THE WAY FORWARD 8

REDEFINING THE ROLE OF THE STATE

The first performance indicator publication by Cloete and Bunting (2000) attempted to monitor progress towards transformation, with transformation defined mainly in terms of the 1997 White Paper. The NWG report (2001) attempted to use indicators to evaluate "well-functioning" institutions and the CHET 2003 report tried to improve on the NWG methodology. As was shown in earlier sections, all these attempts were more or less flawed, with the NWG contributing to a negative perception of performance indicators in higher education. The CHET 2004 work on performance assessment is not an approach to monitoring, but part of reflecting on a methodology for steering change, whether it be from the national government or within institutions.

As was stated in the first chapter, the use of performance indicators at system and institutional level, raises the issue of 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. On the one hand, the state, increasingly bound into networks, must itself become more responsive to differences in the higher education landscape. Grand or comprehensive policy is too crude an instrument to bring about targeted reforms. On the other hand, the mode of governance for achieving this cannot be responsiveness in the form of consultation inherited from the anti-apartheid struggle – deliberative policy jamborees.

In Chapter 2, Kogan argues that in the UK the introduction of performance assessment under Thatcher brought about a certain schizophrenia about the role of the state and "ended the period of trustfulness between universities and the state". Njabulo S. Ndebele, Vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town and chair of the South African University Vice-Chancellors Association, recently reflected on the first ten years of democracy and concluded, amongst other things, that:

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> *Consultation became a technical procedure that did not require any meaningful investment in securing leadership buy-in .... There was a sense of institutions being caught in a whirlwind of inevitable regulation and control ... The overall sense is that higher education was forced into a regulatory tunnel vision before the framework of transformation in its complex articulations had been internalised by the system. Regulation is thus experienced as external intervention rather than as the logical outcome of national transition.* (Ndebele, 2004:1–2)

Both of these observations alert us to some of the unintended outcomes of performance-orientated regulation and reform. It should be remembered that after Thatcher lost power in 1990 one of her most revealing reflections was that she "confessed" that her "unintended centralisation had led to many distinguished academics thinking that Thatcherism meant a philistine subordination of scholarship to the Treasury. Such an outcome was never her intention, but like so many rulers, she was toppled before she could rectify the mistake" (Jenkins, 2000).

In describing the new corporate-pluralist state model of governance, Olsen (1988) argues that this type of state is entirely dependent on knowledge – the production of knowledge for purposes of competitiveness as well as the use of knowledge to better fulfill its steering and policy-making roles. It requires, in other words, greater infrastructural power than South Africa possessed at the time of transition to democracy in 1994. The shift from a comprehensive to a differentiated policy model is going to demand a more efficient government, together with a new approach to consultation. It will require that government is more sensitive to the self-regulating capacity of the higher education institutions and to the consequences of the complex relations between higher education and society.

A differentiated policy approach requires a move away from consultation as an event towards consultation as a continuous process. It implies establishing structural interaction, links and networks that enable government to communicate and engage with all higher education institutions in a process that enhances the capacities of both. There is no sure way of doing this, but a comparative systemic information structure has to offer the foundation for any such relationships, providing as it does a discernible point of reference.

Key to all of this are indicators that have been agreed upon. The important shift that occurred during this project was the shift from a very loose notion of benchmarks to targets. This does not mean that benchmarks, in particular relevant international

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benchmarks, are not important, but targets offer two crucial advantages. First, targets, by implication, are more attainable than benchmarks, and secondly, targets can be negotiated. **Targets that are negotiated provide the basis for a notion of higher education transformation that is grounded in a more differentiated, information-rich policy interaction between government, institutions and society. This implies not only a new approach to policy, but also a new notion of the state.**

In developing such an approach to change, both between the government and institutions, and even within institutions, South Africa will be in line with current European developments, as Kaiser shows in Chapter 2. However, we will not be following Europe, because while Kaiser lays out some very important criteria for the selection of indicators, or targets, he also shows that the European Union is not much further along the road than South Africa in working out how to reach agreement on these targets and how to develop a change implementation process that is constructive rather than undermining of higher education.

The method followed in this volume was to reflect on previous attempts at performance assessment and to suggest different or new approaches. It is hoped that the reflective/development methodology will provide the higher education community (government, organised constituencies and institutions) with a differentiated approach to negotiating targets that will move beyond the current stand-off described by Ndebele (2004).

THE AFRICAN PERFORMANCE INDICATOR PROJECT

The discussions at the March 2004 consultation kicked off with a brief description of the funding partnership[5] started in 2001, that has a focus on African higher education and initiated case studies of institutions in several African countries. These case studies revealed the lack of any common understanding of performance indicators for higher education institutions and hence the difficulty of talking about common indicators across countries.

The main arguments in support of developing a cross-country project centred on the need to develop "continent-relevant" indicators for higher education, especially to facilitate regional integration and co-operation and to enable African countries to compare themselves to their "peers" – other African countries. While there was acknowledgement that countries were at different stages in the development of measuring strategies, it was felt that this project would allow African countries to learn

5 *The partnership between Ford, Carnegie, Rockefeller and McArthur Foundations.*

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from one another's experiences – to recognise common features and generic categories for measuring performance, and to set benchmarks for good practice. It was argued that if performance for higher education systems is defined broadly for the benefit of the countries, then it will also benefit the continent.

Issues that would need to be addressed, are, amongst others, national versus continental indicators and data collection procedures. One possible approach would be to start with generic indicators and then to break these down into country-specific contexts, while another approach would be to start with fine-grained institutional indicators and then look at what can be used at the national or regional level. Another approach could be that core indicators be developed that will work across all the countries. The current South African indicators relate mostly to equity and efficiency, and these could be applicable generally to other countries. It will be important for a distinction to be made between indicators for quality and indicators for the monitoring of higher education systems. Consideration will also have to be given to indicators developed for the region by NEPAD and UNESCO.

Targets for different countries might be different, and although comparison at national level seems feasible, it raises a question as to whether the range of institutions in each country would allow for meaningful comparability. If each country unpacks its own national plans into goals and targets, another question is whether this will result in generic targets and common goals. An Africa-wide project also has to be wary of indicators and benchmarks being used for unintended political purposes – as was illustrated by Kogan.

With respect to data collection, it was felt that the biggest challenge will be to make sure that information from different countries is comparable and that systems are set up for data collection for agreed performance indicators in different countries. It was proposed that a data specialist has to investigate how data is translated into indicators in different countries; for example, in the use of head counts or full time equivalents. Another issue to be considered is the size of biases in data collection processes in different countries, and how to ensure that data collection minimises biases.

The March 2004 seminar concluded that a small group from among the participants should get together to specify deliverables and a budget for a project proposal, informed by this CHET project and issues raised during the deliberations.

While different countries in Africa will continue to develop quality and systemic performance indicators, a joint project will be developed that will aim at both strengthening capacity and constructing a more commonly understood discourse amongst countries on the same continent.

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