for adults) while ensuring that the country's education system also produces knowledge for its own sake, in order to develop what the Minister referred to as "rounded citizens with deeper knowledge of socio-economic challenges facing society". Therefore the mainstreaming of hard sciences such as mathematics and science (to address the needs of the economy and industry) will have to be skilfully balanced with support for the social sciences, history and the arts in South Africa's tertiary education system. In this regard the Minister hinted at the possible establishment of a National Institute for the Humanities. This is a major gesture in terms of policy intention by the new government in the direction of the humanities sector which appears to face neglect in the face of a major national drive towards the hard sciences (i.e. the development of Mathematics and hard the sciences).

Before completing his presentation, the Minister again made several sweeping criticisms on a number of areas – the failure of the country's universities and Think Tanks to respond and engage with the ruling party's policy priorities (i.e. education, health, rural development, employment creation and crime); the growth of business schools as opposed to developmental studies institutes to support the ruling party's push for a developmental state; and the promotion by universities of what he calls a narrow and defensive notion of institutional autonomy which does not necessarily guarantee academic freedom and public accountability. It was obvious that this notion of university autonomy is a sensitive subject for a Minister and government seeking to introduce radical ideas around transformation of the sector. This is therefore a potential ideological battleground between the new Minister and the higher education sector (especially the universities). The Minister also spent time on the traditional/historical institutional inequalities in this sector (especially between universities catering for the privileged and those that cater for the underprivileged), hinting at another possible battle ground – reviewing university funding to address the inequities in the distribution of resources between the so-called historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions. As if this list of challenges is not daunting enough, the Minister also signalled that one of the battle grounds for the new department is to address the global unequal power relations in the production of knowledge, where developed countries are the producers and the developing countries merely the consumers. All this appears to suggest an activist ministry willing to tackle a range of issues in the sector, both nationally and globally – a daunting agenda for newly established ministry.

While the Minister acknowledged that his presentation did not offer any definitive policy pronouncements, largely owing to the fact that the department is still new and formulating its policy agenda, this is a fairly broad but still ambitious policy agenda, filled with potential for conflicts and battles with established role players in the sector. This could tie the newly established Minister into confrontations and controversies during this term of the new government. Nonetheless the Minister seems willing, and probably has political support within the broad left and the tripartite alliance, to confront these battle grounds and highly organised interests in the sector. At the same time, the Minister appeared keen to hold out prospects for broad based dialogue, emphasising the fact that the department is still engaging broadly in the sector as it defines and consolidates its vision and policy agenda through forums such as the CPS High-Level Seminar Series. He revealed that after the 2010 Presidential State of the Nation address, the Department will make a number of key policy pronouncements on transforming the higher education policy sector, and open up dialogue with relevant role players on this.

## **Discussion Points with the Minister**

After the presentation the Minister addressed a number of issues raised by the audience, touching on these points:

- The dearth of a developmental agenda in the policy orientation of the Department of Education
- The fragmented nature of post-schooling education and training
- The funding formula for institutions of higher education, which has contributed to the competitiveness rather than complementarity among the various institutions of higher learning
- The potential role of the private sector in supporting the vision and policy goals of the Department of Education
- Possible ways to enhance student agency so that students' capacity to contribute to the country's transformation can be harnessed and encouraged

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