

**Comments on the CHE's
*The State of Higher Education Report (2009)***

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Although the recently published Council on Higher Education (CHE) report entitled *The State of Higher Education*¹ pulls together a lot of very useful data (not all of it entirely accurate), the problem that is immediately apparent is the absence of a methodology section or at least some clear identification at the start of the report of the critical issues that should be addressed in a current assessment of the “state of higher education” in South Africa. The reference to “National Plan” goals is simply not adequate. It is surprising that after three of these “State of Higher Education” reports, the CHE has still not had a serious discussion about methodology.

At a minimum, an adequate review of the state of higher education would need to cover governance, equity, quality, and development (including research and innovation, high level training, etc.).

With regard to governance, the report takes limited cognisance of Du Toit’s excellent CHE report on autonomy and its implications.² In particular, these insights are not applied to addressing the serious problems caused by a national department with extremely limited internal capacity, not to mention poor coordination of different policies at national level. What has become clear through the findings of the CHET eight African country study (HERANA) is that a combination of considerable institutional autonomy with a weak national department leads to instability and decay.

Although quality in higher education is a central responsibility of the CHE, the report is silent on this issue which can only strike one as a strange anomaly. Considering the extensive, costly, time-consuming and disruptive institutional audits conducted by the HEQC, it is extraordinary that this report makes no reference to the findings for the system as a whole.

Higher education and development is handled in a fragmented, unsystematic manner – and even the discussion on research is slanted towards equity. The section on ‘engagement’ ignores the very original CHE commissioned report by Joe Muller that shows how the Martin Hall (and UCT) approach has become disconnected from any notion of development. Despite its flaws, the CHE still promotes the Hall conception of engagement.

The primary focus in the report is on equity, but on a “back to 1994” approach. The two graphs below, and the following slide, tell a powerful policy story. In 1995 the NCHE proposed the ‘massification’ of the higher education system in order to address equity (increased participation) and development (dramatic increase in high and medium level skills). Senior people in the DoE and National Treasury understood ‘massification’ as massifying universities (in other words, as another version of the African problem of overcrowded elite systems) and therefore opposed the proposal, opting instead for ‘planned growth’. The South African version of planned growth resulted in the three sets of data below.

The change in the racial composition of the student body is one of the most dramatic in the world. Graph 1 shows that the percentage of whites more than halved (from 60% to about 25%) and blacks doubled (from around 35% to 75%). At an international workshop on *Governing Access* (Oslo 2007) it was stated that nowhere else in the world has there been such a radical change in the composition of the student body.

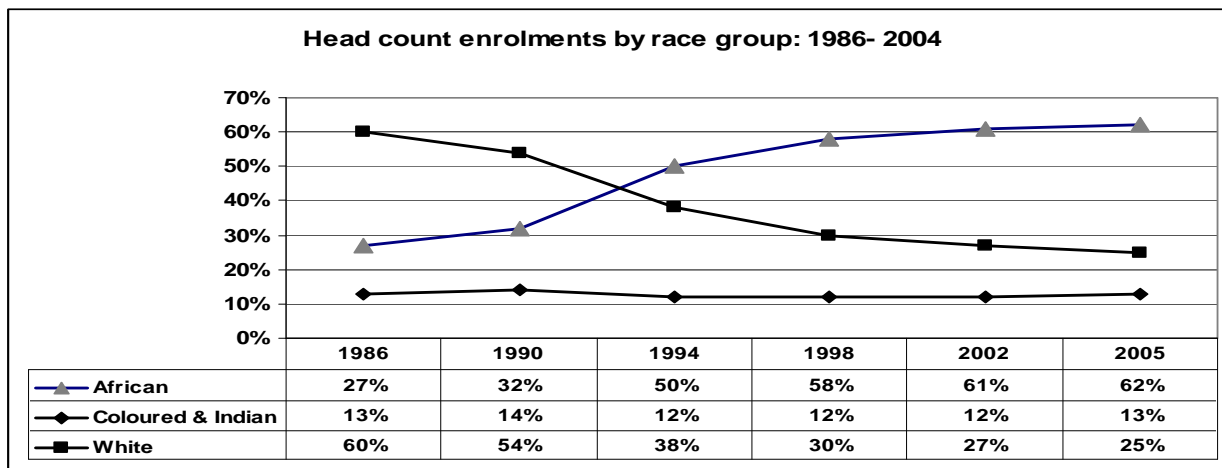
While government had only symbolic policy to increase enrolments of black students, the real dynamic driving change was provided by the institutions, which, through progressive admissions policies, brought about this change. Government did not accept an NCHE suggestion that a higher subsidy value be given to every enrolled black student. The NCHE argued that such a policy steering mechanism would be an incentive for historically white institutions to enroll more black students,

¹ <http://www.che.org.za/documents/d000201/> <Accessed 3 November 2009>

² Du Toit, A (2007) *Autonomy as a Social Compact*. Pretoria: CHE. <http://www.che.ac.za/documents/d000143/> <Accessed 3 November 2009>

and would simultaneously address the thorny redress issue, because the historically black institutions, with their high black enrolments, would receive proportionally more subsidy. It is also interesting to note that the fastest increase in enrolments of black students occurred between 1990 -1994, when the government was not trying to 'govern' access.

Graph 1



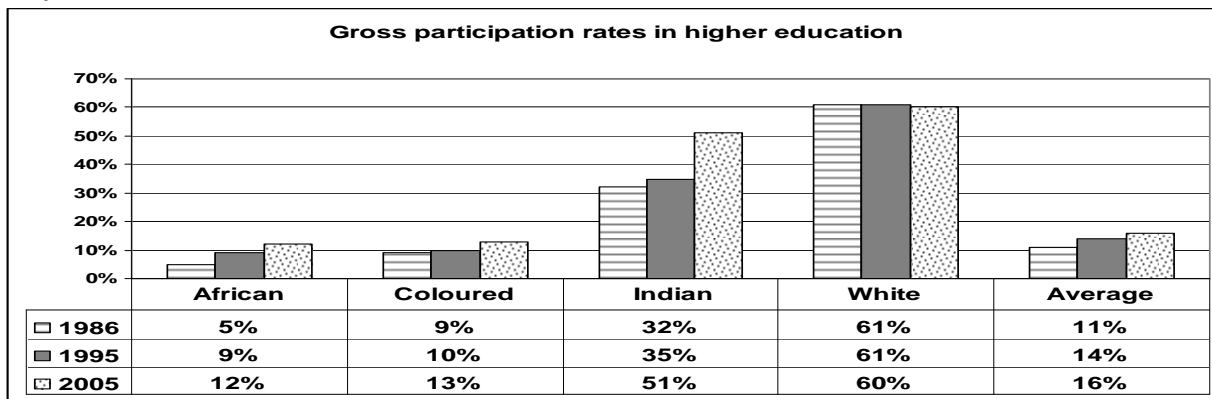
Bunting and Cloete, Governing Access (2007)

Graph 2 shows a different picture. The real measure of equity is not the colour of the of the student population on campus, but the participation rate for the different population groups. Shockingly it shows that not much has changed. The reason for this is that in an elite university system all the students can be black and the participation rate would still be well below 30%.

To change the participation rate requires a massive expansion of the post school system. There are two options here: either university enrolments are doubled; or a differentiated post school system is established with universities, colleges (public and private) and a range of other post school education and training opportunities. Apart from the expense of pursuing the first option, and the shortage of academics, research by HESA shows that the school system is simply not producing enough students adequately prepared for university study, to justify expanding the university system. Actually, it could be argued that in terms of the number of students with adequate university preparation, the university system should shrink.

The big equity issue for the university system is not trying to squeeze a few more black students into the institutions, but addressing the inequity in pass rates (success rates), which, it could be argued, is a problem for both the unequal school system and the universities.

Graph 2




Bunting and Cloete, Governing Access (2007)

The slide below shows the combined effects of failing to develop a post-school college system as part of a higher education, or post-school system. This, in combination with restrictions on private colleges, the mergers, the failure of the SETAS and a highly constrained labour market for school leavers, resulted in 750 000 students in the age group 18–24 not being in education, training or employment – an educational and social disaster.


Slide 1: Post School Education

Pool for post school (matric) education
18-24 year olds (2007)

- ▶ **598 657** Grade 12 without UE (university exemption)
- ▶ **98 335** Grade 12 with UE
- ▶ **696 992** Total **NEET** who need **Immediate** further education, training or employment
- ▶ **57 055** Post matric employed in elementary occupations in need of further education and training
- ▶ **750 000** Immediate pool
- ▶
- ▶ **This means 750 000 with matric are not in education, employment or training**



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Sheppard and Cloete (2009)

It could be argued that this situation has come about largely as a consequence of policy decisions taken collectively by the DoE, Treasury and Department of Labour, and a lack of job opportunities for post-school students. However, if one looks, for example, at two speeches made by the Minister of Higher Education and Training (at the Universities of Johannesburg and Free State) then two things stand out – criticism of the universities for not doing enough to enrol African students (strong emphasis) and hardly any mention of the important role higher education can play in development.

The section on “Progress and challenges ...” is like the weather forecast: “Today there will be some rain and some sunshine.” It says nothing. For example, under “Progress”, the CHE says “NSFAS supports many students”, but HET says the problems in this area are so great that it requires the setting up of a task team. So what is this CHE report actually trying to do? This kind of ‘weather forecast’ raises questions both about the independence of the CHE and the policy usefulness of the report.

The CHE report has a sub-text that plays into this shifting of the 'blame' to the universities and completely exonerates and sanitises government failures. At the same time it glosses over the two key equity debates – improving throughput and expanding post-school educational opportunities. By entering the ‘equity blame game’, which is really not helpful to higher education at this moment

in history, and misdiagnosing the key equity problem, this report does not seem to be helpful to the government or the sector.

Finally, there needs to be a discussion about 'independence' and who writes the report. Even Johan Mouton's moderate criticism of the funding of research is excised out by a CHE that could be perceived to be 'dependent on HET. A different model would be to commission four or five independent academics/HE experts to each write a piece on the state of higher education and then have the courage to publish it. For example, the latest *Mail and Guardian* Higher Education section had a review on mergers that was much more interesting and stimulating than the CHE report, although it was also plagued by inaccuracies. Nonetheless, one analyst trenchantly remarked that: "We have been so busy looking backwards to a certain notion of equity that we forgot to develop a forward looking notion of what a South African higher education system should look like." This one statement seems more thought provoking than anything that I read in the CHE report.