

International Comparators of Widening Participation to and through Higher Education – Policy and Practice

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developments and the adult
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South African universities, new developments and the adult population

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¹ We greatly appreciated the courteous warmth and hospitality with which we were treated by all those we met, and were captivated by the often exuberant energy with which people are addressing the problems of a country they love and value. In particular we were welcomed and informed by members of the University of Western Cape which became our office base. All our work was facilitated by Professor Shirley Walters whose recent chapter in Osborne et al (2004) was our point of reference and departure. Ever a glutton for difficult hard work she has recently accepted the Minister of Education's invitation to chair the board of SAQA, a key role in the transformation of South African education. Many others were similarly positive, helpful and optimistic. It would be invidious to select and name any few.

1. Series Summary – the research project

Context

Widening participation to and through higher education remains a government priority in the UK. Each country in the UK has taken a slightly different approach: Scotland particularly focusing on progression, Wales specifically on community engagement, and England especially on young people's access to higher education (HE). Widening participation to and through higher education is therefore a diverse field with many different issues to be addressed. When international comparators are examined the field becomes even more diverse.

Action on Access is the national co-ordinating team for widening participation for the Higher Education Funding Council for England, (HEFCE), the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The team comprises a dispersed team of researchers and practitioners in the field of widening participation in England. As part of our contract with HEFCE, the team planned to undertake international comparator research into the practice of widening participation.

The purpose of this research is to inform policy and practice in England by learning from other similar situations (e.g. OECD countries²) to build the research capacity of practitioners in the field of widening participation so that they can understand their practice context in relation to other practice contexts and to develop a broader base of research material for future use in the field.

Rationale - globalisation, widening participation and learning from others

Since the 1960s inclusion in learning in higher education has featured in different policy initiatives, most of which were concerned about equality of opportunity, whether equality for Black students as in the USA and South Africa, or greater equality for working classes as in the UK. The global imperative to create more qualified workforces grows out of a concern for economic competitiveness. High- or late- or post-modernity means that the industrial heartlands of countries such as the UK and USA have been devastated and, in order to compete in an increasingly tough global market, knowledge and professional skill development are important to the future of our societies. Jobs are more uncertain and individuals take risks as they move through their employment career. Higher education is seen to be one element of insurance and protection against risk (Beck, 1992). Globalisation impacts on countries but more importantly on the people within countries and it affects their experience differently.

What is certain is that the poorest face the most risks in our society. In the UK, social equity in higher education has not been very successful. Despite the Robbins Report, (1961-1963) creating a new form of HE, the Polytechnics and the rapid expansion of HE numbers in the 1980s, the proportion of people from lower socio-economic groups has not increased. This means that they remain at risk of unemployment, of a less secure lifestyle, of less favourable life chances than their graduate peers, and their position in society

² Although there are similarities between countries, there is no direct comparator, and it is important to take 'lessons learnt' with a degree of scepticism. It is not always applicable to transfer practice from one setting to another, though it is possible with caution to gain a better understanding of process, especially where countries have developed similar policy frameworks.

remains focused on need rather than their ability to contribute. A range of initiatives has been put in place in HE, from the Universities Funding Council in 1991 providing funding for work with ' educationally-disadvantaged groups of adult returners', through to the current funding via Aimhigher for school-age young people and Lifelong Learning Networks focusing on vocational routes into and through HE. Many of these ideas have been tried in other parts of the world and, while it is always difficult to make comparisons, it is worth investigating how others have approached and tackled issues of equality in higher education. This research project attempts to do just that; to explore competitor countries approaches to widening access and participation, their success and their challenges. We hope that the reports will provide cautionary tales, suggestions and inspiration to try to develop policy and practice that can provide answers for the future.

Research methodology

The project is led by Mary Stuart, Associate Director Research and Curriculum for Action on Access. The project methodology consists of a series of research visits to comparator countries to examine practice in relation to the areas outlined above. Each visit had a team of researchers from Action on Access and each team took a specific area of interest to widening participation policy or practice, while keeping an overview of all areas of the student lifecycle.

The research questions that were examined were based on a typology drawing on current UK government policy for widening participation using the student lifecycle model (Action on Access, 2002**), which highlights stages of widening participation practice such as:

1. Pre-HE interventions Policy/Practice
2. HE Experience
3. Post-HE Employment/development/lifelong learning

At all times the central focus was on what can be learned from other countries' experiences. Five visits are being undertaken**⁴ and the teams are as follows:

- South Africa: Chris Duke, Bill Jones
- Australia: Geoff Layer, Mary Stuart, Rhiannon Evans
- Canada: Sue Hatt, Phil Harley
- Sweden: John Harvey, Beth Scott, Pat Rayfield
- USA: John Storan, Liz Allen, Lucy Solomon, Liz Thomas

All teams named a visit leader who was responsible for ensuring that the visit is successful and that the report was written. The visit plan was agreed between the project leader and the visit team to ensure consistency and assure the quality of the research. Key contacts were identified in each country to ensure that appropriate interviewees were identified.

Each visit consisted of semi-structured interviews with key policy makers and practitioners involved in WP activities and visits and observations of WP work. Each team gathered data from the country concerned including policy documents, mission statements and relevant

⁴ The chosen countries and the number of visits is based on comparability in relation to HE systems and approaches. These vary but all have a desire to widen access as well as addressing practical matters such as time, affordability etc.

statistics, all of which are used in producing their reports.

After each visit teams completed a report on the visit and participate in a seminar to share their learning from the visit. This report forms the first of these international comparisons; further reports will follow later in 2005 and early 2006.

Mary Stuart

References

Beck, U, (1992) *The Risk Society - Towards a New Modernity*. London. Sage.

Committee on Higher Education (1963) *Higher Education Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins 1961-1963* London HMSO.

2. Abstract

This study of higher education in South Africa in February 2005 examined the approach to widening participation, especially for adults, asking what it might suggest for policy and practice in England. The visit concentrated on one of the nine provinces, Western Cape, within a national policy framework. It coincided with a national colloquium and two province-level seminars, enabling different experiences and approaches to be compared.

The first four sections set the social, historical, and political context. Ten years after the democratic elections in 1994 and despite unprecedented changes since Apartheid, the education system is stressed. Many of the Black majority who are confined to the informal economy remain unequipped for, excluded from and unable to contemplate affording higher or even further education. Many barriers remain to effective higher education for all. System efficiencies measured by successful completion before and in higher education are low. Deep passion about equity is shared by leaders in the spirit of the Anti-Apartheid struggle, but South Africa is caught in a vicious circle. The economic growth needed to fund the expansion of higher education needs an increased flow of graduates, and the disastrous HIV/AIDS pandemic is predicted to kill one in four young working-age adults. The circle can only be broken by increasing the output of graduates from students already enrolled in the system, half of whom are adults, and by upskilling other adults in the workforce.

Sections 5 - 7 consider more closely the higher education experience of students prior to and during their study, and subsequent employment and lifelong learning opportunities. The two final sections consider national priorities and policies, and possible implications for policy-makers, institutions and practitioners in the UK. The policy is to enlarge the system in the longer-term but to put quality enhancement before expansion immediately. The most urgent need is to modernise the school and further education sectors, improve specific vocational pathways, and have more students complete higher education by improving the completion rates of those already in the universities. The curriculum is to be reformed and new funding levers used favouring throughput, completion and priority disciplines - science, engineering, and business. Participation could be enlarged in the adult population with its huge reservoir of unmet need. Programmes to attract and support working adults are developing. There is little research into adult learning and success; the work reported in the February colloquium could be a basis for a national programme.

The post-Apartheid context for widening participation differs markedly from that in the UK. While in the UK widening participation is focussed on under-represented groups in higher education, in South Africa the focus has been on majority inclusion. This has led to significant inclusion of middle-class Black students in higher education since the ending of Apartheid. Investment at school and college levels demands priority. South Africa recognises the need for wider and deeper participation, and for graduates in fields that generate economic growth. Still more than in the UK, student retention is of great economic and political importance. There is painful tension between economic regeneration and social equity. Widening participation creates 'invisible' cohorts enrolled for evening and distance learning programmes leaving some institutions apparently little changed: conspicuously middle-class and white in character. Articulation between school, college and higher education, and between academic, vocational and workplace education and training, is yet to be achieved.

At a more conceptual level England can learn from South Africa. The extreme and abiding inequalities and inequities in its history, the need for social cohesion and equity, and lack of resources sharpen political minds, with more speed and decisiveness of action. What is the role of higher education in building a strong, sustainable and balanced society, and how is this best addressed and managed by which indicators: these are sharp questions. So is the nature of the national skills deficit, and the appropriate level of intervention in the business of the university. For the UK there is a lesson in the manifest importance given to building both social and economic capital, community and individual progression.

3. The study visit to South Africa

This report derives from a study visit to South Africa, 2-11 February 2005 by Chris Duke and Bill Jones (NIACE and the University of Leicester, and Action on Access). The visit is part of the international comparator research described in the introduction to this report.

The South Africa study was enjoined to look particularly at adult learning opportunities in post-Apartheid South Africa, and to concentrate on just one of the nine provinces, Western Cape, which includes the city of Cape Town.

The visit was facilitated by Shirley Walters, author of a recent chapter on widening participation in South Africa (Osborne et al., 2004) and Director of the Division for Lifelong Learning of the University of Western Cape (UWC), the Province's leading access-oriented university. It was, we agreed, preferable to contribute something, and to engage in the ongoing policy-forming debate in South Africa and the Province, rather than simply take people's time giving us information to take away for our own use.

This report reflects the same wish to give and not just take, in the sense that it is written to and partly for those who showed such courteous, open-minded and non-defensive hospitality as we tried to understand, and reflect honestly on, what we were learning.

The study visit was conducted by 'outsiders' providing a particular set of observations. However, we tried hard to ensure dialogue and inclusion in our approach, checking out our findings with colleagues in SA.

The visit coincided exactly with the implementation of mergers foreshadowed in the national Higher Education Plan of 2001, for example of the Cape and Peninsula Technikons in Cape Town into the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, as well as with a peak in the annual planning cycle. This made the timing difficult. Nonetheless, a national colloquium convened around our visit to receive and critique a draft research report - Equity, Access and Success in Higher Education in South Africa for Adult Learners and Workers (Buchler et al., February 2005) - attracted over 50 rather than the expected 30 participants. This gave an excellent launch pad for a round of visits and conversations on which, together with written and web-based resources, this report is based.

In addition, Chris Duke led a seminar with twenty diverse scholars, community activists and administrators from around the Province on learning cities and communities, and contributed to a meeting convened by the UWC Vice-Chancellor to take forward an attempt to bring the higher education institutions into effective partnership with the Province in its social and economic planning and development. This provided a valuable opportunity to understand more about wider policy development and problems of its implementation at the key provincial level.

This is important context for the widening participation agenda, as is recognising the daunting problems and hard choices involved (see Section 8 below). It relates also to the practical difficulties in involving and working with universities which have a national dispensation, funded directly from the Ministry of Education, for planning within the Province and at more local levels.

In England, the region is of rising importance as we try to work effectively through today's high levels of complexity. South Africa shares with most of the other countries in this study, other than England itself, a federal constitution and a consequent division of responsibilities. The province level is essential for effective planning, consultation and delivery of policies, but is also one of the obstacles to the joined-up governance required for effective widening participation. The African National Congress was keen to create a unitary state in 1994, but Zulu Inkatha resistance ruled this out in terms of relatively consensual nation-building.

4. Making comparisons

There was no intention within the Action on Access project directly to compare between the several countries included. The idea was to look at each system in its own right and way, and introduce possibly disconfirming lessons and analogies into the UK higher education and widening participation policy community.

From the UK perspective the purpose was to focus on what we in England can learn from other countries' experience. We thought however that, insofar as England is open to learning from South Africa at all, this would be more likely if we described and analysed as best we could what is happening there, rather than look over our shoulder too much for lessons for others.

The purpose of the overall project was not to produce 'quick fix tips' for implementation but to raise awareness of the global significance of widening participation to and through HE in different contexts.

The uniqueness of South Africa, of its education and higher education systems, and of the 'widening participation in HE predicament', quickly showed that some widening participation taken-for-granted wisdom and beliefs in England do not automatically apply. What can be learned is not so much tips and tricks for better access and student support. Rather, it is possibly some fresh perspectives for examining what we assume and therefore try to do. Since our received UK assumptions about widening participation do not apply, likewise there are no direct how-to-do-it-better lessons fit and ready to import.

For South Africa too, given its unique history and circumstances, making comparisons and sharing experience, models and approaches is problematic and evolving. For us the challenge is to see the familiar at a high level of generality, without masking real differences and reimposing from a distance understandings and 'solutions', themselves commonly provisional, flawed and unproven, from the UK experience that we work within.

Walking the streets with one's eyes open, driving past the township flats west of the city, visiting the District Six Museum - a memorial to the heartlessness of the former ideology, reading of the similarly brutal Johannesburg Sophiatown eviction of 65,000 Black South Africans; such experiences should be enough to prevent trite transplantation of 'solutions'.

Talking with highly capable, globally informed and networked planners, scholars and administrators however, it is easy to imagine a familiarity and a commonality that can deceive. There certainly are common 'generic' issues that confront higher education policy-making and administration. Moreover global concerns to do with liberal economics, world power, and the greenhouse effect - here causing drought, are exactly shared. In Europe for example the range of breeding birds is moving north; here we found the same effect, but moving south.

We try in the paragraphs that follow not to lose sight of this different world, not to forget either the dreadful uniqueness and abiding legacy, or the inspiring energy and enthusiasm for non-recriminatory restoration of equity and common purpose, that is being displayed by the vibrant community of purpose and practice that characterises this country.

5. South Africa and Western Cape Province – the society and the legacy of Apartheid

We need to understand South Africa's political culture to make sense of how widening participation in higher education is being tackled. There are global forces and global connections. The issue of race, ethnicity and civil rights was central to the development of widening participation in the USA as in South Africa. South Africa was also originally a member of the old white Commonwealth as Canada and Australia are, with a higher education legacy, both systemic and cultural, from the UK. However, the unique recent history of South Africa, still only a decade away from Apartheid, with a population of 45 million which is 79% Black African, distinguishes it from all other countries within and outside this project.

Here in South Africa, people's lives and life experiences were determined and in most cases viciously limited by the political and legal classification of race. This created racially defined and in individual cases administratively arbitrated castes of white, Black, Indian and Coloured, and set out to corral the Black majority into rural Bantustans or Black 'homelands'. As if that were not sufficient, the scale and the human, social and economic cost of HIV-AIDS, especially in the productive young adult age cohorts, is of an order scarcely comprehensible in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) world. HIV-AIDS impacts on the demography of higher education and on human resource planning, as in every other sphere of life, in ways that are hard to understand from outside.

It is also a nation of the South, with rural and urban poverty and deprivation as stark as may be found in any of the poorest poor countries. Since liberation, inequality is certainly shifting its access from being only focussed on race. To some extent class and income are causing new kinds, if not rising levels, of inequality between the richest and poorest across the whole population, echoing trends across many other parts of the Global Village. The contemporary media and policy debate reflects the growth of a Black African middle-class, a 'Black millionaire' phenomenon. This is cause for celebration, since a Black middle-class is essential for equity and for social and economic development, and a source of worry in that at the same time the gulf between the successful and the deeply impoverished is, if anything, widening. See, for example, the recently published Economic Transformation Audit (Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 2004) or the article in the magazine *Business Day* on 8 February 2005. Under the headline, 'Severe imbalances in wealth make SA one of the world's most unequal societies', this shows a 368% growth in Black households in the high income group (more than R153,000 a year) from 1998 to 2004.

South Africa's 'location' and identity as a nation is problematic: outside the OECD, located in the South, and beginning to align for some purposes with the great non-Anglo-European nations such as Brazil and Nigeria, India, China and Indonesia. In some ways the newly-prospering nations of East and South-East Asia could be reference points, as Latin America already is. Ties in the North remain strong, built on a colonial heritage and links with the UK and Holland. South Africa is also a natural leader within the southern Africa region, sub-Saharan Africa being an established geo-political region in global campaigns for development and against poverty and illiteracy.

Familiar to observers from Europe is deep ambivalence about the best route to economic prosperity and success in the global economy. Liberal economic policies are known and more than flirted with, but the recent and living memory and legacy of the ideology of Apartheid, translated into extreme economic and social inequalities, inform, among those

who struggled, a sustained belief in more clearly held egalitarian, communal and socialist values than are now widely found in the European mainstream. An article by Bishop Davies in the *Cape Times* newspaper on 10 February 2005, in asking 'Are we selling our birthright in the name of economic development?', addressed both social and environmental concerns.

The non-governmental, civil society or third sector is valued as a partner and a counterbalance to the public and private sectors. Relations with Government seem to be closer than in most countries, probably since so many now in leadership roles in each sector were companions together in the Struggle.

The universities are defined as being within the civil society sector. Whereas most countries recognise the three sectors and there is fierce resistance in international circles to rolling the civil society third sector in with the private or business sector, in South Africa the trade unions are seen as a fourth sector with a right, a voice and a presence at policy-making and consultative tables.

In looking at widening participation policy and practice in South Africa as a nation, we took as our focus and case study the Province of Western Cape, by most social and economic indicators one of the two most successful of the nine provinces, along with Gauteng, which includes Johannesburg. The Province has a population approaching five million. Its Administration, in seeking to foster innovation and to balance economic development with greater social equity, naturally reflects the tension between redistribution across what have been racially defined socio-economic groups, and competitive success as a region in the South and southern African and world markets. A particularly interesting initiative for those interested in education has been the idea of a Learning Cape as a means to create dialogue and common purpose across the sectors and involving an annual month-long Cape Learning Festival.

The incidence of poverty may be defined and is largely manifest in terms of place as well as race - both rural impoverishment and township poverty, violence and deprivation. Forced Black African resettlement to bleak townships and rural Bantustans in poor areas has been succeeded by migration, especially (partly back) to Cape Town and other cities from the rural areas. One distinctive feature of the Cape area and Cape Town is the large population classified as Coloureds, or Cape Malays. Under Apartheid the University of Western Cape was classified 'Coloured', analogous to the country's only classified 'Indian' university in Natal, Durban-Westville, where the main Indian-classified population occurs.

This brings us on from a general sketch of the country and Western Cape Province to the education system.

6. South Africa and Western Cape Province – education and the higher education system

Education was central to African National Congress (ANC) thinking. It has remained significant in the Government policy agenda since the 1994 democratic elections. Inevitably it is an arena of tension between important competing priorities: between equity to redress the huge inequalities of Apartheid and productivity in meeting national economic human resource development needs to compete in the global economy - the modernisation and skills agenda; between levels in the education system - early years and schooling, further education and training, adult basic education and training (ABET), and higher education; between expanding the size of the higher education sector and enhancing its quality and efficiency.

Our particular interest is in widening access for adults: whether and how participation can be widened and more adults served in a situation of intense competition for finite resources across the whole system, with levels of failure or withdrawal throughout secondary and subsequent levels that are of alarm to government. It is essential to locate the adult widening participation question within the wider picture.

The figures appear truly alarming in terms of system inefficiencies. As explained to us, 45% of those entering Grade 1, the beginning of primary, drop out by Grade 12, the completion of upper secondary education. 30% of those completing Grade 12 achieve 'matriculation exemption', the level required to enter higher education or what might elsewhere be called simply matriculation. Only half of these 30% go on into higher education; the opportunity is commonly turned down for economic reasons, and of these many are lost from the universities without graduating. The school-leaving level Matriculation Certificate which does not give university entrance was described as dumping an annual cohort of 750,000 young people into a high-unemployment youth labour market.

To anticipate what follows, the answer may be not to defer hope and action, nor at once to draw more people into a struggling system, but, in the words of Shirley Walters, in light of the fact that already over half of all students in higher education are over 23 years of age:

The system is working with older students - so it is not a matter of waiting - in fact given the urgent need to build capacities of key professionals, like teachers and nurses who used to be able to have a 3-year diploma, plus many others relating to economic priorities - what has to happen is the efficiencies in the system must be built. There may be an argument to accept that it is not possible to open the doors of HE learning to new, vast numbers of adult learners, but there is a very strong argument for getting better completion rates, and this needs awareness of the reality of student profiles in HEIs and then organisational change to support them more effectively. (personal communication, February 2005)

Walters goes on to discuss the need for research to understand what student development and support mean for those who do succeed in the system _ 'perhaps we are assuming that certain services are key and we continue to have a deficit model instead of saying how are students succeeding and what can we learn in order to build new ways of giving them support'. This touches upon an important wider point familiar to the UK widening participation community: deficiency of data in relation to adult learners, both at national (HESA and UCAS) levels and in confident, grounded research about what enables older students from non-scholastic backgrounds to succeed, even indeed about true patterns of withdrawal and reconnecting.

Higher education in South Africa dates from the early 19th century, allowing the University of Cape Town (UCT) to claim approaching two centuries of history. As is common elsewhere, long history positively correlates with status, and often with relative affluence. There is a hierarchy of status and privilege familiar to those working in the UK, but made more complicated by the changes of the past decade or so – the imminent and then final end of segregation, and the massive system changes that followed.

An Extension of Universities Education Act in 1959 excluded non-White students from existing universities, leading to the creation by the mid-eighties of eight universities for one or other non-white racial group (six Black, one Coloured, one Indian). There followed a gradual racial opening up, accelerated through the nineties such that the number of white and black students moved over a decade from 150,000:120,000 to 122,000:207,000 in 1999. According to Kraak (2004, quoted by Ralphs, 2004), 60% of all students were Black African in 2000, rising from 29% in 1988. Though not at parity with the 79% in the total population, this still represents a massive redistribution in just twelve years, compared with for instance the more slowly changing English social class mix and proportions.

An unintended consequence of this racial desegregation was that successful middle class Black students transferred from the low-status Black universities to the more prestigious formerly whites-only universities. The importance of this institutional inequality is reflected in the abbreviations used in South Africa - HDUs and HAUs for historically disadvantaged and advantaged universities respectively. The transfer no doubt made desegregation easier for the latter, while throwing the former into crisis. This perversity of consequence echoes, with amplification, the effect of postcode weightings in English widening participation policy initiatives: existing students may be shuffled around new and old universities without altering the total intake mix, or reducing the institutional status differential.

Meanwhile 11 (from 15) technikons (to become universities of technology) had grown up alongside the 18 (earlier 21) universities. There was discussion in the post- Apartheid policy community as to whether this binary separation was appropriate, as well as about how big the whole higher education system should be and how many institutions it should comprise. A felt need for rationalisation led into what was known as the 'shape and size' debate. This culminated in the Ministry of Education's National Plan for Higher Education in 2001. Before that a 1997 Education White Paper set out three core requirements for system transformation: 'increased and broadened participation, responsiveness to societal interests and needs, cooperation and partnerships in governance' (Ralphs, 2004). Wider participation included access for Black women, disabled and mature students, as well as new curricula, modes of teaching and delivery to serve a larger and more diverse student population.

The 2001 Plan resulted in a dramatically reshaped unitary higher education structure comprising 23 universities, of which 11 are 'traditional', 6 are universities of technology like the newly merged Cape Peninsula University of Technology in Cape Town, while the remaining six offer both traditional and technology courses and qualifications. Amalgamations and mergers were being put into effect as this study was carried out. As well as drawing the technikons into a single system, the large number of colleges that had been under provincial rather than national jurisdiction have been drawn into the national system - 120 colleges of education, 24 colleges of nursing, 11 colleges of agriculture. One concern that this raised was that the closure or absorption of small specialised colleges in

rural areas would increase the inaccessibility and disadvantage of the already heavily disadvantaged, essentially Black, rural communities.

The Plan noted the large 'potential pool of recruits' - according to the 1996 census 1.6 million adults aged 25-39 with a Matriculation Certificate. Commenting on the need to broaden the social base, it was noted that institutions had done little to offer programmes to attract workers, mature learners (especially women) or the disabled. Little had been done to develop recognition of prior learning (RPL). The National Plan proposed using RPL as a way to increase adult intake, with a target of 5% for RPL student enrolments. This target has not been approached; recently the Ministry has started looking to the University of Western Cape to develop and champion such arrangements nationally.

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme introduced in 1999 has grown rapidly but, 'the available amounts barely begin to meet the financial needs of students who are required to pay for their own tuition and the majority of whom come from impoverished homes' (Walters, 2004). Part-time students only gained access to this Fund from the beginning of 2004. Such studies as exist suggest that the main cause of withdrawal from school and abstention or withdrawal from higher education was in the past, and remains, sheer financial exigency.

The key planning document for higher education, the 2001 National Plan, stressed the need for fundamental transformation of the system. Some impatience is discernible, at both national and provincial levels of government, at the foot-dragging which characterises universities reluctant to change too fast. We heard from the research study around which the Colloquium (see above Section 2) was convened how this plays out through different modes of marginalising and fencing off change. In Walters' words, 'while the policies commit the HE system to lifelong learning and the increase in numbers of adult learners and workers, the realities are that the picture that holds many HEIs captive is still that of institutions for young, mainly men studying full-time' (Walters, 2004).

Recent months have seen rising concern with system inefficiencies, in particular the poor output rates and high withdrawal from higher education. The demand for high skills output to meet the human resource development needs of a modern economy creates severe tension with the equity and redistribution demands of post-Apartheid reconstruction. Given the shortcomings of the secondary school system (matriculating students not well equipped to enter higher education, and a serious maths and science shortfall) and the more serious inefficiencies and reform needs of a historically low-value further education and training (FET) sector, it is reasonable that attention is turning to enhancing the performance of the system, and improving the success rates of those already entering it, rather than immediately setting out to grow it larger. Over-optimistic predictions for 'natural' growth in demand in the nineties probably contributed to this consideration.

From our perspective - that is access and widening participation generally, and for adults in particular - this means that in the three phases reflected in Sections 7-9 below, the main focus is not on access and admission so much as on the second phase, success within the system. The third phase, employment and subsequent learning opportunities after graduation, has not entered the South African equation as a prospective indicator in the way that it is used for example in Australia and now also in the UK and OECD-wide.

In the OECD, return on investment (ROI) has become a significant measure of the utility of undertaking higher education, for higher fee-paying individuals as also for the economy

(OECD, 2004). In South Africa, completing higher education certainly increases the chances of getting a job. The difference is that with very high unemployment levels and large parts of the Black community operating in the informal economy, there is a difficult judgement about where scarce higher education funds are best invested. The present judgement is that the system must become better before it gets larger. This is not in itself prejudicial against widening participation, so long as we realise that the emphasis is - perhaps temporarily - shifting from entry to successful completion. Over half of those already in higher education are older than 23. Among these some are delayed initial 'first-time' enrolments and significant numbers are post-graduates or 'continuing education upgraders' converting initial qualifications in professional areas so as to be able to perform well in the modern economy.

The threat to adults comes more with changed funding arrangements that calculate successful completions against total numbers of students. Older students are often part-time, and may take still longer to complete because of other responsibilities, compared with youngsters. An age-blind penalty on slower completions may dissuade universities from taking in older students, and especially adults who normally study part-time. If the capping of student numbers now under consideration were on a head-count rather than FTE basis, the scales would be tipped overwhelmingly against adult entry. Signs are that the Ministry is however recognising and seeking to avoid such consequences.

We now look briefly at each of the three classic 'participation phases' for how they work especially for adult students in South African universities.

7. The situation in 2005 – policy and practice interventions prior to entering higher education

The growth in higher education in the early 1990s which led to confident predictions of participation rising to 30% by 2005 has not been maintained. It has indeed reversed, participation rates falling from 17% to 15%. This is partly due to systemic shortcomings, and partly to an age cohort bulge working through the education system in the 1990s. The proportion of GDP spent on public higher education has correspondingly fallen from 0.77% to 0.68%.

As we have seen, the policy context was set by the National Plan for Higher Education in 2001. The headline policy statement was that despite a longer-term aspiration to raise participation from 15% to 25% of the age group 20-24 years over a 10-15 year period in order to widen participation, the immediate strategy was to constrain growth in the system. In the words of the Plan:

given financial constraints, it is imperative to guard against rapid enrolment growth unless it is matched by additional resources. Increasing enrolments without new investment will be detrimental to the long-term stability and sustainability of the higher education system, as well as to the quality of offerings..

Policy interventions today are therefore not directed simply at widening participation but rather at two issues of greater social, political and educational significance; ensuring post-Apartheid social equity and diversity, and addressing inadequacies of school and further education and training provision to provide the throughput of students to populate any future expansion of higher education.

Social equity and diversity

The 1997 White Paper expressed the goal of 'ensuring that the composition of the student body progressively reflects the realities of the broader society'. Progress in widening Black participation has been impressive. The National Plan noted that:

the enrolments of Black students increased by 61% between 1993 and 1999, i.e. from 249 000, or 53% to 414 000, or 71% of the total head count enrolments. The change is even more dramatic in the case of African student enrolments. African student enrolments increased from 191 000 to 343 000 between 1993 and 1999, i.e. by 152 000 (or 80%). Thus in 1999, African students constituted 59% of the total head count enrolments in higher education.

Within this overall optimistic situation there were problems. The opening up of the historically White universities from 1994 led to a very large increase in Black students there, resulting in a 9% decrease in enrolments and the consequent serious instability problems at the Black universities mentioned earlier. Moreover, a large part of the increased enrolment of Black students in historically White Afrikaans-speaking universities has been on distance learning programmes, leaving the campuses predominantly White.

The school and further education and training (FET) system

Pupils who fail or drop out of school for reasons of inability to cope academically, or for family, financial and other reasons, are not well served by the inflexibilities of the present system. The FET colleges and schools carry a historical stigma as 'dumping grounds' for those who could not succeed at school. Although the Further Education and Training Act of 1998 made changes, the perceptions remain. The school system has expanded, but so have

corresponding inefficiencies, with no improvement in the throughput of qualified students. For reasons of history, shortage of resource and educational culture there is not at present the throughput of students to support successful expansion of the higher education system.

Yet the overwhelming need for more graduates, and in more economically-relevant disciplines, notably the sciences, is fully recognised. South Africa is trapped in a vicious circle. Economic growth is necessary to fund expansion of higher education. This growth will not happen without an increased flow of graduates. Hence the policy argument that the circle can only be broken by more efficient use of existing financial and human resources, and by upskilling adults already in the workforce.

Policy prior to entering higher education is therefore directed at attracting adults into the system for the upskilling of existing workers:

provision of higher education to workers, mature learners and the disabled, aside from the equity and redress imperatives, could play a significant role in addressing the shortage of high-level skills in the short- to medium-term, especially as there is a large potential pool of recruits (National Plan 2001).

The closest approach to a widening participation policy in 2005 is an intention for some increase in enrolments from non-traditional participants - people in the workforce, mature students, women, disabled students - using in particular Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

In practice any effort put into special access provision is at the individual institutional level, with programmes geared to adults in work and thus largely part time. These occur at a number of universities, including those included in the three-institution research study presented to the February Colloquium, University of the Western Cape, Vaal University of Technology, and University of the Witwatersrand.

Disability and HIV/AIDS

The National Plan acknowledges serious inadequacies in provision. The number of disabled students in higher education is far too low. The worsening HIV/AIDS pandemic is a major new factor, exacerbated by the fact that it will impact disproportionately on those of working age, who are most vulnerable. The loss through mortality of a quarter or more of key professional workers very early in their careers is a tragedy in itself, and a major factor in calculating the required output of skilled professional and other workers.

Vocational vs. general curriculum

There is a familiar tension between general and vocational provision. The traditional educational culture is one of broad and general provision. Alongside this the FET sector of 'technical high schools' provides vocational programmes, but still of a generic kind, not related to employer or sector demands. At the far end of this scale is Sectoral Education and Training Authority (SETA) provision of highly specific occupational training routes, with employer engagement in the approval of programmes. The SETAs somewhat resemble the recent emergent UK Sector Skills Councils.

There is a pressing drive to modernise the curriculum of schools and FET colleges so as to gear provision to contemporary and predicted economic trends, and to enable better

progression from school to college and higher education. The retraining and accreditation of teaching staff is a key element in this, highlighted in the opening address to the Council for Higher Education Colloquium in 2004 by Minister of Education Naledi Pandor, who said that higher education could play a role in the development of the Further Education and Training Colleges, so improving the articulation between the colleges, higher education and the world of work.

Transitions from school and the colleges to higher education are difficult and poorly articulated. There are systemic problems which do not help progression to higher education, exacerbated by the failure of sufficient throughput of school students qualified to progress to universities. The alternative vocational route of Department of Trade-funded 'learnerships' has a poor record of articulation with the Education Department, and the majority of such learnerships are in fact in the intermediate levels of the National Qualifications Framework. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) has responsibility for the Framework. It is seeking to refresh and re-energise the Authority's practical commitment to the access, progression and broader equity agenda to which the democratically-elected Government remains, in principle, strongly committed (Chair of SAQA, personal communication).

One promising development in Western Cape Province deserves attention and might ideally be treated as an experimental 'test site' or 'lighthouse' development for the national Government and the other eight provinces to monitor and, if appropriate, replicate throughout the country. In 2002-03 the National Access Consortium Western Cape (NACWC) undertook a feasibility study of public institutions' readiness to engage in workplace learning at a regional level. The result was a proposal for a Centre for Extended Learning (CEL). This is now being set up, following a series of consultative workshops, under the leadership of Seamus Needham from SAQA, as a brokering agency to assist institutions in providing workplace training. It is intended to be an autonomous 'honest broker':

The vision of the NACWC has been to harness the collective energies of educators, communities, state departments, companies and unions in a partnership. The aim of this partnership is to enable learners in the system to find learning opportunities that are of high quality and that are relevant to their situations (NACWC, 2003).

CEL was visualised as developing a replicable regional model that can be utilised elsewhere in South Africa.. Given the development of Lifelong Learning Networks as a new approach to sub-regional cooperation in England, albeit with a strong initial 14-19 rather than workplace learning emphasis, there could be merit for HEFCE in monitoring and exchanging experience with CEL, and nationally with SAQA.

8. The situation in 2005 – the higher education experience

As we have seen, policy to increase the flow of qualified graduates is directed at students already enrolled in the system. With no additional resources, and the need for increasing graduate production, ensuring successful completion is the obvious option, made the more imperative by poor and worsening retention and high drop-out rates. In the words of the 2001 National Plan:

there is deep concern that drop-out rates are high and have worsened (20% total; 25% at end of first year). The estimate is R1.3Bn in public cost, together with the human cost of failure to the individuals.

Furthermore, the policy is not only to increase graduate production overall, but to intervene in curriculum areas to achieve targets in shortage subjects:

The Ministry will over the next five to ten years shift the balance in enrolments between the humanities, business and commerce, and science, engineering and technology, from the current ratio of 49%: 26%: 25% to a ratio of 40%: 30%: 30% respectively.

Two likely levers on institutions in particular are planned to improve this situation:

1. Graduate outputs will be in the funding formula, with institutional plans linked to targets for field of study
2. Production of graduates (productivity) will be a factor in approval of programmes in the planning grid.

The targets for change in balance of fields of study have an unhelpful incidental impact on social inclusion, since proportionately more women and Black students are enrolled on humanities programmes which do not have the priority of science and mathematics, or some professional fields of study. Similarly it is believed by institutions (though disputed by the provincial Education Department) that the funding formula, with its emphasis on effective production of completed qualifications, is likely to disadvantage programmes for adult students who are inevitably largely part-time.

Adult students' experience in higher education

There is a serious lack of research on adults in South African higher education. Resources for research are scarce. Statistics are sometimes rudimentary, and their basis for collection less than satisfactory. For example, the assumed age of 23 for the lower limit of 'adult' is thought unhelpful: it captures some postgraduates as well as many students who are progressing normally from school to first degrees, thus obscuring the more qualitative notion of 'adult' as returning after a break from initial education.

There is therefore little hard information available to guide practice and provide reliable empirical evidence as to what works in increasing provision and enhancing prospects for success for this age category. The contrast with the UK situation, for all its limitations, is striking. In 2004 the Council for Higher Education was able to release one million rand to support ten research projects at a modest 100,000 rand (less than £10,000) each. For comparison the current (2005) ESRC (HEFCE-funded) widening participation research initiative calls for proposals at £150,000-£300,000 each.

One of the proposals funded - for the first such research in the country - was the research project reported to the February Colloquium. It was to investigate university provision for adults, incorporating case studies of the experiences of adults in three institutions - two

universities and one then technikon all of widely differing character - now Vaal University of Technology; University of the Western Cape, and University of the Witwatersrand. The final research report is being released in March 2005, and the main findings will inform a chapter on widening participation in the official national annual review yearbook.

The studies reveal substantial changes to curriculum and delivery to cater for the needs of the students enrolled. Various stratagems are employed to enable different categories of adults to cope and succeed, including a kind of provisional enrolment whereby what might be called remedial or catch-up work is incorporated into the regular study of those coming back into (higher) education after perhaps many years out of formal study. Western Cape provides a series of 'juggling to learn' workshops from which more could be developed and replicated elsewhere.

The findings accord with expectations of similar studies in the UK: the importance of accessibility, timetabling, student support systems geared to part-time and evening study etc. Access to libraries and computer facilities is important, including whether students can use facilities through their workplace rather than only at university. For the South African student the experience in all these categories is heightened by particular circumstances: for example, accessibility in communities where distances are greater, and transport much less reliable. The physical safety of students, especially of solitary adults on a journey to and from the campus at night, is often problematic. Transport to and from campus, its cost and availability, are sources of practical concern; taxis feature prominently among the modes of transport necessarily used by working adult students.

The need for support systems was identified as differing in the kind of support - for example little use is made of the university counselling service, but there is greater dependence on financial advice. Personal financial anxiety and advice on its management are very common. They impact on the student in some ways not found in the UK. For example, adult students with children often find it an impossible struggle to meet their own fee payments when these coincide with the demand for school fees. For universities in turn, unpaid fees represent a sometimes severe financial problem, although student indebtedness generally appears to be higher among young (or traditional) students than among adults.

As national policy has turned from expansion of total student headcount to improving quality, performance and completion in the reshaped and streamlined system - twenty-three institutions funded by a single Ministry of Education rather than the former multiplicity of higher education institutions with eighteen Ministries - there is the familiar policy tension between steering the system in line with changing policy and interfering excessively in the detail of universities' conduct.

For all the differences, there is a common and generic issue here for England and South Africa. We gained a sharp sense of initiative-weariness, as well as suspicion of governmental intrusion, partly offset by the strong sense of common purpose about building a more open, inclusive and equitable democracy. The Council for Higher Education's Quality Committee (HEQC) has shown its teeth recently in terminating ten MBA programmes deemed not to be of a satisfactory quality; there is probably more bite here than in the English system.

On the other hand the call to achieve high status via world class-rated research affects ambitious universities here as in other modern nations. There is clearly a not always well-

resisted temptation to put aside high quality onerous teaching, especially of the 'different and therefore difficult' 'lost generation' of non-white adults, in favour of the steady supply of more easily serviced 'production line' matriculation exemptions coming out of secondary school. If carrots are preferred to sticks, the UK's recently created Higher Education Academy may suggest a national approach to encouraging enhancing quality that South Africa could monitor and perhaps partly emulate.

9. The situation in 2005 – employment and lifelong learning opportunities following higher education

Equipping graduates for both citizenship and work is specified in the strategy of the National Plan. This identifies a range of skills required by employers: 'analytical skills, and a solid grounding in writing, communication, and presentation skills' to which are added computer literacy, information management and negotiation as well as other competencies. In practice the success of widening participation strategies at the third, post-graduation, phase cannot be considered in any sense as closely resembling the measures exercised in the UK, since the context for employment and the character of the economy are so very different.

Engagement with employers is unsystematic and fragmentary. In some cases, where a programme is populated by students supported by employers, there is good engagement, rather as in the case of foundation degrees in the UK which are geared to a single major employer. Thus the Journalism and Media Studies part-time BA at the University of the Witwatersrand caters mostly for students in employment, upskilling them within their existing careers.

Employer engagement is assisted by the legislation which allows employers to claim back training expenditure by complying with the requirements of the SETAs. The Department of Labour imposes a levy on companies which is then allocated to training programmes through the SETAs - there are currently 25 which are to be consolidated down to 14 _ in effect allowing the employer to claim back the levy.

Over time it is hoped that a modernised, better resourced and better valued FET sector will connect effectively with employers and the economy, and then no doubt also with issues of progression into higher education within a lifelong learning framework. The CEL experiment looks important in this perspective.

In a paper presented to a Council for Higher Education Colloquium, Andre Kraak (2004) indicated the imbalance between low job creation in the high-skills sector and an increased supply of trained employees, many of whom will not obtain jobs at the right level. The fragile nature of South Africa's economic development is again highlighted by this situation, in which the country lags behind the global 'knowledge society' and high skill scenarios, and still has a large demand for intermediate level skills. What is beyond doubt is that the demand for unskilled labour has all but disappeared, even in the labour-intensive sectors of mining and agriculture.

There is little 'lifelong learning' opportunity for workers to engage in higher education, though there are specific programmes in some universities which enable this. One big effort in recent years has been to enrol and upgrade non-graduate teachers in the universities to raise the quality of education at school level. There are mixed reports on how successful this has been, and how well the universities performed.

Postgraduate education has grown rapidly, and itself represents one form of recurrent lifelong learning mainly for some middle-class and professional groups. In 2001, as the National Plan shows, 20% of all enrolled students were postgraduate. The majority of these, 60%, were at below masters level, 35% at masters and 5% doctoral. The approach to postgraduates is in effect the same as for undergraduates:

The Ministry is committed to increasing postgraduate enrolments in the long term. In the short to medium term, i.e. over the next five to ten years, the priority must be to increase graduate outputs at the masters and doctoral level. Even with the current small

enrolments, drop-out rates are high and completion rates are slow. This is unacceptable (Ministry of Education National Plan. 2001).

In concluding this section on links between life after graduation and the economy and society to which students graduate, we should remind ourselves that (higher) education is part of that socio-economic system and indeed a dependent variable, not an autonomous actor. This, as Shirley Walters reminds us, is a 'middle-income country with one of the most unequal distributions of wealth in the world'. The impact of AIDS is shown by falling life expectancies of two and almost three years respectively for men and women in a matter of just 3-4 years. Women significantly outnumber men at 52.2% of the population, and until 1994 life chances were massively confined for the over 90% non-white population, and the 40% of the whole population aged twenty-plus who had no more than primary education. (Walters, 2004)

Although getting a degree correlates strongly with getting or keeping a job, whole township and rural communities exist mainly in the informal economy, surviving with skills not learned at school or college. There is now a rapidly growing and prosperous Black middle-class, a welcome sign of effective redistribution and widening participation, and essential to the country's social as well as economic future.

A study proposing a framework for a Human Resources and Skills Development (HR & SD) Strategy in the Western Cape points out the difficulty of adopting any 'manpower planning' approach, and predicting what 'human capital' is needed in the face of economic globalisation. The report favours a learning region approach in which localities organise themselves to compete globally. Promoting a learning culture requires multiple linkages across all places of learning; but also 'it means planning learning interventions to address the challenges imposed by the "two economies" described by President Mbeki. The first is of high skills in formal workplaces and the second is of informal work, some even on the margins of informal work, which leads to extreme vulnerability' (HR&SD Task Team, 2003). The report speaks of the need for institutional thickness and social cohesiveness, under conditions of stark inequality. Even in the relatively prosperous Western Cape, 77% have no post-school education, and 30% are unemployed.

Despite mountainous challenges, the HR & SD report is upbeat and purposeful, suggesting practical steps including the widespread application of RPL and sustained equity-sensitive upskilling. This and other studies however show that measuring widening participation via post-higher education indicators cannot easily be transcribed from the UK and similar OECD countries to South Africa. Here the virtual dual economy attracts a more 'organic', holistic, communal appraisal, balanced with the labour demands of the** modern economy. Success is determined by broader and generally less individualist measures.

10. Priorities and policy options

The South African economy has recently picked up. Nonetheless, resources are scarce. Competition for public funds for reconstruction and development is acute. Traditional labour and labour union, if not socialist, principles and values remain widely held. Education is just one of many important areas requiring resources.

This study is about wider and deeper access into, and participation especially for older prospective students within, higher education. The proficiency needs of the higher education system are pressing in terms of its organisation, leadership, curriculum and staff development. Student numbers by racial groups now reportedly roughly approximate the proportions in the country at large, a very remarkable transformation in a short time. University staff however remain highly unrepresentative in terms of ethnic mix. This part of the equity agenda remains to be fulfilled through the second post-Apartheid decade. Meanwhile there is pressure from aspiring school leavers (matriculation exemptions) for more places in universities, and a huge legacy of adults deprived, especially by Apartheid, of the right to learn adequately even through the early school levels.

The schools and especially the further education and training system each have huge and pressing needs for investment and quality enhancement in respect of staff, curriculum and organisation development, in order to reduce the high failure and withdrawal rates and to address the national crisis especially in science and mathematics. There is a view among university leaders that young people at school need better preparation and support before they enter higher education, implying a priority to capacity-build at all levels from early years to upper secondary, as foundations for higher education.

It is also evident that universities generally lack the capacity to meet the needs of older non-traditional learners very well, even when the will is there. Further education is in still more desperate need of renewal and reconstitution in terms of morale, reputation, role and identity as well as in its curriculum, staff and often also facilities. It is in poor shape to offer the mix of generic and specialised education and skills training that is needed. It is not well equipped for effective preparation and articulation into higher education.

Yet further education is also the essential locale for those who missed out under Apartheid, and are still missing out, to come back into formal education on terms and in ways that they can manage, and so to gain access to educational and resulting employment opportunities. Until this capacity is enhanced it may be premature to look for strong general or vocational progression pathways for adults from FET into and through higher education.

What this diagnosis might pose is the unpalatable proposition that rapidly expanding access and deepening participation into the (mainly but not only Black) excluded population needs to be planned and phased more slowly than is desirable. It may be counter-productive to bring already cruelly disadvantaged people into a situation where failure is almost certain – or to provide them with study options that lead, if they are unable to complete, back into unemployment, menial employment, or employment only in the informal economy.

The implication would be that there is little point in pursuing more ambitious widening participation policies in higher education for the young until there is adequately prepared 'throughput' from the schools and the further education and training colleges. There may be equally little point in bringing large additional numbers of later life, first chance adults into a system that can barely yet cope with those already entering it. This applies to quality in general, with a special edge in mathematics and science.

On the other hand, the more optimistic view sketched in Section 6 above is persuasive. In this view, the same glass is half full rather than half empty, more than half of all university students being adults over 23 years of age. The glass will gradually fill rather than drain as improvements take effect and lay the ground for a new wave of expansion into a stronger system, with higher rates of successful completion especially by non-traditional students.

A normal assumption in the United Kingdom is that widening participation at the point of access is the main way to produce more graduates, and to achieve desirable social equity as well as human resource development and high-skilled labour policy objectives. An example is the (now sometimes contested) fifty per cent target for young people experiencing higher education, together with foundation degrees and now also lifelong learning networks intended to increase the flow of young people into higher education using vocational pathways.

The position in South Africa is different. The widely shared perception and policy proposition is that the way to produce more graduates with very limited resources is to increase efficiency, thus turning out more graduates from the same intake by reducing loss through withdrawal (or 'wastage' and 'drop-out') among those already enrolled.

The nation is seeking a way out of the vicious circle in which economic growth is required to fund the expansion of higher education, but where growth will not occur without an increased flow of graduates. The judgement at present is that there are no more resources to grow the higher education system as such, so the circle can only be broken by the more efficient use of financial and human resources in the sector, and by upskilling adults already in the workforce.

This may mean advancing the further professional education and qualification of key workers like nurses and teachers to graduate status, with relevant modern knowledge and skills, ahead of the unqualified mass of people who were fated to remain unqualified and struggle to survive in the informal economy under Apartheid. Around this sits the yet more problematic proposition, taking a longer-term social inclusion and social capital view: that a dual-modern, globally-oriented, high-tech and an informal economy _ and so society _ will have to be accepted for some time yet. How far the patience of the excluded will and should extend to tolerate this is a matter for moral and political judgement.

The Action on Access framework for this comparative study indicated that 'lessons' that England can learn from the experience of others should be categorised 'in terms of government and funders' policy, institutional policy and practice and project and practitioner practice'.

We have already placed a question mark in Section 4 above against the notion of learning lessons from comparative international study, in any literal, direct and specific sense. Each country is unique and South Africa is different, its history and politico-social structure so particular that lessons cannot be directly deduced. Allowing for this, the following may be suggested in respect of the three levels properly distinguished in the project design.

Government and funders' policy

Tempered in the fire of anti-Apartheid struggle, South Africa's leadership - to a high degree a 'community of practice'(CoP) sharing common values, principles and purposes - appears capable of taking tough decisions. We discerned a higher level of shared purpose than is evident across comparable leadership circles in England. Not that joined-up government across portfolios is dramatically better; the problem of silos appears not very different, though its recognition and address may be more open. It is more that leaders in the pre-'94 struggle are now found in key roles across the different sectors. There appears to be quite high mobility among this CoP between, for instance, national and province levels, and between the public and the civil society or third sector (within which universities are located) as well as the private sector and - an unusual 'fourth sector' at the policy-making table - trade unions. Whether and how this observation constitutes a 'lesson' for others to learn is for those others to judge.

Whether or not for this reason, we discern a greater willingness to ask difficult questions and make difficult decisions, which may or may not make for political comfort. The huge changes carried through since 1994 attest to this, as does the firmness in restructuring the binary system of universities, technikons and colleges after 2001, leading to the streamlining that is being completed today, with technikons, teacher training, agriculture and other colleges merging into one system of twenty-three universities. The same may be said about addressing the serious shortfall in mathematics and science in the schools. Most obviously it is demonstrated by the rapidity with which proportions of students in institutions of higher education have been brought from the rigid separations of Apartheid to numbers closely reflecting the proportions of the different politically-defined racial groups in the population as a whole.

It impressed us also, insofar as limited contact allowed for judgement, how far university leaders themselves were willingly open to criticism, and able to make criticism, about their own universities and sector, and to sit down with national and provincial planners in discussion about how to address this. Vice-Chancellors in South Africa, at least until very recently indeed, have been between several kinds of rock and hard place, in the fast changes after, as well as in, the period before 1994.

Violence, loss of office, a sense of permanent acute crisis and insecurity, do not make for easy and confident planning and change management. It is not, either, that there is no cultural dissonance among faculty. Some are passionate about equity, others wedded mainly to their research and at best to good teaching, which means teaching the easier to manage well-schooled young people coming through with strong matriculation exemptions.

Somehow government policy-makers seem able to tackle the changes required of the sector more directly than in England: neither attacking nor being cowed by 'academic autonomy'.

As to funding, there are as always analogies and resonances, but not, without heavy qualification, 'lessons'. The current drive to enhance system efficiency involves more attention in the prospective funding formula to completions (or throughput); the ratio of annual graduations to total student numbers is an emergent key performance indicator. The 'lesson' here is about unintended consequences. Throughput, which is 'mode-blind' to full- and part-time mix, penalises (for the university) part-time, more protracted, study. The unintended consequences of this head-count approach would be much worse if the new methodology capped university teaching numbers by headcount rather than by FTE load.

There are obvious echoes in England of changing the teaching (T-)funding methodology without thinking through what it means for adult and part-time students. On the other hand we were impressed by the evident willingness to listen to, understand and to all appearances go away and act on, the insight and caution offered at the Colloquium in this respect. This refers specifically to preferring a full-time equivalent (FTE) over a headcount funding formula so protecting part-time enrolment. It seems to us that funders and policy-makers may be both more tough, more open and direct, and more alert as listeners in post-Apartheid South Africa than we are used to in England.

An interesting comparison is between the inherited structure of nine Provinces in the federal South Africa and the emergent nine regions in historically centralised England. Higher education being a national jurisdiction (or competence as the term is preferred in South Africa), now under one Department of Education rather than the inherited eighteen of 1994, it is not easy for the Provinces, having lost the higher education colleges to Pretoria, to incorporate its resources and expertise into their planning.

The conversation which started within Western Cape about this in 2000 continues. It is gaining strength and clarity in early 2005, with a range of ideas and approaches from system-wide strategy and an evolving high-level quasi-planning mechanism via what might be called multiplying bi- and multi-lateralism between different bits of universities and bits of province administrations, some with private and local level partners.

One gains a sense of gradual and patient take-off, of finding ways of circumventing the difficulty of separated jurisdictions between school/FET and higher education, in order to build collaboration. If so, this may more closely resemble regional development in England, while contrasting with the fast, top-driven, yet participatory nation-building that characterised the past decade and promises to continue into the next.

Institutional policy and practice

Despite the worlds of difference between the two countries, one felt some affectionate familiarity with institutions' intellectual culture and behaviour, including well-versed capacity to rationalise self-interest. On the other hand, especially inspiring was the leadership of our host Vice-Chancellor, who displayed capacity, humour, insight and above all courage: unafraid to speak out about his own and his institution's values, to speak of struggle and inequalities, and to be frank about shortcomings and budgetary and other crises. Capacity for strong yet open leadership (when even walking the campus alone can be hazardous and access in the evening is dangerous) is always a valuable asset in short supply.

11. Implications for the United Kingdom

The UWC Vice-Chancellor's discourse and demeanour suggest a form of leadership willing to make hard choices, and to choose an appropriate road for the institution from which it is not to be seduced by the more glamorous contest for high research (and thence international) standing, probably at the cost of good and relevant teaching, access, equity and community service. If at all such behaviour can be generalised – we lacked the time and sample size to discover whether this was widespread or unusual - it offers a model for others in seeking the hard road to system diversity, and towards complementarity between different, yet comparably respected and valued, universities. There is of course a lesson here for system planners and funding bodies as well.

Drilling down within each university, we found many different things going on. Some showed commitment to widening participation and better supporting adult learners while others were rather the opposite. It was suggested on the one hand that a former White university was meeting its ethnic balance mandate by using remote and distance rather than on-campus teaching for formerly excluded groups. We noticed however, strong cooperation and non-competitive networking between 'access-and-equity' practitioners in institutions straddling from the newest to the oldest, and thus most prestigious. We learned about concern and effort to bring resources such as accessible space, library and computer facilities, affordable transport, user-friendly teaching timed to meet workers' needs, and more sensitive teacher/tutor support to non-traditional students.

We noted on the other hand a preference in various places, with an eye also to the expected throughput indicator, for easier-to-teach young matriculants who will mass-produce as graduates. This rather than have to make great effort and greater changes to teach those whom economic necessity drove out of secondary school two or three decades ago, and who remain likely to withdraw from economic pressure and economic necessity still today.

The case studies in the research presented to the Colloquium threw up the problem, familiar in Britain, of universities making a modest contribution to widening participation (only a gesture compared with the level of need) but keeping the widening participation and non-traditional support work well away from the 'core business' of the university. On the other hand prestigious 185-year-old UCT has in its structure two out of the seven faculties dedicated to different elements of student support and development, including educational research and outreach, thus combining separation with non-marginal standing and senior management level leadership.

We were unable to judge how far the spirit of struggle against Apartheid's inequity is being transmitted to the next generation of teachers and administrators. But we did note the scale of need - and commitment – to make the staff of universities come rapidly and closely to reflect the racial mix of the population at large. We noted the huge challenge that this represents. As indicated earlier, there is no comfy lesson here for England, perhaps none at all across such a gulf of difference. For South Africa however it suggests that, in the near certain if unpalatable pause before the size of the system can be grown, quality enhancement, staff and curriculum renewal may call for some facility analogous to the new Higher Education Academy. If so, there is a 'lesson' here at system rather than mainly at institutional level.

Project and practitioner practice

We found in the earlier three-way framework for this study - that is to say pre-, during, and post- higher education experience - that there was little to say about post-university from a widening participation perspective. The debate and needs relating to employment take a different and more acute form in South Africa. Coincidentally, if for a different reason, there is little to say about 'lessons' for project managers and workers, and for those working for wider participation at the coalface, simply because that coalface is so very different.

There are obvious similarities as well. At the level of individual practitioners networking locally and through remote means, no doubt much good practice and mutual support could be exchanged. We are not privileging such examples as we chanced to come across - nor, for that matter, examples of things that did not work so well. Plucked out of context, they may as well mislead as be useful. Taken to a level at which generalisation is safe, they become trite.

On the other hand, the whole experience of deep if brief immersion did take us out of a well-worn rut of assumptions about what is good and bad, right and wrong, effective and ineffective, in our own particular society as we peeked inside one which, it has to be allowed, is a lot tougher to manage.

One lesson has to do with sustained, apparently unflagging, optimism - even exuberance - in adversity; most obviously by dispossessed Black South Africans but also across the community of widening participation practitioners which we enjoyed being with. England may be maddeningly hierarchical, slow to change and suffocating of energy, but it is certainly an easier place in which to practise widening participation in relative comfort. We could perhaps, as a final speaker at the national Colloquium exhorted all present, be more vigorous in our optimism, less quick to criticise the differences of other also passionate co-workers. The glass is also half full.

Better to understand and exchange, we could also make better use of written and electronic means of sharing experience, so that different models and approaches, disappointments and successes can be more widely useful. Not only do we inhabit a global electronic village, we are also very mobile. Many people move between South Africa and other lands, England often among them. It will be good if, at the most local level of policy-in-practice as well as at more abstracted planning levels, we can build on this HEFCE-Action on Access project initiative and learn more together.

12. Main sources of information and references

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