

Editor's note

In my message in June 2009,¹ I concluded, in reference to higher education, with the hope that “the road ahead, exciting and promising as it seems to be, needs to be mapped with great care and wisdom, if the ‘bubble’ is not to burst”. For a number of different reasons today, higher education internationally is characterised by events which include violent student demonstrations against the rise in tuition fees² (promising to make higher education unaffordable to the majority) and limitations on student visas and jobs.³ There are also desperate and gloomy predictions that a third of universities face closure in the United Kingdom.⁴

By contrast, promising and exciting developments are taking place in South Africa, with renewed efforts to make additional funds available to promote and augment the number of PhD graduates.⁵ The recently released consensus report,⁶ *The PhD Study: an evidence-based study on how to meet the demands for high-level skills in an emerging economy*, documents a comprehensive way forward and recognises the enormity of the challenge. The report, in itself a progressive step forward, makes extensive recommendations, most notably to:

- Escalate the numbers of doctoral graduates through external intervention programmes, for which there is successful precedent in recent South African history.
- Expand significantly the levels of funding for doctoral studies in South Africa, with a particular focus on shifting the balance of students towards full-time study.
- Create an overarching and interconnected national planning strategy for dealing with high-level skills production, such as the doctorate, so that all parts of the system work in the same direction.
- Address the pipeline issues as a matter of urgency for, in the long term, it will not be possible to sustain high levels of doctoral entrants into advanced training without a sharp increase in the numbers of students entering undergraduate education, early postgraduate education and, eventually, PhD programmes.
- Eliminate the multiple barriers (bureaucratic, administrative, political, legal and structural) that stand in the way of increasing the pool of doctoral candidates in the system, and the pool of competent supervisors for doctoral students in South African universities.
- Apply strong quality assurance measures to the doctorate, on the one hand to prevent irresponsible massification of the

degree in the light of the substantial funding incentives for graduating PhDs and, on the other, to deepen the quality of this final qualification across universities.

- Advocate public support for, and understanding about, the PhD so that there is greater awareness and acceptance of its significance in social and economic development, beyond personal gains for the successful student. Developing this shared meaning about the value of the doctorate is vital for garnering public support for it.
- Target specific institutions with existing capacity and established track records for scaling up the production of PhDs, even as selected programmes are funded within universities that are not strong overall in producing doctorates.
- Recognise and reward the diversity of doctoral programmes in practice, and adapt national policy to these realities rather than impose a one-size-fits-all model of the traditional PhD on a system that has long moved in the direction of multiple models of training for the doctorate in traditional academic, as well as professional, degrees.
- Strengthen and elaborate the relationship between universities and industry, as well as science councils, so that larger numbers of doctoral students are trained and supported through learning in practice while, at the same time, supplementing academic advisorships on campus with those working in the field.

As 2010 comes to end, the exciting road ahead will need to be mapped with great care and wisdom in order to ensure the successful implementation of the report's progressive recommendations.

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References

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