

By Elaina Loveland

Educator and Diplomat: South Africa's Barbara Masekela

BARBARA MASEKELA IS THE SOUTH AFRICAN ambassador to the United States. She was educated in South Africa, Zambia, and the United States. Masekela taught at Rutgers University in the English Department for nine years until 1982. She has spent most of her life as a political activist working with the ANC Observer Mission to the United Nations, in Zambia at the ANC Headquarters. After Nelson Mandela was released, she became a member of the NEC of the ANC and later part of the negotiations commission. She also served as Nelson Mandela's chief of staff. Masekela was appointed as ambassador to France and UNESCO in 1995. She was executive director for De Beers and served as director on the boards of Standard Bank of South Africa, the South African Broadcasting Corporation, the World Diamond Council, and the International Marketing Council. She is also a trustee of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund and Nelson Mandela Foundation. After retirement in 2003, South African President Mbeki appointed her as ambassador to the United States of America in June 2003. She has two sons: Mabusha and Selema.

IE: Although you were educated in South Africa, you have been a professor at several universities in the United States. What was your experience like as a foreign scholar teaching? How do you think your teaching experience affects your role as ambassador?

MASEKELA: There is a very slight distinction in the work of teaching students about the world against an ambassador educating the world about South Africa.

As teachers we encourage and inspire critical analysis of situations, greater interrogation of issues, and more lateral thinking. So too do I strive to deepen the understanding of the realities of my country and continent.

I have found my teaching experience in the United States extremely valuable as it empowered me as an ambassador to have firsthand experience of the culture and psyche of the United States and its people. I must add though, that the advent of the mass electronic media and information technology in general has muted curiosity. There is a marked tendency for passive acceptance and the information overload demands too many skills to enable selectivity.

IE: How has the end of apartheid in South Africa affected the higher education system?

MASEKELA: The end of apartheid signaled an end to a racially based education system that actively served to confine the African majority to an unskilled labor unit. This system ensured that blacks could not become scientists, engineers, architects, or have any significant technical expertise.

After 1994 a new policy for higher education had to be developed that was to integrate the higher education system fractured by apartheid. We have managed to create a single coordinated higher education system premised on equal opportunity and redress. To build on this, we are now beginning to make progress in ensuring that this system is geared toward developing the human resources through skills, training, and acquisition necessary for South Africa to participate in the global economy. However, the sciences are still our weakest sector.

IE: What are the key points of the higher education strategy in South Africa today?



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South African Ambassador Barbara Masakela

MASEKELA: Our strategy is rooted in the realities of the knowledge-based global economy that we find ourselves in. Key to our success in this regard is the South African government's strategy to increase access and produce graduates with skills and competencies to meet South Africa's human resource needs.

The government has set out four core objectives that we wish to achieve in the higher education sector, which include the following:

- Increase access and produce graduates with skills and competencies to meet South Africa's human resource needs;
- Promote equity of access and outcomes and redress past inequalities by ensuring that student and staff profiles reflect the demographic composition of the society;
- Ensure diversity in the institutional landscape through mission and programme differentiation to meet national and regional skills and knowledge needs; and
- Restructure and consolidate the institutional landscape to transcend fragmentation, inequalities, and inefficiencies caused by apartheid.

IE: What is the demand for higher education like in South Africa? Is it on the rise and if so, is it for mainly undergraduate education or for graduate-level education as well?

MASEKELA: The demand for higher education is on a steep upward trajectory for both undergraduate and graduate-level ed-

ucation. Enrollment has expanded significantly since 1994, from approximately 495,000 students, to 737,000 by 2005, with the majority of these being black students.

IE: What are the greatest challenges facing South African higher education in recent decades and today?

MASEKELA: Most of the challenges we face in the education sector in South Africa are linked to a broader socioeconomic development context.

A major challenge is within the K-12 school system itself. The schools and the students that were advantaged under apartheid continue to perform well; the challenge is to improve the socioeconomic circumstances of the previously disadvantaged and their learning environment, both physical and intellectual.

Similarly, within the higher education arena, the challenge to redress past inequalities in terms of race and gender profiles for both students and academics is critical. In the case of improving access for students, it is particularly important to focus on the financially disadvantaged. To this end, we need to improve the quality of educational provision, specifically at under-resourced institutions.

Our challenge is and continues to be ensuring that the success in access is matched by equity in outcomes. The improvement of student retention and output remains a high priority. Although we have more than doubled our graduates, we are not producing enough graduates in key skill areas. We are short of business and financial managers. We are short of men and women with engineering skills. We are short of men and women with information technology skills.

We have 70 percent of the potentially economically active youth out of work, in poverty, and under-skilled. We need to provide them with skills to participate in and take advantage of economic opportunities necessary to compete in the global economy.

The skills that we lack and desperately need to deliver requires the public, private and, civil society to collaborate in areas such as engineering (100,000 per year), planning and management skills in the public sector, and the need for artisans, teachers (especially math and science), information and communication technology professionals, project managers, workers with finance skills, etc.

IE: In the past decade, what advancements have been made in improving the higher education system in South Africa?

MASEKELA: We have consistently invested the lion's share of our national budget for education. As a middle income-developing country we do have one of the highest levels of investment in education of any country of comparable economic size to our own.

We have moved away from apartheid divisions and created a single national and coordinated system of higher education.

In terms of access, we have made tremendous strides in opening the doors of learning. In 1994 there were approximately 495,000 students registered in higher education, compared to 734,000 in 2005. This figure is set to increase to more than 800,000 by 2010.

Similarly, the equity profile of the higher education system has changed markedly during the same period.

IE: How has South Africa been affected by trends in higher education such as the development of branch campuses and foreign universities starting campuses in countries beyond their borders?

MASEKELA: The impact of private and foreign universities has been minimal as the public higher education system offers quality higher education programs that are affordable to all. However, all private higher education providers are regulated to ensure the provision of quality and to protect the consumer against unscrupulous business practices.

(ICT). These initiatives also extended beyond South Africa and into the continent of Africa in support of our goal of bridging the digital divide and integrating the continent into the global economy.

In this regard the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) e-Africa Commission aims to roll out ICT infrastructure to 600,000 African schools. U.S. corporations have begun to provide technology solutions at no cost to several secondary schools in many African countries.

IE: Is "brain drain" a concern to South Africans?

MASEKELA: Similar to other developing countries, South Africa is concerned about the recruitment of scarce and critical skills by developed countries from developing countries. In this regard, South Africa continues to discuss with developed countries about this practice, especially in the fields of education and health sciences. However, the movement of our home-grown human resources to other countries is an affirmation of the quality of our higher education system. We are also encouraged by the return of expatriate South Africans. Most are products of a free South African education.

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IE: Do public-private partnerships exist in South Africa to help fund the higher education system? If so, how do they work and what are the advantages and disadvantages of the partnerships?

MASEKELA: We see both the private sector and civil society as critical partners in our efforts to address the huge socioeconomic disparities we inherited from apartheid.

These partnerships are largely between universities and private companies in particular areas of research. The private sector also supports a significant number of students enrolled in higher education, as well as providing funds for infrastructure and other developments at universities.

An innovative and unique example is the CIDA City Campus, a free higher education institution that provides economically relevant degrees with students sponsored through corporate partnerships. It describes itself as "the only free, open access, holistic, higher educational facility in the world which is operated and managed by its students, from administration duties to facilities management." Each student is required to return to their rural schools and communities, during holidays, to teach what they have learned.

A number of U.S. corporations have also invested in South Africa and have become part of this greater social and economic development project. These investments include initiatives to develop community training centers, free application of software, and teacher training in information and communications technology

IE: What impact does international exchange of students and scholars have on South Africa? How many South African students study abroad? Do foreign scholars teach at South African universities?

MASEKELA: Not only do the international exchange programs greatly enrich the learning experience in South Africa, but also lead to international collaboration on research and development. A shining example is the Southern African Large Telescope (SALT), one of the largest optical telescopes in the world. This was a product of international collaboration between South African and foreign higher education institutions such as University of Wisconsin-Madison and Rutgers University in the United States.

As part of our skills-development program, Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA), we are in the process of connecting South Africa with the global skills network in education and training opportunities, including the United States. This involves placement abroad to fast track professional development and provide unemployed graduates with work experience. There is significant scope to deepen collaboration between South Africa and the United States within the education and commercial spheres.

Closer to home, South Africa has made a policy decision to make its higher education system accessible to other African countries. In this regard, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Education and Training Protocol reserves at least 5 percent of enrollments for SADC students. International students are important in helping

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to grow diversity on South African campuses by bringing with them alternative cultures and experiences, thus adding new dimensions to teaching and learning. The internationalization of education also enables South Africa to contribute to the development of the continent.

IE: What are your greatest concerns about education internationally?

MASEKELA: There are several concerns I have about education on an international scale. One, is the increasing gap of information systems and knowledge development between developed and developing nations because of unequal resources. Another concern is the commercialization and marketization of education especially under the auspices of the General Agreement in Trades and Services (GATS). Also, the negative aspect of globalization on education in developing countries—these are largely manifest in governments being discouraged from increasing public investment in higher

education. In addition, the primacy of international content that does not take into account the specifications of local experience is another concern of mine.

IE: What does the future hold for the higher education in South Africa?

MASEKELA: The future of higher education in South Africa is bright. South Africa will continue to build the higher education system to ensure that it is responsive to social and national human resource needs appropriate for the twenty-first century.

South African higher education institutions are rediscovering Africa as a discursive space for intellectual growth. South African universities are now benefiting from scholarships from all over Africa and attracting students and scholars from other African universities, building research partnerships and academic networks. **IE**

ELAINA LOVELAND is managing editor of *IE*.



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