

Session 7: Workshop 7

Title: Issues, problems, policies: a snapshot of higher education in South Africa today

Presenter: Professor Cecil Abrahams, former Vice-Chancellor, University of the Western Cape, South Africa

Chair: Professor David Robinson, Vice-Chancellor, Monash University, Australia

Rapporteur: Nicola Chilvers, ACU

Synopsis

Professor Abrahams outlined the current higher education situation in South Africa, the problems and the apparent solutions. The South African higher education system is facing many problems. There are too many institutions for the available public funding and the participation and retention rate of the eligible population is low. He explained that certain forms of “private” education are frowned upon due to the “socialist” ideology of the current South African government; and that the model South Africa is likely to follow is a collaborative one, motivated by the improvement of the product and the opening of access (to those to whom higher education was previously denied) rather than profit. Examples given of collaborative partnerships include: the arrangement between the University of Missouri and the University of the Western Cape (a relationship which was established during the apartheid era when, even though the University of Missouri was withdrawing its investments in South Africa, it was prepared to enter into a collaborative partnership with a historically black university); and the establishment of a Monash University overseas campus in South Africa.

Presentation

South Africa is currently going through a period of intense change and it is commonly believed that a democratic future is dependent on education. Professor Abrahams pointed to the following key elements of the government's plans for higher education:

National Higher Education Plan

The *National Higher Education Plan* for South Africa was published in March 2001 and is intended to be a blue-print for education. Several initiatives contributed to the plan:

- the National Education Policy Initiative (NEPI), an advisory body present under apartheid
- the National Commission on Higher Education, which reported in 1996 laying the groundwork for the Higher Education Act 1997
- the Higher Education Council report (July 2000), which led directly to the Plan

Background to the Plan: At present there are 36 Higher Education institutions in South Africa comprising:

- 21 public institutions
- 15 technikons (which are similar to the former UK Polytechnics in that they provide largely applied education and award diplomas)

Inherent problems: There are:

- too many institutions for the available public funding
- some are not able to maintain the necessary quality
- some are not financially viable

Proposed Solution: Reduce the number of institutions by merging where appropriate.

Access: The overall aim is to increase access and quality and raise the participation rate to 20% of all those who are eligible.

In expounding on the *Plan*, Professor Abrahams talked about the following issues:

Decline in “Black” Universities

Up to 1960 there was only one “black” university (Fort Hare), a figure which had increased tenfold by the end of the century. However, with the new government policy of “massification” large numbers of black students, many of whom are not properly prepared by their high schools, are entering institutions that are not ready for them with the result that there is a 50% drop out rate. This is not only a waste of human resource potential but also a considerable waste of money.

Adding to this situation is the decline in the overall numbers applying for higher education. Massification did not prevail after the bottleneck created by apartheid had cleared up and the numbers applying (particularly to the “black” institutions) began to diminish. Moreover, the older, formerly “white” universities are now in competition with the “black” institutions and are beginning to cream off the top students whereas, because of the continuing differences in school education, the “black” institutions are having to teach differently, investing in bridging and foundation programmes.

There is now a movement towards the removal of non-viable institutions. Student numbers at the historically important University of Fort Hare, for example, have fallen from 5000 to 1500. It is very difficult to run and faces major student debt problems. The government is keeping it alive with funding directly from the state.

How can student numbers be increased?

The 1996 report argued that by 2005 there should be 1.3 million South Africans in higher education but in 2001 there are only 600,000. How is it possible to double

this figure when the high schools are not yet producing the necessary numbers? Two key strategies must be:

- to increase efficiency in graduating the students who are already in the system and thereby cut down the failure/drop-out rate
- to encourage more people in to the system

The public system can not meet this target on its own; the “black” institutions are unable to increase numbers/improve efficiency quickly enough.

Furthermore, the education budget is set to decrease over the next few years as money is diverted to more pressing health and social projects.

The Way Forward

The way forward is likely to embrace a range of institutions and strategies, including:

- Public institutions
- Private institutions (those encouraged by the act include the setting up of a campus of Monash University in South Africa). Private institutions are welcomed provided they help to achieve the overall objectives of graduating more students with quality degrees who can then contribute to development
- Teacher education, which is a very popular option for increasing student numbers. The University of Port Elizabeth, for instance, now has 14-15,000 students studying teacher education compared with a previous figure of 5-6,000. This has been achieved by empowering private colleges to offer programmes approved by the Port Elizabeth Senate
- Awarding degrees from overseas institutions such as the University of Warwick, which offers an engineering degree

The model South Africa is most likely to follow, given its socialist roots, is a collaborative one, motivated by the improvement of the product rather than by profit; and an example of a flourishing non-profit making collaborative partnership is that between the University of the Western Cape and the University of Missouri:

In 1986, in the face of the international boycott on South Africa (including academic), the University of Missouri withdrew its investments in South Africa but decided nevertheless to assist one of the historically black institutions. The University of the Western Cape was chosen and subsequently benefited from a fund of around \$200,000 p.a. Initiatives included a graduate training exchange programme and staff exchange. The latter allowed for eight professors from each university to teach one programme of eight weeks at the other university each semester; and to date around 400 professors in total have completed this exchange, thereby contributing in no small measure to improvements in both the research and teaching programmes.

South Africa is happy to encourage the involvement of overseas institutions provided that the quality, standards and portability of the education are ensured.

The establishment of a Monash University overseas campus in South Africa is another example of overseas involvement that benefits the South African educational system

by offering high standards, a proven track record, and experience of having established similar overseas campuses in other countries.

Discussion Points

The session was thrown open to the floor with the question “do any of the institutions represented by the vice-chancellors present have any experiences that might be useful in solving South Africa’s problems of increasing participation and retention?” The discussion was extremely lively, and the following bullet points encapsulate the key points:

- It was agreed that it is vital to consolidate the base of the education system at primary and secondary level and, where necessary, to provide, say, six month/one year pre-university "enabling" programmes. If students are better prepared for higher education the retention rate may rise.
- The potential value of merging institutions where duplication exists and encouraging institutional specialisation/centres of excellence was recognised. Note was taken, in particular, of the Indian model of setting up higher engineering and medical institutes.
- Consider a more directional approach: e.g. if South Africa requires more doctors then invest more money in medical training.
- Despite South Africa's efforts to meet her need of economists, engineers and medical scientists, the effects of the Brain drain are ever present: the evidence, for instance, is that white engineering graduates tend to leave the country and 70% of all medical graduates go overseas. It was agreed, however, that in the context of the country's long-awaited free society it would be neither possible nor appropriate to introduce strategies to restrict any individual's freedom of choice of career or of movement.
- The viability was discussed both of quota systems whereby the more wealthy institutions are required to enrol a certain percentage of poorer students; and of implementing a system of exchange between teachers from “black” and “white” universities.
- The group voiced a general disenchantment with franchising and a distinct preference for partnerships.
- In response to the suggestion that industry be courted to support higher education more directly (as has been so successful in parts of India), Professor Abrahams pointed out that, as industry is largely owned by people who went to the old, "white" institutions, it is these institutions which are more likely than their historically black counterparts to be the recipients of any endowment. Moreover, current tax laws argue against industry's endowing educational institutions.

Other suggestions included:

- increasing the number of vocational courses at the higher secondary level
- reducing the number of technikons whilst increasing the number of further education and training centres
- introducing the concept of “US Community Colleges” as a method of preparation for university
- increasing the provision of distance education.