The Transformation and Reconstruction of the Higher Education System

1. Introduction

The National Plan for Higher Education, which was approved by Cabinet in February 2001, identified five key policy goals and strategic objectives necessary for achieving the overall goal of the transformation of the higher education system.

These are:

· To increase access and to produce graduates with the skills and competencies necessary to meet the human resource needs of the country.

· To promote equity of access and outcomes and to redress past inequalities through ensuring that student and staff profiles reflect the demographic composition of South African society.

· To ensure diversity in the institutional landscape of the higher education system through mission and programme differentiation to meet national and regional skills and knowledge needs.

· To build high-level research capacity, including sustaining current research strength and to promote research linked to national development needs.

· To restructure and consolidate the institutional landscape of the higher education system to transcend the fragmentation, inequalities and inefficiencies of the apartheid past and to enable the establishment of South African institutions consistent with the vision and values of a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic society.

1.1 The proposals for the restructuring and consolidation of the institutional landscape, which were approved by Cabinet at its meeting of 29 May 2002, will enable the necessary structural changes to be effected, which will lay the foundation for the transformation and reconstruction of the higher education system. However, institutional restructuring is in itself not sufficient to achieve the broader goals and objectives for the transformation and reconstruction of the higher education system. For example, merging two weak institutions would not necessarily result in a strong institution. It would, however, lay the basis for creating a strong institution through, for instance:

· Ensuring better staff: student ratios thus enabling the development of strategies to improve poor throughput and graduation rates.

· Rationalisation of programmes where there is duplication and overlap, which would allow for a more effective and efficient distribution of programmes resulting in:

(i) Economies of scale through reducing unit costs.

(ii) Economies of scope through broadening the range of courses on offer thus increasing student choice and enabling greater responsiveness to changing labour market requirements.

(iii) More effective utilisation of existing academic staff capacities.

(iv) Enhanced administrative and management capacity through the consolidation of existing personnel, especially at middle management level.

1.2   However, to achieve the broader goals and objectives for the transformation and reconstruction of the higher education system, that is, to ensure an equitable, sustainable and productive higher education system that will be of high quality and contributes effectively and efficiently to the human resource, skills, knowledge and research needs of the country, the institutional restructuring proposals should be infused and implemented in parallel with the other four policy goals and strategic objectives outlined in the National Plan. These are discussed below.

2.   Access

In terms of increasing access and producing graduates with the skills and competencies necessary to meet the human resource needs of the country, the National Plan proposes the following:

2.1   Expanding access through increasing the participation rate, that is, the percentage of 20-24 year olds enrolled, from 15% to 20% over the next ten to fifteen years. This is necessary to address the imperative for equity, as well as high-level professional and managerial skills needs. There is currently an endemic shortage of such skills, in particular, in the science and economic-based fields.

2.1.1   The international evidence suggests that there is a close correlation between economic development and the level of participation in higher education. Increasing the participation rate to 20% will bring South Africa in line with the participation rate in comparable middle-income countries.

2.1.2   However, increasing the participation rate to 20%, which would require an additional 200 000 students, is not possible in the short to medium-term because of inadequate throughputs from the school system. This is being addressed through a range of programmes targeted at improving school performance, including the consolidation and restructuring of the technical colleges into Further Education and Training Colleges, which would facilitate access to higher education, especially for the unemployed youth, through providing targeted higher education programmes.

2.1.3   In the short-term, the focus would be on improving the efficiency of the higher education system in producing graduates. The current graduation rate of 15% per annum is well below that of a normal system, which should be graduating about 30% of enrolled students annually. The National Plan establishes graduation rate targets that institutions would have to meet.

2.1.4   The National Plan recognises that efficiency improvements also require addressing the underlying factors that contribute to low graduation rates. In this regard, it proposes:

·   To fund academic development programmes, that is, programmes targeted at addressing the teaching and learning needs of students from disadvantaged school backgrounds, as an integral component of a new funding formula. It should be noted that as an interim measure, R30 million was allocated for academic development programmes in the 2000/2001 financial year to support activities over a two-year period, that is, the 2001 and 2002 academic years.

·   To review and strengthen the National Student Financial Aid Scheme. The review will focus on the size and coverage, as well as the income cut-off for eligibility, of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme. This year R687 million was allocated to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme to support some 100 000 students. R500 million was allocated as part of the 2002/2003 budget for higher education and the remaining R187 million consists of the re-injection of recovered loans from past students. In addition, R50 million of the total was targeted at students enrolled in teacher training programmes, which is a national priority.

·   Increasing the participation rate through recruiting workers, mature students and the disabled, in particular, women, on the basis of recognition of prior learning. In the short-term, it is proposed to establish a 5% target for such enrolments.

2.1.5   In addition, the participation rate should also be increased through recruiting students from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region as part of the SADC Protocol on Education, which commits member states to targeting a maximum of 10% of their student places for students from other SADC countries.

2.1.6   Access to higher education would not be adversely affected by the proposals to restructure and consolidate the institutional landscape of higher education, as all the existing sites of delivery would remain intact, including in rural areas. In fact, in rural areas restructuring would facilitate increased access through ensuring the development of programmes that address the human resource and skills needs of rural communities.

2.1.7   In addition, special attention will be paid to ensure that the fee structures and admission requirements of the restructured institutions, especially those resulting from the merger of historically black and white institutions, do not adversely impact on access.

2.2   Shifting the balance in enrolments over the next five to ten years from 49% to 40% in the humanities; 26% to 30% in business and commerce; and 25% to 30% in science, engineering and technology.

2.2.1   Further shifts are not possible in the short to medium-term because of the low number of students matriculating with the required proficiency in mathematics and science. This is being addressed through a comprehensive programme on improving mathematics and science education in the schools, including the in-service training of 10 000 teachers. R25 million has been allocated for this programme focused on 102 schools in the rural and urban nodal points.

2.2.2   The desirability of shifting the humanities total below 40% is also debatable given the continued needs for skills in education, law, private and public sector management, the social services and the arts.

2.2.3   In addition, irrespective of the balance in enrolments, the key issue is to ensure that the curriculum is restructured to reflect non-racial, non-sexist and democratic values, as well as equipping all graduates with the skills and competencies required to function in modern society, in particular, computer literacy, information management, communication and analytical skills. This will complement the National Curriculum Statement, which provides for the development of these skills in grades one to nine of the school system. The Ministry will convene a national conference to initiate a process for curriculum reform in higher education.

2.2.4   The restructuring of the curriculum must be linked to the enhancement of quality. Quality assurance, which includes the accreditation of academic programmes, quality audits of institutions and quality promotion, is the responsibility of the Higher Education Quality Committee of the Council on Higher Education. The Higher Education Quality Committee was

established in May 2001. It has developed a policy framework to guide its work and has proposed a new academic policy, including a revised qualifications framework for higher education. The new academic policy is in line with the National Qualifications Framework and is intended to improve the portability of higher education qualifications, thus promoting greater student mobility between different institutions and different qualifications. The new academic policy is currently the subject of public consultations and will be finalised by the end of the year.

3. Equity

In terms of equity, the National Plan proposes the following:

3.1   Institutions would have to establish targets, including strategies for achieving the targets, to ensure equity in the demographic composition of the student body. This applies in particular, to those historically white institutions in which black students constitute less than 50% of the total head count enrolments.

3.1.1   The increase in the participation rate must primarily focus on increasing the participation rate of African and Coloured students. In this regard, it should be noted that although black students constitute 71% and African students 59% of total head count enrolments, the participation rate continues to be characterized by gross inequalities. The participation rate of African and Coloured students is 12%, while that of white students is 47% and Indian students 39%.

3.1.2   Equity targets must focus in the fields in which black and women students are under-represented, in particular, business, commerce, science, engineering and technology programmes, as well as in postgraduate programmes in general. In this regard, it should be noted that the Ministry is in the process of securing $3 million of donor funding for a scholarship programme to support women students in undergraduate programmes in which they are currently underrepresented. The scholarship initiative also includes a research and monitoring component, which aims, amongst others, to examine the impact of institutional cultures on the academic progress of the scholarship recipients.

3.2   Equity in access must be complemented by equity in outcomes through the development of academic development programmes, as currently the drop-out and failure rates for black students is significantly higher than that for white students. Institutions would have to develop strategies indicating how they intend meeting the graduation rate targets established in the National Plan.

3.3   In addition, language will not be allowed to act as a barrier to access or success. In this regard, historically Afrikaans-medium institutions would be required to provide

dual or parallel medium instruction in strategic and high-cost programmes such as medicine and engineering.

3.4   Institutions would have to develop regional strategies to promote the access of disabled students. As a first step, the Ministry intends identifying three institutions that could become the focal point for the development of infrastructure and resources to cater for the needs of disabled students.

3.5   Establishing a National Higher Education Information and Applications Service, which would facilitate race and gender access through:

·   Providing institutions with information on the available pool of potential students with the appropriate qualifications for entry.

·   Satisfying the information needs of applicants on available programmes, as well as providing careers guidance and information on labour market trends.

·   Enabling the government and institutions to monitor progress in achieving race and gender access.

·   Providing government with information to assess the efficacy of the human resource development strategy.

3.5.1   A Working Group was appointed at the end of last year to develop a framework and implementation plan for the establishment of the National Higher Education Information and Applications Service. It is due to report in June 2002.

3.6   Institutions would have to establish targets, including strategies for achieving the targets, to ensure equity in the race and gender composition of staff in academic and professional positions, especially at senior levels. This would have to be done within the framework of the requirements of the Employment Equity Act.

3.7   The Ministry will develop a postgraduate scholarship programme in conjunction with the Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology and the research councils, to facilitate the access of black and women students to postgraduate study linked to mentorships, as a basis for developing the future generation of researchers and scholars. This is especially important as it will contribute to the development of a critical mass of black intellectuals

4.   Institutional Diversity

The National Plan proposes to ensure institutional diversity through mission and programme differentiation based on the type and range of qualifications offered. In this regard, the National Plan proposes:

4.1   That the programme mix at each institution will be determined on the basis of its current programme profile, as well as its demonstrated capacity to add new programmes to the profile, including the relevance of the profile to the institution's location and context and its responsiveness to regional and national priorities, in particular, government's Human Resource Development Strategy.

4.2   To continue to maintain, although in a flexible manner, the existing mission and programme differentiation between technikons and universities for at least the next five years. This is necessary to avoid academic drift, especially as there is a tendency for technikons to want to shift their focus from primarily offering career-oriented programmes at a diploma level to degree-level programmes at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

4.2.1   Academic drift would impact adversely on the ability of the higher education system to meet the government's access goals and human resource development priorities, especially the goal of expanding career-oriented programmes at all levels, in particular, shorter-cycle certificate and diploma programmes in science, engineering and technology.

4.2.2   The access of technikon students to degree programmes should be facilitated through ensuring greater portability of programmes and qualifications between universities and technikons. The proposed new academic policy provides a framework for enabling portability and mobility.

4.2.3   The proposed establishment of comprehensive institutions through the merger of universities and technikons provides an innovative institutional and organisational framework for addressing the underlying factors that give rise to the tendency for academic drift within technikons, as well as the issue of the portability of programmes and qualifications between universities and technikons.

4.3   The implementation of the mission and programme differentiation process began last year. All higher education institutions submitted their proposed programme and qualification profiles for the next five years, that is, 2002 to 2006, at the end of July 2001. The profiles were analysed by the Department and discussed with each institution between October and November 2001. The approved programme and

qualification profile for each institution is in the process of being finalised and will be released shortly.

4.4   The programme and qualification profile process has also enabled the Department to identify a broad range of potential areas for programme collaboration and rationalisation within each region, in particular, in costly and under-subscribed programmes. The following programmes, which cut across all the regions, have been identified:

- Agriculture and natural resources.

- Architecture and environmental design.

- Visual and performing arts.

- Business and management, in particular, Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes.

- Engineering, in particular, mining engineering.

- Health sciences, in particular, postgraduate programmes in general and dentistry and nursing in the Western Cape in particular. In this regard, the dental schools of the Universities of Stellenbosch and the Western Cape will be merged and located at the University of the Western Cape. In addition, undergraduate nursing programmes would be restricted to the University of the Western Cape and the new merged technikon.

- Languages and literary studies.

- Library and museum studies.

- Public administration and social work.

4.4.1   The continued funding of the identified programmes from the 2004/05 financial year would be subject to institutions jointly reviewing and submitting proposals for programme collaboration and rationalisation by the end of the year. In the event that joint proposals are not submitted, the department will determine the framework for programme collaboration and rationalisation.

4.4.2   Programme collaboration and rationalisation could take two forms:

(i)   The establishment of a regional school for the identified programme within one of the existing institutions. This would result in the closing down of the programme in other institutions within the region and the transfer of staff (if required), students and equipment to the identified institution. For example, in KwaZulu-Natal, the Universities of Durban-Westville, Natal, Zululand and Technikon Natal, all of which offer music have agreed to establish a regional school for music at the University of Natal.

(ii)   The establishment of a common teaching platform, in particular, in postgraduate programmes, which require specialist staff to teach the necessary combination of courses that constitute the programme. A common platform would consist of a planned framework of inter-related programmes and qualifications from different institutions based on their strengths but that are available to students from all institutions. For example, in the Western Cape, the University's of Cape Town, Stellenbosch and the Western Cape offer a joint Masters in Labour Law, which enables students registered in any one of the three institutions to undertake a combination of courses offered by all three institutions. Although each institution has specialist niche areas, the combination provides a broad set of choices offered by specialists in their fields, which could not be offered by the institutions separately. Similarly, in KwaZulu-Natal, the University's of Durban-Westville and Natal and the Durban Institute of Technology (established through the merger of ML Sultan Technikon and Technikon Natal) offer a joint qualification in Public Health.

4.5   The provision of distance education in contact institutions will also be regulated as part of the programme and qualification profile process. No new programmes would be approved unless they address identified national and/or regional needs and do not duplicate or overlap with programmes offered by the dedicated distance education institution to be established through the merger of the University of South Africa, Technikon South Africa and the distance education campus of Vista University. Furthermore, institutions would not be allowed to continue with existing programmes if they do not comply with the above criteria.

4.6   To ensure greater accountability and the more efficient use of limited research resources, the National Plan proposes that research should be funded as a separate component in the new funding formula. This is informed by the fact that although currently 15% of the subsidy allocation to universities (but not technikons) is for research funding, 65% of research outputs and 70% of all masters and doctoral graduates are produced by only 6 universities, i.e. Cape Town, Witwatersrand, Natal, Free State, Pretoria and Stellenbosch.

4.6.1 The separation of research funding is intended to maintain current capacities while building new capacities and centres of excellence in a focused manner linked to institutional niche. Research funding will consist of three components:

· A separate research component within the funding formula based on research outputs, including at a minimum, masters and doctoral graduates and research publications.

· Earmarked funds to build research capacity.

· Earmarked funds to facilitate research collaboration between institutions.

4.6.2 Greater co-ordination in the determination of national research priorities and funding between the different State departments and science councils will also promote the more efficient use of resources. The Ministry will work closely with the Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology to facilitate the development of a co-ordinated framework.

5. Implementation

The successful implementation of the institutional restructuring proposals, as well as the broader renewal and transformation agenda is dependent on:

5.1 The availability of the necessary administrative, management, leadership and governance capacity. In this regard, the existing capacity-building initiatives, which are supported by the Department through bilateral agreements, will be reviewed and strengthened, in partnership with the higher education sector. The existing capacity-building initiatives include:

· Enhancing institutional governance through capacity-building programmes targeted at institutional councils, institutional forums and student structures.

· Improving academic programmes at the historically black institutions through capacity-building programmes focused on institutional planning, staff development, student support and curriculum restructuring.

5.2 The development of new institutional cultures and identities based on the values of non-racism, non-sexism and democracy, including recognizing and validating the diverse cultures that constitute South African society. The institutional culture and ethos in the historically white institutions continues to be Eurocentric with little or no attempt to locate these institutions in the context of Africa. This acts as a barrier to both black students and staff from developing their potential to the full. It is imperative that institutions develop and implement institutional policies to transform institutional culture and practice in relation to, amongst others, the following:

- Curriculum to meet the needs of a diverse student body, including the integration of indigenous knowledge systems.

- Language policy both for instruction and administrative purposes, in particular, in the case of merger of a historically Afrikaans-medium institution and a historically English-medium institution.

- Sexual violence and harassment, including initiation rites and practices.

- Student structures such as halls of residence, sport and cultural clubs and associations.

- Support structures for international students, in particular, students from the Southern African Development Community and the rest of the Continent.

5.2.1 All higher education institutions will be required to indicate in their three-year "rolling" plans, the strategies and steps they intend taking to transform their institutional culture and practice in order to create an enabling environment for all students and staff. As a first step in this process, the Ministry will convene a national conference of higher education constituencies to facilitate the development of a framework and process for addressing the transformation of institutional culture and practice.

5.2.2 The Ministry will monitor the changes in institutional culture and practice through its recently established Race, Gender and Values Chief Directorate.

5.3 A combination of planning and funding levers will be used to achieve the policy goals and strategic objectives for the transformation and reconstruction of the higher education system. This is a fundamental departure from the current and inherited situation in which the size and shape of the higher education system is determined by

a combination of student choice and institutional preference based on interpretations of labour market signals with little or no reference to national goals and objectives.

5.3.1   Higher education institutions would be required to submit annually three-year "rolling" plans indicating the strategies and targets, including time-frames, they intend putting in place to respond to the national policy goals and strategic objectives, as outlined in the National Plan.

5.3.2   The approval by the Ministry of the institutional three-year "rolling" plans would determine the level of funding of each institution.

5.3.3   Institutions that fail to meet the approved targets within the specified time-frames would be penalised through a reduction in their funding level.

5.3.4   The implementation of the planning process began in 2001 with the submission by all higher education institutions of their proposed programme and qualification profile for the next five years, i.e. 2002/2006. The approval of the programme and qualification profiles, which is in the process of being finalised, will determine the funding of each institution from the 2003/2004 financial year.

5.4   The effective use of funding as a lever for change to achieve national goals requires the development of a new funding formula based on the funding framework and principles outlined in the White Paper on Higher Education.

5.4.1   A draft framework for a new funding formula was released in March 2001 for consultative purposes. The draft framework is in the process of being refined in the light of the comments received. It will also be modelled to assess its impact on the sustainability of the proposed new institutional structure. It is anticipated that a new funding formula would be phased in from the 2003/2004 financial year.