

# **National Imperatives and the Micro-Politics of Higher Education Change**

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Ladies and Gentlemen

The slogan – South Africa, a world in one country – is used in tourism circles to promote the abundant natural wealth and diversity of scenery of our country. However, in a socio-economic perspective, South Africa actually comprises two totally different worlds.

On the one hand there is the privileged minority who enjoys a standard of living second to none with opportunities to pick and choose from. On the other, there are the poverty-stricken masses of millions upon millions of our countrymen and women for whom survival from one day to the next is their first and only priority.

The main differences between these two groups are to be found in their divergent needs and the opportunities available to them. As a result they are poles apart in how they view the future.

A similar division exists in higher education – between the former black and former white higher education institutions in South Africa. This division is still a reality for many institutions in spite of the large-scale transformation that took place this past decade and which is still taking place. This ongoing process resulted in the adoption of the National Plan for Higher Education, published in March 2001.

Among the critical elements of the plan is the increase in participation rates in higher education from 15% to 20% in the next ten to fifteen years; the shift in the balance of enrolments over the same period between the humanities, business and commerce, and science from the current ratio of 49%:26%:25% to 40%:30%:30% respectively; and the transformation of the higher education structure to a more streamlined model, capable of delivering on these priorities.

The plan recognises that higher education has immense potential to contribute to the consolidation of democracy and social justice, as well as to the growth and development of the economy. These change vectors are inextricably intertwined. While the enhancement of democracy lays the basis for the greater participation in economic and social life generally, higher employment levels contribute to political and social stability and the capacity of citizens to exercise and enforce their democratic rights. Thus, the overall wellbeing of the South African nation is vitally dependent on the contribution of higher education to the social, political and economic development of its citizens.

However, the practical implementation of the National Plan is being hamstrung by certain perceptions. The reality that former black institutions have been disadvantaged in the past, today translates into a call for transformation or redress which in certain cases borders on to being a sense of entitlement on the one hand and a fear of being taken over in the several mergers that have taken place at the beginning of this year and that are still to come. In cases of mergers between former black and former white institutions this results in turf wars, with both sides clinging to what they have, while former black institutions regard the so-called "white" institutions as Big Brother. This perception is further

reinforced or exacerbated by the reality that the seats of new institutions in many cases are proclaimed at the so-called “white” institutions and that, for effective management, executive management is concentrated at the main campus.

Obviously these perceptions are not conducive to relationship building, which is the key ingredient for effective merger negotiations on the one hand and effective integration after the merger has taken place. Clinging to past institutional loyalties also negatively affects the building of a new, united institutional culture.

Coupled to this is the fact that merging institutions are at different stages of development both academically and regarding facilities. Given the financial constraints in higher education, expectations of immediate equality and redress politics hugely complicate matters. Demands are made for the full spectrum of courses the Institutional Programme and Qualification Mix (PQM) provides for to be presented at all campuses. Not only is this logistically impossible but it is also contrary to the aim of the merger – to streamline higher education delivery and counter duplication.

Drawn-out interim phases in the establishment of the new institutions heightens uncertainty and tension, with those in interim management being seen as not permanent and hence without legitimacy. This obviously impacts negatively on the processes of taking of decisions and implementing them.

Inevitably all this results in inter-campus conflict, which is exacerbated by factors such as inequalities in salaries and conditions of service.

Another potential flashpoint is the differences in fee structures, and the demands around student funding that have resulted in student protests on almost all campuses this year.

These protests often centred on funding provided by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). While this scheme is indispensable in assisting needy students, students can only apply for financial aid once they are registered at an institution and many lack even the minimum funds to register.

For example, the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) receives the largest allocation of all higher education institutions from NSFAS annually, yet this has not shielded us from protests and severe disruption of academic activities. As our role is limited to the administration of the funds allocated to us, our hands are to a large extent tied in preventing these occurrences. A national review of student funding is therefore urgently needed.

The conflict potential with students is furthermore enhanced by the misperception of many student leaders that they should share in all management decisions, thus clearly confusing governance oversight and much-needed stakeholder consultation with joint management. However, management cannot and should not abdicate the responsibility to manage the institution in the best interest of ALL stakeholders, including students, to a particular interest group. This would quite simply result in chaos and would be counterproductive to the efficient and cost-effective management of the institution.

Another practical reality is that while institutions on the one hand are challenged to increase access – as per the National Plan on Higher Education – funding in real terms for higher education has been on the decline in spite of the fact that the national higher education budget has increased from R4,8 billion in 1994 to just under R10 billion for the current financial year. The truth is that the number of students enrolling at higher education institutions has increased exponentially over the past decade and that higher education funding has not kept pace. This is obviously putting institutions under severe financial pressure, which means that student demands regarding fees cannot, in most instances, realistically be met if institutions are to remain financially viable.

To try and address the challenges posed by the National Plan for Higher Education and their practical implications the Tshwane University of Technology has come up with a set of objectives for the next three years (2005 – 2007). This is based on extensive consultation with all stakeholders internal and external to the institution, also with the student leadership and organised labour. The objectives include:

- Having a Programme and Qualification Mix (PQM) that is responsive to social and economic needs, with a 40% FTE enrolment in Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) programmes and presenting 25% of programmes up to doctorate level.
- Increasing the student graduation rate by 2% per annum.
- Implementing an educational intervention strategy for under-prepared learners in each faculty.
- Incorporating cooperative education in 60% of all career-focused programmes.

- Achieving national equity targets according to the employment equity plan.
- Establishing compulsory personal development modules within each academic programme to holistically develop students.
- Improving the success rate of learners in the academic support programmes by 5% per year.
- Increasing the success rate of student applications for financial aid by 2% per year.
- Implementing an effective integrated technology plan at an affordable and manageable cost.
- Managing the institution according to accepted financial management principles and governance systems.

These objectives were agreed to earlier this year and are currently being translated into action plans by all operational units on all levels. They are however doomed to fail if they do not enjoy broad-based support among all stakeholders groupings. That is why we involved everybody from the start. Even before TUT was established, in the merger negotiations of last year, all structures included representatives from both organised labour and the student community to enhance the broad-based, inclusive nature of the solutions devised.

The principle of inclusion was maintained this year with the establishment of two integration committees to continue the work the various merger teams did last year. The one is focusing on academic matters and the other on administrative and support services. Inclusion of as many stakeholders as possible, however, does not mean joint management. Once consultation has taken place it is still up to management to develop the necessary strategies, goals and objectives

to turn shared vision into practical reality. In this process compromises have to be made to accommodate as many stakeholders as possible, without losing sight of the vision and of realities imposed by effective management.

I thank you.