

14 January 2002

Professor A K Asmal  
Minister of Education  
Private Bag X603  
Pretoria  
0001

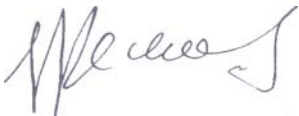
Dear Minister

REPORT ON THE POSITION OF AFRIKAANS IN THE  
UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

I am pleased to submit to you the attached report by the informal committee convened to provide you with advice on the position of Afrikaans within the university system.

I thank you on behalf of the Committee for the opportunity to do this work and we trust that our report may be of some assistance as you contemplate this issue.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G J Gerwel', written in a cursive style.

G J Gerwel

**REPORT TO MINISTER OF EDUCATION A K ASMAL BY THE INFORMAL  
COMMITTEE CONVENED TO ADVISE ON THE POSITION OF AFRIKAANS  
IN THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM**

**1. BACKGROUND AND BRIEF**

In its section dealing with the question of achieving equity in the system, the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) makes the following comment:

"...although the historically white Afrikaans-medium universities are gradually moving towards the adoption of a combination of dual and parallel-medium language strategies, language continues to act as a barrier to access at some of these institutions. This is especially the case at the undergraduate level within some of the universities. Furthermore, even where a dual and parallel-medium language policy is in place, its implementation remains uneven as not all the courses within a degree or diploma programme are offered in dual and parallel-medium mode. This is unacceptable and cannot continue."

The Plan further announced that the Ministry had requested the Council on Higher Education to advise it on the development of an appropriate language policy framework. These recommendations will provide a basis for determining a language policy for higher education.

The Minister in the meantime also invited Professor G J Gerwel to convene and consult with an informal task group ("the Committee") with the following brief:

*1. Taking cognisance of*

*(i) the founding values of human dignity, the achievement of equality, the advancement of human rights and freedoms, non-racialism and non-sexism as proclaimed in the Constitution;*

*(ii) the Constitutional provision regarding all official languages enjoying parity of esteem and equality of treatment;*

*(iii) the Constitutional provision pertaining to the right to receive education in the official language(s) of choice, taking into consideration equity, practicability, and the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices;*

*(iv) the Constitutional provision dealing with language and culture; as*

*(v) any other relevant Constitutional, legislative or policy provisions;*

2. *After conducting such consultations and investigations as may be deemed necessary, keeping in mind the work already done by the Council on Higher Education's Task Group on Language Policy in Higher Education;*
3. *Provide the Minister with advice and recommendations about ways in which Afrikaans, whose achievements as scientific and academic language had been recognised as a national asset by the National Commission on Higher Education, can be assured of continued long term maintenance, growth and development as a language of science and scholarship in the higher education system without non-Afrikaans speakers being unfairly denied access within the system, or the use and development of the language as a medium of instruction wittingly or unwittingly becoming the basis for racial, ethnic or cultural division and discrimination.*

The Chairperson convened a Committee consisting of himself, Ms S Daniels, Prof W P Esterhuyse, Ms A E Krog, Prof N S Ndebele, Dr C L van Louw, Prof S C Satyo, Prof H S S Willemse and Mr M Yoyo. The Committee consulted amongst its members, met, received and considered submissions from a variety of organisations and individuals and the Chairperson now wishes to report and recommend to the Minister as follows.

## **2. INTRODUCTION**

The statement in the NPHE quoted above makes it clear that the movement towards the adoption of a combination of dual and parallel medium strategies at the historically white Afrikaans-medium universities is a positive and desired development. Even more pertinently: the situation where not all courses within a degree or diploma programme are offered in dual or parallel medium is described as unacceptable and not to be continued because it acts as a barrier to access.

While the Committee could have interpreted its task as primarily advising on ways in which the use of Afrikaans as access restricting medium should be addressed, it chose, with the concurrence of the Minister, a more positive point of departure.

The main brief of the Committee as approved by the Minister is to "provide (...) advice and recommendations about ways in which Afrikaans, whose achievements as scientific and academic language had been recognised as a national asset by the National Commission on Higher Education, can be assured of continued long term maintenance, growth and development as a language of science and scholarship in the

higher education system without non-Afrikaans speakers being unfairly denied access within the system, or the use and development of the language as a medium of instruction wittingly or unwittingly becoming the basis for racial, ethnic or cultural division and discrimination."

The point of departure is the positive obligation to nurture, develop, promote and conserve a South African language and is located within the overall concern for the promotion of multi-lingualism as one of the foundational values of our postapartheid society.

The mobilisation and pressures from sectors of Afrikaans speakers are in some sense irrelevant to this undertaking. The same obligation applies for all the South African languages, irrespective of the extent of organised effort on the part of speakers of the language.

The promotion of multi-lingualism is a constitutional obligation and the Constitution contains the basic or foundational ideals of what South Africans imagine themselves capable of being in societal context and of the manner in which they wish to live together.

Three emancipatory strands in contemporary South African social thought are of particular relevance to this discussion: the emphasis on rights of women and gender equality; the awareness of ecology and of the need to protect and conserve the natural environment; and the recognition of social diversity as of intrinsic value. None of these social ideals may already be adequately expressed in the actuality of our daily living, but they combine to provide a forward-looking and liberating thrust to our conceptions of sustainable humane existence in the twenty-first century. More than any of the values contained in our foundational notions these three clusters represent advances on the project of modernity with its largely homogenising intent that had been so formative to much of liberation thinking.

The promotion of multi-lingualism is an important manifestation of the recognition and nurturing of social diversity. As with the other two clusters of values cited in conjunction with this one, its implementation and expression in practice will always be in tension with competing imperatives and considerations. In our specific circumstances financial affordability and the rights of others immediately present themselves as limiting and competing considerations. The Constitution is explicit about such rights as receiving education in the official language(s) of choice being subject to not only considerations of practicability but more fundamentally those of equity and the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices.

The primary premise, though, is that there is a societal obligation to promote multi-lingualism, inter alia through attention to the development of the various functions of the different languages.

The report by the Council on Higher Education's task team on language, "Language policy framework for higher education in South Africa", made some broad policy recommendations aimed at the promotion of multi-lingualism in higher education. The Minister requested from this Committee some more specific recommendations in regard of Afrikaans.

### **3. AFRIKAANS IN A MULTILINGUAL CONTEXT**

The argument for multi-lingualism in South Africa often sets itself up as a campaign against the dominance of English as language of public functions. This is particularly pronounced in some Afrikaans discourses on multi-lingualism, mostly expressed in terms of the right of Afrikaans to have its practical status left untouched and undiminished. Appeals to collective memories of Anglo-Boer rivalry in which contests over language were central, sometimes play a role in this approach.

While this Committee has as its point of departure the obligation and intrinsic desirability to promote multi-lingualism, it situates that firmly within a positive acceptance that South Africa is a leading country within the anglophone world; that English is our medium towards access and competitiveness in the globalised modern world; that English is a major binding language amongst South Africans; and, that for all the preceding reasons the promotion of competence in English amongst all South Africans should be an important part of the multi-lingual

Some of the arguments for institutionalised linguistic diversity also tend to take issue, even if only by implication at times, with the project of nation building. In those arguments nation building is presented as a homogenising and hegemonic project seeking to secure central control by certain sectors of society over all forms of social expression.

In this respect the Committee once more took its cue from the Constitution that in various places in its text posits national unity as a priority amongst our foundational notions. The deeply destructive divisions of our past and the structured injustices that accompanied those divisions render the building of national unity and the healing of those divisions the primary task of social

The promotion and nurturing of socio-diversity are not alternatives or qualifications to national unity. In its Preamble, for example, the Constitution speaks of us being

"united in our diversity" and of "build(ing) a united and democratic South Africa". The recognition and nurturing of socio-diversity is as intrinsically essential to the building of sustainable living-together-in-society as is the nurturing of biodiversity for a sustainable natural environment. This is firmly acknowledged in the South African Constitution.

Progressive societies - and South Africa communally imagines itself one of the foremost progressive societies in the current world - expend resources on the nurturing and protection of biodiversity and the natural environment even where the economic and practical returns are not immediately forthcoming. Erosive threats to species and formations are anticipated and acted on, ensuring that the pressures of the immediate present do not endanger diversity and sustainability in the longer term. Our Constitution's repeated emphasis on aspects of social diversity as the constituent elements of sustainable national unity supposes an analogous commitment. There is nowhere in the South African Constitution the hint of an implied wish for a reduction in the number of forms of social or cultural expression, least of all as concerns languages.

While it does not have the brief to advise on the position of other languages, the Committee cannot but comment on Afrikaans within the combined context of the other South African languages. This is, amongst other things, in keeping with the approach of the CHE's language task team whose work our brief asks us to keep in mind.

In its earlier report the Council on Higher Education's task team referred to some of the objectives of language policy in a multi-lingual South Africa. Amongst these are: the facilitation of individual empowerment and national development by promoting the equitable use of the official languages and thus ensuring that all South Africans have the freedom to harness their language rights by using the official languages of their choice in a range of contexts, with particular reference in this regard to access to knowledge and information through language; the promotion of the official African languages; provision for the learning of South African languages by all South African citizens to promote national unity and multiculturalism.

Their crucial role of critic in society means that universities have as a task the constant examination and interrogation of even those values regarded as foundational to a social order. At the same time - and this is particularly important for societies in their early developmental stages - the social mandates of universities and institutions of higher education oblige them to be key agencies for the transmission and promotion of those notions that a society imagines to be central to it and around which it achieves relative coherence.

Theoretically the notion of multi-lingualism (and social diversity) is, and should be, open for such constant critical scrutiny; at the same time, however, the institutions have an obligation to be in the forefront of the practical promotion and theoretical study of multi-lingualism.

There is, analogous to the case of natural environmental phenomena, the danger that languages (and other expressions of social diversity) could through benign neglect be subject to steady and eventually irreversible erosion. The South African languages other than English are particularly in danger of this fate as English, through no malevolent designs, comfortably provides in the various needs, thus steadily supplanting the other languages.

Positive steps and the active development of the languages are required to prevent and forestall such erosion. The CHE task team on language identified very specific tasks for the institutions of higher education in this regard, proposing that all HEIs should participate in facilitating and promoting the goal of the national language policy to develop all South African languages in such a manner that they can be used in all high status functions.

In practical terms it would require that for each of the official African languages (amongst whom we consider Afrikaans for these purposes) one or more universities be assigned the task of promoting the development of that language. The CHE task team made very specific recommendations with which this Committee is in broad agreement.

We recognise that there may be differences in the stages to which the languages have developed competencies in the so-called high status functions. Hence the importance of the CHE task team's recommendation that a step-by-step development plan be formulated for each of the relevant languages.

We further recognise that it may not be possible in the short term or the aim at all to develop each of the languages to the level where they become languages of tuition at higher education level. We leave that matter to be argued by the CHE task team. The principle, though, that an institution or institutions be charged with the task of the active and systematically planned development of a particular language is above argument. The performance of those tasks should be regularly monitored and reported on.

We have argued for the intrinsic social value of multi-lingualism in our national context. On a more practical level, we may refer, as one example, to the need for developing the capacity of the different languages to impart scientific and technological literacy and numeracy at a more grass-roots level. As one submission to us read: "We feel that the speakers of the different languages in SA have the right to say: we want a university to take care of our language. We want to know it is





being cherished and developed somewhere, that there are these supported roots of the language. We want to receive from them the terms they have coined for cyber space, for retroviral drugs, for balance deficits."

The relative paucity of creative literature in some of the languages is another pertinent aspect as is the declining state of the study of all the non-English languages at higher education level.

These development plans for the different languages should therefore be comprehensive in its scope and not confined, for example, to the development of technical terminology as was once done for some of the African languages. It is also important that the older better resourced historically White universities be given and take major responsibilities in this scheme.

In conjunction with such a scheme the Academy of Science of South African may be requested to explore what role "language academies" could play in the development of multi-lingualism.

It is within such a framework and scheme that the Committee considered the position of and came to make recommendations regarding Afrikaans in the higher education system. Its level of competencies in many of the high status functions is more developed than that of the other languages and its needs are therefore slightly different. We shall address its specific position in the next section; our point of departure is that like the other languages besides English it deserves, for all the reasons argued above, particular attention and should not be left to erode irreversibly through benign neglect.

#### **4. THE POSITION OF AFRIKAANS**

The level of development attained by the Afrikaans language is in demonstrable ways connected to aspects of the history of colonial-settler domination and particularly in its latter phases to the dominant position of a sector of the Afrikaansspeaking communities in the apartheid order. Afrikaans became the language most closely associated with the formalisation and execution of apartheid. To a great proportion of South Africans it probably calls up first and foremost associations of discrimination, oppression and systematic humiliation of others.

These associations understandably often affect the approaches people take to the role and future of Afrikaans. That history of association with racism and racially based practices is one that Afrikaans-speaking communities will have to confront and deal with. That is part of the challenge of healing, reconciliation and reparation our society will continue to face for a considerable time to come.

This Committee's brief is to advise on the way forward, taking into consideration all the relevant precepts of our Constitution. It is worthwhile recalling a comment from the Report of the National Commission on Higher Education: "...one could say that as a medium of academic expression and communication, and apart from any political and historical considerations, it (Afrikaans) is a national asset which is worthwhile retaining." The Report then proceeds to posit as a question to be pursued "which institutions will have the right to maintain and advance Afrikaans as a medium of teaching, and under what conditions, especially as far as the accommodation of speakers of other languages are (sic) concerned."

Afrikaans is no longer the dominant and officially favoured and protected language it was until democratic change. Many of the high status functions it obtained competencies for are in danger of being eroded in the manner referred to earlier.

The difference between it and the other African languages is that there are already institutions of higher education catering for it as academic medium. Its danger paradoxically lies in the fact that there are too many such institutions, each one for specific reasons of contemporary self-interest claiming the right to be that custodian in the sense we spoke of in the previous section.

There has for long, even from before democratic change, been a recognition that the number of Afrikaans-medium institutions was unjustifiably high and that it served as a restriction on access to a disproportionate number of places in the system. The political changes accelerated the response by the institutions to that recognition. That response has mostly taken the form of the introduction of combinations of parallel and double medium strategies with all of the historically Afrikaans-medium universities still claiming (the right) to be Afrikaans-serving institutions.

The predictable danger for the long-term continuance of Afrikaans at these institutions is that the force of demographic changes in the student population will "naturally" erode the use of Afrikaans as academic medium. There is in our view the need for an agreement, in terms of the scheme suggested in the previous section, on one or more universities that shall have the specific obligation to cater for the (continued) development of Afrikaans as a language of high status functions, including particularly those of science and scholarship.

Our understanding is that the University of the Free State and Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit have fully fledged parallel language policies and practices while the University of Pretoria is a largely parallel medium institution.

Potchefstroom University is Afrikaans (and Christian) by Act and Statutes. The language of tuition is Afrikaans but other languages may be used where, in the

opinion of the Senate, it is necessary for effective tuition. The policy is presently applied in the following way:

- Full time students at the main campus receive tuition in Afrikaans with assistance to non-Afrikaans speakers.
- Tests, examinations and assignments may be submitted in English.
- At the Vanderbijl Park campus lecturing may be in either Afrikaans or English, structured as a parallel or dual medium.
- The telematic programme is at present exclusively in English.

Stellenbosch University is designated an Afrikaans university by an Act of Parliament. The language medium is Afrikaans with more or less the same provision as at Potchefstroom for the use of other languages.

(The University of the Western Cape and the University of Port Elizabeth have historically been dual or parallel medium but have, according to our understanding, since become practically single medium English institutions.)

The percentage of Afrikaans students are declining at each of the five previously mentioned institutions. While at one or two the absolute number of Afrikaans speaking students increased over the last few years, Afrikaans speakers as a percentage of total enrolment decreased at each one of the

The historically Afrikaans-medium universities (including the historically dual and parallel medium UWC and UPE) deserve recognition for the manner in which they had changed to grant access to non-Afrikaans speaking black students. Of course, all universities are national assets and not the property of specific communities; making them accessible to all South Africans is not a concession but a national obligation. Even so, though, one has to acknowledge that diversification involved deliberate efforts and costs on the part of those universities. In some respects a number of those institutions can be said to have undergone much deeper change than the historically White English-medium

The changes in the demographic profile of the student bodies had, and are having, an unavoidable effect on the language arrangements at the institutions. While the University of the Western Cape is strictly not within the ambit of this Committee's brief its history is illustrative in this regard. The accelerated demographic changes since 1987 directly lead to it changing from a dual medium (Afrikaans/English, and predominantly Afrikaans) to an effectively single medium English institution.

That development was not surprising but in fact highly predictable. The university's policy was for the language arrangements to be arrived at informally in specific courses, programmes and faculties, largely dependent upon the student demographics. As the number of students grew who were taught through the medium of English, the pressure became stronger on Afrikaans students to change to the English medium classes as that alleviated the teaching burden on lecturers. The tendency developed, for understandable reasons, for public and official student activities to be conducted exclusively in English.

One can safely predict a similar trajectory for the so-called historically White Afrikaans-medium universities. As the proportion of Afrikaans-speaking students at these universities decreases, the pressure on Afrikaans as scholarly medium and language of public life at the institutions will increase, is in fact increasing. The parallel and dual medium approach and the so-called "language friendliness" towards others are positive but temporary measures by a current generation of leadership at these institutions. Their joint submission to the Committee suggests a faith that, in a manner of speaking, the future will sort itself out.

On the one hand, such a development could be seen as the desirable course where market forces and a non-engineered approach deliver a particular social outcome that reduces the costly complications of diversity. It can also be argued that attempts to rationally plan the future of any language within our social and historic context run counter to the full implications of the indeterminacy of social processes in a diverse social ecology. While fully appreciative of the force of so-called creative indeterminacy, the argument of this Committee has been that the process of nation building is not intent upon the obliteration of any of its constituent elements but that, on the contrary, it has the obligation to avoid erosion through benign neglect or *laissez-faire*.

We therefore return to the proposal that for each of the official languages other than English one or more universities be tasked with the responsibility for the systematic development of that language; in the case of Afrikaans that would include the continued development of the language as a medium of scholarship and science.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The University of the Free State, Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit and the University of Pretoria are effectively already meeting the requirement implied in the NPHE statement quoted at the start of this document, viz that all offerings at a university (also) be available in English. This arrangement should be clearly formalised so that all parties, and particularly current and prospective students, are aware that

offerings in English do not represent a concessional departure from the norm, but are in fact the norm. Such an arrangement will effectively ensure that language (i.e. Afrikaans) does not continue to act as a barrier to access.

All of these universities have substantial numbers of Afrikaans students with the University of Pretoria in fact having the largest number of Afrikaans students of all universities in the country. There are a variety of reasons why it is important for these institutions to be able to continue drawing those students for as long as there is such a demand on them. Some of the considerations are, importantly, financial.

A significant proportion of donor support may still be forthcoming from sources linked to the traditional Afrikaans character of the institutions. At another level, these institutions practise a form of cross-subsidisation, benefiting from the presence of White Afrikaans-speaking students with a greater fee-paying ability.

The latter argument may even be experienced as offensive because contemporary differentials in abilities to pay fees and contribute donor funds are themselves functions of the political economy of a historically race-structured society. Valid as this may be, the protection of the financial base of institutions striving to become truly national in their reach and service is important, especially in an environment of increasing financial pressure on institutions of higher education.

The formalisation of the arrangement for universal availability of tuition in English at these institutions should not detract from their freedom to also offer tuition in Afrikaans where and for as long they can afford and are willing to meet such a demand. (These universities will inevitably face - and are in fact already doing so - added financial and other resource pressures while they remain dual or parallel medium in order to accommodate their Afrikaans students.) The proposal is therefore not that these institutions summarily be rendered single medium English universities; rather that their obligation to offer in English be foregrounded, formally recognised and fully implemented. Any announcement or marketing in this regard should make it clear that the current status of these institutions as Afrikaans-offering universities is not diminished.

The University of Stellenbosch and Potchefstroom University are the two that the Committee would recommend for being tasked with having as one of their main responsibilities attending to the sustained development of Afrikaans as academic and scientific medium.

The distinction is that while the previously mentioned three universities should retain the freedom to offer in Afrikaans next to their offerings in English, the latter two will have a primary obligation to nurture, develop and promote the knowledge production functions of Afrikaans.

No one of the five universities, operating in the global modern world, wishes to be exclusively Afrikaans. The University of Stellenbosch and Potchefstroom University already have significant aspects of their functioning through the medium of English and this trend will undoubtedly only grow. What is at issue here following the line of argument the Committee advanced in the preceding sections is the need to ensure that at these two institutions the right of access to Afrikaans-medium studies be guaranteed and dynamically promoted, particularly at undergraduate level.

The two universities should be encouraged to continue and enhance their policies and practices of creating environments that are friendly to and inclusive of speakers and users of other languages. These two universities should not be excluded from consideration as candidates for hosting a centre for the development of another African language. English as the nationally available language of access to the world community of scholarship and learning should not be put beyond the reach of students at these institutions.

The pertinent obligation, though, is to ensure that within these developments Afrikaans is systematically and consciously attended to as medium of scholarship and institutional life. This obligation should be a binding agreement reached with the Ministry of Education (and possibly the Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology).

Exactly how the execution of that obligation is arranged in practice should largely be left to the autonomous management of the institutions. What should be required, though, is the submission of a plan that will have to be monitored on an agreed upon regular basis.

The Committee is aware that its recommendations precede the outcome of the investigation into the size and shape of the higher education system. Our recommendations depart from the relevant aspects of the present position with regards to number of and relationships amongst institutions. We considered, amongst other things, that the University of Stellenbosch is an urban university within close proximity of two other universities, while Potchefstroom is a rural university in a province where there is one other university.

South African history has been so pervasively affected and fundamentally shaped by issues of race that few aspects of social planning can be adequately addressed without reference to their impact on redressing past racial inequalities and healing divisions. The approach and recommendations of the Committee were informed by that spirit of generous inclusivity that marked our transition and found expression in our Constitution. The Committee would recommend to the two institutions that they in similar spirit develop and submit to the Minister comprehensive plans as to how they would ensure that their predominantly Afrikaans-medium character is at the same time one of inclusivity.

Afrikaans-language communities face challenges of dealing with internal diversity and inequities. As one submission to this Committee read: "The acid test for the designated institutions is whether they can entertain a scenario where nonAfrikaner Afrikaans speakers, who love their Afrikaans but whose base of social power is weak in relation to the power behind 'official Afrikaans', can be allowed to evolve into a (more) dominant social presence on campus. Were that to happen, Afrikaans may survive as a vibrant language without being a tool of cultural exclusivity."

While it is once more not strictly within our brief, the Committee is compelled to refer to the fact that the designation of Potchefstroom University as Christian in its Act and Statutes poses a complication also with regard to our recommendation. We recommend to the Minister that the matter be addressed with the University.

The Committee wishes to make two final comments. The first is to note that the position of Afrikaans at the technikons was not addressed in our work. The second is to note that the historically White English-medium universities cannot escape their responsibility of contributing to the promotion of multi-lingualism.

## **6. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Committee recommends that

1. as the context within which its specific recommendations are received, the Minister approves the general principle that each one of the official languages be assigned to one or more universities to attend in systematic and planned manner to the broad development of that language;
2. the Minister confirm as policy the statement of the National Commission on Higher Education that as a medium of academic expression and communication, and apart from any political and historical considerations, Afrikaans is a national asset which is worthwhile retaining;
3. the Minister reaches agreement with the University of the Free State, the Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit and the University of Pretoria that all of their offerings shall be available in English while at the same time their right to offer in the medium of Afrikaans where there is such a demand not be impaired;
4. the University of Stellenbosch and Potchefstroom University be charged, in line with recommendation 1 above, to take as part of their institutional task the

responsibility for the continued and sustained development of Afrikaans as language of scholarship and institutional life;

5. the above two universities submit to the Minister a comprehensive plan as to how they will execute the above mandate and that its implementation and effect be monitored on an agreed upon regular basis:
6. the above two universities submit to the Minister a comprehensive plan on how they would ensure social and racial inclusivity within their predominantly Afrikaans-medium character:
7. the Minister addresses with Potchefstroom University the issue of its Christian character as contained in its Act and Statutes:
8. the Academy of Science of South African be approached for advice on ways in which language academies could play a role in the promotion and development of the different official languages in the country.

SIGNED: G J Gerwel  
Cape Town  
14 January 2002