

## A new look at demographic transformation: Comments on Govinder et al. (2013)

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I noted when I read the draft of Govinder et al.'s<sup>1</sup> paper on equity indices that it equated equity with transformation, and delinked equity from development and performance. This draft version of the paper fell into the trap of a prevailing South African condition: using transformation as a code word for race. Furthermore, the formula used in the paper produced a result in which several of the most equitable institutions were those being run by a government-appointed administrator. By this, the authors implied their promotion of high equity, yet also regarded the existence of dysfunctional institutions as a given in their proposed model for the South African university system.

The paper on equity indices, published in the *South African Journal of Science*<sup>1</sup>, certainly responds to both these criticisms. Firstly, equity is used mostly in reference to the formula as described in the paper,<sup>1</sup> although the focus of equity is racial, being mainly African. Secondly, a serious attempt is made to reconcile the well-known Harold Wolpe tension between equity and development, as described by Cloete et al.<sup>2</sup> While I will argue that the attempt is not entirely successful, the approach of developing empirical indicators to reflect the equity–development duality of transformation is to be lauded as it is a step towards developing South African indicator-based performance clustering systems. My time spent at the Shanghai Jiao Tong University's Centre for World Class Universities during early November 2013 has made it even clearer to me that, while for the foreseeable future the Jiao Tong type of methodology will continue to make a considerable contribution to debate and controversy, it will not assist much in strengthening universities in Africa.

Govinder et al.<sup>1</sup> are correct when they assert that equity-weighted research output goes beyond the Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET) clusters,<sup>3</sup> which were based mainly on performance and efficiency in knowledge production. The more recent CHET clustering<sup>3</sup> in 2010 has been expanded to include factors such as staff qualifications, undergraduate-to-masters graduation rates and high-level knowledge production (doctorates and research publications). This latest CHET clustering has shown that, in addition to those usually in the top group of higher education institutions (such as UCT, Stellenbosch University and Wits University), some 'on-the-move' institutions, such as UKZN, North-West University and the University of the Western Cape, have moved into the top group.<sup>3</sup>

Govinder et al.<sup>1</sup> are also correct in pointing out that some of their results do not square up with the CHET differentiated clusters<sup>3</sup>. For example, their high rating for Unisa – in terms of both the graduation Equity Index and the weighted research output – is completely contradictory to the performance of Unisa in the South African system as shown by CHET. Similarly, their low ranking for Rhodes University is contradictory to the CHET finding that Rhodes is one of the three most efficient knowledge producers in terms of weighted publication per staff member. It appears that by not using staff:research ratios, the Equity Index formula has skewed results in favour of larger institutions.

Stellenbosch University, amongst others, can be used to illustrate the difficulty of finding a measure that adequately combines equity and development. Stellenbosch comes last in the equity indices for students and staff, and ninth in the equity-weighted research output.<sup>1</sup> However, CHET has shown that Stellenbosch has the highest undergraduate and doctoral throughput in the South African system. For 3-year degrees, 68% of students graduate after 6 years at Stellenbosch. UCT is second with 64%, while the national average is 40%.<sup>3</sup> At the doctoral level, Stellenbosch's graduation rate after 7 years is 71%. Here, Wits shows in second place at 69%, while the national average is 46%.<sup>4</sup> Proportionally, Stellenbosch also produces the most female doctorates<sup>4</sup>; however, gender does not feature in the racially orientated Equity Index. The African Doctoral Academy at Stellenbosch has 60 students from five sub-Saharan African countries,<sup>5</sup> but black Africans from countries other than South Africa also do not count for equity on the Equity Index.

The role of Africans from countries other than South Africa in academia is becoming a sensitive issue, and it has some resonance with demonstrations of township competition between local and foreign traders. In the Govinder et al.<sup>1</sup> report, it seems rather disingenuous to exclude the Africans from countries other than South Africa when calculating student demographic ratios, but to include them when counting publications, especially because at certain institutions – such as UKZN, Fort Hare and North-West – publications by black Africans are substantially by Africans from countries other than South Africa. In recent presentations, CHET has highlighted the fact that in 2010, for the first time in history, there were more black African than white doctoral students enrolled in South African higher education.<sup>3</sup> Instead of expressions of delight at this emerging trend, one usually hears the murmured lament that 'The majority are foreigners'. We seem to be reaching a rather indefensible position in which we count black Africans who are not from South Africa only when it suits us!

I leave further comment on the statistical and the demographic methodologies of the Equity Index to other contributors to this issue of the *South African Journal of Science*, and focus in the rest of this response on the educational and political implications.

In terms of the nature of higher education, there appears to be a fundamental flaw in the Equity Index assumption that the university should be a mirror of national demographics. The university is a specific institution in society that is supposed to lead rather than reflect society. A forthcoming book by Castells and Himanen<sup>6</sup>, in discussing Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom* (1999) and John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971), highlights the argument that, while all citizens are equal before the law and are all entitled to dignity, this is not the case in terms of capability, particularly if capability is understood as performance rather than potential.

In almost all countries, educational performance – capability – is skewed because of historical contestations and struggles, with socio-economic class showing as a worldwide distorter of representivity. In the long term, it is part of the South African universities' developmental role to play a part in redressing these distortions, within the broader context of debate and policies on affirmative action. Nonetheless, it is generally accepted that this is a long-term and secondary task. The first task of universities is to enrol and educate the most educationally capable – those with the highest educational attainment – in order to contribute to development. The first question that must be asked is thus whether the universities are reflecting educational attainment.

In their conclusions, Govinder et al.<sup>1</sup> ask whether the reasons behind the slow progress in transformation of higher education are passive resistance, denial, the abuse of autonomy or an abhorrence of accountability. The assumption that the lack of transformation is simply the result of a bad attitude is a common South African form of accusatory politics. This kind of thinking assumes that there is a university-ready pool of applicants reflective of racial demographics and that they are not admitted to top-performing institutions because of prejudice and a bad attitude. In reality, in certain areas such as doctoral enrolments, overall enrolments grew by 149% between 1996 and 2011; however, the enrolment of black African students exploded over this same period by 795%.<sup>4</sup> This growth is not slow change: no other country in the world has been identified to have had such a dramatic change in equity. There is also ample evidence, such as that provided by Wickham<sup>7</sup>, that the system is already admitting candidates who are not educationally prepared for university study. And, while the whole university system must accept blame and take more responsibility for poor school performance, also implicated in this failure are the national education system and the government.

Another assumption underpinning the arguments of the authors is that the slow progress is as a result of a lack of institutional compliance. Not once is the question raised as to the role of the national Department of Higher Education and Training and its contribution to the problem.

As research director for the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) over the period 1994–1996, I was part of the ongoing equity-development debates, both within the Commission, and between the Commission and the then Department of Education. It is widely accepted that the NCHE was essentially an equity commission; development, knowledge production and differentiation were raised but did not feature in the final report.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, although equity was dominant in the report, there was no unanimity about how to redress it. One redress suggestion was to award a disadvantage subsidy from the government block grant for each black student enrolled. This process would serve as an incentive for historically advantaged universities to enrol more black students and offset some lost tuition fees. Furthermore, for the historically disadvantaged universities whose enrolments were almost 100% black, a disadvantage subsidy would have been a redress bonus. The group supporting this recommendation in the NCHE even made financial projections based on different scenarios; and it seemed a simple-to-implement and affordable redress mechanism. However, another group, led by the historically black university vice-chancellors in the NCHE, wanted institutional – rather than individual – redress. The incentive group abandoned their proposal when it became clear that the Department of Education leadership, headed by a minister who was also a former historically black university vice-chancellor, was also not supporting their position. Of course, the Education Minister never expected that the Ministry of Finance would turn a deaf ear to the institutional redress pleas. Apparently Treasury rejected the institutional redress proposals owing to, amongst others, a combination of the 1996 currency crisis<sup>9</sup> and a lack of confidence in the institutional absorptive capacity of the historically black universities.

The second redress argument was that of the massification of the post-secondary system. The NCHE was heavily influenced by Peter Scott's book, *The Meanings of Massification*<sup>10</sup>, which appeared in 1995, soon after the NCHE began operating. Scott asserted that in the evolving knowledge society, massification of higher education was inevitable and

was already happening in most advanced countries. Even the United Kingdom, with its elitist system, had by then taken a decision to massify: it increased participation from under 15% in the late 1980s to over 40% in 2002, simultaneously reducing the cost per student.<sup>11</sup>

In essence, a massified and differentiated system requires a dramatic increase in higher education participation, while also accommodating top-end research universities. The knowledge economy/society needs much larger numbers of post-school educated citizens, both for skills and for democratic citizenship. Differentiated massification was thus the possible resolution to the contradiction between equity and development.

The NCHE accepted the massification argument; however, in a rereading of the 1996 report<sup>8</sup>, it is clear that it could have done a much better job of explaining and promoting it. If truth be told, the Commission itself was not that clear about how it should be done and what the implications could be. And, of course, with the strong presence of the vice-chancellors of the historically black universities, differentiation was a taboo topic.

Massification was rejected by both the Ministries of Finance and Education. It is disappointing that neither the Hegelian liberals nor the Marxist revolutionaries could grasp the dialectic. The 1997 White Paper instead proposed planned growth – a decision which had serious, unanticipated consequences. The first consequence was that the higher education system in South Africa remained elite. Overall gross participation increased from around 14% in 1996 to only 19% in 2011.<sup>12-15</sup> While this figure puts South Africa third in sub-Saharan Africa (behind Mauritius and Botswana), only South Africa and India are under 20% amongst the BRICS countries.<sup>16</sup> Countries in the World Economic Forum innovation (knowledge) economies are now almost all at over 60% post-secondary participation rates and many, like South Korea, are at over 80%.<sup>16</sup>

The one consequence of a low overall participation rate is that, even if the proportion of overall enrolments grows, the participation rate does not necessarily increase significantly. Figure 1 shows that for black Africans, head count enrolments increased from 53% in 1996 to 69% in 2011, while the participation rate only increased from 9% to 16%.<sup>12-15</sup> In contrast, for whites, the enrolment percentage declined from 34% to 19% but the participation rate only dropped from 57% to 56%.<sup>12-15</sup>

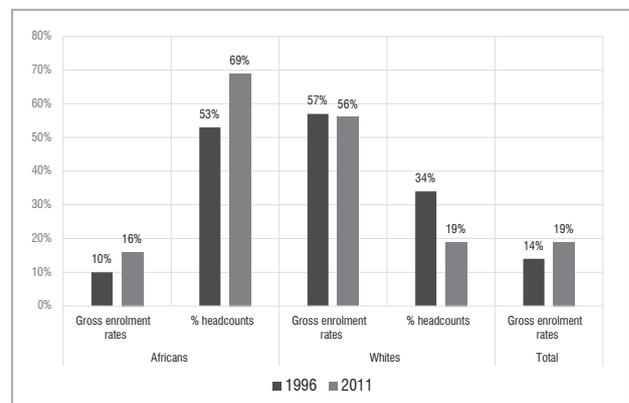


Figure 1: Gross enrolment rates in higher education for black African and white students, in 1996 and 2011.

When looking at participation rates, it is important to take changes in population growth into consideration. The white population in the 20- to 24-year age cohort declined from 349 102 in 1996 to 316 262 in 2011<sup>12-15</sup> – a 10% decline (Table 1). In contrast, the black African population in this age cohort increased by 912 444<sup>12-15</sup> or 29% (Table 1). To increase the participation rate of black Africans to be at the same level as that of the white population (56%) in 2011<sup>12-15</sup>, an additional 1.63 million black African students would have needed to be enrolled in 2011. This means that the system would have needed 2.8 times its current capacity. With the current size of the South African higher education system, even if *all* the students were black, their participation rate would be only 23%!

**Table 1:** Gross enrolment rates in higher education by race, in 1996 and 2011

	1996			2011		
	Enrolments	20–24 year olds	Gross enrolment rate	Enrolments	20–24 year olds	Gross enrolment rate
African	308 104	3 153 083	10%	646 829	4 065 527	16%
White	198 904	349 102	57%	177 365	316 262	56%
Indian	37 118	103 123	36%	59 312	110 667	54%
Coloured	32 742	344 373	10%	54 698	404 336	14%
<b>Total</b>	<b>576 868</b>	<b>3 982 353</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>938 204</b>	<b>4 896 792</b>	<b>19%</b>

The definition of the gross enrolment rate as determined by UNESCO is:

$\frac{\text{Total number of enrolments in higher education}}{\text{Population size in the 20–24-year-old age cohort}} \times 100\%$

Population size in the 20–24-year-old age cohort

The real indicator of equality is participation rate and not percentage of enrolments. As a result, having a significant improvement in percentage of enrolment does not reflect a major improvement in equality. The damning Council on Higher Education report shows that more than half of all first-year entrants never graduate, which means that for greater equality it is not only the actual numbers who enrol, but also the success rate that needs to be considered.<sup>17</sup>

The Govinder et al.<sup>1</sup> formula uses a version of participation rate. However, in my view, it is used incorrectly as it is only applied at an institutional level. An improvement in participation rate (equality) is both a system and an institutional issue, and will not be corrected by identifying a few individual, institutional scapegoats.

The most disastrous unintended consequence of planned growth was revealed in a 2009 CHET<sup>18</sup> report which showed that, in 2007, there were 2.7 million young people in the 18–24-year-old cohort who were not in employment, education or training. By 2011, this figure had grown to around 3 million or about 40% of the cohort, and there are more than three times more young people not in employment, education or training than the 950 000 students in the public and private universities.<sup>12–15</sup>

The leader article in the *South African Journal of Science* May/June 2013 issue,<sup>19</sup> addressing the problem of Generation Jobless, concludes:

*Here, then, is the timeline: In 2009, CHET reported that 2.7 million young people between the ages of 18 and 24 were NEETs. The immensity of the problem was covered in the local and international press (including the New York Times). In 2011, the number of NEETs had grown to 3.2 million, by which time work was in progress on what was hoped would turn out to be a relevant Green Paper. Now, 4 years after the problem was identified and made public, nothing practical has been done by the Department of Higher Education and Training to implement current solutions. The numbers of NEETs continue to grow and there is nothing available to address the present problem. The solution proposed for the future will take, at best, many more months to finalise and a good number of years, and large sums of state funds, to implement. So many years wasted; so many opportunities wasted. Time for the Ministry to focus more earnestly on the well-being of young people and the economy.*

The above quotation demonstrates fairly dramatically that the more serious problem is systemic rather than individual institutional change. Furthermore, the Department of Education – despite all its rhetorical or 'symbolic' policy<sup>20</sup> – has yet to implement a policy plan to incentivise or

sanction the enrolment of black students in South African universities. In overall figures, the rather remarkable increase in the enrolments of black African students was achieved through individual institutional strategies, aided by the first recommendation of the NCHE to establish a national student financial aid scheme, along with the substantial expansion of the scheme by the Department of Higher Education and Training and the inclusion of further education and training colleges in the funding scheme.

In a significant departure from previous Department of Education policies, the National Planning Commission background paper<sup>21</sup> and the subsequent National Development Plan 2030<sup>22</sup> came out categorically in favour of South Africa joining the knowledge economy through massification and differentiation. It proposed a dramatic increase in post-secondary school enrolments, mainly in the further education and training college sectors. The National Development Plan<sup>22</sup> envisages a 30% participation rate for universities by 2030, with enrolments at around 1.62 million by that time. It recommends a participation rate of 25% in further education and training colleges, which would accommodate about 1.25 million enrolments compared to the current 300 000.

The task is thus to build a new post-secondary differentiated higher education system with built-in quality checks. This system should include a mix of research-led universities, universities that are mainly undergraduate teaching institutions, a further education and training college sector that is mainly post-matric and vocationally orientated, and a private sector that is market driven.

It is the development of a differentiated and massified post-secondary system that will dramatically expand participation for the majority and provide skills<sup>23</sup> for an economy that needs increasingly larger numbers of people with post-matric education. The unintended consequence of the Equity Index of the Transformation Oversight Committee<sup>24</sup> could be an over-focus on equity for a privileged elite at precisely the moment that the central challenge for higher education is to support development, with increased equity, as outlined in the new vision of the National Development Plan.

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