Challenges Facing South Africa's Educational Advancement

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Abstract

In recent years, South African higher education institutions (HEIs) have experienced unprecedented change. Radical restructuring has taken place across the country with almost all HEIs affected. This paper argues that while such radical reform initiatives were in fact necessary for the advancement of higher education in South Africa, it also had several unintended outcomes that need to be addressed. The state-driven project of merging institutions has presented dynamic challenges that threaten progress and desired advancement. *International Journal of Educational Advancement* (2006) 6, 243–252. doi:10.1057/palgrave.ijea.2150029

Introduction

Division and racial segregation characterized South Africa under apartheid. During this period, divisions were enshrined in the constitution of apartheid. All spheres of education in South Africa were shaped and modeled on the principle of separation and division along racial lines. Additionally, the development of higher education institutions (HEIs) under apartheid occurred along racial lines. Resource allocation for the advancement of higher education favored the minority white population, while institutions established for the black population were largely underresourced. The independent homeland model resulted in the establishment of black HEIs in these geographically dispersed homelands.

After the first democratic elections in 1994, and the institution of a new political order under the leadership of the African National Congress, a pressing imperative for South African education was to rationalize the provision of education. Higher education transformation was guided by the Education White Paper No 3 (2001) and the National Plan for Higher Education (2001).

HEIs in South Africa and other related academic programs are currently undergoing intensive change. One reason for these rapid changes is that HEIs in South Africa have shifted

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over the past 11 years from being separate institutions based on race (i.e., Historically White Institutions and Historically Black Institutions). As a result of these changes, the nature of students, faculty, the curriculum, and assessment is also changing within South African HEIs.

This is a period of significant challenges, a period in which universities—comprehensive universities and universities of technology (i.e., former technikon colleges)-must grapple with and respond to serious questions about their roles and responsibilities in society. These challenges include demands for institutions to respond to societal needs, to ensure access, equity, and support for increasingly diverse student and staff populations, and to respond to fiscal constraints coupled with expectations for accountability, effectiveness, and quality.

Restructuring: Mergers and Incorporations

The critical policy milestones in the restructuring of higher education include the creation of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE, 1996), the release of Education White Paper No. 3 (2001), the adoption of the Higher Education Act (1997), and the creation of the NPHE (2001). These policies provided the overarching framework within which further substantive changes have occurred.

Transformation of higher education in South Africa has accomplished mergers and incorporations. Mergers in this paper are clearly understood to be a political imperative for building the nonracial system of higher

education that is articulated in the NPHE (2001). It emphasizes that for students and staff population these processes would improve equity and access to quality facilities.

Restructuring through mergers and incorporations was also associated with a number of challenges. The institutions affected were concerned that decisions had been made without due regard to whether the system had sufficient capacity and resources for implementation or to the potential impacts on the individual institutions (Luescher and Symes, 2003).

A major aspect of transformation in HEIs in South Africa was the merger and incorporation of certain institutions into single universities and universities of technology (i.e., former technikons). Prior to the democratic dispensation in 1994, there were 120 colleges of education in South Africa. These numbers were reduced in 2001 when all colleges were incorporated into universities and technikons. In addition, there were 24 nursing colleges and 11 agricultural colleges. The number of HEIs in South Africa has been reduced from a total of 36 to a current total of 21 through institutional mergers. These institutions now comprise 11 universities, six universities of technology (former technikons) and four comprehensive institutions (i.e., institutions offering both university and technikon programs).

Some universities in the country still maintained their institutional identity, even though certain academic programs were discontinued. Institutions that retained their names include the University of Cape Town, University of Western Cape, University

of Stellenbosch, University of Pretoria, University of Venda, Free State University, Witwatersrand University, and University of South Africa. Out of the eight universities mentioned above, only two were the Historically Black Universities (HBU); the rest were Historically White Universities (HWU). Although some institutions have retained their names, there is still political pressure to undergo restructuring or changes in terms of governance, demographics, vision and mission, and organizational culture.

Table 1 shows the new higher education landscape in South Africa.

New Funding Formula

The financial sustainability of higher education is of foremost concern to the merging institutions. There are fears that a new funding formula might be inadequate for a range of reasons that include the potential failure to support a focus on redress and equity and the difficulties of incorporating the new funding formula into a business plan (Luescher and Symes, 2003).

The South African government has been making concerted effort to support student training and support in the higher education sector through budgetary increases from the Ministry of Education (MoE) and restructuring of institutions such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and the National Research Foundation (NRF). NSFAS has been fairly successful assisting students. It has a budget that has been increasing annually and a turnover of R1.5 billion a year. The National Treasury has allocated NSFAS an additional R776 million above the original medium-term expenditure estimate. During the current fiscal year

2005/2006, the MoE is expected to transfer R864.1 million to NSFAS, R926.4 million in 2006/2007, and R1.1 billion in 2007/2008.

The NSFAS awards financial aid packages as loans to students. The loans range from R2,000 to R30,000 per student, per academic year, depending on the need of each student. The NRF is the main funding agency for research in the higher education sector and manages the funds for national research facilities. The NRF total expenditure increased from R606.2 million in 2003 to R736.7 million in 2004 (National Research Foundation, 2004).

The government spent R10 billion on universities in 2004–05. This constitutes 13 percent of the education budget, or 2.6 percent of total government spending. Growth in real Rands that occurred in government allocations to higher education from 1995 was matched by growth in student numbers, which meant that funding per student remained fairly constant (NRF, 2004).

Universities are funded from three main sources—government allocations, which on average account for about half of their income; student fees, which generate some 25 percent of funding (often through the NSFAS); and private income earned through investments, fund-raising, donations, and entrepreneurial activities. The ability of institutions to attract "private" income varies greatly. For some institutions, alternative funding sources account for up to 65 percent of income. This depends largely on past advantage (or otherwise).

Allocations to universities from central treasury comprise subsidy block grants (around 87 percent) and earmarked

Table 1: New higher education landscape in South Africa

	Institution type	Institution
Universities	The eight separate and incorporated Universities	1. University of Cape Town 2. University of Fort Hare+Rhodes University East London campus 3. University of the Free State+Vista University (Bloemfontein Campus)+University of the North (Qwa-Qwa Campus) 4. University of Pretoria+Vista University (Mamelodi Campus) 5. Rhodes University 6. University of Stellenbosch 7. University of the Western Cape+University of Stellenbosch Dental 8. School University of the Witwatersrand
	The three merged universities	1. University of KwaZulu-Natal=University of Durban Westville and University of Natal 2. University of Limpopo=University of the North+Medical University of Southern Africa 3. North-West University=Potchefstroom University of Christian Higher Education+University of North-West+Vista University (Sebokeng Campus)
Universities of Technology	The three separate and incorporated (universities of technology)	1. Central University of Technology=Technikon Free State+Vista University (Welkom Campus) 2. Mangosuthu Technikon 3. Vaal University of Technology=Vaal Triangle Technikon+Vista University (infrastructure and facilities of Sebokeng)
	Three merged universities of technology	1. Cape Peninsula University of Technology=Cape Technikon+Peninsula Technikon 2. Durban Institute of Technology=ML Sultan Technikon+Natal Technikon+(still to come) Mangosuthu Technikon and a Durban campus of the University of Zululand 3. Tshwane University of Technology=Technikon Pretoria+Technikon Northern Gauteng
Comprehensives	Two separate comprehensives	1. University of Venda for Science and Technology=University of Venda 2. University of Zululand
	Four merged comprehensives	1. University of Johannesburg=Rand Afrikaans University+Technikon Witwatersrand+Vista University (East Rand and Soweto) 2. Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University =University of Port Elizabeth+Port Elizabeth Technikon+Vista University (Port Elizabeth) 3. University of South Africa=University of South Africa+Technikon South Africa+Vista University Distance Education Centre 4. Walter Sisulu University of Technology and Science=University of Transkei+Border Technikon+Eastern Cape Technikon
National Institutes		1. Mpumalanga Institute of Higher Education 2. Northern Cape Institute for Higher Education

funds (around 13 percent), which include NSFAS funding and money for other purposes such as teaching, community development, academic development, and quality assurance.

In 2004, the government introduced a new universities funding framework which was meant to be goal-oriented, with a particular emphasis on the achievement of national policy goals. It is also performance related, that is finding is dependent on teaching and research outputs. These is also a focus on redress through earmarked funds. The new system was to be phased in over three years. Minister of Education Naledi Pandor has said that, given the lack of growth in resources available to universities,

> …we have to do more with less and do it well. This means a very rigorous examination of funds and budgeting by institutions.

The new formula provides government with a strong steering mechanism with which to direct universities towards national goals, which is in line with practice in many countries—this is contested by many scholars, who also point to a tension between government's stress on fiscal constraint and commitments to equity and development.

Funding will be based on research output grants based on research graduates and teaching output grants that encourage institutions to increase non-research graduate rates, weighted by qualification level. Teaching input grants are based on full-time equivalent student numbers and weighted by study field and course levels. Institutional factor grants will tackle disadvantage by raising teaching input grants by up to 10 percent for institutions with high numbers of poor students.

The funding formula is aimed at encouraging diversity by, for instance, funding institutions that achieve high graduation rates and institutions with a large number of poor students. The CHE however has expressed concern that while policy is aiming for a transformation in terms of diversity and differentiation in the higher education sector, the formula may be counter productive and in fact encourage higher education institutions to become pure research Universities at the expense of achieving desired social goals.

Staff Composition

The NPHE (2001) notes that staff composition has not changed in line with changes in student composition in HEIs in South Africa, blacks and women remaining under-represented in academic and professional positions, especially at senior levels. Institutions will therefore be expected to develop employment equity plans with clear targets.

The higher education plan recognizes the short and medium-term difficulties of achieving employment equity. This can be attributed to the relatively small numbers of black and women postgraduates and other potential recruits. It therefore encourages institutions to recruit black and women staff from the rest of the African continent.

It is evident that in South Africa the higher education workforce has not experienced significant change in terms of equity and diversity. A critical structural reason is the limited pool of qualified black and women academics and managers.

Efforts to achieve equity are hampered by institutional cultures that attempt to resist or subvert transformation.

Under apartheid, academics and managers were overwhelmingly white men, even in 'black' institutions, while lower positions were occupied mostly by black people and women. In 1994, of 45,000 staff, 80 percent of the professors were white, while more than half the nonprofessorial staff were African and just under half were women. By 2002, the workforce had dropped to 43,000, the result of efficiency drives in universities.

According to the Centre for Higher Education Transformation, by 2002 whites still comprised 66 percent of academics while 20 percent were African, 5 percent were colored and eight percent Indian. Whites occupied 61 percent of executive and professional support positions, against 23 percent for Africans, 8 percent for coloreds and 7 percent for Indians. The news for women was a little better. Between 1995 and 2002, the proportion of women professors grew from 13 percent to 19 percent, but their proportion as senior lecturers rose to 38 percent, as lecturers to 53 percent, and as junior lecturers to 55 percent.

Higher education in South Africa also has a problem with diversity in terms of age. Unable to compete with government and private sector pay and opportunities for top scholars, its academic profile is rapidly ageing. By 2002, nearly half of all professors were between 45 and 54 years old, and a further 30 percent were older than that, throwing up a challenge in terms of producing the next generation of academics and transforming its social composition.

The challenges ahead, the CHE concluded, are to consolidate progress and focus attention on balancing equity and quality, as equity "will depend on high quality teaching and learning, curriculum innovation, and academic development and mentoring initiatives."

The processes of quality assurance that stress transformation and institutional mergers might also provide opportunities to reconfigure staff profiles, according to the CHE. Also "It appears that policy and law are not enough to mobilise change, and that conceptions of academic excellence may constitute unfortunate barriers to achieving equity. Attention to transforming institutional and academic cultures and conceptions of excellence appears to be the necessary starting point for meaningful change" (CHE, 2004).

Institutional Autonomy and Governance

The NPHE (2001) and the Education White Paper No 3 (1997) states that it is the responsibility of HEIs to manage their own affairs, thus ensuring autonomy. This autonomy should, however, be exercised in tandem with public accountability. This paper understands university autonomy to imply the ability of universities to organize their own affairs without interference from the government.

Accountability is also understood to refer to the regime of quality assurance via a set of procedures and mechanisms that would regulate higher education. Many academics view this kind of regulation as impinging on the

academic autonomy of the University. The feeling is implying that universities are not autonomous. That the South African higher education governance system is conditionally autonomous because of these accountability measures. This is confirmed by the fact that the Education Minister has the power to intervene directly in the institutional affairs of universities (Adams and November, 2005).

According to cf. Enslin, Pendlebury and Tjattas (2003) in Adams and November (2005) interpret these accountability measures as a form of bureaucratic control driven by the National Qualification Framework (NQF) and Higher Education Qualification Committee (HEQC) (Adams and November, 2005). Their argument is that for academics these new bureacratic structures with their array of criteria for public accountability generate a tension between freedom and autonomy, on the one hand, and transformation agenda of current higher education policy on the other hand.

The principle of academic freedom requires that academics be at liberty to teach and carry out their research activities as they see fit. The Education Education White Paper No 3 (2001) states that senates have the constitutionally established right to expect no outside interference, censure or obstacles in the pursuit and practices of academic work. Academic freedom is therefore constitutionally guaranteed, while autonomy seems to be conditionally regulated. This reinforces the interpretation that the "transformed" university is conditionally autonomous (Adams and November, 2005).

Institutional autonomy is necessary and sufficient for academic freedom, and thus for freedom of opinion and expression, without which academics will never produce dispassionate and objective research and solutions to societal problems (Mthembu, 2004). Academics should engage more robustly without fear or favor. For institutions of higher education, public accountability is to society itself, not just to subsector and structures of society.

In South Africa, prior to democratic dispensation in 1994, all institutions of higher education had little institutional autonomy. Afrikaner institutions of higher education (i.e., Afrikaans speaking) were intellectual reservoirs for illegitimate apartheid thought and policy. Black institutions, against their will, were designed for intellectual and professional servitude. Liberal English-speaking institutions were nominally autonomous in that they could straddle between servitude and rebellion, sometimes expediently (cf. Mamdani, 1999).

Some universities in South Africa defended and enhanced the principle of autonomy even as it was slowly being chipped away. After 1994, Black institutions in South Africa have tended, not against their will, to relinquish even the semblance of autonomy they could muster to the whims of the Black and legitimate government. Transformations in the wake of mergers and incorporation of institutions appear to have hit them harder than any other institutions.

According to the CHE (2004), the National Commission on Higher Education (1996), the Education White Paper No 3 (2001), and the NPHE (2001) provided the framework for a

single coordinated system-based "cooperative governance," and the fourth shifted towards "stronger central regulation" and altered the model of governance. The CHE writes in its 2004 report:

> Cooperative governance was developed as a philosophy for higher education governance grounded in the South African constitution. The Constitution declares that all organs of state must cooperate with one another in mutual trust and good faith. In higher education cooperative governance advocated that while different interests exist and contestation is inevitable, governance should enable cooperative rather than conflicted negotiation of differences.

"Cooperative governance" recognized both the existence and desirability of diverse voices in higher education, and that transformation required structures through which to negotiate the collaboration of the sector's many partners. At the system level the model, the CHE explains, was state supervision:

> This meant elaborating a particular relationship between principles of public accountability, institutional autonomy and academic freedom. First, government would adopt a state steering role—instead of controlling all aspects of HE from the centre, it would delegate to the institutional level authority over inputs and resource use, while demanding accountability for outputs.'

In institutions, "cooperative governance" required structures that would enable differences to be negotiated that supported "democratisation, effectiveness and efficiency," in the words of the CHE. Institutions are governed by a council including external members with oversight and public interest responsibilities, and a senate of academics that is accountable to council for academic and research functions. Institutions also have a representative stakeholder forum that advises council on issues of transformation and institutional culture.

By the late 1990s, government had become concerned that under cooperative governance's voluntary thrust institutions had failed to transform themselves or the sector sufficiently, and concluded that consultation over restructuring was over. The National Plan of 2001 heralded stronger state steering, stressed implementation and shifted to the new funding framework, centrally determined programs and qualification mixes, regional program collaboration and rationalization, and mandatory institutional mergers and incorporations. Amendments to the 1997 Act gave the minister increasing powers and sparked concern in academia over the erosion of institutional autonomy and, according to the CHE report, an apparent move "away from democratisation, equity and redress in favour of efficiency and responsiveness."

In 2004, respected University of Cape Town vice-chancellor, Professor Njabulo Ndebele, wrote that the administrative success of the third elections in 2004 indicated that South Africa's democratic framework was in place, and that the challenge for the

next 10 years would be "the processes and the content of democratic consolidation." In higher education, pressures to implement policy goals had ended a "vital continual process of engagement" and got institutions "responding to the urgency of a driven delivery regime" (Ndebele, 2004).

But at the time delivery was being pursued, he argued, there was little cohesion and stability in higher education, there were continual leadership changes, historical differences between institutions were strong and a weakened sector became vulnerable to "external intervention, which drew its legitimacy from the imperatives of delivery."

Ndebele (2004) asserts that the critical challenge facing higher education under new political leadership is to promote higher education with a greater sense of self-assurance about its role in democratic consolidation.

Research and Development

The democratic dispensation ended apartheid in 1994, but its legacy of glaring inequalities lingered on. To begin with, this was not good news for research—spending was directed away from research and towards delivering the basic needs that most South Africans had been demanding for so long.

Funding for research plummeted from 1.03 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) in 1991 to a low of 0.68 percent in 1997. Research infrastructure, such as equipment, ran down and productivity took a dive, with academics publishing declining numbers of scientific articles. At the turn of the millennium, realizing that South Africa was losing a precious

asset, one that also quietly underpinned the economy's competitiveness and could help solve the problems of a developing society, the government started pumping funds back into research.

By 2003–2004, spending on research and development has recovered to 0.81 percent of the gross development product (GDP) and totaled R10.1 billion, according to a study commissioned by the Department of Science and Technology (DST), conducted by the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) and titled the National Survey of Research and Experiential Development (2004).

Currently, university research is part of a large national system of research and development, which is itself a component of a national science and technology system, which is a subset of a national system of innovation that covers all people and institutions engaged in formal innovative activities. As has been the case with transformation of higher education, new approaches to Science and Technology have had to concern themselves with both the past and the future, and with national social and economic development goals.

Concluding Summary

From the discussions above, it is apparent that issues of deconstruction and reconstruction for higher education in South Africa present challenges which HEIs in this country must grapple with and respond to. These challenges demand a greater responsiveness of institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Authors of this paper hope that South African HEIs will work tirelessly to transform

themselves in tangible ways into universities that address societal needs.

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