Chapter 71
Transformation and Social Justice in South African Higher Education:
An Unequal Turf

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ABSTRACT

There are inequalities at all levels of the South African education system, and these are more visible in higher education, which, until recently, was inaccessible to most people. Levelling the turf and bringing about true transformation in higher education institutions requires redress of past inequalities and catering for all students who seek admission. To increase participation levels by students from varied backgrounds and achieve justice, it is essential for higher education institutions, particularly those offering open distance e-learning, to devise plans towards tackling challenges confronting students and possible ways to overcome them. This chapter discusses the purpose of higher education in offering support to students in the context of massification. It also explores the manner in which higher education institutions model transformation, how they bring about equity and redress to overcome challenges and to pursue justice. Lastly, it concludes with possible considerations for these institutions to tackle inequalities and attain social justice for their students.

INTRODUCTION

It is well documented that before 1994, the majority of black South Africans had limited access to higher education (Department of Education, 1997, 2001; Mncube & Madikizela-Madiya, 2013; Council on Higher Education, 2015). This changed after the democratically elected government came into power and policies were revised and aligned with the Constitution which regards education as a basic human right, including further education (Republic of South Africa, 1996). The following year, the South African Higher Education Act 101 (Republic of South Africa, 1997) was proclaimed. Among other things, this Act is concerned with restructuring and transforming programmes and institutions such that they redress past inequalities and become more responsive to the country's development needs (RSA, 1997).

In the same year, the Department of Education (DoE hereafter) promulgated Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (EWP 3) (DoE, 1997). Like the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 (RSA, 1997), EWP3 seeks to further the transformation agenda in higher education. For example, amongst other things, EWP3 prioritises the issue of access and participation of those groups that were historically and socially marginalised in higher education (DoE, 1997), for example, black people, women, people with disabilities, and mature students. To that effect, public higher education institutions (HEIs) are now expected to have admission policies that do not unfairly discriminate against anyone but instead, policies that redress past inequalities and cater for all students.

Four years later, the Ministry of Education published the National Plan for Higher Education which provides a framework and mechanism for the transformation of the higher education system (DoE, 2001). This drive to redress past inequalities has led to a significant increase in the number of students from previously disadvantaged groups accessing higher education. At the same time, the global wave of massification of higher education which started at the end of the 20th century (Altbach, 1999) reached African shores. For example, Ashcroft and Rayner (2011) estimate that between 1985 and 2002, higher education students increased by 15% per annum in sub-Saharan African countries.

Altbach (1999) links massification and advances in technology with the rise in distance education. Distance education seems to have been the main avenue to access higher education for many students who were already economically active and unable to study full-time. This means that when higher education massification led to enrolment increases, not only were contact institutions affected but also those offering distance education, which previously catered for predominantly part-time students. Despite this increase in enrolments, Ashcroft and Rayner (2011) observe that Africa trails behind other continents in that student participation levels remain low. Given such observations, there is a need to establish what the state of transformation is in the higher education sector with the intention to confront systemic injustices that impede students' learning and participation.

The values carried by HEIs are themselves generally promissory tenets that serve as traction principles, potentially giving hope to prospective and registered students. However, the challenges confronting students seem to upset the very notion of the values of redress and access to HEIs. Cloete (2002, 274) decries the unequal situation of affluent versus disadvantaged institutions, a legacy of South Africa's unequal and divided history. Effectively, this inequality disconcerts one of the primary constitutional values of our country, whilst also contradicting section 29(1b) of the Constitution which commits the state to making further education progressively accessible through reasonable measures (Republic of South Africa, 1996). We therefore ask a critical question; to what extent are higher education institutions compliant, given inequalities amongst institutions and the different degrees of disadvantage that South African students come from?

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