Democracy, higher education transformation and citizenship in South Africa

Y Waghid
University of Stellenbosch

Abstract
Higher education restructuring in South Africa has been heavily influenced by policy processes which culminated in the formulation of several documents which include: the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) Report (1996), the Education White Paper 3 (EWP 1997) entitled A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) Report entitled Towards a New Higher Education Landscape: meeting the Equity, Quality and Social Development Imperatives of South Africa in the 21st Century (2000) and the National Plan for Higher Education (2001). The primary aim of these policy documents is not only to ensure that the higher education system is planned, governed and funded as a single national co-ordinated system but also, to enhance the transformation of the higher education system which needs to reflect the changes that are taking place in South African society, to strengthen the values and practices of our democracy and most importantly, “to overcome the fragmentation, inequality and inefficiency which are the legacy of the (apartheid) past...” (EWP 1997). On the one hand, three central transformation pillars on which the detailed policies of the 1997 Education White Paper 3 are based include the following: increased and broadened participation, responsiveness to societal needs, and partnership and co-operation in governance. On the other hand, the CHE’s arguments concerned with restructuring higher education in relation to, by now well known globalised conditions accentuate the concern to develop human capital, that is, to develop the thinking and intellectual capacities of South African society which is considered to be the key to economic, social, cultural and political stability. It is taken as axiomatic that the development of human capital articulated by a demand for a more skilled and educated populace, is central to South Africa’s “capacity to purposefully, energetically and creatively establish a democracy after decades of political strife” (CHE 2000:2). The National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa (2001) outlines the framework and mechanisms for implementing and realising the policy goals of the Education White Paper 3. With reference to the need of the higher education system to develop the intellectual capacities of people by inculcating in them high quality skills and competences which in turn, can lead to a heightened form of political accountability on the part of democratic South African citizens, my contention is that this can best be achieved if “outcomes” announced in the National Plan are implemented along communitarian liberalist lines. It is this position I wish to analyse and explore in this article with reference to one specific “outcome”: Enhanced cognitive skills of graduates.

A Brief Overview of the National Plan on Higher Education

Post apartheid higher education transformation started with the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) report of 1996 and continued through the development of the Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (EWP) in 1997, the Council on Higher Education’s Report entitled “Towards a Higher Education Landscape: Meeting the Equity, Quality and Social Development Imperatives of South Africa in the 21st Century” in 2000 and the National Plan on Higher Education (NPHE) in 2001 the response of...
the Minister of Education to “advice” provided to him and the Government on the transformation of higher education in South Africa.

The NPHE addresses five key policy goals and strategic objectives, which in the Ministry’s view are central to deliver on the transformation of higher education:

- to provide increased access to higher education to all irrespective of race, gender, age, creed, class or disability and to produce graduates with the skills and competencies necessary to meet the human resource needs of the country;
- to promote equity of access and to redress past inequalities through ensuring that the staff and student profiles in higher education progressively reflect the demographic realities of South African society;
- to ensure diversity in the organisational form and institutional landscape of the higher education system through mission and programme differentiation, thus enabling the addressing of regional and national needs in social and economic development;
- to build high level research capacity to address the research and knowledge needs of South Africa; and
- to build new institutional and organisational forms and new institutional identities through regional collaboration between institutions (NPHE 2001:16 17).

The above mentioned goals and objectives of the NPHE are based on the policy framework outlined in the EWP of 1997 which include, goals, values and principles intended to develop a higher education system that will: (1) promote equity of access and fair chances of success to all who are seeking to realise their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress of past inequalities; (2) meet, through well planned and co-ordinated teaching, learning and research programmes, national development needs, including the high skilled employment needs presented by a growing economy operating in a global environment; (3) support a democratic ethos and a culture of human rights through educational programmes and practices conducive to critical discourse and creative thinking, cultural tolerance, and a commitment to a humane, non racist and non sexist social order; and (4) contribute to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship, and in particular address the diverse problems and demands of the local, national, southern African and African contexts, and uphold rigorous standards of academic quality (EWP 1997:1.14). In short, whereas the EWP provides the policy framework for higher education transformation in South Africa, the NPHE focuses on key goals and strategies to be implemented to realise the central policy goals of the EWP.

In eighty seven pages and organised in seven major sections, the NPHE announces sixteen outcomes described as “system wide targets and goals” to be achieved through “steering mechanisms” or “levers” such as setting “benchmarks” to increase graduate outputs, establishing a student financial aid scheme to ensure that academically able students who do not have the financial resources are not prevented from pursuing higher education studies, and providing postgraduate scholarships targeted at black, women and disabled students. The following table provides a summary of the first six stated “outcomes” of the NPHE:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Lever</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Increased participation rates</td>
<td>A 20% increase in participation rate of the age group 20-24 over the next 10-15 years (The higher education system enrols 750,000 students compared to 608,000 in 1998 and 580,000 in 2000)</td>
<td>Improvements of the throughputs from the school system in numbers and quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Increased graduate outputs</td>
<td>From the current 90,000 to 100,000 graduates per annum over the next 5 years: Up to 3 years undergraduate (25% Contact and 15% Distance), 4 years or more (20% Contact and 10% Distance), Postgraduate up to honours (60% Contact and 30% Distance), Masters (33% Contact and 25% Distance) and Doctoral (20% Contact and 20% Distance)</td>
<td>Earmarked funding for institutional and regional academic development programmes to improve access and success rates of students from disadvantaged backgrounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td>Indicator</td>
<td>Lever</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Broadened social base of students</td>
<td>Recruit non traditional students (workers, mature learners, in particular women and disabled) from the 1.6 m adults in the 25-39 age group with a matriculation certificate</td>
<td>Promotion of “Recognition of Prior Learning” initiatives to attract adult learners  Establishment of Sector Education and Training Authorities (SE TAs) to develop programmes targeted at adults and to identify skills gaps and shortages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Increased recruitment of students from the South African Development Community (SADC)</td>
<td>Recruit students from the SADC region at postgraduate level (Currently 14 000 SADC students enrolled in public higher education institutions)</td>
<td>Subsidisation of foreign students with effect from 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Changed enrolments by fields of study</td>
<td>Over the next five years shift the balance on enrolments between humanities, business and commerce and science, engineering and technology from the current ratio of 49%: 26%: 25% to a ratio of 40%: 30%: 30% respectively</td>
<td>Improve the quality of mathematics teaching  Increase the number of students matriculating with mathematics and science  Restructure curricula to provide the skills and qualities for employment purposes, particularly in increasing enrolments in information and communications technology through the steering of funded student places  Develop a national teacher development plan, which will identify the requirements in pre service training, the upgrading of un and under qualified teachers, as well as in service training in line with the new curriculum and school improvement policies  Develop and enhance fields of study such as African languages and culture, African literature, indigenous knowledge systems and more generally, the transformation of curricula reflecting the location of knowledge and curricula in the context of the African continent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Enhanced cognitive skills of graduates</td>
<td>Equip all graduates with the skills and qualities required for participation as citizens in a democratic society and as workers and professionals in the economy (In addition to technical skills graduates should also demonstrate knowledge management and organisational skills which include: computer literacy, knowledge reconfiguration skills, information management, problem solving in the context of application, team building, networking, negotiation/mediation competences and social sensitivity</td>
<td>Investigate the desirability and feasibility of replacing the current three year undergraduate degree with a four year degree (in the long term) which can address academic development needs of under prepared students, the skills requirement of a changing labour market and the enhanced access of workers, mature learners and the disabled to higher education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Whether the NPHE can actually deliver on its “outcomes” and hence, the transformation of higher education in South Africa is a question which requires rigorous analyses far beyond the scope of this article. Jansen (2001:5 9) argues that it would be difficult for the NPHE to deliver on at least three “outcomes”:
(1) Increasing participation rates would be difficult to achieve for the reason that the NPHE did not make an explicit and extended analysis of HIV/AIDS and its implications for higher education enrolments in the future; (2) Improved staff equity seems to be another intractable problem facing transformation in higher education due to the undersupply of black and women academics within a highly competitive labour market; and (3) New institutional and organisational forms (whether “combinations”, “incorporations” or “mergers”) particularly the risk of defending five to seven historically black universities (out of a total of 21 universities in the country) where enrolments were falling, deficits were increasing, institutional leadership was in crisis, educational quality was suspect, student protests were (in several cases) severe leading to campus occupations by police and private security firms, and public and political confidence in these institutions reached an all time low.

Like Jansen and other critics, I want to take a similar supportive stance vis à vis the implementation and possible success of the NPHE, by focusing on one specific “outcome”, that is, “Enhanced cognitive skills of graduates”. My contention is that this “outcome” has the “best” chance of being realised (and of achieving democracy) if implemented along communitarian liberalist lines with its connection to a theory of citizenship. Put differently, cognitive skills of graduates could “best” contribute towards achieving a democratic ethos in society if shaped in relation to a theory of citizenship. In this way, higher education institutions can develop the intellectual capacities of graduates by inculcating in them high quality skills and competences which in turn, can lead to a heightened form of political accountability on the part of democratic South African citizens.

**CAN THE ENHANCED COGNITIVE SKILLS ANNOUNCED IN THE NPHE ENGENDER A DEMOCRATIC CITIZENRY?**

The NPHE accentuates the importance of equipping all graduates with the skills and qualities required for participation as citizens in a democratic society and as workers and professionals in the economy. The NPHE envisages to achieve this through not only equipping graduates with technical skills but also knowledge management and organisational skills which include the following: computer literacy, knowledge reconfiguration skills, information management, problem solving in the context of application, team building, networking, negotiation / mediation competences and social sensitivity. At first glance, graduates certainly require knowledge management and organisational skills for a changing labour market economy, whereas team building, networking, negotiation / mediation and social sensitivity skills are necessary for graduates to participate as democratic citizens. However, my contention is that team building, networking, negotiation / mediation and social sensitivity skills are not sufficient to ensure that graduates participate in society as democratic citizens.

Why not? Democracy, more specifically, deliberative democracy—a term that is currently much in vogue simply refers to “a conception of democratic government that secures a central place for reasoned discussion (rational deliberation) in political life” (Cooke 2000:947). For Gutman and Thompson (1996:1) a deliberative democratic theory offers “a conception of democracy that secures a central place for moral discussion in political life”. They argue that the promise of a deliberative democratic theory lies in a concern for “finding terms of cooperation that each citizen can accept” for the reason that contemporary societies are driven by deep conflict and moral disagreement (Gutman & Thompson 1996:26). Benhabib (1996:68) explains deliberative democracy as “a model for organizing the collective and public exercise of power in the major institutions of a society on the basis of the principle that decisions affecting the well being of a collectivity can be viewed as the outcome of a procedure of free and reasoned deliberation among individuals considered as moral and political equals”. Bohman, another contemporary defender of deliberative democracy, posits that democracy in some form implies public deliberation, that is, “(t)he deliberation of citizens is necessary if decisions are not to be merely imposed upon them … consent, is after all, the mean feature of democracy” (Bohman 1996:4). In other words, political decision making is legitimate in so far as policies are produced in “a process of public discussion and debate in which citizens and their representatives, going beyong mere self interest and limited points of view, reflect on the general interest or on their common good”. Other defenders of deliberation such as Walzer (1983:304) posits that “(deliberative) democracy puts a premium on speech, persuasion, rhetorical skill … and the citizen who makes the most persuasive argument that is, the argument that actually persuades the largest number of citizens gets his (her) way”. Benhabib (1996:69) pertinently posits that “the deliberative model of democracy is a necessary condition for attaining legitimacy and rationality with regard to collective decision making processes in a polity, that the institutions of this polity are so arranged that what is considered in the common interest of all results from processes of collective deliberation conducted rationally and fairly among free and equal individuals. The more collective
decision making processes approximate this model
the more increases the presumption of their legitimacy
and rationality.” She argues that participation in such
deliberation is governed by the norms of equality and
symmetry; all have the same chances to initiate
speech acts, to question, to interrogate, and to open
debate; all have the right to question the assigned
topics of conversation; and all have the right to initiate
reflexive arguments about the very rules of the
discourse procedure and the way in which they are
applied or carried out (Benhabib 1996:70). To my
mind, these rules of deliberative democratic discourse
to initiate speech acts, to question, to interrogate, to
open debate, and to initiate reflexive arguments
would be difficult to apply if they are simply guided
by practices involving the use of team building,
networking, negotiation/mediation and social sensi-
tivity skills. One can still embark upon team building,
networking, negotiation or mediation, and social sensiti-
insisting without questioning, interrogating, debat-
ing and initiating reflexive arguments without
developing a deliberative democratic discourse. For
instance, non functional or even dysfunctional
“teams” can network and negotiate on issues invol-
vying societal or political life, as is the case with several
of the school governing bodies in South Africa,
without improving the effectiveness of democratic
governance in many schools. Consequently, in order
to ensure that deliberative democratic discourse is
cultivated in society, more specifically, that graduates
become skilled with qualities that would enable them
to function as democratic citizens, I contend that
communitarian liberalist discourse seems to be a
“desirable and feasible” practice which could en-
hance graduates’ repertoire of skills necessary to build
a democratic citizenry.

CULTIVATING CITIZENSHIP: A
COMMUNITARIAN LIBERALIST PRACTICE

Implicit in my defence of a deliberative democratic
discourse is an understanding that citizens make
political choices considered as reasonable by others
on the basis that such citizens be held accountable by
and to others for the choices they make. In other
words, citizens have political choices, however, these
choices cannot be articulated “freely” without any
sort of justification as to why they need to be
conceived as reasonable by other citizens. In other
words, a deliberative democratic discourse attempts
to transcend the opposition between atomistic (in
individually) liberalism and the demands of community
membership. Instead, a communitarian deliberative
democratic framework aims to integrate the demands
of individual political rights and that of any feasible
political community. In contemporary political philo-
sophy the theory of citizenship seems an obvious
candidate to link ideas of individual rights with that of
communal sentiments. Kymlicka (2002:284) poign-
antly states the following: “Citizenship is intimately
linked to liberal ideas of individual rights and
entitlements on the one hand, and to communitarian
ideas of membership in an attachment to community
on the other. Thus it provides a concept that can
mediate the debate between liberals and commu-
nitarians.”

Interest in citizenship has been sparked by a number
of political events and trends throughout the world
increasing apathy and long term welfare dependency
in the United States, the resurgence of nationalist
movements in Eastern Europe, the stresses created by
increasingly multicultural and multiracial populations
in Western Europe, the failure of environmental
policies that rely on voluntary citizens’ cooperation,
disaffectation with globalisation and the perceived loss
of national sovereignty (Kymlicka 2002:284). These
events indicated that the stability of modern democ-
racies depends not only on the justice of its institu-
tions, for instance, in the case of South Africa on its
Constitution, Bill of Rights, Constitutional Court and
multi party democratic system, but also on “the
quality and attitude of its citizens: eg their sense of
identity, and how they view potentially competing
forms of national, regional, ethnic, or religious
identities; their ability to tolerate and work with
others who are different from themselves; their desire
to participate in the political process in order to
promote the public good and hold authorities
accountable; their willingness to show self restraint
and exercise personal responsibility in their economic
demands, and in personal choices which affect their
health and the environment. Without citizens who
possess these qualities, democracies become difficult
to govern, even unstable (Kymlicka 2002:285). The
point I am making is that South Africa’s democracy
would not necessarily function effectively in the
absence of an especially virtuous citizenry, that is,
each person (graduate) cannot just pursue her own
self interests without regard for the common good, neither
would procedural institutional mechanisms
such as a Constitution, Bill of Rights and multi party
democratic system of government be enough but,
also, what Galston (1991:217) and Macedo
(1990:138) refer to as some level of civic virtue and
public spiritedness which requires a richer and more
subtle understanding of citizenship. In other words,
effective policy implementation relies on responsible
citizenship and not just narrowly on the acquisition
of team building, networking, negotiation / mediation
and social sensitising skills as suggested by the
NPHE. For instance, the state would be unable to
provide a basic education if citizens do not act
responsibly with respect to their own education, in
terms of attending school (both teachers and stu-
dents), eradicating the vandalism of school buildings,
and fostering communal involvement in school
activities. Attempts to implement policy would floun-
der without the cooperation and self restraint of
citizens, that is, the exercise of civic virtue – citizens’
willingness to participate, ability to trust, their sense of justice (Putnam in Kymlicka 2002:286).

Galston’s (1991:221 224) posits that responsible citizenship is constituted by four types of civic virtues: (i) general virtues: courage, law abidingness and loyalty; (ii) social virtues: independence and open mindedness; (iii) economic virtues: work ethic, capacity to delay self gratification, adaptability to economic and technological change; and (iv) political virtues: capacity to discern and respect the rights of others, willingness to demand only what can be paid for, ability to evaluate the performance of those in office, willingness to engage in public discourse. Many of these virtues are to be required by South African citizens, particularly the ability and willingness to question political authority, and to engage in public discourse about matters of public policy, since they are precisely the goods necessary to enact political deliberation. It is for this reason that Kymlicka (2002:293) cogently claims that a communitarian deliberative model of democracy requires that people act with a profound sense of democratic citizenship: “Democratic citizens must be not only active and participatory, critical of authority, and non dogmatic, but also committed to seek mutual understanding through deliberation rather than exclusively seeking personal benefit through bargaining and threats (ie negotiation and mediation according to the NPHE). Without citizens who display these virtues, liberal democracy cannot fulfil its promise of justice, and may indeed slowly succumb to undemocratic or illiberal forces”.

In essence, there must be a sufficient number of citizens who possess the virtues of democratic citizenship to a sufficient degree, particular those virtues associated with people’s commitment to public participation, respectful dialogue, or critical attention to government, that is, “the need for people to be active citizens who participate in public deliberation” (Kymlicka 2002:293). For people to be apathetic and passive, as well as withdrawing into the private sphere of family, career and personal projects, referred to by Habermas (1996:78) as the “syndrome of civic privatism”, poses a serious challenge to the effective functioning of a communitarian deliberative democracy - a situation South Africa can ill afford to let happen.

The question arises: How can this “syndrome of civic privatism” be overcome in order to live up to the demands of democratic citizenship? One way is to persuade people to accept the activities associated with political participation and public deliberation to be intrinsically rewarding. This Aristotelian view holds that political participation and deliberation are superior to private life involving the family, work, religion and leisure, which most people often find burdensome and sacrificial (Kymlicka 2002:297). Most people, certainly in South Africa, do not necessarily accept the intrinsic value of political participation and deliberation as rewarding since they “will find their greatest joys and projects in other areas of life, including the family, work, the arts, or religion” (Kymlicka 2002:299). If this were to be the case, and one has good reason to believe it is, the least people could do to cultivate citizenship would be to learn the social virtue of “civility” or “decency” since it applies not only to political activity, but primarily to our non discriminatory actions in everyday life, on the street, in neighbourhood shops, and in diverse institutions and forums of civil society such as stores, corporations, churches, charities, support groups, unions and families. Walzer (in Kymlicka 2000:305) posits that the civility that makes democratic politics possible (that is, participatory and deliberative) can only be learned in associational networks of civil society. According to Glendon (1991:109) it is in voluntary organisations of civil society such as those mentioned above, that human character, competence, and capacity for citizenship are formed for it is here that people internalise the idea of personal responsibility and mutual obligation and learn the voluntary self restraint which is essential to responsible citizenship. However, Okin (1992:65) posits that these associational networks of civil society can also teach deference to authority and intolerance towards other faiths, prejudice against other races, and male dominance over women, which do not make these networks defensible “seedbeds of civic virtue” (Glendon 1991:109). It seems clear that no single institution can be relied upon as the exclusive “seedbed of civic virtue”. Therefore, I agree with Kymlicka (2002:307) who argues that virtues of democratic citizenship can “best” be learned in schools (I would argue universities). In his words, “schools (universities) must teach children how to engage in the kind of critical reasoning and moral perspective that defines public reasonableness ... (and) promoting these sorts of virtues is one of the fundamental justifications for mandatory education (Kymlicka 2002:307). Of course, historically, schools and universities have often been used to promote deference, chauvinism, xenophobia, and other illiberal and undemocratic practices, but this not detract from the fact that schools and universities can be reorganised, particularly in South Africa, to be effective “seedbeds of civic virtues”. According to Gutman (1987:30), education for democratic citizenship should inevitably involve equipping children (graduates) with the intellectual skills necessary for civility. In this regard it is worth referring to a passage of Kymlicka (2002:308):

(C)ommon (public) schools (universities) teach civility not just by telling students the oral value of civility, but also by insisting that students sit beside students of different races and religions, and cooperate with them on school (university) projects or sports teams. Similarly common schools (universities) teach public reasonableness not only
by telling students that there are plurality of religious views in the world, and that reasonable students disagree on the merits of these views. They also create the social structures whereby students can see the reasonableness of these disagreements. It is not enough to simply tell students that the majority of the people in the world do not share their religion (or culture and differences) ... To learn public reasonableness, students must come to know and understand people who are reasonable and decent and humane, but who do not share their religion (or culture).

The kind of learning espoused above requires the presence of a (university) classroom with people of varying ethno cultural and religious backgrounds such as those of South Africans. Certainly in this way, public schools and universities can in a forward looking way cultivate the civic virtue of democratic citizenship required of citizens (graduates) to enact a communitarian deliberative democracy in South Africa as has been argued for in this article.

In conclusion, merely for the NPHE authors to announce that graduates should achieve the “outcome” of “enhanced cognitive skills” is not sufficient to ensure that a democratic ethos would be fostered in society. Graduates also need to be equipped with civic virtues of democratic citizenship if higher education restructuring is to contribute towards strengthening the values and practices of South Africa’s democracy and most importantly, “to overcome the fragmentation, inequality and inefficiency which are the legacy of the (apartheid) past ...” (EWP 1997).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Abridged versions of this article were first presented at two conferences, namely, (1) Annual National Conference of the Education Association of South Africa, Education for Nation Building (Pretoria, 15 18 January 2002) at the University of Pretoria under the title, “Deliberative Democracy And Higher Education Policy Restructuring In South Africa”, and (2) An International Symposium Presented By the German Institute for International Educational Research in Collaboration with the University of Erfurt and the Bundeswehr University of Hamburg (Berlin, 24 26 January 2002) under the title, “Communitarian Liberalism, Democracy And Higher Education Transformation In South Africa”.

REFERENCES