The South African National Plan for Higher Education

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In February 2001, minister of education Kadar Asmal announced the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE), without first officially passing it through his own “expert” advisory Council on Higher Education (CHE), which had made some significantly different proposals in its own discussion document in 2000. Interestingly, instead he sought, and obtained, prior approval from internal African National Congress (ANC—the ruling party) committees and the cabinet, and other “alliance” structures linked to the ANC such as the leading trade union federation and the South African Communist Party (both of which had raised political questions about his recent reforms in school education). Clearly, new processes were under way in South African higher education. Moreover, the content of the NPHE differed from a whole series of earlier policy discussion documents leading up to the higher education white paper of 1997, the definitive document prior to the NPHE.

Was the NPHE a shift in direction in terms of policy substance and process? And was it what it asserted—a real plan to transform the Apartheid-based system of higher education into a new system fulfilling the white paper goals of equity, efficiency, and social development?

Core Elements of the NPHE

The white paper of 1997 had initiated the setting up of a Branch of Higher Education within one new Department of Education, putting an end to Apartheid-fragmented governance consisting of separate branches and departments to administer universities and technikons (polytechnics) for
various urban-based “race groups” and so-called black homelands in the rural areas. However, after what might be termed a few years of policy “implementation vacuum,” the NPHE in 2001 confronted much more openly than previous documents the crises facing higher education in South Africa.

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The NPHE listed massive problems of inefficiency and dislocation resulting largely (but not solely) from the Apartheid era. It confronted a higher education system with unnecessary duplication among historically separate institutions for “African,” “white,” “coloured,” and “Indian,” Apartheid-designated race groups—21 universities and 15 technikons, a total of 36 higher education institutions. The NPHE document spoke openly about the inefficiencies of student graduation rates and staff research output levels of most universities and technikons. It viewed with alarm the high drop-out rates of students, due in large part to lack of student financial aid, and the falling annual numbers of first-year student university enrollments, due partly to problems in the high school system. Furthermore, the uncontrolled proliferation of private higher education institutions; the fragile governing structures and even mismanagement at a few historically black, publicly funded institutions; the skewed enrollment patterns, whereby many black and female students were underrepresented in science, technology, and business fields; and the opportunistic spread of distance learning and other modes of program development by some historically white universities—all these the NPHE viewed as having the potential to undermine the whole higher education system.

In its 100-page report, the NPHE addresses issues of access (to increase the student participation rate from 15 to 20 percent over the next 10 to 15 years); equity (with a stress on race and gender, but not class, and on inequities in the student body and especially in the academic staff); and research output (particularly for national economic development, with capacity building via master’s and doctoral degree program increases). But I would argue the thrust is located in two areas. First, there is an overarching concern by the NPHE with efficiency—particularly with respect to student outputs for the economy. For the first time, the focus is not just on student enrollments but on graduation rates as well, with financial incentives proposed to improve these. Moreover, a shift in the “shape” of the system is proposed, to change the balance of student enrollments in humanities:business-commerce:science and technology from the current ratio of 49:26:25 to 40:30:30 over the next decade.

Second, and even more importantly, the problem of institutions in the same region with overlapping programs and functions is addressed head-on. The NPHE accepts that for at least the next five years the university/technikon divide will be retained. However, a multistage process has been set up to establish institutional program concentrations in each region. Some institutional mergers and forms of regional cooperation will be required. The NPHE document does outline a few specific mergers, but the document also calls for the setting up of a National Working Group that will report to the minister by the end of the year on the recommended forms of mergers and cooperation by region (with the only NPHE proviso that there are to be no closures of sites of learning, although sites may be restructured).

The Nature of the NPHE

The NPHE must be understood alongside the proposed new National Funding Framework and the Higher Education Quality Committee of the Council on Higher Education. The NPHE document of 2001 has put itself forward as a far more nuanced policy strategy with respect to the 36 higher education institutions—including what it terms a “planned differentiation of higher education institutions through negotiation and consensus”—compared to the proposals submitted by the Council on Higher Education to the minister in 2000. The council had put forward a restructuring proposal for a hierarchical system of three types: I) research institutions (extensive programs up to the Ph.D. level); II) institutions mainly up to master’s level, with some niche area doctoral programs permitted; III) “bedrock” institutions, with a focus on undergraduate education, and some programs permitted up to the master’s level. The council’s proposal unleashed a massive outcry in
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The closing of the national university came at a time of rising demand for postsecondary education. El Salvador had been the Central American nation most committed to economic modernization. Its burgeoning middle class and growing need for an educated workforce put the education system under increasing scrutiny and stress. During the 1970s student enrollments grew to about 30,000 students at the UES and another 10–12,000 at the four privates. By 1996 this number expanded to over 108,000 students.

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