

Analysing Access in the Context of the Merger

Fazel Khan

Then perhaps, when your back is to the wall, you will let loose at last that new violence which is raised up in you by old, oft-repeated crimes. But, as they say, that's another story: the history of mankind. The time is drawing near, I am sure, when we will join the ranks of those who make it (Jean-Paul Sartre 1967:32).

Each generation, shall out of relative obscurity rise to fulfil its destiny or betray it (Fanon 1968).

Introduction

The merger between the University of Durban-Westville and Natal University in 2004 was supposed to build a combined university that would seek to redress the inequities of the past (Department of Education Merger Plan). It was billed as a merger between equal partners; Natal would bring its huge financial resources and Durban-Westville its historical mission of providing an affordable education for the disadvantaged. The Mission Statement of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) was to be 'A truly South African University that is academically excellent, innovative in research, critically engaged with society and demographically representative, redressing the inequities and imbalances of the past'. No one can question such noble goals, especially with the huge socio-economic inequalities that beset South Africa.

In the context of such a noble mission statement, the 2005 drop (2366) in first year student intake at the University of KwaZulu-Natal is a cause for concern. It is worrying that the 2005-intake, which in essence is the first combined intake, should lead to a drop in student numbers. What are the causes behind this trend? Is the decline in student intake an inevitable consequence of the merger? It would be tempting though, comforting if not expedient, to explain away this drop as an isolated phenomenon restricted to a prudent university management committed to the university's financial sustainability and efficiency.

It does not come as a surprise because the Department of Education (DoE) released a document in June 2004 entitled *Student Enrolment and Planning 2005 to 2007*, which clearly states that current student numbers are unsustainable. The document implores management to begin cutting numbers from the beginning of 2005¹. After the release of this document, discussions in the university's governing structures began to echo these sentiments. It was then that the management decided to increase Matriculation entry-points and registration fees e.g. Faculty of Humanities minimum entry Grade Twelve (matric) points increased from 24 to 32 and Science is now 34 points. The student leadership and some staff unions raised voices of opposition, but the proposed intake criteria seem to have won the day. Furthermore, the new requirements, also advocate cutting student numbers in Access Programmes that have advantaged under-qualified applicants throughout the years. Better-qualified students complete their degrees in record time, thus insures an efficient use of already strained resources, they claimed.

Background

The merger of the University of Durban-Westville and the University of Natal in 2004 was a milestone in the history of university education in South Africa. It was first of the most publicised merger of two, though dissimilar, yet prominent universities that had epitomised the segregated apartheid tertiary education system. They were two universities in one city, on two

¹ An article appeared in *This Day* called 'Opening The Doors For Learning' by F. Khan. It was a response to management's plan to cut student numbers.

prominent hills one might add, that catered for the metropolitan's two racial groups (Indian and White). The University of Natal was conceived as a white English-speaking university, whereas the University of Durban-Westville was a strictly 'Indian' university, staffed by mostly white lecturers and managers.

In the post-apartheid era, racial labelling was no longer entirely applicable. The Durban-Westville became a university that served black (African, Indian and Coloured), in contrast to Natal University that came to serve students who were from better-endowed backgrounds (either financially or academically), both black and white. Therefore, class rather than race became the basis of distinction between the two universities after 1994. Nevertheless, this should not downplay the relation between class and race in our still racially ridden society.

In that post-apartheid context, The University of Durban-Westville has had an illustrious history of providing a liberal policy on providing an education to students from lower incoming earning backgrounds. In other words, it had a deliberate open door policy on students from the previously disadvantaged backgrounds since 1994. It instituted a counselling process that allowed indebted students to register and had lower entry matric qualifications. An aggressive tutorial programme was initiated to overcome any academic inadequacies for under-qualified students. It also had a one-year Foundation programme for students who did not meet even these lowered matric qualifications².

Of course, management was forced to implement these progressive policies because of a sustained student and worker struggles since the early 1990s. It was their willingness to think critically, to fight domination, to build non-racialism and to forge worker, academic and student alliances. No fewer than three major class boycotts have occurred. The students shut down University of Durban-Westville at least twice as they protested against tuition orientated exclusions or expulsions. The institution's apartheid struggle history of protest, boycotts, intimidation and the state security apparatus contributed to a politicised culture. It was this inherited political tradition that made it possible for them to link their indigent economic

² These are references to the Academic Development Program (since 1991/2) which was then replaced by the Upward Bound Program in 1997.

status, an unequal educational system they came from and their families' inability to pay fees with the legacy inherited from the previous regime. Their lived experience gave them the determination to break the shackles of the backgrounds they came from.

However, students were not always at odds with management concerning access. Saths Cooper the last vice-chancellor of the University of Durban-Westville, a former Black Consciousness Movement cadre, went further than previous managements in providing easier access for poorer students. He suspended the annual fee increases and increased student numbers. Therefore, the University of Durban-Westville, at the eve of the merger, had the most liberal entry criteria for disadvantaged students.

On the other hand, Natal University experienced few student protests to talk about throughout its history. Its then privileged background ensured that it had adequate government and corporate support in the apartheid period. Moreover, its student body being white, then synonymous with a middle class background, meant that issues of affordability were never relevant to the experiences of its students. Thus after 1994, a political tradition of protest was never a part of its culture.

Furthermore, it never quite had an admission policy that made the university accessible to poor students. If Black student numbers increased, it was not a result of a premeditated policy, but merely mirrored the changing economic realities of a growing African and Indian middle class as Jonathan Jansen's study has shown³. This new group could now afford private schools and thus their children could obtain better matric results to meet the stringent entry requirements and go on to pay the exorbitant fees. Natal University did have some Black students from indigent backgrounds, but they were those who had overcome the in-built inequities of our legacy, to obtain high matric results and so were able to get scholarships. In other words, factors that were beyond the control of University of Natal's management control were the cause of a marked increase in the number of black students. As a result, at

³ Actually Jansen's study was shown in a rather unconventional way. It was shown as a wine glass with high income represent the broader parts and the narrow bottom sections representing diminishing income. It shows that income rapidly decreases and there are huge inequalities between the rich and poor.

the eve of the merger, Natal University in stark contrast to Durban-Westville did not have a clearly defined policy that catered for students from lower income earning families.

It would be naïve to explain the merger and its aftermath (student cuts etc.) in exclusively apartheid terms (mostly a white university joining a black university). However, existential conditions in the socio-economic stage i.e. the rise of the Black Middle Class after 1994, by and large, explains the entrenched class, rather than race, distinctions between the two universities. Furthermore, as explained above, the two universities had developed distinct criteria on access, as well as financial and academic exclusions.

It appears as if the new University of KwaZulu-Natal adopted the Natal University policy, albeit with the expected lip service to the disadvantaged, that has led to the drop in the 2005 intake. In the current neo-liberal hegemony, it will be inauthentic to discuss education and the policies that govern it – or health, social services, and welfare amongst others – without grounding them in the geo-political hegemonic context that forms a part of the late 20th and early 21st century. This article therefore limits itself to three main perspectives, namely the World Bank's policy about higher education in Africa, the link with developments in other universities across Africa including South Africa, and lastly, the present toughening of access requirements in the merged University of KwaZulu-Natal in the context of the neo-liberal hegemony.

World Bank's Higher Education Policy in Africa.

It is common knowledge that the World Bank (WB herein after) introduced austerity Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP's) in African countries in the mid 1980's⁴. Slash in funding for social programmes and subsidies that benefit the poor are the hallmarks of SAP's. It also entailed the liberalising of domestic markets, privatisation of education, parastatals and municipal services. One of the conditions of the SAP's required governments to reduce

⁴ The reasons behind the implementation of the SAP's are beyond the scope of this paper, however, many African intellectuals like Mahmood Mamdani, Dennis Brutus, and Ashwin Desai have explored this phenomenon.

funding on tertiary education⁵.

George Caffentzis in an article in the book *A Thousand Flowers: Social Struggles Against Structural Adjustment In African Universities* argues that the WB calls African universities 'sacred cows' because they are only available to urban elite at the expense of the rural majority⁶. The WB then demands governments, if never to continue receiving aid, that they should instead, support a more 'egalitarian educational system that redirects higher education funds to primary education'. Furthermore it has the advantage that

[It] would be a golden opportunity to ... keep in check the demands of the urban elite (whose political influence has distorted sound economic reasoning) (Caffentzis 1998:5).

This was to be achieved through drastic reduction in funding for higher education in Africa. He says that

This reduction is advocated in the name of higher education *efficiency* and a more egalitarian distribution of educational resources (Caffentzis: 1998:3).

Efficiency! Sustainability! One can see the direct relationship in the words that amount to the same thing in practice. They lead to cuts in university funding and a reduction in student subsidies that result in an increase in tuition fees to recover costs. Its amazing that the WB demanded cuts in funding when Africa's higher education enrolment rate was at 1%, seven times below the average for developing countries (Africa included). The amazing development to emerge from all the grandstanding on egalitarianism of educational resources was that primary education funding was cut too.

⁵ G. Caffentzis discusses the issue in his article 'The World Bank and Education in Africa' that first appeared in the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa journal and in the book *A Thousand Flowers*.

⁶ It is actually incorrect. In research conducted by the UNPF, 40% of Africans live in rapidly expanding urban areas. 40% hardly constitutes an 'urban elite'.

To offset the fall in funding, the WB advised governments to encourage the private sector and donors to take an active role in the financing of higher education. Of course, the issue of powerful donor funding and academic freedom became a contested terrain. Students were to take loans from banks to pay for tuition. The measure automatically excludes those who do not have the required collateral.

Caffentzis (1998) contends that the WB had an ulterior motive, besides the apparent one of forcing African governments to recover costs; it wanted a pliable, ill-educated populous – a cheap labour resource for menial work that multinationals could readily exploit.

World Bank-inspired Neo-liberal Policies in the South African Context

South Africa was not included in this initial phase, but it was to have its own 'Home-grown Structural Adjustment Programme' with the Orwellian title of Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR). The essence of this programme is not very different from the SAP's that took place in much of the Third World.

Ashwin Desai's book *The Pools of Chatsworth*, explores the effects of GEAR in the townships in Durban, Soweto and Tafelsig in Cape Town. The book shows the effects of the neo-liberal inspired GEAR on the poor people of South Africa. The increases in the cost of basic services such as water and electricity led to cut-offs because this stratum of society could not afford to pay for the increased services. Furthermore, unemployment rose (40% nationally) in these areas because of the relaxation of the tariff regulations which allowed for cheaper imports from the Far East – that flooded the domestic markets – the closing down of factories and the inevitable retrenchments. Privatisation, retrenchments and cost recovery measures in the parastatals increased unemployment whilst at the same time incomes were declining.

Thus, in the context of GEAR, the effect of SAP's on other African universities is comparable to South African universities, especially those experiencing the merger. After its implementation, the South African home-grown SAP, GEAR, higher education institutions experienced similar cost cutting measures as those in other African countries in the early 1990s. The

DoE encouraged universities that

... by virtue of academic 'autonomy' [universities] are being asked to play a major role in the generation of their resources through the 'internal efficiencies', rationalisation and synergies with the private sector (Barchiesi 1998:167).

This makes for an ideological twist – enhancing academic 'autonomy' through 'synergies' by forming partnerships with a private sector that will not invest in unprofitable ventures. The private sector will virtually decide what is important. Can independent knowledge be pursued in such circumstances? The DoE's advice continued thus

... the bulk of [government] funding was [from now] to be shifted from generalised core subsidies ... to 'ad hoc' provisions of training needed to compete Internationally. (Barchiesi 1998:167).

The language used in this case was only different in its sophistication from that used earlier by the WB. Nevertheless, the commitment to a reduction in funding, in real terms, is clear. The logical conclusion would be an increase in tuition for universities to maintain their already existing programmes.

The Merger in the Paradigm of the Neo-liberal Hegemony

Contrary to the ingrained view, mergers are not a recent phenomenon. They actually started in the late 1990's with the mergers of Teacher Training Colleges throughout the country. Moreover, in recent years two Durban technikons merged into the Durban Institute of Technology. Despite these developments over the last decade or more, it is surprising that there hardly exists an empirical study that focuses on the financial implications of tertiary institution mergers for poor students in South Africa.

Mergers in Higher education: Lessons Learned in Transitional Contexts, a book edited by Jonathan Jansen does try to uncover the impact on 'access' after the merging of teachers' Colleges in South Africa. Actually, it is the only comprehensive study on tertiary institution mergers so far. However, the book only analyses in essence Teacher Training Colleges that

pales in significance in that the student numbers are small, the budgetary ramification negligible as compared to the UKZN merger. Furthermore, it does not give an in-depth perspective on the impact of mergers that focus on students from low income backgrounds. Nevertheless, it still unearths some vital information.

The number of Colleges was reduced from 120 (80 000 students) [in 1997] to 50 (15 000) by the start of 2000 ... to [another] 25 'contract institutions' holding 10 000 students Another 5 000 students were registered in two distance Colleges ... (Jansen 2002).

Thus, up to nearly half the student numbers were cut in a couple of years. The study does not specify the class background of the students most affected by the cuts. What is apparent though is that the cuts effected a huge saving by a government that claims that a basic education is a right for all, but simultaneously cuts the number of qualified primary teachers that need to go into the system.

At the backdrop of such scant knowledge as exists now, we have no choice but to use governments STUDENT ENROLMENT PLANNING 2005 TO 2007 as the primary guiding document on mergers. The document was presented to management in June 2004, and to the UKZN as a framework for future planning. The DoE document alleges that the current enrolment growth rate of 11.4% reduces the funding per head count, which raises questions of quality and resourcing. It says that the 2003 national enrolment in universities of 481 000 was more than the DoE had anticipated.

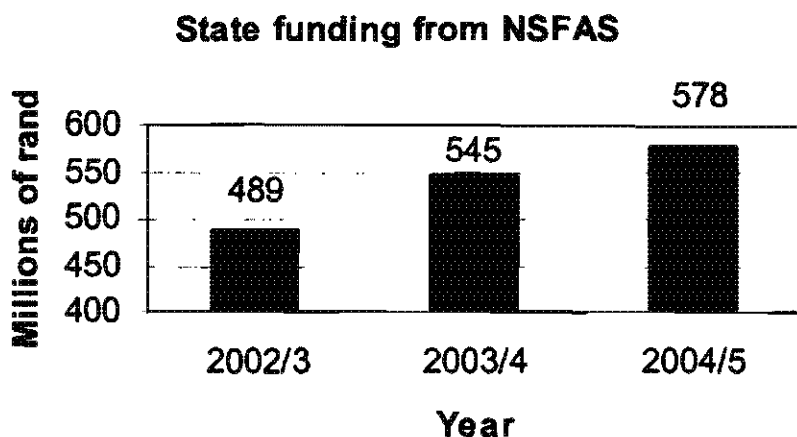
The DoE document, then goes further to advise UKZN management to reduce total student enrolment from 43 000 to 34 000 by 2007. The government claims that the current growth rate of 14.5% at the combined UKZN is 'unsustainable'. The document is quiet on the percentage increase in the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. One can only speculate that it is not the numbers that are of concern; but rather the quality (financial) that is at stake here. Perhaps the actual increase of poor students is even greater than the 14.5% - therefore the subsequent concern. Nevertheless, as in times gone by, the DoE used familiar 'World-Bank-speak' of tired old phrases to give horrendous cuts a semblance of sophistication. This means that 9 000 students are to be denied an education

come 2007. Of course, if we were to factor in the projected 14.5% growth rate, the slashing in student numbers that would have enrolled by 2007, verge on treachery.

It is problematic that one of the reasons that DoE gives for cutting student numbers is because of a fall in funding per head count. In other words, if the funding per student ratio falls, the only remedy DoE alleges, is to cut student numbers. There is no mention though, of increasing funding with a corresponding increase in numbers.

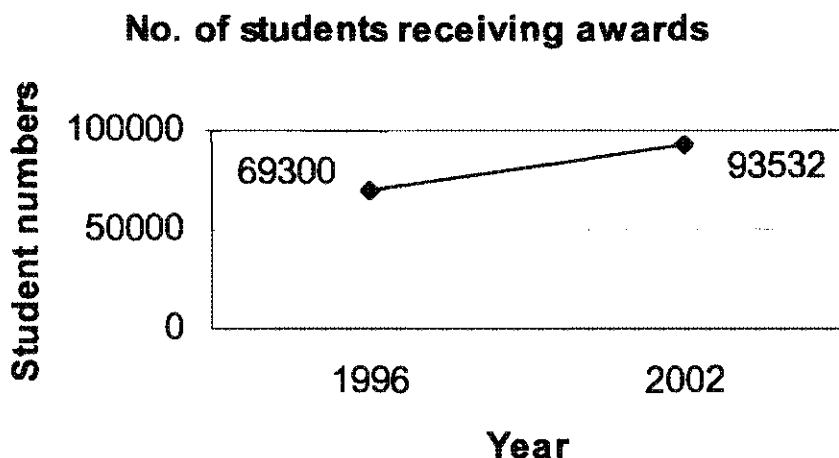
Comparison of the two graphs below clearly illustrates the point that the student numbers that receive funds from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) shows a growth rate that has outpaced percentage increases in funding by half.

Graph 1



Graph 1 shows state funding for NSFAS in the period indicated below has increased by 18.3%

Graph 2



Graph 2 shows the number of students nationally that receive NSFAS awards. The average rate of increase for the period 1996-2002 is 35%. Indeed, the funding per student has been falling since 1996, the year government implemented GEAR. The trend has been actually a de facto strategy of DoE and it is only now that it actually decides to make it official.

The DoE document pulls no punches; it plans to legislate a law that puts a cap on student numbers.

... [And] Institutions taking more students will require permission from the Minister of Education otherwise they will be transgressing the law and will be penalised

Now government plans to penalise institutions that enrol more students than are in line with the national cost-recovery policy. That should be a first in recorded history. I do not know of any other country that has been so eager to parrot the WB line, and then fervently carry it out, thus limiting its own people's chance to empower themselves. Before, in other African countries, the WB, on the pain of bankruptcy, forced reductions on them but here, the

DoE effectively whips itself into action – whilst on the other hand funding provided for presidential jets and arms go unchecked.

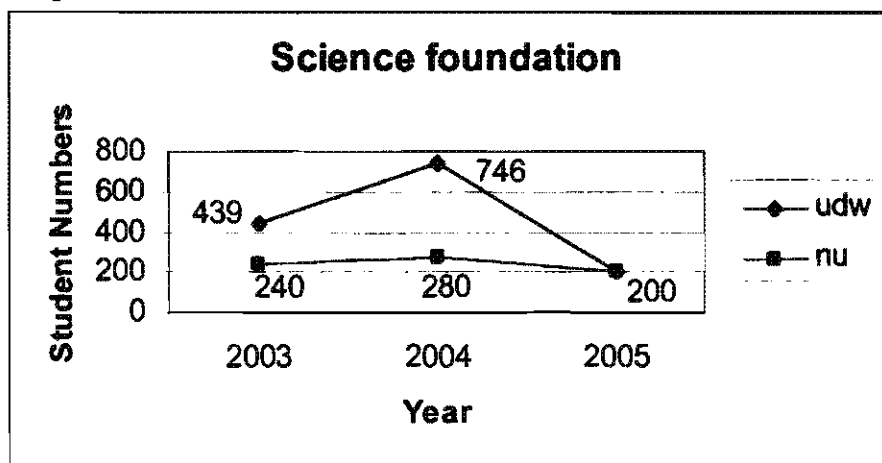
In such circumstances, it is not difficult to believe that the university will ensure that those who can afford to pay for tuition would constitute the greater majority of qualifying students. If subsidies from government are drying up, then the burden will be shifted to poorer students. The burden will come in the form of tuition increases, a reduction in NSFAS payouts in real terms as seen in Graph 2, increasing matric entry points needed to enter university, retrenchment of staff, etc.

The first shots have already been fired and sadly gone unheeded by the wider university community. As stated in the DoE document, first year students at the UKZN are to be limited to 6 500 across all campuses as compared to 7 633 that were enrolled in 2003. This means a cut in real terms of 2 366 if one takes into consideration the projected increase to 8 566 first year students that have had the opportunity to better their lives. That is the first step in cutting more than 9 000 students from the UKZN by 2007.

Already the Science foundation student numbers were slashed by more than half. The Foundation programme was the UDW's attempt to level the material conditions of students who come from poor backgrounds, go to schools that lack libraries⁷ and textbooks, thus inevitably obtain lower matric qualification marks. The foundation programme enabled them to enter university with lower qualifications, learn for a year in this programme, and then eventually join the mainstream university courses. It was started at UDW, although the former University of Natal had it too, it was small in proportion to its total student population. However it had become an institution at UDW as many students from this programme went on to study the health sciences and engineering. Also the Humanities Access program Durban had assigned places for 200 students, but just over 100 students only registered in 2005.

⁷ This will penalize learners from indigent communities where 83% of schools have no libraries or textbooks. These are the results from DoE's Basic Schools survey of 1999.

Graph 3



Graph 3 shows that there has been a steady increase in students accepted into the Science Foundation Programme since it began in 1999. In fact it actually peaks in the first year of the merger. The significance of this fact is that the student intakes at the two institutions were still managed by the individual universities for this year. Note that NU's figures are more or less unchanged but UDW's figures were increasing until they peaked at the Westville Campus in the 2004 intake. The total in 2004 for all the Science Foundation Programmes in the combined UKZN was 926 students. But this year it has been cut to about 400 students university-wide.

As stated above, this cut in the enrolment will affect poorer students who attend less endowed high schools thus are unable to obtain good qualifications.

Prof Makgoba at the Vice Chancellor's Consultative Forum on 18 February 2005 at T1 Westville campus, announced that 28000 students had been registered at that point. That is about 15000 students less than the previous year. The Division of Management Information had reported that the total students registered by March 2005, was 37997 for UKZN, again the figure at that time is far less than the previous 43000 students.

Conclusion

Perhaps it was inevitable that neo-liberal's soul would emerge from the mist of all this transformation and merger rhetoric. The new global forces or John Pilger's more accurate epithet – 'The new rulers of the world', have consolidated their hold on virtually all facets of social and economic life in the third or 'developing' world. Our leaders have internalised this ideology, unaware that other possibilities exist. Change, transformation, progress is not a bad thing as long as it meets the needs of the most economically vulnerable sectors of society. The other side is the subordination of the state and with it education, welfare and social services to the whims of the market and International Financial Institutions.

The increase in the entry point requirement, the cut in funding for students and the downgrading of the Foundation /Access programmes are in totality a blanket exclusion of poor students. If becoming a 'world class' university, means accelerating the process of commodification of education to the detriment of the poor then the struggle was in vain.

This will penalize learners from indigent communities where 83% of schools have no libraries or textbooks, teachers are often poorly qualified and students walk long distances to school and often arrive hungry. Instead, the already privileged students from private schools with state of the art libraries and computer classes will benefit from such a scenario. Furthermore, these students can afford a university education – much to the delight of those in the DoE who conform to neo-liberalism's foundational principle, cost-recovery, and its cry for sustainability. In such circumstances it requires no stretch of the imagination to believe that the university will ensure that those who can afford to pay for tuition would constitute the greater majority of qualifying students

Academics, students and the wider community should be vigilant in their protection of the advances that were made in the availability of higher education. The dominant neo-liberal agenda with its sycophant calls for 'sustainability', 'rationalisation', and 'efficiency' should be stripped of all its sophistication veneer and laid bare. Perhaps, at last we will see what all these words really are in human costs.

Note: The Current figures of student numbers at UKZN are down 5% from 2004 to 2005 and a further 9,4% from 2005 to 2006. In 2006 students, the

drop to 38 945 from the expected 43 500 equates to a minimum of loss of R45m in student fee income for 2006. This excludes the loss of subsidy which will be felt in 2008.

References

- Barchiesi, Franco 1997. South Africa: Between Repression and 'Homegrown' Structural Adjustment. In Federici Silvia, George Caffentzis & Ousseina Alidou (eds): *A Thousand Flowers – Social Struggles against Structural Adjustment in African Universities*. Irtoenton: Africa World Press.
- Caffentzis, George 1991. The World Bank and Education in Africa A Thousand Flowers – Social Struggles against Structural Adjustment in African Universities. In Federici Silvia, George Caffentzis & Ousseina Alidou (eds.): *A Thousand Flowers – Social Struggles against Structural Adjustment in African Universities*. Irtoenton: Africa World Press.
- Department of Education 1999. Basic Schools and Needs Survey.
- Department of Education 2004. *Student Enrolment and Planning 2005 to 2007*.
- Desai, Ashwin 1998. *The Poors of Chatsworth*. Durban: Madiba Publishers.
- Federici, Silvia 1991. The Recolonisation of African Education. In Federici Silvia, George Caffentzis & Ousseina Alidou (eds): *A Thousand Flowers – Social Struggles against Structural Adjustment in African Universities*. Irtoenton: Africa World Press.
- Jansen, Jonathan 2002. *Mergers in Higher Education: Lessons Learned in Transitional Contexts – Setting the Stage*. Pretoria: Unisa Press.
- Fanon, Frantz 1968. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Khan, Fazel 2004. Opening the Doors for Some. *This Day*.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul 1967. *Preface to the Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/dmi/ukznstats/students.asp>
- http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wup2001/WUP2001_CH5.pdf

School of Sociology and Social Studies
University of KwaZulu-Natal
khanfz@ukzn.ac.za