

# **Governance in Higher Education in South Africa: A transformation and development perspective**

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## **Abstract**

Since 1994 the South African government has been involved in numerous activities in the country, trying to rid itself from its unequal past and repositioning the country for the future. This was primarily done through a vision of transformation. The major challenges to Higher Education institutions are "to address past inequalities and to transform the higher education system to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs, and to respond to new realities and opportunities" (White Paper: 1.1). The transformation agenda is articulated in documents such as the Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (1997). This was followed by the National Plan for Higher Education (2001) with a focus on development and addressing the current needs of the South African Communities, labour and the future needs of the country.

This article analyses the National Plan expectations and reviews how the Higher Education landscape has changed over the last 3 years. Three comprehensive, merged institutions are used to compare the pre-merger and post merger outcomes in terms of the National Plan (2001) desired outcomes.

## **INTRODUCTION**

According to Tordoff (2002, p.72), the year 1948 was the watershed in the political history of South Africa since it marked the assumption of power by the National Party (NP) and the establishment of a white minority government committed to the pursuit of separate racial development. A protracted struggle to end separate development (apartheid) and establish a non-racial government and society by the African National Congress (ANC) then ensued. The struggle was concluded in the advent of majority rule in April 1994 when Nelson Mandela was installed as president, under a democratic ANC government.

Nelson Mandela inherited a highly developed financial and physical infrastructure, with sound economic policies encompassing growth, employment and redistribution as essential elements, however when Thabo Mbeki took over as president in 1999, the government was faced with a number of critical challenges that included the following:

- a fall in the price of gold which led to mine closures,
- massive job losses, as a result of the closures,
- unemployment levels that rose to 33 percent.
- a low productivity rate,
- a soaring crime rate,
- a drop in foreign investment, which affected the economy.

Although there was a new democracy, income patterns remained skewed with blacks, who made up 77 percent of the country's 44 million people, still the most disadvantaged group (Tordoff, 2002).

## **EDUCATION CONTEXT**

According to the document, "A Policy Framework for Education and Training" (1994, p.20), a racially and ethnically based system of governance was at the heart of apartheid education and was constructed as follows:

- 19 operational education departments under 14 different cabinets implementing own regulations in terms of at least 12 Education Acts,

- 17 different education authorities employing educators,
- a high degree of centralisation and authoritarianism in all the parallel subsystems,
- a non-consultative, opaque and top-down style of bureaucracy.

There were also 21 universities, 15 technikons and over 100 private providers of education in South Africa.

From this it is obvious that apartheid in South Africa entailed one of the most formidable social engineering exercises ever undertaken and transformation would require a significant change in the social structure of society. The concept of 'transformation' particularly in the education context would appear to have been a compromise between 'revolution' and 'reform' and this came about in 1994 through the agreement reached between the National Party (NP) and the liberation movement led by the African National Congress (ANC) – an agreement that higher education was in need of transformation. Revolution was claimed by the liberation movement while reform was an outcome that many people expected to occur with a regime change.

### **GOVERNANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Internationally there are clear indications that governments have adopted regulatory and funding responsibilities with respect to higher education. This implies that the state has taken care of the public interest in higher education while social expectations have not been addressed in direct links between social actors and higher education. The state has assumed this function. Consequently in most countries, including South Africa, until recently the society's higher education institution dimension was the weakest side of the following triangle

Government policy (policy and steering)

Society

Institutions (culture & capacity) (Economic, social and political (administration and management) demands – needs and expectations)

(Source: Neave 1988).

Olsen (2000, p.67) states that academic self-steering was part of a large democratic-constitutional social order, with partly autonomous institutions. Constitutional regulations defined these institutions and their roles, competence, social and political relations, and responsibilities. Patricia Gumport (2000, p.87) indicates that there is growing tension between the perspective that interprets higher education as a social institution and the other perspective that sees higher education mainly as part of the national economy – as an industry. The social institution position puts the functions of higher education as the attainer of goals related to its core activities; retaining institutional legacies and to carry out important functions for the wider society such as the cultivation of citizenship, the reservation of cultural heritage, and the formation of skills and the characters of students. Within South Africa there was a calculated move to transform higher education and to locate its social character.

### **The rise of a legislative framework for South African higher education**

The making of education policy in South Africa can best be described as a struggle for the achievement of a broad political symbolism that would mark the shift from apartheid to a post-apartheid society (Jansen 2001).

The following is a chronological development of policy:

National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) – devoted much attention to higher education and organised two conferences – Johannesburg in 1985 and Durban in 1986. In 1987 the NECC held regional and national conferences with the theme "Preparing to Govern" (Muller, 1987). One of the key objectives emanating from these conferences

was to identify differences between actual transformative change and “mere reform”. (Muller 1987)

## **THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY INITIATIVE (NEPI)**

NEPI developed the Post-Secondary Education report that formed the basis for the development of much of the policy on higher education during the 1990s. Cloete, N., Fehnel, R., Maasen, P., Moja, T., Perold, H. and Gibbon, T. (2002, p.94) write “this peoples education project put together education activists and trainee policy experts in a participatory, consultative and argumentative process”. In 1993 NEPI reported on topics related to transformation in South African Education.

The Union of Democratic University Staff Associations (UDUSA) established a policy forum that enabled organisations and its member institutions to participate in the debates about transforming education (UDUSA, 1994).

The Policy Framework for Education and Training (ANC, 1994) set out proposals for ANC policy on education and training. The document states the goal as follows: “The challenge that we face at the dawning of a democratic society is to create an education and training system that will ensure that the human resources and potential in our society are developed to the full” (ANC, 1994, p.2).

The National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) started operating in 1995 and was set up by the new government. The central proposal of the NCHE was that South African higher education should be massified – an attempt to resolve the equity-development tension. The final NCHE Report released in July 1996 included the following principles:

- equity in the allocation of resources and opportunities
- redress of historical inequities
- democratic, representative and participatory governance
- balanced development of material and human resources
- high standards of quality
- academic freedom
- institutional autonomy
- increased efficiency and productivity

The plan called for expanded access within the limits of public funding, development of a single coordinated system of higher education including universities, technikons, colleges and private institutions, an expanded role for distance education, three-year national and institutional higher education plans, development of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF), enhanced research efforts, capacity development in new structures at the national level within the Ministry of Education, and a new funding formula with both a revised equitable funding formula and earmarked funding for programmes that meet vital national policy objectives (such as redress, staff development, research and critical subject focus) (Moja & Hayward 2000).

## **THE GREEN PAPER**

The release of the Green Paper marked the formal response of the Ministry and Department of Education to the NCHE Report. The Green Paper focused on transformation both to overcome the inequities of the past and to develop a higher education system so that it would make a far greater contribution to social, economic, and political development (DoE, 1996). The Green Paper endorsed the NCHE’s recommendation to establish a single coordinated higher education system. An important addition to the Green Paper focused on restructuring higher education to foster economic development.

Moja and Hayward (2000, p.347) state that the most contested change to the NCHE’s recommendations had to do with governance. The report disagreed on the necessity for the Higher Education Forum (HEF) and Higher Education Council (HEC). The HEC

was thus limited to an advisory role and the HEC and HEF were combined into a new body called the Council for Higher Education (CHE).

## **THE DRAFT WHITE PAPER ON HIGHER EDUCATION**

The initial White Paper (Draft) prepared by the Department of Education differed significantly from major proposals contained in both the Green Paper and the NCHE Report. It focused primarily on the role of higher education in national development, but devoted little attention to many of the values and goals central to the recommendations of the NCHE Report and the Green Paper.

The then Minister of Education, Professor SME Bengu states the Education Ministry's task as follows: "Education and training are central activities of our society. They are of vital interest to every family and to the health and prosperity of our national economy. The government's policy for education and training is therefore a matter of national importance second to none" (DoE, 1995).

The White Paper and the Higher Education Act of 1997 (Act was amended in 2000 and 2001)

The major policy changes focus on the transformation of the higher education system

- to redress the inequities of apartheid
- to meet the needs of a new South Africa with fundamentally changed, economic, social and political structures

These changes were to be facilitated by establishing a new single coordinated system in contrast to the 15 autonomous structures under apartheid (DoE, 1997, p.1).

This new unitary structure is seen as an essential condition for higher education's role in providing a better quality of life for the country and its citizens. It is also regarded as key to establishing effective democracy at both the national and institutional levels (DoE, 1997, pp.2, 3 & 6) as cited in Moja and Hayward (2000, p.349).

## **THE NATIONAL PLAN FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

The National Plan for Higher Education was released by the Ministry of Education in 2001. It is the Ministry's response to the Council on Higher Education Report, "Towards a New Higher Education Landscape: Meeting the Equity, Quality and Social Development imperatives of South Africa in the 21st Century", which was released in June 2000. The then Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal stated the objective as follows: "The National Plan outlines the framework and mechanisms for implementing and realizing the policy goals of the White Paper. It is far reaching and visionary in its attempt to deal with the transformation of the higher education system as a whole" (DoE, 2001).

Naidoo and Singh (2005, p.13) assert that, faced with the massive and resource-intensive task of restructuring and transforming all areas of social provision, the state in all its key policy pronouncements, has signalled very clearly its requirements and expectations of higher education. It has established indicative targets for the size and shape of the higher education system including overall growth and participation rates, institutional and programme mixes and equity and efficiency goals. It also provides a framework and outlines the processes and mechanisms for restructuring the institutional landscape of the higher education system, as well as for the development of institutional three-year 'rolling' institutional plans (DoE, 2001, p.1) as cited in Naidoo and Singh (2005).

What is clear from this is the unfolding of a comprehensive process for the reconfiguration, transformation and regulation of higher education in South Africa. The transformed system is intended to better serve the social, educational and economic needs of an emerging democratic South Africa.

## **EVALUATION OF OUTCOMES**

Outcome 1: Increased participation rate	"...an increased participation rate of 20% of the age group 20-24 in public higher education should be the target over the next 10-15 years" (CHE:65-66)
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In 1997 the percentage of black enrolments stood at 69 percent. The figures below indicate a very slight increase in black enrolments overall as well as African enrolments in particular. In 1993 there were 70 percent white enrolments.

Headcount enrolments in public higher education

	2002	2004
Total enrolments	677 913	744 488
% black students	74,5% (60%)	74,5% (61%)
% white students	27,0%	25,0%
% female students	54,5%	54,5%

(Black includes, African, Coloureds and Indians)

(Bracket indicates African enrolment)

Source: Department of Education (2002, 2004)

Outcome 2: Increased graduate outputs	Qualification-type	Qualification-type	
		Contact	Distance
	Up to 3 years: undergraduate	25%	15%
	4 years or more: undergraduate	20%	10%
	Postgraduate: up to honours	60%	30%
	Masters	33%	25%
	Doctoral	20%	20%
"The benchmarks have been calculated by reviewing student cohort models, involving a combination of retention rates, drop-out rates and graduation rates over a five-year period" (NPHE, 2001)			

The systems output of graduates remained low in relation to its headcount enrolments total. In 1993 only 17 percent of university students completed their degrees. The data for the 2000 academic year remained at low levels. In 2002 and 2004 the graduates/diplomates were as follows:

### Graduates/diplomates by qualification

	2002	2004
3 Year Undergraduate	55 253	62 061
Professional Undergraduate	17 172	21 589
Postgraduate Master	19 961	24 109
Masters & Doctoral	7 856	9 038
Total	100 242	116 797

Of the 116 797 students who completed their qualifications in 2004, 72 percent obtained undergraduate degrees or diplomas. The masters and doctoral students increased by 1 182 students only. It should be noted that there was a decline from 8 to 7,7 percent in the graduation rates of masters and doctoral students between 2002 and 2004. Outcome target is 24 percent (Source: Department of Education, 2002/2004).

Outcome 5 has as objective a change in the fields of study. The target and outcomes look as follows:

	Target In	2004
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Science, Engineering and Technology	30%	27%
Business Management	30%	32%
Humanities	40%	26%

The enrolment figure for science, engineering and technology increased from 177 807 in 2002 to 202 551 in 2004. Forty-one percent of students still enrolled for education and humanities related courses.

Outcome 7: Increased equity in access and success rates	The increase in the participation rate from 15% to 20% within a ten to fifteen year timeframe must be driven primarily by equity concerns. Target should be principally African and coloured students as well as disabled students.
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		Participation	Success
1993	Black	30%	
	White	70%	
2002	Black	73%	62,8%
	White	27%	72,5%
2004	Black	74,5%	74,7%
	White	25,5	84%

The inequality within the success rates is still very evident.

Outcome 8: Improved staff equity	<p>Postgraduate scholarships should be targeted at black, women and disabled students. Recruit academic staff from the rest of Africa and other countries. HEIs to develop and implement employment equity plans. SAUVCA:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff equity: % Africans prof. staff: 40%</li> <li>• % Female professional staff: 50%</li> </ul>
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	Instruction (professional)	Administration	Service
Overall	14 810 (15 375)	20 177 (21 190)	7 883 (6 781)
% Black	33% (36%)	52% (55%)	97% (97%)
Female	39% (41%)	59% (60%)	38% (38%)

(Figure in bracket indicates African)

The figures indicate that there is still a very low percentage of black staff (36%) in 2004 against black enrolments (74,5%). Most blacks are still in administration (60%) in 2004 (Source: Department of Education, 2002/2004).

The evaluation indicates clearly that 10 years after the introduction of a democratic government the education objectives have not been realised. Graeme Block confirms this when he writes in The Argus, February, 2006: "In a country with great expectations of equity, education is failing to make the grade in a way that particularly impacts on poor, rural and township schools".

Prof Barney Pityana, vice-chancellor of the University of South Africa states in his criticism of higher education policy that it at times was prescriptive, ineffective, often incoherent and often contradicted other aspects of the policy. In this regard Prof Pityana could possibly cite the policy on massification and open access (Outcome 1, National Plan for Higher Education). In 2005, the Education Department's deputy

director of higher education, Ahmed Essop, said the department wanted to 'cap' student numbers at higher education institutions (Business Day, 2005). In 2006 the Education Minister Naledi Pandor announced that government is considering wresting away control over the levels of fees tertiary institutions can charge students in a bid to accelerate transformation and access to higher education (Financial Mail, 2006).

Professor Mokadi, vice-chancellor and rector of the Vaal University of Technology writes that higher education transformation will only be complete when our institutions produce graduates who participate meaningfully in society. He further states that the Department of Education is tinkering with policies, student capping, funding formulae, Programme Qualifications Mix's (PQMs), mergers and so forth, without getting to the 'real issues'. He identifies the 'real issues' as primary and high school delivery (Sunday Times Higher Education, April 3, 2005). Justice Edwin Cameron of the South African Supreme Court of Appeal shares the above sentiment and states that the school system (in 2005) is incapable of substantially reducing inequality in the South African labour market because of its inability to reduce inequalities in education output in any major and systemic way in a relatively short time frame (Cameron 2005).

Anthony Johnson (Cape Times, 2005) writes on unskilled youth and contextualises the problem of schools by giving the following statistics:

- only 10 percent of matriculants enter higher education
- another 10 percent find learnerships or employment
- 80 percent end up at home or on the streets

The joining of and name changes of higher education institutions received the most comment and criticism.

Prof Jonathan Jansen, dean of education at the University of Pretoria says that while the legal establishment of mergers was easily accomplished, the more difficult and complex issue is merging the institutional cultures. (Sunday Times, 2005). The University of Pretoria had the Mamelodi campus of Vista University incorporated.

Professor Rolf Stumpf, vice-chancellor of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) says that he sees mergers as a wonderful opportunity to create a new emerging institution that can function very much more effectively in terms of networking with its constituency. He further says, 'where I have an issue with government is that certain costs are piling up that don't qualify for merger reimbursement (Sunday Times, 2005). The Port Elizabeth campus of Vista University was incorporated into the University of Port Elizabeth to form the NMMU.

Professor Fourie, vice-chancellor of the University of Free State, says the challenge is to create an entirely new institutional culture with nondominance as the norm so that a sense of belonging can be created for white and black students (Financial Mail, 2005). The Bloemfontein campus of Vista University was incorporated into the University of Free State.

The South African Students Congress (SASCO) is quoted as saying that the process of mergers has lost sight of the original intention – correcting the evils of apartheid education. They are further quoted as saying that the notion of a merger of equals has been grossly overstated since historically white (affluent institutions) has tended to assimilate their historically black counterparts in all areas of institutional life (Financial Mail, 2005).

Sallim Vally of the Education Policy Unit at Wits University states, "to be fair, most of the problems we are seeing now cannot be blamed directly on the mergers, but there is no question that they have exacerbated them" (Financial Mail, 2005).

## **SUMMARY**

As illustrated in the section on responses and evaluation, the policy process has not been matched in terms of implementation outcomes. Cloete, et al (2002, p.21) state that policy studies show, convincingly that policy outcomes are hardly ever the same

as the policy intentions. Consequently, they say, there is a wide and in many respects a widening gap between politics and political programmes on the one side, and the dynamics of public sectors such as higher education on the other side. Donnelly (1984, p.257) says elected officials are more likely to support policies based on short-run politically unpopular but economically essential sacrifices. Sandbrook (1988) is more direct in his evaluation of transformation processes and states "the view that democratization will resolve problems of inequality and poverty is overly sanguine". He says that in principle electoral politics empowers the poor to demand reform. In practice the entrenched power of the dominant classes obstructs social and economic reform.

Chisholm and Fuller (1996, p.714, in Jansen 2002) state that national and provincial policymakers display a rich tapestry of policy symbols signalling mass opportunity, but are stitched together with a thin thread. They refer here specifically to the promises of 'lifelong learning' that did not come to much. Cloete and Muller (1998, p.534) conclude that although international experts described the NCHC proposals for reform as one of the best tertiary education policy documents ever written, the question remained whether government has the ability to implement them. Prof Pityana's recommendation is that policy must factor in the contributions expected from higher education and how such partnership can be structured to become our common responsibility. He says that in this partnership, universities must not be mere recipients of the state's bounty but be co-investors with the state and other sectors of society in a common enterprise (Pityana, 2005).

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