

By Hermien Kotzé

New needs, new universities

MANY questions have been raised about the future direction and role of Fort Hare – and all other universities – in the context of transformation and transition in South Africa.

The regional office of Idasa in the Border therefore felt it could make a contribution by holding a public meeting on the campus, on "The role of a university in a changing society and beyond."

The fact that we were allowed onto campus was an achievement in itself, since the previous administration would never have permitted this.

The meeting took place on August 2. It was co-hosted by the Democratic Staff Association and was attended by an enthusiastic audience of about 500 staff, students and interested persons from the region, reflecting a general desire "to know what is going on".

The speakers were Prof Francis Wilson, in his capacity both as chairperson of the new Fort Hare council and that of "local boy" (he grew up in the district) and Mr George Mashamba of the Education Policy Unit at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Both speakers raised key issues that warrant consideration by all Southern African universities. Similar themes were tackled by the guest speaker at the June graduation ceremony, Dr Ahmed Kathrada.

The first was the fact that universities operate in the wider context of a country undergoing unprecedented social and political upheaval.

In his graduation address, Dr Kathrada remarked that learning could not be an abstract intellectual exercise. The situation today demands that universities go beyond verbal condemnation of racist education and lip service to the cause of freedom and start playing an active role in the process of educational and social transformation.

Both Wilson and Mashamba reiterated this point and urged universities to involve themselves in the process of change, rather than being forced into it later.

The notion of the neutrality of universities and academics was repeatedly rejected by all the speakers. It was plain that this has never been possible, and certainly not so in present-day South Africa. The very concept of so-called "neutrality" is ideologically loaded and it has been misused to justify reactionary policies and practices, especially at Fort Hare.

The notion of preparedness was also highlighted. Wilson observed that the present political restructuring was a crucial, but insufficient, condition for the achievement of a better society.

The role of a university during a period of transition would thus imply the need to prepare people for the challenges posed by major reconstruction and development.

Mashamba stressed the need to inculcate in students a sense of realism regarding the potential and constraints of a new South Africa.

Crucial issues that needed urgent attention included the attainment of a political democracy; the restructuring of the education system — specifically the financing

thereof; massive unemployment; the housing crisis; the land issue and the nature of the post-apartheid economy.

In the light of this, it was only natural for the speakers to call for relevance, in both research and university curricula. This call was also echoed in discussions with Fort Hare academics and senior students. It is especially important at Fort Hare where many academics have not kept up with the latest academic and research trends — a situation that can be attributed either to their outdated ideological preferences, plain laziness, or both.

The development of human resources will remain an important part of the role of a university, but students should not only be prepared for service in commerce and industry, but should also acquire intellectual and creative skills for the development of oppressed communities. They need to "plough back" their skills into the community.

At the June graduation ceremony Dr Kathrada, while recognising students' right to independent student activism and struggle, reminded them of the daunting task ahead. He called on students to take their academic responsibilities seriously and to exercise firm discipline.

"We have a future to prepare for, we have a country to build, we have an economic and social order to reconstruct. We do not want generations of under-qualified, ill-disciplined youth who will be unable to make an effective contribution to tomorrow's society," he said.

Academic standards is a particularly hot topic at Fort Hare at present. The "Broeders" secretly (and sometimes not so secretly) predicted doom — an ironic situation indeed in the light of the dubious standards under Broederbond rule. Fort Hare has not exactly been a centre of excellence during the last 30 years!

But this concept is a minefield at the moment and demands the intense scrutiny of academics. Whose standards are these, who determines them and what do they mean?

Kathrada's thoughts on the subject expressed at the graduation ceremony are

worth repeating: "To say that a university must become a people's university is not to imply that there should be a lowering of academic standards and norms. On the contrary, we should encourage all our students to strive towards academic excellence but, at the same time, take into account the disadvantages that black students suffer as a



The head of the Fort Hare council, Prof Francis Wilson, with students.

result of the deepening crisis in education.

"These conditions require a sensitive, innovative, non-racist approach from universities which would assist our students to excel at the higher institutions of learning."

In the face of all these changes and plans, I

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could not help but wonder aloud about the fate of the people who came to Fort Hare and stayed for 20 years or more to implement "Bantu Education". The general response to my question was that there will be no witch hunts, but that the radical paradigm switch will probably leave people with the old choice of adapt or die.

The "Broeders" had been so utterly successful in making Fort Hare a miserable place. Yet, in the afternoons, when they were back at their homes in Fort Beaufort, one could almost imagine the old days on the campus before their arrival. It was as if those days were patiently and knowingly lurking in the wings. And now they seem to be back.

Hermien Kotzé is Regional Director of Idasa in the Border area and a former lecturer at Fort Hare.