

SA HIGHER EDUCATION: POST APARTHEID CHALLENGES

Address by Prof R H Stumpf at the occasion of the International Conference on Agricultural Education, Elsenburg (Stellenbosch), 7 December 2001

Chair, Honoured participants to this conference:

Thank you very much for the opportunity to share with you some thoughts on the post-apartheid challenges for HE in SA.

1. INTRODUCTION

As with all other public functions pre 1994 - HE in SA was governed and managed from a large number of different government departments in terms of race groupings. Although efforts were made to ensure some commonality of policies, the application of these policies was very uneven. Inevitably this gave rise to a large degree of fragmentation, lack of co-ordination, severe inequities and inefficiencies in the HE system.

Against this background it should thus come as no surprise that the major challenge for the post 1994 government in the field of HE has been to: 'conceptualise, plan, govern and fund higher education in SA as a single, co-ordinated system'. In terms of the White Paper on HE of 1997 the planning of such a system of HE was to be premised on a number of fundamental principles. These are: Equity and redress, democratisation, development, quality, effectiveness and efficiency, academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability. These principles are intended to characterise policy development and policy implementation in pursuit of establishing a HE system which will achieve all the goals set for it in the White Paper.

The challenges which we have set for ourselves in HE are daunting indeed. I know of no other HE system where such a multiplicity of issues - covering matters such as: financial equity and redress, improved academic quality, increased and equitable participation in HE, greater democratisation of HE structures and practices, greater levels of institutional diversity etc - were all addressed simultaneously and within such a short space of time. No wonder that many of us in HE institutions are beginning to suffer from severe policy and transformation overload.

In this paper I wish to discuss with you very briefly indeed some of the challenges that still await us in our attempts to give effect to the vision for our HE system as outlined in the White Paper on HE and the subsequent HE Act of 1997. In doing so, I will even more briefly refer to what has already been achieved since 1996 when the National Commission on HE completed its investigations into our HE system and published its report. To arrange my presentation, I start off with the issue of our desired institutional landscape and, after that, have simply chosen some of the major operational HE areas.

2. DESIRED HE INSTITUTIONAL CONFIGURATION

SA's public HE system at present consists of 21 universities and 15 technikons (polytechnics). During the past few years a large number of teacher education colleges were incorporated into existing universities and technikons. The position of the nursing colleges and the agricultural colleges is somewhat ambiguous at present. Constitutionally they form part of the HE system but managerially they fall outside the domain of the Department of Education.

Earlier this year Government approved a National Plan for HE in which the desired institutional configuration for our HE system features very strongly. In terms of this HE Plan Government is committed to 'ensure diversity in the organisational form and institutional landscape of the HE system through mission and programme differentiation'.

Part of this HE Plan entails preserving the main aspects of the present binary system distinguishing strongly between the academic orientation of universities and technikons for the next five years at least. Furthermore, it stipulates the 'coherent development of distance education programmes' which in turn is based on the premise that so-called 'contact' and 'distance' education modes of delivery can be separated meaningfully. To achieve the goal of institutional diversity, institutions are required to develop five year forward looking programme niche plans which will form the basis for their institutional development trajectories. Finally, Government foresees the possible merger of a number of institutions in decreasing the number of institutions while maintaining the present number of sites of delivery. Three such mergers were announced in the HE Plan and a National Working Group was appointed to advise the Minister of Education on any further ones.

What are some of the challenges facing us in this regard? First in seeking to establish a single co-ordinated HE system can and should the binary divide between universities and technikons still be maintained in its present rigid format? Worldwide trends in the production of new kinds of knowledge (characterised as Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge), the growth of new areas of study in which previously separate fields of

knowledge are combined, the increase in interdisciplinary studies as institutions seek to become more responsive to the changing needs of society, and the increasing permeability between previously separate emphases on science and technology, pure and applied research etc imply that such a binary divide distinction will not be sustainable. If this is so – the challenge will indeed be how to maintain sufficient institutional diversity through concerted programme diversity. We certainly do not need, neither do we want, 36 HE institutions which all drift towards ‘sameness’.

Second - if the distinction between ‘contact’ and ‘distance’ education modes of delivery is becoming obsolete how does one deal with the present dedicated distance education institutions in SA that have played, and are expected to play such a hugely important role in increasing HE participation rates in SA? Does one move towards protectionist policies for such institutions by limiting the involvement in ‘distance’ education by residential institutions?

Third – given the apartheid history of our country and the acknowledged need for redress in a variety of areas, how does one deal with some of the aspirations of particularly historically disadvantaged institutions. Is it right that there is only one engineering faculty at a historically disadvantaged university in our country – obviously the answer is: No. On the other hand given the cost of establishing a new engineering faculty and the predominantly rural and non-industrial geographical placement of historically disadvantaged institutions, can it be justified economically to establish such a faculty at one of these universities? Clearly the answer is: No. What now?

Fourth - while a powerful case has been presented for a greater number of institutional mergers, success in such mergers in HE is notoriously difficult to achieve – especially in the absence of sufficiently large carrots! Mergers in HE are time and energy consuming affairs and seldom lead to cost savings in the short term. The merging of HE institutions will pose a serious challenge to our already stretched HE human resources management capacity. Institutional planning will have to improve dramatically if we are to cope with all the simultaneous challenges of mergers and a host of new policy implementation.

Fifth - a resolution will have to be found speedily for the position of the nursing colleges and the agricultural colleges. Establishing a single co-ordinated HE system will require that the challenge be faced of where these two sets of institutions are located within the sphere of Government’s departmental structures. In my view new knowledge trends and developments in broader workplace skills development, imply that there is only one solution – they have to be placed within the Department of Education with strongly developed links to the Departments of Health and of Agriculture respectively.

3. GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF HE.

Much has been achieved on the regulatory front concerning broad governance and management of HE. The HE Act of 1997 ensured a far greater measure of democratisation and representivity of governance structures such as Councils and Senates in HE institutions. New structures such as Institutional Forums in which the various structures in institutions such as Councils, Senates, SRCs etc were represented, were established. These Forums are required to advise Councils on matters such as race and gender equity policies and on issues relating to institutional cultures.

In addition a welcome emphasis on increased levels of public accountability has been introduced. A new HE management information system has been developed and is being implemented. Likewise, a new financial reporting system for HE has been developed and is in the process of being implemented. The new planning approach adopted by Government for HE, in which institutions have to develop a range of institutional plans, has certainly heralded a new era of increased public accountability in HE.

Undoubtedly these measures have been instrumental in changing governance arrangements and practices in many institutions. Many have moved from authoritarian and non-participative approaches to more egalitarian and participative approaches. In many institutions the race and gender composition of such bodies has also changed appreciably. On the whole these changes seem to have largely met their objectives of the democratisation of institutional structures. Where Institutional Forums are functioning effectively, they have contributed to the levels of participation and debate on institutional issues and ensured greater cohesion in institutional responses on new policy initiative sby Government.

What are the remaining challenges in this area? First, many of the newly established structures do not seem to be functioning as effectively as expected. Some of them are simply too large and have become unwieldy. Councils, in particular are too large and will have to be trimmed in size without sacrificing the newly gained victories around their representivity and democratisation. Not doing so will inevitably mean that Excocs of Councils will assume too high a level of final decision making.

Second, in some cases the sub committee structures of Councils do not seem to be functioning effectively. This means that governance issues are not accorded the required depth of analysis and debate since Councils as such can not hope to deal equally exhaustively with the many policy and governance issues they are confronted with during their meetings.

Third, in especially the historically advantaged institutions these structures are still overwhelmingly dominated by white males. Appreciable progress in this regard still awaits many institutions.

Fourth, the sudden introduction of large numbers of new role-players to the governance functions of Councils has not been an unqualified success. In many cases new members of Councils were simply not given sufficient training in especially their fiduciary responsibilities. Training in corporate governance – especially in view of the changing public accountability environment - is a very serious challenge indeed.

Fifth, the large scale democratisation and reconstitution of all boards and council type structures in our society- both in the public and in the private sectors - since 1994 has meant that many black persons and women are unfortunately simply having to serve on too many such bodies simultaneously. It would be unfair to expect an equal time and energy commitment to all the many boards. The pool of suitably qualified persons to serve on governance structures in our society will have to be enlarged.

4. STUDENT AND STAFF EQUITY AND INCREASED PARTICIPATION RATES.

In 1994 the overall HE participation rate of about 17% of all 20-24 year olds in SA displayed severe inequities- the participation rate for whites was in the region of 70% while that of Africans was approximately 10%. The present participation rate of about 16% displays a significant improvement in the participation rate of Africans to 13% but equity in this regard still remains a serious and long term challenge.

Similarly student numbers of black persons (Africans, Coloureds and Indians) in HE increased very rapidly in the post-1994 era. In 1993 black students comprised 52% of all enrolments in HE while this figure increased to 72% in 2000. A large part of this change is, however, attributable to a fairly significant decline in the student numbers of whites in the HE system. In terms of gender equity overall women student enrolments in HE comprised 50% in 1997 and in 2000 had become 53%.

Despite these obvious achievements towards greater levels of equity in student enrolments and participation in HE a number of serious challenges still confront us. First - enrolments of women and black students in especially science, engineering and technology are still way too low. In addition this category of students is also under represented in business and management and in post-graduate programmes. During the next few years a concerted effort will have to be made to achieve greater levels of equity in these areas as well.

Second - an analysis of graduation and retention rates in HE institutions also reveals some serious challenges that are awaiting us. Retention rates amongst the universities were 87% in 1997 and then dropped to 83% in 1999. For technikons the corresponding figures were 74% and 68% respectively. The drop in retention rates is alarming. Some analysts attribute at least a part of the increase in drop-out rates to the high cost of HE study and the insufficiency of available student financial aid in the National Student Financial Aid Scheme. This challenge will have to be faced squarely. A further challenge awaiting us in this regard is the fact that historically white universities have had an appreciably higher retention rate in the period 1996-1999 than historically black universities – solutions will have to be developed to curb the extent of such inequalities.

Third – an analysis of graduation rates in terms of proportions of graduates to enrolments in our HE system reveal the following figures for 2000: Science, Engineering and Technology – 26%, Business and Commerce –22%, Humanities- 33% and Education 19%. Once again these overall average figures mask significant differences in terms of type of institution (university or technikon) and the race of students where black students still tend to have lower graduation rates than white students. Clearly equity in terms of student outputs is as important as equity in terms of student inputs and HE will be hard pressed to make substantial progress in this regard in the next few years.

Fourth – in terms of staff equity the challenges awaiting us are, if anything, even more severe - especially as far as academic staff and executive management in HE is concerned. In 1994 14% of all executive management staff in HE were women- this figure had only increased to 19% by 1999. In 1994 18% of all HE executive management staff were black (Africans-9%, Coloureds-7% and Indians – 2%). By 1999 this figure had become 29% (Africans-16%, Coloureds-8% and Indians-5%). Once again these overall figures mask very real differences between historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions with the historically advantaged institutions typically displaying lower numbers of black executive managers. It is clear that a massive challenge awaits HE concerning executive management staff equity both in terms of race and gender.

Fifth - for academic staff the picture is hardly any better. In 1994 20% of all academic staff in HE consisted of black persons (Africans-13%, Coloured-3% and Indian-4%). By 1999 this had changed to 27% only (African- 18%, Coloured-4% and Indian- 6%). In terms of gender, 32% of all academic staff were women in 1994 while this figure changed to 37% in 1999. As in the previous case, these overall figures - particularly in terms of race - mask very real differences between historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions. In 1999, for example, only 6% of academics at historically advantaged universities were African while the same figure was 46% for historically disadvantaged universities. The demand for qualified black academics is enormous, not only in HE but also in the broader labour market. Innovative ways will have to be found by HE institutions to improve their equity performance in this regard.

5. HIGH QUALITY ACADEMIC PROGRAMMES

HE is expected to supply those graduates required to contribute towards economic growth and the furtherance of the democratisation of our society through their role as enlightened and self-critical citizens. In addition the internationalisation of HE and the emergence of a large array of new knowledge producers means that in order to remain competitive, HE institutions have to display far greater levels of social and economic responsiveness and continuously improve the quality of their academic programmes.

In this regard a new academic policy for HE has been developed for discussion within the broad framework of our National Qualifications Framework as administered by our SA Qualification Authority. This draft policy attempts to place academic programmes at SA institutions within a broader internationalised context and seeks to bring about a measure of coherence and systematisation in our present HE qualifications environment. It also seeks to break down some of the present impediments in the way of students wishing to move from one type of study towards another in the form of clearly set out articulation pathways – in terms of horizontal as well as vertical articulation.

In line with trends in many other countries the HE Act of 1997 established a HE Quality Committee to develop and implement an approach towards ensuring quality in HE. The HEQC has done a considerable amount of work and is soon to begin with their task of institutional auditing and programme accreditation.

In addition the National Plan on HE stresses the importance of significantly greater levels of regional collaboration between institutions in developing new learning programmes and makes certain collaborative arrangements mandatory. This is largely meant to eradicate and prevent unnecessary overlap and wasteful duplication within the same HE region. Furthermore, as has been mentioned already, the NPHE requires each institution to develop a five year programme niche plan in terms of its institutional mission and focus. The intention is to assist institutions in developing areas of real strength and excellence rather than simply trying to do everything- this is particularly true of the post graduate level of study and of research based programmes.

A large number of challenges await HE in this regard. First - all HE institutions will have to develop ways to ensure the continuous evaluation and adaptation of their learning programmes to incorporate changing social and economic realities. In doing so they will have to develop partnerships and co-operation agreements with structures in business/industry and in civil society through which they can constantly re-interpret the suitability of their academic offerings. For many universities specifically this represents a new challenge and demands a decisive change in moving towards a more 'client-based' approach in the provision of HE learning programmes.

Second - the new quality assurance dispensation in HE in SA poses a number of challenges to HE. HE institutions will all have to develop well functioning systems of self- evaluation and self-regulation, both in the academic and non-academic spheres. The efficiency of present structures such as academic planning committees and senates in ensuring quality will also have to be improved significantly. A particularly significant challenge consists of accommodating programme evaluation in institutions. This is a daunting challenge since most learning programmes cover a number of academic departments (or schools) and the usual departmental evaluation procedures are not suitable for programme evaluation.

Third – in terms of the new academic policy a number of overall challenges await HE institutions. Some of these are: What is the desired number of separate qualification levels in the NQF for HE; is the present approach in the NQF of a predominant unit standards based approach compatible with the emphasis on the integration of knowledge in the form of coherent ‘whole’ qualifications HE; are the present sets of university and technikon qualifications equivalent in terms of learning achieved or not; and should one attempt to formulate some guidelines for the designation of qualifications in an environment where meaningful communication with the ‘market’ and society at large is becoming ever more important.

Fourth - how do institutions in a region reconcile the inevitable competition for students (and thus funding) with the demands for regional collaboration? What mechanisms can be established which will give meaningful effect to the notion of institutional autonomy in terms of academic offerings while at same time satisfying demands for greater efficiency in terms of dealing with duplication and overlaps in regions- especially in expensive post-graduate programmes?

6. FUNDING OF HE

HE has been funded in terms of subsidy formulas which are based on student enrolments, successful student numbers in terms of courses passed and research outputs. The present subsidy formulas for universities and technikons are set to be replaced in 2003 by a new funding framework consisting of block grant allocations and earmarked funding.

Block grant funding will be generated by teaching input subsidies based on approved student places, teaching output subsidies based on numbers of graduated students, research output subsidies based on masters and doctor’s graduates and research outputs in the form of research articles published in accredited journals and a provision for set-up costs. In the teaching input subsidies provision is made for differential costs associated with levels of study (three levels) and fields of study (four cost categories). In essence this leads to a 4x3 funding matrix.

The heart of the new funding framework's block grant allocations consists of the notion of 'approved student places'. This means that institutions will be awarded a certain number of approved student places in terms of three year rolling institutional plans which are to be based on the five year programme niche plans drawn up by them and which are the subject of present negotiations between them and the Department of Education.

Time constraints preclude me from getting into too much technical detail on the new funding framework but the following main challenges arise for HE in this regard:

First - the envisaged funding of research outputs only in the block grants means that institutions with low research outputs will be largely dependent on earmarked funding for allocations to improve their research performance. If earmarked funding is insufficient the challenge for HE in SA will be to avoid a situation where 'the strong keep on getting stronger' while the 'weak keep getting weaker'. Regardless of an institution's position on the research output league ladder, all institutions will find it necessary to develop stronger research specializations. This should prove to be a powerful incentive for improving research quality.

Second - it is not clear at this stage whether the new funding formula will indeed address the urgent equity and redress imperatives in HE adequately. Once again earmarked funding seems to assume an inordinately important role in meeting the equity and redress goals of HE. The challenge will thus most certainly be to ensure that earmarked funding levels are sufficient to steer the system into the direction of set equity and redress policy goals.

Third - institutions will have to develop well functioning management information systems which will ensure a good fit between institutional capacity and student places asked for. Since student places are likely to be awarded in such a way as to stimulate certain policy goals such as increasing study in science, engineering and technology, and in post graduate study institutions are facing greater challenges in managing their admission policies and practices to correlate with such goals. It will also be important for institutions to avoid declining enrolments in the four categories of fields of study since this will simply result in lower numbers of approved student places and thus lower allocations.

Fourth - HE institutions face enormous challenges in efficiency improvements to deliver greater numbers of graduates to qualify for teaching output subsidy. This is also true of research output subsidies since masters and doctor's graduates will also qualify for such allocations. Will this not put enormous pressure on quality considerations? Undoubtedly – but the HEQC's role in quality assurance will be pivotal in ensuring that

quality is not sacrificed for financial gain. In short, institutional efficiency will be of the utmost consequence for determining the size of allocations.

7. CONCLUSION

In this short presentation I have attempted to present some of the major challenges facing HE during the next number of years. These are probably not challenges which are unique to SA institutions only. What makes them somewhat special, however, is the fact that they cover virtually every facet of HE simultaneously and in addition form part of a much larger transformation of our society in all its structures and arrangements.

This in fact constitutes the last challenge I wish to mention for HE – that of stimulating a broader national and social transformation as we move towards a new post apartheid society and a new expression of nationhood. In this, HE has an indispensable role to play.