Guest Editorial

Does the national plan effectively address the critical issues facing higher education?

J D Jansen

University of Pretoria

In a recent analysis of the politics of higher education reform in Germany, Hans Weiler (2001) combines theoretical insight with personal experiences as *Rektor* of Viadrina European University in the former East Germany, to address two inter-related puzzles in that context: why education reform did not happen when it was widely expected; and why it *did* happen when nobody was demanding it. Weiler argues that there remains an enduring "politics of ambivalence" in German higher education when it comes to making and implementing wide-scale reforms, an ambivalence that he attributes to "the putative political costs of reform" of that country's universities. The Wielerian thesis provides a useful point of entry for an analysis of the National Plan on Higher Education – the response of Government to what the Minister calls "advice provided, at my request", by the Council on Higher Education in its report titled, *Towards a new higher education landscape: meeting the equity, quality and social development imperatives of South Africa in the 21st Century* (CHE 2000).

In slightly less than 100 pages and organised in six major sections, the *National Plan for Higher Education* (henceforth, NPHE) of the Ministry of Education (February 2001) announces 16 outcomes (thankfully, less than the 66 specific outcomes associated with the new curriculum or the 140-odd "competences" for educators) described as "system-wide targets and goals" (NPHE 2001:10). These outcomes would be achieved through "steering mechanisms" or "levers" such as the use of earmarked funding to stimulate research capacity building, or the installation of regulatory frameworks to control the growth and quality of private higher education institutions.

But can the National Plan in fact deliver on the transformation of higher education in South Africa? Does it effectively address the critical issues facing higher education institutions? Can the planning outcomes can be attained, given the stated strategies for achieving them? Or is the National Plan simply another brick in the formidable wall of policy and planning intentions erected after apartheid?

But before making this assessment, it is important to ask "why now?" After all, *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* has been in place at least since July 1997. Why was a National Plan not developed later that year, or the following year? According to the Ministry, "an incremental approach was adopted" because of the lack of capacity to plan, the poor quality of available information, and the need for consultation (NPHE 2001:8). The result? An "implementation vacuum" resulted that drove institutions into competition, encouraged the growth of private higher education, and deepened inequality among institutions. The National Plan, according to its authors, "addresses the implementation vacuum and is, therefore, a key instrument in moving towards the implementation of the vision and policy framework outlined in the White Paper" (NPHE 2001:8). Let's assume, for the moment, that the historical reasons for planning inaction are valid ie, that capacity *now* exists at national and institutional levels. Can the National Plan then deliver on its own "outcomes"? I will limit this brief analysis to three stated "outcomes" of the NPHE (see summary in Table 1).

INCREASING PARTICIPATION RATES

It is clear to most analysts that participation rates will not increase even in the medium-to long-term (Reddy 2001:2). The steady decline in matriculation pass rates since 1994, with a small reprieve in 2000, and the ongoing decline in the absolute numbers of students entering and graduating from the public school system, suggest that participation rates will not improve in the foreseeable future (see Cloete & Bunting 2000:13).[1] The authors are clearly aware of this dilemma: "The scenarios indicate that a continuation of the current output from secondary schools is unlikely to allow an increase in the participation rate" (NPHE 2001:22) but then con-

Table 1

Selected outcomes, indicators and levers: National plan on higher education 2001

Outcome	Indicator	Steering mechanism or lever
Increased participation rate	• A 20% increase in the participation rate of 20–24 year olds over 10–15 years; that is, the higher education system enrols 750 000 students (compared to 600 000 in 1998)	• Significant improvements in the throughputs from the schooling system
Improved staff equity	• No system-wide targets set	• Targeted postgraduate scholarships • Recruitment of staff from the rest of Africa • Targets specified in institutional three-year rolling plans
New institutional and organisational forms	• Merger of Technikon Natal and ML Sultan Technikon • Incorporation of the Qwa Qwa Branch of the University of the North into the University of the Free State • Unbundling of VISTA University • Merger of UNISA, Technikon South Africa and VISTA (Distance Education)	• Request completion of existing plans (the two KwaZulu Natal Technikons) • Initiate development of implementation plans (Qwa Qwa and the Free State University) • National Working Group to advise on appropriate regional institutional structures • A working group to facilitate merger and advise on the development of a single distance education institution

tinue to make wildly optimistic projections based on one single factor: ''a significant improvement in the throughputs from the school system'' (NPHE 2001:22). Despite the percentage increase in matriculation passes, the 2000 matriculation results did *not* stem the steady decline in actual numbers of graduates writing the final school examination; in fact, only 489 000 students sat for the examination in 2000 compared to 511 000 in 1999. Furthermore, the nine percent increase in pass rates is widely regarded as a ''one-off'' event explained, in large part, by the elimination of repeaters from the system (60 000 repeaters wrote in 1999 but only 6 000 in 2000) and the mass migration of students to standard grade subjects (65 000 fewer students sat for the university admission examination in 2000 compared to 1999).

The answer is clear: there is no way in which sufficient numbers of learners will be able to pass well enough to fulfil the optimistic projections of the NPHE. But it is not simply a problem of Grade 12 outputs; it is, more seriously, a problem of Grade 1 enrolments. All the evidence suggests that child mortality rates have increased (largely due to HIV/AIDS) and that fertility rates have decreased (Kinghorn 2001; see also Ministry and Department of Education 2000:45–47). In other words, fewer lear-

ners enrol in Grade 1 than before, either because there are not enough of them, or because they did not live long enough. It is a serious flaw in the NPHE that it did not make an explicit and extended analysis of HIV/AIDS and its implications for higher education enrolments in the future. Could it be that this illogical proposal has less to do with serious demographic analyses and much more to do with the political costs of acknowledging that higher education will not be able to deliver on that most cherished goal of our new democracy: to broaden access and participation to those who have been historically marginalized from higher education?

IMPROVED STAFF EQUITY

The lack of staff equity in higher education is, perhaps, one of the most intractable problems facing transformation in higher education. The NPHE attributes the problem to a low recruitment base from the small numbers of black and women postgraduate students; inadequate levels of financial support for postgraduates, and the more competitive salaries offered in the public and private sectors. How does the NPHE propose to address this problem? In three ways: by providing postgraduate scholarships aimed at black and women students; by making it easier for

academics from other African countries to be employed in South African universities; and by requiring higher education institutions to develop and implement employment equity plans with specified targets. The first and third strategies do not make any sense, and the second is racially offensive.

With regard to postgraduate funding, there is no other third world country that has provided more scholarship support for postgraduate students through bodies such as the National Research Foundation (formerly, the Foundation for Research Development and the Centre for Science Development); through international Foundations such as Mellon, Rockefeller and Spencer; through the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR); through special overseas university Fellowships managed by the Fulbright Commission and the Educational Opportunities Council; and through the institutions themselves. There is no other African country that continues to have such a plethora of funding opportunities for postgraduate scholars. The problem is that there are not enough black and women students applying, that the quality of the applications from these target groups are often extremely poor (and therefore turned down), and that in many cases the funding available is not exhausted and either returned to the source or simply diverted to other programmatic needs. It is, therefore, remarkable to read that ''the Ministry will consider providing scholarships ...'' (NPHE 2001:48).

With regard to institutional equity plans, there is again a miscalculation of what is happening within institutions, and already poor track-record of initiatives proposed in the National Plan. Consider two institutions at the opposite end of the resource spectrum: the University of Durban Westville (historically black) and the University of Pretoria (historically white). Both institutions, for a long time, have developed well-refined staff employment equity targets. Both have devised well-resourced internal strategies to attract and retain black staff. Both have failed to visibly increase the pool of especially ''African'' staff within their institutions despite strong commitments in the leadership and finances of the two universities. The problem cannot be resolved simply by restating institutional commitments to equity in the so-called ''three-year rolling plans'' to be submitted to the Department of Education. The NPHE strategies or ''levers'' for changing staff equity ratios are therefore impotent, and we are left, once again, with meaningless statements characteristic of the first-wave of reforms in the mid-1990s: ''... The Ministry would like to encourage institutions to identify the factors that make academic careers attractive so that these advantages can be built into the development of strategies for recruiting and retaining staff'' (NPHE 2001:46).

But desperate times call for desperate measures, and so a third strategy for addressing this intractable problem is to find black Africans elsewhere. To understand the why this proposal is offensive, the recommendation should be quoted in full:

> In this regard, the Ministry would like to encourage institutions to recruit academics actively from the rest of the Africa (sic). Although this should not divert attention from the importance of recruiting and retaining black South Africans, it could play an important role in the short-term to providing role models for black students and helping to change institutional cultures. It would also contribute to the broader development of intellectual and research networks across the Continent, thus contributing to the social and economic development of Africa as a whole (NPHE 2001:46).

Most of what is contained in this proposal is laudable, except that it appears in the context of ''improved staff equity'' and not as part of an internationalisation or even Africanisation (in a continental sense) of our universities. Its assumptions are racially offensive by suggesting that Africans from elsewhere on the continent can do what South African scholars have been unable to accomplish: ''providing role models for black students''. What this suggests is that being a role model at university is tied-up with one's physical characteristics; this is a crude, insensitive manipulation of race in the face of a staffing equity problem. No matter where ''the African'' comes from on the continent, no matter what kind of person this is, no matter what cultural or social profile the person possesses, such an academic can serve a role that, presumably, ''non-African'' South Africans cannot. Such thinking conflates a continental identity (''African'' as a continental location) with a racialised South African identity (''African'' as a peculiar racial tag from the apartheid era). The strategy suggests that institutions, including government, might (as some no doubt do) count African scholars from outside South Africa as part of their equity targets, a device made possible by perceived ambiguities in the legislation about ''who counts'' in the equity stakes. I wish to be clear: South African universities must of necessity be ''internationalised'' through academic appointments from our continent, from Latin America, Asia and elsewhere – but not as a cynical attempt to boost equity profiles in the face of an obvious political dilemma in the national system: how can staff equity be attained in institutions, given the undersupply of black and women academics within a highly competitive labour market?

NEW INSTITUTIONAL AND ORGANISATIONAL FORMS

Whether the policy intention is named ''combinations'' or ''incorporations'' or ''mergers'', creating single institutions out of two or more entities represents a risky political process. Nowhere is this

risk more evident than in current attempts to change the higher education landscape in South Africa which, in the choice phrasing of the Minister of Education, reflects ''the geopolitical imagination of apartheid planners.'' But declaring this motivation – that the racial identity and geographic distribution of higher education institutions reflect the logic and purposes of apartheid – is one thing. Changing this institutional legacy through a higher education plan that anticipates a smaller set of strong, competitive, high-quality institutions that can compete within the global market of universities and produce the critical human resource needs of the nation, especially in science and technology, is quite another matter.

It is clear that at least one impetus behind the Minister's commission to the Council on Higher Education investigation was the gross inefficiencies in higher education, the costs of maintaining such an inefficient system, and the problem of sustainability of the higher education system (see CHE 2000:5–7). In this context, five to seven of the historically black universities (HBUs) constituted a dilemma: enrolments were falling, deficits were increasing, institutional leadership was in crisis in most of these HBUs, educational quality was suspect, student protests were, in several cases, severe – leading to campus occupations by police and private security firms (some with dubious reputations), and public and political confidence in these institutions reached an all-time low. At least in part, the restructuring of higher education was supposed to resolve the problem of dysfunctional institutions and an inefficient higher education system.

The Minister ignored the recommendations of the CHE for a three-tiered classification of higher education institutions and the mergers of several institutions listed by name. In fact, the mergers listed in the NPHE were either affirmations of mergers already underway (like the two technikons in KwaZulu Natal) or the identification of ''soft-targets'' for mergers ie, institutions where the political calculus was such that a forced merger could happen without significant crisis for the politicians. So, for example, the incorporation of the Qwa Qwa campus of the University of the North into the University of the Free State – something that has been on the cards for many years – will not cause major ripples in political circles given the size of the Qwa Qwa campus and its distance from the Northern Province – the headquarters of the University of the North main campus. Similarly, VISTA University (which, incidentally, is financially ''in the black''), unlike Fort Hare or Zululand universities, does not possess the same historical, emotional or political sensitivities that could lead to serious public confrontation with government. In fact, decisions on those institutions in deep financial crisis and social instability (like the Universities of the North, Fort Hare, Zululand, Durban Westville, and others) have effectively been postponed in favour of yet *another*

investigation, this time by a National Working Group (NWG) required ''to investigate and advise the Minister on the appropriate institutional structures on a regional basis to meet the regional and national needs for higher education, including mergers and/or other forms of combination'' (NPHE 2001:93). The NWG will, no doubt, be staffed by senior politicians and unionists (rather than higher education planning experts) in an attempt to obtain regional ''buy-in'' to what will certainly be unpopular political decisions.

The expectation, though, of a major shake-up in higher education is unfounded. Even the ''soft-targets'' are taking political aim against the Minister's initial decisions, with both VISTA University and Technikon South Africa (TSA) continuing ''business as usual'' despite the strategies announced in the NPHE. In the month immediately following the statement of Ministerial intentions, TSA advertised the position of Vice-Chancellor, a clear act of defiance against political authority! There are rumours of TSA ''going private'' with the profitable components of its core business in distance education. If the ''soft targets'' render this level of political resistance, then the message to the more difficult candidates for mergers will be to entrench their positions; and to the politicians, to hold back from any direct interventions to support mergers in those cases.

A telling example concerns the University of the Transkei (UNITRA). Several recent investigations by auditing firms, government-appointed commissions as well as independent researchers are unanimous: UNITRA is in serious condition, meriting state-intervention and, in some reports, meriting closure or merger with another Eastern Cape institution. Between 1994 and 2000, student numbers had dropped by 57.2%, from 6628 to 3793 students. And UNITRA's estimated cash flow deficit at the end of March 2001 was R125 million while the subsidy it expected to receive in April 2001 would only be in the region of R95 million. This problem of large-scale deficits has continued since 1997, with government convincing banks to provide an additional R50m credit line to the institution at the end of 1999, with subsequent monthly ''top-ups'' from the Department of Education simply to meet operational expenses (Habib 2001).

In this context, the Department of Education tried to declare a moratorium on first-year enrolments at UNITRA at the start of the 2001 academic year. Such a decision, in effect, means the beginning-of-the-end for a university. By cutting-off the life-line of new entries, now matter how small, there is no ''feed'' of students into successive years and, within 3–4 years, the so-called pipeline students would have passed through (or transferred from) the institution in question. Implementation of this decision was resisted by the community around UNITRA – a context in which the withdrawal of the civil service (to

Bisho), and the depletion of the former capital, Umtata, of major business interests, had raised the political stakes around UNITRA as the major employer in the region. In the face of intense resistance from the community – and one which represents perhaps a critical but contested (by the United Democratic Movement) power base of the ANC, a decision was made, to withdraw the moratorium on first-year enrolments. The future of UNITRA, if only temporarily, was secured.

The significance of this event is that any future attempts to close the University of the Transkei, directly or through mergers, will have to take account of Weiler's ''political calculus'' in making that decision. At the moment, those political forces are tilted decisively in favour of the *status quo* as far as higher education in the Eastern Cape is concerned.

Short of political intervention, the lethal cocktail of declining student numbers and increasing financial debt might eventually lead to institutions closing themselves. This process of self-closure is what Saleem Badat, the Executive Director of the CHE, calls ''the Darwinian resolution'' of the problem of non-viable institutions. The flip-side of the withholding of action is that another kind of political risk then surfaces; that is, the risk of defending in the public arena what taxpayers (let alone the political opposition in Parliament) witness daily as institutional crisis and collapse, and deploying costly resources as ''holding operations'' in institutions which simply cannot be turned into world-class universities. An example is the ineffective role of the newly legislated *Administrators* (displacing Vice Chancellors and Principals) as part of the ''holding operations'' at black universities.

South Africa's capacity to build high quality, competitive universities that also deliver on the equity demands made of a nation at the margins of powerful globalisation pressures, depends crucially on how the state makes decisions about the sector in the next 24 months. It could go either way.

ENDNOTE

1   The number of students obtaining full matriculation exemption dropped steadily from 89 000 in 1994, to 79 000 the next year (1995) to 69 000 in 1998.

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