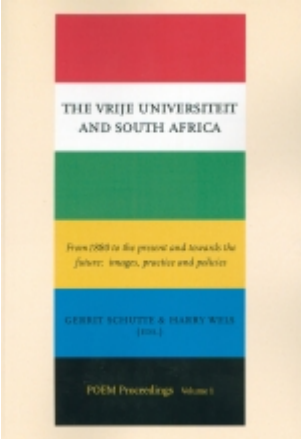
The Vrije Universiteit And South Africa ~ The Changing Higher Education Landscape In South Africa



The apartheid legacy

In order to contextualise the discourse on the changing higher education landscape in South Africa, it is necessary to briefly sketch the historical origins and thrust of the ideology underpinning black education in South Africa during the apartheid era.

Hendrik Verwoerd and apartheid education laws 1953-59

Black education in South Africa was originally introduced, developed and funded by Christian missions of various denominations. Subsequently and as the benefits to the economy of an educated black workforce became apparent, the government introduced a system of subsidization for the mission schools. The mission schools offered the same content and used the same syllabuses as the white schools, and the successful students received the same diplomas and certificates as the white students. Some of these black mission schools became well known for excellence, such as Lovedale in the Cape (Mandela's old school), Marianhill and Adam's College in Natal.

Fort Hare Native College, later Fort Hare University, was established by the Presbyterian Church and drew students from as far afield as east and central Africa. It boasts among its graduates such famous African leaders as Robert Mugabe and Nelson Mandela.

In the early 1950s, Hendrik Verwoerd was Minister of Native Affairs, and immediately complained that missionaries were providing the wrong kind of education for black people, and were trying to make 'black Englishmen' out of them. In 1953, he introduced legislation to remove black education from mission

control to that of the Department of the Department of Native Affairs, vowing that:
I will reform it [black education] so that Natives will be taught from childhood to realize that equality with Europeans is not for them.

There was 'no place [for blacks] above the level of certain forms of labour. So, what is the use of teaching a Bantu child mathematics when he cannot use it in practice? Education must train and teach people in accordance with their opportunities in life'.

Verwoerd then created the following landmark laws:
Bantu Education Act (1953)
Separate education for black children; use of the vernacular; teachers and school, boards handpicked by the government.

Extension of University Education Act (1957)
Banned undergraduate training of black people at white universities; created what became know as 'bush colleges'.

Democratic dispensation
The apartheid ideology and apartheid laws ruled the roost for four decades, until the political changes culminating in the democratic elections of 27 April 1994. The advent of democracy in 1994 brought about dramatic changes in the South African higher education system, described by Van Vught (of the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies, CHEPS, of the Universiteit Twente, and later rector of that same university) as 'probably the most ambitious and comprehensive change programme in the world today'. The changes began with the appointment by Nelson Mandela of a national commission to map out the future of HE in a democratic SA.

National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) The NCHE made sweeping recommendations, which were incorporated in the *Higher Education White Paper* (policy document) and the *Higher Education Act* (legislation) and continue to reverberate through the Higher Education system today. Among these were:

– Deracialise the HE education system;
– Increase the participation rate (18-24 year olds in Higher Education): from 19 per cent overall (12 per cent for black students, 70 per cent for white students) to 30 per cent overall [these goals have not been attained];

– Transform from the Higher Education system from an ‘elite’ to a ‘mass’ system, a process called massification, which refers not only to an increase in student numbers, but also to diversification of academic programmes and qualifications [note: there is a tension between massification and quality, hence the concomitant need for a quality assurance mechanism];
– Adopt a cooperative governance model for institutions: between internal stakeholders, and between the institution and the state [raising the question of institutional autonomy];
– Promote race and gender equity among students and staff.

Subsequent to the NCHE, the government published: *The 1997 White Paper called A orogramme for the transformation of Higher Education.* The White Paper took cognisance of the far-reaching NCHE recommendations, and laid down the philosophy underpinning the new HE system as follows:
To redress past inequities and to transform the HE system to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs and to respond to the new realities and opportunities.

The impact of democratic change on higher education
The new democratic dispensation was followed by numerous changes in the higher education sector, both positive and negative, three of which are perhaps most relevant in the context of this paper:
Drastic changes in student demographics in Higher Education
One of the most dramatic changes have been in the composition of the student population at universities/technikons:
– The overall proportion of white students dropped from 44 per cent in 1994 to 36 per cent in 1997.
– In the Technikon sector, there was an even more dramatic change from 52 per cent in 1993 to 24 per cent in 1997.
– Black students now constitute more than 50 per cent at historically white institutions.

Underperformance of the secondary school system
Ironically, as the tertiary system was expanding to take in more disadvantaged applicants, the secondary school system was increasingly producing applicants who were alarmingly under-prepared for tertiary education, particularly for science and technology disciplines.

In 2002, the year considered to have produced the best high school results since 1994, 443,821 candidates wrote the senior certificate examinations nationwide, of whom only:
– 4.6 per cent passed mathematics HG;
– 5.6 per cent passed physical science;
– 5.1 per cent passed accounting;
– 16.9 per cent obtained university entrance grades (matriculation).

And there is evidence that high school graduate proficiency in literacy and numeracy has deteriorated significantly, certainly to a level inferior to that of the other SADC states.

The rise of private HE providers
With the inception of the democratic dispensation in 1994, private Higher Education became a growth industry with numerous domestic and international Higher Education providers establishing themselves in the country. In 1999, private Higher Education colleges were thought to have attracted more than 150,000 away from the public universities. Perhaps fuelled by negative perceptions regarding the quality of public HE in South Africa, these private institutions continue to thrive.

The changing Higher Education landscape: the merger movement
Prevailing HE debates and contestations post-1994
The post-1994 era has been characterized by a whole set of debates and contestations, many of them historically based. These included the following:
– Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) expressed frustration and resentment towards the government for failing to provide redress funding to help liquidate their huge student fee debts, upgrade their crumbling infrastructure and provide facilities similar to older universities so as to 'level the playing fields'; there was a sense that the new democratic government had a moral obligation to create black institutions of equal prestige to the historically white institutions.
– On the other hand, the government's attitude seemed to be that HDIs were poorly managed, financially wasteful, racked with disruptions, corruption and chaos, and probably beyond salvage.
– There was the unmistakable community perception that HDIs offered second-rate education and produced poor quality graduates, and the better qualified high school graduates flocked to previously white and largely English-medium institutions.

– Afrikaans-medium institutions struggled to find black students, and were perceived as unwilling or unable to transform, and as covertly wishing to remain white using language as a barrier to access by black students.
– English medium institutions were seen as elitist, arrogant, covertly racist and financially 'fat and sassy', and the earlier cohorts of black students at these institutions were frightfully unhappy.

The government found it difficult to run an orderly operation in the midst of these conflict-ridden divisions and contestations within the Higher Education system, and probably saw academic mergers as one way to get rid of the problem.

Rationale for institutional mergers
According to the Department of Education, the main objective of mergers is to establish institutions that:
– Are better placed to meet the demands of the modern job market;
– Offer equalized access;
– Provide opportunities for sustained student growth.

Mergers are also intended to address the thorny questions of quality, institutional governance, and financial sustainability. However, there clearly are tacit subtexts beyond the formal motivations. These include the desire:
– To deal with perceived incompetence at HDIs;
– To blunt the tensions between HDIs and the more successful historically white institutions;
– To deal with the conundrum of Afrikaans-medium universities.

Minister Kader Asmal put it more plainly on 25 July 2002, when he told the *Mail & Guardian* that mergers would help eradicate unhealthy competition between apartheid divided academies.

Institutions for the most part have yet to go beyond the old apartheid divides. The reality on the ground has unfortunately been characterized by unhealthy competition between institutions rather than working together to complement each other's work.

Minister Kader Asmal was well known for his impatience with, and some would say disdain for the frequently crisis-ridden HDIs. On 12 March 1999, he complained to the newspaper Business Day that
… some of our vice chancellors [rectors][of HDIs] are still using historical

disadvantage as an unconvincing cover for the mess they've caused in their tertiary education institutions.

Higher education institutions under apartheid
To understand the changes brought about by mergers, it is necessary to have an idea of the nature of the deployment of Higher Education institutions prior to the inception of the merger process.

In 1994, there were 36 Higher Education institutions in South Africa, consisting of 21 universities and 15 Technikons. These could be classified as follows:
* *Historically White Universities* 11
– Afrikaans medium (5)
– English medium (4)
– Bilingual (1)

– *University of South Africa* 11
– *Historically Black Universities* 9
– *Technikons (white and black)* 15

Total of universities + technikons 36

Pre-1994 institutional governance models
Prior to 1994, three governance models were to be found in Higher Education:
– The collegial model primarily at the English-medium institutions, with minimal state interference;
– The centrist/'autocratic' model primarily at the Afrikaans-medium institutions, with minimal state interference;
– The nominal autonomy model with strong state interference, primarily at historically black institutions.

For a variety of reasons, all of these models began to change quite significantly post-1994, with a move towards the managerial model (the adaptation of business management principles and style) with varying degrees of success, coupled with greater state interference than before 1994. Nevertheless, significant institutional culture differences remain within the system, and overcoming these differences would inevitably constitute one of the critical challenges for merging institutions.

The changed Higher Education landscape post-merger
The merger template provides for a radically reduced and diversified higher

education landscape from the pre-1994 constellation of 36 universities and technikons down to 21 Higher Education entities consisting of four types of tertiary institutions: traditional universities, comprehensive institutions (now also called universities), universities of technology, and national institutes:
– Some institutions would be merged, some across the binary divide (between technikons and universities), and some would remain unmerged to constitute 11 traditional universities.
– Some institutions would be merged, or if unmerged would convert, to form six comprehensive institutions offering both university and technikon courses (such as the new University of Johannesburg resulting from the merger of Rand Afrikaans University and Technikon Witwatersrand).
– Five technikons would remain unmerged, to be known as 'universities of technology'.
– Two national institutes, offering a limited menu of tertiary courses, would be established in the provinces currently without universities or technikons.

The role of government in the merger process
The role of government in the actual merger process has been uneven, for a number of reasons, among which are:
– There is a lack of capacity (in terms of staff and expertise) within the Department of Education to guide and manage the massive nationwide merger process.
– It is evident that the merger initiative was undertaken with insufficient insight preparation for the sheer magnitude and complexity of the exercise.
– The government underestimated the cost of the exercise.
– The objectives would appear not to have been sufficiently thought through; for example, the concept of a 'comprehensive university' remains poorly articulated. Without a roadmap, institutions destined to assume this role are at sixes and sevens about how to curriculate, staff and implement a combined offering of traditional university and technikon programmes while the binary divide continues to be maintained.
– The introduction of a new funding formula in the midst of all the changes has created uncertainties about the sustainability of newly merged institutions.
– The government has imposed a cap on growth in student numbers, which would seem to contradict the fundamental objectives of increased access and participation rates.
– Some mergers do not appear to have an academic rationale, do not seem to

meet the test of common sense and would seem to have been politically inspired.

The impact of the merger on the Higher Education system
It will probably be a decade before the benefits of the merger, if any, are realised (according to international experience, merger consolidation can take up to 10 years). Merger has, however, achieved some things:
– Adjacent institutions separated only by a road or a fence on the historical basis of ethnicity have been brought together.
– The merger will neutralize the perception of exclusivity for those Afrikaans-medium institutions that are being merged.

But it is not clear that the merger will save money, increase access or promote institutional stability at this present time.

The challenges of merger for the institutions
My own institution, the Durban Institute of Technology (DIT) is a product of a merger between two technikons, one historically white and one historically black, which occurred on 1 April 2002. As South Africa's first merger, we have the longest merger experience spanning two-and-a-half years.

Originally separated by a fence for historical reasons, a merger seemed the right thing to do. But we were also separated by institutional culture and traditions, ethnicity, resource endowment and long-standing rivalries, and these barriers have proved more difficult to overcome than was anticipated. Potentially, there are significant academic benefits to be gained from the merger, but not before we have resolved the complexities of merging people, systems and academic programmes.

Merging people in an endeavour to mould a single unified institution with common citizenship has proved to be the greatest challenge. As one example, human resource issues have loomed large, such as harmonizing salaries and benefits, sorting out academic leadership contestations, and dealing with staff redundancies. However, the academic endeavour, our core business, has proceeded largely unimpeded, and the process of merger consolidation is beginning to come together. We are therefore confident that DIT is already proving to be a viable institution, and that in time, our merger will prove to have been the right thing to do.

Other post-1994 changes in the Higher Education landscape

Finally, I want to conclude by highlighting some of the other changes in the Higher Education landscape beyond the merger initiative, as articulated by Professor Jonathan Jansen of the University of Pretoria in an article published in 2003. He lists:
– The dominance of an ageing white professorate in South African HE and in research particular, and the declining research output as these greying individuals are 'put out to pasture' (my words). The greying white professors are being replaced by less experienced black appointees under pressure to meet equity targets, and Jansen is concerned about what he sees as 'the declining status of the South African professorate'.
– The declining quality of the student body due to secondary school problems already discussed in this paper.
– The culture of instability and campus conflict at some institutions, mainly the HDIs, reflecting lack of credibility of institutional leadership due to the intrusion of political considerations in the appointment of such leaders.
– Declining the voice of criticism of government and public policy within higher education 'in the face of perhaps the greatest challenges to universities' such as mergers and changes in the funding formula.

Jansen calls these 'changes in the soft architecture of higher education' as opposed to the 'changes in the hard architecture' in the form of mergers. However, the final word has to be that despite challenges of the hard and soft changes in the Higher Education landscape and the associated turmoil, South African Higher Education remains intrinsically sound, and it is up to people of good will and of courage to ensure that the seemingly monumental challenges are overcome.