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## EDITORIAL/REDAKSIONEEL

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### SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: NEW DIRECTIONS IN A CHANGING SCENE

- At the moment large-scale innovations are taking place in the academic offering of universities. This entails adapting our courses to more practically oriented teaching programmes, in accordance with the socio-cultural, political and economic demands of a South Africa transforming itself for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- A university, in my view, is not a true 'universitas' if it does not link its theory to the expectations created by societal needs and values. But to do this effectively the discipline should be relevant and "appropriate". In saying this I am not suggesting your discipline has become inappropriate, but we should at least be willing to test its relevance in the context of (i) changing institutional rules, (ii) societal needs, and (iii) scientific/academic norms.
- May I quote in this regard a comment from the Secretary-General of the United Nations in his opening speech at the Urban 21 Conference in Berlin last year. I remember clearly his words on the future development of cities and societies: "We need more than technology! We need changes in human behaviour, attitudes and values to cope with our problems of humanity." Within the context of this week's horrible attack in the USA, we can see that technology in the hands of people with sick values leads to senseless behaviour!
- In my view Social Work is ideally suited as an academic discipline to play a significant role in appropriate knowledge production to enhance the real understanding of human problems and the development of our societies.
- I would like to return to my theme of appropriateness: Our point of departure should be to ask "appropriate for whom, or what purpose?" Appropriateness should be evaluated on the basis of three criteria – (i) firstly, the academic relevance of Social Work's scientific base; (ii) secondly, the discipline's appropriateness for society and the job market; and (iii) thirdly, the requirements of the higher education framework and its budget.
- Within this context we could ask – does Social Work still matter? Faced with the awesome problems of South Africa and its apartheid legacy – for instance, the glaring inequalities which have sharpened rather than diminished over the last few years; the desperate shortage of jobs and housing, the state of school education, the problems of AIDS and crime, and the insecurities and suffering these breed – are there more important matters to worry about?
- It is specifically in support of such a focus on community needs that academics and practitioners in Social Work help us in further developing the social skills of our students and colleagues to tackle the immense problems of poverty, homelessness, broken families and loss of dignity.
- We are on the verge of a societal crisis, endangering our communities and its value systems. What will be required of graduates in the 21st century, therefore, are generic problem-solving skills, information management, knowledge reconfiguration skills, networking and communication competencies, social sensitivity, and above all, integrative and synthesising skills. I am convinced South Africa cannot afford not to be concerned with the Humanities and Social Work, but you will have to work out for yourselves how this should happen.

- Science and technology have to be tempered with the human element that the Humanities introduce. The real challenge is grounding science and technology in lived life, in the needs of our society. South Africa and Africa are entering a millennium of enormous societal, institutional and scientific challenges to which no academic discipline can remain indifferent. Social Work, therefore, will have to position itself anew within an evolving and transforming framework. A changed environment has offered Social Work opportunities and challenges to apply its knowledge and skills and to make valuable contributions to society. To achieve this possibility, proactive planning, hard work, interdisciplinary affiliation, international linkages, the correct academic training and high-quality research output on relevant themes are needed. May I suggest a few ideas on how to achieve this:
  - Social Workers should accept their social responsibilities within the changing needs and challenges in Southern Africa;
  - Be adaptable in an institutional and international environment that may very soon look different again. Remember in our present information and knowledge society we have to prepare students who are going to change careers at least three times in their lives;
  - Form partnerships and co-operate with other role-players – you cannot survive in academic isolation. Discover talented fellow role-players in other disciplines (multi-disciplinary programmes), at other universities (regional co-operation), as well as in the public and private sector;
  - Protect your academic and conceptual base but keep in mind that disciplinary boundaries are becoming more and more faint;
  - Be innovative: make yourselves indispensable in the market and society. Do not allow other disciplines and professions to take over and erode your traditional fields of study because they think "Social Work" is not appropriate any longer;
  - Aspire to the highest academic standards with the shrinking resources at our disposal;
  - Social Work in this country perhaps also requires a widening horizon, focusing on Africa's renaissance and millennium needs. During the recent conference of the Association of African Universities held in Nairobi in February this year universities were once again called upon to make a greater contribution towards the sustainable development and advancement of African societies through applied research.
- In conclusion, use your academic base and experience to contextualise your discipline and its teaching, research and community service role within the development needs of South Africa and Africa. I am convinced that Social Work indeed matters – more so than ever before!

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