

CHAPTER 1

THE CASE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION¹



1.1 The Social and Public Value of Higher Education

Amidst the multiple competing demands of social transformation, reconstruction and development in post-apartheid South Africa, why should public resources and energy be directed towards higher education?

The answer to this question lies in the fact that higher education and its constituent institutions have immense social and public value: they contribute to the good of society, and therefore should be accorded a share of public resources.



In many parts of the world, the case for higher education's social and public value is founded on recognising that countries which have managed to sustain high levels of economic growth with significant improvements in the living standards of the masses of their populations are those which have given priority to excellent education and training, and to higher education and training in particular as an agent of socio-economic change and development. In successful national education and training systems in democratic countries, education equips learners with skills to absorb new knowledge and the desire to learn and continually expand knowledge. At the apex of these systems, higher education is charged with developing a citizenry capable of participating effectively in democratic processes, and thus enhancing the project of democracy; with producing intellectuals who can engage with the most intractable problems of society and so develop more generally the ability of citizens to participate politically, economically and socially; and with producing high-level skilled graduates and new bases of knowledge to drive economic and social development, and to enhance the overall levels of intellectual and cultural development.

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This case for higher education has not been uncontentious. For years the World Bank fostered the belief that higher education offered lower individual and social returns than primary education, with negative consequences for levels of public investment in higher education in many countries – especially developing ones. The pendulum swung back on this view during the 1990s, however, and the value of higher education is again unequivocally endorsed, albeit with an increased emphasis on its role in enhancing national economic competitiveness within a global knowledge-driven economy.² (This may entail a risk that there will be undue focus on labour-market and economic responsiveness, at the expense of recognising the wider social and cultural contributions of higher education.)

In South Africa since 1994, a democratically-elected government has set out to achieve ‘a better life for all’ by focusing on economic development, by seeking to reconstruct the entire social system, and by aiming to reintegrate successfully into the international community while taking a lead role on the African continent. In this context of comprehensive transformation, the demands on higher education have been extensive. Chapter 2 of this report explores the policy and legal context of South African higher education. Here it is apposite to cite the general purposes that higher education is expected to fulfil, as set out in its key framework policy, the *White Paper* of 1997:

Higher education has several related purposes. In the context of present-day South Africa, they must contribute to and support the process of societal transformation outlined in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), with its compelling vision of people-driven development leading to the building of a better quality of life for all. These purposes are:

- To meet the learning needs and aspirations of individuals through the development of their intellectual abilities and aptitudes throughout their lives. Higher education equips individuals to make the best use of their talents and of the opportunities offered by society for self-fulfilment. It is thus a key allocator of life chances [and] an important vehicle for achieving equity in the distribution of opportunity and achievement among South African citizens.
- To address the development needs of society and provide the labour market, in a knowledge-driven and knowledge-dependent society, with the ever-changing high-level competencies and expertise necessary

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for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy. Higher education teaches and trains people to fulfil specialised social functions, enter the learned professions, or pursue vocations in administration, trade, industry, science and technology and the arts.

- To contribute to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens. Higher education encourages the development of a reflective capacity and a willingness to review and renew prevailing ideas, policies and practices based on a commitment to the common good
- To contribute to the creation, sharing and evaluation of knowledge. Higher education engages in the pursuit of academic scholarship and intellectual inquiry in all fields of human understanding, through research, learning and teaching.³



Within the context of these general purposes, the *White Paper* and other key policy documents such as the *National Plan* of 2001 call urgently upon higher education to address the challenges of social equity, development, effectiveness and efficiency. Higher education is asked to provide equitable opportunities for learning and (self-) development; to be responsive to societal needs, producing relevant knowledge and socially committed graduates; to contribute positively to the development of the country (and by extension, its region and continent); and to be publicly accountable for the manner in which it applies resources in the

fulfilment of these roles. Such demands imply that the case for higher education in South Africa is a compelling one in principle, and that there is a concomitant strong rationale for public investment in higher education.

While such a case and rationale are implicit in these policies and their goals, they were not explicit realities at the time the policies were written. By the mid-1990s, public confidence in the ability of higher education to deliver accountably while at the same time satisfying the requirements of the new order was low. The lack of trust in – specifically – public higher education was the result of a number of factors. First, there was a perception that higher education institutions (HEIs) remained essentially fixed in their apartheid past. Second, there was concern about the quality of output and institutions. Third, numerous inefficiencies plagued the system, with many HEIs evincing governance and financial problems, inadequate financial systems, the unwarranted duplication of programmes and the lack of optimal use of infrastructure and human resources. Fourth, these problems of trust and accountability occurred in a new context, as private providers rapidly entered the arena and seemed set to erode the historical monopoly enjoyed by public HEIs.

Given that the deep distrust engineered by apartheid education continued to abide in the system after 1994, the rallying cry to higher education to contribute to transformation has been at the same time a cry to higher education to transform itself, in order to fulfil its potential for serving the needs of a democratic South African society.

The case for higher education in practice – and the extent to which it has been possible to address the loss of public confidence in it – will be analysed more fully in the chapters that follow. This chapter sets out the in-principle case for higher education in a democratic South Africa.



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1.2 *The Case for South African Higher Education*

Despite the inherited problems and challenges it faces, higher education – and public higher education in particular – has immense potential to **contribute to consolidating democracy and social justice, producing critical intellectuals, developing knowledge, and expanding and improving the economy. Further, these contributions can be complementary and systemic.** Higher education that serves the purposes of democracy helps to lay the basis for greater participation in economic and social life more generally. Higher education that supports higher levels of employment contributes to political and social stability. Higher education that effectively combines these functions builds the capability and capacity of citizens to exercise and enforce their democratic rights and to participate effectively and critically in decision-making. Thus the overall well-being of nations gains enormously from higher education's contribution to the social, cultural, political and economic development of its citizens. Higher education is capable at once of delivering public goods (opportunities for self-fulfilment, critical citizenry, free intellectual inquiry), and of responding to contextualised societal and economic needs (high-level skills and knowledge production for the modern economy).

1.2.1 *Higher Education, Democracy and Social Justice*

Through its traditions of academic freedom and collegial interaction, higher education can **foster open and critical intellectual debate and contribute to a vibrant and engaged civil society**, which in turn increases the possibility of civil society participation in decision-making. By creating opportunities for social advancement on the basis of acquired knowledge, skills and competencies, higher education also **enhances equity and social justice.**

The role of higher education in the defence and advancement of democracy is closely related to the manner in which it **promotes good citizenship.** As noted, this is an in-principle function accorded to higher education in the *White Paper*⁴. In practice, the proper execution of this role requires South African higher education to deliver academic programmes that encourage intellectual critique, and to ensure the relevance of these programmes wherever possible to South African social and development challenges.

In exercising its core functions of teaching (developing critical thinking), research and community engagement, higher education can also **support social policy development and the monitoring and evaluation of policy implementation.** In other words, it is able to contribute to society by engaging with the actual problems and challenges of social reconstruction and development, as well as by functioning as a social critic.

This ability is essential to enhancing society's capacity to consolidate democracy and promote prosperity in the long term. South African President Thabo Mbeki has on a number of occasions referred to the role of higher education in society, and especially in emerging democracies such as our own, placing emphasis on the need for more vigorous debate and discussion, especially amongst the country's black intelligentsia. Critical discussion of, and engagement with, social policies are paving stones to reinvigorate the African continent. The African Renaissance is inconceivable without knowledge and a critical mass of intellectuals (scholars, thinkers, scientists, economists, writers, artists...) being produced or enriched by HEIs.

The concept of a 'learning society' is predicated on democratic principles and processes which enable the engagement of broad social layers in learning, and which promote tolerance for differing viewpoints.

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The premise is that democratic learning environments can tap the collective experience and wisdom of communities and so build society's capacity to sustain and renew itself. The value and legitimacy of higher education in South Africa must also be judged by the extent to which it **provides access and opportunities for all South Africans**. In particular, higher education must provide evidence of opening the way to black South Africans (especially Africans); to women and other socially disadvantaged groups; and to non-traditional learners, including students from working-class and rural backgrounds and adults who possess work-related knowledge. The extent to which higher education promotes or frustrates equity and access will have a direct bearing on social and class stratification, and the nature of the labour market. If it can successfully create equitable opportunities, the higher education system is a potentially powerful agent for enhancing the life opportunities of increasing numbers of people over time. High-quality, equitable higher education **promotes social mobility and the well-being of larger social constituencies**, and thereby increases the stability of society as a whole.



Higher education **affords private individual and public social benefits**. The former relate to enhanced employment possibilities, better salaries and benefits, improved working conditions, improved health and quality of life, and greater capacity to participate in a society endeavouring to build a democratic and just social order. These private gains also generate public (social) gains such as higher employment rates, higher savings, increased contributions to national revenue and incomes, greater workforce flexibility, a decreased reliance on government financial support, and more active citizenship.

1.2.2 Higher Education, Economic Growth and Development

It has already been noted that higher education has the potential to contribute in a complementary way to the economic and humanising goals of society. Both these goals are of critical importance to the survival and sustainability of nations, and to their ability to participate effectively in a competitive global arena and meet the needs of citizens.

Studies on the relationship between knowledge production and economic and social development have demonstrated the critical importance of the creation of new knowledge. As an illustration of this, the growth of knowledge, enhanced by wider diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) since the 1980s, has been the catalyst for high levels of social and economic development in regions such as the Pacific Rim over the last two decades.

The contemporary 'knowledge society' that is the product of increased capital in the global economy and of rapid technological advances, demands integrated knowledge solutions to deal with complex socio-economic problems – in developing countries as much as if not more so than elsewhere. HEIs have a critical role to play in **developing solutions to 'real world' problems through research that supports innovation, as well as through sustaining disciplinary knowledge foundations** which underpin interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary knowledge production. In South Africa, a large proportion of



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intellectuals, and of knowledge production, dissemination and application, is based in HEIs, and can be leveraged to address societal and economic development needs – both directly, and in partnership with government, industry and communities.

A central feature of South Africa's economic policy since 1994 has been a focus on meeting the challenge of international competitiveness. It has been eminently clear to policy-makers that an inability to compete globally will increasingly marginalise the South African economy, have profound effects on its rate of growth, and negative consequences for the social well-being and stability of South African society. For instance, the potential threats and opportunities of the 'network society', as conceptualised by Manuel Castells⁵, may imply from a South African perspective that the acquisition of knowledge and ready access to new knowledge and technology create new global power relations to our disadvantage: those countries that can rapidly access knowledge and ICTs and adapt to their demands ('the network') will dominate those countries that cannot. The knowledge capacities of higher education, properly supported by an enabling policy environment and constructive inter-sectoral partnerships, **can enable South Africa to stay on the competitive side of the digital divide.**

Rapid knowledge production and technological development as the underpinnings of international competitiveness demand educational capacity for lifelong learning: i.e. continual opportunities to expand, upgrade and refresh skills acquired on the basis of prior learning. Skills acquired flexibly in this model can enable graduates to operate in diverse social settings and to develop complex notions of identity and citizenship. Giving effect to lifelong learning demands concentrated effort from higher education: the **development of flexible and continuing adult education programmes, and support and resources for such work.**



As in the rest of the world, the South African labour market has undergone major restructuring in recent years. Increasingly, capital- and knowledge-intensive production and services have created a demand for skilled professionals in the scientific, technological, technical, and business fields. Thus from an economic perspective, **the private and public returns on many higher education programmes have an important complementary contribution to make alongside the contributions of other levels of the education**

system. The manufacturing, processing and service sectors, which aim to have a significant impact upon the country's economic future as they produce internationally-traded goods, depend upon the knowledge produced by, and applied in, HEIs.

Since 1994, South Africa has pursued a 'high skills, high growth' economic development path. Increased supply of high-level skills and personpower is critical in such a scenario. Higher education therefore represents a **much-needed capacity to alleviate the skills constraint on economic expansion.** Such expansion and improvement is intended to promote the possibility of jobs for many less skilled and unskilled workers, and thus to result in a net improvement of economic welfare and equity.



South Africa's process of democratic transformation has placed new demands on state bureaucracy, with a particular need to develop an honest, effective, efficient and innovative public service. Higher education is equipped to play a major role in **generating the high- and medium-level capacities and skills required in the public sector,** including conceptual, policy development, planning and implementation skills, and managerial, administrative and financial competencies and skills.

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Finally, higher education has a crucial role to play in **improving the quality and skills levels of schooling, health care, welfare and other public services at national, provincial and local levels.** This requires the active promotion of continuing education amongst those working in health, social services, education, and other public sector fields, as well as the provision of flexible opportunities for lifelong learning that will enable the upgrading of professional knowledge and technical skills. As an anchor to such learning, thoughtful applied and strategic research is required in order to engage effectively with key social, political and economic policy issues and to deal with the concrete problems of social reconstruction and development. Such research, along with the consolidation and enhancement of the knowledge and skills of public sector personnel, is necessary for innovation, improved social delivery and development in South Africa today.

1.3 Conclusion

In the context of South Africa's socio-economic transformation agenda, the development of socially responsive HEIs and of socially committed individuals with the critical intellectual capabilities to produce, disseminate and apply knowledge and technology, is both a short-term priority and a long-term policy imperative. Without investment in human resource development (HRD) and expanding opportunities for both young and adult learners, sustainable growth will be difficult, and competitive participation in the global economy well-nigh impossible, to achieve. Equally, effective and efficient implementation of policies and strategies, and delivery of opportunities and services, will be compromised, and the achievement of a genuinely democratic and caring society will be frustrated.

It is true that the costs of higher education are high when compared with lower levels of education. Yet even in circumstances such as South Africa's, where the schooling system is in urgent need of funds to enhance quality, it needs to be recognised that the claim of higher education on public resources is justified precisely because it serves purposes complementary to other parts of the system. The critical value of higher education to society lies in its unique ability to provide graduates with intellectual capacities and skills that can both enrich society, and enhance economic growth. This is dependent on higher education's ability to provide equitable opportunities for the development of high levels of intellectual rigour, of analytical capacity, of self-motivation, and of independence of thought; basic research skills; and a capacity and mental aptitude for innovation. These attributes, as delivered by a well-functioning higher education system (which cannot be achieved at lower levels of schooling), are crucial since they contribute substantively to the quality of public and professional leadership at all levels and in all sectors of society, which is essential to the fostering of social justice and economic development.

The case for higher education is argued in the context of South Africa's challenges of social equity, economic and social development, and the building and consolidation of democracy. Through its fundamental roles of high-level teaching and learning, research and knowledge production, and community engagement, higher education can play a critical role in addressing these challenges. Public support, allocation of public resources, and public oversight, are required if higher education is to deliver constructively on its social and public purposes. The chapters that follow in part evaluate the extent to which South African higher education has been able to do this in practice over the last ten years.



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Chapter Notes and References

- ¹ This chapter is adapted in large part from Council on Higher Education, Shape and Size of Higher Education Task Team (2000). *Towards a New Higher Education Landscape: Meeting the Equity, Quality and Social Development Imperatives of South Africa in the 21st Century*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education (CHE): Chapter 2.
- ² Sing, M (2001). 'Re-inserting the "Public Good" into Higher Education Transformation'. In Council on Higher Education Transformation. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education (CHE). (Kagisano CHE Higher Education Discussion Series Issue No 1 (Summer 2001).): 7-22: 7. The dangers of emphasis on the 'market responsiveness' of HE are addressed in Chapter 9.
- ³ White Paper, 1997: Section 1.3.
- ⁴ Ibid
- ⁵ Castells, M (1996). *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. Volume 1. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell. Castell's analytical framework is used for indicative purposes here, while recognising that critiques of his starting points and assumptions are possible.