



COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION

**REPORT ON THE COLLOQUIUM ON
10 YEARS OF DEMOCRACY AND
HIGHER EDUCATION CHANGE**

Held at Glenburn Lodge, Muldersdrift

10 – 12 November 2004

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1. Rationale for the Colloquium

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) was of the view that the tenth anniversary of South Africa's democratic dispensation created a unique and timely opportunity for reflection on a decade of policy making and policy implementation towards the goal of transforming South African higher education. The specific goals of the colloquium were¹:

- Critically **identifying** and **discussing** national and institutional weaknesses and shortcomings and issues and trends of concern, and the reasons for these;
- **Defining** ongoing systemic, institutional research and development challenges, cognizant of constraints but also the bounds of possibility;
- **Celebrating**, appropriately, progress and achievements;
- **Renewing commitment** to higher education transformation.

The intended emphasis was on **critical intellectual engagement** that highlights current paradoxes, ambiguities and tensions in the higher education transformation process and facilitates the effective pursuit of the higher education transformation agenda

The agenda for the colloquium was developed and enriched through a period of consultation and discussion with key actors in the sector. A thematic dialogue thus began well before the colloquium.

2. Introduction

In a stark challenge to the sector in her opening address, Education Minister Naledi Pandor observed that higher education stood “at the precipice of weighty decision-making. It could take a leap into a strong revival of all institutions and a firm role in influencing and shaping the process of transition in South Africa. Or it could choose to reside in isolated mediocrity, satisfied with a few star performers, and a majority that refuses to accept a mantle of change.”

Colin Bundy observed that the colloquium provided “an extraordinary space for discussion” between policy-makers, managers, scholars, government, students and other stakeholders that was quite unique. This report on the colloquium is intended to reflect major themes of debate, as well as to allow an opportunity to continue to engage with the issues. It will reflect trends, areas of agreement and disagreement as well as suggestions for further debate. To this end, it will draw from the discussions at the colloquium rather than serving as a summary of all discussion and papers delivered.² A list of participants is attached to this report.

¹ Taken from the CHE concept document.

² All papers available will be posted on the CHE website, <http://www.che.ac.za>

3. Major Themes and Cross-cutting Topics

3.1 The goals of higher education

Appropriate goals for higher education in South Africa were a subtext of most discussions, and covered the following:

- The range and interpretation of goals before higher education;
- The success of the sector in attaining the goals of the White Paper;
- The success or otherwise of current steering instruments and strategies.

Clearly the tension between equity and development goals still remains. As an example, while some argued that the current proposal from the Department of Education (DoE) to cap enrolments was contrary to the needs of the country and to equity goals, others argued that undisciplined growth on the part of a few higher education institutions put a burden on the system as a whole, limiting its ability to meet other goals. An appropriate size (linked to goals) for the system as a whole was not resolved, nor was Ahmed Essop's question of how to match the system to the financial resources available. Alternatives to one-size-fits-all approach to enrolment planning were not explored.

With regard to whether there should be free education or not, there were two polarised views. There was a surprisingly strong lobby arguing that much more emphasis should be put on finding the best academics to work with the best students. It was recognised that this might mean identifying students with the most potential to succeed even at school level. This view found expression in Brian O'Connell's argument that the academic product (including the production of excellent researchers) should become a priority for South Africa and that this would require a more nuanced view of equity goals ("knowledge production is different from a rugby game").

The above argument for meritocracy was at complete odds with the SASCO campaign for free education. O'Connell highlighted the contradictions in using two different examples about national consensus over economic goals (Cuba and the USA). He argued that Cuban students receiving state support carried heavy expectations and responsibilities and their support would be removed if they did not succeed. If there were to be free higher education in South Africa, fewer students were likely to receive support and students would have to be accountable for the investment in them. This was not always consistent with the ethos of South African students. Taking the consequences of providing free higher education further, this would also contradict the demand that there be no exclusions.

If the country were not to provide free education, however, who should bear the burden of this policy? Theuns Eloff argued that heads of institutions bore the pressure from students for access and this was not fair if it was a national policy to cap enrolments both financially and numerically.

Taking the discussion away from a narrow view of access, Bundy cautioned that access did not necessarily deliver equity and Blade Nzimande argued that equity had to be linked to quality of output, not just access to higher education.

With regard to the question of how successful the sector had been in meeting White Paper goals, debate veered between the poles identified by Mala Singh of 'restructuring triumphalism' and 'restructuring cynicism'. Representing the optimists, Malegapuru Makgoba argued that the situation was a vast improvement on 10 – 15 years ago. On the other hand, Rolf Stumpf and others wondered

whether, in some instances (such as research), South African higher education might even have regressed. Many argued, further, that evaluation of success should not be limited to “bean-counting”, in the same way that accountability covered many more dimensions than financial, including professional, managerial and democratic.

Many reasons for the lack of success (if applicable) in attaining White Paper goals were advanced: inadequate or inappropriate steering mechanisms, sector overload, unaligned policies, the intransigence and lack of proactive initiatives on the part of the sector.

In their presentations, however, Singh and Essop emphasised that it was too early to judge the efficacy of steering instruments. They referred to unintended consequences, but remained optimistic that the way had been opened for goals to be attained. In fact, Singh contended that HEQC initiatives had directed attention towards core academic functions of teaching and research and that institutional behaviour had been shaped in ways that could only enhance quality and provide students with greater protection. She believed that institutions had the opportunity to appropriate quality assurance to progress transformation. Singh argued that the current challenge was how to optimize synergy between the instruments of quality assurance, planning and funding, to simplify their requirements and move to a different balance between state, sector and institutional regulation.

Overall, there was probably agreement that we were looking at a very short period and that it was not possible to evaluate successes and failures within such a short time frame. Despite this, O’Connell argued that higher education was at the centre of our society’s hopes. It had to produce a culture that could help society transform at the same time that it transformed itself. O’Connell argued that the following were crucial for success in higher education transformation:

- A shared vision for higher education;
- Alignment with goals as well as agreement on how to attain them; and
- Mechanisms for conflict resolution.

Barney Pityana argued that the South African constitution and traditional ideas of academic freedom provided a way to develop shared values in the system. Despite Saleem Badat’s argument that, because of the nature of our society, we would live with paradoxes and intractable tensions in goals and strategies for a long time, Mapule Ramashala, in summing up a session, concluded that the higher education sector did not know what transformation was or what it wanted to look like. If it is indeed true, as it appears, that the sector has no clarity about appropriate goals for higher education, this clearly needs attention.

3.2 Core activities of higher education

In her address, the Minister of Education had argued that transformation was “much more than a numbers game”. Transformation had to be deepened to impact on the core work of higher education i.e. teaching and learning and research. While many of the points below were raised in the Minister’s speech, they were returned to in other sessions. There was agreement that

- Insufficient attention had been paid to curricula and their content;
- Institutions had to emphasise teacher education, especially that of mathematics and science;

- Creative ways should be sought to produce and support the next generation of academics, especially Black and female, (extensive discussion prompted by four presentations in a designated session proposed many solutions);
- Institutions had to find ways to promote research and innovation to a greater extent (Rob Adam);
- The absence of a strong link between higher education and further education and training was problematic (this also related to lack of agreement about the optimum size for the sector);
- The quality of students from secondary schooling was still problematic and higher education had to adapt to this.

Interestingly, one of the absences in the debate was a focus on regional collaboration, both with respect to partnerships and being able to do more with less. Also interestingly, given other foci of discussion, the session on internationalism was disbanded because of a small audience.

3.3 The relationship between higher education and the state

This theme was inevitably returned to again and again, consuming a great deal of attention. The overthrow of apartheid initiated an intense period in which all new ministries began a process of giving attention to social equity and redress. In higher education this meant restructuring a fragmented, divided and unequal sector, the development of clear goals and the formulation and implementation of policies towards transformation.

For many of the participants at the colloquium, it was entirely reasonable that there had to be strong state steering in order to restructure and reconstruct higher education and to achieve White Paper goals. Opposing this, others at the colloquium argued that the nature and extent of state steering had undermined academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Others, more pragmatically, argued that there is inevitable contestation and tension in the relationship between the state and higher education. The balance between them is located on a fluctuating and contextually-based continuum, which requires continual re-examination and negotiation.

Remaining on this more abstract level, one of the key questions asked by Bundy was whether policy could be implemented selectively or whether one implemented an “overall policy package – ideologically coherent, internationally endorsed”. His question was asked in the context of his analysis of international changes in higher education, and specifically how these trends had been experienced in the UK. He painted a gloomy picture of an overall erosion of academic status and authority in an over-bureaucratized situation of institutional compliance. Ironically, as public funding had decreased in the United Kingdom, requirements of accountability had increased.

Given his contention that South Africa is facing the same global patterns as elsewhere, but in a condensed time period, Bundy’s concerns seem legitimate. This presentation, however, was contested with a great deal of heat that did not always engage with the issues themselves. One participant suggested that Bundy was dramatizing conditions in the United Kingdom in a way that made one wonder why foreign academics still sought employment there. Badat expressed concerns about Bundy’s methodology of reading off from developments elsewhere in a way that gave little recognition to the specificity of the South African context. He also argued that, in a situation where there was a limited range of strategies and repertoires for change, there was a danger of Bundy confusing mechanisms and instruments used elsewhere and their connection to local goals and social and political frameworks. Singh provided a strong defense of South African choices with respect to

quality assurance, where the challenge was to regulate unintended consequences. Mark Orkin commented that “reporting gone mad does not excuse lack of reporting, or inadequate reporting”.

In other sessions, while no one appeared to challenge the responsibility of the state to reverse the past, many seemed to support the fear (expressed by Frederic Fourie) that this could become a habit and then a distortion. In any event, while no one questioned the good intentions of current policy formulators and implementers, they would eventually move on; there were fears that particular personality types (“nitpickers”) could be attracted by this brand of policy and would shape its further implementation, with consequences of the kind described by Bundy. Nico Cloete argued that the weaker the state, the more sophisticated and complicated its attempts to steer were likely to be. Notwithstanding these challenges to the level of state involvement, several other speakers, in different ways requested the state to provide leadership, or to set an agenda for change. Thus, there were contradictions in expectations of the state.

One of the interesting features of the colloquium was the response to the Minister’s address. David McFarlane appeared to speak for many when he described it as “welcome and brilliant”. One might ask, however, whether the positive responses were shaped by hopes for a different relationship with the state rather than the actual content of the speech. Given the restructuring of the recent past, this inevitably had to be a “period of consolidation in the policy arena”. While saying this, which appeared to comfort participants, the Minister still warned that she would “not hesitate to revise or augment policy if it is warranted in the light of unfolding experience”.

The questions about the balance between state and higher education responsibilities were continued in a separate session on institutional autonomy, academic freedom and public accountability.

There was general agreement with the distinction the chair (Anthony Melck) made between academic freedom and institutional autonomy. He demonstrated the link between the two concepts, however, in that the freedom to teach in the natural sciences, for example, did not amount to much if there were inadequate resources to support this. Giving more attention to this distinction, Andre du Toit cautioned that “higher education systems and institutions the world over come in a striking variety of forms and mixes including their basic relations to the state and the political economy”. Despite this, he said that some contributors to the South African debate tended to invoke institutional autonomy, academic freedom and public accountability as “general *principles* or fundamental *norms*”.

Du Toit provided a range of versions to illustrate the complexity of the concepts. He explored the relationship between the public good and accountability (and who the custodian of the public good might be). There was general agreement that state funding was clearly a factor in accountability, but questions about a situation where state funding was minimal. Several speakers had referred to the fact that there were other forms of accountability, but there was no agreement on the extent and nature of various forms of accountability.

Njabulo Ndbele argued that he was not unduly perturbed about academic freedom and institutional autonomy being under threat. The concerns about autonomy were most likely to arise when there was a distance between Vice-Chancellors and a delivery-oriented government. He argued further that concerns about autonomy were related to a weakness of leadership within the higher education sector, arising from:

- Lack of sector identity;

- A sector which was reactive rather than proactive;
- A sector which was externally directed rather than sector driven.

There was little detailed discussion or agreement on legitimate regulating roles for the state as well as for the sector. While the need for self-regulation by the sector and individual institutions was expressed throughout the colloquium, many participants were not optimistic about its likelihood. Given that the sector had not regulated identified areas and unacceptable practices, Stuart Saunders and others argued that the state would have been derelict in its duty if it had not stepped in to correct these matters. Furthermore, participants queried how self-regulation could occur without a shared vision from the sector and agreed views on redistribution. While several speakers were optimistic about the role the new association, Higher Education South Africa (HESA), could play, du Toit noted that self-regulatory bodies often played a primarily defensive role.

Accepting that there must always be tension in the balance between state and sector regulation, there was no consensus on this topic. In addition, several speakers demonstrated some impatience, arguing that it was time for the sector to “move on” from bemoaning its fate and to get on with its work.

3.4 The relationship between higher education and civil society

Nzimande commented that the higher education sector seemed reluctant to look at itself. At key times, it had appeared defensive and insular rather than confident in debate. He challenged higher education to debate what a developmental agenda for the country should be, to locate higher education within this, and to provide a vision for key challenges facing higher education. Furthermore, he challenged higher education to enter into dialogue with other developing countries and African countries more broadly.

Nzimande also provided an analysis of the South African transition formulated around an “elite pact in the middle” and a context for left and critical intellectuals to debate an appropriate place for higher education in a neo-liberal context. Compromises had been made in 1994; in the absence of the violence of that time, what could now be done?

Other speakers echoed elements from Nzimande’s presentation. McFarlane from the Mail and Guardian argued that there had been disturbing changes in public discourse since 1994, that sectors of society seemed to have stopped talking to each other and that he saw this mirrored in higher education. He asked “when last did a university talk to a FET college or technikon or vice versa” and challenged the sector to seek benefits from collaboration. Neva Seidman-Makgetla argued that Congress of South African Trade Unions members and their children were still excluded from higher education, with race still determining access and employment.

Several points arose from the ensuing discussion:

- While perceptions of higher education were not always correct, they nonetheless exist, sometimes among powerful actors, and have to be dealt with. Badat expressed disquiet when heads of the universities of technology did not confront some of Seidman-Makgetla’s perceptions and suggested that the sector may need to consider how it engages with important social and political actors.

- Existing and extensive contributions and engagements of various types across higher education were not always visible enough. This was higher education's responsibility (Badat).
- The lack of robust debate was not restricted to higher education. In all arenas, former activists struggled to find a way of relating critically to an ANC-led government.
- Barney Pityana suggested that it might be helpful to separate what would be an appropriate role for an academic as opposed to an intellectual.

Nzimande's challenge that higher education had to analyse and contest the neo-liberal agenda was not really taken up at the colloquium, apart from SASCO's reference to its campaign for free education. The time given to the different discussions gave some credence to Ndebele's comment that the relationship between higher education and the state was over-theorised, whereas the relationship between higher education and civil society and the market was under-theorised.

3.5 The relationship between higher education and the market

There was general agreement that links with the private sector were important and that third stream funding was growing in importance in most South African higher education institutions. There was further agreement that the sector could be more creative about gaining access to funding through partnerships. Attention should also be given to partnerships with respect to other challenges such as the development of a new generation of academics (for example through joint appointments). Saunders and others expressed serious concern about the way some research contracts entered into by academics and institutions shaped academic work or undermined academic freedom (for example, secrecy clauses). Although these examples struck to the heart of the academic enterprises, they did not generate as much heat as discussion about the state.

With regard to the relationship with the economy, Andre Kraak argued that more attention should be paid to addressing the middle-level skills shortage. He questioned, further, whether institutions should be differentiated explicitly so that they interacted with the economy in different ways from each other. Angina Parekh questioned whether the economy was growing at a rate fast enough to absorb graduates.

3.6 Conceptions of the transformed, African, engaged university

There was general agreement that higher education debates about transformation had largely been caught in structural/governance issues and that this was only a small part of what transformation implied. There were strong voices that much more attention should be paid to issues such as institutional cultures and curricula rather than "bean counting".

There was general agreement that all universities should be engaged in ways appropriate to their missions (as discussed in presentations in a designated session), but this was not specific to South Africa. With respect to what was meant by an African university, argument ranged along the following continuum:

- Our "African-ness gives us access to a powerful and liberating consciousness, one that is worth 'reclaiming', defending and promoting"; this African identity provides us with an "intellectual focus and institutional ethos which can give Africa, and South Africa, a competitive advantage on

the world stage” (Makgoba). Jakes Gerwel cautioned, however, that knowledge was universal, and that much “western” knowledge had its origins elsewhere.

- Although there may be sub-cultures within it, an institutional culture that is colonial and racialised must be ruptured; merged institutions may show us the way (Beverly Thaver).
- Any university anywhere in the world takes its identity from its context whether Russian, Spanish or African (Fourie).
- We have witnessed the last rites of the concept of the African university (Cloete).

Aki Sawyerr argued in his opening address that South African institutions could work more strongly at the regional and continental levels and raised some of the pitfalls that would have to be addressed in such relationships, but this topic did not receive much further attention.

Workshops were suggested on what is meant by a ‘university’, ‘transformation’ (to what?), and ‘African’ university.

3.7 Leadership to address the challenges before higher education

Recurring opinions were expressed that the higher education sector was weak, lacking unity and confidence. Many of the outside voices at the colloquium referred to the insularity and defensiveness of the sector. This was illustrated in the course of the colloquium, where, rather than engaging with issues, responses to perceived criticism were often defensive. In addition, discussion in some sessions was often descriptive and identified problems and uncertainties rather than proposing solutions.

Many referred to the “deficit model” used to describe the sector, primarily by the Ministry, and said that this had been harmful. Yet at the same time, weaknesses and abuses within the system were acknowledged as well as the need for massive transformation post apartheid. Noting that this seemed to have resulted in the sector casting itself as victim or supplicant (Pityana), several speakers urged the sector to move on from this.

Ndebele argued that there was a deep psychological crisis in the sector and that the interests of the sector should be prioritised rather than individual institutional interests. Notwithstanding the fact that the stronger institutions could survive divisions within the sector, even the strongest needed a strong sector.

While recognising that this psychology was not limited to higher education, it must also be overcome if the sector is to provide the leadership which could reasonably be expected from it. It is also a crucial element in deriving a balance between state and institutional regulation. Several speakers asked what the sector had done with its autonomy - there were many areas where the sector could already have taken a lead. For example, the session on teacher education identified actions that could already have been proposed by Deans of education.

There were clearly hopes that HESA would be able to provide united leadership. Yet many of the speakers doubted this and argued that the organisation could be even less united than before. Siphon Sipepe suggested that distinctions could be made between principled, strategic and tactical unity in order to allow HESA to move forward. It could also be an idea to find early projects which look to the future in a non-threatening, rather than regulatory, way. In this light, O’Connell emphasised that the sector was not speaking enough about what it had hope for.

There was general agreement that there were many areas where higher education could design solutions. These included:

- The relationship between higher education and the FET sector;
- Teacher education;
- Partnerships with each other, civil society and the private sector;
- Links within Africa.

Clearly, ways to provide leadership and vision will have to be found. The sector should not delay in making tangible, and publicly visible, efforts in these areas.

4. Possible ways forward

There were calls for workshops on a number of issues. Some of these included:

- Development of a vision, shared values and goals for higher education;
- Development of rules of engagement;
- Development of a social contract for higher education;
- Clarity about what is meant by a university (as well as in Africa and in South Africa);
- Human resource development needs and institutional planning.

There appeared to be conflicting hopes for the outcomes of such workshops, however. Since resolution of many of these issues is an unrealistic hope in such a diverse group, perhaps what could be done is to distinguish between different types of topics. Some discussions can never be resolved, such as the relationship between the state and higher education. Yet, despite this, it is imperative for the health of both that this relationship be reevaluated continually. Other topics, such as goals for higher education, require broad consensus if they are to be attained.

A variety of locations for these suggested debates was proposed, including the President's Higher Education Working Group, a mini-CODESA, CHE and HESA. Contestation about responsibilities within the sector remains, however. With the overwhelming list of issues before the sector, more clarity on this front could avoid duplication of effort. Here, perhaps a hierarchy of ownership of responsibilities could be proposed.

The first level would be within and between institutions, where the sector develops common understandings and agreements to disagree. This would be at institutional, regional and HESA levels. The second level would be at CHE level, where the CHE has the responsibility to consult stakeholders and to advise the Minister. At a third level, the President's Working Group could, if appropriate, be a forum for taking discussions within the sector to cabinet level. None of these levels should be mutually exclusive, however; HESA might want to consult outside stakeholders; the DoE might want to obtain a view from the sector. Since areas of overlap will be inevitable, there could be annual or biannual informal consultation to agree on responsibilities about proposed projects and workshops. Leaders within the sector could themselves develop rules of how they will engage productively with each other.

Taking the above suggestions made at the colloquium as a priority, with the first one as top priority, one could reasonably expect the sector to develop a vision, values and goals for higher education. The focus could be on a 10 – 15 year period as well as a longer period. Different ways could be found to do this such as the development of scenarios. Development of clarity on these questions could take place, with different foci, at HESA and CHE levels.

The establishment of HESA will generate a myriad of tasks in and of itself. Within the topics discussed at the colloquium, the suggestions about developing rules of engagement and a social contract for higher education appear to lie within the responsibilities of HESA. Since it would be foolish to romanticise the potential for unity within HESA, it also appears important for HESA to explore different ways for members to relate to each other and to develop strategies for key priorities. In addition to this, HESA is likely to have its own projects; human resource development and planning will fall within this agenda.

Finally, it seems important to acknowledge and celebrate Bundy's contention that we in South Africa have a unique space within higher education, to find foci of hope as advised by O'Connell and to address the psychology of the sector so that higher education can provide the leadership role it could reasonably be expected to play. This will be a task for everyone in the sector.

5. Participant's List

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Dr G Braxton	United Negro College Fund
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Ms J Favish	University of Cape Town
Mr P Fish	SAUVCA
Prof. FCvN Fourie	University of the Free State
Prof. J Gerwel	Nelson Mandela Foundation
Prof. W Gevers	Academy of Science of South Africa
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Mr S Macozoma	Council on Higher Education
Mr T Magabane	CHE Secretariat
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Prof. MW Makgoba	University of KwaZulu Natal
Mr M Maleka	South African Student Congress (SASCO)
Mr A Maseko	SASOL
Mr B Masuku	SASCO
Prof. S Mayathula	Education Portfolio Committee
Mr B Mbhele	CHE Secretariat
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Prof. AT Mokadi	Vaal University of Technology / Committee of Technikon Principals
Prof. CC Mokadi	Technikon Witwatersrand
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Dr JJC Sauer	National Union of Tertiary Employees of South Africa (NUTESA)
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