PART 2

STAFF AND LEADERSHIP

CONCLUSION

Chapters 6 and 7 show that in South Africa, higher education institutions are expected to be, at one and the same time, models of democratic reform, socially responsible and responsive to labour and economic development needs, competitive within the higher education marketplace while maintaining world-class academic standards, and far more efficient and effective in the production of highly skilled graduates. All this in a context of fiscal constraint.

This is a critical theme addressed in Chapter 1, where Maassen and Cloete suggest that one of the global trends is for nation states to demand more efficiency and public accountability from higher education institutions. Coupled with market pressures for institutions to become more competitive, these developments result in a tendency towards greater centralisation of management. The two chapters show that the movement towards centralised management is in full swing in South African higher education institutions and that, just as is the case globally, this increasingly separates management from academics and from workers.

The new hierarchy has set up dynamics that threaten the full achievement of a significant local reform goal – co-operative governance. Although institutional governance structures are now modelled on more egalitarian principles and encourage widespread participation by a variety of stakeholders, centres of power and control have, in many instances, shifted away from these structures. Like policy goals in relation to governance, reforms to labour legislation are also aimed at achieving more consensual, co-operative relationships, but their application has produced contradictory effects. Forms of contractual employment foreground the rights and obligations of employers and employees, but in so doing, undermine the basis for collegiality. On the one hand the opportunity is offered for greater participation, protection against unfair treatment, and the right to negotiate; on the other hand, academics and other workers may be retrenched on the basis of equity considerations or institutional restructuring in the pursuit of efficiency gains. Under these conditions, labour relations have the potential to become more adversarial than co-operative.

Equity is the other major item on the local reform agenda – in relation to staff demographics and employment practices – but Chapter 6 (Staff) shows that the record is fairly disappointing. Policy reforms in the fields of higher education and labour relations – and their concomitant translation into legal statute – have provided both the goals and the legal basis to achieve employment equity in the institutions of the higher education system. The fact that gains have been minimal, provokes the obvious explanation that this is because of lingering racism and protection of white interests and privilege. But this

explanation is inadequate (even though these dynamics may still operate within the sector) when failure to achieve equity occurs even where there are high levels of commitment and adequate institutional resources to pursue it (Jansen, 2001). The chapter suggests, instead, that the pool of highly qualified black and women graduates from which to recruit staff is still too small, that movement is rapid, and competition for staff, both within the sector and outside, is intense.

But why should this be so? Has the higher education system been so inefficient over the last decade that it has been unable to ameliorate this situation? The chapter on students indicates that part of the explanation lies in the fact that the drop-out rates are high and through-put rates low. Much of this is acknowledged in the most recent policy document to emerge from the Department of Education, the National Plan for Higher Education (2001).

Jansen (2001) argues, however, that the strategies advanced in the National Plan to address this issue, fall woefully short of the mark in failing to acknowledge some of the other fundamental realities. According to Jansen, the suggestion that more postgraduate scholarships should be made available to black and women students is 'remarkable' (p7), considering that the sector is already awash with funding for postgraduate studies. At this level, it is not money that is in short supply, but students. Jansen suggests that this connects directly with declining rates of participation in higher education – a function of inadequate levels of financial aid, the fact that many undergraduates struggle despite having access to financial aid, and a steady decline in the absolute numbers of students graduating from the schooling system with the qualifications necessary for access to higher education.

The issue of staff equity, therefore, is merely the tip of a problem of iceberg proportions. At an analytical level this suggests that there is a skewed relationship between policy goals and the reality they seek to address. While the goals themselves are exemplary, it becomes increasingly clear that the possibility of realising them is dependent on having in place a prior set of conditions. Where those conditions do not exist, goals become unrealistic, and accusations of implementation failure abound. This is not a society with high levels of general education. But widespread general education is probably one of the fundamental conditions for achieving the stated goals of current policy positions. In this context, policy, shaped by the ideals of social democracy and the demand for a world-class system, sets itself impossible tasks. The setting of more modest, realistic goals and corresponding strategies, however, carries little political glamour, and requires, at a minimum, a clear-eyed analysis of the full and complex array of conditions within which the higher education system must operate. And this would include an uncompromisingly honest confrontation with realities of the HIV/Aids pandemic.

The realisation of equity goals in higher education, in other words, would seem to be dependent on the achievement of much greater efficiency and effectiveness within the system as a whole. The two chapters reveal that the capacity of higher education institutions to respond successfully to these demands, under market conditions, depends on a complex interplay of intellectual and organisational capacity, resources and environmental opportunity, and leadership strategies that foster innovative responses. Where that enabling complex of factors is lacking, institutional stagnation, decline and decay are the order of the day.

These changes, registered very unevenly across South Africa's higher education institutions, represent attempts to adapt to the new demands of the age of globalisation and to reconcile being responsive to those demands with performing the traditional functions of teaching and learning, training and research, under new conditions and on new platforms. Institutional and human capacity are clearly central to successful adaptation and may now be the strongest differentiators amongst institutions. How that capacity is used, however, is a critical question for leadership. Speaking of universities, Peter Scott (2000) represents the tightrope that has to be walked in this way:

> If they are not flexible enough, they may become redundant – relegated to the sidelines by new kinds of edu-tainment organisations, or merely as primary producers of academic materials that are processed, packaged, disseminated by global corporations. But if they are too flexible, they may cease to be universities, at any rate in a recognisable form. If they abandon their commitment to liberal learning, to critical knowledge, to disinterested scholarship and science – in other words if they sacrifice their core, their fundamental, values on the altar of novelty – universities may not be worth defending. (p8)

REFERENCES

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