

The Australian



Lesson in priorities from South Africa

- Andrew Trounson
- From: **The Australian**
- February 10, 2010 12:00AM

LIKE many black South Africans living overseas, mathematician Thandwa Mthembu was swept up in the euphoria following the collapse of apartheid. He returned home from his teaching post at Ohio State University to share in the new nation building.

But 16 years on, and now a vice-chancellor, he is still waiting for the building in higher education to start, while grand plans to boost participation have foundered through bad planning and lack of funds.

In a cautionary tale for Australia's higher education sector, Mthembu knows from experience that fully funded projects aimed at tackling specific problems are preferable to grand schemes that aren't adequately funded.

"We said all the nice things about where we wanted to be, but we couldn't back that up with proper budgets and specific projects," the professor told the HES on a visit to Melbourne last week as a guest of the Australian Technology Network of universities.

Mthembu was just 44 when he was appointed in 2007 to head the Central University of Technology in South Africa's Free State, but he has an older man's sense of squandered opportunity when contemplating his country's investment in its people and economy.

He says the government was too distracted by symbolic changes and too unfocused in its attempt to transform the country. "Only now are we realising that we should have built our economy."

In 2000 the government set itself a target to boost public university participation among 20 to 24-year-olds to 20 per cent within 10-15 years.

But today, while the colour of universities has been transformed by an influx of black students, participation has remained stuck at just 16 per cent. That is three times the rate of the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, but it is well short of where a country with South Africa's resources should be, says Mthembu, who believes 20 per cent is an achievable target.

A key reason for the failure has been underinvestment in schools, where he says pass rates for university entry of just 15-18 per cent are going backwards. But even if the government had invested in schools, universities have remained starved of the funds required for infrastructure to take more students.

Despite the influx of black students, they still remain under-represented at university, making up 79 per cent of the population but only 63 per cent of students. The participation rate among Africans is about 12 per cent, compared with 51 per cent for Indians and 60 per cent among whites. But, paradoxically, he says there is an emerging problem in the declining number of whites attending public universities. Many whites are shunning the public system to study overseas or at private institutions.

Ads By Google

- **Online Degrees & Courses**
Study any time at your own pace. Enrol now for 2010!
www.seeklearning.com.au
- **South Africa Flights**

Find a cheaper available price. Flight Centre will beat it!

www.FlightCentre.com.au

- **No.1 Ranked Growth Fund**

Want High Returns? Our Fund Has Returned 30%+ pa Since '05 Min \$40k

ManagedFunds.WilsonHTM.com.au

More related coverage

- **Mentoring programs fail in aim for equity** *The Australian, 10 Nov 2009*
- **Lift aim on poor targets, unis told** *The Australian, 20 Oct 2009*
- **Loading set to target low-SES students** *The Australian, 29 Sep 2009*
- **\$5.3bn for higher ed and research** *The Australian, 12 May 2009*

- **Campuses to chase unmet demand** *The Australian, 10 Nov 2009*
- **VCs salute Gillard's brave new vision** *The Australian, 20 Oct 2009*

More related coverage

Related Searches

- **Richard Larkins,**
- **Monash University,**
- **Education Minister Julia Gillard**



Copyright 2009 News Limited. All times AEST (GMT +11)..