

# HOW HIGHER EDUCATION HAS CHANGED: NEW OPPORTUNITIES (AND THREATS) FOR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

by Jonathan D. Jansen  
University of Durban Westville

**U**ntil recently, students finishing high school made very simple choices about their future studies. You either went to a university or a technikon or a teacher education college. At technikon or college you studied for a diploma. At university for a degree. You stayed in the institution in which you started. You matriculation subjects determined what you studied after school e.g., with good passes in science and mathematics, you probably did a Bachelor of Science degree or a medical degree. And you were almost certainly guaranteed a job after you completed your diploma or degree. You were one of a few who were privileged to study further, especially if you were a black South African. Well, things have changed dramatically in the past three years and it is important that students understand how these changes impact on their choices of institution and career.

First, students now have more institutions in which they can study. It is estimated that most South African students now study in private institutions of higher education like Varsity College or Bond University. You can get a degree from Oxford Brookes University or Morgan University without leaving the country since many of these institutions have campuses inside South Africa. Students are no longer confined to the 21 universities and 15 technikons which offer public higher education. Indeed, many students choose private universities because they are perceived to offer better quality, international degrees and diplomas in a relatively more stable campus environment than what is often available at public (or government funded) institutions.

Second, students now have more curriculum options in terms of what they study. And what you study is more likely to give you job-related skills than before. The regular BA (Bachelor of Arts) degree is no longer the only option to students with non-science subjects in high school. Universities and technikons have been forced to make their degrees and diplomas more accessible to students by increasing the subject choices within these conventional qualifications. You can now study for a BA in tourism or a BSc in industrial technology where the emphasis is much more on learning linked to the world of work. Shorter courses abound, offering students everything from computer technologies to basic physiotherapy.

Private universities offer numerous business education courses including the formidable MBA qualification. In the effort to attract more students, public institutions have been concerned to offer qualifications that meet the very diverse needs and interests of the thousands of students leaving high school. You are now more likely to study for a qualification that is linked to the job market than before.

Third, students no longer have to feel that they have an inferior education if they enter technikons or some other institution. Technikons now attract many students who qualify for university entrance and now offer degrees (like the BTEch) which was formerly only possible through a university. Through the National Qualifications Framework, government intends for students doing technical qualifications to be able to move easily into professional qualifications, for those doing diplomas to continue in degree studies, for those doing the new two-year associate degree (as proposed by the new Task Team on higher education) to do the new four year degree, for those with work experience (or "prior learning") to be credited for this learning towards a new qualification, and so on. In other words, there is a move towards much more flexible pathways by which students can access different kinds of qualifications, including learning on the job. Now this might not work as easily or immediately as is sometimes professed by over-eager government officials, but the intention is certainly there to prevent studies from becoming "stuck" in one kind of job or institution without the ability to progress to higher learning or to continue in what government calls "lifelong learning."

Fourth, students can now study in a variety of different ways than was possible before. A student in Pietersburg can now study through Stellenbosch University in the Western Cape without ever leaving the province. Satellite technologies have made high quality distance learning possible. A student in Bizana in the Eastern Cape can now do a business degree through Duke University in the USA without leaving her home provided she has access to a computer and the Internet. The e-degree is perhaps the most significant revolution in higher education in recent years. Through telematic education at Pretoria University, a student in Mpumalanga can enjoy degree training through a combination of technology-based distance learning, face-to-face tuition, quality materials delivered by mail, and access to regional laboratories without the need to travel or live in residence as the only way of accessing university education. The different ways of studying have broadened the options available for higher education especially for rural students.

Fifth, the diversity of higher education providers, and the greater competition for fewer available students, have placed all high school graduates (and indeed, post-graduate students) in very powerful positions as consumers. Before, students were denied access either because of racial discrimination or because of the great demand for few places especially at university. This has changed.

Universities (and to some extent technikons) are desperate for students since their government subsidies are tied to how many students show-up for higher education. If you are a good student, with the ability to pay (or with a scholarship), you will no doubt be a sought-after student in South Africa. Students must realise their potential as consumers in the new environment.

But there are real dangers that students should be aware of in this changing environment. The greater opportunities available also mean that there are real threats facing the student as consumer. To begin with, the fact that you can obtain an international degree in South Africa does not automatically mean that this is a good degree. Check whether the institution offering that degree is accredited with the South African Qualifications Authority before you decide. Check whether that institution is highly regarded within its own country of origin. Check with other students or even with academics at other institutions to find out whether the qualification or institution is worth the paper it is written on. In other words, do your homework.

Furthermore, beware of short-term, dead-end courses of two or three months which offer you a diploma but for which the basic skills you obtain are not recognised by any employer. There are no short cuts to a decent education. And finally, do not be enticed only by the benefits of securing employment in industry or business. If your heart is set on gaining a broad education in the humanities (such as music and philosophy) or the social sciences (such as sociology or political science) or teacher education, then make the investment. In the end, earning lots of money quickly may not provide you with the kind of personal and career fulfillment that you seek through music or teaching.

The most important change in the field of higher education is that students are now taken much more seriously since they have the power to choose from a variety of providers of education in a range of countries. Use that power, responsibly.