

Higher education transformation

The transformation of the South African higher education sector remains no less vexed than that of other facets of our society. But two recent reports at least provide insight into the complexities involved in this process, and usefully, suggest some ways forward.

The first is that of the ministerial committee on transformation in higher education, appointed over a year ago by former education minister Naledi Pandor, and which tabled its report last November (<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/reports/UniversityRacismReport.pdf>). No-one is denying that racism still exists on South African campuses—last year's disgraceful incident at the University of the Free State is evidence of this. But undergraduate enrolment is now moving steadily closer to reflecting the country's demography, although large racial differences in participation rates remain: in 2006 the percentages of 18–24-year olds engaged in tertiary education were 59 for whites, 42 for Indians, 13 for coloureds and 12 for black Africans. In terms of staff transformation, the situation is even less satisfactory: universities struggle to retain talented black staff members, as the relatively low remuneration they receive often results in their leaving academic life for either the public service or the private sector, where they can earn higher salaries.

This is corroborated by evidence by the second report—on postgraduate studies in South Africa—commissioned by the Council for Higher Education, and compiled by the Centre for Research into Science and Technology at Stellenbosch University (<http://www.che.ac.za/documents/d000196/>). This found that postgraduate enrolments grew in the first five years of this decade, but not nearly as fast as undergraduate enrolments

during the same period. Although there has been growth in numbers of South African honours students, particularly in humanities and social sciences, it is clear, that were it not for significant increases in enrolments from other African countries, there would be very little growth in our master's or doctoral enrolment figures. Most strikingly, whites in the 25–34 age group are 28 times more likely than their black African counterparts to be enrolled in a doctoral programme.

The picture that emerges is one of our universities struggling to encourage South African students of colour to study beyond the honours level; and then again to recruit the few that do so to their academic staff. Students from other African countries, by contrast, are eager recruits in both categories. This does amount to transformation of a kind, is certainly good for South Africa, and is probably also good for the continent. But the problem is that (correctly), employing foreigners does not satisfy the country's employment equity requirements. So what is to be done?

The ministerial committee found that funding for staff development at universities was inadequate—in particular, for training black staff members to take up senior level positions. It recommends that earmarked funds for staff development posts be made available as part of the state subsidy to higher education institutions; and that the provision of these funds should be based on the submission of institutional plans for staff development. It further recommends that postgraduate bursaries should be competitive with the remuneration levels for entry-level professional posts in the public service. Some universities have already taken their own initiatives in this regard—of which the recently announced University of Johannesburg scholarship programme, which makes available R150 000 per annum for a three-year period for doctoral students, is an example. □

...and the University of KwaZulu-Natal?

The committee investigating academic freedom at this institution lacked credibility from the outset on account of its composition. Its report confuses the issues of transformation and managerial arrogance.

No-one would claim that Malegapuru Makgoba had been dealt an easy hand in assuming the vice-chancellorship of the University KwaZulu-Natal almost five years ago. The merger between the former universities of Natal and Durban-Westville was the most challenging one implied by Saki Makozoma's working group's recommendations, which were accepted by government in 2002 rather than the more sage proposals of the Ramphela 'size and shape' commission three years earlier. Now one of the country's largest residential universities, it is a national asset, but one of particularly crucial importance in the future development of the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

Recent events at the university are a source of grave concern. Following several incidences, including a major strike by staff in 2006, last year each faculty was invited by management to make submissions on academic freedom at the institution. The Science and Agriculture faculty's submission was prepared by a three-person committee and duly endorsed by the faculty board. But the vice-chancellor at two successive meetings refused to allow the document to serve at the university's senate, on the grounds that 'it contributed nothing to the debate'—this despite

senate passing a motion specifically demanding that it be tabled. As a last resort, two of the authors of the report then discussed its contents with the media, and were immediately faced with disciplinary proceedings (see *SAJS* 105, 5–6; 2009).

Now a committee appointed by the university's council has exonerated Makgoba (see pages 163–164 of this issue). This is perhaps unsurprising, as the committee suffered from a lack of credibility from the outset: its three senate members—quite apart from being in the minority—were not elected by that body, but nominated by the council. The committee has largely ignored submissions relating to factual incidences of suppression of academic freedom (<http://www.fx.org.za/content/view/206/1/>) in favour of an implausible conspiracy theory, for which they provide no substantive evidence, that the vice-chancellor is being unfairly portrayed as authoritarian by opponents of transformative change at the university.

This bleating cry could be dismissed as merely puerile were it not becoming alarmingly familiar. More recently, University of Cape Town deputy registrar Paul Ngobeni, on resigning following the conclusion of disciplinary hearings against him, wasted no time in labelling the university's law faculty as a 'racist group of gangsters', and its vice-chancellor, Max Price, as 'the wrong person to lead transformation at the university'. Such utterances are sadly not the harbinger of a society free of racial prejudice, but in particular they have no place in an environment dedicated to the pursuit of scholarship. □