UNIVERSITIES
SOUTH AFRICA

AGENDA OF THE TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY GROUP

The USAf strategy groups represent the key committees that determine the programme of the organisation. It is not surprising therefore that one of these is the Transformation Strategy Group (TSG). The agenda of the TSG is always going to be difficult to pin down due to the fact that 'transformation' as a concept has multiple meanings and dimensions. It should be the case then, that the programme of work of the TSG be regularly reviewed and aligned as conditions within the sector and outside it shift.

There is a second reason for this review of the programme of the TSG. This stems from a deep concern within the USAf Office that while the other strategy groups have developed significant programmes of activity and have attracted significant participation from individuals across the sector, the TSG has not been as successful. There are several possible reasons; one of which is that the work of the TSG is quite tightly bound up with the Transformation Managers Forum (TMF). One unintentional consequence of this is that the work of the TSG within our institutions is possibly 'balkanised'. But another more serious reason, perhaps, is the fact that the programme of the TSG has not been sufficiently broad and contextual to capture the wider interest and participation of key parts of the sector.

Needless to say, the transformatory agenda of the sector is, correctly, also captured in the work of the other strategy groups. So, the question is what should be taken into account in constructing the programme of the TSG. To answer this, we would suggest that it would be important to take into account some of the driving challenges faced by the sector in the context of the framework for transformation presented in the White Paper on Higher Education of 1997 and the Higher Education Act of 1997.

We suggest that there are two driving challenges.

1. **Institutional Culture:**

   The first relates to the overarching issue of what is perceived to be the exclusionary nature of the institutional culture at most, if not all, of our universities – the idea that significant numbers of students and staff feel alienated from the environment in which they study or work. This comes through over and over again in engagements with students and staff and it speaks both to the history of the sector and the design of our institutions and the sector as a whole.

2. **Engagement:**

The second relates to the often mentioned perceptions of universities as disengaged, elitist ivory-towers. This raises the idea of universities as engaged institutions. Most challenges facing our societies are simultaneously intensely local and intensely global. At the heart of our higher education system is the project of knowledge, the very nature of which is global. This embeds our institutions in a global system of higher education, of science, of humanism, etc. While this is important in itself, it is also of vital importance for our universities to be, and to be seen to be, significantly engaged in the local contexts in which they find themselves. Unlike businesses or public sector institutions or not-for profit institutions, universities are deeply embedded socially, politically and economically in the local contexts in which they find themselves. They are what may be referred to as anchor institutions in the communities, cities and regions in which they find themselves. The question is what are the implications of this for the way in which our institutions and the sector as a whole are designed and geared in terms of their core activities and their existence as local, national and international citizens.

Any suggested change in the agenda of the TSG must help to simultaneously galvanise deeper and broader communities of staff in the reshaping of our universities so as to gear them for another 20 years, to make them much more sensitive to the social, political and economic contexts in which they find themselves. We are concerned, for instance, that the student services/development/affairs professionals at our universities are mainly absent in the programmatic profile of USAf.

It is proposed that the TSG establishes, with the participation and advice of key individuals within the sector and outside it, an agenda that focuses on the following:

(a) The reconstitution of institutional culture by focusing on the design of the universities around our students and staff; and

(b) On establishing a national project to theorise and to build models of universities that are seriously engaged in the local context in which they find themselves.

END