

**ENGAGING THE UNIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA (UNAM)**

Paper presented by

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INTRODUCTION: CHANGING DEMANDS ON THE UNIVERSITY

Education has become an indispensable tool for development. But formal education institutions, especially those of higher education, must change to reflect the complex interplay of society dynamics, which themselves constantly change.

Studies have emphasized the importance of higher education and the contribution of a university to economic development. Bourne (2000) pointed out that “a country that allows its universities to decline is opting out of the development process. Investment in people should be the central policy of any country’s long-term economic strategy.” Universities need to achieve more relevance and restructure curricula to ensure greater articulation with the labour market while not being just market driven. They need to provide life-long learning for the labour force.

The negative effects of globalization – cultural invasions, unemployment, accelerated brain drain, and intellectual migration – have to be challenged, and the benefits of a knowledge economy and information and communication technology, fully embraced. To do this, universities need to re-examine their status in society, the status which has portrayed them as being highly valued and protected, and fixated by the traditional notions of autonomy and academic freedom, thus isolating themselves from society as ivory towers. Instead, universities have to be deeply in touch with the needs, large and small, of society. The university with its social and intellectual energy should be a force of change and emancipation, its intellectual power moderated by moral force (du Pisani and Gretschel 2003).

The Twenty-first century university is envisioned to be a well resourced university, closely tied to the community it serves, becoming a cultural as well as intellectual centre for the community, and able to resolve major societal problems, that is both the university and community being fully engaged. As Makgoba (2003) has recently pointed out, this is because higher education systems throughout the world are products of the society surrounding them. In a normal, free and democratic society, higher education relates strongly to the culture and values of that society. It is a vehicle and instrument of development and transformation. Higher education engages with issues and problems of society and posits new knowledge and solutions in a dispassionate, insightful and reflective manner. It interacts dynamically, intimately and meaningfully with society and it shapes and filters external values. Higher education also responds to the changing and competitive world of knowledge, values and the norms for and on behalf of society. It

champions and promotes the knowledge, values and ideals of society, and thus should fully embrace indigenous knowledge, tradition and history.

For universities and communities to engage in development as stated above, and in the context of Africa, universities need a re-visioning of the entire education and training process, and need also innovative strategies. I would like to share with you something of the experience of the University of Namibia in this regard.

THE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT IN NAMIBIA

Namibia has, for more than a decade beginning with independence in 1990, pursued a development path guided by four strategic objectives:

- reviving and sustaining economic growth,
- reducing inequality,
- creating employment, and
- eradicating poverty.

The social and economic outcomes of the four objectives over the decade have been mixed. Per capita economic growth has been slow, averaging 0.57% in 1999 over 1990. Jobs have been created, but unemployment has changed little from the 33.7 % recorded in 1991. indeed, job creation and poverty reduction remain real challenges as Namibia enters the twenty-first century.

The Namibian Government is well aware of these issues, and is pursuing policies and multiple strategies to address these challenges. For instance the communication infrastructure (road network and telecommunication system) are well developed and maintained in an effort to facilitate rural development, as well as community based eco-tourism.

The Namibian Constitution has been described as one of the best on the continent. It provides for a unitary secular republic with an executive presidency, a bicameral legislature, regular multi-party elections and an independent judiciary, while at the same time guaranteeing freedom of association, and respect for human rights and gender equality.

The second National Development Plan (NDP2), reaffirming the continued relevance of the above four development pillars, has added three others, namely:

- gender equality and equity,

- reducing regional development inequalities, and
- good governance.

The National Long Term Vision 2030 and the National Poverty Reduction Action Programme are parts of the framework being developed to meet these challenges. Other challenges include HIV/AIDS, which has emerged as a major destructive force, which threatens to undo the development gains achieved so far, and will compound the poverty and fledging human resource base of Namibia.

Thus, the Government of the Republic of Namibia, with the assistance of our development partners, is seeking to:

- reduce poverty, inequality, food security, and to provide an environment conducive of health, in particular that of women and children, reproductive health and well being, economic growth and respect of human rights;
- combat and contain the spread of HIV/AIDS, to assess the social costs and to assist in the mitigation of the effects on the infected and affected;
- implement land reform and redistribution policies; and
- strengthen the capacity of the Government to implement the Declarations, Conventions and Accords ratified by Namibia as a member of the family of Nations in support and furtherance of the fundamental rights of the Namibian people.

With these few introductory remarks about the present state of affairs in Namibia, let me now talk about the University of Namibia, and the important role it has played and continues to play in human resource development and capacity building for Namibia and the SADC region in general.

THE UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA (UNAM)

The University of Namibia (UNAM), with the Polytechnic of Namibia, four Colleges of Education and a more recently established private university, together constitute the higher education sector in Namibia.

Prior to independence, the Academy of Tertiary Education, organized around faculties of social science, education, nursing, languages and police studies, provided limited options of mostly non-degree programmes to a very small number of Namibians, predominantly from urban areas.

Therefore when UNAM was established in 1992, one of the challenges it faced was to overcome the relics of colonial tertiary education, the lack of subject choice, poor enrolment figures especially in the fields of science, and gross imbalances with respect to geographical origins, ethnic groups and gender perspectives.

The Eastern and Southern African Universities' Research Programme (ESAURP) 'Report on University Capacity in Eastern and Southern African Countries' (1987, p.16) states that universities should concentrate on excellence in the development of human minds, not in some abstract sense, but also by offering courses and degree programmes that are relevant to the needs and demands of society. From its inception, UNAM has been expected to do this, and to play a major role in the development of the country's high-level human resources, and in shaping Namibian society. To this end, UNAM went through a major transformation of curriculum, switched from Afrikaans to English as a medium of instruction, reorganized the various Faculties, paid particular attention to the development of the Faculty of Science in terms of content and staffing, and set up new Faculties of Agriculture and Law, and Centres for Language, Justice Training and Public Policy.

The development of UNAM should therefore be seen within the context of the general development of independent Namibia. Its development must thus be in line with that of the rest of Namibian society. At the same time, UNAM faces problems that are common to various universities throughout the world, especially those in developing countries. UNAM views these as the challenges to be overcome. They include, inter alia:

- The process of curricula review to ensure its relevance to Namibian society;
- Developing the necessary infrastructure for UNAM to become a university of accepted standard;
- Asserting quality teaching, research and extension services to help transform Namibian society; and
- Training quality specialist who are prepared to serve both urban and rural communities.

To respond to these challenges, UNAM adopted a Five-Year Development Plan for the period 1995-99, which was tailored to be in consonance with the aims and objectives of the Government-steered First National Development Plan (NDP1).

Key elements of UNAM's first Five-Year Development Plan were:

- Improving the governance of the university and promoting its efficiency;
- Promoting a balanced output from the university, where disadvantaged groups were enhanced and science fields were encouraged;
- Strengthening the university's research and consultancy capacities;
- Strengthening staff development to assist Namibians to develop and assume academic and administrative roles within UNAM;
- Developing and encouraging linkages with institutions in Africa and abroad to allow cross-fertilization of ideas, culture and academic excellence;
- Developing incentives for attracting and retaining talented staff through better terms of conditions of service;
- Extending the library facilities and availing them to the public in the main campus, and in satellite centres across the country;
- Providing a good support environment to allow students to excel academically and socially, and encourage an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect between students and the university administration; and
- Diversifying sources of financing to ensure that the university is able to flourish, given the pressure on government finances.

Most of these proposed actions have been implemented. In addition, UNAM has been connected to the internet and this has enabled the university, its centres and other tertiary education institutions to have access to key information on research and development, through the adoption of modern technology.

The total student population at UNAM has grown from 2000 in 1992 to some 9000 in 2003, with 10% of these being international students, mainly from the SADC region.

A Second Five-Year Development Plan has been developed for the university based on a major review of the achievements of the first such Plan, taking into account the changes which have taken place since then and dovetailing with the country's Second Five-Year Development Plan (NDP2). It recognizes the need to consolidate the university's overall development.

Access to UNAM Programmes

Charged with the responsibility of addressing the training backlog in tertiary education as a result of the policies of the apartheid era, UNAM had to devise a mechanism of reaching people in all parts of the country, most of whom are too poor to afford formal tertiary education. With limited resources at its disposal the university developed nine outreach centres, distributed across the country, and also established the University Centre for External Studies (CES) to run them through distance education. Today, nearly half of the nine thousand students registered with UNAM are enrolled with the CES, a very remarkable achievement in the provision of education, training and empowerment of communities across the country.

The university also took note of the fact that the Northern part of the country, where more than fifty per cent of the Namibian population lives, needed greater access to tertiary education. To reach these people, there was a need to set up another university campus in this region. To be truly effective, such a campus needed to work alongside the community to foster socio-economic development, expand educational opportunities, strengthen leadership networks and promote social justice, thus giving the university an opportunity to promote human development.

Thus in 1998 UNAM established a Northern Campus at Oshakati, to undertake both academic and community development programmes. Following an extensive consultative process that included conferences and workshops, the University together with the community developed the following vision for the campus:

“Our vision is of an enlightened, free, well informed, well educated and healthy people, living in a harmonious, and integrated and caring community, guided by a democratic culture based on shared common values, open to positive interaction with other cultures, in an economy which is productive, diversified and provides meaningful employment.”

In the establishment of the Northern Campus, UNAM recognised its responsibility to develop well-educated and well-informed citizens through both formal and informal education and training programmes.

The achievements of the Northern Campus are tangible. UNAM now enjoys widespread support in the local community and is actively involved in the dynamic equation of actual skills and career development in the area. Various weaknesses within the community have been identified and addressed. These include crime,

unemployment and job insecurity, lack of business skills, etc. The Northern Campus and thus UNAM are now seen as a true achievement in community development, and as an effective way in which universities can help in socio-economic development. It is the intention of the university to strengthen and consolidate these achievements and become the think-tank and development agent of change in the country.

The development of the Northern Campus has been made possible with the support of the Government of Namibia and the Ford Foundation and other partners, who have provided the necessary resources and other forms of support needed to implement this initiative.

The planning of the Northern Campus and, indeed, the university's Development Plans, was built on a consultative basis, with extensive consultations within the university as well as with the communities in the area, through chiefs, mayors, counselors, churches, Government Ministries, the private sector, etc.

Gender Equality and Equity

The Namibian Government's Second Five Year Development Plan (NDP2) has identified gender equality and equity as an important cross-cutting issue that needs to be addressed, if equitable socio-economic development is to be achieved in the country. The University of Namibia, on its part, has followed and continues to follow policies that promote gender equality and equity. A Gender and Development Unit has been established at the university, which has played a very important role in promoting gender awareness by educating staff and students and the public on issues related to gender equality and equity, through short courses, seminars and workshops as well as through the publication of books and pamphlets. Sometimes public lectures are organized by the Gender Unit, often in close collaboration with other partners such as the UNDP country office. Recently the university introduced Gender as one of the major components of the course "Contemporary Issues", taken by all first-year students in the Faculty of Humanities.

HIV/AIDS: A threat to Growth, Poverty Reduction and Human Resources

HIV/AIDS is a very serious problem affecting many Sub-Saharan countries. It poses the single biggest threat to all development efforts in Namibia. Apart from the

suffering of individuals affected by HIV/AIDS and the emotional and financial strain on their families, the direct and indirect costs of the pandemic would render any attempt to reduce poverty in Namibia futile if the spread of the disease is not contained. Thus UNAM decided to take an aggressive approach by first establishing a university-wide committee drawing membership from staff and students, as well as Faculty level coordinating committees to deal with the problem.

The focus has been on educating the university community on the dangers posed by the disease, high-risk sexual behaviour, disease transmission and counseling. UNAM is among the first in the Sub-Saharan region to publish a book that outlines very clearly the institution's HIV/AIDS policy, and the leading role the university is expected to play in combating the disease at national level. These efforts have produced results as evidenced by the high awareness among both staff and students on the dangers posed by the disease, and the decrease in the numbers of new reported HIV/AIDS cases among staff and students. HIV/AIDS also forms part of the "Contemporary Issues" course mentioned above.

The SADC Vice-Chancellors Forum

The SADC Protocol on Education has laid down the principles of co-operation in higher education and training and research. The University of Namibia has taken an initiative to share its experiences and achievements with sister universities in the region. Through the SADC Vice-Chancellors' Forum, and other forums, universities in the SADC region can play a significant role in shaping the future of tertiary education and training through engagement with communities, and thereby bring about socio-economic development of the people of the region.

Established in October 2004, the SADC Vice-Chancellors' Forum is now functioning as an important regional grouping of the Association of African Universities (AAU).

CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined the challenges facing human resource development in Namibia, focusing on the effort undertaken by UNAM.

The university is one of the youngest in the continent. Having emerged at a time of severe challenges, it had to consider a number of innovative initiatives to ensure quality of its academic programmes, strong community involvement, and pertinent research agenda that are relevant for socio-economic development. While resources, indeed, are limited, the experience of UNAM has demonstrated that with innovativeness it is possible to achieve a great deal.

It is also clear that the participation of other relevant partners is necessary. Partnerships, collaborative efforts and linkages of various kinds at various levels have been, and need to be, forged on a continuous basis.

Given the poverty trap in Africa, a university in Africa must develop vision and strategies that resonate with current pressing needs.

However, I agree with Ahmad Sarji when he says: “vision-setting alone is not sufficient.’ He goes on to say: “It is easier said than done.” What is important, however, is our ability to translate the vision we advocate into reality. This is precisely what UNAM is in the process of doing. I believe that the achievements attained to-date by UNAM will be consolidated, and that the university will become a centre of excellence in the region that the people of Namibia will be proud of for many years to come.