

The Public and Mergers in South Africa: Policy and Opinion

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In late March 2002, the American Council on Education and the Center for Higher Education Transformation conducted focus groups in Cape Town and Durban, South Africa, as part of a workshop with the Pilot Project Consortium, made up of the University of Durban-Westville, M. L. Sultan Technikon, the University of Natal, and Peninsula Technikon. The workshop was designed to present the kinds of information that can be obtained from the public and demonstrate the use of focus groups to scan the environment of higher education in South Africa.

The focus group findings suggest a very high level of information about higher education, strong support for higher education, near universal concern over the cost of education, and insistence on high quality. Particularly striking was the skepticism about the minister of education's recent proposals for mergers to reduce the number of institutions from 36 to 21, as part of restructuring higher education.

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Focus Groups

The focus groups included faculty and administrators, students from a number of different universities and technikons (both historically disadvantaged and advantaged institutions), businessmen and -women, a council (equivalent to U.S. governing boards), and a township group. Each focus group was composed of 10 to 12 people. Discussion was facilitated by a professional working for Strategy and Tactics, an NGO specializing in surveys.

The Value of Higher Education

The participants in the five focus groups placed a high value on tertiary education. They saw it as critical to individual advancement and to national development. Respondents were generally happy with the quality of higher education and believed it was the best in Africa. Several talked about the role of higher education in the

democratization of South Africa.

Typical of responses was a township resident who said, "These days we need our kids to have a very bright future, and they have to attend the technikons or the universities so they can build themselves a sense of direction." In the student group, one noted, "From a woman's point of view, if I am one day in a position where I am divorced with kids, at least I have something behind me, something practical that I can take anywhere." A member of council, referring to the era of apartheid and racism, stated, ". . . our mothers and fathers and grandparents used to tell us that the only thing that people can't take away from you is your education. . . . They can take your property, your dignity, your job, but they couldn't take your knowledge."

Major Problems

The most common complaint concerned the high cost of education for students, with those from disadvantaged communities protesting it most strongly. "We need somebody who is going to listen to our cries. . . . Our kids are so focused, but unfortunately, there is the problem to do with money." Access issues were also cited, as were instability and unrest at some institutions.

Government Support

Respondents were nearly unanimous in their view that government was not adequately funding higher education. People recognized the many demands on the government purse, but most participants felt education was far too low a priority. When asked what should be the highest priority for government, education was in the top three or four, usually grouped with health care, housing, crime, and employment.

A surprisingly high level of cynicism emerged about government's claim of lack of funds to meet educational needs. Someone in almost every focus group cited expenditures on defense as an example of wasted government funding that would more wisely be devoted to higher education.

Universities versus Technikons

There was almost universal agreement that both technikons and universities provided valuable instruction and learning for critical societal needs. No enthusiasm was expressed for merging technikons with universities or for abolishing technikons. One businessman suggested: "you have to have universities and you have to have technikons. . . . In business you need a blending of practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge."

Historically Disadvantaged Institutions

Support for historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) was strong in all the focus groups even in the

context of falling enrollments and unrest at some of the institutions. Perhaps most surprising was the clear support of the HDIs from the business community, which was also concerned that government had not provided adequate funds for them to overcome past inequities.

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The Proposed Mergers

The proposed merger of institutions, suggested by Minister of Education Kader Asmal earlier in the year, elicited mixed responses. The strongest negative sentiments were expressed by people in the disadvantaged community, but they were shared by many in the advantaged community, including business. Both the minister and the Department of Education were perceived as having done a very poor job of making their case for mergers and most respondents were distressed by the lack of consultation. As a result, people were suspicious about their motives and felt ignored because these decisions did not seem to follow the democratic pattern of public participation established earlier in drafting the new national constitution, education reforms, and national development.

Typical questions were, “what will be the value added and how will this be a better higher educational system—that is not clear.” A businessman thought the real motivation was political, not what would be best for higher education. The council focus group was concerned about cost, and not just from job losses: “the merger process is going to absorb the time, energy, attention of your top people in these institutions for the next couple of years.” People worried that university and technikon mergers would lead to “academic drift.” There was some support for mergers among the focus groups including a businessman who thought mergers would save money. The business focus group agreed that there is no such thing as a merger—just a takeover.

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Implications for Higher Education

Higher education in South Africa operates in an envi-

ronment of solid support, though that seems to have eroded somewhat in recent years. While people do value higher education, a stronger case needs to be made for its benefits both to society as a whole and to individuals. The degree of importance given higher education in the townships was lower than expected. However, in the context of the long history of discrimination, limited opportunities for the majority population under apartheid, high unemployment, and lack of information about the benefits of higher education, these findings are less surprising.

The cost of higher education to students and families and inadequate government funding are major issues. The vast majority believe that government could afford adequate support for higher education. Rather, the problem was seen as lack of government commitment and will—or distorted government priorities. Disenchantment with the ministry and Department of Education was expressed in all five focus groups—especially regarding lack of consultation with stakeholders. This was particularly striking in the context of the democratization of South Africa in the 1990s.

Public ambivalence about the mergers provides a major opportunity for higher education to influence the debate. Since positions have not yet hardened, public concerns about government policy toward higher education could be mobilized to encourage a change in policy in ways desired by the higher education community. ■

Crucial Choices: Student Behavior and Persistence in the United States

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Everyday, students make decisions that affect their ability to complete a degree. Some of these choices they weigh carefully, such as which college to attend. Yet they underestimate the impact of many other choices, such as whether to drop a course or work more hours at their jobs, on the likelihood of completing their degrees.

Given that more than half of all U.S. undergraduates attend college part time and 80 percent work while enrolled, it is crucial that American institutions understand and confront the effects of student choices on academic success. Colleges and universities in the