

Wednesday, 30 March, 2011, Edgewood College, UKZN. On the occasion of the Launch of the Transformative Educational Studies (TES) project.

Address by Professor Fred Otieno, Deputy Vice Chancellor: Technology, Innovation and Partnerships, Durban University of Technology, Durban, RSA

Distinguished Guests, Senior Staff of Universities here tonight (WSU, UKZN and DUT), Colleagues, Staff and Students, Ladies and Gentlemen:

“Good evening everybody. May I welcome you to this most pleasant and positive event – the launch of the National Research Foundation funded “Transformative Education/al Studies project” which is a three university partnership in innovative research, the three universities being the Durban University of Technology, the University of KwaZuluNatal, and Walter Sisulu University.

I am most appreciative of the opportunity to speak on this occasion. Thank you for inviting me.

I consider this a momentous and significant occasion. We are celebrating a number of FIRSTS here tonight, and in my capacity at the DUT as Deputy Vice Chancellor Technology, Innovation and Partnerships, you will understand that I am particularly interested in, and excited by, ‘FIRSTS’.

So in what ways is the TES project a ‘FIRST’?

This is the ‘first partnership’ between our three universities, each capacitated in a unique and idiosyncratic way.

This is a ‘first partnership’ between three different kinds of universities : DUT as a university of technology, UKZN as a research university, and WSU as a rural comprehensive university.

This is a ‘first partnership’ between three newly merged universities. And each merged in ways unique within the partnership. DUT is a merger between two technikons. UKZN is a merger between two research universities. WSU is merger between a research university and a two technikons.

BUT most important of all : This is the first time that the National Research Foundation has funded a project focused specifically on Self Study so generously. This is significant as it signals that the NRF considers Self Study to be a respectable, high quality, scholarly research pursuit. But also, significantly, this award signals that the NRF has favoured THIS Self Study – OUR SELF STUDY - project in particular.

So I need to ask, what is it in OUR SELF STUDY project that the NRF has recognized and awarded with this significant amount of money?

To answer this question I have read the proposal and chosen what I consider to be significant, and of interest to us this evening.

The TES projects focuses itself on the improvement of learning teaching and assessment with the view to improving under- and post-graduate throughput.

“In this project, educators/postgraduate students in Higher Education will reflect critically on their learning, teaching, assessment, curriculum and/or educational professional practice in a variety of ways with the multiple benefits of improving the quality of their practice, earning the award of a senior degree and earning research outputs in the form of publications. This will simultaneously impact positively on the quality and rate of under- and post-graduate throughput and research outputs.”

The TES project is original and innovative in a number of ways...

“2.1 this large-scale critical reflective self-study research into teaching and learning interventions for transformative educational practice in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is the first of its kind in South Africa, and worldwide.
2.2 this project is simultaneously multidisciplinary and multi-institutional;
2.3 this research project targets a number of seemingly unrelated educational problems through a single integrated and holistic intervention, which can be interpreted and applied in diverse ways which are context-dependent.”

The TES project reminds us again of the value in research of a really good research question. The TES project uses only one research question. Such a practice might appear, at first glance, to be overly simplistic, but on reflection and in idiosyncratic application, it yields a broad, rich and transformative spectrum of scholarly insights, and professional and social practices. The TES project simply asks “How do I transform my educational practice as?”

For a moment let us consider the impact of responding to that question in our personal, social and professional lives - on a daily basis. I think that the result would be profound.

The research proposal reminds us that ...

“This research is needed because it addresses the pressing need to transform teaching and learning in the Higher Education sector. The report by Scott, Yeld, and Hendry, “A Case for improving Teaching and Learning in South African Higher Education” (2007:2), “indicates not only that the improvement to Higher Education might be less significant than initially thought, but that in terms of throughputs the Higher Education system as a whole is not doing very well. Of even greater concern is that student performance continues to be racially differentiated. Black students do worse than white students in most disciplinary fields and African students have performed worst of all. As the authors indicate, these outcomes undermine the gains made in terms of access and raise a number of issues about the quality of the educational process and the possible reasons for the unsatisfactory results.”

The TES project looks to contribute to the transformation of higher education in South Africa through self study. In the words of the proposal, “Self-study including auto-ethnographic, psychological, sociological methods allows for a critical interrogation of Higher Education epistemologies, which can contribute to the development of a uniquely African approach to social transformation and growth.”

At the heart of the TES project lies its relevance to our time, our people and our place. The TES project is “relevant in the first instance to the transformation, quality and

effectiveness of learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum in higher education. It is simultaneously relevant to the disciplines in which each of the participants teach and assess in higher education. This project is thus intrinsically multi-disciplinary. It is intended that the impact on both the discipline of education and the academic disciplines in which the practitioner-researchers conduct their investigations. The scientific products emerging from this project will include : a masters, or doctoral thesis produced by each of the practitioner-researchers, and /or publications in accredited journals; conference presentations, and a refereed conference proceedings; transformed learning, teaching and assessment practice, and transformed curricula; a comprehensive the project report and peer reviewed publications on the overall results of the project.”

I am sure that you can now understand my enthusiasm for this project in my portfolio as DVC Technology, Innovation and Partnership. It is clear to me that this project has been planned with enthusiasm and passion and that those engaged are knowledgeable and skilled. I am confident that it will succeed in what it intends, and I am looking forward to the evidence of its impact in improved throughput in both the under- and post-graduate sectors and evidence of its success in publications in reviewed and accredited journals. But most of all, I am looking forward to evidence of its contribution to a more just and equitable professional and social South Africa.

Before I conclude, I wish to add that the importance of this project and many others that aim to empower our staff to become researchers and to publish is indicated in the recent serious drop in Research Development Grant (RDG)), which has seriously affected DUT and WSU (I had a chat with Prof Obi DVC Academic and Research from that university). For example, for DUT we had expected to get R18m in 2011 but instead we got R400k. The Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Training Prof Mkhize at the Inauguration of Prof Bawa, the VC of DUT on the 26th March also alluded to this serious situation. We therefore remain hopeful that initiatives of this nature will assist the universities affected in bridging the financial gap through increased publications. We will do all that we can to provide support to such groups.

Congratulations to all those who were instrumental in putting the proposals together that resulted in the funding and who continue to hold the groups together. Please keep up the good work. I also sincerely thank the participants (researchers) involved in this group, for their dedication and effort as I am aware that studying at this level is never easy and is full of sacrifices.

I thank you all for being here tonight and wish TES all the best over the next three years.

God Bless you all.