

TRACING AND EXPLAINING CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE SOUTH AFRICAN CASE

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1. INTRODUCTION

In South Africa's brief century of higher education, nothing matches the wide-ranging changes encountered by post-secondary institutions since the middle 1990s.¹ These changes range from the fundamental reorganization of the distribution and character of higher education institutions (Jansen, 2002), the comprehensive redesign of higher education curricula governed by a national qualifications authority (Ensor, 2002), and the profound reconstitution of the academic workplace (Webster & Mosoetsa, 2001). Despite such far-reaching changes in the higher education landscape, there remain disconcerting continuities, including the racially skewed profile of especially senior academic appointments, racial and gender inequalities in research productivity, and the stable "institutional cultures" of universities that still bear their distinctive racial birthmarks expressed in dominant traditions, symbols and patterns of behaviour (Department of Education 2001; Mouton 2003; Thaver, 2005). Yet, except for bold and official pronouncements of change, it is not clear exactly what the reach and impact of these changes have been on higher education practice; nor is it clear what these changes mean to higher education practitioners; and it certainly is not clear how these changes in one national context relate to, or derive from, global changes in higher education.

Against this backdrop, this chapter has three objectives. The first is to briefly survey the major changes and continuities in South African higher education over the past decade. The second is to examine and evaluate these surveyed changes more deeply through the medium of two illustrative case studies: the case of private higher education and the case of the national qualifications framework. And the third is to explain these changes in the context of higher education reform across the globe; that is, rather than treat South Africa as peculiar or exceptional, this chapter attempts to explain the national response to changes facing higher education systems throughout the world. The findings and arguments presented in this chapter draw on a more extensive research report on higher education change in South Africa.² And these findings are conceptualized within the growing theoretical work on educational change, as briefly described in the next section.

1.1. THE STUDY OF CHANGE IN (HIGHER) EDUCATION

In recent years, the study of educational change has established itself as a respectable field of inquiry. Since the landmark study by Michael Fullan (1982) on *The Meaning of Educational Change*, a growing community of scholars has assembled under the banner of educational

1 South Africa's first fully-fledged university, the University of Cape Town, was only established in 1918, although it had existed as the South African College since 1829.

2 The methodology for this study was based on extensive analyses of higher education reports and analyses, in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, practitioners and thinkers in higher education, and a critical synthesis and application of the major theories of change in the more recent higher education literature.

change to develop and test new concepts, theories and methods for investigating the problem of change. This renewed impetus for the study of change led, for example, to the magisterial two-volume collection on studies of educational change by some of the leading change theorists in the world (Hargreaves *et al.*, 1998) and the production of the first-ever journal dedicated to this subject, *The Journal of Educational Change*. As Ann Lieberman (1998:19) concluded in her review of the subject, 'the field of educational change has put down roots and grown in knowledge and influence'. This research on change in higher education works with and revisits (in the last section of this chapter) some of the key and more recent concepts and conceptual frameworks for understanding the problems, politics and possibilities of change. At the same time, this chapter self-consciously moves the explanations for change beyond the earlier and established theories which described higher education change in terms of metaphors – physical, universities as loosely coupled organizations (Weick, 1976); biological, universities as adaptive organisms (Goedegebuure, 1992); and cultural, university members or disciplines as tribes (Becher, 1989). As will be demonstrated, the metaphorical approach underestimates complexity, context and contingency as explanations for how universities change in a globalized world (see Meister-Scheytt & Scheytt, 2005).

But how does the study of change in higher education express itself in the South African literature? Put differently, what are the kinds of approaches and claims made in the local literature on higher education change? The character and limitations of the knowledge base on higher education in South Africa are examined in order to answer these questions.

2. THE KNOWLEDGE BASE ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

In comparative terms, South Africa as a small, medium-income country has an impressive infrastructure for higher education research evidenced in the generally high level of research outputs and the quality of published research. The scale and diversity of studies are remarkable by any standard, and completely outstrips the available research on schools in quality and depth. The South African research on higher education can be divided into six broad classes or categories of research on higher education; these categories are not mutually exclusive, but presented in this way, draw attention to the kinds of studies available by approach, method and focus of inquiry.

Statistical surveys – broad surveys of system monitoring and performance in relation to standard indicators, such as equity, efficiency and effectiveness, for example, headcount and enrolment studies (Cooper & Subotzky, 2001); system-wide monitoring studies (Cloete & Bunting, 2000); annual reports on policy initiatives and achievements (CHE, 2004); national planning accounts and strategies (Department of Education, 2001); and research performance trends (Mouton, 2003). The most common equity indicators used in most of these studies relate to race and gender participation and performance.

Case studies – site-specific and in-depth studies of typically single institutions, faculties, departments or programmes (Ensor, 2001; Anderson, 2002; Jansen, 2002) where the subject matter could range from institutional mergers to deracialization to curriculum restructuring. These studies tend to offer fascinating accounts of one or more institutional sites but, with few exceptions, lack a broader theorization, which enables these single cases to hold meaning beyond a specific locale.

Historical inquiry – intensive studies of higher education policy or social movements concerned with higher education, for example, policy evolution (Sehoole, 2005); and student politics (Nkomo, 1984; Badat, 2001). These studies tend to foreground the role of politics and political movements in shaping and constraining policy options in higher education; their value lies in the thorough documentation of historical processes and events that continue to shape higher education.

Critical events research – special study of an emergent, significant national phenomenon that is of contemporary and critical importance to higher education, for example, private higher education (Kruss, 2004); black academic migration (Potgieter, 2002); new forms of knowledge production (Kraak, 2000); institutional culture studies (Thaver, 2005); and higher education as international trade (Sehoole, 2005). These studies generate high concentration value for limited periods of time and tend to locate South African higher education within international thinking and trends on the issue under analysis.

Policy analysis – focused review and criticism of an emergent or established higher education policy or policies, with an assessment of the nature, origins and consequences of such policies (Muller, 2003; Hall, Symes & Luescher, 2004; Jansen, 2004; SAUVCA, 2003). This category of study ranges from thoughtful theoretical or public position papers on a topic to more conventional policy analyses targeting a particular higher education policy or plan.

Single-issue studies – coverage of a wide spectrum of issues or concerns in higher education that are often confined to a particular institution, based on a specific interest of an individual academic researcher, and using a wide range of methodologies. Such studies typically appear as a single article in a higher education journal or as an entry into a general education or social science journal. A single issue of the *South African Journal of Higher Education* would, for example, cover topics as disparate as performance management in higher education, environmental education research, building research capacity, indigenous knowledge systems, language policy in higher education, postgraduate supervision, and industry-university partnerships.

All these studies, while impressive in range and scope, share the following five key limitations. There are very few comparative studies in higher education. Many of these studies are descriptive and to some extent analytical, but very few can be classed as

theoretical in design and approach. Most of the published research uses European and North American higher education literature as reference points, with very few continental studies or work related to other parts of the developing world, such as Asia and Latin America. With the exception of the single-issue research, these studies are largely political in character – meaning that they tend to reflect policy-oriented research focused on higher education performance as it touches on race and gender; a more limited literature in this regard examines the power relations among actors within universities, between institutions and the State, and between local institutions and international knowledge networks or agencies. And there are no longitudinal studies of the higher education system or of institutions, except of course for routine performance data on participation and productivity; the system performance data are not, however, presented in consistent frames from one year (or period) to the next, a problem exacerbated by the restructuring and realignment of higher education through mergers and incorporations.

While this chapter cannot remedy all these limitations in the existing corpus, it does seek to theorize well-described and well-documented changes in higher education drawing on recent conceptual labour in the field of educational change. But first, what is the status of change in South African higher education?

3. HIGHER EDUCATION PERFORMANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA: A BRIEF SURVEY WITH RESPECT TO EQUITY ACHIEVEMENTS

There are seven major and familiar claims that should be briefly and simply restated regarding one of the fundamental goals of higher education transformation in South Africa *viz.*, the achievement of equity in the higher education system.

First, there is the claim that there has been a steady though uneven growth in student enrolments over the past decade. Secondly, there are now more women in higher education than men. Thirdly, there are now more black students (and fewer white students) in higher education. Fourthly, there are now more women in university appointments, recently reaching equal numbers in male/female permanent staff. Fifthly, while female enrolments have increased overall, women remain underrepresented in engineering and the hard sciences. Then, senior academic positions in universities are still largely white and male in character. And lastly, white men still dominate the research landscape in terms of total research outputs such as publications (see Tables 1 and 2; and Figures 1 and 2, that follow).

In short, while quantitatively the system has expanded through greater participation of black and women students and staff, there are still huge imbalances with respect to the levels of academic appointment, the distribution of black and female staff across all disciplines, and the racially skewed production of scientific output.

Table 1: Output by gender by year (1990-1998)

Gender	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	Total
F	244	264	311	397	490	455	537	414	335	3 447
F%	15%	17%	18%	16%	17%	17%	19%	16%	17%	17%
M	1 359	1 273	1 429	2 141	2 397	2 284	2 303	2 150	1 693	17 029
M%	85%	83%	82%	84%	83%	83%	81%	84%	83%	83%
Total	1 603	1 537	1 740	2 538	2 887	2 739	2 840	2 564	2 028	20 476

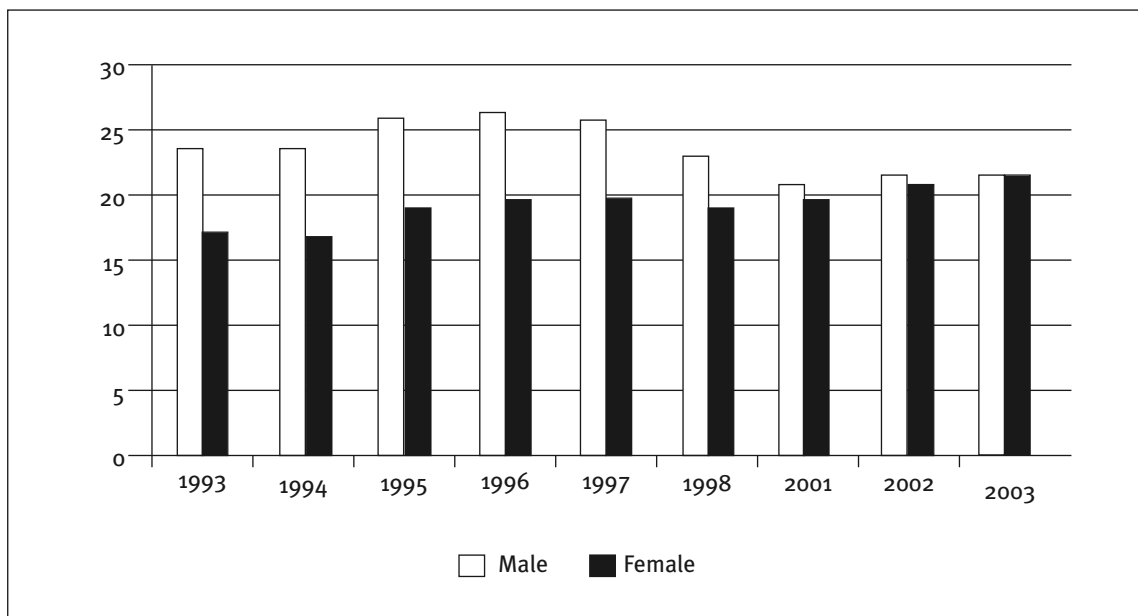
Source: Mouton 2003:23

Table 2: Output by Race by year (1990-1998)

Race	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	Total
B	60	74	96	125	170	185	174	180	151	1215
B%	3.5%	5%	6%	5.4%	6.4%	7.4%	6.6%	7.6%	8%	6.4%
W	1 466	1 410	1 561	2 192	2 470	2 310	2 462	2 188	1 695	17 754
W%	96.5%	95%	94%	94.6%	93.6%	92.6%	93.4%	92.4%	92%	95.6%
Total	1 526	1 484	1 657	2 317	2 640	2 495	2 636	2 368	1 846	18 969

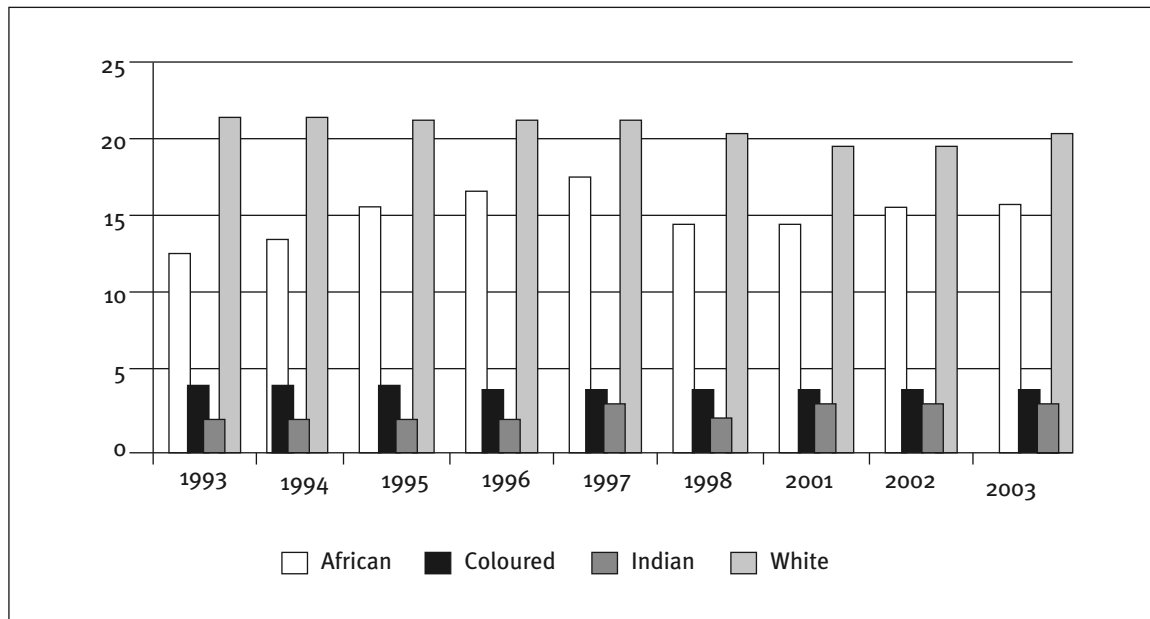
Source: Adapted from Mouton 2003:24

Figure 1: National Total Headcount of Permanent Staff according to Gender (Thousands)



Source: Department of Education, HEMIS data for State subsidized universities and technikons, April 2004

Figure 2: National Total Headcount of Permanent Staff according to Race (Thousands)



Source: Department of Education, HEMIS data for State subsidized universities and technikons, April 2004

Since the confirmation of the major trends in this statistical snapshot of higher education performance in various reports (such as Department of Education, 2001; CHE, 2004), the debates have largely shifted from how much has been achieved in the first ten years of democracy to the scale, consequences and sustainability of such achievement for the post-secondary school system.

3.1. THE SCALE OF CHANGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION, 1994-2004

The scale of changes are briefly recaptured here to lay the foundation for a set of broader theoretical attempts to explain how and why these changes came about, and their long-term consequences of change for higher education, democracy and society.

The single most important change in the higher education landscape has been the overall restructuring of the higher education system. A programme of government-mandated mergers reduced the number of institutions from 36 universities (21) and technikons (15) to 22 new institutions consisting of universities (11), universities of technology (5) and comprehensive institutions (6). More than 100 teacher-training colleges were closed and a limited number “incorporated” into universities or technikons. In short, 306 separate institutions for post-school education were radically reduced to at best 72 remaining institutions – not counting the restructuring of nursing and agricultural colleges.

The second major change in the higher education system was the spectacular growth in private higher education, which has challenged, if not undermined, the public higher education system just as it was emerging from its apartheid legacy. This unforeseen expansion of private higher education has created political, policy, and legal dilemmas about the appropriate nature and degree of governmental action in response to what has become a powerful, transnational phenomenon in the post-Cold war period.

The third major change has been the emergence of new models of delivery in higher education. It is no longer possible to clearly distinguish contact and distance education institutions in South Africa, as the former increasingly blurred the distinction in practice between these two forms of education delivery.

The fourth major change has been the changing value of higher education programmes (the rise of the economic sciences and the decline of the humanities). In South Africa, as elsewhere, the last decade witnessed a serious decline in humanities enrolments – leading several universities to retrench humanities academics, to restructure humanities faculties and to terminate certain humanities programmes – such as foreign languages, music, art and drama (see Ensor, 2002:287).

The fifth major change has been the changing nature of the academic workplace. In a short period of time, the collegial model that characterized the academic workplace has been replaced with what is often referred to as *the new managerialism* characterized by some of the following: a growing emphasis on performance, measurement and accountability; the increasing ethos of competition; a changing language that recasts students as clients and departments as cost centres; the growing vulnerability of academic and administrative positions as “outsourcing” and “efficiencies” dominate the institutional strategy (Webster & Mosoetsa, 2001).

3.2. THE CONSEQUENCES OF CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The most important consequence of the changes in higher education – both those initiated by government (such as mergers) and those forced upon government (such as the growth of private higher education) – has been the changing role of the State and in particular expanding State intervention in higher education. The interventionist role of the State caught the higher education sector by surprise; after all, the *raison d'être* of the anti-apartheid struggle in universities was to circumscribe government regulation and control of higher education. A new discourse surfaced, one that pitted historical struggles for *autonomy* against the new language of *accountability*. Under the banner of autonomy, universities argued that the right to decide on academic policy matters was sacred; under accountability, the State argued that it had a vested interest in how the heavily funded public universities used public funds. More than the physical alterations or programmatic reforms that changed higher education, the most far-reaching changes in universities have been the gradual erosion of institutional autonomy and the corresponding growth of accountability regimes in the higher education system. These “soft

changes” have altered the way in which institutions understand themselves, their missions and their degrees of freedom – thereby fundamentally altering the value and significance of ‘the academic estate’ (Altbach, 2000).

There were legitimate grounds for concern on the part of the institutions. Government had invoked legislation that could replace university vice-chancellors with ministerial appointed administrators. Government had passed legislation that empowered it to close down, merge or incorporate whole institutions over the objections of a particular university, technikon or college – an unprecedented action. Government had signalled the need for a national student applications office, fuelling concerns of greater State control over admissions. Government had changed the traditional funding formula for higher education, placing greater control over the management and manipulation of the formula in the hands of the Minister of Education. Government had introduced the idea of ‘capping’ student numbers in higher education institutions – an act rationally described as ‘enrolment planning’ – thereby changing the once dominant policy discourse of participation to a planning discourse of adequacy. Finally, government had also indicated the need for “monitoring” the final arbiter of governance in institutions – the university council; the concern in this regard was that council’s were either aloof from or deeply involved in the management of institutions, without clarity about what their responsibilities of governance entailed.

The specific merits of each of these acts or signals of governmental intervention are not of concern in this chapter; rather, what is crucial to recognize is the fact that together these events have permanently altered the relationship between the State and universities in South Africa, with long term implications for the governance, management and administration of higher education institutions.

It is impossible to account for such changes – such as the relationship between State and universities – outside the global context of higher education developments. As international commentators have warned, it is too easy for South Africans to claim uniqueness when in fact much of what is happening locally has its roots in what is taking place globally. The spread of new managerialism is a reflection and outcome of a broader neo-liberal discourse that has transformed relationships between the State, civil society and universities in major ways throughout the world (Webster & Mosoetsa, 2001). The emergence of international private higher education is part of a global sweep of trade in a borderless education environment (Knight, 2002; Scherrer, 2002). The changing meanings of accountability and autonomy are as contested in Europe and North America at the present time, as they might be in Africa and Latin America (Altbach, 2000). The restructuring of higher education through mergers and other forms of realignment is by no means a South African or even an education phenomenon (Harman & Meek, 2002), even though its local manifestation might invoke apartheid’s illogical development as the stimulus for such radical changes.

It is however difficult to assess the full impact and consequences of these changes in higher education without exploring systemic shifts within specific instances of change. For this purpose, two case studies were deemed as powerful and illustrative of changes in higher education and which allow for deeper and more penetrating analyses of what such changes mean in global contexts.

4. A CASE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION CHANGE: THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

With the exception of the mergers, the most important structural intervention in higher education was sought through the reorganization of the qualifications system and, through this medium, the enhancement of access and the improvement of teaching and learning in institutions. The instrument for achieving these goals of access and quality was the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), its implementation to be overseen by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Yet two questions remain amidst the growing number of largely speculative and advocacy writings on qualifications' reform in South Africa. First, what was the actual impact of the NQF on increasing access to higher education? In particular how and to what extent did the policy objective described as the recognition of prior learning (RPL) facilitate access into higher education? Second, how did the NQF influence the processes of teaching and learning in higher education institutions?

A single case study – the University of Pretoria (UP) – was selected to gauge end user perspectives and experiences of implementing the NQF, how the NQF impacted on decisions regarding the recognition of prior learning, and on how curriculum was construed in the light of the framework. This case was selected because, at the time, the University of Pretoria was the largest (in terms of student enrolment) and most diverse (in terms of programmes on offer) residential university in South Africa, and therefore the ideal site for studying the overall impact of the NQF. The significance of this inquiry is that it works with practitioner perspectives on the implementation of the NQF; it adds empirical depth to our understanding of the relationship between higher education policy and practice in a transition society; and it places the meaning and impact of the NQF within a comparative perspective.

As a single case report, this study relies entirely on academic and administrative voices and perspectives of UP stakeholders. This report acknowledges that there may be other, more wider-ranging perspectives on how and why NQF implementation struggled with “uptake” in institutional life, for example, the epistemological (knowledge) assumptions of a labour-driven change process within traditional academic contexts. The UP case, however, reflects response and resistance within this particular institutional context.

4.1. WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW ABOUT THE NQF EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL BASES FOR CURRICULUM KNOWLEDGE

Following the requirements of the NQF, academics proceeded to identify different kinds of modules (fundamental, core, elective), again with little consideration of the curriculum implications of such physical division of disciplinary knowledge. The formatting of the qualifications appeared to be in line with the requirements of the NQF; on closer inspection, though, it was clear that any deep or sophisticated intellectual processes that typically accompany fundamental curriculum reforms were simply not done. What preoccupied institutional planners and academic departments, was the largely organizational and bureaucratic task of preparing their qualifications for purposes of interim registration with SAQA, rather than engaging in a fundamental rethinking of the purposes of teaching and learning in a democratic South Africa.

There was little intervention from the University Management, in the case of the University of Pretoria, to push for a deeper sense of curriculum change at faculty level, other than what was required to meet the formal submission requirements for the registration of qualifications. At the same time, university leaders acted through the then South African Universities Vice Chancellor's Association (SAUVCA) to ensure that academic programmes and structure of qualifications would not be fundamentally altered by arguing for 'whole qualifications' rather than unit standards favoured by powerful stakeholders within the NQF and, in particular, by the trade unions. A senior academic was adamant about this point:

The whole qualifications approach is nothing more and nothing less than the status quo, that's what we've been doing all the time...it simply meant that in terms of the submissions of our programmes for approval by SAQA it appeared as if we were conforming; in reality, it was just the outer cover, if you will, of the book that had changed, but the content, everything else, remained the same.

The 'technocrats' in universities and in SAUVCA ensured that the process of registering qualifications on the NQF would be as painless as possible.

.... So they got a few technocrats who would package this stuff in what appeared to be appropriate language but it was very, very superficial. It didn't really take down the NQF language and the NQF discourses into the redesign of higher education curricula.

But how exactly did institutions understand and interact with the policy provisions between central administration and the faculties? A senior member of the University Management, tasked with coordinating the process of registering qualifications with SAQA, recalls the process:

firstly we studied the material that came in from SAQA; then we provided that material to the Deans and the Heads of Departments. We had meetings with various faculties on an individual basis, and provided them with the format that qualifications had [to have] to prepare for registration. We gave assistance while they were busy doing this, and then eventually, in June 2000, everything was received by our [administrative] officers. The material was organized in a meaningful way per faculty, and then we delivered it to the SAQA.

The level of interrogation of the NQF policy remained focused on the technicalities involved in the formal requirements for the registration of qualifications. One respondent after another confirmed that there was no strategy on how the University would ensure that crucial concerns about access, teaching, learning and assessment would be reconfigured in accordance with the new policy. Yet another senior member of the academic staff offered insight into this essentially technical and managerial approach to the design implications of the NQF: “We compiled a program in Microsoft Access which enabled you to type in the things that were asked [for] little bit by little bit. And in the end it would give you that big involved report... in the form that they wanted and that made the process much easier.”

This highly technical, routine and fragmented response of institutional end users to the NQF in terms of curriculum change did not, however, mean that there was resistance against, or disagreement with, the broader goals that inspired the original NQF. As one academic leader recalls:

There was buy in, I think, to the broad goals. But the broad goals are so well formulated in the SAQA Act, and so incredibly universal and progressive. And nobody could really disagree with the broad goals. I mean, who would disagree with increasing access? Who would disagree with the goal of enabling people to move up and across the ladder of the NQF?

Nevertheless, the policy message carried down to Faculties and departments ensured that the implementation remained superficial with emphasis placed on the formatting of new qualifications. Here, respondents used what broad criteria and meanings were formally specified for learning outcomes, assessment criteria and so on. In short, while the University in principle agreed with the broad policy goals of the NQF, they also had reservations with implementing it ‘as is’. They accordingly adopted a position that would allow flexibility to retain ‘what worked’ in their context and exclude what they did not agree with or found difficult to implement. At the root of the institutional response to the NQF lies buried a much deeper set of concerns about academic freedom and autonomy.

But there were also straightforward concerns about implementation capacity as institutions grappled with one of the first major interventions targeting the formal curriculum of universities and (at the time) technikons. It is clear from stakeholders’ experiences that there simply was not sufficient capacity built *at the level of end-users* to make the language and meanings of the policy accessible to them. To many of the respondents in the study, this was a fundamental flaw that kept the vision of change proposed by the NQF policy locked in the minds of its developers and a few senior persons in university administration.

A senior member of staff explained how the administrative work that accompanied the implementation process seemed divorced from the initial goals of the NQF:

What I think universities got disenchanted with was when that [the NQF] came with an administrative language and a bureaucratic packaging, which made the original goals seem very, very distant from the policies of SAQA and the NQF. And that's where I think the universities just stopped engaging, however they were bound by legislation and required to submit their programmes.

Another senior staff member from a different department tasked with coordinating the overall implementation of the NQF policy at institutional level, pointed to the burden that the additional work of implementation demanded from academic staff: "But the fact that implementation of the NQF was generating a lot of paper work and a lot of administrative work made many staff negative about it."

Another barrier to implementation was the demands set by participating in the various committees responsible for ensuring the implementation of the policy; this presented a conflict of interests for academics. One of the lecturers records that participating in the many committees (such as Standards Generating Bodies) meant time away from conducting research and marking papers. For academics, research, teaching and marking of papers are core activities that define their identity as academic teachers; this was more of a priority for them than the new spate of activities required for the implementation of NQF policy. Academics did not always feel that the people constituting committees could relate to the academic environment since "stakeholders" came from industry, non-governmental organizations and other non-academic sites.

In this context, it was also unusual for university academics (as opposed to technician staff) to deliberate on curricular or pedagogical issues with people from industry who were perceived to have little in common with the academy. Therefore, while the process was recognized as democratic in that it included stakeholder participation, its relevance to higher education practice was not evident to the academic respondents in this study. The impression left with the academic delegates was that this was a process that emphasized the technical formatting of qualifications and the employability of graduates. The core issues of teaching, learning and curriculum design did not steer the discussions with these stakeholders.

This short representation of the voices and views of end users of the NQF focused on the impact of the framework on curriculum in higher education. But the ideological centrepiece of the NQF, at least as far as the trade unions were concerned, had to do with its enormous power for leveraging greater access to education and training for those previously excluded from learning. How did end users estimate the impact of the NQF as far as access to higher education was concerned?

4.2. THE IMPACT OF THE NQF ON INCREASING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was the primary policy instrument of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) for ensuring that learners were able to achieve a qualification in whole or in part based on their prior learning, albeit formal, non-formal or informal (SAQA,

1995: 16) learning. In response, most higher education institutions, at least in formal terms, put RPL policies and procedures in place. Higher education access was to be achieved in two ways. First, RPL could be determined through a challenge test so that a pass on the test leads to exemption from particular components of a course. Second, RPL could be determined through an assessment of a portfolio of work, to ascertain whether the learner's prior experience approximated the formal learning outcomes towards a qualification; in such a case, credit or recognition is granted towards a qualification for what the learner already knows.

The University of Pretoria position, entitled 'Policy with regard to postgraduate student cases'³ makes provision for admission on the basis of what is called the traditional *academic route*, and then also on the basis of what is referred to as *standard competence*. The academic route refers to cases in which a student has proven herself on the basis of academic achievement. This access route describes how access is traditionally provided into the institution for the majority of learners. The second option allows for the Recognition of Prior Learning in that access can be granted on the basis of an estimation of standard competence. Standard competence can be evaluated in three ways: by means of a written motivation by the student, which is evaluated by the head of the department; the successful completion of an oral or written entrance examination in which one or more external examiner(s) is/are involved; and a formal submission to the Senate. Although access as described here through evaluation of standard competence is regarded as akin to the Recognition of Prior Learning, it needs to be said that no mention is made in this institutional policy about RPL. In fact, the University of Pretoria does not have a written access policy formally described as RPL.

Access through the evaluation of standard competence as described in the institutional policy is limited to postgraduate admissions and is not applicable to undergraduate students; the entrance requirements for baccalaureate degrees are still matriculation exemption. What lies behind this position is a more defensive and traditional discourse with respect to access, as became clear through interviews with senior administrators; as one administrator put it: "Universities use not a special system, but an existing senate system in which the prevailing discourse was one of standards and not one of open access."

Rather than facilitate access through the provisions of the RPL policy, universities like Pretoria prefer to follow more traditional routes of entry for undergraduate students, such as the University of Pretoria Foundation Year (UPFY) programme, which provides bridging courses in the sciences for disadvantaged students. Students who pass this programme are allowed formal entry into the UP science programmes.

There is widespread suspicion that RPL, as formally described in policy, might undermine quality, a position defended by a senior administrator: "The University has rules and regulations for basic reasons...you know you can't just allow mediocrity to slip in by the door."

³ Document S1791/96 [amended G 27/96].

However, RPL is being implemented at postgraduate level across numerous Faculties of the University of Pretoria. One other senior member of staff indicates how it is being implemented and some of the challenges that make it difficult to implement RPL fully in the university context.

The Senate Sub-Committee would meet and it would be a combination of deans, the registrar, the vice-rector...there would be a hell of a debate that would break out in every meeting between a dean in a particular Faculty who says: but this person is really good, this person has 30 years of experience in disability education, how can we insist on an Honours degree for doing a Master's? Another senior academic would counter and say but experience is not the same thing as theoretical and abstract training...we should not allow the University of Pretoria to reduce standards.

As a result, the implementation of RPL is very limited in the postgraduate class and justification for this includes the fact that the University is able to attract large numbers of students who meet its formal requirements without having to rely on RPL.

However, the issue of demand is not the only factor that makes RPL less appealing to University Management. The quality of prior learning that learners bring with them to higher education has also been cited as a fundamental issue that make RPL less appealing. One head of department was adamant on this point: "They really battle with the Honours [degree]...There is a big difference between a traditional university culture...and the culture of a college."

Another senior member of staff made the connection to the quality of formal education in general:

When I think of our current Master's students, I can tell you now that the Honours level qualification has an enormous range in South Africa from really poor to very good. And so the student might have met the formal admission requirements, but would struggle enormously. Now when you have that experience the last thing you want to do as a university is to take students who do not even meet the formal requirements.

What is clear from this research, however, is that even within a single institution, there is a wide range of responses among practitioners to the NQF. And this became clearer as the research moved from the views of the senior administrators and senior academics to the staff in academic departments responsible for making sense of the NQF within particular disciplinary and field contexts. Three such responses are distilled here, presented as ideal types rather than mutually exclusive departmental reactions to the NQF.

4.2.1. RESPONSE AS FORMAL COMPLIANCE

This group of respondents constituted academics located in Centres of the University and who were teaching programmes that were largely designed to respond to specific client groups. In such a context, the curriculum as well as the teaching and learning methods was designed to fit the needs of the client groups or learners directly. These Centres offer specialized postgraduate

programmes, which were often funded by an external agency as a form of service to a particular group of clients. The programmes were therefore intended to drive change within specialized markets and had to be sensitive and responsive to the demands of the target group of learners served by the Centres. The Centres adopted the language, procedures and methods aligned with the NQF – such as outcomes based education, learner-centredness, and applied competence to formulate qualifications, as a direct response to clients needs. What is crucial to recognize in these client-driven programmes, is that the targeted beneficiaries are non-traditional learners who would not normally be able to access the university postgraduate courses. Accordingly, the Centres were compelled to enrol learners into their programmes through the Recognition of Prior Learning.

The Director of a Centre (or the relevant Head of Department) would proceed to establish the standard of competence and make a submission to the University Senate. This was difficult since official RPL policy does not give clear guidelines as to what the Head of Department should look for in evaluating the standard of competence, or what Senate would look for in making its decision. Moreover, very little support was given to the Heads of Departments in implementing this process. Most of the senior academics, who followed the standard of competence route, expressed a sense of powerlessness and frustration as they sought to advance access to non-traditional students into postgraduate programmes. One Head of Department found the process to entail considerable risk:

When I found that there were students who wanted to apply who were in fact coming without Honours Degrees, I was quite shocked to find that there wasn't a process already in place. And in fact I think that the Faculty tried to catch up with policy, and likewise the University was trying to do so...meanwhile I was working with all five students assuming they would get in. And I must be frank that four of the five students that were RPL'd had turned out to be the strongest students in the programme.

What distinguished this group of academics, is that they routinely and faithfully complied with the standard RPL policy required in official documentation even though there was little guidance on the substantive process within the institutions. Their goal was to find the quickest route to facilitate admission of non-traditional students in order to satisfy the external client body that funded the programme.

4.2.2. RESPONSE AS SELECTIVE ADAPTATION

This group describes departments whose response to the NQF was to follow a selective combination of what the NQF as policy required and what their institutional environment allowed. The first response to the NQF was to restructure the programmes of the department in line with the policy signals embedded in the new policy framework. This was done on the basis of the competences required of professionals trained in a particular qualification. In this case, the NQF structure of formatting programmes and qualifications was used as the basis for restructuring the instructional offerings in the department.

What is notable, is that the connection between what the NQF was recommending in terms of formatting and structuring qualifications was taken beyond this to redefine the identity and strategic niche of the Department. This led to some programmes that were traditionally offered in the Department being discontinued, while new ones were introduced. The restructuring also forced the Department to examine their articulation with other programmes, qualifications, departments and faculties that were offering similar qualifications or, who were drawing students from other departments into their own department.

The design and level of programmes were reformulated in line with the NQF levels and learning outcomes for the qualifications. The restructuring also forced the Department to review the access streams and integration across the different disciplines. The type of change and restructuring was radical and met with some resistance, since the restructuring was perceived as infringing on the independence and autonomy of individual academics.

But the response of the academic departments in this Faculty to the NQF was also moderated by a major reorganization that was taking place at about the same time viz., the incorporation of the college of education into this Faculty, and its implications for the job security of ordinary academics.

People [from the college] thought [that] if they would “curriculate” [redesign] the program[me] in such a way that they could make space for those people, those [college] people would be employed. It wasn't influenced by the criteria. People felt very, very threatened... It was very difficult when you've got this emotional process and you have to keep to the academic criteria.

This combination of compliant logic and survival logic explains the response of this Faculty to the NQF. On the one hand, the NQF guidelines were used to reconfigure the courses on offer within the programme in line with what was expected of the new teacher or educator. On the other hand, the programmes were also designed to ensure greater employability for those threatened with job losses under the terms of the college incorporation.

4.2.3. RESPONSE AS STRATEGIC AVOIDANCE

This section describes departments that recorded very little change in enhancing access or in improving the quality of teaching and learning; what such academic units were able to accomplish is to design a set of measures that, in effect, amounted to strategic avoidance of the core requirements of the National Qualifications Framework.

Access into a department is based on the traditional entrance requirements, and the University's own initiatives that deal with the admission of under-prepared students. The reliance on traditional entrance requirements is so entrenched that even students who could be admitted through Recognition of Prior Learning are required to first meet the basic or standard entrance requirements.

This requirement created a barrier that made it difficult for RPL to be implemented. What a key respondent in Dentistry underlined, was the fact that the entrance requirements for the field was determined nationally and controlled by the Health Professions Council. Therefore, the opportunity to acquire any relevant prior learning is limited to people who at least hold some form of formal qualification in a related field to Dentistry, which is qualification as a Dental Technician. Such requirements therefore exclude any other students acquiring experience in the field of Dentistry without a minimum qualification and registration with the Health Professions Council.

The influence of the Professional Council on curriculum structure and teaching practice determines the modalities of access in this Department. The overarching influence of the Professional Council, in this case, constrains decisions with respect to who teaches, whom to teach (access), how to teach and what constitutes meaningful learning outcomes.

In response to a question about what would need to change in order for the Department to have the independence to accommodate learners through RPL, the Head of Department was direct: “Detach ourselves (Dentistry) from the Medical profession.”

The Head of Department was reflecting, of course, on a professional practice with a history of 50 years, and what the NQF was, in fact, proposing was an epistemological and political detachment from that history and a movement into something new. The regulation of these professions and the power of its traditions explain why changes in the medical and dental curricula are so difficult to attain in these departments. Such revision of the curricula is even more difficult in a field that is deeply fragmented with different specialists, such as orthodontists and periodontists, working separately from each other. Each specialist area has a training site fully equipped with all the resources housed in its own specialist building. The fragmentation in the specialist areas is also reflected in the infrastructure of the buildings where learning is meant to take place, with separate clinics for the various specialist areas.

In short, the regulation of the profession, the establishment of powerful traditions and the deep fragmentation of the curricula led to an approach whereby the academic respondents to SAQA policy gave precedence to the status quo rather than to a reconfiguration of teaching, learning and assessment – in any deep sense – to comply with these new, external requirements. In the current classification, it was a matter of strategic avoidance – finding creative ways of shielding the curriculum from external regulation beyond what was already established through professional bodies and ingrained in professional practice.

The purpose of this section on the RPL as an instrument of the NQF was to describe *academic practice* that is, what academics and academic departments actually do (and

⁴ Department of Education and Department of Labour (2003), An Interdependent National Qualifications Framework System, Consultative Document, Pretoria, South Africa, p. 7. See also Paula Ensor (2003), The National Qualifications Framework and Higher Education in South Africa: some epistemological issues, *Journal of Education and Work* 16(3): 325-346.

understand themselves to be doing) in response to policy intervention in one institution. It does not seek to engage the deeper social, theoretical and epistemological reasons that might further explain the dissonance between policy and practice; or what the governmental response to the NQF Review called ‘the strained relationship between...workplace based and institution-based learning...’.⁴ The recent Review of the NQF and the South African NQF Impact Study are both indicative of a serious attempt within and outside of SAQA to seriously assess the many conceptual, theoretical, political, and financial dilemmas facing the implementation of the Framework. What this segment of the study does, is to focus only on how academics respond in their practice to one aspect of NQF policy, that is, the recognition of prior learning.

5. A CASE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION CHANGE: PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1994-2004

Although in existence since the early nineteenth century, Private Higher Education (PHE) in South Africa was largely ignored by both government and the research community for most of the twentieth century (Mabizela, 2002). This changed dramatically in the late 1990s when the rapid expansion of PHE alerted the public sector and the political world to its presence. In a matter of few years, PHE emerged from obscurity to become one of the most regulated and well-studied segments of the education enterprise (Kruss, 2002; Mapesela, 2002; Levy, 2003).

The advocates of private education base their arguments on the natural trajectory of global markets, the complementary role of the private sector, and the fundamental principles of democracy and liberty as enshrined in the Constitution⁵ (see Smit, 1998). The opponents perceive private colleges as the iniquitous competitor of the public sector; a phenomenon which comprises institutions in such a way that ‘*vulnerable students receive mediocre programmes from private providers who take advantage of the unregulated terrain*’.⁶ Between these two extremes there was a range of ambivalent attitudes and contradictions regarding private education, in general, and PHE, in particular. The main focus of this section is to map out and explain the South African government’s ambivalent position on PHE and the impact such a disposition has had on the sector.

5.1. THE PERIOD 1994–1997: HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Following South Africa’s transformation to democracy, and the National Commission of Higher Education’s (NCHE) report (1996), there were high expectations for greater privatization of education provisions and for significant government investment in education. It was perceived that the public higher education sector by itself could not address the skills shortage and the needs of the labour market and that ‘the government is looking to the private sector for assistance. We [PHE] have the financial backing to provide an essential service to the community’.⁷

5 Republic of South Africa, The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996), section 29, subsection 2.

6 Moshoeshoe Monare, ‘Education needs urgent surgery’. *The Sunday Independent* 27 June 2004.

7 Cornia Pretorius, ‘Midrand to get its own university, Campus will be upgraded to meet growing demand’. *Sunday Times* 20 September 1998.

The White Paper on Higher Education (Department of Education, 1997) and the subsequent Higher Education Act of 1997 welcomed PHE into the higher education landscape, even though the White Paper assigned footnote status to some of the problems associated with the sector. The new policy context allowed for private providers to offer degrees and diplomas for the first time. This accommodation was aimed at increasing access, diversity and differentiation, based on a view of PHE as having a complementary role to the public sector in addressing the human resource needs of the new democracy. Official policies dealt mostly with the registration of the providers, as required by the Constitution. Registration at that stage was generally viewed in terms of consumer protection, though framed by a basic lack of elaboration as to how the policy would be implemented (Coombe, 2001):

The Minister recognizes that private provision plays an important role in expanding access to higher education, in particular in niche areas, through responding to labour market opportunities and student demand. The key challenge in expanding the role of private institutions is to create an environment which neither suffocate educationally sound and sustainable private institutions with State over regulation, nor allows a plethora of poor quality, unsustainable “fly by night” operators into the higher education market (Department of Education, 1997. p.10, online version)

Several reasons were forwarded to explain this *laissez-faire* attitude towards the private sector: the government’s lack of knowledge or conjecture about the private sector. The assumption was that the sector was insignificant and benign (Andrew, 1999; Coombe, 2001); the accommodative aspects of the White Paper, which was written in the spirit of access, democracy and reconciliation that pervaded negotiations in the first two years of democracy under the Government of National Unity (Thaver, 2001); the impact of globalization on the policy context, which gave support to the rhetoric of increased access, diversified providers and differentiation of academic programmes – all were perceived as necessary conditions in order for South Africa to become a recognised player in the global economy; and the expectation of massification.

As indicated earlier in this chapter, the performance of higher education failed to satisfy the White Paper’s requirements for broader participation. In contrast to public higher education, however, the private sector was reported to be flourishing with student enrolments “informally” estimated at 500,000 (Cloete & Bunting, 2000). Public institutions in South Africa reacted to the trend by entering into a complex range of partnerships with both local and foreign private institutions. At the same time, negative perceptions of falling quality and standards in the public sector, fiscal constraints, student demonstrations and class stoppages led to a general mistrust of public HE. Consequently, private institutions, especially those offering overseas programmes and accreditation, became an attractive alternative.

It could be argued that the proliferation of private providers was encouraged by the promise of the NQF as envisaged in the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA) Act (Act 58 of 1995), which allowed for articulation between training and education, and the accumulation of unit standards to

constitute a qualification. For private providers, this new environment comported well with their vision, that is, less stringent admission policies, the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and flexible entry and exit points.

5.2. THE PERIOD 1998–2000: DISILLUSION, SUSPICION AND HOSTILITY

Following the unexpected growth of PHE, the general perception was that the unregulated terrain and the “policy vacuum” allowed a “free for all” in which PHE institutions strategically positioned themselves to ensure greater market share and diversity of income sources. Consequently, the second Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, announced in his “Call to Action” the intention to apply stricter regulations to the private sector in order to protect the interest of the public system (Department of Education, 1999).

The enabling context for the proliferation of private institutions that existed in the first few years after the dismantling of the Apartheid State changed to one that became restrictive and even suspicious of the private provision of education. PHE began to be viewed as competitor to public institutions, especially to historically black institutions or HBUs (Mapesela, 2002).

From 1999 onwards, private providers were required to register with the Department of Education and to have their programmes accredited by SAQA (the South African Qualifications Authority) until such time that the HEQC (Higher Education Quality Committee) was established. With the registration process, the Department began to realize the expansiveness of the sector and the complexity revealed in the process of registration and accreditation. There was not enough clarity on what constituted higher education, on who the providers were, and on how to obtain reliable information (SAQA, 2001).

At the same time that the Department was fumbling through the initial stages of setting up an operational registration and accreditation mechanism, the private sector continued to expand, coupled with the very visible emergence of trans-national institutions on the national landscape. The Department and SAQA received over 700 inquiries for application.⁸ By late 1999, 323 applications were received by the Department of Education. This unforeseen development intensified the confusion and contradictions in the second period.

The registration process was complicated and was confusing to both government and providers. The private providers maintained that the Department of Education started the process with a negative approach, seeing their role as being that of ‘watchdog over PHEIs operating in South Africa’ with the aim of ‘root[ing] out poor quality, unsustainable, fly-by-night operators’ (Andrew, 1999). On the other hand, many private providers were inexperienced and could not provide either the necessary registration information to the Department of Education, or appropriate course materials for quality assurance purposes to SAQA.⁹ Providers were also not forthcoming with data about enrolments, which only increased suspicion about their operations. The uncertainty and confusion caused a great

⁸ Media release 10 January 2000: Registration of private higher education institutions. DoE

⁹ Colleges left out in the cold; ‘Some grievances with the registration process’. *The Star* 26 January 2000.

¹⁰ Marcus, R. (2001) Interview. www.che/reflections/Marcus

deal of agitation, irritation, and ill feelings between SAQA, the Department and private providers; some private providers brought successful court actions against the Minister.¹⁰

The situation became even more complex with the Skills Development Act (1998) and the establishment of the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) and 25 new Education Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs); each of these bodies may accredit a private provider of higher education.

Once the HEQC was established, it took over the responsibility for the accreditation process from SAQA. In the CHE's view, the SAQA/NQF system, as it was structured, was neither workable nor sustainable. While SAQA adopted a developmental approach that would allow the institutions to slowly develop their capacities to conform with the requirements, the HEQC restricted accreditation to private providers offering learning programmes leading to whole qualifications, excluding private providers who offer short courses and learning programmes that lead to unit standards. The latter had to refer to the appropriate ETQA SETAs for accreditation. This caused more confusion and a feeling of victimization among some private providers.¹¹

The policy context was significantly altered to fit in with the changed approach. In 1999, the CHE requested the Minister to place a moratorium on public-private partnerships.¹² The Higher Education Amendment Act of 1999 gave the Minister of Education much greater power to regulate private providers of higher education. It also prevented private or foreign higher education institutions from using the words "university", "technikon" or "higher education college".

The amendments were justified by the CHE as a necessary step to curb the proliferation of a number of small, "fly-by-night" operations and to counteract the drop in enrolments in public institutions 'even though there is no data available to link declining enrolments in public HE with the growth of private HE' (CHE, 2001).

For the private providers, the new amendments came as a shock. It was perceived by some as a short-sighted policy that would hinder the country from meeting the challenges of globalization. Others saw it as a futile attempt to bar foreign institutions from entering the country given the capacities for access through new information technology networks and the Internet.¹³ Nevertheless, there was no objection to the principle of regulation and there was an acknowledgement of the problems associated with an unregulated terrain. Others argued against the protectionist nature of the changes, which allowed certain local higher education institutions to continue with weak programmes and practices instead of allowing open competition to challenge and eliminate weaknesses (Bitzer, 2002). Representatives of higher

¹¹ Notes for the record of the meeting of representative of the APPETD and the CHE. 10 December 2002.

¹² Memorandum to the Minister of Education: Towards a framework and strategy for reconfiguration the higher education system: recommendation and advice. CHE, December 1999.

¹³ Interview with Dr R Marcus conducted by H Perold. www.che/reflections/

¹⁴ Emma Gordon, Open the higher education market. *Business Day* 13 March 2001.

education institutions were concerned that this clause would decrease their institutional autonomy. The amendments generated public debate. It was argued that the hostile references to private institutions were a result of pent-up resentment by sectors of the ANC government against private encroachment into areas that were mainly government-run monopolies.¹⁴

At this stage, the attention of both government and the research community turned on PHE, simultaneously researching, regulating and controlling the sector. Often regulation and control preceded research and formal studies of the sector. The first empirical research was completed in 2000 (Mabizela *et al.*, 2000), with the initial findings later updated by Subotsky (2002, 2003). These were mainly quantitative studies based on limited and sketchy data captured by the Department of Education for registration purposes.

5.3. THE PERIOD 2000–2004: RESEARCH, REGULATION AND CONTROL

In 2000, the Minister of Education requested the CHE to provide him with a set of concrete proposals on ‘the shape and size’ of the higher education sector, including the private sector. The study that followed corrected some basic misconceptions on the size of the latter sector, and the racially skewed and elitist character of PHEIs. The report further identified distinctive trends within the private sector (Mabizela *et al.*, 2000). The EPU research claimed the following: that the sector was smaller than estimated; that PHE was not dominated by white students, but was a rather de-racialized system; that most of the private institutions were single-focus entities and offered programmes in one field only; that almost half (48%) of the enrolments were in business/commerce/management; and that most of the programmes were at NQF level 5. Only fourteen per cent was at NQF level 6 (first degree); six per cent was at level 7 (Master’s) and less than one per cent was at doctoral level. The researchers concluded that with only six per cent of reported enrolments in the Master’s and doctoral levels, the private sector, and the *trans-nationals* in particular, hardly posed a threat at the higher levels, except in the MBA field.

In a report to the Minister, the CHE (2000) continued to acknowledge the potential benefit of PHEIs in providing diversified education; yet it argued that the sector was inadequately monitored in terms of registration, regulation and quality assurance. The CHE therefore requested that the moratorium on private-public partnerships remain in place until the nature of these arrangements could be clarified. The report argued that a concentration by private providers on programmes with high economic returns could damage public institutions. It also differentiated between single-purpose and multi-purpose institutions. The CHE suggested that private providers, which function as multi-purpose institutions, should be required to meet the set criteria for public institutions to fulfil their social purposes, roles and goals.

In response to the CHE’s report, the Minister of Education released *The National Plan for Higher Education* (Department of Education, 2001), which made explicit the government’s

attitude toward the private sector. PHE was presented as a competitor to the public sector, especially over historically disadvantaged institutions, with obvious advantages because of its strategic positioning and its 'limited focus on the delivery of low cost, high demand programmes which are financially lucrative, such as those in business, commerce and management' (Department of Education, 2001, Section 1.3).

In order to regulate the sector, the National Plan linked the registration of private higher education to three factors: (i) the financial viability of institutions; (ii) the quality of programme offerings; and (iii) whether the provision is in the public interest (Department of Education, 2001, Section 4.6).

The Ministry is concerned that the rapid expansion of foreign institutions, especially in fields of study that are already well provided for by the public and local private institutions, may adversely impact on the public higher education system at a time when the latter is undergoing fundamental restructuring (Department of Education, 2001: Section 4.6).

In this period, the government's attitude had clearly become more interventionist and protectionist, especially against foreign institutions.

6. EXPLAINING CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Across the globe, higher education has changed in dramatic ways in the past three decades. Scholars are at one on *the external manifestation* of these changes: the "massification" of higher education, the explosion of private higher education, the greater role of the State in the regulation of higher education, the emergence of new organizational forms in higher education, the declining availability of government funding of institutions, the expanding managerialism in the academic workplace, the changing conditions of academic employment, and new forms and sites of knowledge production (Altbach, 2000; Gumport, 2000; Deem, 2001; Scott, 2002; Jacob & Hellstrom, 2003). How higher education institutions have responded to these changes, is captured in a host of *descriptive categories* from the entrepreneurial university (Clark, 1998) to the enterprise university (Marginson & Considine, 2000) to the hybrid university (Mouwen, 2000) to the networked university (Lewis, Marginson & Snyder, 2005). What remains relatively less well documented, are powerful explanations for the origins, nature and trajectory of change in higher education. With the exception of globalization, the focus in this section falls on new explanations beyond the familiar theories of change in higher education, such as neo-institutionalism, culturalism and adaptation theory.¹⁵

Of course, the most common explanation for these global shifts in the organization and purposes of higher education is the phenomenon of "globalization", usefully defined as 'the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa' (Held, 1991:9). By viewing changes in higher education through the lens of globalization, it is possible to understand the

¹⁵ Kay Harman & Lynn Meek (2002), 'Introduction to Special Issue: Merger Revisited: international perspectives on mergers in higher education' (Higher Education 44(1):1-4); Peter Maasen (1996), Governmental Steering and the Academic Culture, CHEPS, Management and Policy in Higher Education; Leo Goedegebuure (1992), *Mergers in Higher Education: A comparative perspective*. Utrecht: Lemma.

inexorable logic of economic reasoning within universities, the transnational adoption of common discourses (such as managerialism) and technologies (such as quality assurance) within institutions, and the growing vulnerability of public universities to global and regional trade in higher education services.

Universities are, however, not uncritical respondents to global authority. Here, another phenomenon, described by Weiler (2005) as ‘ambivalence’, aids in understanding the behaviour of the State and universities towards globalization. This ambivalence is a function of societal and political contradictions about the role of knowledge and the purposes of universities. For Weiler, ambivalence at once describes contradictory attitudes towards a particular issue, whereby one attitude inhibits the expression of another; and at the same time conveys uncertainty as to which approach, attitude or treatment to follow. The concept of ambivalence is best demonstrated in the South African government’s attitude towards private higher education. Rhetorically, government continues to recognize and encourage the complementary role of the private sector, while at the same time limiting, constraining and even closing down private provision through regulation and control. At the root of this ambiguity is a broader set of ambivalent behaviours that lie between globalization and nationalism (or regionalism); centralization and decentralization; higher education as elitist and as a “massified” system; reliance on market forces and increasing State control; and between the rights of individuals and the rights of community.

Neither globalization nor ambivalence can, however, explain the remarkable agility of universities *as institutions* in the face of their changing external environment in the last two decades. Sociologist, Francisco Ramirez (2005), offers a powerful explanation through his thesis on the ‘rationalization’ of universities. Ramirez agrees that universities are changing in the direction of greater inclusiveness, usefulness and flexibility, but argues that such responses are not simply rational adaptations to the environment; rather, these changes are ‘propelled by general rationalizing accounts to enhance their legitimacy...[and]...further enhanced by the rationalization of universities as organizations and the corresponding decline of tradition and charisma as the legitimating sources of university identity’ (2005: 2). These processes are nevertheless transnational in character as universities everywhere embody the ideal of ‘the socially useful university’ away from the idea of ‘the university as the institutional embodiment of high culture and canonical knowledge’ (2005: 3). As universities became less elitist under the force of massification, this same logic inspired greater utility, diversity and flexibility with respect to university knowledge. This “socially embedded university” diffuses world wide, creating a dense global network that further carries the logic of mass higher education so that ‘At that point university-specific traditions or highly historicized national university profiles are undercut by the normalization of the rationalized university’ (2005: 27).

Explaining how institutions change in relation to their external environment cannot, however, explain the mechanisms internal to institutions that allow and enable such responses. In the context of runaway capitalism, Slaughter (2001) examines the changing structures of

power/knowledge inside higher education. On the one hand, the nature of capitalism is changing, resulting in discussions about the “post-industrial” or “knowledge” economy, “late capitalism,” and “new times”; on the other hand, its dominance, expansion and “globalization” is also evident. Slaughter (2001) draws attention to the ways in which the structures of political power function within institutions of higher education. Analyses of accountability and quality assurance have treated the State as homogeneous and monolithic, instead of looking at which groups and forces are pushing for what ways in which to shape higher education and why they are doing it. Little attention has been paid to the relationship between the State and scholars of higher education who through networks, actions and work influence the formulation and implementation of policies regionally and globally (Slaughter, 2001: 396-7).

The “knowledge economy thesis” shifts attention to the ways in which globalization has led to the transformation of knowledge itself (Scott, 2002). As changing modes of production transformed society from an agricultural, to an industrial and then to an information-driven economy, knowledge became more and more critical as a form of transnational exchange and a source of new wealth. In this context, research knowledge shifted from its traditional or Mode 1 form (basic, disciplinary-based, institutional research) to a distributed or Mode 2 form (applied, trans-disciplinary, extra-institutional research) (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994). Yet, an important critique of the knowledge economy thesis has been that it underestimates the organization, authority and resilience of institutions (Jansen, 2000); that is, the enthusiastic literature on the knowledge economy simply ignores the ways in which universities as knowledge brokers undermine and resist transitions from Mode 1 to Mode 2 forms of knowledge organization. In a memorable turn of phrase, Muller (2003: 103 & 102) observes that ‘the institution of science keeps its own council’ and proceeds to examine ‘the constraints placed on choice or responsiveness by [institutions’] sedimented histories, by their inherited institutional forms, which project particular dispositions for action’.

Finally, in a recent study, Jansen (2002) offers a “contingency theory” of change that links the behaviour of the State and institutions rather than the independent actions of either actor (or set of actors) in explaining the outcomes of the restructuring of higher education in South Africa. Using comparative case studies of change, this research posits that the merger of higher education institutions in the country took on such diverse forms and yielded such disparate results because the ways in which government responded to different institutions and the ways in which those different institutions responded to government, co-determined merger outcomes.

In sum, what is clear from the literature reviewed, is that institutions do not change in the same ways under conditions of globalization; and that even within single institutions there are diverse responses to the external environment, as the NQF study in South Africa has demonstrated. While there are no doubt signs of the marketization and corporatization of the university (Gould, 2003; Kirp, 2003), Meek (2005) makes the useful point that ‘Statements about the advent of a new type of university are more normative than empirical’. What is

equally clear, is that despite widespread changes in higher education, such changes are neither linear, predictable nor uniform within or across national contexts (Currie *et al.*, 2003; Henkel, 2004; Meek, 2005).

What these varied explanations for changes in higher education do, however, is to bring together the personal and the political, the State and the institutions, and trans-national agency and national government. Together, these explanatory concepts shed light on both the power and the limits of external authority and the external environment on institutions, and the processes that render institutions capable and culpable in relation to change. Once common theories of domination and dependency now find themselves displaced by new explanations of authority and interdependency in a globalized world.

7. CONCLUSION

What does this research on higher education reveal about the problem of change? This study on higher education change demonstrates, again, that rationalist accounts of policy reform are inadequate for understanding the origins, trajectory and effects of educational change, especially in the turbulence of transition states like South Africa. Change is not linear, uniform or predictable in educational or, for that matter, any other social settings. Reforms seeking change are not simply 'implemented'; they are interpreted by real actors in real institutions, so that even with the same planning script (the National Qualifications Framework), academic departments within the same university understand and respond differently to planned change. Institutional change is not a simple reflex reaction to official policy intentions, but a complex response to both internal (institutional) and external (environmental) stimuli. Moreover, the way in which universities respond to change is as much a product of institutional dynamics as it is an active response to governmental policy. Planned change in the public sector, the study shows, can easily be undermined and redefined in the light of unexpected changes in the external environment, such as the unprecedented explosion of private further and higher education. Change is as dependent on capacity as it is on political will, as the case of RPL demonstrates. Change in an interconnected world is as much an adoption of transnational discourses and technologies as it is an accommodation of national policy demands. Even in national terms, government policy is simply one of many change stimuli, which could include professional bodies (as in the case of the health sciences in this study), institutional standard bearers (as in the RPL case) and academic or disciplinary organization. Changing participation rates is more easily achieved than changing performance outputs – a point clearly demonstrated when comparing changes in the race and gender demographics of universities and continuities in research productivity by race and gender. The mere observation of change does not mean much, for change can be deep and meaningful or it can be superficial and temporary; yet, whether permanent or transient, planned change leaves its impact on practice. In short, institutional change bows neither to central planning nor market forces; it yields neither to global pressures or local realities; it responds neither to institutional inertia or external pressures. Rather, higher education change, whether planned or incidental, takes its pace and direction from the interaction among these variables, shaped by particular institutional contexts.

To conclude, seeking changes in universities is a highly complex endeavour to be pursued with modest claims about planning ambitions, measured accounts about institutional contexts, and moderate expectations about sustainability.

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