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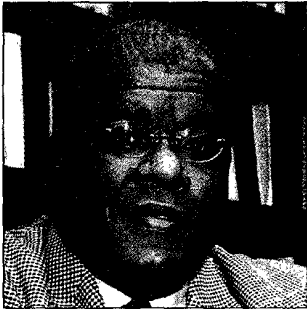
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By Invitation

STATE TIGHTENS GRIP

Jonathan Jansen



State control is based on the flawed assumption that it can best transform universities

Institutional autonomy is under greater threat in democratic SA than ever before. This can be seen in the pattern of state intervention in the universities, which I highlighted in this year's T B Davie memorial lecture at the University of Cape Town recently.

The state now decides what can be taught, or rather, what institutions might be willing to teach without subsidised income, through skilful manipulation of the funding formula. What the "programme and qualifications mix" exercise does in effect is authorise the state to decide what can be taught, where, or if at all, irrespective of local demand or institutional capacity.

The state now also decides which institutions will offer what programmes. The decision to close mining engineering at the University of Pretoria and transfer it solely to Wits University is a case in point.

Once again the state today decides who can be taught, or rather, how many students are allowed to enter universities and in which specific fields. The recent cap placed on student enrolments is an official retreat, as a result of declining central funds, from a fundamental commitment of the white paper on higher education to the goal of increasing access to higher education.

The state now decides how students will be taught by placing institutional qualifications on a national framework grid through which qualifications are organised and delivered. The requirement that learning outcomes should be specified, that assessment criteria should be made explicit, and that programmes should be "packaged" in particular ways are unprecedented intrusions into actions that were always considered the domain of the universities.

The state decides on the credibility of qualifications, programmes and even institutions through the mechanism of higher education quality audits. What has been a matter of self-regulation among institutions is now the prerogative of the state.

The state now decides which institutions will exist and in what combinations. The tertiary education mergers generated fierce resistance and this may account for some reversals in the more ambitious plans of the former minister.

The state is contemplating the centralising (or, rather, "de-institutionalising") of informa-

tion required for student admissions, in a proposed central applications office. There is considerable suspicion on the part of institutions that the real intent is to push for a central admissions office, based largely on a distrust of the institutions.

Under the revised higher education legislation the state can now displace a vice-chancellor on the basis of review and install its own administrator to run the institution. An institution deemed to be in crisis and unable to resolve that crisis could be subjected to direct government intervention that changes key personnel.

These interventions, taken together, have irrevocably changed the discourses, understandings and behaviour of institutions in ways that make any state intervention more legitimate than before. They have also permanently altered universities' understanding of themselves, their mission and their degrees of freedom.

What is to prevent a virile state now or an undemocratic state in the future from pressing for even greater control over the day-to-day actions, decisions and destinies of individual institutions?

The quest for greater state control is based on the flawed assumption that the state can best "steer" higher education institutions in the direction of what is too loosely called transformation. There is no evidence for this. Since ministers tend to act on short-term political priorities rather than long-term system gains, the entire higher education sector is placed at risk not only in relation to its basic functioning, but also in its quest for autonomy of academic management. There is no evidence that centralised planning models can best achieve transformation goals.

The silence among academic institutions on the question of autonomy is dangerous because they assume that a benevolent state that exists in the present to advance the intellectual interests of higher education will remain a benevolent state well into the future. This is where the case for institutional autonomy is strongest. One African nation after another has found that as the post-colonial state failed to deliver economically, and as the state became more authoritarian as a result, the first target was the university.

If and when that point arises in the future, on what grounds will the SA university be able to challenge the post-apartheid state? ■

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