

THE ROLE OF THE STATE IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION (1994 – 2002): EQUITY AND REDRESS REVISITED

Abstract

The South African experience of higher education transformation which began with the appointment of the National Commission on Higher Education by former President Nelson Mandela in 1995 has been described by one commentator (an international expert on comparative higher education) as the most ambitious attempt at transforming any higher education system anywhere in the world ever.

This observation has to be seen in the context of the imperatives generated by the unexpected peaceful political transition from an apartheid social order to a democratic one in the last decade of the last century. One of the priorities of the new democratically elected Government of National Unity (GNU) was to reconfigure and transform the racially and ethnically fragmented and unequal education system which had served as an instrument for minority domination and racial oppression to an asset for national reconstruction and development.

This paper examines the role of the state in achieving the considerable but limited progress that has been made in transforming the system into an accessible one characterized by an open and equitable opportunity structure for all learners regardless of gender and race. It argues that in a situation where fundamental political transformation is juxtaposed to a change resistant white-minority owned and controlled enclave economy characterized by slow, jobless growth amidst extremely high levels of unemployment, the multiple demands that are made on the education system, especially higher education, require concerted state intervention. This is likely to generate tensions around conventional assertions of institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

Further, when it comes to serious reconfiguration of the institutional landscape an interesting irony emerges, namely, that while it is commonly accepted that the present institutional landscape is a creation of the gigantic apartheid social engineering project, apparent attachments to these institutional identities by the role players emerges as a major obstacle to mergers and combinations.

By examining the limits of the progress that has been made since the promulgation of the Higher Education Act in December 1997 and the continuing tensions around size and shape issues it seeks to demonstrate that aspects of the inherited apartheid legacy continue to present a formidable challenge that is exacerbated by the impact of globalisation. The central theme is that while considerable progress has been made in changing institutional student demographic profiles (both 'race' and gender) overall, when these are unpacked with regard to the location of black and women students vis a vis the strategic disciplines, differential participation is evident. This in turn leads to the highlighting of the structural limitations to the use of education, as a subsector of the wider political economy, as a viable instrument of radical societal transformation. Lack of progress in changing staff composition is but one indicator of these difficulties.

1. INTRODUCTION

In December 2001 the National Working Group (NWG) which had been established by the Minister of Education in April to advise on restructuring the institutional landscape in higher education, submitted its report (The Restructuring of the Higher Education System in South Africa) to the Minister. Prior to the setting up of the NWG the National Plan for Higher Education had been released in March following a report by a Council on Higher Education Task Team which had been established to advise the Minister on what should be the appropriate size and shape of the higher education system in the country.

These developments represent the latest phase of a process of a concerted attempt at transforming the higher education system dating back to the appointment of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) by former President Mandela in 1995 to recommend on how the apartheid based higher education landscape should be reconfigured to best serve the human resource needs of the new democracy. The NCHE final report: A Framework for Transformation (1996) formed the basis for the Education White Paper 3 and the promulgation of the Higher Education Act (101) in December 1997.

The wider context has been that of a society grappling with the legacy of centuries of European colonization and half a century of apartheid policies. The unfolding process is a largely uneven one characterized by fundamental and radical changes at the political level without anything approximating this scale of change in the economic sphere. In other words while the country enjoys the benefits of what has been hailed as one of the most progressive Constitutions world-wide and has permanent commissions that seek to entrench a non-racial and non-sexist democratic culture, the inherited race-based class structures have only been slightly transformed. Further, the wider globalisation context is threatening to exacerbate overall inequality profiles.

In such a situation where radical political transformation is juxtaposed to a slow changing enclave economy characterized by slow growth amidst high levels of unemployment, it is not surprising that the education system, especially the higher education sector would be subject to multiple demands. In South Africa, three main ones are easily identifiable:

- To provide the necessary skills and knowledge generation, preservation and dissemination mechanisms to enable the economy to grow and be globally competitive.
- To act as a leverage for redress of past racial and gender imbalances, and to promote individual and community empowerment.
- To be a catalyst for democratic values and active citizenship in the context of a changing opportunity structure in which ascriptive factors like race, ethnicity, gender and disability are no longer major determinants of life chances.

It is therefore logical that the recurring principles and goals for the transformation of the higher education system as outlined in the White Paper have been identified as equity and redress; democratisation; development; quality; effectiveness and efficiency; academic freedom; institutional autonomy and public accountability. It is obvious that tensions between aspects of these are inevitable given a context characterized by vested interests; multiple stakeholder contestations and conflicting and competing agendas within and between institutions.

2. THE EQUITY CHALLENGE

Besides noting the inverted pyramid at the Further and Higher Education levels the NCHE (1996) described the inherited system in the following terms:

"The present system perpetuates an inequitable distribution of access and opportunity for students and staff along axes of race, gender, class and geographic discrimination. There are gross discrepancies in the participation rates by students from different population groups and

indefensible imbalances in the ratios of black and female staff compared to whites and males. There are also vast disparities between historically white institutions in terms of facilities and capacities for teaching and research. The inescapable need is for a dynamic and viable programme of large-scale redress for both disadvantaged individuals and disadvantaged institutions."

The Commission saw the principle of equity as involving the distribution of benefits of higher education opportunities, privileges and funds in an impartial and fair manner.

"Impartiality means that everyone qualifying on relevant grounds for the benefits in question should be treated equally, according to the established rules of distribution. Fairness means that the rules of distribution themselves should exclude unjust differentiation or discrimination, in the sense of disqualifying some people or institutions on irrelevant grounds such as race, colour or creed".

Having observed that the inherited system of higher education was characterised by unjust inequalities resulting from racial and gender-biased policies, structures and practices for both individuals and institutions, it went on to stipulate that:

"Applying the principle of equity implies on the one hand a critical identification of these inequalities, on the other hand a programme of transformation with the view to redress. Such transformation includes not only abolishing all existing forms of unjust differentiation, but also measures of empowerment to bring about equal opportunity for individuals and institutions disadvantaged by the discrimination and inequities of the past".

In the proposed framework for transformation it captured the issues of equity and redress in the following manner:

- The imperatives of equity, redress and development require a significant expansion of higher education over the next decade and beyond.
- Policies must be implemented to promote race and gender equity and to develop new programmes and capacities at historically disadvantaged institutions.
- The overall proposed framework would be that of a programme-based, single co-ordinated national system encompassing universities, technikons, colleges and private providers. The vehicle for the process would be a rolling three year national education plan while some of the specified instruments would include an expanded role for distance education and for high quality resource based learning. Also recommended was the inclusion of higher education programmes in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and in a new quality assurance system within the broad ambit of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). A restructured college sector and improved regional co-ordination were also proposed.
- This multi pronged strategy should enable South Africa to increase its higher education participation rate to approximately 30% (as a percentage of the 20 to 24 year-old cohort) over the next decade. This would see an increase from about 800 000 students in 1995 to about 1 500 00 in 2005.

It is also worthwhile to note that the three critical links to the expansion process, namely affordability, quality assurance and graduate employability were also given the necessary

attention by the Commission hence they expressed the view that increased participation must occur within a framework of planned growth, linked to capacity, available resources, enhanced quality and national human resource needs.

The White Paper linked expanded access directly to equity, redress and development and identified the following areas of focus:

- increasing the participation and success rates of black students in general, and of African, Coloured and women students in particular, especially in programmes and levels in which they are underrepresented
- expanding career-orientated programmes at all levels, but in particular, in shorter cycle (one and two year) programmes at certificate and diploma levels, and in science, engineering and technology programmes
- expanding enrolments in post graduate programmes at the masters- and doctoral levels, to address the high-level skills necessary for social and economic development and to provide for the needs of the academic labour market
- expanding the range of programmes and increasing enrolments based on open learning and distance education, especially for young and older adults with particular emphasis on women.

At the level of implementation, commitment to changing the composition of the student body would be effected through the targeted redistribution of the public subsidy to higher education institutions with a projected increase in the relative proportion of public funding used to support academically able but disadvantaged students.

Furthermore, institutions would be required to mobilise greater private resources as well as to reallocate their operating grants internally. While not encouraging the setting of quotas, the Ministry would require institutions to develop their own race and gender equity goals and plans for achieving them, using indicative targets for distributing publicly subsidised places.

Also, equity of access had to be complemented by concern for equity of outcomes. Since chronic underfunding of black education during the apartheid era, and the negative effects of repression and resistance on the culture of learning and teaching had resulted in serious deficits of underpreparedness among talented black students, the necessary investments would be made to prevent a 'revolving door' syndrome of high failure rates by enhancing quality. In this regard bridging and access programmes would be encouraged within the further education sector and the new funding formula would provide for the subsidisation of academic development programmes and extended curricula. Community service for students would also be explored.

3. THE REDRESS CHALLENGE

The Ministry proposed a goal-oriented, performance related funding framework for the higher education system with the view to achieving:

- more equitable student access
- improved quality of teaching and research
- increased student progression and graduation rates, and
- greater responsiveness to social and economic needs.

The framework would have two major components: general purpose block funding to institutions on a rolling triennial basis and earmarked funds for institutional redress, earmarked funds for student financial aid and earmarked funds for other specific purposes. We shall discuss each of these in turn.

The block grant would be generated by means of a two-dimensional grid consisting of levels and fields of learning. Funds would be allocated through the mechanism of approved FTE student places to which are attached normative prices. This would be the first time that there would be a coherent funding formula for the entire higher education system. Also, the subsidisation of academic development, foundation and extended programmes would be of special significance in accommodating cost differentials arising out of differential preparedness levels arising out of the badly uneven secondary school terrain.

Further, unlike the present SAPSE formula which is strongly output based and incorporates successful students and research outputs in its mathematical formulation, notwithstanding the vastly dissimilar inputs occasioned by racial discrimination, the new formula, though performance related, would not be based on the notion of successful students a-la-SAPSE. So there is a sense in which by attempting to level the playing fields, the new formula would have an in-built redress component even in the distribution of the block grant.

The rationale for earmarked funding in the words of the Ministry was that:

“Funding formulae cannot take account of all the differences between institutions without being too complex and unwieldy. Nor do funding formulae lend themselves to accommodating particular needs, especially if such needs are expected to fluctuate or diminish over time”.

While emphasizing the need for financial aid for students from disadvantaged backgrounds the White Paper stated categorically that: *“fee-free higher education for students is not an affordable or sustainable option for South Africa”.* Rather, *“the costs of higher education should be shared equitably between public and private beneficiaries”.* The above position was further qualified in the following manner: *“It is important, however, that the direct cost to students should be proportionate to their ability to pay... financial need should not be an insuperable barrier to access and success in higher education. A realistic fee structure must therefore go hand-in-hand with a sustainable programme of student financial assistance”.* The latter was viewed as *“integral part of the public, and private investment in the nation’s high level human resource development”.*

The White Paper did not support the idea of a single capitalised public endowment or trust fund whose proceeds would support annual disbursements and which would be replenished through loan repayments. This was because in government’s view the initial capitalisation required was unaffordable. Further, the White Paper stressed a central role for institutional financial aid offices in the disbursement process rather than a central funding agency. Allocations to institutions would be based on the equity profiles of institutional enrolments and would relate to progression and graduation rates.

The White Paper also made provision for a programme of targeted funding to address inequities and deficiencies experienced in particular by historically disadvantaged institutions.

This programme would “target specific needs related to access and capacity which derive from the educational deficits and other forms of deliberate disadvantage suffered by individuals or institutions as a result of past government policies”. The specific targeted areas were: management capacity development, staff development, academic development, curriculum development, library holdings, student amenities, buildings and the development of institutional capacity. Institutional audits would be carried out in this regard.

The third category of proposed earmarked funding for other specific purposes was a response to the “need to encourage innovation and adaptation, and to build capacity in new areas”. The specific areas that would be targeted were: improving student completions, research capability development, postgraduate training, capital works, development in planning capacity and regional collaboration. In this programme targeted expansion of the institutional base for research for HDUs and technikons would be undertaken.

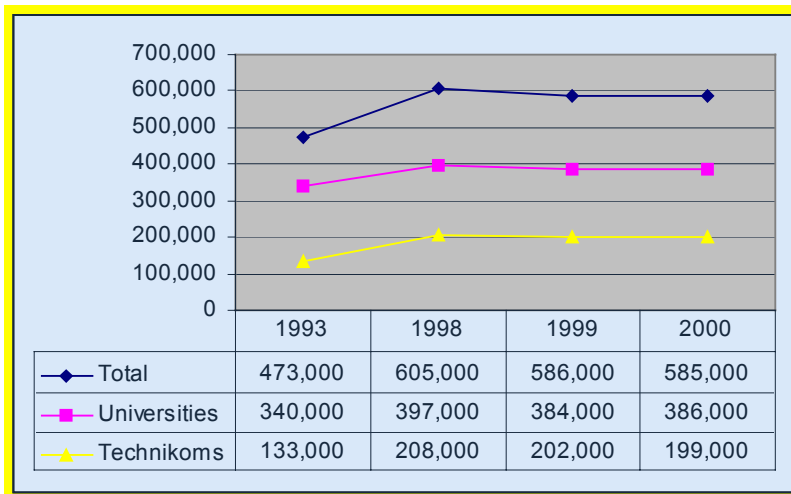
4. THE ACCESS SCORECARD

The NCHE and the resultant White Paper afterwards had anchored the attainment of equity on a considerable broadening of access. In the words of the NCHE:

“A key feature of the new framework is a policy of growth: that is an expansion of student enrolments, feeder constituencies and programme offerings. The principles of equity and redress, as well as the imperatives of demography and development, signal an ineluctable expansion of participation in South African Higher Education. Greater numbers of students will have to be accommodated: and these students will be recruited from a broader distribution of social groups and classes.”

The White Paper subsequently emphasized the importance of opening access to African, Coloured and female learners. Furthermore, the issue of proactive action to ensure that massification (in the words of the NCHE) would not compromise quality, was also raised.

Figure 2: Head count enrolments by type of institution



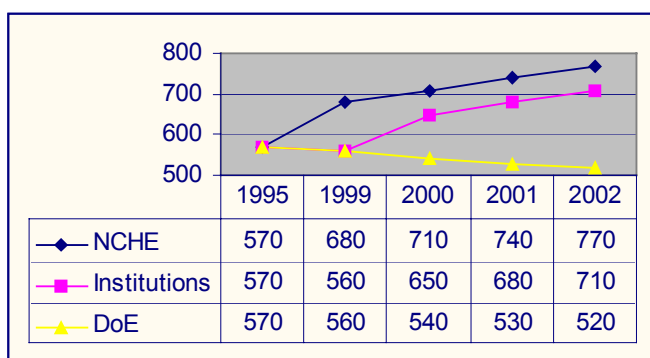
Note: A head count enrolment treats all students as units, regardless of the course load they are carrying.

Figure 3: Full-time equivalent enrolments (thousands)

	1993	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Universities	193	252	260	261	260	245
Technikons	96	126	140	153	152	141
TOTAL	289	378	400	414	412	386

As can be gleaned from the two preceding tables enrolments in the public higher education sector did not increase evenly over the past few years. They peaked in 1997 and subsequently declined.

Figure 4: Headcount university and technikon enrolment projections (thousands)



As can be gleaned from table 4 the NCHE projections were somewhat optimistic. This optimism resulted from an extrapolation of the rapid growth which the system had experienced up till 1996. Headcount enrolments at technikons increased by 67 000 (50%) between 1993 and 1996 while university ones increased by 50 000 (15%) during the same period. This yielded an annual average growth of 7.6% in headcount enrolments and 11.6% full-time equivalents over this four year period.

It can also be seen that the institutional projections (culled from the three-year rolling plans submitted to the Department of Education) were less optimistic compared to the NCHE projections while still projecting steep growth. In contrast, the Department of Education's own projections can be regarded as being somewhat pessimistic if comparatively more realistic.

If one disaggregates the figures it becomes clear that the major decline in enrolments took place at the historically black universities and at the two distance education institutions.

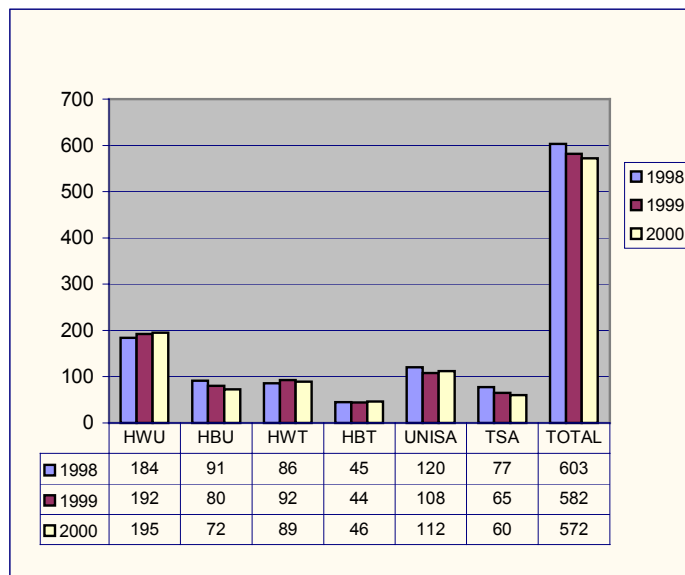
Figure 5.A: Head count enrolments totals: Summary for the system

	1998	1999	2000	Enrolment changes comparing		% change: 2000	
				2000 to 1998	2000 to 1999	To 1998	To 1999
HWU's	183.6	192.3	194.7	11.1	2.4	6%	1%
HBU's	91.1	79.9	71.5	-19.6	-8.4	-22%	-11%
HWT's	85.5	92.3	94.4	3.9	-2.9	5%	-3%
HBT's	45.3	44.2	45.5	0.2	1.3	0%	3%
Distance Institutions	197.9	173.2	171.9	-26.0	-1.3	-13%	-1%
Overall Total	603.4	581.9	578	-25.4	-3.9	-4%	-1%

Figure 5.B: Headcount enrolment totals in distance education institutions

	1998	1999	2000	Enrolment changes Comparing:		% change: 2000	
				2000 to 1998	2000 to 1999	To 1998	To 1999
Unisa	120.8	107.8	111.6	-9.2	3.8	-8%	4%
TSA	77.1	65.4	60.3	-16.8	-7.0	-22%	-11%
Overall Total	197.9	173.2	171.9	-26.0	-1.3	-13%	-1%

Figures 5 A & B: (in graph)

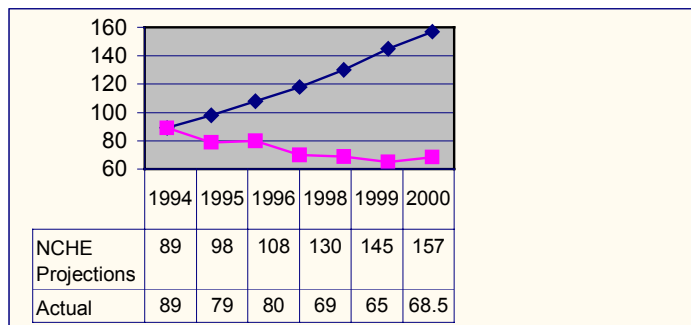


From the above data it is evident that while headcount enrolments in the historically white universities sub sector grew by 6% between 1998 and 2000 the opposite occurred in the HBU sub sector, namely, a 22% decline. In comparison the technikon sector showed overall resilience with a 5% increase in the historically white technikon and no change in the

historically black technikons. This difference is even more significant viewed against the high expansion base in the technikon sector accumulated since 1993.

The above picture was reversed when it came to the distance education providers with Technikon South Africa showing a 22% decline in 2000 compared to 1998 while the University of South Africa (UNISA) registered an 8% decline.

Figure 6: School-leavers obtaining full matriculation exemption (thousands)



The discrepancy between the NCHE projections on the one hand and actual enrolments on the other, is a function of poor matriculation results on the one hand and a decline in retention rates in the sector on the other. Between 1994 and 2000 the number of school leavers obtaining a matriculation exemption decreased from 89 000 to 68 628 (23% decline) a far cry from the NCHE projections of 157 000.

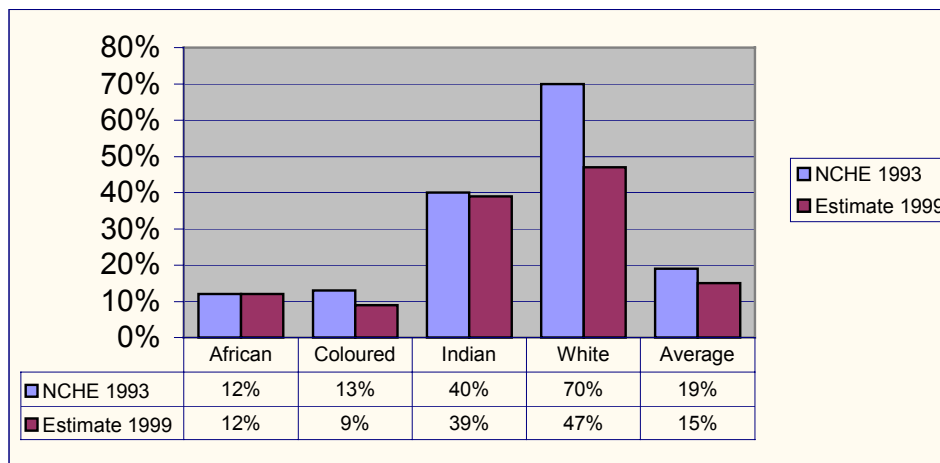
Insofar as the retention rates are concerned there is clear evidence of decline though the extent varies among institutions. The reasons that have been suggested include:

- Large numbers of students from the enrolment bulge of the mid 1990s obtaining their qualifications and exiting the system.
- High drop-out rates due to failure leading to academic exclusions, plus financial constraints preventing academically good students from continuing with their studies as well as poaching by private providers.
- Fewer students undertaking post graduate studies immediately after completion.

All these access-related factors have impacted on participation rates nationally. The level of participation in higher education of a nation's population is critical for its overall development. The trend is from 'elite' systems to a 'mass' system. According to the NCHE: *"the terminology denotes more than a mere increase in enrolment. It also refers to a series of concomitant changes that must accompany greater numbers. These include: the composition of the student body, the diversification of programmes, curriculums and qualifications, the introduction of multiple entry and exit points, new relations between study and the workplace and shifts in institutional functions and missions."*

The average higher education gross participation rate for the developed high income countries is placed at just over 40%, just over 20% for middle income countries and 5% for low income countries.

Figure 7: Gross participation rates: based on age group 20 – 24



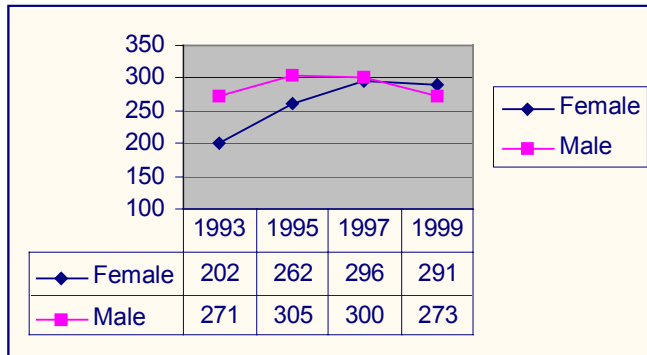
According to Cloete and Bunting the reasons for the apparent decline in the average participation rate are threefold:

- The 1991 census understated the country’s population and did not include the homelands (so-called TBVC states). Since their residents were given unrestricted access to other South African higher education institutions they would have increased the 1993 headcount student enrolment without being added to the age – group count used in the participation rate calculation.
- White student enrolments in universities, technikons and teacher training colleges fell by about 33% in 1999 compared to 1993.
- There was a dramatic drop in matriculation exemption passes.

They estimate that a more accurate figure for 1993 would have been around 9% for Africans and about 17% overall. They opine that the only firm conclusion, which can be drawn, is that African participation rates have probably improved since 1996/1997 and that those of coloureds have certainly not improved. Overall, the rate in their view has declined.

Central to the focus on equity is the need to change the demographic profile of both students and staff in a more representative direction in terms of ‘race’ and gender. In this regard something of a mini revolution – albeit a skewed one according to Cooper – has taken place in the past few years in the ‘racial’ demographic profiles of learners while a significant shift has taken place in relation to the gender factor.

Figure 8: Head count enrolments by gender (thousands)



As can be seen above, female enrolments increased by no less than 44% between 1993 and 1999 while male enrolments reached a peak in 1995 and stabilized for three years and then declined by 10% by 1999 to a level only 1% higher than 1993.

The overall effect of these trends is that female representation changed from 43% in 1993 and 52% in 1999. A disaggregation of figures would indicate an unevenness in terms of actual programme location of females within the sector.

Figure 9A: Head count enrolments by population group (thousands)

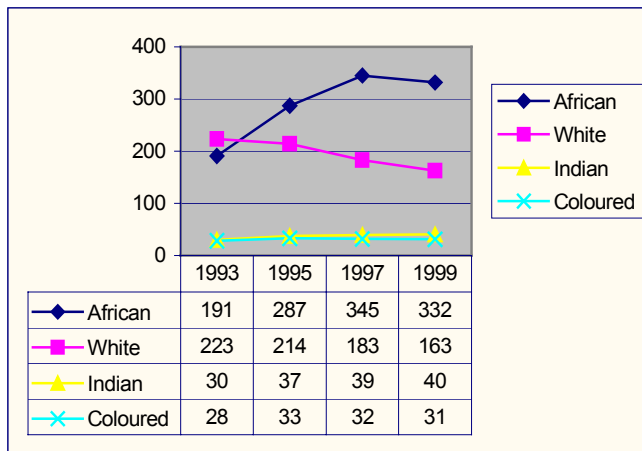
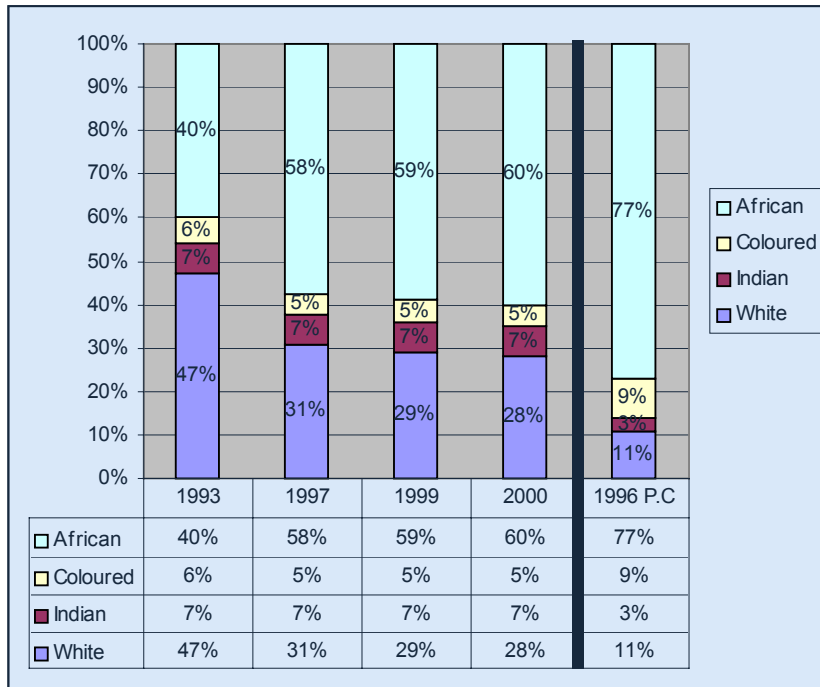


Figure 9B: Percentage distribution of the head count enrolment by population group



Figures 9 A & B show an exponential growth in the number of African students between 1993 and 1999 to the tune of 74% and a 27% decline in white student enrolments over the same period. The other two groups remained fairly stable over the period bar a 1% drop in the percentage of Coloured students.

The last column in B contextualizes these proportions in relation to the national demographic profile provided by the 1996 population census. Against this backdrop the seemingly small 1% drop in Coloured enrolments assumes significant regressive implications.

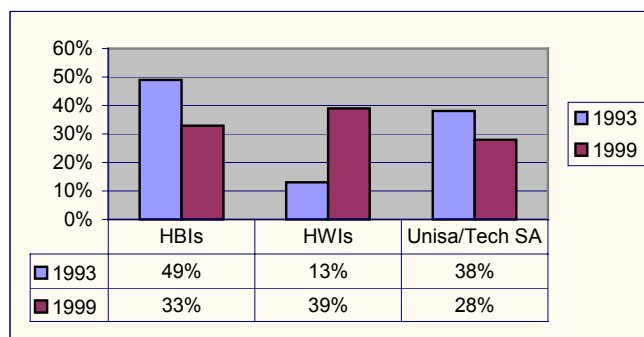
Furthermore, the figures above, like the now outdated proverbial ‘bikini statistic’ hide more than they reveal. This is primarily because of the fact that in terms of distribution among disciplines black students (and females) tend to be underrepresented in the strategic science, engineering and technology disciplines. This is also the case with respect to post graduate programmes. Throughput rates are also largely skewed. Cooper has captured the salient features of this situation in the following terms: *that aggregate, figures of ‘overall Africanisation’ hid complex underlying processes, pointing to a need for many ‘buts’ ‘and maybes’.* Thus it is argued that there has been a revolution in the student profile on South Africa in the 1990s but it is a skewed revolution: *many qualifying clauses are needed in order to reach a full picture of its nature at a deeper level.*” He goes on to identify the following ‘anomalies’.

- historically Afrikaans universities are selectively enrolling African students primarily in certain areas or fields.

- African women (and Coloured and Indian ones) have been enrolling at a significantly greater rate than their male counterparts but concentrating mainly in the social sciences and humanities fields.
- historically white (and historically Coloured and Indian) technikons are enrolling African students to a much greater extent in Science and Technology fields than many universities, but particularly for three-year diplomas.
- African students are very absent from the upper post-graduate level (masters, doctorate) compared to the undergraduate level.

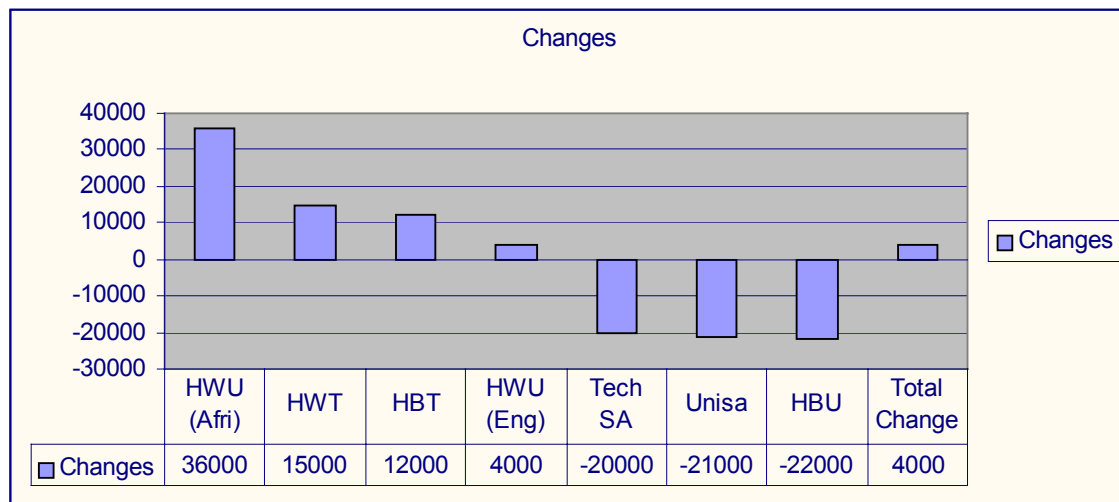
These developments have resulted in significant changes in the institutional placement profile of African students as illustrated below.

Figure 10: Distribution of African Students by sub-sector.



These changes have, as indicated, been occurring in a context in which the country's historically racially stratified institutional types have experienced vastly different fortunes in terms of attracting students as Figure 11 below shows.

Figure 11: Changes in enrolment 1995 compared to 1999



Resultant on the output side the changes are reflected in Figure 12 below.

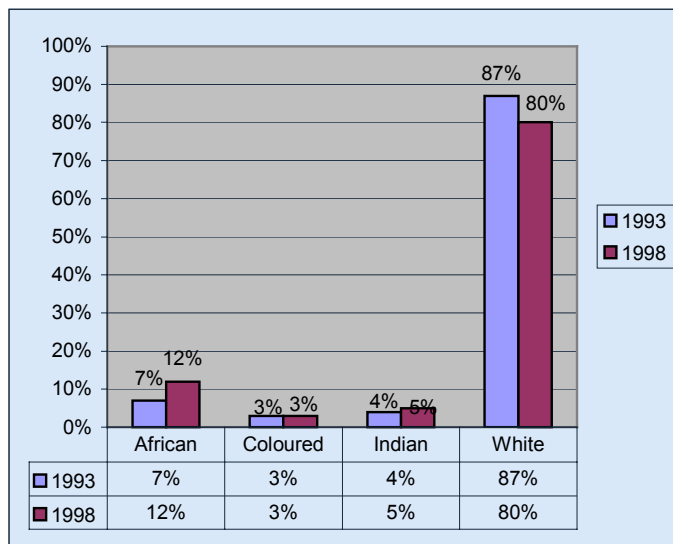
Figure 12: University graduates by population group (thousands)

	1995	1996	1997	1998	Average Annual Increase
African	14.4	14.6	17.1	17.8	7.3%
Coloured	1.5	1.7	1.7	1.7	4.3%
Indian	1.7	1.7	1.8	2.0	5.5%
White	33.9	32.4	33.6	33.4	-0.5%
TOTAL:	51.5	50.4	54.2	54.9	2.2%

If the picture in terms of student demographics shows considerable progress the same cannot be said of academic staff demographic profiles.

Figure 13: Academic staff by population group.

A. Universities.



B. Technikons

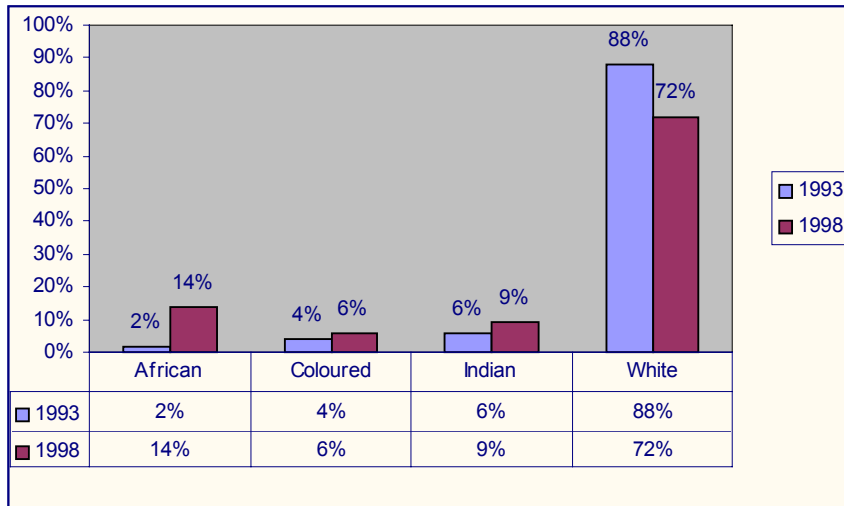
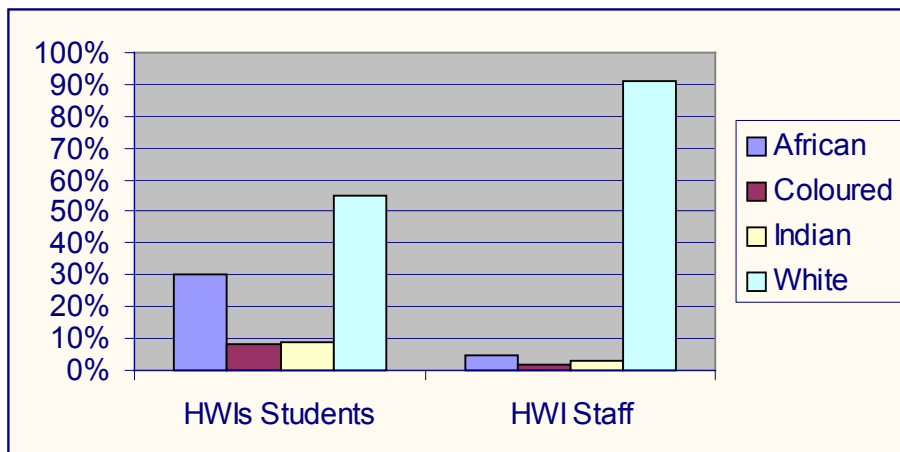


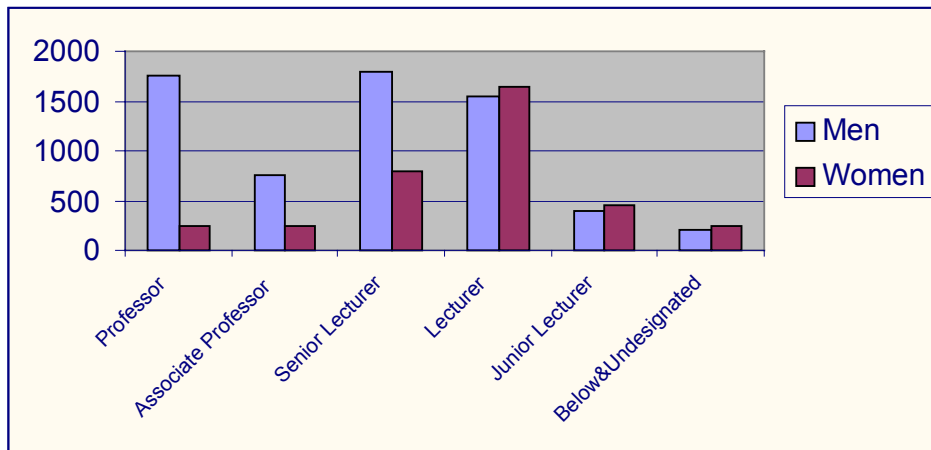
Figure 14: Comparison of student and academic staff bodies at historically white institutions (1998)



Insofar as the gender breakdown is concerned there has been some growth in the number of women academics from 30% in 1992 to 35% in 1998 in the universities. The increase was higher at the historically black institutions (32% to 37%) compared to their white counterparts where it rose from 26% in 1992 to 32% in 1998.

However, again when we scan the picture in terms of actual location of women in the academic hierarchy white male dominance becomes evident.

Figure 15: University academic staff by rank and gender (1997)



This overall situation of formidable white male domination varies between institutional types as can be gleaned from figures 16 & 17 below:

Figure 16: Black staff as % of full-time staff: 1999

	Academic	Executive/Support Professionals
Historically white (Afrikaans) universities	5%	6%
Historically white (English) universities	21%	27%
Historically black universities	60%	65%
Historically white technikons	11%	17%
Historically black technikons	67%	79%
Unisa and Technikon SA	17%	35%

Figure 17: Female staff as % of full-time staff: 1999

	Academic	Executive/Support Professionals
Historically white (Afrikaans) universities	35%	44%
Historically white (English) universities	34%	57%
Historically black universities	38%	40%
Historically white technikons	38%	37%
Historically black technikons	38%	29%
Unisa and Technikon SA	48%	51%

In the recently released National Plan the Ministry has recognised the following difficulties in changing the staff profile in higher education:

- low numbers and proportions of black and women post-graduate students, leading to a limited potential pool from which academic staff can be recruited
- inadequate levels of financial support for post-graduate students
- inability of higher education institutions to compete in the labour market with the public and private sectors in terms of salaries.

It proposes to consider providing post-graduate scholarships targeted at black, women and disabled students as well as to remove obstacles to recruiting academic staff from the rest of the continent. Higher education institutions in turn will have to indicate in their three-year 'rolling' plans the strategies, including time frames they have put in place for the development and implementation of employment equity plans which conform to the guidelines required by the Department of Labour in terms of the Employment Equity Act. The same will be required in respect of infrastructure for the disabled.

5. EQUITY AND REDRESS REVISITED

When a new Minister of Education was appointed in June 1999 following the second national democratic elections Professor Kader Asmal indicated that he would be asking the Council on Higher Education to advise him on the optimal size and shape of the higher education system. In April 2000, the first draft discussion document was released by the CHE task team. It proposed a model of structural differentiation on a continuum ranging from colleges to comprehensive research universities with in-built prescriptions and rigidities. By all accounts it was a bad document. There was general consensus that if implemented the model would further entrench the current legacy of racial inequalities in the higher education sector.

The revised final document foregrounded the four pivots of equity, quality, responsiveness and sustainability. All these resonated well given the unfinished business of achieving equity and redress in the system as well as the tendency to associate the broadening of access with declining standards. Issues of relevance and sustainability have become central challenges to higher education systems the world over. It also clearly broadened the category of historically disadvantaged institutions to include not only historically black institutions (HBIs) but also historically white technikons (HWTs).

The revised structural differentiation model proposed a three tier system with 'bedrock' universities specializing in the provisioning of undergraduate degrees with very little research on the one hand and comprehensive research universities on the other with a middle group offering extensive masters and limited doctoral programmes. Though less rigid than the original one, it still pointed to a hierarchy of institutions based on how much research would be allowed. A most controversial aspect of the report was an attempt to identify examples of possible institutional 'combinations' across the institutional black/white and university/technikon divides. It also effectively sought to remove the binary divide between the technikons and universities and set out the programme mix criteria for Universities of Technology. This latter recommendation was welcomed by the technikon sector some of whose members have been positioning themselves to become Universities of Technology.

The university sector was largely opposed to the recommendations on various grounds including likely breach of institutional autonomy, an unacceptable and artificial separation of research and teaching as well as the likely entrenchment of existing inequalities a point also

made by the Association of South African Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (ASAHI). This represented a rare occasion of solidarity within the university sector and led to heavy political lobbying which won the day. The new cabinet-approved national plan rejected the proposed structural differentiation model in favour of differentiating institutions principally on the grounds of their negotiated mix of academic programmes and missions while retaining the binary divide between technikons and universities for the next five years albeit with a 'loosening of boundaries'.

It also effectively postponed the issue of mergers except in the case of a few, some of which had been voluntarily mooted, by setting up a National Working Group to investigate appropriate institutional structures on a regional basis.

Insofar as issues of equity are concerned the National Plan largely reiterates the positions articulated in the White Paper while proposing to use funding to punish non-compliance. It also proposes to review the National Student Financial Aid Scheme which was started in 1994 with a sum of R90.4 million increasing to R600 million in 2000. While the amount has grown it is still far from meeting the vast needs of needy students.

Insofar as institutional redress is concerned the Ministry is of the view that: *"the starting point for restructuring the higher education system must be to ensure that higher education institutions, as they are currently structured, become more efficient and effective before embarking on new roles and functions. This requires that both institutions which are performing well are maintained and supported and that those which are not are provided with the opportunity to improve their performance, including redressing the inequities of the past. Redress must however be linked to enabling institutions to discharge their agreed mandates."* The CHE Size and Shape report fell short of articulating a strategy for redress even though it acknowledged that *"it is beyond dispute that under apartheid certain HE institutions experienced a history of disadvantage"*. Furthermore it went on to assert that: *"Claims for institutional redress on the part of 'historically disadvantaged' institutions must confront the realities of the financial and human resources available to higher education to meet all claims. The claims for institutional redress must also be balanced with the imperative of social redress for historically advantaged groups of people. Social redress and institutional redress are connected but the former is not reducible to the latter."*

The suggested approach is that *"while planning must take cognisance of the institutional inequities and the distortions of the past it is vital to look to the future."*

This approach, articulated as it has been in a context in which extremely small amounts (less than ½% in 1998) and (less than 1% in 1999) of the higher education allocations have been provided for institutional redress, gives the impression that no urgency is attached to the matter.

It is perhaps pertinent to note that opposition to equity and redress has over the past five years been articulated at various levels. At one level some critics of redress have contended that the concept of 'disadvantage' is fallacious. By superficially and selectively comparing some facilities across the HDI/HAI divide they argue that the concept is untenable and that in any case large numbers of black students are now attending historically white institutions. It therefore makes more sense to de-emphasize historically-based divisions and concentrate on building a common national system. The obvious counter to this is that the playing fields have to be levelled before a truly equitable national higher education system can emerge.

At the other end of the spectrum some critics of redress have called for the closure or ‘downgrading’ of several HDUs on the grounds that these institutions lack the capacity to be proper universities and that savings from such closures or ‘downgrades’ would provide the higher education sector with badly needed funds.

In the final analysis the controversy largely relates to the problem of the availability of resources. Simply put, the starting point of the critics of redress is that given the limited resources manifested in declining subsidies, if funds are made available for redress purposes this will lead to a decrease in the slice of the cake that goes to the historically advantaged institutions thus impacting negatively on the quality and scope of their own delivery at a time when most have opened their doors to black students.

Some of these concerns dramatically played themselves out at the end of 1996 when the projected subsidy levels for 1997 were released by the Department of Education and showed considerable reduction from the previous year for all institutions including cuts in financial aid for students. There was, as would be expected a massive outcry against the cuts. It transpired that a process of top-slicing had occurred with the view to using some of the funds for redress purposes. Interestingly enough, the HDIs also objected vociferously to the cuts on the grounds that they would exacerbate their already precarious financial situation. It was also not clear as to what the time frames and possible outcomes of the proposed audits the results of which would determine the allocation of redress funds would be. The whole idea was scrapped for 1997 and the same levels and principles of allocation for 1996 were restored.

The hard fact is that the government has not demonstrably and unequivocally embraced the issues of institutional redress. This is even more disappointing in light of the fact that the black institutions, responding to demand, expanded their enrolments beyond their carrying capacity in the early to mid-nineties without extra resources being provided either for academic development or infrastructural expansion. Furthermore they are suffering under the debilitating burden of student debt in the absence of a comprehensive student financial aid scheme. The decline in enrolments indicated above is therefore not surprising.

In a manner of speaking the Ministry has so far refused to “walk the talk” in this regard. It has so far failed to develop a redress strategy and has allowed the few cases of mismanagement in some of these institutions to cloud this important issue. This does not imply ‘throwing money at the problem’ but there clearly is no logic, in our view, in admitting the inequities of apartheid and then not doing anything about their persistent legacy.

As ASAHDI has pointed out: “The shift to funding TEFSA appears to be based on the principle of prioritising social as opposed to institutional redress.”

However in their view *“it must be strongly emphasized that the two are inextricably interlinked and mutually dependent. It will simply be counterproductive to fund individual students without effective institutional redress measures to ensure that the education they receive is of a higher quality and that they have not only access to higher education but success with it. Conversely addressing the financial plight of the majority of disadvantaged students is critical to the sustainability and therefore quality of the HDIs who have long been bearing the national responsibility of carrying these students with limited external support.”*

In lamenting the ‘ongoing effects of disadvantage and the lack of materialisation of a redress strategy they point out that as a result:

- the absolute gap between HDIs and HAIs has increased, not diminished
- mounting student debt is crippling many institutions
- capacity building and institutional development at HDIs has been limited
- levels of staff demoralisation are increasingly high, leading in some cases to an exodus.

They note that the current policy environment is increasingly characterized by fiscal constraints, inter-institutional competitiveness, and by growing scepticism towards redress claims. Furthermore they state *“In this climate, the HDIs are being asked to take responsibility as agents for their own transformation – to pull themselves by their own bootstraps so to speak. But their agency is limited by the effects of the broader socio-structural conditions beyond their control which nail their boots to the floor and hampers the very progress they are expected to achieve. This raises the urgent need to identify an alternative strategy to ensure that the required capital injections for specified redress purposes is procured.”*

They see redress as a time-delimited mechanism targeted at specific, identified needs, based on a systematic audit of disadvantage and an analysis of needs with a view to ensuring long-term quality, relevance and sustainability.

Finally they suggest that redress

- should be built into the institutional planning process with identified budgets, and measures to monitor and evaluate progress and success and to account for funds received;
- should complement other donor and NGO initiatives such as the USAID TELP.

Practically this would entail:

- exploring reallocations within the funding formula;
- new innovative and robust funding mechanisms including borrowing from local sources as well as from multilateral lending agencies.

They conclude that: *“Without this purposive intervention the goals of higher education transformation and its contribution to development and equity will continue to be frustrated.”*

The 1999/2000 CHE annual report states that engagements around the Size and Shape issues have highlighted concern about the absence of a substantive redress policy and strategy. In light of this a recent CHE meeting agreed that the financing and funding Task Team should examine the question of redress policy and strategy with a view to advising the Minister in this regard and report to the CHE.

6. PROPOSED MERGERS: THE FINAL SOLUTION?

When the report of the National Working Group was released to the public in February 2002 the recommendations contained therein evoked an array of both positive and negative responses.

Notwithstanding the differences of views on the specific merger proposals there was general consensus on the importance of the report. The South African Universities Vice Chancellors Association (SAUVCA) statement quoted below captured this very well:

“The report of the NWG is clearly an important document in the reform of the national system of higher education in South Africa. Prepared by a working group with an impressive range of expertise, it has examined some of the problems currently facing the system and has argued strongly for substantial reform. It presents far-reaching recommendations, that, if accepted, would result in the most drastic changes ever experienced by any higher education system in the world. And it has pointed to the range of factors that has (sic) a bearing on the success of the proposals, not least the cost of change to the central government.”

In recommending a radical reconfiguration of the landscape which would reduce the number of higher education institutions from the current 36 to 21 the NWG believes that:

“The implementation of its recommendations will transform the apartheid edifice of the system and lay the foundation for a higher education system that is consistent with the vision, values and principles of our young and vibrant democratic order.”

Viewed from the equity angle, in essence the proposed mergers would involve the following types:

¹ HDU and HAU – 3	Natal and Durban-Westville; North-West and Potchefstroom; Fort Hare, Rhodes and Unitra Medical School.
HDT and HAT – 2	Northern Gauteng, North-West and Pretoria; Natal, M L Sultan and Mangosothu.
HDT and HDT – 1	Border and Eastern Cape
HDT and HDU –1	Peninsula and Western Cape
HAT and HAU – 2	Port Elizabeth and Port Elizabeth, TSA and UNISA
Unbundled HDI – 1	Vista
Unmerged HDI – 1 (mission refocus)	Zululand
Unmerged HAI – 10	Gauteng 5, Western Cape 3, Free State 2

¹ HDU: Historically Disadvantaged Universities
 HAU: Historically Advantaged Universities
 HDT: Historically Disadvantaged Technikons
 HAT: Historically Advantaged Technikons

Changing Landscape

	Present	New
HAI	19	12
HDI	17	4
HBD ²	-	5
Total	36	21

	Present	New
Universities	21	14 (2 comp)
Technikons	15	7
	36	21

The main thrust of criticisms of the report has been:

- differential treatment of institutions based on their location in the advantage/disadvantage divide – the so-called “outright assault on historically black institutions”
- the lack of a focus on transformation which should have been an underlying principle together with equity, sustainability and productivity
- the overriding focus on unitary mergers as the most appropriate model for reconfiguration

Responding to some of these criticisms against the background of somewhat acrimonious exchanges sometimes involving resort to the courts of the land, the Minister of Education recently reiterated the case for restructuring by restating the litany of inefficiencies and inequalities of the system.

- the average graduation rate stands at 15 percent when it should be around 33 percent for three-year full time undergraduate programmes
- twenty percent of all undergraduate and postgraduates drop out of the system each year resulting in about R1.3 billion wastage
- black students still constitute only 30% of all enrolments for masters and doctoral degrees

² HBD: Hybrid

- only six universities produce 65% of research outputs recognised for subsidy purposes and
- black people and women remain underrepresented in academic and professional positions, especially at senior levels.

The logical question to ask is whether the proposed restructuring will solve these shortcomings. At another level is it wise to insist on a big bang merger exercise? What are the financial implications of the proposed mergers? Would a common teaching platform approach as espoused by the Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) not yield the desired outcomes without massive disruption?

The central sociological problematic is whether the higher education system can be used as an instrument for radical transformation in a situation where democratic political change coexists with an economy in which change has been very slow. The outcome of this world – historical experiment will throw light on some of the theoretical issues in the sociology of higher education. Certainly if the NWG recommendations are adopted and implemented issues of equity and redress would play themselves out in a significantly new context.

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