

Dear Colleague

Having received the adverts for the 'Higher Education Summit' (summit is an interesting choice of term) and 'Higher Education Symposium', I wish to use this opportunity to set out my views on such 'events' (a term that I use deliberately) that are organised by for-profit commercial events organising companies. I do so with no intention to adopt a 'holier than thou' attitude or cause slight, but to provoke reflection on the part of higher education academics, administrators and organisations about involvement in and promotion/endorsement of such events.

To begin with, these events are very different from the usual scholarly, policy or consultative conferences since the commercial companies organise them principally, if not solely, for financial gain. Consequently, both the appropriateness of participation in such commercially-driven conferences and their value in terms of the benefits for Higher Education Institutions, scholars and administrators and the Higher Education sector as a whole must be questioned.

Is there also not a contradiction between bemoaning the marketisation, commercialisation and commodification of higher education, and yet being involved in various ways with commercial conference organising companies and their events?

To the extent that important issues and questions arise from these events, who will take these forward - the commercial companies themselves? Is there then not the danger of the market, through these companies, setting the agenda, formulating the issues and the need and then claiming to address them – a supply side rather than demand side approach.

If there are vital issues related to higher education which need to be addressed (and it is highly unlikely that a single event can do so in any serious or sustained manner), then it is surely the responsibility of Higher Education South Africa, the Council on Higher Education, the Department of Education, bodies like the Centre for Education Policy Development or universities, individually or in partnership, to take up these issues, organise the necessary fora and bring key persons and stakeholders together. If there are indeed important issues which are not being addressed through the key higher education bodies and institutions then this is perhaps an indictment of our organisations, institutions and ourselves.

If we want to approach this matter from a commercial perspective, let's note that attendance at these conferences is not cheap – profits have to be made! Yet it is most unlikely that any presenter will be compensated for researching and preparing the invited paper and address, for delivering it and participating in the conference – perhaps put this to the test. It should be a simple matter to work out the costs entailed (frequently *public* costs), which then result in purely *private* profit.

Already in 2003, when commercial events organising companies were making their appearance and seeking to focus on higher education matters, the CHE took a policy decision that it and its officials would not participate in any events organised by

commercial companies. This decision was communicated to the then SAUVCA with a request to think about adopting a similar stance but there was unfortunately no response.

The CHE decision was based on actual experience - me agreeing to undertake research, produce a paper, and speak on the impression that the 'conference' was organised by a public not-for profit body. Sizeable profits were made by the commercial company hosting the event, but any attempt to engage the company on compensating the CHE for the costs of my participation (many thousands of rands) was futile.

Over the years, I have been approached by various commercial companies to provide advice on themes and speakers for their higher education events, and to speak – all for free, of course. The most recent was the organisers (Institute for International Research – interesting name) of the forthcoming 'Higher Education Symposium'. They also indicated how thrilled they were that HESA was endorsing their conference and had recommended speakers – an issue that as a Board member and Executive Committee member of HESA I have requested be tabled for discussion.

It should be noted that a few years ago, Prof. Martin Hall and other colleagues withdrew from one of these higher education events when they fully grasped the nature of the event and who the organisers were.

For what it's worth, my own position is that I refuse under any circumstances to be associated with or participate in any event on higher education organised by for-profit commercial events organising companies. I have indicated this to HESA and that I am consequently not available to represent it at any such events. For me the issue is not one of compensation, but that there is a serious contradiction between critiquing the marketisation, commercialisation, commodification and privatisation (by stealth or otherwise) of higher education, and being involved with commercial conference organising companies and their events. But perhaps this is being too simple-minded and too 'ideological' and I look forward to hearing alternative views.

Regards

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