

# STATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING IN SOUTH AFRICA: POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

E.U. Akor  
School of Public Management and Administration  
University of Pretoria

N.L. Roux  
School of Public Management and Administration  
University of Pretoria

## ABSTRACT

Higher education in South Africa appears to be confronted with diminishing state funding and at the same time, more interference by government in its management and administration. Government's policies on increased access and participation rates and meeting the developmental needs of the country may be in jeopardy as a result of the steady decline in the funding of higher education. The extent of government involvement in higher education's autonomy and academic freedom may also lead to the loss of universities' identity and ability to determine their directions, roles and functions.

This article focuses on the funding framework for higher education institutions, as well as on the planning process for new funding of tertiary education. Apart from explaining the categories of government grants to higher education institutions, this article also explores current funding problems and the implications thereof, as well as investigates the practical problems associated with the interference by government in the institutional autonomy and academic freedom of tertiary institutions.

## INTRODUCTION

Against the background of the principal overarching provisions of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1996 and related educational legislation and policy frameworks, the system of higher education in South Africa has been undergoing

a series of transformational exercises in order to redress the educational imbalances of the past. One of these changes relates to the funding of higher educational institutions, and, although a number of changes have been made to the funding formula that even culminated in the development of a new funding framework, higher education funding remains a key challenge as it appears insufficient and is characterised by a steady decline. This has resulted in the inability of a number of the previously disadvantaged groups to acquire university education; failure to develop the underdeveloped institutions and an inability of many students to study the courses of their choice. It appears that the subsidy cuts would not enhance the higher education's transformational need for increased access to higher education; neither would it enable the rendering of sufficient essential services to the previously disadvantaged groups.

Apart from higher educational institutions having to deal with the problems of inadequate funding, they also have to deal with the problem of government interference in the way they utilise their funds, *what* and *how* they teach and the number of students to enrol for particular courses. Higher educational institutions, therefore, may not be able to enjoy the absolute autonomy they would wish for, since these institutions are held accountable for the public funds they receive to finance academic related activities.

This article examines the uncertainties pertaining to higher education funding arrangements and the implications for institutional autonomy and academic freedom. The article further explores the problems associated with the former funding formula, which led to the development of a new funding framework. Current funding problems and the implications thereof, as well as the practical problems associated with the interference by government in institutional autonomy and academic freedom of tertiary institutions, are also investigated.

## THE FUNDING FRAMEWORK

The former funding framework which came into being in 1982/83 was not suitable as a steering mechanism in meeting the policy goals and objectives of transforming the system of higher education in South Africa, especially since it was based on a market model and cost driven (Ministry of Education, November 2002: 3; November 2003: 1.5.1). As a cost driven framework, the basis for allocating funds to institutions had little to do with whether the costs were linked to the main activities of the institution, namely research, teaching and community service. Rather, the basis for determining the allocation of funds was, according to Ministry of Education, (November 2003: 1.5.1) "... the generation of an ideal income for individual institutions based on the determination of actual costs".

The main feature of the former funding model was that students were treated as agents who were able to rationally respond to labour market demands. The major fields of study, institutions and qualifications they chose followed the signals of the labour market and their understanding of these signals. Higher education, as a result, became a construct of the kinds of choices that these students made as individuals. The only function which the model gave to government in the system of higher education, as a consequence, was,

according to the Ministry of Education (November 2002: 4) "...that of funding student demand, and of correcting any market failures which may occur". As a market driven model, it could not be used as a steering mechanism to address national objectives and goals (Ministry of Education, November 2003: 1.5).

The *Education White Paper 3, 1997*, according to Ministry of Education (November 2002: 4) disagrees with the idea of viewing students as rational agents in the labour market. Rather, it posits that the model has failed in the South African context, and as a result, must be abrogated. The development of the system of higher education, according to the *Education White Paper 3, (1997: 2.9; 4.6.1)*, cannot be left to market forces, especially since it is not able to find solutions to the reconstruction and development challenges of higher education. In place of the student as rational agent model, it proposes a planning model of higher education funding, which is able to achieve the following national policy goals and objectives: equity in the system of higher education; an adequate regulatory framework; a responsive funding framework, national and institutional three-year rolling plans. These plans, which are updated annually, consist of data, annually updated plans, targets, and resource estimates. They facilitate the planning of growth and change in higher education to be more responsive to economic and social needs and ensure stability in the budget process. The planning model consists of the following three steps (Ministry of Education, 2003: 1.7):

- National policy goals and objectives are determined by the Ministry.
- Three-year rolling plans are developed by each higher institution, indicating their means of addressing the national policy goals and objectives.
- Subject to available funds, and on the basis of the interaction between the institutions and the Ministry of Education, which leads to approval of institutional plans, funds would be released to respective institutions.

The Council on Higher Education (November 2004: 192) also recommended that the new framework be consistent with the principles of efficiency and effectiveness, equity and institutional redress, financial sustainability, democratisation, development and shared costs.

The new funding framework, which was finalised in 2004 attempts to improve the overall efficiency of the system of higher education (Unisa May 2005: 9). The framework, according to the *Education White Paper (1997: 4.14)*, was required to accelerate the process of transforming the system of higher education in the country. The new funding framework has to be performance and goal oriented in order to contribute to meeting the aims and objectives of transforming the system of higher education, which include equitable access for students, better quality of research and teaching, better student graduation and progression rates, and better responsiveness to economic and social needs. The *National Plan for Higher Education, (2001: 12)* notes that funding, planning, as well as a new and adequate funding framework are central to achieving set targets and goals.

The new funding framework considers the main focus of higher education to be teaching, research and community service, which contribute to improving the economic and social conditions of the country. It begins by establishing how much money is available

to spend on higher education, and then makes the funds available to higher institutions on the basis of their priorities and needs. The mechanisms within the funding framework become operational once government has determined the amount of funds available to fund higher education in a given year, and the services that higher education should deliver within that year (Ministry of Education, November 2002: 4 & 6).

The new funding system involves a cyclical process, in which funding by government depends on the three-year rolling plans which the universities develop, their equity targets, research outputs and their graduation rates (Van Essche and Mason, 2004). The new funding framework also ensures that the distribution of government grants to higher educational institutions, which is in accordance with the approved plans of individual such institutions, is also in line with policy priorities and national planning, and the amount of funds which the national budget on higher education makes available (Ministry of Education, Feb 2004:2).

The framework requires the Minister of Education to issue an annual statement, in which the following forward determinations aimed at ensuring the stability of the funding framework are included (Ministry of Education, April 2005: 2):

- a forecast of the total amount of grants which could be possibly available for distribution to the public higher education system over a three-year period.
- a forecast of the system of public higher education's likely totals of outputs and of planned student inputs for a three-year period.
- information on how required data for input, output and institutional factor calculations will be determined.
- information on the input and output weightings, and on the various reference points employed in calculating block grants.
- information on the mechanisms to be employed in redistributing unallocated proportions of output block grants.
- information on the means of calculating institutional factor grants.
- information on how the framework would be implemented, and the measures employed to ensure that the system of public higher education is not destabilised.

The Minister of Education, prior to carrying out any major changes to the new funding framework, would consult the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the higher education sector. Such changes would be announced in the Annual Ministerial Statement, and, according to the Ministry of Education (April 2005: 2) "...would be implemented at the earliest in the final year of the three year cycle following that covered in the Statement". In 2003, government announced new financial reporting regulations, which demand that higher institutions must adhere to strict standards of accounting and corporate governance. Higher institutions will be held accountable through these regulations for effective and efficient use of public funds and for the identification of issues in need of urgent attention (Van Essche and Mason, 2004).

The planning process for new funding commences with interaction between individual higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education. The Ministry determines the needs for funding, in terms of the student enrolment plans of individual institutions

(Ministry of Education, February 2004: 3). The main feature of the planning process can be explained as follows:

The planning process commences with the Ministry of Education analysing the real student enrolment of each higher institution over a four to five year period. The Ministry of Education also considers any recent plans that it expected higher institutions to submit to, such as equity plans, three-year rolling plans and operational plans. As soon as these analyses are completed, each higher institution receives from the Ministry, an initial indication of what the likely size and shape of its funded student enrolment would be over the next cycle of funding years. Institutions are then given the opportunity to react to these initial proposals. In the same process, the Ministry also gives the institutions the opportunity to submit amended or alternative proposals to it, which are then discussed with concerned institutions. Once the iterative process is completed, the Ministry consolidates the individually approved institutional plans into system-wide totals of full time equivalent (FTE) student places which government would fund during this planning period. Each one of the approved institutional enrolment plans is subject to annual review in order to take cognisance of changing institutional performances or changing external circumstances (Ministry of Education, February 2004: 3).

## CATEGORIES OF GOVERNMENT'S NEW GRANTS TO HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The three components of government funding for higher education are Institutional Restructuring Grants, Block Grants and Earmarked Grants. These can be explained as follows:

### Institutional Restructuring Grants

These are special allocations to merging institutions in 2004 and 2005 to assist them in the merger process, having considered their academic and business plans (Council on Higher Education, November 2004: 202).

### Earmarked Grants

Earmarked Grants are allocated to higher institutions to fund the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) (Ministry of Education, November 2003: 4.1). Only about 2% of earmarked funds are allocated to other specific matters like interests and redemption payments on government approved loans (Ministry of Education, February 2004: 5)

### Block Grants

Block grants are undesignated amounts to cover higher institution's operational costs which are linked to the provision of activities related to research and teaching. The allocation of earmarked and block grants are subject to available public funds for higher education in

a particular year; the teaching and research related services, and other objectives which the government expects the system of public higher education to deliver. The proportion of the higher education budget for allocation to either block or earmarked grants and their subcategories, remain the prerogative of the Minister of Education. These determinations will be viewed as three year forward determinations by the Minister of Education. Thus, should there be changes, according to the Ministry of Education (November 2003: 2.1 & 2.3) "...to the proportions of the national higher education budget allocated to any category or sub-category, these would be implemented at the earliest in the third year of the next Medium Term Expenditure Framework triennium".

## SUB-CATEGORIES OF BLOCK GRANTS

Higher education block grants consist of the following sub-categories: Research Output Grants, Teaching Output Grants, Teaching Input Grants; and Institutional Factor Grants. The implications of the latter are as follows.

### Research Output Grants

These grants are determined, based on publication unit outputs and actual research graduates, weighted, according to the Council for Higher Education (November 2004: 203), as follows: "...publications units 1; research masters graduates 1; doctoral graduates 3". Research productivity, according to the *National Plan for Higher Education* (2001), should be enhanced; research funds should be properly accounted for; while institutions with proven research capacity should be provided with sufficient resources. In the context of the Medium Term Expenditure Framework three-year rolling projections, the Minister of Education annually determines what constitutes research output. The Minister also determines if it is necessary to submit a formal application for the use of research development funds (Ministry of Education, November 2003: 3.1).

### Teaching Output Grants

The funding framework, in line with the provisions of the *National Plan for Higher Education, 2001*, makes teaching output grants available as incentives for higher institutions to ensure higher pass rates, throughput and graduation rates among their students. The Minister of Education will annually determine what constitutes teaching outputs and if institutions would need to formally apply for teaching development funds (Ministry of Education, November 2003: 3.2).

### Teaching Input Grants

The teaching input grants of higher educational institutions would be generated by the actual total of full-time equivalent (FTE) student enrolments. Thus, the amount of teaching input grants that universities receive would be based on their planned enrolments in vari-

ous programmes and levels of study (*Education White Paper 3, 1997: 4.20*). If necessary, this will be adjusted in accordance with the Minister of Education's student enrolment plan. Annually and in line with the Medium Term Expenditure Framework's three-year rolling projections, the Minister of Education will determine the planned totals of full time equivalent (FTE) student places for the system of higher education and for every higher education institution (Ministry of Education, November 2003: 3.3).

### **Institutional Factor Grants**

Unlike the former funding framework, which provided for institutional set-up subsidies that compensated institutions for basic running costs without considering the size of its student population, the new funding framework does not contain such provision since it acknowledges the principle that government's funding to higher education is for the purposes of delivering research and teaching related services, and not for defraying costs (Ministry of Education, November 2003: 3.4).

### **FUNDING PROBLEMS**

Funding of higher education remains a fundamental challenge to concerned institutions and government itself, especially in view of the steady decline in state funding of higher institutions. The funding of higher education in South Africa has become problematic and apparently difficult to manage. Although the funding made available by government over the years to higher education has been relatively stable as a percentage of the Gross Domestic Product, the education budget and state budget, the years after 2000 have witnessed decline in this regard. Although education in general receives almost the largest chunk of the national budget, higher education funding has decreased progressively in real terms in spite of the fact that higher education participation rate has increased dramatically (Pityana 2004: 13). The excess of R1billion, which government has made available in financial aid through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, is not sufficient in meeting the financial needs of students. Many students, both the enrolled and those wishing to enrol for higher education are not able to obtain bank loans to finance their studies due to such factors as high interest rates, collateral and the credit bureaux' blacklisting of students (Nzimande, 2004).

Government's funding approach remains a paradox as it contrasts with its agenda to promote social reforms. For instance, national government expects universities to control the number of student intakes since uncontrolled growth cannot be funded by the system. At the same time, this has to be balanced against the national call for equity and access, to increase the number of student intakes from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, and to give more opportunities to deserving students. The application of the formula mechanism encourages higher institutions to produce graduates in specific fields, which government considers as more beneficial to the country.

Although the system of higher education in the country has undergone a series of transformational exercises in order to redress the educational imbalances of the past, the

level of reduction in allocations to universities may not ensure the realisation of an effective and relevant education. The subsidy cuts would not enhance the higher education's transformational need for increased access to higher education; neither would it enable the rendering of sufficient essential services to the previously disadvantaged groups. As a result of the insufficient funding allocated to universities, many of the less privileged institutions remain unable to upgrade their facilities and infrastructure like laboratories and libraries. At the beginning of 2005, a number of institutions such as the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) and the University of Pretoria experienced various crises and protests resulting from the dissatisfaction from underprivileged students who were excluded as they were not able to pay their registration and tuition fees.

Government has reacted to the dissatisfaction among various higher education stakeholders, by claiming that it has never committed itself to meeting all the funding needs of higher education institutions. What appears from this is that, in opposition to the model that underpins the current formula, the funding of higher education by government has to a large extent been based on the hope that higher institutions would provide for the rest of their costs through private income sources, such as tuition fees and research projects. The new framework accepts the fact that government can only spend available funds. It might not be possible for government to maintain steady levels of funding, in view of the fact that the country's expenditure is lower than international standards (Council on Higher Education, November 2004: 207).

This leaves higher institutions with the daunting task of diversifying their income more, through additional and alternative sources of income such as contract research, donor funding and collaborative agreements, often at the expense of teaching, research and community service.

### **IMPLICATIONS OF FUNDING AND GOVERNMENT INTERFERENCE IN INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM**

Higher educational institutions are established in accordance with legislation such as the *Higher Education Act, 1997*. However, they are governed by their own regulations with the University Council as their highest governing body. The *Bill of Rights (1996 Constitution, section 29; & 16 (1))*, posits that further education, which must be made progressively accessible and available by the state through reasonable measures, is the right of everyone. It further provides for freedom of scientific research and academic freedom. These constitutional provisions have been operationalised through the formulation of educational policies as well as their implementation.

Institutional autonomy, according to Jansen (August 2004: 2) means the right of institutions to make decisions on core academic concern for themselves, while academic freedom is the absence of external interference in addressing these concerns. Institutional autonomy consists of the following essential components: freedom to choose staff and students and determine the criteria for retaining them in the institution; freedom to determine the contents of the curricula and the degree standards; and freedom to disburse available funds to the various types of expenditure (Fourie, 2004: 2).

The academic freedom of higher institutions according to higher education leaders and academics is under erosion as government's higher education policies are seen to undermine this inherent right of Universities. University principals and top management claim that government's funding policies undermine the academic freedom of higher educational institutions. For instance the merger policies are seen to violate institutional autonomy. The new funding framework for higher education is also considered in the same light as it attempts to prescribe what courses higher institutions may or may not teach, and to control admissions as a prerequisite for adequate funding (Pityana, August 2004: 2 & 4).

In terms of the new funding framework, the total of public funds available to higher educational institutions is determined solely by government, without any input from higher educational institutions, except their contributions through the three-year rolling plans. In terms of the new funding framework, it is the prerogative of the Minister of Education, in line with the Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF), to determine what teaching and research outputs consist of; define what 'disadvantage' means; determine the benchmark ratios for teaching and research development funds; and determine the weightings attached to teaching and research outputs. Various stakeholders considered seen the autonomy of higher educational institutions to be under jeopardy as a result of these Ministerial powers to carry out such far reaching changes (CHE, November 2004: 206).

Government has defended its intervention in higher education through the mergers and incorporations of higher institutions, as well as the funding arrangements on the grounds that these are all geared towards setting the higher education landscape on a path of higher growth, development and equitable provision of education for all people, and therefore the creation of a better life for all. Government also justifies these initiatives on the following basis: that the level of transformation within higher institutions have remained slow to make meaningful impact on the country's democratisation processes; the numbers of administrative and academic staff within previously advantaged institutions have not increased dramatically; the previously disadvantaged institutions do not as yet have sufficient funding to improve their infrastructure or to hire highly qualified personnel; the funding of higher institutions must be accounted for as it is government as well as tax payers' money. Since Universities are the custodians of the country's future leaders, government believes that they cannot be left alone without taking an interest in their products, that is the graduates, research output and publications (Pityana, B, August 2004: 2 & 4).

It would in practice be unrealistic for higher educational institutions to enjoy absolute autonomy because their existence and functions affect various stakeholders such as the staff, students, parents, employers, and government, especially, in view of their contributions towards the human resource needs of the country and the need to account for the public funds they receive.

Since 1994, policy proposals for higher education witnessed emphasis on the role of the state in higher education transformation. This led to the agreement on the principles and values that should guide policy formulation, adoption and implementation. Accountability and institutional autonomy were some of the values adopted by relevant legislation and policies, such as the *Education White Paper*, 1997. Accountability and autonomy relate to

the relationship between higher educational institutions and government. Considering the functions of the state within the system of education and within the society is necessary in order to understand this relationship. The functions of the state include the development of a functional and well structured system of education in order to take care of its citizens' welfare. As a public good therefore, higher education needs public investment, and this is provided by government in the form of physical and financial resources, which the system of higher education needs for operation (Fourie, 2004: 5&2).

It is clear from the above that the state is a major player in the higher education sector. Although it is generally agreed that higher educational institutions need to account for the resources they receive, the challenge ahead is the ability of such institutions and government to reach equilibrium or a balance between their functions, institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Jansen (Holiday, 2004: 1) warns that it would be difficult or even impossible to regain their autonomy if higher educational institutions lose it. The erosion of this autonomy would not stop unless all the institutions of higher education collectively make their disapproval heard.

Universities should be allowed to decide how many students to enrol and how to disburse public funds, in agreement with the Department of Education. Since public funding would not be sufficient to meet all of the institutions' needs, higher educational institutions should seek alternative and additional sources of income, including contract research and consulting work.

## CONCLUSION

The article has examined the uncertainties around the higher education funding formula and the implications of higher education funding arrangements for institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Numerous complaints and dissatisfaction have emanated from various higher education stakeholders on how to derive sufficient resources to meet the challenges of higher education. These complaints include the pressure on academics to deliver more services with fewer resources; to undertake academic capping since the system cannot fund uncontrolled growth; to balance the latter between the need for access and equity; to increase the number of students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds; and to provide more opportunities to deserving students.

Higher educational institutions may not be able to enjoy the kind of autonomy and academic freedom that they seek. These institutions have to account for their activities and the money they receive from the state. The fact that the functions of government include the development of a well-structured and functional system of education, implies that the state cannot ignore the higher education sector. Higher educational institutions are required to be accountable for how they spend public money, as well as how effectively they have spend such money and whether it was to the interest of the public. In a sense, public funding of higher education can therefore be considered as a means by which the state fulfils its obligation to support higher education. In another sense, government is able to direct the system of higher education towards particular targets and goals through the powerful mechanism of funding.

In order to realise the goals of accelerated development of the country by means of a fully functional, efficient and effective system of higher education, government needs to allocate adequate funding to the higher education sector and provide universities with more space to execute their functions without interference. The latter appears to be vital in the successful transformation of the higher education landscape of South Africa.

Higher educational institutions have a major role to play in increasing their financial status. In view of the reality of shrinking government funding of tertiary institutions, these institutions themselves need to vigorously seek alternative sources of funding that is sufficient to meet the shortfalls in government allocations to them. It is pertinent that they pursue this means, especially as this would indicate a seriousness regarding too much interference in institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

Although the state has a duty to provide strategic direction, develop regulatory frameworks and policies for an effective and efficient higher education system in line with the provisions of the *Constitution, 1996*, the *Education White Paper 3, 1997*, and the *National Plan for Higher Education, 2001*, these objectives can only be adequately fulfilled by government in partnership with the management of higher institutions and their governance structures.

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