



# **The Higher Education Policy Issues in 2013: Implications for the Central Application Office, Kwazulu Natal**

Address delivered on the occasion of the **Annual General Meeting** of the Central Application Office (CAO) Kwazulu Natal (KZN) at Coastlands on the Ridge – Peter Mokaba Ridge, Musgrave, Durban, South Africa.

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Directors of the CAO Board  
Registrars of the four public universities in KZN;  
Chief Executive Officer of the CAO, Mr George van der Ross  
Heads of public and private FET colleges;  
Representatives from the Department of Education, KZN  
Head of Admission at public and private institutions in KZN; and  
Ladies and gentlemen.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Let me start off by expressing my sincere gratitude to the Chief Executive Officer of Central Application Office (CAO) KZN, Mr George van der Ross for inviting me to address your organisation's Annual General Meeting. It is indeed a privilege and honour to be with you today.

I should indicate that I struggled a bit to choose a topic suitable for an occasion such as this, in part because so many things are happening in Higher Education sector and the FET College sector now, than at any time in our history. I have decided to settle for all embracing topic, i.e. **The Higher Education Policy Issues in 2013: Implications for the CAO KZN.**

## **2 HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY AGENDA IN PERSPECTIVE**

Our Higher Education policy agenda has undergone tumultuous changes since 1994. Although one is totally against the notion of periodisation owing to its reductionist approach to complex phenomena such as policy-making, I have decided to explain the evolution of Higher Education policy in South Africa using four distinct periods. I however, proceed from an understanding that the boundaries in between these periods should be seen as arbitrary and permeable. The periods are as follows: (i) envisioning period; (ii) rationalisation period; (iii) consolidation period; and (iv) policy review and optimisation period.

**2.1 Envisioning period:** The period 1994 to 1999, was characterised by the imperatives to evolve a policy agenda that was in line with the democratic ethos and values of a post-apartheid South Africa, as envisioned in the Constitution of the Republic, both interim in 1993 and final Constitution of 1996. It was during this period that a number of legislative pieces were passed to give effect to this overarching goal. These include the Education White Paper 3: A Programme of Transformation (1996) and the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, as amended. It should also be mentioned that during this period, a number of state institutions were established to support the broader Higher Education agenda, including the Council on Higher Education and its Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC); and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). This period, one can argue, could be termed the “golden age” of Higher Education, because it was an era of envisioning and reimagining the Higher Education project for a democratic, non-racial, non-sexist society. It was a period of reflection, of speculating what was possible, and a period of anticipating a new Higher Education project able to serve the diverse interest of South African society. The discourse of the period was characterised by such words as transformation; broad transformation forums, access; social responsiveness; equity, historically black universities; historically white universities; quality; relevance; economic development; higher education as a public good, and so on. Our Higher Education Institutions, had a lot to think about, and most had to reconceptualise and recast their own identity to respond to the challenges of the period.

This period also saw the dismantling of the college sector in ways that were unimaginable. The teacher training colleges were closed down during this period, and some were absorbed by the universities’ faculties of Education. Related to this, the technical colleges were also reconfigured into FET colleges, and as a result, the apprenticeship system was completely done away with.

**2.2 Rationalisation period:** Soon came 1999 to 2004, one of the most “stressful higher education periods” in South Africa’s history, the Asmal period. Firstly, one should indicate that some of the elements of the previous period continued to this period, including consolidation of the regulatory and legislative framework. One of the most seminal developments of the period was the development of a National Plan for Higher Education in 2001, which framed for the first time, the type of Higher Education system envisaged for a post-apartheid South Africa. This plan, amongst others, called for a creation of a single, coordinated and responsive Higher Education system geared to meet the development needs of South Africa. The Plan foregrounded a need for a diverse and differentiated higher education system which would enable institutions to determine the type and range of qualifications offered, based on relevance and responsiveness of the academic programmes on offer to their location and context.

A defining feature of the period was the mergers and incorporations of universities from 36 into 23 public universities. Our binary system in Higher Education, comprising both technikons and universities was also done away with. It was a period of uncertainty, as there was a perception of winners and losers. The introduction of the new quality assurance regime for the sector was also met with some resistance, as it was seen by others as part of a broader neo-liberal agenda undergirded by managerialist undertones that were at odds with the very founding principles of universities. The real effects of this period are still being felt in our Higher Education system to this day evident in part by our system’s inability to conclude a discussion on differentiation for instance; and the glaring inequalities between our universities. With regard to the FET college sector, nothing much was done during this period. As the spotlight was put on the universities, the college sector was totally ignored, and allowed by consequence, to disintegrate.

**2.3 Consolidation period:** The 2004-2009 was largely a period of policy consolidation. To the credit of the Minister of Education then, Ms Naledi Pandor, the system was allowed to settle down, to absorb the far-reaching changes it had undergone during the last two periods. A number of incentives were introduced, including infrastructure efficiency grants, and a new funding framework was introduced in 2005. It should be indicated that during this period, a number of universities begun to settle in their new - either self-imposed or state-imposed roles in society. It was, one must add, a relatively tension-free period. A major issue here which nearly unsettled the sector was a proposal to standardise the remuneration of members of the executive management team of our universities, which, in some quarters was seen as giving offence to member of the executive management teams occupying higher offices.

During this period, the FET college sector was also put under the spotlight, particularly in relation to improvement of their programme qualification mix, including the introduction of the National Certificate Vocational (NCV) and a huge amount of money was also allocated to this sector for infrastructure improvement, in the form of a National Treasury conditional grant.

What is intriguing to observe is that these periods, had common features, although to varying degrees:

- Some universities witnessed the appointment of assessors and later administrators to address issues of governance and management lapses.
- The student enrolment grew in leaps and bounds during the three preceding periods, and in specific terms black students continue to swell the ranks of university student population.
- However, student success remained a challenge, in part due to low throughput rate and high drop-out rate.
- The sector continued to lose academics to the private sector, at an alarming rate, in part due to the uncompetitive nature of academic remuneration offered at universities.
- In terms of funding, more earmarked funding was allocated to drive specific development imperatives of interest to the State, as the main funder of public Higher Education system.
- Funding for poor students, through National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), continued to increase even though the number of eligible students far outstripped its coverage.
- A balance between institutional autonomy; academic freedom and public accountability continued to be a matter of public debate.

In which period are we now in?

**2.4 Policy review and optimisation period:** I would like to argue that the period 2009 to 2014 is yet another period of intense policy changes in the history of Higher Education in our country. The first indication of big things to come was the President's decision to split the then Department of Education into the Department of Basic Education and that of Higher Education and Training, each with a dedicated Ministry, and specific focus. The Department of Higher Education and Training is responsible for post-school education and training in universities, colleges and adult education centres. It seeks to steadily build a single, coherent, differentiated and highly articulated post-school education and training system. It is anticipated that such a post-school system will contribute to expanding access to education and training opportunities and increasing equity, as well as achieving high levels of excellence and innovation. The first policy salvo from the Ministry was released for

public comments in 2012 in the form of the Green Paper on the post-school education and training system. In addition, we have also seen the following far-reaching policy developments, to cite but a few:

- A. Higher Education and Training Laws Amendment Act, of 2012;
- B. Draft Reporting Regulations for Public Higher Education Institutions, 2012;
- C. Draft Regulations for National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences, 2013;
- D. Central Applications System, 2012;
- E. Establishment of two new universities in Mpumalanga and Northern Cape;
- F. Establishment of Ministerial Transformation Oversight Committee, 2013;
- G. National Development Plan, 2012.

Other initiatives planned to be initiated in the second half of 2013 include the following:

- A. White paper on post-school education and training system;
- B. Differentiation policy framework;
- C. Review of the Funding Policy Framework for Public Universities; and
- D. Post-School Education and Training Articulation Policy Framework; 2013.

A heavy focus was placed on the college sector (including FET College sector) during this period, it is anticipated that these sector will grow to approximately 4 million students in 2030. This growth requires huge capital injection in this sector to strengthen its academic, leadership and governance capabilities. Although a lot of positive noises are being made about the centrality of this sub-sector for the growth of our post-school education and training system, the jury is still out as to whether society's collective energy has been harnessed to give effect to the ideals spelt out in the Green Paper. The period also saw the changing of reporting and accountability lines of the FET colleges from the provinces to a national department, DHET.

As you can see, the period, 1994 to 2013 was a really a defining moment for our Higher Education system. Some of our institutions came out of these intense policy developments better whilst others came out a bit wounded and some are still limping to this day. At any given time, the capacity of our universities to absorb these far-reaching policy changes was stretched to the limit, and so was the capacity of the department (either Education or now Higher Education and Training) to provide stewardship to these policies was often tested to the limits.

### **3 IMPLICATIONS FOR CAO KZN**

All these are big transformative initiatives, and will over time reconfigure the relationship between the Higher Education Sector and the State. A critical question is whether the Sector (both university and college sectors) has thoroughly interrogated the implications of these policy changes, including their unintended consequences? The CAO of KZN, for its part, needs to understand the diverse array of public policy discussions that will shape the future of higher education. Of relevance to the mandate of the CAO KZN is the Central Applications System, to be established by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). It is my view that CAO KZN should pose the following questions in relation to the Central Applications System in the interest of both the Higher Education system and FET college sector:

- a. With the establishment of the national Central Applications System, what would the future of the CAO in KZN be? Is there clarity and certainty in the national policy regime around the relationship between the two?

- b. With the projected growth of Higher Education student enrolment from 950 000 to 1.6 million in 2030, and the college sector is expected to grow to 4 million students by 2030, what would be the disaggregated growth for Kwazulu Natal, and how will this in the ultimate end, affect the operations of the envisaged national Central Application System?
- c. The Central Applications System proposes to levy students a single application fee of R100. How will this impact on the operational costs of the CAO KZN and its business model?
- d. What lessons can the CAO KZN share with the national CAO, informed by its own establishment experiences, so that we do not have a repeat of the teething problems at the national CAO.

From the perspective of some of us are deeply worried, not so much about the introduction of the system, but the capability of a public entity to run such a complicated system, which is dependent on the cooperation of universities and colleges. In brief terms, our concerns are as follows:

- a. **Funding of CAS operations, including start-up costs:** It is my view that an earmarked grant should be made available for the setting up of CAS in the first few years of its operations, until it becomes sustainable on cost-recovery basis. Therefore, it would be premature for the sector to agree to a standard application handling fee of R100 for all universities and/or colleges, until the State commits fully to fund the operations of CAS in the first few years of its establishment. Given the complexity of this, a detailed modelling exercise will have to be done to determine if the envisaged application handling fee would be adequate for meeting the operational costs of such a system, before a commitment to this effect is made.
- b. **The robustness of the IT system of CAS, and its ability to manage a huge volume of applications:** Universities and colleges in the last few years have been receiving large volumes of applications, and the question naturally arises as to whether CAS' IT system will have the requisite capabilities and capacities to manage these large volumes without compromising application management and admissions processes of individual universities and colleges. The pre-testing of the robustness and efficacy of the IT system of CAS is required, and an assurance needs to be given to the sector that such a system will have the requisite capabilities and capacities to manage large volumes of applications.
- c. **Interface between data requirements of the CAS and the data capturing systems of institutions:** This interface will constitute a major set-up challenge. The DHET will have to develop some definitive proposals on how this could be done. The sector should insist that such an interface be assessed for relevance and appropriateness.
- d. **The effectiveness and efficiency of CAS depends on its ability to provide information to a wide range of prospective students:** Good information for and communication with applicants, especially those in rural areas, is required to facilitate informed choices, including information on student financial aid and housing. Provision of information of subject choices and general career guidance information is a key dependency for the successful implementation of the system.
- e. **Flexibility of CAS in terms of the management of walk-ins:** In the early stages of the implementation of CAS, it should have the flexibility to manage the walk-ins.
- f. **Implementation time-frames:** It is my view that given the complexity of the system, a phased implementation approach will have to be followed, in order not to

destabilise the operations of universities during the beginning of the year in which the system is going to be implemented.

Since the CAO KZN has massive experience in the roll-out of a system such as this, we expect it to share its own experiences and lessons learnt with the DHET.

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

In summary, the policy proposals I have referred to will have a profound impact on the Higher Education system and the college sector in our country. The CAO has a key role to play in this regard. Specifically, with regard to the national Central Applications System, the CAO is urged to participate actively in the conceptualisation of such a national system owing to its own experience accumulated over the years. With the participation of CAO KZN it is hoped that plans of action that are flexible and realistic will be developed and can be adapted to various conditions. As HESA, we look forward to working more closely with the CAO, KZN, particularly in relation to the national Central Applications System.

**END.**