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living LEARNING

'Blue ribbon' panel given a political mission

This week Professor Jonathan Jansen, education policy analyst at the University of Durban Westville predicts a new form of hierarchy in the higher education system emanating from the reshaping and resizing of institutions suggested by Education Minister Professor Kader Asmal

At the end of June 2000, the Minister of Education expects a report from a 13-person task team on "the size and shape" of higher education. The task team consists of prominent people from labour, higher education, business and government, though none of them are official representatives or spokesmen for their sector. It is my contention this "blue-ribbon" panel is intended to lend status and credibility to a political task that will reshape the profile of higher education in South Africa.

The minister is clear: the 36 public higher education institutions (21 universities and 15 technikons) reflect "the geopolitical imagination of apartheid planners". In other words, our universities and technikons are products of apartheid; there are too many public institutions too close together doing the same things for too few students. Taken to its logical conclusion, the minister has no choice but to close down or merge or re-

name as lesser institutions (eg universities becoming community colleges) certain institutions. But is it really that simple?

I believe the changes in higher education are at attempt at aligning higher education with the logic of the market. It has been increasingly clear since the mid-1990s that government was concerned that higher education become more competitive in the global arena; that universities become more productive; that programmes become more vocation-alised; that the core business of universities and technikons are aligned with the demands of the labour market; and that graduates are more flexibly trained. The entrepreneurial university that regards students as clients and vice-chancellors as chief executive officers and departments as productive units is

the kind of institution that would be viable within a changing external environment. Students would "vote with their feet" in choosing some institutions and leaving others; the fittest will survive. It is this logic that allowed private higher education to flourish after apartheid, with such institutions now absorbing more than 300 000 students following post-compulsory education.

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Pretoria News

Jr..... Nr..... P.6..... Dat. 28 MAR 2000

But market pressures are not enough. While black universities have seen their numbers dramatically diminished because of competition from viable (read "white") universities and private providers, many still limp along from one public image crisis to the next. There is increasing pressure from the cabinet to act firmly against black universities and technikons which, with few exceptions, appear to have mismanaged resources and accumulated debt. It is an open secret that the Ministry of Finance is reluctant to continue pouring money into black universities that lack credibility. It is for this reason Mr Asmal, through the offices of the Council on Higher Education, has created a task team as surrogate action for a risky political exercise.

That is, no minister will risk closing down black universities (like Fort Hare or Zululand) directly, without unacceptably high levels of political fall-out. But a task team may recommend such action, and thereby provide technical justification for an otherwise political task.

The "typologies" being developed of higher education institutions is nothing less than an attempt to create a hierarchy with a few small historically white universities at the top, and a second, third and fourth-tier of inferior institutions at the bottom.

Middle class and privileged students will access the upper tier of universities; poor and less privileged students will be doomed to a second- or third-rate education, if anything at all, in the lower tier of institutions.

Class will displace race, though not perfectly, in defining the architecture of higher education in the future. In that sense, little will change from our apartheid past.

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