

# INTRODUCTION

## POLICY AND PERFORMANCE

What is the appropriate role of the state and of state policy in an increasingly networked world where distinctions between market and society, public and private, are blurring? This is an issue raised in a recently published book, *Transformation in Higher Education; Global Pressures and Local Responses* (Cloete et al, 2002). The broad message emerging from this volume is that the state, more and more tightly bound into global and local networks, must itself become more responsive to differences in the higher education landscape. The mode of responsiveness inherited from the liberation struggle – deliberative policy participation – will no longer suffice. Instead, the state will have to make use of information and information networks, and this will become more technical as the application of more and more advanced information technology proceeds apace.

Cloete et al (2002) demonstrate that in South Africa, the post-apartheid period started with the production of “symbolic policy”, the prime intention of which was to declare a break with the past, and to signal a new direction. The need to declare a break with the past demanded that the main items on the policy agenda had to reflect political priorities. As a consequence, the new policy issues with respect to higher education in South Africa in 1994 were centrally concerned with the need to create greater equity and deepen democracy in the sector.

A similar policy pattern can be seen in Central and Eastern Europe after the changes of the late-1980s and early-1990s (Vlasceanu & Sadlak, 2001). New higher education policy signalled a break with the past through an initial emphasis on the “de-ideologising” of the curricula in higher education, as well as in an attempt to strengthen institutional autonomy. The difficult fiscal situation faced by the governments in those countries, however, meant that neither of these two original policy aims served to improve the position and functioning of the battered public

universities. What followed was a succession of new policies of a largely symbolic nature, none of which were co-ordinated with overall state policy or with efficient allocation instruments. The result was a constantly changing policy focus described as “changing the changes” which led to policy fatigue and scepticism, especially among academic staff.

In both instances, symbolic policy was born out of political necessity, but attempts to implement it were fraught with difficulty and revealed its innate limitations. In South Africa, symbolic policy took the form of “comprehensive” policy in the immediate post-1994 period, that is, a set of broad general principles and benchmarks for a whole sector (such as those in the 1997 White Paper). Indeed, both before and after 1994, South Africa may be said to have concentrated on “comprehensive or grand policy”, thereby neglecting the difficult priority decisions and differential levers that have to be designed to implement it. In contrast to symbolic and comprehensive policy, differentiated policy-making means identifying and agreeing upon particular institutional targets that prescribe the route each institution is supposed to follow against broad systemic benchmarks, while simultaneously creating an environment of pressure and support necessary to facilitate progress along the route.

Differentiated policy is not necessarily aimed at creating institutional differentiation. It can have quite the opposite intention, namely to reduce differentiation. In contrast, a comprehensive policy that is “the same for all” often has highly differentiating effects, as was demonstrated in the application of the South African Post Secondary Education (SAPSE)-based funding formula in the South African case. One of the most important factors hindering the design of specific policy levers since 1994 has been the absence of an up-to-date information system and a common set of informational formats so that benchmarks can be constructed and each institution’s performance can be compared – both with the performance of other institutions in the system and with their own performance over time.

The assumption here is that systemic benchmarks, systemic evaluations based on quasi-experimental designs, and a host of other sources and forms of information must be commissioned, co-ordinated and monitored. It is on the basis of this kind of sophisticated information that the state needs to respond to the sector. If political consultation was the dominant mode of distributed democracy previously, then information and knowledge management become the primary mode of accountable responsiveness in the network society. Intervening to enforce “comprehensive or grand policy” will only serve to increasingly destabilise the sector.



A key aspect of differentiating policy is experimentation. Policy is a form of explicit and deliberate governmental intervention. It is very important that policy-makers design a policy in such a way that the effects of the intervention can be assessed and this can only be done through experiments; in other words, knowledge about which measures and instruments work, and which do not work, can be increased through experimentation. It is risky to make any statements, or come to any conclusions concerning interventions and their effects, without using experimental or quasi-experimental research methods. Too much is assumed concerning the effects of policies and policy instruments and very little is actually known about these effects. No national system can prosper without continual monitoring and research that creates the kind of information and analysis around which collaboration most usefully occurs. This circulates information and allows all the actors – government, society/market and institutions – to be responsive.

The above discussion points to the fact that unidirectional comprehensive policy has not worked in South Africa in the post-1994 period. Instead, a different notion of higher education transformation, based on a more targeted, differentiated, information-rich policy interaction between government, institutions and society has to be developed.

In moving towards a mixed mode of comprehensive and differentiated policy, the South African government published in 1997 a White Paper on Higher Education Transformation and in 2001 a National Plan for Higher Education. Both publications indicated that the government would develop steering mechanisms involving planning and funding to assist with the transformation of the public higher education system.

These and other policy documents indicated that this steering through planning and funding would involve a cyclical process of this kind:

- ▶ The Ministry of Education would, at the start of a planning cycle, assess the performance of individual higher education institutions against goals and targets contained in institutional plans approved by the Ministry.
- ▶ Institutional goals and targets would be confirmed or adjusted in the light of the performance measures applied by the Ministry.
- ▶ The goals and targets approved by the Ministry would determine, for each public higher education institution, what totals and categories of students would be funded by government in the national budget cycle to follow.
- ▶ The performance of institutions in achieving the same or revised goals and targets would be measured by the Ministry at the start of the next planning cycle.

If this cyclical process is to function as an effective steering mechanism for a higher education system, then how institutional performance is to be measured will have to be spelled out in clear and precise ways. One of the purposes of this CHET discussion document is to contribute to the South African debate by considering various models of performance measurement and raising various methodological and technical issues. The document does not argue for the adoption of a specific set of performance measures for public higher education, but records a process of thinking about performance indicators that can contribute to institutional improvement. Institutional improvement is not meant to refer only to a government-driven process, but to institutions and stakeholder groups having access to information that can help them shape the course of the institution.

The importance of assessing the performance of higher education systems has been registered in many other parts of the world, and, as can be seen in the contributions of Maurice Kogan and Frans Kaiser in Chapter 2, such assessments attest to new relationships between the state, higher education and society. The introduction of performance indicators and the assessments implied by them have often been controversial as they relate critically to resource allocation, quality, notions of public accountability and marketing. The goal of the European Union to improve the quality and efficiency of its higher education systems has led to the use of performance indicators that will also provide a platform for co-ordinating and comparing the very different national systems of its member states.

Similarly, for the rest of Africa, a very important issue is how higher education institutions throughout the continent can break out of the country-specific discourses of the moment which make it impossible to have a meaningful conversation across countries. If the framework for such a discourse is not developed, then aid and development in higher education, a part of the broad thrust of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), will remain insubstantial pipe dreams. It is also hoped that this document can serve as a basis for developing a broader, Africa-wide debate on performance indicators.

So while this report offers what is largely a country case study of the development of performance indicators for a higher education system, it does so in the context of international experience of, and debates about, the development and role of performance assessment and indicators.



## STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The main body of the report sets out and discusses in detail a number of indicator models which have been proposed for use in South Africa since 2000. It concludes with proposals designed to take further the South African debate on performance measures for the higher education system. The concluding sets of proposals were framed after taking account of discussions and presentations at two seminars organised by CHET during 2004.

The first seminar was held in January 2004, and the second in March 2004. The second seminar began with presentations by invited international speakers, and two of these papers, those by Maurice Kogan and Frans Kaiser, are reproduced in full in Chapter 2 of this book which provides an international perspective on the issues of performance indicators and performance measurement.

The South African discussion begins in Chapter 3, which re-visits the CHET publication of 2000 on measuring the transformation of the South African public higher education system. Although the data used in the CHET 2000 book is updated wherever possible, the point of this section is not to offer a new assessment of transformation in the South African higher education system, but rather to focus on the methodology employed in, and the main weaknesses of, the CHET 2000 approach.

Chapter 4 moves to a report published in 2001 by the Minister of Education's National Working Group (NWG) on the restructuring of the South African higher education landscape. The discussion focuses on the NWG's attempt to define indicators of the "fitness-for-purpose" of higher education institutions. The main text in this section is based on the published report of the NWG. The discussion highlights the key features of the NWG methodology, and considers some of the objections raised to it in South Africa during 2002.

Chapter 5 extends the South African debate. It discusses a CHET model which was formulated in 2003, and which accepted the basic NWG methodology (but not the NWG indicators and benchmarks). The main purpose of the section, once again, is to illustrate the effects of accepting the NWG's methodological assumptions within a framework of new indicators and benchmarks. This model was discussed at a CHET seminar held in Cape Town in January 2004, and a number of criticisms were voiced. These criticisms are summarised in the conclusion to this section.

Chapter 6 sets out a model which responds to the critique of CHET 2003, and which was discussed at a March 2004 seminar. Its basic thrust involves the separation of

systemic indicators and institutional indicators. The systemic indicators are based on a variation of the CHET 2000 model, and the institutional indicators on a methodology which moves away from that of the NWG and of CHET 2003. The responses of the March 2004 seminar to this CHET 2004 model are discussed at the conclusion to Chapter 5.

Chapter 7 gives a summary of CHET's responses to points raised at the March 2004 seminar. It also sets out a further set of proposals on appropriate performance indicators for the South African higher education system and South African higher education institutions.

Chapter 8 offers CHET's summing up of possibilities for charting the way forward in the ongoing debate on measuring performance in South Africa's higher education system.

The chapter concludes that, considering the interest expressed from the other six African countries who participated, there is a need to embark on a project that will develop "continent-relevant" indicators that will both strengthen capacity and construct a more commonly understood discourse amongst countries on the same continent.

