

Reflections: Dr TREVOR COOMBE

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This is an edited version of an interview conducted by Richard Fehnel in the course of research for the book

TRANSFORMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION Global Pressures and Local Realities in South Africa

On the Public/Private Education Interface:

The Director-General felt it important for the department to elaborate its policy on the public/private interface in higher and further education. His view was that it had become reactive rather than formative and there were far more elements in the equation than the current policies really took account of, so it needed to be done systematically. He was keen to recruit me to help the department think through some of the matters, and at the same time continue to give technical support to the higher education branches in dealing with registration matters.

If one looks back to the Green Paper/White Paper process, there is undoubtedly a predominant focus on the public sector in our higher education. Almost certainly that is true for the NCHE (National Commission on Higher Education) as well. Quite understandably, that was the case. The private sector in higher education was totally unknown and being unknown, very little was speculated about it and its potential relations with either the public providers or the Department. But where the Department had a clear responsibility was with respect to the issue of registration, because that was a constitutional requirement. Any person has a right to establish and maintain a private education institution at own expense on condition that it is registered with the State, does not discriminate on the basis of race, and maintains standards that are not inferior to those of a comparable public institution. So the Department understood that it had a responsibility to make registration happen and therefore a chapter in the Higher Education Act was written to take account of that process.

So that was one very specific responsibility the Department was given, though we did not necessarily understand the dimensions of it at the time. We understood that a registration process would involve, in particular, database creation and management, a high degree of detailed information and its management.

Beyond registration matters, I guess the chief policy position in the White Paper with respect to the private sector was encapsulated in a very broad statement about partnership, which mirrored similar statements in other policy documents (if I think back to the first White Paper in March 1995). This was in tune with the general position of the Ministry. The ANC policy framework document recognised that we were attempting to build a system anew, which would be unified entirely, not segmented or fragmented, which was national and which, to the highest possible degree, was built on a consensus view about its broad mission. This view didn't exclude the private sector, although little was known about it. Throughout the policy documentation one finds this refrain of creating unity and partnerships. Nevertheless there was a considerable degree of ignorance about what was there on the outside and precisely how partnerships were being engineered. So it was more of a rhetorical thing than anything else, putting a viewpoint in position rather than spelling out a programme.

It certainly had nothing to do, in our minds at that time, with the idea of PPPs - Public Private Partnerships - as they are currently known, but it didn't exclude them, necessarily. So there was a benign view based on a lot of ignorance and on a central point of principle and I think it is correct that it was benign.

You get to know a sector as soon as you start to regulate it, that is for sure. The registration process, as such, is a regulatory process. It is based on a constitutional principle. We have interpreted it as the principle of consumer protection. Registration means essentially a license to operate and it is granted or not granted by the registrar acting as a gatekeeper. So the registration process has been the vehicle by which the Department has come to terms with the private sector in higher education. This has occurred, of course, simultaneously with the rapid expansion of that sector and its diversification. It has also coincided with the new phenomenon (for South Africa) of international entrepreneurs in education, operating either by partnership with existing institutions or by direct investment, establishing their own entities, or by a combination of those.

So the environment was changing very rapidly at the time that the Department was trying to set up a registration system and, of course, having to deal first hand with these players who had not been part of the policy process to any perceptible degree. They may not have thought themselves to be covered by it. Then, to their surprise, they found themselves actually having to deal with expectations and demands which were placed in the statute, but whose implications were not necessarily very clearly understood, either by themselves or by the Department. It was a learning process.

The matter of registration was highly complicated. By necessity, the Department felt it had to bring in SAQA (the South African Qualifications Authority) as a partner to handle quality assessment or accreditation issues. This is the burden of the discussion paper I wrote in August last year, so I have a particular position on it that I won't disguise. It was, and still is, my view that it was a mistake to make provider and programme accreditation a precondition of registration. What it certainly did was to complicate the registration process, inadvertently, by making the Department, in a sense, hostage to a process

which was being undertaken by another entity altogether. SAQA was standing in for the HEQC (Higher Education Quality Committee), which didn't yet exist, and having to pull in SERTEC (Certification Council for Technikon Education) as assessors and evaluators to judge the applications for accreditation. And a great deal of anxiety, irritation, and some ill will built up between all of these players: SAQA, the Department and the private providers.

As the Department matured in its organisational capacity to handle this thing, it became dissatisfied with the way in which accreditation matters were being handled by SAQA. Some of SAQA's quality judgements were being second guessed – it was a hopeless situation. The delays in the accreditation process amounted to delays in the registration process, because of the way in which it had been set up. Institutions couldn't register prior to accreditation and with the accreditation taking so long, the Department had to sweat it out and meanwhile the providers were getting more and more agitated. Many regarded this long process as essentially interference in their capacity to trade and advertise, to do their business. A couple of them brought court actions against the Minister, one or two of which have been successful.

This aggravated if not inflamed the situation, which had become extremely complex. It complicated and soured the relationship between the parties. I think a lot has been done in recent months to straighten that out and to rebuild bridges. Certainly the organised provider body (APPETD – Alliance of Private Providers of Education, Training and Development) that in fact represents only a minority of them, has become the interface for the constituency with the Department. They have done their level best to cool tempers down and to recognize that we are all working in a new and complex organisational environment, which has become even more complex with the Skills Development Act and the establishment of the SETAs (Sector Education and Training Authorities) and 25 new ETQAs (Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies) in embryo, each of which may well have an interesting impact on our higher education. So APPETD has been playing a very responsible role in attempting to educate its constituency about this environment and to say, "Look, nobody is going to get very far by creating antagonistic relationships or believing that making policy through court action is going to really solve issues – it may bring temporary relief, but will not solve them".

On the other hand, I think there is far greater understanding in the Higher Education Branch about the nature of the private sector in higher education, which is very diverse. With knowledge has come wisdom, a certain degree of tolerance, and greater efficiency in handling the process. SAQA yielded their quality assessment responsibility (and I think they did this with relief) to the interim HEQC, once it was established. The HEQC has now taken on, the responsibility for the accreditation process. And I think Mala Singh (Executive Director: HEQC) has been at pains, also, to be very cool, to be extremely measured, in her response to these very complex issues, trying to work to a common understanding of what each party's responsibilities are.

My view is still not a prevailing view. I am still sort of barking at the edge of the crowd on this one, because a huge amount of effort has gone into the process

by which accreditation is a forerunner of registration. My colleagues in the Department are understandably very, very concerned about what it would mean if the Department were solely responsible for the quality judgments which are inherent in a registration process - quite apart from the accreditation issue. Neither the Constitution nor the Act is quality neutral. Registration is meant to weed out some players from others. How that process is to be undertaken is something that sends shivers down the spines of the higher education people. It is convenient to have that being handled under the guise of accreditation by the quality assurance mechanism. But we are still having to grapple with that. I think we must grapple with that. In my view that conundrum has to be solved, it can't be allowed to persist, but I may not win the argument on that.

On the Protection of the Public Sector from Undue Competition from Private Providers:

What we are dealing with in the review is the position taken very publicly by the Minister with respect to foreign institutions. The Minister, having been party to the approval of Monash's application, took a very hard line, in principle, about protection of the public sector in higher education from undue competition by private institutions. He argued that vulnerable institutions could be severely damaged by foreign institutions coming in and cherry-picking programmes and drawing off high quality staff from public institutions and high quality students as well. I think those were the main elements of his case against foreign education investment.

He has also indicated (but not publicly, as far as I recall) considerable reserve about the World Trade Organisation's designation of education as a tradeable service. And I think it may be in that context that we will see our policy position evolving. It would be very foolhardy if we tried to elaborate the policy on foreign institutions entering South Africa without taking that into account. One would have to do that by engagement with our sister department, the Department of Trade and Industry, which is responsible for managing world trade business. That is an area that we have noted but not yet confronted.

I am sure the intention is that we should be proactive in our policy, but whether we would, in fact, be proactive to the extent that the Singaporean and Malaysian Governments have been, is a very different question altogether. There has been no indication at the political level in education, that we are searching for foreign partners for our local institutions. There has certainly been a very clear statement that we don't want poor foreign institutions offering a poor service.

On the Work of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE):

The NCHE was one of the very clear policy commitments in the ANC policy document, so it had been anticipated well before 1994. At that stage, thinking collectively, we believed that the totally fragmented nature of the higher education system required a very high level investigation. We were thinking in terms of national commissions, for a number of similar policy areas, where leadership would be required now the Department's view changed as the Government got into its stride and its experience with the National Commission

of Higher Education began to tell on similar investigations that were being thought about. So, it turned out that the National Commission on Higher Education was the only one of its kind. We used other instruments, in particular Ministerial task teams or committees, to do the work in other sectors. We felt, I think, on balance, that the necessary political weight could be accorded to these types of investigations. It depended very much on how they were set up and the quality of their membership.

Even during the course of its work the National Commission became, for the Department, very contested. That influenced what one hoped from it. The Report was a superb piece of work. What it did for the country was ensure, through its members and its chairperson, that it delivered something of high authority, of unquestionable authority, which had been painstakingly negotiated, not just consulted upon, and which would have international recognition. International recognition was consciously worked on right up to the last minute. In all of those respects, I think the National Commission Report is an ornament to our post 1994 dispensation.

But the Commission was an extremely difficult thing for the Department to manage, right from the beginning. For reasons that were never very clear to the leadership of the Department, it used its autonomous status as a National Commission to take a very independent, bureaucratic organisational course of its own. There was a degree of exasperation from the leadership of the Department with respect to the National Commission, because it appeared to be doing its own thing entirely. Meanwhile the Director-General and his colleagues were having to run the system. It appeared as though the National Commission was almost oblivious of that (I am quite sure it wasn't) but the separation was there. As a National Commission, it engaged directly with the Minister, not with the Director-General, and that was a source of tension. I don't have much more to say about that.

From August 1994, when Chabani Manganyi was appointed, when he oversaw the establishment of the National Commission, because it was something that had to be done, he did not have ownership of the process and yet he was the executive head of Education. Particularly for one who had been a Vice Chancellor that was something that rubbed very hard with him.

There were also problems, which were problems of inexperience. Everybody was inexperienced in running something like that and the National Commission got into trouble with bookkeeping very, very early on. The Department had responsibility for its budget and for accounting, so they had to send in an official to bring order to the Commission's books, and instruct its staff in the financial regulations which they needed to observe.

So for a bureaucratic head this was very irritating as well. It was not just that the Commission seemed to be ploughing its own furrow, but it seemed to be doing it in a way that was oblivious to the accounting officer's financial responsibilities.

And then, of course, there was the length of time the Commission took to actually produce results. This, I think, was the most difficult thing of all for the

Department to take on board and ultimately the Minister himself became exasperated by the delay. The appointment of a National Commission virtually paralyses the Department from acting on any policy issue in that area. It makes it extremely difficult. You don't want to downgrade the work done by the National Commission by anticipating what they are going to recommend. At the same time the environment was by no means static. It was extremely volatile, to the point of violence on campuses and so forth. The Minister was advised to appoint first the Carolus Committee very, very early on to try and bring peace. These processes were exceptionally hard to manage. None of the characteristics of a mature jurisdiction applied. In a system like this, a highly volatile one, extremely disparate, the National Commission was expected to provide a direction, answers to the questions, a common view or mission for the public sector. So long as that was absent, the Minister's hands were tied, as were the Director-General's, and it became extremely important to get the Report in and not allow the best to become the enemy of the good, which we felt might happen if the Report was delivered after two years, which the Commission itself seemed to want.

We talked about a common vision or mission for the sector. I think that was an extremely important outcome of the NCHE, which was anticipated.

We had a very much lower key, very much faster exercise for the school sector. It wasn't anything like as complicated, although the sector is certainly vaster in size and complexity. We were keen to have a Review Committee – that was also part of the ANC's policy framework. The committee was appointed and asked to report in 4 months. It reported in five. The Minister charged that committee to achieve consensus amongst its membership, which had been constructed in a very similar way to the NCHE, as an all-constituency membership, highly representative, but with members working in a personal capacity, to the extent that that was possible. They succeeded. They delivered a consensus report out of which grew the second White Paper and the South African Schools Act. It turned out to be a brilliant exercise, brilliantly managed.

On Developing Policy Instruments out of the NCHE Report:

The key question, apart from creating consensus and a common vision, was how do you translate a National Commission Report into policy instruments? There, I think, the Department really fumbled. For a while it was very unclear how the policy would emerge from a very complex but very clear document. Jairam Reddy (Chair of the NCHE) was asked to come in as a consultant to help that process. I think that was asking a great deal of him, to switch roles, having been absolutely immersed for the best part of 2 years in the NCHE process and then to have to start seeing policy issues through the eyes of the Minister and Director-General.

A very important initiative was taken to make use of our relations with the Australian Government, to get expertise from the Australian Ministry of Education. They had done a major higher education reform exercise in the 1980s, so it was still very fresh. It was essentially a modernization exercise in higher education. Mike Gallagher was a superb acquisition to the team and

brought profound experience of the bureaucratic political arena, of which he was really a past master. He had come out of a political environment into the Australian Government so his advice on those sorts of things, being able to think as a government person, was indispensable. There were others involved as well.

We meandered through a very long, complicated process for the production of a Green Paper. I started to get involved at that stage. And then we had the Draft White Paper. The Green Paper is normally the only draft policy document for consultation, but despite all the NCHE report had done to unify the field and provide a common paradigm for higher education in the country, there was still such segmental interest at play and such lack of clarity about important matters that another interim document seemed to be called for. And of course everything was being done in a highly consultative fashion. That was still very, very much the vogue, the pattern. The practice of attempting to achieve consensus through consultation - and if you don't get it, you consult some more - has now fallen away, but it was still very much with us then.

In our terms it was a very extended process of policy and legislative development. Between mid-1994 and the end of 1997 was 3½ years. Admittedly in other jurisdictions this would be lightning speed. It may be unprecedented that something of this nature should be taken on board and accomplished in so short a time.. But, of course, in the post 1994 environment, with the knowledge that the first administration only had a 5 year period to accomplish its goals, 3½ years did seem to be a very long time indeed.

On the Capacity of the Department of Education to Implement Policy:

And then one has to confront the question: What capacity does the Department have to do what is expected of it? Which brings into focus the Higher Education Branch. We have been both fortunate and unfortunate. We have been fortunate in the degree of continuity which has existed. Ironically there has been considerable continuity among the cadre of higher education officials who were brought over from the old Department of National Education, who joined what was at first the Programmes Branch in this Department and later the Higher Education Branch. Apart from some of the top leaders, we have not been able to retain many of the new cadre of officials coming in. Many of the new black officials have left after relatively short periods. This has told on our capacity in a very serious fashion.

We engineered a Branch structure and established two chief directorates, one for planning and the other for what is now called policy support. I termed them the hard chief directorate and the soft chief directorate: the planning one was responsible for information systems and finance and converting data into planning sequences; the soft part dealt with scholarship issues, international relations issues, academic policy issues. In fact, it included a very hard element, which was the registration of private institutions.

Our first Chief Director responsible for the latter area was someone who I don't think really wanted to be there and left soon afterwards, but perhaps not soon

enough for either his interests or the Department's. He left and so we were limping to a considerable extent through a lack of senior leadership. My own leadership as Acting DDG was, I am sure, compromised by the fact that I was running another branch and we were totally focussed, at that point, on getting the White Paper through and getting the Act through and other items, such as relations with the institutions, took second place. I just did my essential bit, but I couldn't really do anything else. And of course the other obligation was to find a permanent DDG, which we were not very successful in doing. It was a very long search and it took considerable persuasion before Nasima Badsha agreed to leave the academy and join the government. But once she came in, of course, she was brilliant. There is absolutely no doubt about that. The constituency had someone who was accessible and was proactively accessible. She was getting in touch with institutional, staff and student leaders and she had capacity to drive processes. Ahmed Essop's appointment as Chief Director: Planning has been a godsend.

They have had to draw on a rather shallow professional resource base within the Branch and have compensated for that very substantially by outsourcing important work. I think that has worked well for the branch. It is not something that one regrets. It is something that should be happening and has happened well, but the capacity within the Branch needs constant replenishment and upgrading.

Richard Fehnel: Some would speculate as to whether or not the delay in implementation, of some the key sections of the Act, could be explained in terms of the capacity issue or could be explained, perhaps, in terms of not having political agreement, or maybe technical agreement, on how to move forward. On developing, for example, a national human resource plan or a new funding formula. From your recollection of that period of time, how would you sort the cards? Was it capacity, or was it uncertainty about how to proceed, either technically or politically, or a combination of all of those things?

On the Development of a New Funding Formula:

The two areas you mentioned turned out to be very different in demands on the Department and in policy applications. First, the funding area: we spent a huge amount of time on this in the Green Paper/White Paper process, following the NCHE. What we put into the White Paper was as explicit as it was possible to be at that stage, without a great deal of highly detailed technical work being done. The White Paper was meant to be the catalogue of the work to be done and no time was lost in commissioning Charles Simpkins to lead that work. That has been going on and the institutions have been involved, in many ways, in the development of the new funding model. We all regret that the SAPSE formula has persisted so long, because in 1994 we certainly didn't expect that. That was not anticipated. But whether, in fact, there could have been a more rapid roll-out of the new funding process I am simply not in a position to know. I did not manage it. Ahmed Essop has had the responsibility from the outset. So he is certainly in a much better position to know. The higher education funding

exercise, incidentally, was happening somewhat independently of the Systems & Planning Branch, for which I was responsible, although the finance component there, which was responsible for budget preparation and management, was quite closely consulted.

We came to an agreement, a jurisdictional agreement, within the Department, that the initiative with respect to planning in the sector, and the new funding model and the new HEMIS model (Higher Education Management Information System) would be managed by the Higher Education Branch but in close conversation with the Systems and Planning Branch. So when a new stage in that process was undertaken, there was a joint meeting which involved all the relevant divisions and branches. It was not something in any way abnormal, as far as our internal processes were concerned. So while it may seem regrettable, I am not sure how avoidable it was. It was a highly technical and complex process. Before people were sure that we had it right, the new funding model had to be (a) conceived, (b) subjected to trial in all its detail and tested before it could be brought to the operational stage. Of course the delay in replacing SAPSE (the South African Post Secondary Education system) has set up a huge amount of tension between the institutions and the Department. At each budget time the issue is re-opened and so nobody is more aware of the cost in terms of goodwill and no doubt also in terms of necessary programme changes. I think others than myself would have to make a judgment as to whether it could have been done differently. So that is the funding side. There was no attempt to depart from the essential principles in the White Paper.

On a National Human Resource Development Strategy:

Human resource development is a very different kettle of fish. It is spoken about in the White Papers on Higher and Further Education. And here I absolutely cannot avoid responsibility, because at times over the past few years the Minister himself (Minister Bengu) charged me with leading the work on the human resource development policy in the Department. Various initiatives, some halfhearted, others more purposeful, have been launched in an attempt to do that, but it was a major failure of mine that I never got it off the ground. It has been brought to fruition since I left out of an initiative that we were busy with, together with the Department of Labour and other departments. The Ministers of Education and Labour have published the *National HRD Strategy* document. So the human resource development policy is a very sore point with me, with several of my colleagues as well, who have been party to its tortuous development.

We never had a clear policy directive. There were conflicting or different political directives coming through, not just from the Minister of Education. He was reacting, very often, to directives which came from the Deputy President's office, Thabo Mbeki's office. He was concerned about the equity issue, concerned about the totally inadequate representation of black professionals. That's as we understood it. We didn't always hear it direct from his mouth. He was chairperson of several Cabinet Committees, including the Cabinet Committee on Science and Technology, which was serviced by DACST (the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology) who were key partners in these rather

crude attempts to get a policy into place. And they discussed it in that committee, we didn't, and the directive came to Education to take the lead with it. So the message that came through to us was never couched in RDP/GEAR (Reconstruction and Development Programme / Growth, Employment and Redistribution) terms, we could not have interpreted it in those terms. It was more how do we create either the incentives or the capacity in our system to deliver against a history of injustice and impoverishment. So one was having to manage, first of all, an unclear policy mandate with, from time to time, a quite severe political charge behind it, with a totally inadequate professional resource base. Our position was complicated by the fact that there was no way (and we were always clear about this) that Education could be the sole department responsible for human resource development. It would have to be a multi-ministerial issue, with Education and Labour being the leaders. But how could one imagine a human resource development policy without the Public Service Administration Department being involved, without trade unions being involved? And where does NEDLAC (National Economic, Development and Labour Council) come in? It is appallingly complex. And human resource development, per se, was not written in on our schedule of responsibilities in any particular branch of the Department. It made sense that people looked to myself, as head of Systems and Planning, for direction, as my Branch was clearly the logical one to take the initiative. But the political signal seemed to be saying that the Deputy President was interested in getting more black architects, more black engineers, and quantity surveyors. Systems and Planning didn't have a hell of a lot to say about that. The priority to increase the numbers of black professionals involved matters of institutional priority, of dedicated scholarship funding, funding of South Africans to go abroad, where required. (Foreign scholarships seemed to be part of this very indistinct mix that we had been asked to look after.) And if the higher education institutions were not able to admit sufficient people with the necessary skills at senior certificate level, then of course it meant addressing the whole problem of learning deficiency in science, maths, language and so on.

So we were dealing with major systemic issues, but issues that resonated at the institutional level. They involved the provinces and the schools and colleges. The long and the short of it was that we were having to deal with the political pressure which came from Cabinet Committees, having to do rushed jobs on that with the Inter-Departmental Committee which was set up for that purpose, and at the same time we were attempting to conceptualise the policy and think through how to translate that into a bureaucratic structure which would take possession of HRD policy and make it operationally coherent. Adrienne Bird was very helpful on this, in helping to think graphically about it, to lay out in picture terms, as it were, how all the different components might operate. Of course she was extremely busy at the time, in bringing to conclusion the Skills Development Act, and the establishment of the SETAs. The institutional environment was changing under our feet, as we were attempting to envisage the policy. So we didn't do it. We were trying. The failure wasn't through any doctrinal differences, it was a distinct lack of capacity. We did outsource as much work as we thought we could, but you can't outsource efficiently if you don't have clarity about your objectives.

On the Apparent Shift in Economic Policy from RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) to GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution):

The RDP/GEAR shift is a very complex and very current debate in the political arena and the university community as well, not least in Education. And I suppose it would be churlish to suggest that it is all a mistake, that there hasn't been such a shift. I don't think the shift has been as profound or as clear cut as many commentators make it out to be, and certainly as the political rhetoric would have it be. I remember reading the statement issued when the multi-party South African delegation (representing the Transitional Executive Council) signed the IMF loan agreement in Washington in December 1993, and realising with absolute clarity that the incoming Government was committing itself in advance to a policy of fiscal conservatism and that this was being done as a means of allaying fears about what an ANC-led Government might do. So it had that strategic interest [to prevent the flight of capital].

But it was also grounded in a particular policy decision. In other words, it wasn't simply a public relations job. My interest in it was because we were grappling with the production of the ANC Education and Training policy and we had to engage with the likely nature of the fiscal environment in making sensible and responsible statements about such things as expansion of the system. Pundy Pillay was our senior policy analyst on finance at that time and was leading our work on the financial environment. We took great pains with what was said and we tried to be as responsible as possible, not to lay the ANC open to a charge of reckless promises. The reckless promises were made by Shell House, incidentally, in the election placards and so forth: free education for all. It is there as an objective in the Yellow Book, but we were extremely circumspect.

And then the first White Paper (this is now in 1994/5, once we were in government) included three chapters on financial analysis and budget issues. This was well before GEAR and it was in the era of the RDP. The RDP White Paper was being prepared. So if there were a simple, dichotomous relationship between the RDP and GEAR, one would have expected it in that policy environment. In fact, we were totally committed to the RDP, both in the Yellow Book, because the RDP policy development was going on in parallel with the other sector policy process, and in the White Paper. We speak to the RDP in the White Paper policy objectives, the use of language, etc. But the RDP was never a national plan and it was certainly never a national plan on the basis of a national budget. That it never was. It was using windfall money to do certain things.

The RDP office was set up independently of the Minister of Finance. It gave the RDP, certainly, a far more autonomous political profile and it gave Jay Naidoo all the scope in the world to do what he does best – to communicate, to inspire, to kick butt, which he couldn't have, if he had been (and it was unthinkable that he should be) a junior Minister to the then NP-nominated Minister of Finance. So he probably needed that political freedom. But if the intention was that it would, in fact, cause redistribution in the national budget, it could not have happened, and it was not necessarily because there was not an ANC appointed Minister of

Finance. One of the early things that Trevor Manuel did when he came in, was to cause the RDP Office to close down and the RDP Fund to be brought under the Treasury. No, it was not sustainable. You can't have two budget policies, separate entities. And you can't have, on a sustainable basis, an office like the RDP Office, with a brief that extends potentially over the entire country, all social sectors, when you have got line ministers with line ministerial responsibilities, with their own budgets.

So fiscal responsibility is something that we have tried to write into the education policy and we have always, since 1994, been aware that that was the environment we were operating in. That became clear immediately. The RDP had project funding and that was it. What the MTEF (Medium Term Expenditure Framework) process has been able to do (and do extremely well) since 1997 is create a budget planning framework with very, very high level documentation produced by the Budget Office about budget intentions. And it has enabled sectoral departments like ourselves, through the sub-structures of the MTEF, to bring the education officials into direct dialogue with the Department of Finance. It has enabled us to move from a position of long distance budget advocacy or, as it were, from adversarial relations with the stone-hearted Treasury (which is a classic model of budget construction), to collaboration and joint analysis of the bottlenecks and the problems in the budget environment.

On Whether There was a Lack of Political Will to Implement Redress Policies:

It is difficult to measure political will. Whose will are we talking about, you know – is it the Minister of Education's? This would be the normal attribution. He is in charge of education, in charge of the higher education sector. Why doesn't he make it happen? Well, governments don't work like that, unfortunately. Very rarely do you get a single line minister able to impose on the government a particular action, especially when it involves substantial sums of money, which of course this does. So you are dealing, always, with a collective, where the Minister of Finance is the key player and the Presidency gets called in as a referee from time to time. So in that circumstance it is difficult to be very precise about whose will one is talking about, especially if the concept of redress is unclear.

I think it is extremely important, in all assessments of policy implementation, to judge first whether the terms that are being used are understood, whether they are translatable in policy and executive action. The Higher Education White Paper, as we were discussing earlier, put a great deal of importance on the new funding system, on restructuring the funding system. The principles underlying the new higher education system were to be reflected in the new funding system which was to be the instrument to bring it about, along with the new statutory environment and in the new Higher Education Act and statutes. We have got the structures, and so to the extent that the new funding system has not yet materialised, many of those principles have not been made operational in the way that was expected, or for which there is still potential. What the Department of Education and Department of Finance were both clear about was that if there was to be a redress fund it would be part of the Department's higher education

budget. It could not be a trust fund or foundation in the classic sense, something standing outside of government, but something within the budget and which would therefore have to be justified in budget terms in the normal fashion. It would have to be allocated within the expenditure ceiling which is set, not by the Ministry of Education, but by the Ministry of Finance and the Cabinet. One would therefore have to trade off whatever went into that redress fund against other line items. Because of the budget arrangements set out in the Constitution, the other line items would have to be higher education line items, rather than drawing funds from any other part of the education system. So it would mean having to carve funds out of existing potential institutional allocations.

The question would arise how large a fund is required and for how long? For how many years would such a fund be operational, such a line item be available, and on what principle would one devise the redistribution process? The Department felt that to tinker at the edges of the existing funding system while anticipating a new funding dispensation, would be disastrous. It would be indefensible, literally indefensible. One would not have a principled basis on which to view such action, because the principled basis was the one that was being installed in the new policy. In fact, changes at the margin were made, because SAPSE didn't cover all institutions. Some changes were made almost counter-intuitively in respect of institutions that had been funded in the former "independent" homelands well above the funding level of other institutions. The decision was made – and I say counter-intuitively, because it appears to go against the redress policy to bring all institutions into a common funding framework prior to translation into the new funding system envisaged in the White Paper. So institutions that were funded well above the norm have been brought to the norm over a progressive period, not overnight but over a number of years. In fact, at times the point of convergence had to be deferred because of extreme difficulties in some institutions.

The Department of Finance had to be convinced that a redress fund or allocation made sense. And there was a counter argument, namely that the whole country has been screwed up by apartheid. If a redress principle had to be applied consistently – and a budget policy looks for consistency – it would have to be applied across the board. Now what would that actually mean? Would it mean that historic deprivation would have to be compensated for through the budget by special grants to all institutions that have been deprived? Consider the implications at school level, for instance, or in the hospital set-up? It is an intolerable proposition, especially if you are running a tight fiscal ship, if you are attempting to bring down a budget deficit and there are certain limits on your expenditure ceiling. And, of course, that was the prevailing policy. So there was really no encouragement on the part of the Department of Finance for a major fund or allocation under the name of redress and it was a very difficult matter to argue, because we were not in a position to argue a similar case with respect to the school system. It seemed as though one was having to argue it simply because there was a strong lobby in favour of it in the higher education domain, one which was attempting to lobby politically and did lobby very actively politically for its requirements. Obviously the lobby group met frequently with the Minister of Education to make its case, but he would, from time to time, say, "Look, I don't control the budget, but if you want to make your point, you need to

convince the Minister of Finance". I think there was perhaps one meeting with the Minister of Finance!

Under those circumstances, the Department certainly was not showing a great deal of zeal for the concept of a redress allocation. It was a complex thing to translate into operational terms. What exactly was being redressed? Was it physical facilities? In that case it would be billions. Was it in terms of equipment? And then there was another consideration, namely that there were extra-budget funds which were coming in from USAID, from the European Union, which were specifically targeting the HDIs (historically disadvantaged institutions) and which, if anything, were dedicated redress funds. These were never talked about when the HDI group was giving its pitch for additional budgets, but these donor funds were in terms of inter-governmental agreements: the Minister of Education was in there supporting them. The EU-supported Libraries Project is a very good example, and USAID's project on capacity building is another. So we were having to extend the scope of the argument and look at whatever aid we could muster in budgetary terms within the redress context, and try to gain some persuasive advantage on that score.

Then there was the issue of how you manage an allocation, which is one off, and whose distribution has to meet certain criteria. Do you get the institutions to bid for it? Having bid, you need a process of adjudication. Who would be satisfied by any process of adjudication, which gave more to one institution than to another? And how would you hold the institutions accountable for the spending of that money? Would it simply disappear into the general revenue of the institutions, never to be seen or heard of again? So from the point of view of financial management, there was not a great deal of enthusiasm for something of this kind.

I think, by and large, those are the many elements in this rather sad and disappointing story. If my memory serves me correctly, the White Paper was not explicit about establishing such a redress fund or allocation. The question of redress was addressed in the new funding arrangements and it is those that we are struggling to deal with.

On the Changing Nature of the Landscape:

From year to year it was changing, so we became aware of it, as everybody else did, but the Department was behind and particularly slow in recognizing these things. I heard a comment made by Jonathan Jansen. I have now heard him make it twice and feel he was wrong both times, although he was right about a great deal of other things. He said, "The greatest planning blunder that the Department of Education has made is to propose the massification of the higher education system, when all the evidence is that it is shrinking." Why he is wrong is that "massification" does not appear in the Department of Education's policy document. We specifically abjured that phrase in the Higher Education White Paper, because we didn't believe it either possible or desirable to set it out as a policy objective for the period that the White Paper is concerned with. So we departed quite consciously and radically from the NCHE report in that respect.

Was there an awareness that the landscape is actually changing? Yes. But, of course, changing in unexpected ways. We didn't expect some of them until they happened. The outreach by the Afrikaans-language universities, especially through distance education partnerships with private institutions, we only became aware of when they happened, especially when one got to know a little more about what the terms of these partnerships were. They vary a great deal of course in the degree of oversight by the principal institution. I think we only became aware of them in detail with the registration of the private institutional partners.

On Voluntary Inter-Institutional Co-operation:

Well, the White Paper is explicit, that the institutions should be looking for collaboration and for regional partnerships, but the Act is clear that that may not be sufficient. Of course the Act has been strengthened to make the Minister explicitly responsible for breaking the impasse if institutions fail to merge. Initially it was intended to be a voluntary process. It would be encouraged by the Department but not actually managed by them. I think that was partly because, to have suggested otherwise point blank, would have been a recipe for a huge outcry. There was also a very realistic recognition that if the Department had actually tried to manage that through some kind of master plan at the national level, it would have required resources that the Department, particularly the Higher Education Branch, absolutely did not have. That was in 1997, and it is going to be difficult enough to manage the National Plan for HE as it is.

On What Could Have Been Done Differently:

I hesitate to use hindsight to say what we would have done differently with what we now know. What has been done, has been done in good faith. It has been done, as far as possible, with all the relevant information having been considered - assembled first of all and considered - in the consultative processes, including the normal day-to-day process of lobbying, of political grandstanding and so forth. All of that has been part of it. It is trite, these days, to say that implementation is always slower than one would have wished. But trite as it is, I think it has to be said. I am not really so sure that the slowness of implementation is a matter of surprise to the people who are closest to the process. I think our documents, even as far back as the ANC Yellow Book, were attempting to caution against unrealistic expectations. It is only those who have had unrealistic expectations who are deeply disappointed. Those who had some knowledge of how Governments operate, how the exceptionally deep-seated structural deformities in our system had to be turned around, would not really have expected things to have happened very much faster. Of course, another very major consideration is our capacity, both in the policy process and the implementation process, not just here but at the institutional level. So I can't admit to be surprised, although at times one really has been disappointed, that certain things have not happened, particularly at the institutional level. We would absolutely have liked to have had a much stronger, more convincing higher education programme, more on par with our policy at so many different levels, especially at the institutional level. But I think we can thank our lucky stars that we have had the continuity in policy and leadership that we have had and the

degree of dedication that has been displayed. Long may it last. Although some areas of implementation may be a lot slower than we had wished.

I think the great achievement – and so many players deserve credit for it, no-one can claim it as sole property, not by a very long stretch of imagination - is the fact that the national discourse about higher education is now essentially unitary. We are having the same conversation. Now that is not to say we are always using the same language or that the conversation doesn't go into many different nooks and crannies and so on. It is a complex conversation, no question about that. But the dialogue has been joined on the same terrain. And one can say the same thing across the board, for the education policy in all the sectors. It is a huge achievement, if one considers the situation pre-1994. That result has been brought about by the process in which the NCHE has been a very great component. So the interminable consultations within all the task groups and so on, have had their pay-off. The White Paper and the Act willy-nilly set the agenda and it is impossible for anybody to conduct a meaningful conversation on higher education outside of those parameters. That became clear in the debate over the CHE's (Council on Higher Education) size and shape document.

And the irony is (if it is an irony) that the sector has been brought together in conducting this discourse, even though structurally, superficially at least, so little has changed, particularly in respect of the conditions in the HDIs.

On the Policy Process:

Policy is not just a rational process, and if it doesn't communicate, it is not worth much. But it is more than that. Those two descriptors do not cover the true complexity of the policy process. It is a very untidy process and it involves many people - and rational though it is in the sense of setting out goals and working out defensible means to achieve them, it is not a purely rational process.

It doesn't operate in the sublime detachment of an academic institution. The political interface is extremely important. The political process doesn't always operate as a deliberate policy process, but no policy-maker can ever regret the political domain or its interest or its intervention. It obviously provides the legitimacy for a policy process. Political players do carry the responsibility in that they have to use their judgment as to what is important and necessary. And I think higher education policy has partaken of all of these elements. We now have a situation where the White Paper, although it has been very much an anchor (as we have just been saying), as with the other White Papers, is also becoming out of date. The environment to which it addressed itself has changed. And the new Plan, although it is an endorsement of the essential principles of the White Paper process, will itself accelerate the change.

We are now at the very interesting interim stage where, because of the changing environment, political actors are having to make improvised alterations to policy, amendments to the Act, and new documents like the National Plan. So little by little one may say that the policy isn't as coherent or as bounded as one could have said in 1997, 1998, even 1999. And there will be a move, I am

sure, in a couple of years to have a new statement of policy - maybe towards the end of this administration or perhaps at the beginning of the next one.

Interview conducted by Richard Fehnel, May 2001

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