



# REPORT

## Accounting for Autonomy

Jointly hosted by:

*CHEC (Cape Higher Education Consortium)  
CHET (Center for Higher Education Transformation)  
CSHE (Center for the Study of Higher Education)*

**Vineyard Hotel, Cape Town**

**7 October 2004**

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## **Introduction**

The seminar - Accounting for Autonomy – was set up to explore a question raised by Jonathan Jansen in his TB Davie Academic Freedom lecture: “Do you think that universities are less autonomous today than they were prior to 1994?” The seminar forms part of a larger CHET project to assess changes in the governance of higher education. Four speakers, Nasima Badsha, Ian Bunting, Martin Hall and Brian Figaji addressed Jansen’s question. Chika Sehoole gave an overview of Jansen’s argument. These presentations were followed by questions and comments from the seminar participants, and closing comments from Nico Cloete. What follows is a summary of the main points raised in the papers presented and the subsequent discussion.

## **Nasima Badsha – Department of Education**

Nasima Badsha drew attention to the distinction between academic freedom and institutional autonomy, by citing their definitions in Education White Paper 3 on Higher Education. In relation to academic freedom, she argued that since 1994, in terms of a) what is taught in higher education, b) who is taught, and c) who teaches, higher education had moved entirely away from the apartheid system. This is evidenced in particular in relation to the apartheid era’s banning and restriction of certain content, in legislating what was taught, and in the defining of race criteria for who was taught and by whom.

Badsha emphasised the link between institutional autonomy and accountability. Again reflecting on the apartheid era, she contended that there was a measure of autonomy for universities then, which was dependent on an uncritical stance towards government, and in general, the pursuance of a state research agenda, or at least minimal resistance to it. Otherwise, universities were left to their own devices, and by the time the NCHE was established in 1995, many disconcerting features were emerging in the system which are well documented in the NCHE report, as well as in Education White Paper 3. They include, amongst others:

- a proliferation of public-private partnerships, threatening quality through an emphasis on gaining high student numbers and outsourcing tuition;
- a growth of distance education providers, where again there was a disregard for quality;
- a mushrooming of satellite campuses.

The NCHE envisioned a single system, with the national plan translating the goals of the system into strategies. The three key levers were planning, funding and quality assurance. Badsha argued that in this context steering in the system was crucial; that the case for institutional autonomy cannot be unfettered. She argued this by taking issue with three points raised in Jansen’s paper: the fact

that the state can decide which institutions can offer which programmes; the fact that the state can displace a vice chancellor on the basis of review; and the fact that the state decides on the credibility of qualifications.

She demonstrated through example, why regulation was needed in each of the three areas. In relation to programmes she pointed to issues of efficiency, cost, and competition for small pools of students and staff. In relation to the displacement of vice chancellors she highlighted the breakdown of financial and governance structures in some institutions. In relation to qualifications, Badsha stressed issues of quality.

Badsha concluded her talk by asking whether higher education should hanker after the old days, of 'give us a subsidy and keep quiet', or whether there was an acknowledgement that there is a role for the state in steering the system towards the achievement of key policy goals. If the latter, then the questions that arise are around the extent of that steering, and what the balance should be between self-regulation and external regulation. Finally, there is a need to question what instruments should be used to achieve this balance.

## **Ian Bunting - Department of Education**

Ian Bunting took up two issues central to the autonomy question: the programme and qualification mix and enrolment planning. He set out to provide some background to, and explanation of, the decision-making processes involved in the application of these policy instruments.

### **1. Programme and Qualification Mix (PQM)**

The PQM policy was derived from the 1997 White Paper, which made it clear that institutional diversity was a precondition for transformation. It adds that diversity requires mission and academic programme differentiation to be central features of public higher education institutions in South Africa.

The first academic programme differentiation process ran from 2001-2002. The aims of the process were to:

- stabilise qualification and field-of-study profiles in areas of institutional strength;
- create baselines for determining rational allocations of new programmes to institutions;
- contain unrealistic institutional aspirations;
- address mission and academic drift in both universities and technikons;
- prevent unnecessary programme duplication and overlap between institutions.

In December 2002, the Minister approved a programme qualification mix (PQM) profile for each public higher education institution, having taken account of institutional capacity, including qualifications of academic staff, and student to academic staff ratios, and past enrolment and graduation trends at institutional and programme levels. In this way, a profile was established for each institution. Qualification types were established for each institution.

A new process was then begun in 2003, which was an approval process for new programmes. Bunting described the process whereby applications were made and considered. In the final instance the Minister approves only those programmes, which have been accredited by HEQC and registered by SAQA. Bunting showed the process to be relatively stringent. Approximately 200-300 applications were received. About half of these were passed to the HEQC, and the other half rejected. Therefore few programmes were actually getting through the process.

## **2. Student Enrolment Planning**

Bunting went on to explain the processes around student enrolment planning. He explained how, in the December 2003 statement on higher education funding, the Minister committed the Department of Education to engaging in a system-wide student enrolment planning exercise covering the academic years 2005 to 2007, facilitating the implementation of a new funding formula and, in particular, ensuring that institutional enrolment plans are affordable and sustainable in the context of the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework. The enrolment planning exercise would involve the Department in developing broad national and institutional enrolment projections indicating the student numbers that the Department would consider for funding.

Affordable and sustainable enrolment plans were a key concern. This was because of a number of trends within the system:

- Student enrolments had grown rapidly - a growth of 131 000 students in a four year period. The growth in technikons had been half that of universities. The number of disadvantaged students had also grown rapidly. African students had grown by 83 000, and also the coloured student population had gone up rapidly. Growth in academic staff had not matched student growth, and nor had growth in government funding. The growth in total student funding units (2000-2003) was 20%, the nominal growth in government subsidy (2000-2003) was 26% and the real growth in government subsidy (2000-2003) was 7%. Staff had increased by only 6% in the four-year period.
- Cohort figures from 2000 to 2003 showed a high drop out rate. Of the 2000 cohort - half had dropped out by the beginning of 2003. A check was run to see if this was due to institutional transfer, but a low incidence of this was found. After four years only 22% of the cohort had graduated.

Bunting went on to explain the student enrolment planning processes, and presented a summary of the analysis of data and the preparation of reports. He also outlined some of the institutional responses to the DoE's preliminary enrolment proposals. The following questions had been posed:

- Can enrolment caps be set for a triennium as close as 2005-2007?
- How can inconsistencies between the DoE's proposed planning parameters and institutional strategic plans be resolved?
- Will student enrolment growth necessarily lead to additional government funding revenues for an institution?
- If caps are being set by the DoE, should these not be broad, general ones? Should the DoE be involved in the micro-management of student enrolment flows at an institution?
- Since the output performance of institutions played a major role in the setting of the preliminary enrolment parameters, how will the DoE monitor and assess institutional performance in future? In other words, the question had shifted more to what indicators were being used, and whether these could be made available to institutions.

## **Martin Hall – University of Cape Town**

Martin Hall began by directly addressing the question raised in Jansen's paper – "Are universities less autonomous today than they were prior to 1994?" – and arguing that it was a superficial question, which needed to be challenged.

Academic freedom and autonomy, he argued, are not synonymous. The example of France in 1968 shows that there can be academic freedom without autonomy. He also argued that there could be autonomy without academic freedom, as evidenced in the US situation, where a large amount of research is funded by the Defence Department. Finally, he stressed that autonomy is about governance, that is, the principle that an institution should govern itself, independent of state control.

For Hall, Jansen's account was a-historical. Was there *any* real autonomy prior to 1994 in South Africa? He went on to question whether any higher education institution is really autonomous (given state funding and authorisation of qualifications), and claimed that all higher education institutions globally have state regulation of qualifications in some form.

In 1994 the higher education system in South Africa was in a category of ONE, unique in its racialisation; there was no other system like it. Since 1994 it has become more like other systems. Successive governments have seen institutions as part of a system, and have sought a return on investment in human capital development and research. This trend is mapped through the Higher Education

Act (1997) and successive (almost annual) amendments. Seeing institutions as part of a system again is also not unusual, and is rather an expression of a global trend

So Hall redefined the question. Arguing that all higher education systems are to some extent controlled by legislation and regulation and universities themselves depend on the protection of the state for their status, the issue rather is: are there limits to the legitimacy of legislation and regulation, and how should these limits be determined?

He presented two sides to the argument. With respect to the state, public money must be accounted for against objectives, including developmental goals. The government is mandated by the electorate to ensure appropriate economic and social benefits. With respect to the university, knowledge is created and transferred within disciplines that have their own requirements and logic; knowledge creation, in other words, is best served by free enquiry, and this is likely to be compromised by outside interference. The question then is how to find a position between these two arguments, to avoid polarisation.

Hall suggested that the question may be thought about in terms of *conditional autonomy*.

Autonomy in higher education institutions has always been partial, and can never be absolute, and is related to, but distinct from, academic freedom. Effective higher education depends on the recognition of accompanying responsibilities by both state and universities.

In this regard then, there are key questions for the universities and the state. Have universities focused sufficiently on key development issues to justify the expenditure of public funds on higher education? Hall pointed to graduate unemployment rates (5% white, 20% black; in the face of 300 000 – 500 000 skills shortages). In relation to the state, the question is whether it has sufficiently recognised that the consequences of inappropriate state steering might be the undermining of educational and research processes? This is a risk, Hall argued, that the state has not properly considered.

Hall raised a further question as to whether there had been a point in the successive amendments to the legislation over the past decade where the balance had shifted from state steering to state interference. And he proposed that the tipping point had been the Programme Qualification Mix (PQM), which was an inappropriate intervention that represents the limit of the legitimacy of conditional autonomy.

Hall reiterated his central point – the state should be concerned with how public money is spent, but cannot legislate what universities may teach. In this way he

took issue with both Jansen (in his polarisation of issues and a-historical approach), and with the DoE position articulated by Bunting and Badsha.

## **Brian Figaji – Peninsula Technikon**

Brian Figaji described the fierce contestation from the liberal institutions to the Extension of University Education Act 45 of 1959, which in some institutions led to the extinguishing of the torch of academic freedom.

He went on to give the present restriction on universities' freedom to take financial actions as a particularly powerful example of the current infringement of institutional autonomy by the state. He raised the question of protest in the current circumstances, and examined the state's actions in relation to institutional autonomy from the NCHE to the present.

Figaji argued that the state had started out with three models to choose from: state control, state supervision and state interference. The NCHE proposed a model of co-operative governance of higher education. What this assumed, however, was a highly skilled staff in the higher education branch of the DoE, an higher education forum representative of stakeholders who would advise the minister, and an higher education council of experts to oversee the planning and act as a buffer between institutions and the government.

Despite the adoption of the co-operative governance model, Figaji argued that the state changed the elements of the model and implemented a state control model. He showed the changes that were made to the Higher Education Act of 1997 which eroded institutional autonomy and he argued that higher education finds itself in the same place with respect to autonomy as before 1994. He went on to say that there was an erosion of institutional autonomy not only through policies and regulation but also attitude. The question to higher education institutions is: "How do we allow people to speak to us and about us?" A culture of 'blaming, naming and shaming' higher education has been established.

Figaji concluded by stating that the central control of higher education has increased and institutional autonomy has been undermined. The biggest concern is the silence of higher education. This begs the question as to whether higher education deserves institutional autonomy if it cannot be critical and vocal in defence of its own autonomy.

## **Chika Sehoole - University of Pretoria**

Sehoole presented a summary of Jonathan Jansen's paper (2004), in particular the nine points Jansen raises around the specific actions the state has taken that have contributed to the receding line of the institutional autonomy of universities. In summary these are:

1. The state now decides **what** can be taught, or rather, what institutions might be willing to teach without subsidised income, through skilful manipulation of the funding formula.
2. The state now decides **which institutions will offer what programmes**.
3. The state now decides **who** can be taught, or rather, how many students are allowed to enter universities and in which specific fields.
4. The state now decides **how** students will be taught by placing institutional qualifications on a national framework grid through which qualifications are organised and delivered.
5. The state decides on **which programmes will be funded at what levels**— *but in ways that appear increasingly arbitrary*, such as the differential funding decision on what kinds of programmes are more desirable than others.
6. The state decides on the **credibility** of qualifications, programmes and even institutions through the mechanism of higher education quality audits.
7. that the state now decides **which institutions will exist**, and in what combinations.
8. The state now contemplates the **centralising of information** (or rather de-institutionalising information) required for student admissions in a proposed central applications office.
9. The state can now displace a Vice Chancellor on the basis of review and **install his or her own Administrator** to run the institution (Jansen, 2004: 6-8).

Sehoole went on to summarise Jansen’s argument. These interventions, Jansen argues, were not necessarily avoidable or unnecessary. The question is how will higher education institutions manage their relationship with a state that has centralised so much authority in itself that what is taught, how and to whom, are now legitimate areas for official intervention. And the more disturbing question is: “What is to prevent a virile state now, or an undemocratic state in the future, from pressing for even greater control over the day-to-day actions, decisions and destinies of individual institutions?” (Jansen, 2004:11)

Sehoole points out that at the heart of the matter is the role of the state with respect to higher education, and the question is what kind of state is needed to steer higher education to the social goals set for higher education. What comes out of Jansen’s paper is an alert to the dearth of public debate in higher education and the absence of the policy forums of the past. It is hoped that the debate will not end here, and further, that we guard against thinking that the situation was better before 1994 than it is today.

## Discussion

A number of issues were raised in the discussion, and the speakers responded to some of these points. The issues are presented below.

## **1. A polarisation of the debate – between higher education and the state**

A point was made that the debate around institutional autonomy had been set up as the state versus higher education. But then the question that arises is, where is the absent guest? What about society, employers, communities and business? Is there an assumption that the state simply speaks for civil society and for the economy? There is an assumption that the state can make decisions on its own, in isolation from these different interest groups and pressures. One speaker asserted the need to move attention away from the state for a while and consider the relation between higher education and civil society.

Another speaker also expressed the need to move away from the polarisation of higher education and government. The speaker argued that this polarisation was taking us nowhere and destroying the credibility of higher education, where higher education was seen to be engaged in public squabbling. The true value of the NCHE had been its broad based notion of partnership, and its establishment of the potential partners and stakeholders.

## **2. Theorising the nature of the state**

The nature of the state was raised a number of times. A need to theorise the changes in the state, and locate the analysis of the university within this was expressed, especially in terms of the implications for accountability.

The nature of the state was related to the issue of the public good. Martin Hall's input was referred to as highlighting the problems arising from the state behaving in ways that threaten the university's role in serving the public good. The question then is where do the limits to the state's control lie? Another speaker raised the importance of placing the discussion of institutional autonomy within a theorised notion of the role of the state. In this way questions raised around the relationship between the state and the university's autonomy and accountability, could be addressed.

In the response to the issue of the role / nature of the state it was agreed that if we are talking about a public institution working in the name of the public good we need a theory of the state. There is a need to theorise the *post-apartheid* state, about which there is a gap in the sociological literature. The 'death of the state' predicted in the nineties had not happened; we need to think about the contemporary state.

## **3. Implementing national policies**

Bunting offered a response to Hall's input, particularly his argument that PQM 'tipped the scale' from state steering to state interference. Bunting did not agree that either the PQM or student enrolment planning amounted to state interference in the autonomy of institutions. Both exercises were essential to the

implementation of the transformation vision of the 1997 White Paper on Higher Education.

Bunting summarised some of the history of higher education policy implementation in SA since 1997. He pointed out that a fundamental starting point in various implementation processes, especially those involving the restructuring of the higher education landscape, had been the recognition that apartheid had affected the entire higher education system. The higher education system as a whole had been dysfunctional and in need of transformation.

Bunting went on to say that there were, nevertheless, degrees to which institutions were dysfunctional. In terms of basic performance measures, there are institutions that are doing well, but there are others whose overall performance has been weak. It would be possible to move away from a 'one size fits all' principle in policy implementation, and to place higher education institutions into different categories based on their performance in relation to the realisation of national goals. Those in the top categories could be given higher levels of self-regulation than those in the lower categories. A key overriding concern, however, would be how could this be done without re-instating the old apartheid era categories of institutions.

Badsha agreed with the comments made by Bunting, and in particular with the problems implicit in moving away from a 'one-size-fits-all' principle of policy implementation. She added a further perspective on the implementation of national policy goals. It was important to stress that implementation had to take place in a context determined by national fiscal policies. For example, in pressing the commitment to equity, the 2001 National Plan for Higher Education set 20% as a national higher education participation rate, to be realised over a number of years and in line with resource availability. The higher education system could enrol more and more students, but it would also need to provide the necessary facilities and quality instructional services so that students can pass and get work.

#### **4. The silence from higher education**

A question was raised as to why there had been no march led by the five vice chancellors in the Western Cape, and why this was unlikely to happen. Again, Hall's presentation was referred to as raising the question of agency within higher education. The speaker argued that Jansen sets up a straw man argument. The real issue is identifying the motor of change. In this regard reference was made to the nature of 'practical autonomy', and the university's response to its community.

A slightly different view was that the DoE should ensure greater involvement of institutions in decision-making. The claim was made that the DoE was not taking the sector seriously.

## **5. Curriculum construction**

A question was raised about the construction of curricula. The speaker referred to Halls' stress on the importance of the difference between institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Jansen had blurred this distinction. He went on to question what we mean by academic freedom. Can I construct my curriculum absolutely on my own? What is the role of professional societies? Should the technikon curricula be re-shaped? Who will do this re-shaping?

Also in relation to curriculum, another speaker raised the issue of affordability, arguing for the necessity of taking note of the question of rationalisation, and things coming down to a question of money. Is it all about affordability? Is what we are doing reducing responsibility to affordability? In relation to curriculum reform, do we only teach what is fundable, what is measurable?

## **6. Globalisation**

The issue of globalisation was raised. The latter has meant the erosion of the wealthy state, and the onset of the neo-liberal agenda. There is a need to look at the implications of these global shifts for higher education. In this regard the speaker argued that Jansen's argument was not only a-historical, but also a-sociological.

## **7. A sense of history and place**

Another speaker reiterated the need to bring back a sense of history. In terms of apartheid regulation there is a need to disaggregate the sector and create an historical account. The speaker stressed the need to be sensitive to where the foundations were laid of where we are situated today.

In a similar vein, a further speaker warned about thinking about what apartheid did correctly, and taking the cue from there. The cue should be taken from Africa. He suggested looking at what is going on in universities in Africa, rather than always turning to Australia, Canada, etc.

## **Nico Cloete – CHET**

In closing Nico Cloete identified a number of dichotomies that emerged in the course of the discussion:

- Political versus efficiency concerns. Under apartheid there was a political violation of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. This has shifted to a concern with efficiency, the current driving factor in the autonomy debate.

Efficiency, of course, is not 'apolitical': it was no accident that the title of Jansen's lecture was "Accounting for autonomy."

- Imposed versus negotiated decisions. How the DoE came to decisions was at times opaque, and often not negotiated. The problem with structurally weak states is that they cannot negotiate - GEAR is an example of where a weak state could not negotiate and the policy set the way for transformation in other areas.
- Differentiated versus 'one-size fits all' approaches. What happens with a 'one-size fits all' approach is that the weakest set the policy agenda. It is not feasible to impose the same policies, and there is a need to develop a set of conditions under which things may happen (i.e. under these conditions, you can do this; under other conditions, or if you do not fulfil these criteria, you may not).

Cloete thanked everybody who participated in a very informative and constructive discussion.

## Reference

Jansen, J. (2004). Accounting for Autonomy. *The 41<sup>st</sup> TB Davie Memorial Lecture*. University of Cape Town, 26 August 2004.

**Report by:**  
**Ursula Hoadley**  
**12 October 2004**

**FOR COMMENTS OR SUGGESTIONS PLEASE CONTACT**  
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## Participants

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Barnes	Teresa	University of Western Cape
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Bunting	Ian	Department of Education
Bunting	Lisa	University of Cape Town
Busby	Pat	CHEC
Cele	Gabriel	University of Western Cape
Cloete	Nico	CHET
Cooper	David	University of Cape Town
Ensor	Paula	University of Cape Town
Esau-Arendse	Shahyda	Student
Fataar	Aslam	University of Western Cape
Favish	Judy	University of Cape Town
February	Collette	University of Cape Town
Figaji	Brian	Peninsula Technikon
Fisher	Glen	NBI
Fourie	Magda	University of Free State
Galant	Jaamiah	University of Stellenbosch
Hall	Martin	University of Cape Town
Higgins	John	University of Cape Town
Hoadley	Ursula	University of Cape Town
Jaffer	Kay	University of Western Cape
Johnson	Dominic	Student
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Khotseng	Benito	-
Koen	Charlton	HSRC
Leatt	Jim	CHEC
Matshedisho	Raji	University of Cape Town
Mdekazi	Zolile	University of Western Cape
Metcalfe	Anthea	Student
Moller	Allison	University of Western Cape
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Murray	Noeleen	University of Cape Town
Nguni	Ngisana	Student
Nkanyuza	Sylvia	University of Transkei
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Smith	Mathew	Strategy and Tactics
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Tisani	Thami	Cape Technikon
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# CSHE, CHEC and CHET

invite you to a

## SEMINAR

7 October 2004

Vineyard Hotel, Conference Center, Cape Town

16h30—18h30

(drinks & snacks will be served)

SEMINAR

### ACCOUNTING FOR AUTONOMY

Over the last ten years the relationship between higher education and the state in South Africa has changed dramatically in the aftermath of the shift from the apartheid regime to a democratic government. While the constitution guarantees academic freedom, autonomy is a much more contested notion. In preparing for the T B Davie Academic Freedom lecture, Jansen asked a range of influential academics: "Do you think universities are less autonomous today than they were prior to 1994?" This seminar continues to explore this question and is part of a larger CHET project to assess changes in governance.

**Welcome:**

- Tyrone Pretorius / Jim Leatt (CHEC)

**Chair:**

- Beverley Thaver (CSHE, University of Western Cape)

**Speakers:**

- Nasima Badsha & Ian Bunting (Department of Education)
- Martin Hall (University of Cape Town)
- Brian Figaji (Peninsula Technikon)
- Jonathan Jansen (University of Pretoria)

**Closing:**

- Nico Cloete (CHET)

**Due to space being limited, only the first 50 RSVP's will be allowed to attend! Please RSVP by 4 October 2004 to:**

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