Introduction

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It is important at the very outset, to mention important documents essential for analysis of the South African education system. These are, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (May1996), the South African Schools Act (1996) No. 84, the Higher Education Act (1997), which all impacted on the committee for development work on the National Qualifications Framework (Feb1996). To these we may add: African National Congress, A Policy Framework for Education and Training, Johannesburg (1994), the South African Qualification Authority Act (1995), the Gender Equity Task Team and the National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training (1998). These are authentic testimonies of national consensus, national values and ideals and the kind of education required to fulfil them. They influence the philosophy of education required in South Africa. They all deal with values in a society free from domination in political, economic, social and personal relations.

The South African constitution for instance stipulates that every human being has the capacity and the will to determine his destiny as individuals without infringing on the rights of others. There are also various agencies established in terms of the constitution to protect the rights of individuals in society, place of employment and other avenues. These are the South African Human Rights Commission, the Commission for Conciliation, Meditation and Arbitration, the public protector, and the labour court. To what extent do the new educational policies of South Africa translate these fundamental elements of human rights into reality particularly with regard to education still remains to be seen.

Transformation of Education and Higher Education in General in South Africa

Any talk about the transformation of higher education and education in

general in South Africa is incomplete without reference to the history of this country. The history of education in this country is littered with elements of injustice, inequality, repression, denial etc. Access to higher education and education in general has been a problem particularly for African people. Various indicators have shown clearly that access to higher education in South Africa has been unequal (Bunting 1994: 39).

A major inequality that exists in the RSA's higher education system as indicated by Bunting as early as 1994 is that: blacks have a very small chance compared to whites of entering the university system; and most of those that do will have to do part-time studies by correspondence through UNISA or will have to do undergraduate diploma studies through Vista University (Vista University has since merged with UNISA) (Bunting 1994: 41). The major causes of these inequalities in access can be found in the socio-political circumstances of South Africa, and again in particular in the unfavourable schooling offered to blacks. Other factors which have generated these inequalities according to Bunting (1994: 42ff) have been economic ones, and the language and admission policies of universities, which to a very large extent still impact on universities.

1. Black applicants and students from economically deprived background have generally not been able to afford the fees charged by House of Assembly [which does not exist anymore] residential universities. Black students at these universities have often struggled to maintain their registrations under increasingly heavy debt burdens. [This is still the case in the new South African democratic dispensation.]

2. The admission policies of all but a few ... residential universities have tended to be based on requirements that successful applicants achieve a certain level of performance in their matriculation or school leaving examinations. This has led to the competition for places at these universities being inherently unfair – applicants from disadvantaged black [background] have not been able to compete on an equal footing with applicants from privileged white schools. [Little change has also taken place on this issue in the new South African dispensation.]

3. The use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction by the majority of the ... residential universities has effectively closed off these universities to the majority of black applicants. [Little change has also taken place on this issue in the new South African dispensation.]

4. Most of the ... English medium universities have language requirements which affect the admission of black applicants. Applicants are required to display a competency in English which is determined normally by the subject symbol, which they achieve for English in the standard 10 or matriculation [Grade 12] examinations.

5. Poor school results in mathematics also have an effect on the admission of blacks to universities. Their failure to achieve a prescribed minimum in mathematics at matric level [Grade 12] prevent many black applicants from gaining admission to faculties of agriculture, commerce, engineering, medicine and science.

6. A final inequality, which must be highlighted, is that of access of female South Africans to universities. Even though their share of total university places is dropping, male students have a majority share of both the total enrolment of universities in South Africa and the first time entering undergraduate enrolment.

Another level of tertiary education, the technikons (now referred to as Universities of Technology), shows that access at this level has been a problem. These institutions, like universities, have admitted many more white students than black students. Another point about access to technikons is that of gender inequalities which were more serious than those at universities (Bunting 1994: 45). In addition to the problem of access to higher education in South Africa, has been the inequitable spread of qualifications offered between the residential universities – who have been established to serve mainly the interests of whites. White students have benefited from the past and current university systems, which enabled them to follow professions, which few blacks have accessed. The history of higher education therefore in South Africa, is that of inequality and inaccessibility.

Therefore any debate about the role funding for higher education, for example has to play today, will be incomplete without recognizing this history, already sketched by Bundy in 1994, and still continuing to detrimentally impact on the tertiary sector in South Africa.

Challenges Faced by the Higher Education System in the New South Africa

One of the key challenges facing the higher education system is outlined in the White paper: 'to redress past inequalities and to transform the higher education system to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs, and to respond to new realities and opportunities' (White paper 1.1).

The white paper goes also further to indicate the role of higher education in a knowledge-driven world as three-fold:

- Human resource development: the mobilization of human talent and potential through lifelong learning to contribute to the social, economic, cultural and intellectual life of a rapidly changing society.

- High-level skills training: the training and provision of person power to strengthen this country's enterprises, services and infrastructure. This requires the development of professional and knowledge workers with globally equivalent skills, but who are socially responsible and conscious of their role in contributing to the national development effort and social transformation.

- Production, acquisition and application of new knowledge: national growth and competitiveness is depended on continuous technological improvement and innovation, driven by a well organized, vibrant research and development system which integrates the research and training capacity of higher education with the needs of industry and of social reconstruction (White paper 1.2).

The challenges also have to be understood in the context of the impact of the

phenomenon of globalization on the higher education system throughout the world, especially the changes and alignments it requires (National Plan for Higher Education 2001: 65). The 21st century has also brought changes in the social, cultural and economic relations as a result of the revolution in information and communication technology. In South Africa the victory over apartheid and the dawn of democracy forced policy-makers to change the social, political, economic and cultural institutions in order to democratize them. There is no doubt this set South Africa on a road with many challenges but also opportunities. Whether South Africa is ready to meet these challenges remains to be seen. Higher education therefore faces a multiplicity of problems. These are the socio-political pressures for democratization, globalization and deficiencies within the higher education system itself.

Added to this complex of issues, it is further imperative that relevant perspectives which are all having a profound impact on the character of the higher education system currently, such as Higher Institutional mergers and the challenges 'Africanisation' pose for Higher Education, be addressed. This issue of *Alter*nation addresses a selection of these issues, especially as it has been experienced at the recently established University of KwaZulu-Natal.

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