Aspects of student equity and higher education in South Africa

J. Beckmann
Department of Education Management and Policy Studies
Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria
South Africa
e-mail: johan.beckmann@up.ac.za

Abstract
Badat (2004, 4) refers to the triple challenge facing higher education: to promote equity and growth within a democratic framework and to consolidate a fledgling democracy. In higher education there is inherent tension between growth (access to education) and equity. The article argues that the vagueness in which the term “equity” is generally used as a synonym for “equality” contributes to an over-simplification of relevant issues. It also argues that the common practice of describing equity almost exclusively in quantitative terms (such as enrolment figures) detracts from important issues like the quality of the educational process, accountability and even outcomes. It explores other possibilities of conceptualising and reporting on equity.

INTRODUCTION
Equity has been a cornerstone of South Africa’s new education policies since 1994 and is even believed to be a constitutional principle. White Paper 3 on the Transformation of Higher Education (Department of Education 1996) does indeed contain some detail on equity and higher education. The same is true of the report of the National Commission on Higher Education (1996). However, the Constitution of 1996, which contains the principles on which the new democratic state is founded, contains only two references to equity. Both times equity is not the focus of the provision concerned but merely a factor to be considered in the implementation of the provisions in question namely the right to education in the language(s) of one’s choice (section 29(2)) and the division of fiscal powers and functions between two municipalities (section 229(3)). The word ‘equitable’ occurs more frequently, mostly in connection with fiscal powers.

In this contribution I investigate the rather problematic use of the word ‘equity’ in policies and in strategies aimed at transforming higher education; I also try to assess whether or not we have, after 1994, made significant progress towards the achievement of equity in higher education. I depart from the point of view that equity implies more than the achievement of formal equality effected through the repeal of discriminatory laws and formal desegregation policies. I argue that one needs to
have more than quantitative indicators in order to assess possible progress towards equity. I also argue that equity is used in a way that obscures rather than clarifies its meaning and that the consequent uncertainty tends to obliterate the possible energising influence equity might otherwise have on strategies.

One scarcely needs to be reminded though that historical-educational disparities, skewed patterns of access, participation and success and socio-economic inequalities (running on racial lines) affect development negatively and that redress appears vital for development and progress and stability and individual advancement (Scott 2003, 41–42). Scott makes two further statements that are hard to refute namely that policy has been largely symbolic and that substantive ‘policy and actionable strategies for balancing equity and development have not yet been put in place’ (Scott 2003, 42–43).

**HIGHER EDUCATION**

I think that the warning by Minister (Pandor 2005, 1) that universities do not exist in vacuums and that they cannot seek isolation from social forces that influence progress and development is an apt one. Much of the discussion of redress and transformation of higher education seems to have a myopic view of higher education as a self-contained system. It tends to seek to find in the system solutions that may be found wholly or partially in other subsections of the education system or in the external environment.

In discussing equity one needs to locate the discussion in the functions of universities, taking into account that universities emphasise higher education functions differently. It also seems that almost all if not all South African universities are migrating or attempting to migrate between various manifestations of higher education functions such as being research universities, universities concentrating on providing access to higher education, etcetera. These two assumptions both limit and determine the form that equity could take in South African universities at this moment. In a recent Council on Higher Education (CHE) commissioned research paper Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007) draw attention to the vital role of ‘the educational process’ in higher education institutions in the pursuit of equity.

**TERMINOLOGY**

I depart from the point of view that equity implies more than equality and is a term we invoke when we have to address equality when the removal of formal barriers to equality is not enough to ensure fairness and justice in the light of historical and other contextual factors. The introduction of formal equality in South Africa after years of purposeful discrimination, unequal treatment and consequent neglect is a good case in point.

In this article I approach the issue of equity using an education law lens since equality is a key concept in post-apartheid law in South Africa and is linked to, but
not synonymous with equity. Admittedly I am not using this lens like a lawyer would but as an educationist knowing that the law speaks to educationists in a manner that demands compliance, change and implementation based on appropriate knowledge of applicable legal principles and rules. In a manner of speaking I will be using a legal lens adapted for educationists.

It seems fair comment that those who use the term equity do not take much care to explain and contextualise the concept. The National Policy on Religion and Education (Republic of South Africa 2003, 7) illustrates this point well and provides a very unhelpful ‘clarification’ of equity in regard to religion and education, saying that equity means that the education process in general, and this policy in particular, must aim at the development of a national democratic culture with respect for the value of all of our people’s diverse cultural, religious and linguistic traditions.

Normally quantitative data do not shed much light on fairness, justice, values and the developments of skills, which are integral parts of the concept equity. Price and (Wohlford 2005, 59) say that higher education represents the ‘gateway to individual opportunity and the vehicle for expanding social benefits such as long-term growth, a healthier population, and increased civic participation’. If the discourse on equity and higher education does not touch on issues such as these, its usefulness as a tool for leveraging change and measuring progress and redress must be questioned seriously.

I have an uneasy suspicion that equity is often used as a substitute for ‘affirmative action’. This latter term is fairly closely defined in legislation such as the Employment Equity Act of 1998. It requires compliance with settled legal procedural and other requirements in order to meet the rigorous scrutiny of the law. I am suggesting that the word ‘equity’ may be used as a ‘proxy’ for ‘affirmative action’, which is subject to more rigorous and robust legal requirements. Like ‘democracy’, ‘equality’, ‘non-racialism’ and ‘non-racism’ (to name but a few) ‘equity’ is a word which does not encourage or countenance challenges and contestations. It is assumed to be good and useful per se. It would be sad if equity were purposefully used to bypass and evade legal scrutiny and put actions beyond the reach of critical debate. The chances that this might be done deliberately are likely to be remote; in line with the adage that ineptitude is more common than conspiracy.

Many authors make the obvious point that equity means different things to different people in different contexts (World Bank 2005, 18; Dinello and Squire 2005, 4). Among the helpful contributions in conceptualising equity are those by Orfield (2005:4), the World Bank (2005, 18), Scott (2003, 43, quoting Subotzky 2001, 100), Badat (2004, 33), Dinello and Squire (2004, 4), Ng (2002, 206) and Favish (2005, 282). The World Bank points out that ‘the common denominator [to the long-standing and nuanced characterisations of the word] is that equity relates to fairness, whether locally in families and communities, or globally across nations’ while Orfield comments that higher education needs to open up and create ‘equal opportunity for mobility’ in society and not reinforce separation and inequality.

postulates that equity is a condition reached where the market and parents (among others) are assured that graduates are ‘able to fulfil the requirements of the various professions and the labour market, to be life-long learners and able to function as critical, culturally enriched and tolerant citizens’.

Dinello and Squire (2005) say that the term equity implies freedom from bias and favouritism and suggests justice according to natural law or right. They point out that it denotes impartiality, disinterestedness, even-handedness, fair play, fairness, integrity and justice. It is broader than equality and also addresses equality of opportunity (fair play) and equality of condition (fair share). They cite Rawls (1971, 100) who conceptualised equity as corrective measures designed to ensure a fair system of equality of opportunity and a just system of end results.

Ng (2002, 206), writing about Canada, says that equity takes differences into account and does not assume (like equality) that people who receive equal treatment are or should be the same. It shifts the debate from equal treatment to the removal of barriers for historically disadvantaged groups. Educational equity (unlike employment equity) encompasses options of respect for diversity, inclusive curricula and a ‘warming up of the chilly climate some experience in educational settings’. She warns that if one pursues only one of these issues to the exclusion of others, one tends to reinforce ‘differences constructed along lines of gender, race and ability’ (Ng 2003, 27). Favish (2005) identifies language of tuition, happiness with social environment, support levels to address problems and difficulties, accommodation of different levels of cultural experiences, acceptance into programmes of choice and organisation of the curriculum including lecture structures as factors relevant to the achievement and measuring of equity.

From the above it seems clear that equity in higher education cannot be tracked, illustrated, understood or explained solely in terms of quantitative data. Ng’s warning (2002) that isolating one or more factors in isolation is dangerous and could reinforce differences constructed along racial and other lines and prove counter-productive to constituent aims of equity like tolerance and acceptance seems particularly valid.

A further issue on which documentation and policies are silent is whether or not equity needs to be viewed as a systemic or institutional issue although in a more recent work Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007) now depart from the view that equity is a systemic issue. From Favish’s article (2005) it appears that his research institution viewed equity as a regional or institutional issue rather than a systemic, national issue. I would suggest that many institutions would find it exceedingly difficult if not impossible to comply with equity provisions if targets in this regard were expressed in terms of national demographic patterns.

**POLICY INTENTIONS**

South Africans seem to be very susceptible to the notion that laws and policies are magic wands and that once policies and laws have been promulgated, the ‘job is done’. Put differently: And they said let there be equity and there was equity. It
should be clear from the discussion of terminology above that such expectations are at best optimistic.

Jansen (2002, 1) expresses his ‘deep discomfort’ with the education change assumptions of many higher education planners and policy makers. He quotes from the National Plan that articulates the ‘profoundly ambitious ambitions’ that the Plan ‘...will be achieved’. Similarly, the South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa 1996, Preamble) seems to assume that the advent of democracy and the enactment of the South African Schools Act can consign the past system of education to history and create a new national system for schools to redress past injustices.

Before I try to assess the progress or lack of progress made toward the achievement of equity in light of certain indicators, I need to paint South African higher education policy intentions and initiatives in broad strokes.

**Higher education policy intentions and initiatives**

Documentation is not clear about what or who is to be ‘equitised’ but from data produced and arguments put forward it is fairly safe to say that equity targets the ‘designated groups’ as defined in section 1 of the Employment Equity Act (Equity Act 55 of 1998): black people (a generic term which means Africans, coloureds and Indians), women and people with disabilities. The question arises as to whether the terms are used in rank or in random order. The case of Motala v University of Natal suggests that one cannot rule out the possibility of an intended rank order. In this case, an exemplary Indian student was refused admission into medical school in favour of a less meritorious African student in terms of an admission policy which limited the number of Indian students in order to make room for more African students. The court upheld the exclusion of the Indian student and found that Africans were disadvantaged more than Indians under apartheid.

I have already suggested that it is possible that equity might be used as a surrogate for affirmative action because it is easier to ‘get around’ than affirmative action which is fairly clearly described and limited in law. Section 6 of the Employment Equity Act of 1998 provides for affirmative action, echoing section 9(3) of the Constitution. The Employment Equity Act states first of all that

No person may unfairly discriminate, directly or indirectly, against an employee, in any employment policy or practice, on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, family responsibility, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, HIV status, conscience, belief, political opinion, culture, language and birth.

and then says that it is not unfair discrimination to

take affirmative action measures consistent with the purpose of this Act.
Mawdsley and Russo (2003, 417) discuss relevant American litigation and say that in the *Gratz* case a 7 – 2 decision of the American Supreme Court struck down the University of Michigan’s undergraduate admissions process that used a points system that allocated 20 points based on race or ethnicity. In the *Grutter* case a 5 – 4 decision of the Supreme Court upheld the University of Michigan’s law school’s use of a race preference system that permitted applicants with lower LSAT scores and GPAs to be admitted over non-minority students. Before these two 2003 cases the Supreme Court made only one other decision in this regard namely in the 1978 *Bakke* case which involved the Regents of the University of California. In this case a divided court invalidated a medical school admission programme that reserved 16 of 100 places for disadvantaged minority students. Ancheta (2005, 175–181) also refers to the effect of race-conscious admission policies to address discrimination and to promote equity in the United States and comments, in regard to quotas vis-à-vis targets, that race cannot be the exclusive or predominant factor in admission to higher education (Ancheta 2005, 181).

This small sample of American litigation illustrates the often-quoted dictum that ‘it all depends’ and suggests that in South Africa too court judgments regarding affirmative action will not be easy to predict. However, it needs to be remembered that South Africa is a separate jurisdiction although S39 of the Constitution of 1996 does empower a tribunal or forum to have regard to foreign law when interpreting constitutional rights issues.

Seepe (2005, 1–3), argues that the unintended consequences of acts sometimes do more harm than good to the general black population and concludes that ‘[M]ediocrity wins for blacks what excellence wins for others’ and that ‘[S]urely, we cannot continue to maintain policies that assume that black people are mentally inferior and incapable of competing on their own merit!’. One does not have to agree with Seepe’s rather strongly-worded observations to realise that he does highlight some of the possible unfortunate if unintended consequences of badly-conceived and managed affirmative action.

The Equity Act does not support the idea of quotas for, or absolute barriers to certain groups but introduces the notion of targets whose achievement or failure to achieve can be justified to escape possible sanctions or accountability. Although it is fair to assume that the notion of affirmative action has been transferred to the higher education arena, it does not seem to be accompanied by sanctions in case of non-performance. There also does not seem to be any clear insistence on accountability regarding acts or omissions in this regard. It is, however, possible to put a construction on the funding framework for higher education that would suggest some form of sanctioning of institutions who do not demonstrate progress in the direction of an elusive aim namely equity. I will return to this issue.

In the remainder of this section I will deal briefly with various policy statements on equity in higher education to highlight the great degree of vagueness and lack of clarity that could energise initiatives, interventions and programmes.
THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION

In its report to government the National Commission on Higher Education (1996, 2) refers to an inequitable distribution of access and opportunity for students and staff along axes of race, gender, class and geographic discrimination. It says that there are gross discrepancies in the participation rates by students from different population groups and indefensible imbalances in the ratios of black and female staff compared to whites and males. It proposes that the provision of resources and opportunities in higher education should be premised upon equity (1996, 3).

EDUCATION WHITE PAPER 3 (DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION 1997)

Par 1.14 of the White Paper presents the Ministry of Education’s vision of higher education as one that will 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 for past inequalities.

Par 1.18 relates equity to fair opportunities and the identification of existing inequalities ‘which are the product of policies, structures and practices based on racial, gender, disability and other forms of discrimination or disadvantage . . .’. It also refers to transformation with a view to redress and says that such transformation ‘involves not only abolishing all existing forms of unjust differentiation, but also measures of empowerment, including financial support to bring about equal opportunity for individuals and institutions’.

According to par 2.28 the Ministry will require institutions to develop their own race and gender equity goals and plans for achieving them, using indicative targets for distributing publicly subsidised places rather than firm quotas. Par 2.29 states that ensuring equity of access must be complemented by a concern for equity of outcomes. Increased access must not lead to a ‘revolving door’ syndrome for students, with high failure and drop-out rates. In this respect, the Ministry is committed to ensuring that public funds earmarked for achieving redress and equity must be linked to measurable progress toward improving quality and reducing the high drop-out and repetition rates.

TOWARDS A NEW HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE: MEETING THE EQUITY, QUALITY AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IMPERATIVES OF SOUTH AFRICA IN THE 21ST CENTURY (COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION (CHE), 2000) (LANDSCAPE)

This document represents a report to government by an expert group. It admits that the achievement of equity is compromised by inefficiencies, lack of effectiveness and shortcomings in quality. It adds that equity should mean more than access to higher
education and that it must incorporate equity of opportunity – environments in which learners, through academic support, excellent teaching and mentoring and other initiatives, genuinely have every chance of succeeding. Equity, to be meaningful, is also ensuring that learners have access to quality education, and graduate with the relevant knowledge, competencies, skills and attributes that are required for any occupation and profession (CHE 2000, 10). These views convey a clear awareness that discussions of equity cannot be located adequately only in statistical analyses and that, among others, narrative studies and considerations of quality need to be prominent in the examination of equity issues.

On page 22 the document argues that responding appropriately to the equity challenges of the country is one of the most critical challenges facing the reconfiguration of higher education given the legacy of exclusion in our country. It then goes on to say that equity targets will have to be set and monitored for all programmes and for student and staff equity. Such targets should apply across all other effectiveness and efficiency targets.

It is remarkable that statistics abound that little progress has been made regarding equity since 1994. It is like measuring achievement against unknown and unarticulated expectations. It is unsurprising therefore that most statistics fall back on a simplistic, unsophisticated portrayal of equity in terms of numbers of students and staff divided into racial and gender categories. Even a study completed as recently as 2007 (Scott, Yelds and Hendry 2007) still work extensively with statistical data. They provide for example, the following table (see Table 1) derived from a study of the 2000 cohort by the Department of Education (DOE). It shows how many first year entering students in this cohort completed within 4 years (Scott, Yelds and Hendry 2007, 25).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All programmes</th>
<th>22%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universities excluding UNISA</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technikons excluding TSA</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

They comment (2007, 28) that, with one exception, black students make up fewer than 25 per cent of all who graduate in regulation time.

The above extracts indicate to a large degree the current level of the debate on equity. In addition to revealing what indicators are going to be used for assessment of progress toward equity, it also suggests important indicators and dimensions that may be absent. Quantitative indicators appear to be pre-eminent. Much of the vocabulary used is imprecise and susceptible to many constructions and abuses – many people would frown at a phrase like ‘creative change management’ (CHE 2000, 23).
Likewise publicly-subsidised student FTE places (Department of Education 1997, par 4.23) might suggest quotas that government invariably denies in public fora.

Overworked political and struggle rhetoric still finds a home in the arguments while management imperatives and challenges are relatively underplayed. Although qualitative considerations like empowerment, extended curricula and student support do surface, it is unclear as to how the system will account in this regard. In this regard the report by Scott, Yelds and Hendry does open up new dimensions of the debate by suggesting greater accountability in and by institutions (2007, 63) and by adducing two categories of reasons why institutions fail to make significant headway in regard to equity (2007, 31).

They refer to factors outside the control of institutions including:

- Outputs and prospects of the school system
- Material (socio-economic conditions) and student finance.
- To these they add factors within the higher education system’s control:
  - Affective factors and institutional culture
  - The effectiveness of the educational process in higher education.

SNAPSHOTS OF PROGRESS

Having addressed terminology and policy issues in broad terms in the preceding paragraphs, I will now attempt to provide snapshots to provide answers to the questions regarding what has happened and is happening to equity in South African higher education. The data is somewhat dated as the very latest data is not readily available. The issues discussed will cover both factors outside and within the control of institutions.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT(S)

Physical infrastructure has deteriorated since the early 1990s when student numbers started surpassing the state’s ability to fund universities pro rata (Bundy 2002, 2).

The Landscape document says that the geographic location of institutions which was based on ideological and political considerations rather than rational and coherent planning resulted in fragmentation and unnecessary duplication and militated against equity (CHE 2000, 14).

INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT AND ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

Questions about the quality of the institutional management and academic environment are undoubtably valid. The picture that emerges is not a rosy one: higher education institutions show alarming signs of instability and are far too often in the news because of student unrest and allegations of mismanagement. The government has on occasion had to invoke its power to appoint administrators of institutions to replace duly selected and appointed Chief Executive Officers.
The likelihood of achieving equity therefore seems to be closely linked to the management and environment quality of institutions as well as the level of autonomy and freedom accorded to institutions.

Teaching and teaching materials

Goldstein (2000, 217) comments that new teaching material that reflects linguistic, cultural and racial diversity is needed. New materials, text books, methods and assessment are needed. Presumably more is needed than trying to correct past wrongs by including black faces in all illustrations and giving characters in cartoons and scenarios ‘black’ names. It seems that there is a real danger of creating new stereotypes and caricatures of black people as eternal campaigners, rights activists and even as helpless victims.

Scott (2003, 49) comments aptly that equity and development should not be treated separately. He observes that ‘[T]he challenge of developing latent talent, particularly in disadvantaged communities, is a central one for the third world as a whole, intensified by globalization. . . . poor performance of students from disadvantaged groups is not due to shortage of talent, but has much to do with the incapacity of the existing higher education structures and approaches to cater for diverse educational backgrounds’. Similarly, many disadvantaged students who might succeed never enter higher education because standard selection methods see only achieved performance rather than potential, or in Miller’s words ‘predict the past’ (1992, 101).

Scott (2003, 50) also criticises the lack of flexibility regarding ‘fundamental parameters’ such as entry level, duration and expected rate of progression. He also argues that extended curricula and support need to be viewed as mainstream provision in diverse student populations and that ‘. . . all students gain substantial benefits, both cognitive and social, from regular, positive interactions with others outside their own ethnic peer group’.

Whitla et al. (2005, 131) conclude from their studies that white (medical) students gain capacity to communicate with people from different cultures through studying in diverse settings. They do, however, warn against what Steele calls ‘stereotype threat’ (Whitla et al. 2005, 134–5). This threat exists where minority students are academically highly motivated but very susceptible to the threat of being negatively stereotyped.

STUDENT PARTICIPATION, EDUCATIONAL PROCESS AND ACHIEVEMENTS (CHE, 1994)

In 1993 the public higher education participation rate expressed as percentage of the total population in question was 9 per cent for Africans, 13 per cent for coloureds, 40 per cent for Indians and 70 per cent for whites with the average participation rate at 17 per cent. In 2000 the rate was 13 per cent for Africans, 9 per cent for Coloureds,
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39 per cent for Indians and 47 per cent for Whites with the average rate at 16 per cent (Cloete 2004, 56). This represents a negligible decrease in the average rate, a significant increase in African numbers and a notable drop in White and Coloured numbers. However, BHUs did not attract White students and retention and graduation rates at these institutions decreased (Cloete 2004, 59).

In the USA average national figures by race and ethnicity show that whites, and to a greater extent Asians, are more likely to have attained at least some college education than Latinos, blacks and American Indians (Kurlaender and Flores 2005, 17).

A possible problem with such statistics is that they may not reflect population (demographic changes over time) (Price and Wohlford 2005, 59). Price and Wohlford (2005, 60) designed the Educational Attainment Parity Indicator (EAPI) to address some of the limitations of statistics. See Figure 1 for the EAPI equation (Price and Wohlford 2005, 67).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race and gender with BA* in a location / Total BA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race and gender population / Total population</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*First degree in the humanities

Figure 1: EAPI (Price and Wohlford 2006, 67)

An EAPI of 1.0 for any race and gender group indicates the attainment of educational parity.

Gender is one of the commonly used indicators of equity and, like the data concerning racial participation in higher education; these figures are nothing but figures from which no qualitative dimensions regarding the participation of women in higher education can be deduced. The number of women exceeded that of men in 1999 and the gap kept increasing. The participation of women increased at a rate three times faster than that of men and the overall proportion of women increased from 42 per cent in 1990 to 53 per cent in 2000 (Cloete 2004, 55) to 64 per cent in 2002. Whether this translates into real advances of the status of women in society and to a decrease in discrimination against, and abuse of, women and to better career prospects is a moot issue.

**BLACK STUDENTS**

Black students did not become significantly more successful and they did not populate ‘the high-skill, high status fields of study in the numbers anticipated by the equity policies’ (Cloete 2004, 62). Furthermore throughput rates were not adequate (if they had been 20%, 25 000 more graduates would have been produced in 1998), 25 per cent of new graduate intakes drop out by the end of the first year and too many failing students are retained in the system (CHE 2001 cited in Cloete 2004,
The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and student support and enrolment management initiatives have not addressed student retention as expected (Cloete 2004, 65).

Kurlaender and Flores (2005, 18) discuss the position in the US and point out that, among 24–35 year olds, whites have the highest proportion reaching an associate degree, American Indians achieving the second highest achievement (‘potentially revealing the important role of two-year tribal colleges in American Indian postsecondary attainment’).

Large gaps exist between whites and underrepresented minorities in graduate and professional degree attainment (Kurlaender and Flores 2005, 19; Price and Wohlford 2005, 59). Kurlaender and Flores (2005, 26) suggest three reasons why higher education attainment remains unequal: The cost of higher education, unequal preparation in schools, and changing admission policies – among others a roll back in affirmative action in admissions.

Cloete (2004, 62) concludes that the gap between historically black universities (HBUs) and historically white universities (HWUs) has increased and that remedying historical disadvantages has not been as easy as anticipated. He believes that redress policies have ironically benefited historically Afrikaans institutions and not the historically Black institutions. At an ‘overall system level it is quite clear that higher education is no more efficient in 2000 than it was in 1994’ (Cloete 2004, 70).

Favish (2005, 274–276) quotes Cooper and Subotzky (2001) saying that a ‘revolution in African enrolments at HEIs occurred in the decade from 1988 to 1998. Absolute numbers of Africans and females increased, so has the proportion of African students at historically white institutions (HWIs)’.

He believes that it is a particular challenge to open up access in ‘to education and training programmes which are demand led’ and to enable students to exit with ‘a skills profile that matches current employment demand trends’. This touches on a crucial characteristic of equity: it needs to lead to more students finding better employment. Favish (2005, 278) comments that not enough black students proceed to postgraduate degrees and that there is a noticeable tension between wider access and non-completion of studies. One reason why black students do not perform on a par with other students is advanced by Ngqakayii-Motaung (1976, 74) cited in Favish (2005, 280) who avers that in HWIs blacks perform alongside students ‘whose racial and class status and places them at a considerable advantage in generating resources (linguistic, material and psychological) that facilitate success . . .’.

Scott (2003, 44–47) reaches conclusions similar to those reached by Cloete and Favish. He says that the overall participation is inadequate, articulation with secondary education is inadequate (matric exemption rates), throughput and completion (efficiency) rates are low, participation and output are skewed in terms of race and class and fields of study (there is too much growth where there is no shortage of graduates) and that equity and development are not served by differing or uneven quality and standards across the system. Scott believes there is not enough excellence or equity to provide a firm enough base for meeting contemporary needs.
FUNDING

I have already indicated that funding might well be a reason for the unsatisfactory participation and performance rates of black students and thus the lack of progress towards equity targets. In this regard the assumption that higher education is suffering from a decrease in government funding is incorrect according to Cloete (2004, 66). He says funding may not be enough but has not decreased. He blames inability to diversify income for lack of funds.

Vermeulen and Melck (2004) discuss two sources of earmarked funding for institutions that are intended to improve their capacity to serve students better, namely teaching development grants and research development grants. ‘Surplus’ Teaching Output Funds will be allocated to institutions that do not yet meet the normed teaching outputs as Teaching Development Funds and such grants will be allocated for 3 year cycles. Similarly ‘surplus’ Research Output Funds will be allocated to institutions that do not yet meet the normed research outputs as Research Development Funds as grants allocated for 3 year cycles. It seems fair to allocate extra funds to struggling institutions but there is also a real danger that this might work as a disincentive in institutions that do meet the normed standards. Certainly incentives to well-performing institutions must be an option.

CONCLUSION

The enduring impression one gains is that equity is a complex issue and that managing the pursuit of equity in higher education takes considerable balancing skills. The title of Scott’s article (2003) is revealing: Balancing excellence, equity and enterprise in a less-industrialized country: The case of South Africa. It suggests a need to balance various issues simultaneously and to perform the necessary prioritising. Badat (2004, 4) refers to the triple challenge: to promote equity and growth within a democratic framework and to consolidate a fledgling democracy. He adds that for ‘good political and social reasons, it is not an option to postpone one or another of the elements of the triple challenge or to tackle them in sequence’.

According to Badat (2004, 21) pursuing equity and excellence (quality) establishes political and social dilemmas and ‘raises the question of trade-offs between principles, goals and strategies’. Focusing on one or the other can jeopardise the other. He also points out that, when facing intractable tensions between goals and values simplifying manoeuvres are possible such as refusing acceptance of a dilemma (moral blindness), elevating one value or goal above all others and ranking values in advance (2004, 22). Cloete (2002, 52) summarises what the government decided in this regard, saying that they opted for expanded access with a focus on equity and redress.

In future the greatest growth in eligible students will be students of colour (Price and Wohlford 2005, 63). In assessing how equity plays out in their studies and careers, we will need to explore the usefulness of Price and Wohlford’s (2005) EAPI
and also Bensimon and Oakes’s Diversity Scorecard (Price and Wohlford 2005, 65). This Scorecard assumes that inequity is a function of institutional performance rather than of individual weaknesses or deficits and that evidence about ‘equity in educational outcomes for underrepresented students presented in the form of graphically displayed quantitative data can have a powerful effect in mobilizing institutional attention and action’. Oakes created the College Opportunities Ratio to measure the effectiveness of high schools in preparing students of different racial and ethnic groups for higher education (Price and Wohlford 2005, 66). All of these intimate that it may be possible to measure progress in the pursuit of equity through custom-made instruments.

Cloete’s conclusion (2004, 76–77) is that there is still an equity-development tension and the challenge remains increasing the number and types of graduates and the biggest impediment to growth in South Africa is the increasing scarcity of high-level skills.

Orfield (2005, 7) says that, taken as a whole, his book is not optimistic about the role of higher education in the struggle for social justice. A single policy or set of policies cannot ensure equity in a transforming society (Orfield 2005, 9).

In the end we are left with a set of intriguing questions the answers to which will determine the success or failure of the quest for equity:

- What is the extent to which equity has been attained in regard to essentially human qualities such as attitudes, views, capacities, etc?
- Can we expect equity if the system does not provide incentives for promoting equity, does not sanction non-compliance and does not demand accountability?
- How can we move away decisively from a predominance of number crunching to where qualitative aspects also feature?
- How can we ensure that the equity debate also addresses the impact of equity on students’ lives and prospects and on the welfare and growth of the economy and the country?
- How can we change to an integrative approach to the evaluation of the success or failure of equity initiatives?

Thinking and talking about equity is laudable but how one talks about it and how frankly one accounts may be even more important.

NOTE

The Employment Equity Act of 1998 requires explicit equity plans regarding staff. This is not necessarily true to the same degree of student equity plans.

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