

GLOBAL PATTERNS, LOCAL OPTIONS? CHANGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INTERNATIONALLY AND SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH AFRICA

*This paper comprises two linked sections. **Section 1** analyses changes in higher education internationally since about 1980. It draws most heavily on UK data, but refers also to European, North American and Australasian experiences. It notes that essentially similar shifts – massification, marketisation and managerialism, overseen by the regulatory state – emerged with striking synchronicity in advanced capitalist societies. **Section 2** assesses higher education in South Africa over the same period, with particular reference to practice and policy over the past decade. It tries to assess the extent to which global patterns have impacted upon local issues and local options – and asks if such impact compromised policies designed to transform and reconstruct higher education provision and outcomes?*

1. REINVENTING HIGHER EDUCATION IN ADVANCED CAPITALIST SOCIETIES

A familiar trope in writings on higher education emphasises the longevity of universities: famously, Clark Kerr noted that some eighty institutions existing in 1520 had survived into modernity – and 66 of these were universities. This emphasis upon continuity and durability is not very helpful in coming to terms with the fact that more than half the world's universities were founded after World War II. Nor is it an adequate starting point for comprehending the quite startling changes that have affected universities in recent decades, but especially since about 1980.

All universities, ancient and modern, have been subject to powerful forces of change in the past quarter century. These changes involve the transition from elite to mass provision; the construction of radically new relations between government, society and universities; accelerating penetration of academic life by the market and market relations; and a series of new demands and expectations coming from other social actors – fundamental revisions of how universities are defined, governed, funded and influenced by fields of force external to them. They also involve new ways in which universities manage themselves and carry out their core activities; the construction of new professional identities; the accommodation of existing values and norms to new circumstances; and a series of experimental engagements with other social actors – major shifts in how universities have sought to define, govern, fund and shape their own field of social activity.

These changes are particularly visible in the British case, where the university system has undergone “a more profound reorientation than any other system in industrial societies.”¹ But, as I try to indicate with some comparative glances at European, Australasian and North American cases, developments in the UK exemplify those that have affected higher education globally. Indeed, international comparisons suggest that the British experience is in many ways paradigmatic of changes in the OECD countries – and highly suggestive for changes currently under way in a number of middle-income countries. Permit me a truism. The transformation of universities in all advanced capitalist countries is imbricated and implicated in the shift from Keynesian to neo-liberal macro-economics, in the impact of informational technologies, and in the discourse of globalisation. The gearing between these dual sets of change – material, organisational, and ontological shifts within universities and economic, political, cultural and technological shifts on a global scale – is peculiarly transparent in the United Kingdom.

1.1 Massification of Higher Education in the UK

It may not be entirely true that Britain “stumbled absent-mindedly into mass higher education”². But it is certainly the case that British higher education expanded from elite to mass provision in the space of a single generation; that the UK went from having the least accessible higher education among industrialized nations to the upper reaches of international measures for participation³; and that this rapid process had profound implications for university finances, for teaching and learning, for the academic profession, and for what was expected of higher education within society. Consider just a few indices of accelerated change. In 1961, only 4.1% of the age group was at university. The participation rate reached 15% (Martin Trow’s widely cited measure for a mass system) only in 1987; yet by 1992 it stood at 28%. Between 1987 and 1992 participation virtually doubled: as Peter Scott wrote in 1995 “It was only yesterday, during that turbulent half-decade, that Britain irreversibly acquired a mass system.”⁴ Today the participation rate is 44%, and Blair’s government has a manifesto goal of raising this to 50%.

Although the British experience was particularly hectic, its broad contours were replicated fairly closely in other OECD countries. Expansion of student numbers meant that existing universities grew larger and that new institutions were created. What once appeared an instance of “American exceptionalism” now looks much more like an issue of periodisation. There are real parallels between the British and European experience of the last twenty years with American experience in the two decades after 1945, chronicled most famously by Clark Kerr in 1963.⁵ Between about 1965 and the late 1990s, higher education in Europe saw unprecedented growth, with two main spurts. These two phases of accelerated expansion were significantly different in terms of underlying policy and ideology, of how they were funded, and of how universities were interpellated with their societies.

Take the British case. The surge from the mid-60s to the late 1970s was the final phase of a political culture characterised by expansive welfare state provisions, Keynesian budgets and a confidence in the benefits of technology. University education was held to be an important socio-economic good and its main beneficiaries were graduates. It was a welfare benefit, a social good, and the important issue was its distribution. The bullish tone was famously present in the 1963 Robbins Report, produced at the high noon of the postwar welfare state: “We take it as an axiom that courses of higher education should be available to all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue this and wish to do so.” Most remarkable, in retrospect, was the sanguine pronouncement of the government White Paper accepting the Robbins Report: “Plans are being put in hand and resources will be provided accordingly.”⁶

The second growth spurt was very different. It was carried out by the governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, “far more committed to rolling back the frontiers of the welfare state than any other European government”.⁷ Expansion was accompanied by a funding squeeze and by the deployment of a series of new policy tools intended to change the behaviour and alignment of universities. The Thatcher years also saw the crystallisation of a new, utilitarian view of universities. The socio-economic benefits of higher education were expressed in terms of national economic competitiveness; universities were a tool, a resource, for human capital development and the production of relevant skills. In the early 1980s, the emphasis initially was upon efficiency through improved governance. By the end of the 80s and into the 90s, there was a new, explicit enthusiasm for efficiency achieved by market relations within higher education.

1.2 Markets

Public funding per student fell by 40% in less than two decades. In Britain, as elsewhere in the OECD, the post-welfare state expansion has precipitated a more or less permanent financial crisis.⁸ Universities across the industrial world have had to “do more with less”; academic salaries have fallen relative to other public sector professions; the physical infrastructure on many campuses has decayed. Everywhere, the proportion of funding for higher education from the public purse has fallen, and the proportion from other sources has had to increase. The decisive change in the funding of higher education has been the changing proportions of university income – less public spending, more “user costs” and more revenue from universities’ own endeavours.

In the UK, this led to the introduction of tuition fees for British students in the mid-1990s (a move preceded by the introduction of much higher fees for international students in 1979). It also spurred the development of “third stream” income: contract research, consultancies, spin-off companies, science parks, professional fundraising, the commercialisation of Intellectual Property, etc. Universities became more competitive: they jostled and jostled for esteem, for students, for research grants and for endowments. Inevitably, universities became explicitly more concerned with markets – with those prices and costs that they could control or influence.

This commodification of higher education has had a “crucial, pervasive structural effect”.⁹ A simple illustration of this is the extent to which decisions on curriculum are made on grounds of affordability, rather than on grounds of academic desirability. This has led to the large-scale closure of departments in certain disciplines – classics, philosophy, area studies, but also physics and chemistry are especially at risk – and recently prompted the Education Minister, Charles Clarke, to point out that decisions made for valid market reasons at individual institutions can imperil subjects of national strategic importance.¹⁰

1.3 Managers

If the Thatcher years brought expansion and a new funding regime, they also transformed the governance of British universities. “New Public Management” was pioneered in the National Health Service and in local government. It promoted decentralisation, market mechanisms and performance targets; it reduced the available workforce despite a rhetorical emphasis on quality and customer service. Over the past twenty years, New Public Management principles have been systematically applied to British universities.

The most important political technologies (to borrow from Foucault) have been the construction of forms of external audit and internal compliance. The concept of audit “has broken loose from its moorings in finance”¹¹ and serves now as description and prescription for all sorts of processes that can be reckoned and reported in column after column of quantification. At SOAS we submit annually torrents of data on students: how many enrol, drop out, complete, and with what grades; we report on their age, their ethnicity, on how many come from certain postcode districts – and we repeat the exercise for faculty and staff, for classroom size and occupancy rates – and for much else besides.

The audit culture, in other words, has created an intricate grammar of requirements and measurements. It rests upon a self-justificatory vocabulary of quality and best practice and accountability. “Quality” writes Louise Morley “parades as a universal truth and therefore continually extends its domain” while accountability “appears to be a kind of penance that is now being paid for former autonomy.”¹² Good practice is measured through Performance Indicators and monitored through Quality Assurance mechanisms. Continuous improvement defined in terms of rising productivity is the state of grace aspired to by strategic planners.

At the national level, the defining characteristic of the governance system is “steering at a distance” – a combination of central control and decentralised authority. Universities are simultaneously deregulated (that is, permitted to become more entrepreneurial and more competitive) and more effectively regulated, through compliance with centrally set norms. Institutions and individuals are in Foucault’s words “caused to behave” in ways consistent with desired outcomes. Such behaviour – compliance with externally imposed expectations - is precisely that described by Lyotard as “performativity”. In my weaker moments, I find myself wondering if there is a civil service unit somewhere in the bowels of Westminster charged with the enactment of *The Postmodern Condition*.

At the institutional level, the most striking feature has been the intensification of more managerial forms of governance, with much borrowing from private sector and from American universities.¹³ British universities have seen Vice-Chancellors styled as CEOs (and many appointed from the private sector); they have grown accustomed to strategic plans, organisational re-engineering, management-by-objectives, and the vocabulary of devolved budgets, cost centres, and line management. Frequently this has resulted in the reduction of powers of older, collegial structures. Managerialism in British universities has been defined in terms of three overlapping elements. It is a narrative of strategic change constructed in favour of new processes and structures; a distinctive organisational form; and a practical control technology. Because universities raid the same conceptual larder as the policy-makers, they tend to replicate on the campus most of the features identified at the national level. Thus decentralised units compete for funding tied to centrally determined targets or benchmarks; performance is quantified and rewarded accordingly; and an “ethos of beratement and surveillance”¹⁴ is replicated locally. The logic of performativity penetrates the campus and the corridors, creating a “climate of unease and hyperactivity.”¹⁵

Both sets of changes – different funding regimes and new relations of power and governance – that I have described for the UK have been mirrored internationally. Marilyn Strathern speaks of higher education being “moulded and managed according to what seems an almost ubiquitous consensus about aims, objectives and procedures.”¹⁶ Although some European countries still provide university education free to all students, most have embraced some level of tuition fees. Sweden embarked upon its “reforms” of the public sector in 1977, two years before Mrs Thatcher formed her first government. Australia and New Zealand have in certain respects provided the purest commitment to market-based privatization strategies in higher education. Australia provides a “compact and transparent” case-study of neo-liberal modernisation; and New Zealand, with a much smaller system, has gone further than anywhere else in devising an outcomes-based unit standards system permitting educational “products” to be “packaged, moved, compared and traded with ease”.¹⁷ And, strikingly, in the last decade a number of developing countries have drawn assiduously upon the lexicon of modernization, privatization, competition, quality assurance and benchmarks in refashioning their university systems. South Korea and Malaysia are cases in point – the South African instance is assessed in Section 2.

Thus far I have discussed the exogenous pressures on universities that emanated from the state and the market. Alongside these was another zone of turbulence, another set of changes pressing in upon universities in the latter decades of the twentieth century. These may be categorised, broadly, as changes in the production of knowledge – or more accurately in the production, consumption, circulation and conservation of knowledge. They are genuinely international in scope and impact, and are listed as often in analyses of globalisation as in studies of higher education. I am not going to make even a token attempt to summarise this considerable literature; but will merely list some of its salient findings – they will be familiar to most of you.

- The exponential growth of information and communications technology;
- The shift away from knowledge that is academic, disciplinary, homogenous and hierarchic to knowledge that is applied, trans-disciplinary, reflexive and horizontal;
- The demise of the enlightenment model of knowledge as coherent, autonomous and self-referential;
- The simultaneous globalization and fragmentation of academic disciplines, so that disciplinary expertise is no longer unitary and cohesive but diffuse, fluid and opaque.

1.4 A Sense of Loss?

Having viewed British universities from outside, let me now invite you within, into the domain of practice, into the academic profession. It so happens that there is a rich strand of enquiry, yielding vivid ethnographies of the lecture hall and common-room.¹⁸ Much of this work has been published in the past three or four years, as British academics sought to come to terms, intellectually, with life in the “education panopticon”.¹⁹

The territory was mapped by Halsey, in a magisterial and melancholy study called *Decline of Donnish Dominion*. Halsey conducted three large-scale surveys in 1964, 1976 and 1989 and his data shows conclusively how directly and adversely the academic profession has been affected. Terms and conditions of employment deteriorated and relative salaries slumped. Members of the profession are older. The younger ones are disproportionately non-tenured staff, typically on research contracts. “The atmosphere is different. It is both busier and more apathetic, newer and more neglected, more impersonal, more fragmented.” The profession has been proletarianized. Academics have less autonomy, less secure employment and fewer promotion prospects. Accompanying all this is a corrosive loss of status and esteem.

It is an international phenomenon. In his major study of the academic profession in the United States, Rhoades argued that academics are “managed professionals”, increasingly subject to managerial decisions and increasingly stratified. In Australia, Marginson analysed the “deconstruction of academic professionalism”.²⁰ For Britain, Morley identifies a “powerful discourse of crisis, loss, damage, contamination and decay in higher education”. British universities – like the National Health Service or the railways – have become a site of social anxiety and fear. Loss has become “constitutive of current academic identity”.²¹

And, yet, intriguing recent work on identity formation has charted the collective capacities of resilience, recovery and resourcefulness among academic communities. A study of a post-1992 university, buffeted by funding crises and highly managerial leadership, uncovered a variety of behavioral adjustments to market-driven and top-down change rather than any linear outcome. The spectrum of response included resistance, distortion, compliance and enthusiasm.²² Similarly, Henkel has argued that despite the tendency to bureaucratisation of their workplace, British academics generally are engaged in a process of “reprofessionalisation”.

They are re-articulating core values around the centrality of research and the value of teaching. She also posits an emerging new identity: the academic manager. Departmental chairs and faculty deans play a role that verges on the heroic, adapting to new institutional tasks while defending core values of collegiality, collective professionalism, and academic autonomy.²³

2. SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION: LOCAL PROBLEMS, GLOBAL SOLUTIONS?

If the account above of changes in higher education in the highly industrialised world is broadly accurate, it remains to ask this CHE audience: what are the implications for South Africa's universities and technikons? Within HEIs, how far have similar changes already affected your working lives – and are they likely to accelerate? Within government, is it possible to formulate policy selectively, adopting this element of the international model, adapting that, and rejecting the other? Or is there an overall policy package – ideologically coherent, internationally endorsed – that is for all practical purposes irresistible, an educational equivalent of the Washington Consensus that shapes macroeconomic policy across emerging economies as much as mature capitalist states?

The first point I want to make is one of periodisation. An unintended consequence of the apartheid era was the delayed arrival in South Africa of the changes that spread so rapidly across higher education globally from about 1980. Universities in South Africa remained largely insulated from the global 'climate change' prior to 1994. This was due partly to the academic boycott of the 1980s, which meant that academic traffic into South Africa slowed to a trickle – and also meant that South African academics mistakenly "continued to believe that they were part of contemporary developments in higher education internationally." (Cloete et al 2002: 189) But the insularity and self-referentiality of the system went beyond these diminished contacts. It derived too from a level of state funding that remained constant while it was being whittled away elsewhere; from the high degree (by international comparison) of institutional autonomy exercised by white universities; and correspondingly muted requirements from the apartheid state that universities should embrace "modernisation".

In consequence, the experience since 1994 has sometimes seemed like a film projected at fast speed: the sequence is recognisable, but seems jerky, exaggerated and frenetic. It is only recently since that HEIs have been required to submit strategic plans to government, to contemplate quality assurance, to envisage funding tied to outcomes, or to have their student and staffing profiles monitored against targets. They now compete with each other, especially for student places; but also with a burgeoning and unprecedented private sector. HEIs comply with new forms of governance, experiment with different delivery modes, admit vastly different student bodies, and tailor curricula and qualifications to a National Qualifications Framework. Simply to enumerate these changes indicates the accelerated similarity of what has occurred in South Africa with what has taken place over a longer period elsewhere. On one campus after the other, institutional innovations closely replicated models designed in the USA, UK, continental Europe and Australasia.

“Much of what appear[ed] as free-swinging market behaviour or strategic invention” was directly imitative, not so much an exercise of autonomy as a reactive response to exogenous pressures, drawing upon an imported repertoire. (Marginson & Considine 2000: 183)

And yet (drawing on my experience in two post-94 HEIs and on my reading of the South African literature) there is currently little reflection in South Africa on the overall direction being taken by the sector, on the resemblances between local developments and those studied in detail elsewhere, or on the reasons for this isomorphism. Instead, and entirely understandably, it is *local* issues that preoccupies analysts and policy-makers in South Africa: issues such as transformation, redress, the crisis in some HDIs, “size and shape”, and mergers. In what follows, I attempt to reconsider aspects of recent South African higher education experience as refracted through the comparative lens provided by Section 1 above.

2.1 Three pillars of policy

Two major policy documents marked the years of the Mandela government: the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) which reported in May 1996 and the White Paper, *A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*, promulgated in August 1997. They did not write on a clean slate. Considerable intellectual activism went into the production in 1992 of a National Education Policy Initiative and a pre-election framework statement by the ANC.²⁴ But the NCHE – in its sheer scale, its formal remit by a new government, its *modus operandi* and its impact on subsequent policy deliberations – was unmistakably a milestone.

The NCHE commissioners (a mix of NEPI veterans, institutional heads, and representatives of business and labour) worked to a demanding schedule of site visits, public hearings, study groups and conferences, and lengthy drafting sessions. In addition, some 100 experts (including senior international participants) were grouped in five task teams: they carried out a vast body of research, produced about 100 reports, and placed these – together with submissions, responses and feedback - on what may have been the first electronic policy database anywhere. The process was exhaustive, highly consultative, and fed by a huge flow of data and analysis.

The NCHE Report was hailed domestically as “a massive participatory drive towards policy formulation” and internationally as “one of the best tertiary education policy documents ever written”.²⁵ The most sustained questioning of the Report has been mounted by Jonathan Jansen within a broader critique of post-apartheid policy as “political symbolism”. He holds that the state was preoccupied with “settling policy struggles in the political domain rather than in the realm of practice” and that a “fascination with new policy statements, rather than their implementation, may continue to constitute the dominant mode of policy engagement with education.”²⁶

Others, while acknowledging the undoubted symbolic content of the NCHE – its demarcation of a foundational post-apartheid dispensation - have argued that it also contained more substantive proposals or that symbolic policy does not necessarily involve a failure of implementation.²⁷

The NCHE Report identified three central attributes of a future, transformed, unitary higher education system: **increased participation, greater responsiveness and increased co-operation and partnerships**. Its first central policy proposal, then, was growth or massification: more students, and from a broader distribution of social groups and classes. The NCHE estimated the overall participation rate for the 20-24 age group as 19.8% and projected that the rate would reach 30% by 2005 (a rise in student numbers from some 800,000 in 1995 to about 1.5 million.) The assumptions on which this expansion was postulated were simply wrong, particularly in terms of numbers of school-leavers qualified to enter higher education; yet the Report's advocacy of growth was sophisticated and far-reaching.

Mass access, the NCHE shrewdly saw, was the policy which could address the tensions between equity and development imperatives: “if South Africa is to compete economically ... it will need increasing numbers of skilled professionals and ‘knowledge workers’ ... *and* the great bulk of this increase will need to come from the black community”.²⁸ The Report was well aware that massification was also a driver of differentiation and efficiency. It would involve changes to curriculum, qualifications, and quality assessment; it would require greater cost-effectiveness, and, more provisionally, would probably require universities to increase their private and external income.

The second main pillar of the report was “responsiveness” to societal interests and needs. The NCHE was influenced by the “mode 2 knowledge production” debate and heralded an epistemological shift from canonical, disciplinary knowledge systems to more “open”, interactive and externally receptive systems. It also claimed that such interaction would lead to the incorporation of the perspectives and values of previously silenced groups; but this attempt to balance equity and development tensions remained largely hortatory. The third pillar called for greater co-operation and partnerships in governance structures and in the operations of higher education. It was inflected by the international literature on higher education as a site of functional interdependence between multiple actors and interests. How have these three objectives fared since 1996?

2.2 Participation

In terms of **increased and broadened participation**, the major gain of the past decade has been a sustained acceleration in the number and proportion of black, and particularly African, students at universities and technikons. In 1993 African students (by headcount) comprised 40 of enrolments in universities and technikons; by 1999 this proportion had risen to 59%; and by 2002 to 65%. In absolute numbers this represented a rise from 190,000 in 1993 to 332,000 by 1999, or an increase of 74%.

On most of the historically white campuses, the increased enrolment of black students has been even more dramatic. Overall, changing patterns of access to higher education in South Africa amount to one of the most rapid and socially significant demographic changes, anywhere, in the contemporary era.

However, upon closer scrutiny this positive development is more ambiguous than at it seems at first glance. The *proportional* increase in the numbers of African students was due partly to falling enrolments of white students. There were 220,000 white students in higher education in 1993, but only 164,000 in 1999. The reasons for this decline are still somewhat conjectural; but they appear to involve a move into private institutions, an increased tendency of white school-leavers to go overseas, and issues of affordability for less affluent white families (but who earned too much to qualify for student loans under the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, NSFAS). What this meant was that the overall participation rate for the age cohort 18-24 years actually fell between from the 16% achieved in 1993/4 to 15% in 1999/2000. The access gains also prove less healthy when measured against student success levels. A dismaying and wasteful number fail to complete their courses; retention rates fell in universities and technikons; student drop-out rates were as high as one in five in 2000.

Moreover, the substantial rise in African student numbers masks what has been called “the skewed revolution”.²⁹ African students are disproportionately enrolled in distance programmes; in the humanities as opposed to science, technology and business degrees; and in undergraduate and diploma courses. Finally, although hard evidence is scarcer than anecdotal accounts, it appears that the South African case is similar to other experiences of massification, in that expanding access does not led directly to increased equity. The participation rates rise most steeply for the more affluent: “Because the trade-off [between marketisation and equity] is not forthrightly faced” the overall effect is “to widen stratification and widen exclusion.”³⁰

2.2 Responsiveness

What of the NCHE’s second cardinal criterion, **responsiveness to societal interests and needs**? This was always a profoundly ambiguous brief. South African universities were expected to be vehicles of social redress: broadening access, setting targets for improved racial and gender balances, tending to the educational needs of first-generation students, improving success rates, and inculcating democratic values of tolerance, citizenship and the common good. They were *simultaneously* required to excel in the market place: to diversify their funding base, establish niches, add value, hustle for clients, out-compete their neighbors, service industry and commerce, and produce employable graduates.

The outcome was as unanticipated as it was unintended. A handful of institutions seized the responsiveness agenda scripted by Burton Clark. They reinvented themselves as “entrepreneurial universities”. They diversified their curricula, ran market-oriented courses, experimented with new delivery modes, and entered into profit-making public/private partnerships.

They recruited large numbers of new [black] students, housed mainly on satellite campuses where they could operate unchallenged by government regulations or competition.³¹ With highly managerial leadership styles, they shifted from milking the military-industrial-research complex of late apartheid years and filled their pails instead from incentive schemes promoting applied research in support of the post-apartheid economy. These were the Afrikaans-medium universities, with Pretoria as the most successful prototype, closely followed by the Free State, Potchefstroom and RAU.

In stark contrast, the weaker historically black universities went to the wall. They lost staff and students to historically white competitors; tenuous academic cultures grew weaker; and a mix of “crisis management and decision-avoidance”³² led to a dismal pattern of falling enrolments, mounting debts and endemic conflict. This was the “supreme irony for South Africa’s first black majority government but entirely explicable from the perspective of students” who voted with their feet. The existing biases of the funding formula, deregulation of the system and the promotion of market relations brought about “a new, differentiated, but demonstrably more unequal new landscape.”³³

2.3 Governance

The NCHE’s third pillar was **co-operative governance and partnerships**. It was elaborated in the 1997 White Paper as an ambitious and capacious agenda with three tiers. Firstly, governance at institutional level should become more democratic and participatory; identifiable stakeholders were to be accommodated; and a new statutory governance structure – the Institutional Forum – would represent this plurality of interests. Secondly, intra-institutional cooperation and collaboration was intended to bridge inherited identities. Thirdly, at national level cooperative governance was presented as a variant of state supervision, distinct from state control or state interference, “based on the principle of autonomous institutions working co-operatively with a proactive government and in a range of partnerships”.³⁴

At the institutional level, the outcome was far from the anticipated “stakeholder democracy”. The statutory institutional forums brought relatively few changes “in the way these [institutional] structures function, particularly in relation to the participation of previously disadvantaged groups.” Instead, the single most striking feature of the multiple demands on universities saw “institutional leaders beginning to play a more pivotal role in the governance and management of their institutions.”³⁵ And, most fully in some Afrikaans-medium universities and technikons, but generally across the system, South African higher education took on most of the features identified in the comparative international literature on New Managerialism.³⁶

Cloete and Kulati have made a valiant attempt to reconcile managerialism and cooperative governance at an institutional level.³⁷ They distinguish three forms of institutional governance since 1994: managerial leadership (sub-divided between strategic managerialism and unwavering entrepreneurialism), transformative leadership (sub-divided between reformed collegialism and transformative managerialism) and crisis management (or failed leadership).

The heroes of their saga are the second category: but their story line is weakened by the fact that this category comprises only one university and one technikon. It is telling that their extensive bibliography does not include a thorough-going critique of “stakeholder” governance, a sardonic but forensic demolition job by an educational philosopher.³⁸ It is equally striking that South African studies of recent shifts in higher education management simply does not engage with the critique of “new managerialism” developed elsewhere.

The second tier of co-operation has effectively been overtaken by the programme of mergers. As the CHE audience is well aware, since May 2002 the merger programme has dominated the higher education policy domain. It has survived legal challenges, institutional opposition, and sustained media and academic criticism. George Subotzky’s unease is representative. Minister Asmal, preoccupied with the size and shape of the system, focused his policy on reducing the number of institutions.

From the outset, however, it was never clear how this reduction would necessarily advance the policy goals of efficiency (mergers are not a cheap option), effectiveness and systemic equity (despite numerous mergers between previously advantaged and disadvantaged institutions). In the absence of a compelling rationale, the minister’s single-minded insistence on system pruning appears to be primarily motivated by the political need to achieve demonstrable change ... to stamp his change on the system by removing the anomalies of apartheid planning at all costs.³⁹

And indeed the process is fraught with all the difficulties that mergers face anywhere: complex human resource issues; the challenge of meshing institutional cultures; and the possibility that some of the new institutions will be too large, too amorphous, too geographically distributed, easily to govern. But the merger project is not driven primarily by considerations of efficiency or scale. It seeks to alter an institutional landscape (in Asmal’s pungent phrase) “largely dictated by the geo-political imagination of apartheid planners”. The onus is perhaps on the critics of mergers to develop a convincing alternative: one that realistically reflects the vision and imagination of *post*-apartheid planners. For whatever problems the mergers generate, it is difficult to think of a more efficacious mode of landscape engineering.

The third level of cooperative governance – a benign form of state supervision – has also leaked credibility in recent years. Cloete and Kulati speak of a “gradual transition from a steering to an increasingly centralised approach” by central government; Kraak goes further and identifies a shift from state supervision to state interference.⁴⁰ Several critics of the merger programme drew attention to its “coercive” nature.

Whether one characterises governance at the system level as centralisation, interference or coercion, there is little room for argument that the major change has been an increasingly interventionist role by the state. The National Plan of 2001 is a robust version of state supervision by any international comparative perspectives.

2.5 Local urgency and global imperatives: whose hand holds trumps?

South Africa's higher education policy-makers have had their setbacks since 1994. Some of these are the familiar shortcomings of policy-making in any society: unintended or unanticipated consequences; varying expectations from different quarters; failures of fit between implements and objectives – and so on. But underlying or framing these deficits has been a profound policy dilemma: strongly countervailing pressures upon policy options that are accurately if incompletely described as “local” and “global” in nature. Muller noted that by 2002 universities were grappling with some 30 “change initiatives” under the master term of “transformation”, being pursued as high policy at hectic pace:

Diverse as these “transformation” policies are, they all face in one of two directions: they are directed towards equity and access ... on the one hand; or innovation and economic development on the other. To put that in different terms, the redemptive longings driving higher education transformation in South Africa are salvation from the dead hand of apartheid on the one hand, and progress towards global economic competitiveness on the other. These two longings anchor the political theology of restructuring in South Africa.⁴¹

The nature of these dual demands has been recognised and theorised since before the ANC even took office. Between 1992 and 1994, a series of policy interventions argued that policy formulation “had to locate itself between sets of tensions or contradictions, particularly between equity and development”.⁴² However, recognition of the dilemma is one thing; its resolution something else entirely. My argument here is that the dilemma of competing imperatives continued to be addressed rhetorically while in reality the scales tilted increasingly towards the global and away from the local field of force. I agree with Maassen and Cloete, who bluntly state that in South Africa as in most other countries, “the national higher education agenda has been made subservient to the global reform agenda.”⁴³ In Muller's suggestive terminology,

The logics of these two redemptive longings, are, unfortunately, contradictory – the logic of equalisation ... is in strict contradiction to the logic of differentiation ... - but this contradiction rarely if ever becomes visible in the policy discourse itself, and the contradictory ensemble constructs a discursive alibi for the overall transformation agenda that placates but can never resolve the salvation anxiety driving the “new governance”.⁴⁴

The 1997 White Paper spelled out with commendable clarity the double challenge, global and national, facing policy:

The South African economy is confronted with the formidable challenge of integrating itself into the competitive arena of international production and finance ... Simultaneously, the nation is confronted with the challenge of reconstructing domestic social and economic relations to eradicate and

redress the inequitable patterns of ownership, wealth and social and economic practices that were shaped by segregation and apartheid.

Three years later, the Council on Higher Education quoted this passage and added: “The challenge is, of course, formidable yet unavoidable and requires creative, innovative and courageous responses if higher education is to contribute positive and decisively to the economic and social needs of our country.”⁴⁵ Well, yes – but exhortation translates poorly into implementation. The CHE rhetoric begs several questions. Should every university grapple with both horns of the dilemma? Or should some tackle the domestic equity horn and others the global modernizing horn? And who should take this decision? Universities individually, or collectively? Or the state? And if, at institutional or system level, pursuit of agreed equity objectives was compromised by equally compliant pursuit of efficiency gains, which suit was trumps?

Two years later, with the publication of the National Plan, the questions continued to be fudged but the answers were more legible. The Plan opens by citing the White Paper’s key challenges: “to redress past inequalities and to transform the higher education system to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs, and to respond to new realities and opportunities.” But it proceeds in a different register:

the role of higher education in a knowledge-driven world ... human resource development ... high-level skills training ... production, acquisition and application of new knowledge ... the changes associated with the phenomenon of globalisation ... development of an information society ... limited resources used efficiently and effectively.⁴⁶

The *content* of the National Plan, noted one commentator, “differed from a whole series of earlier policy discussion documents”; it “confronted much more openly ... the crises facing higher education”; it marked an end to “symbolic policymaking” and a shift to “substantive, procedural and material policy” approaches; and it stressed “efficiency and globalization and the knowledge economy.”⁴⁷ Explicitly, Fataar argued that the discursive shift apparent in the National Plan stemmed from “congruence” between higher education policy and macro-economic policy. Adopted in 1996, the macro-development path of GEAR favoured export-led growth, fiscal orthodoxy, deregulation, privatisation and incentives to foreign capital; and with the National Plan “an economic rationalist discourse had come to settle on the higher education discursive terrain”.⁴⁸

3: INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

This paper ends with some questions. Firstly, if higher education is to become more competitive, does it not follow that there will be winners and losers? In Australia, for example, “the government-constructed market is leading to greater vertical differentiation between institutions. In a competitive system there are bound to be winners and losers, and the gap between these two increases over time.”⁴⁹ It is clear that in South Africa differentiation after 1994 was fairly rapid, and took place along the lines of an older, racially inscribed hierarchy. Will the merger programme avoid this outcome, or simply ensure that there are smaller numbers of winners and losers?

Secondly, as noted earlier, it has long been acknowledged that there is a policy tension between equity and development. Has the post-apartheid institutional landscape successfully addressed this tension? Or has the system become not only more differentiated but less equitable? This was a central finding of the multi-authored stock-taking published in 2002.⁵⁰ Jansen argues that policy since 1994 has “routinely reflected discourses and practices association with globalisation” and that market-led “reforms” will see a renegeing on fundamental equity goals. He predicts that race will become increasingly less important, and class more salient, in the differentiation of educational provision. Poorer, rural African students will be siphoned off into inferior institutions – a class outcome that is “the real tragedy of globalisation.”⁵¹ Is this alarmism or a timely warning?

Thirdly, will South African higher education become subject to the negative aspects associated with “the audit culture” elsewhere? Is it possible to introduce a national qualifications system, the HEQC, and the monitoring and evaluation measures inherent in the funding/planning nexus, without importing in addition a whole set of unintended consequences? It is noteworthy that similar questions were tentatively raised by the Council on Higher Education in a discussion document earlier this year.⁵²

Fourthly, if massification, marketisation and managerialism have impacted significantly upon the academic profession elsewhere, will the same happen in South Africa? Will academics here experience a similar relative decline in salaries, less secure conditions of employment, less autonomy, and less esteem? Two studies suggest that such parallels are already under way. Webster and Mosoetsa identify deteriorating relations with “management”, an intensification of workloads, a loss of shared identity and feelings of impotence as key concerns for their interview sample. Koen emphasises continuities with apartheid-era institutional differentiation, but also discusses declining job security, increasing reliance on temporary staff, salary slippage relative to other public sector opportunities and heavier workloads.⁵³ None of this is particularly surprising, in comparative terms; but perhaps the most urgent question for South African higher education is how these changes may impact upon the reproduction and transformation of the South African academy and intelligentsia.

Fifthly, on a comparative basis, South African higher education policy makers are significantly more open to critical engagement than is the norm elsewhere. There continues an important set of discussions – like this Colloquium! – between policy-makers and policy critics. How much capacity do these critical impulses possess and what will they yield? Will the post-merger landscape generate real institutional differentiation, or a newly sedimented set of winners and losers? Will equity considerations be successfully reinserted as a real driver of policy (as opposed to the rhetorical trope it has become)? Can the very real local issues of post-apartheid South Africa be translated into progressive policy outcomes, or will they be subject to the globalising tendencies of the post-industrial world?

End Notes

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