

**Address by the Minister of Education , Ms. Naledi Pandor, MP,
at the Closing Ceremony of the 11th General Conference of the
Association of African Universities**

*Cape Town, South Africa
Friday 25th February 2005*

The Secretary General of the AAU, Prof. Akilagpa Sawyerr
The Executive Board of the AAU
Vice Chancellors of the Member Institutions of the AAU
Representatives of International Agencies
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for according me the honour of closing the 11th Conference of the Association of African Universities (AAU).

The conference is a timely occasion in the calendar of African events. Recent Developments on the continent consistently point to the need for full intellectual engagement with the many tasks Africa must fulfill if we are to succeed. It is clear from a range of evidence that critical to our success is the urgent revival of higher education institutions on the continent.

The central challenge the Association faces is to place itself in a position that it allows it to support and strengthen intellectual engagement research and institution building. The Association should be supported to become the premier African vehicle for linking higher education to African and world development.

Once you have the necessary support and infrastructure you will be able to play an effective role in determining practical responses to the central challenge of identifying new knowledge that is grounded in the realities of ordinary Africans and contributes to the sustainable development of our countries.

We intend to continue engaging the leadership of the Association in order to cement our early discussions about possible avenues of support. It is also important for African governments to take some responsibility for supporting African organizations such as this one. I am confident that South Africa will be the first to act on this belief.

Intellectual partnerships cannot solely rely on government support and I am pleased that the conference spent time discussing the critical role of partnerships on the continent. As many of you well know we also need to learn from past experience and to prepare

African higher education to develop the ability to shape partnerships in the interests of our institutions, and in support of an African driven agenda.

The lessons from existing partnerships across the continent provide a useful base on which to craft a future model of engagement. I have noted a significant growth in higher education collaboration in several regions. These suggest that slowly but surely the revitalization of the African university is under way.

Despite these positive developments there are warning signals that we must heed. The growing international market for education has the potential to undermine our best efforts at revival and survival. If we are not proactive and organized we face the prospect of undermining all the recent positive gains and advances. We would also face the prospect of erasing the presence of African heritage and African identity in higher education.

Our education ministries have increasingly been reluctantly dragged into discussions about GATS in higher education. Very little engagement with the sector had preceded our discussions in international fora. We should be worried by GATS and the pull we are experiencing. Worried, about the trend towards treating knowledge as a commodity. Education is not merely a value-free instrument for the transfer of skills across national and regional boundaries. Any view that argues education is value free wants to convince us to accept external dominance. On the contrary, education embraces the intellectual, cultural, political, and social development of individuals, institutions and nations. It is these characteristics that support arguments for a significantly strengthened African derived higher education system.

The “rules” that shape the GATS are complex and far from transparent and we worry about the so-called progressive liberalization of trade. We must ensure that the effects of trade liberalization on efforts to truly internationalise higher education can be minimized.

There is a real pull on our institutions and we have to strive to ensure that our already limited financial resources are not increasingly used for trade driven activities rather than those that emphasise intellectual and social gains.

We are convinced that a fundamental re-thinking of the inclusion of education in GATS is needed. We must avoid, at all cost, an approach to GATS that puts our education in peril. Only time will tell whether it is indeed possible to engage with GATS in ways that hold promise for our own agendas and needs. I think the AAU should not wait to see. It should assist in shaping effective responses.

However, I believe GATS should neither become our sole preoccupation, nor should it paralyse meaningful transformation and partnership.

All of our public universities and technikons have a rich history of partnerships with sister institutions across the globe. These relationships include staff and student exchanges, support for capacity building, and research linkages. They are partnerships between peers, shaped for mutual benefit and not for commercial purposes.

South Africa is also deeply committed to our responsibilities in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Since 1994, South Africa has witnessed a tremendous increase in the flow of students, particularly from other parts of our region and Africa – from about 5000 students to some 50,000 today.

Our rich international partnership in higher education have also played an important role in helping to reduce the accumulated effects of years of isolation from the global community during apartheid.

The South Africa Norway Tertiary Education Development (SANTED) Programme is an excellent example of genuine support for the development of higher education not only in South Africa, but also in the SADC region as a whole. The SADC projects include a major 3-way collaboration in academic programme development in economics, engineering and biological sciences. Seven universities are involved in the project.

South Africa is willing and ready to contribute to the renewal of the African university through partnerships.

This year we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Charter, which was our guiding light in the struggle against apartheid. The Freedom Charter called for the “doors of learning and culture to be open to all”.

This is no easy task given resource constraints and the range of competing social claims in other sectors such as health and housing.

However, we are committed to ensuring that opening the doors of learning and culture is not narrowly restricted to our citizens.

I cannot emphasise enough the difference staff and students from beyond our borders make to our higher education system.

This is mainly in two aspects:

First, our institutions are enriched by increased diversity. One of the great advantages of going to university is to get a wide range of experience. Students do not just learn from books and professors. They learn from all the different people they meet. The best universities in the world boast the greatest diversity in teachers and students.

Second, diversity plays a key role in transforming our higher education system. I would like to elaborate on this.

As you may be aware, we have transformed the institutional landscape of higher education and re-arranged that spatial geography of apartheid that reserved the best places and resources for whites and left the worst and often rural outposts for black colleges.

The student ratio has been turned on its head within ten years. Black students and black female students are now in a majority at our institutions and I am pleased to say that most graduates are now black and female as well. There are still some skewed ratios in relation to what we would like to see between students studying the arts and those in the sciences and between undergraduates and postgraduates and between men and women undertaking research in the fields of science and technology. We have taken great steps and I think we can be legitimately proud of what we have achieved.

But the process of transformation is not static. It does not stand still. It does not wait for change to happen. Transformation has to reach into every nook and cranny of our higher education system and we find that the most difficult thing to change is institutional culture, that way of doing things, those invisible patterns of power and influence that determine that because a thing has been done like this since time immemorial it should continue to be done so, because it benefits a few, an entrenched few. And that is where we can learn from students and academics who bring fresh perspectives.

This positive diversity on our campuses helps democratic South Africa by ensuring that our commitment to Africa and to African solutions is reflected in the culture, organizational ethos, and curriculum framework and content of our higher education institutions.

It is our view that the increasing inflow and presence of academics and students from Africa in our institutions can and should contribute to helping us redefine their vision and mission.

As we can learn from the rest of Africa, there is much that we can offer in return. We have a relatively large, stable and well-resourced higher education system, which in some cases and programmes can compare with the best in the world. Our institutions can contribute to enhancing access to higher education, and to the building capacity of institutions on the continent.

However, we need to ensure that the emerging and developing relationship between South African institutions and others on the continent is based on a partnership of equals. We cannot be party to a new form of colonialism and domination.

We are particularly concerned to ensure that the role of South African institutions in Africa is regulated. We do not want our institutions to go into Africa as academic entrepreneurs. We want them to be guided by the vision of the African Renaissance and not by a narrow drive to generate additional income at the expense of quality provision.

In this regard, a draft for regulating South African institutions was released some two years ago. So it would be opportune for the AAU to consider developing a code of conduct that would guide inter-institutional relationships and partnerships between higher education institutions in Africa.

Let me leave you with that thought. I would like to thank you once again for inviting me to address this closing ceremony.