SARUA Leadership Dialogue on Rebuilding Higher Education in Zimbabwe

The Cape Town Accord and Call for Action

24 April 2010

Introduction

We recognise that higher education in the Southern African region faces daunting challenges in the rapidly changing global conditions. If we are to realize the developmental benefits of higher education, not only on a national scale but also for a broader regional development, these challenges need to be addressed through collective leadership, on a regional basis. On the 24th of April 2010 the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA) convened a special Leadership Dialogue Event in Cape Town, with Vice-Chancellors from universities in Southern Africa, to identify strategies that would strengthen the higher education sector in the region, while responding to the needs of the higher education sector in Zimbabwe. The meeting was convened in response to a request made by the Chair of the Zimbabwean Universities' Vice-Chancellors Association, for strategic assistance to stabilise Zimbabwean universities currently under threat as a result of the exodus of highly qualified academics and professionals, a weakened research and teaching infrastructure, and the lack of optimal Internet connectivity and access to development resources. SARUA's facilitation of the meeting is in keeping with its strategic objectives of developing a regional identity for higher education in Southern African, and for enhancing collaboration between the universities in the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

We reaffirm that both the governance and the planning of higher education are a national responsibility. The outcomes of the dialogue event tend towards supporting the leadership of the higher education sector in Zimbabwe in their process of rebuilding and revitalizing the sector within the context of a national responsibility. The platform for dialogue provided by SARUA has created an opportunity for building solidarity amongst higher education institutions in the region in support of Zimbabwean higher education.

We emphasise the significance of the regional contribution made by the higher education sector in Zimbabwe. We firmly believe that any decline in its performance will weaken the higher education sector in the region. Zimbabwe accounts for the second highest student enrolment in the region and has the second highest absolute number of students studying through Open Distance Learning. After South Africa, the Zimbabwean higher education sector accounts for 18% of the total student enrolment in Science, Engineering and Technology; and nearly a quarter of the student enrolment in Business Management and Law; and close to 20% of the student enrolment in the Humanities and in the Social Sciences. Furthermore, it is recognised that students and scholars from Zimbabwe provide a source of inspiration to many countries in the region because they are of the highest academic calibre.

The Zimbabwean Higher Education Challenge

We acknowledge that the Zimbabwean higher education sector faces significant challenges that threaten its very survival. The growth in demand for higher education graduates, and services has continued relentlessly, yet the resources to meet these demands have dramatically diminished under the impact of political and economic crisis in recent years. Institutions now operate in an environment that is characterised by grossly inadequate financial, material, human and other support resources. The exodus of senior academics in particular, exerts an enormous constraint on the capacity of the system to reproduce itself. Physical facilities necessary to undertake quality teaching, learning and research are in short supply and in many cases where such facilities are available they are run down, and grossly inadequate.

The Zimbabwean Higher Education Sector Priority Needs

We confirm our agreement with the priority needs of the sector, as defined by the leadership in the Zimbabwean higher education system, which include:

- *Teaching and Learning* – There is a critical need for qualified academic and teaching staff. Human resource development and additional measures that will assist staff to become better qualified rank as the highest priority. Furthermore, basic teaching and learning facilities as well as equipment that includes better resourced libraries, computers and access to the Internet, are required.
- *Research* – An increase in research funding is necessary to expand the rate of knowledge production and communication. Mentoring by means of collaborative research activities is necessary to develop the skills of young researchers and scientists. The visibility of

Zimbabwean research needs to increase through increasing research funding, communication and publication.

- *Infrastructure* – Accommodating the growth in student numbers requires a significant expansion of the existing teaching, laboratory, administrative and research infrastructure. The system needs support so that it can make use of the current developments in broadband availability in South Africa that would enable Zimbabwean universities to take advantage of reliable and cheaper connectivity and the establishment of ICTs in university management, teaching, learning and research.

- *Governance and Management* – The governance and management systems of the institutions in the sector have been adversely affected by a lack of funds and personnel. Staff turnover at senior management levels is high and these vacancies cannot be filled due to poor working conditions, the general political situation and a scarcity of appropriately qualified skills.

Framework for Regional Collaborative Action

We propose to undertake collaborative activities aimed at rebuilding the Zimbabwean higher education system within a framework that calls on the following stakeholders:

Governments
- **Affirm** the crucial role and impact of higher education in national reconstruction and development.
- **Remove legislative barriers** that constrain student and academic staff mobility, hinder the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for education, and prevent lower customs duties on research and ICT equipment.
- **Create a favourable policy environment** in support of the SADC Protocol to especially enhance mobility, exchange and partnership.
- **Prioritise national higher education development** for the establishment of effective national systems and institutions.
- **Provide specific funding to enhance collaboration efforts** in the form of incentives for regional collaboration, the funding of projects on problems endemic to the region and making specific funds available for student and staff exchanges.
- **Facilitate networking** aimed at building relationships with institutions, initiating dialogues with other SADC governments regarding areas of potential collaboration, and at providing support for regional networks of excellence.

Donors
- **Prioritise regional initiatives in funding considerations** in view of promoting and funding collaborative activities and supporting the cost of collaboration processes.
- **Manage collaborative relationships** to ensure that collaboration works to the benefit of both partners.
- **Communicate with institutions** to ensure that projects are based on the identified priorities of institutions and invite participation in co-operative endeavours.
- **Facilitate networking** through funding regional conferences and support networking opportunities that may lead to collaborative activities.
- **Share information** by sharing expertise, hosting information portals, documenting existing initiatives, exchanging research results and by promoting good practice.
- Provide both technical support and technology transfer opportunities.

Institutions
- **Promote, motivate and reward collaborative activities.**
- **Manage collaboration relationships** in a manner that ensures mutual benefits for the concerned parties.
- **Collect and maintain data on regional involvement** to understand the extent of these initiatives and their impact.
- **Ensure transparency** regarding the recognition of qualifications for admission purposes, and regarding the possibility of transferring credits.
- **Ensure sensitivity to cultural and language differences** through the provision of orientation programmes and the appropriate support mechanisms.
- **Provide administrative support** that not only enables but also facilitates collaborative projects including post doctoral work done by candidates from the region**.**

We take into account the many lessons on collaboration shared at this meeting, to inform and to shape our actions in support of regional collaboration. We acknowledge that mutual reciprocity is fundamental to making co-operative action work and therefore, we insist that mutual benefit becomes a core criterion that guides the development and implementation of collaborative projects.

A Call for Action

We take cognisance of the wide range of proposals discussed in response to the short, medium and long-term needs of the higher education sector in Zimbabwe. We highlight the following commitments made by the Vice-Chancellors:

Short-term actions

We commit ourselves, within the reach of individual institutions, to finding innovative ways of making academic staff available in Zimbabwean institutions for short periods of time. Many academics across the higher education sector in the region already have active and functional working relations with Zimbabwean colleagues. These partnerships should be developed, where practical, and extended to increase collaborative support for higher education in Zimbabwe.

Factors such as the existing workload, areas of expertise, as well as the practical and logistical requirements will obviously be taken into consideration in framing inter-institutional partnerships aimed at supporting the Zimbabwean higher education. The modalities and mechanisms for making staff available may include, for example, secondments, staff exchange arrangements, and to serve as research supervisors. In the process we encourage institutions to take full advantage of ICTs for both synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning within and across borders. Furthermore, we recognise that academics in the sector, especially Deans and Heads of Schools, may have additional ideas on support for their colleagues in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwean institutions will communicate their specific staff shortages to the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZCHE). The ZCHE will perform a co-ordinating role driven from the office of the Chairperson. The ZCHE will facilitate direct contact between Zimbabwean institutions and institutions from the region so that the nature and the extent of support can be negotiated, given the specific resources available at institutions in a position to offer assistance. Vice-Chancellors are encouraged to issue a communiqué that informs academics, at their institutions, of this request for assistance and that encourages them to assess opportunities for providing support.

Medium-term actions

We commit our support for the appointment of a special representative to develop a detailed *Action Plan for Rebuilding the Zimbabwean Higher Education System.* Efforts to appoint the special representative will be co-ordinated by SARUA in partnership with the Zimbabwe Universities Vice Chancellors Association (ZUVCA) and the Zimbabwean Council for Higher Education. A Steering Committee, convened by ZUVCA will be established to guide the work of the special envoy and to ensure that the process of formulating the Action Plan is led by the leadership of the Zimbabwean higher education sector. SARUA will develop a proposal, in consultation with the higher education leadership in Zimbabwe, to raise the necessary funds to support and to host the work of the special envoy over the next four to six months. The task of the special envoy is: to confirm the priority needs of the Zimbabwean higher education sector, formulate strategies in response to the identified needs, identify the implementation modalities and institutional arrangements, and to draft a detailed action plan and include a projected budget.

Long-term actions

We commit ourselves to using this period of transition as an opportunity for re-envisioning the Zimbabwean higher education sector and its contribution to higher education in SADC in the long term. We are mindful of the immediate character of the assistance required, but remain hopeful that the process of stabilising higher education in Zimbabwe will create a strategic space for thinking through the long-term sustainability of the sector in that country.

Conclusion

We are resolute in our conviction that the challenges faced in higher education in Zimbabwe are challenges to higher education in SADC. We are convinced that co-operation and partnerships among higher education institutions in the region and other stakeholders such as government, donors and the private sector are a *sine qua non* for addressing the plight of Zimbabwe and the region.