

## **Equality in Access to Higher Education in South Africa**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to investigate progress with respect to equality of access on tertiary (or higher) education in South Africa since 1994. The paper commences with a portrayal of the socio-economic stratification and social-political context in South Africa. This is followed by an outline, first of higher education for White South Africans till 1994, and secondly the history of higher education for Black South Africans till 1994. Subsequently, the reconstruction of higher equalization since 1994 is discussed, focusing on progress in equalization of access. The expansion and equalization of access to higher education in South Africa since 1994 have been nothing short of spectacular. Yet there is still much ground to be covered. Furthermore equalization of access should be followed up by equalization of survival, certification and output.

### **Introduction**

In the second half of the twentieth century, equality of educational opportunities has become the dominant motive for educational reform and expansion worldwide (*vide*: Cooper, 1980:1; Wolhuter, 1993, Ball, 1989:2), from the movement towards comprehensive schools in Western Europe (*vide*: Lewin, 1982) to the international drive for Education for All (*vide*: UNESCO, 1990; 2000; 2003). The main dimensions of historically bequeathed inequality in education systems are gender

(*vide*: Lapidus, 1982; Bain & Cummings, 2000), race and ethnicity (*vide*: Ogbu, 1982; Mickelson *et al.*, 2001), the First-World-Third World divide (on an international scale) (*vide*: Todara, 1989:334; Altbach, 1982), the rural-urban dichotomy (*vide*: Coombs, 1985:214; Bredie & Beeharry, 1998:221), socio-economic stratification (*vide*: Pape, 1998; Lemon, 1995; Dorsey, 1989), and the core-periphery gradient (*vide*: Wolhuter, 2007:354-355).

As part of the post-1994 societal reconstruction of South Africa, equalization of educational opportunities became one of the corner stones of the new educational dispensation (*vide*: Wolhuter, 1999). The intense efforts of equalizing educational opportunities are noteworthy for the international audience. Transitologies are regarded as very illuminative by Comparative Educationists (cf. Cowen, 1996; 2000, 2002; Sweeting, 2007:159; Steiner-Khamsi, 2005:148-172). Cowen (2000:338) defines transitology as "... the more or less simultaneous collapse and of (a) state apparatuses; (b) social and economic stratification systems, and (c) political visions of the future, in which (d) education is given a major symbolic and deconstructionist role in these social processes of destroying the past and redefining the future".

Farrell (1982) distinguishes between the following levels/forms of equality in education:

- equality of access
- equality of progress
- equality of certification, and
- equality of output (i.e. equality in the workplace, in life chances and income for equal qualifications).

The aim of this paper is to investigate progress with respect to equality of access in tertiary (or higher) education in South Africa since 1994).

The paper commences with a portrayal of the socio-economic stratification and the socio-political context in South Africa. That is followed by an outline, first of higher education for White South Africans till 1994, and secondly the history of higher education for Black South Africans till 1994. Subsequently the reconstruction of higher education since 1994 is discussed, focusing on progress in equalization of

access. Finally, to complete the picture, equalization of subsequent levels in higher education (equality of progress, equality of certification and equality of output) is briefly discussed.

### **Socio-economic structure and Socio-Political Context of South Africa**

The South African population consists of Blacks (from African descent), Whites (from European descent), Indians (from Indian descent) and “Coloured” (from mixed racial descent). The Black population group has been the longest in the country. While the exact date of their arrival has been the subject of scientific (and political) controversy, respected historian Davenport (1991:9) draws attention to carbon-14 dating techniques, which show evidence of ancestors of this population group being in the country from the third to the fifth centuries AD.

White settlement dates from the establishment of a refreshment station by the Dutch East Indian Company, where Cape Town is today, in 1652 (Johnson, 2004:32). In the course of time interbreeding led to the “Coloured” population segment (cf. Van Jaarsveld, 1976:29). The most recent population groups, the Indians, date from 1855, when Indians were brought from India, to work as indentured labourers on the sugar farms (Muller, 1975:221).

Currently, the composition of the South African population (total 44.8 million) is as follows: Blacks: 79%; Whites: 9.6%; Coloureds: 8.9%; and Indians: 2.5% (Steyn, 2008:40-41). The per-capita income is US\$ 3630 p.a., which places the country in the World Bank category of upper middle income countries (World Bank, 2006:22). The Gini-index is 57.8 – the fourth highest in the world (after Namibia, Swaziland and Brazil) (World Bank, 2006:76-78). What makes it more problematic is that, although diminishing, the contours of the socio-economic stratification run largely coterminous with that of the racial divide – with the Whites concentrated in the affluent echelons, the blacks in the bottom strata, and the “Coloureds” and “Indians” somewhere in-between (For example in Gauteng – South Africa’s most populous and most affluent province-average annual incomes per household are Rand 253 370 in the case of Whites, R240 114 in the case of Indians, R130 101 in the case of Coloureds, and R90 280 in the case of blacks (Thys, 2008:3)(R10 = 1 Euro)) – a highly inflammable mixture.

A typical colonial set-up *de facto* segregation between the various social groupings was always a feature of the South African social scene. A key date in the history of South Africa is 1948. In that year the National Party came to power. It implemented a programme of rigorous *de jure* and *de facto* segregation policies (apartheid). The advocates of apartheid believed that the separation of the races (and of the various ethnic groupings within the Black race) would enable each grouping to develop to prosperity on the basis of and along the lines of its own culture. For this purpose, 10 autonomous status (so-called Homelands) were created within the borders of South Africa for the various ethnic groupings. Each was to have its own government, schools, etc.

The idea of separate, segregated education systems was, as the entire policy of apartheid, widely rejected and condemned among Black South Africans as inferior education meant to perpetuate inequality and White domination (*see*: Christie, 1991:229-265; Karis & Gerhart, 1977; Nkomo, 1990). In contrast to White education, which was on any count upon a par with the best systems of the developed world (*see*: Reschovsky, 2006; Wolhuter, 1997), Black education was, while far more developed than the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, lagging far behind White education (*see*: Wolhuter, 1999). The following data would suffice: In 1993 government spending per Black student was R1 659, R2 902 per Coloured student, R3 702 per Indian student, and R4 372 per White student (1993 exchange rate R3,67 = 1US\$) (Nkabinde, 1997:44).

In the socio-political turmoil preceding 1994, segregated, unequal education was invariably acted as a major grievance.

### **History of higher education for White South Africans till 1994**

The first university in South Africa was the University of the Cape of Good Hope, founded in 1873 under the auspices of the then British colonial administration. This university did no teaching but instead, laid down syllabi, conducted examinations, and conferred degrees for teaching done at colleges such as the South African College (Cape Town) and the Victoria College (Stellenbosch). The University Act (Act no 12 of 1916) made provision for the establishment of a federal examining university to be

called the University of South Africa, located in Pretoria. Thus university would incorporate the University of the Cape of Good Hope. In time its constituent colleges became autonomous university: Stellenbosch University (Victoria College in 1916), University of Cape Town (South African College, in 1916), Witwatersrand University in 1922, University of Pretoria in 1930, University of Natal in 1949, University of the Orange Free State in 1950, Rhodes University in 1951, and Potchefstroom University in 1951. All these institutions were meant to cater for the White population. Once its constituent colleges became independent institutions, the University of South Africa became a correspondence (distance teaching) university in 1951 open for all South African students, but staffed by Whites only the last two universities created for the White population were the University of Port Elizabeth (1965) and the Rand Afrikaans University (1968).

A second type of higher education in South Africa (besides the universities), were the technikons, meant to provide higher education with a technical-vocational bent, to supply in South Africa's urgent need for technicians (Kruger, 1986:193). They were created in terms of the *Advanced Technical Education Act of 1967 (Act 40 of 1967)*. By the end of the 1980s, there were seven technikons for Whites: the Cape Technikon, Natal Technikon, Port Elizabeth Technikon, Pretoria Technikon, Vaal Triangle Technikon, Witwatersrand Technikon, and the Orange Free State Technikon.

By 1993 the gross tertiary enrolment ratio for White South Africans was 50.4 (Wolhuter, 1998:15) – one of the highest in the world (*vide*: Wolhuter, 1997).

#### **History of higher education for Black South Africans till 1994**

Tertiary education for Black South African commenced in 1916 when the South African Native College was established in Fort Hare. This institution became autonomous in 1949 under the name of the University of Fort Hare.

The post-1948 government policy (outlined above) also meant that each homeland should have its own university. For this purposes the following universities were created for Black South Africans: the University of the North (1960), the University of Zululand (1960), the University of the Transkei (1976), the University of Bophuthatswana (1977), and the University of Venda (1982). In 1960 the University

of Durban-Westville (for South Africans of Indian descent) and the University of the Western Cape for Coloureds (i.e. South Africans of mixed racial descent) were created. Finally, in 1982 Vista University – a multi-campus university with campuses in Black residential areas in cities outside of the homeland, was created for Black South Africans living in such areas.

Technikons for Black South Africans came into being too. By the end of the 1980s these comprised the following: the Northern Transvaal Technikon, the Mangosuthu Technikon, and the Setlogelo Technikon, for Indians, the M.L. Sultan Technikon, for Coloureds the Technikon Peninsula, and the Technikon RSA providing distance education to all population groups (Kruger, 1986:194).

Black Opposition to the segregated education system was an important grievance causing the socio-political turmoil which characterized South Africa during the years preceding 1994 (cf. Christie, 1991:221-226; Mphahlele & Mminele, 1997:104-119; Nkomo, 1990:2).

Despite the increase in the number of tertiary education institutions for Black South Africans (as outlined above), enrolment numbers and ratios were still very unequal by 1994. The enrolment ratios for the various population groups are presented in table 1.

Table 1: Gross tertiary education enrolment rates in South Africa, 1993

<b>Population group</b>	<b>Aggregate</b>	<b>Whites</b>	<b>Indians</b>	<b>Coloured s</b>	<b>Blacks</b>
Gross tertiary enrolment ratios	12.9%	50.4%	30.4%	9.2%	11.1%

(Wolhuter, 1998:15).

Once again, White enrolment ratios were upon a par with the most advanced education systems in the world (Western Europe and North America) (cf. Wolhuter, 1997), and Black enrolment ratios, while far ahead that of the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, lagged far behind those of Whites.

### **The Transformation of Higher Education since 1994**

In 1994 a new constitution came into operation and a new socio-political dispensation commenced. The constitution, which turned South Africa into a liberal democracy on the Western model, and its Bill of Human rights are of the most progressive in the world.

After the 1994 elections, the baton of government was passed from the National Party to the African National Congress (ANC). The ANC formulated a new education policy, which was based on the following four principles (cf. Wolhuter, 1999):

- democratization: education and training should be available to all, and should be based upon the principle of democracy, characterized by active participation by all parties, in particular teachers, pupils/students, parents and the community
- equity: equal opportunities for all
- desegregation: one of the first steps that the ANC took in the field of education, was to collapse all the homeland ministries of education, as well as the White, Indian and Coloured ministries of education, into one National Department of Education
- multicultural education

Furthermore, the entire education system should be geared towards the realization of the potential of the entire population, with the societal objectives of economic development and the molding of national unity as final goals. In order to accomplish this, two major reforms were to take place:

- firstly the introduction of Outcomes-Based education, to replace the pre-1994 content-based education, which was condemned as promoting rote-learning and a culture of submissiveness
- secondly a National Qualifications Framework would be set in place, in order to create a network of lifelong learning and training for all South Africans.

Higher education too has had to be reformed in alignment with new societal imperatives and new education policy. For example, programmes offered by universities had to be accredited in the National Qualifications Framework. Democratization and equal opportunities meant that access to higher education had to increase and social inequalities in higher education enrolments had to be obliterated.

A strategy used to increase access to higher education, was the establishment of a

student loan scheme, although the scheme is by far not large enough to satisfy the demand. In order to attain a more equitable access to higher education, many universities use differential minimum secondary school examination grades for the different racial groups for admission. (In South Africa, admission to universities depends upon students' grades in the national secondary school termination examinations).

### **Progress with Equality in Access to Higher Education**

Growth in university enrolments are presented in table 1

Table 1: Growth in University enrolments

<b>Year \ Population Group</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Indian</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Total</b>
1994	212 042	27 474	34 010	221 829	495 355
1999	315 330	29 039	31 973	162 929	539 271
2005	449 241	46 357	54 618	185 889	736 105
% growth 1994-2005	+111.9	+68.7	+60.6	-16.2	+48.6

Sources: Calculated from Statistics provided by the Department of Education (2005; 2007).

Aggregate enrolments rose between 1994 and 2005 (the most recent year for which official statistics were available at the time of writing, July 2008) with an impressive 48.6%. During the same time White enrolments dropped by 16.2%. Two factors which might have played a role here is declining numbers of birth among White South Africans (since 1990 birth statistics among White South Africans show a consistent decline, (cf. Wolhuter, 2000:155) and emigration. While official statistics do not exist, it is often estimated that almost one million White South Africans (or a quarter of all White South Africans) have left South Africa since 1994 (*see*: Kenny, 2008:13). Between 1994 and 2005 Indian, Coloured and especially Black enrolments increased even more phenomenally than the aggregate figure, with respectively 60.6%, 68.7% and 119.9%. While there was clearly equalization taking place, tertiary enrolments still do not reflect the national population composition: Black, Coloured, Indian, and White students constitute respectively 61.0%, 6.3%, 7.4% and 25.3% of tertiary enrolments, while they constitute 79%, 8%, 2.5% and 9.6% of the population.

### **Next layers of equality**

As mentioned above, using Farrel's model, equality of access is but the first layer of educational equality, followed by, and becomes only meaningful when it is a step towards the following successive layers of equality:

- equality of progress
- equality of certification, and
- equality of output

These are not the topic of this paper, but to complete the above, a few things would be said about each of them.

Equality of progress: The attrition rate at South African higher educational institutions is high, and white official statistics do not exist, it is generally admitted that the failure rate of Black students is higher than that of White students.

Equality of Certification: On equality of certification two remarks should be made. Firstly: desegregation of universities (as in schools) in South Africa is very much a one-way process: (especially affluent) Blacks move from the historically Black universities to the historically White universities, leaving the historically White universities desegregated, and the historically Black universities institutions for Blacks from the lower socio-economic strata. So racial segregation has been replaced by socio-economic desegregation – similar to the process in school education – leaving Blacks from lower socio-economic strata in the less endowed, poorer quality historically Black universities. Secondly, Black students are disproportionately concentrated in the soft options (social sciences, humanities, education) and underrepresented in more prestigious programmes leading to the higher level professions such as medicine or engineering). Once again hard statistics are not available, and rigorous research would be very valuable.

Equality of Output: in this case too, two remarks are apt. In spite of laws pressurizing employers to apply affirmative action and giving preference to Blacks when making appointments, the profiles of much sought occupations do, by far, not reflect the population composition. For example, there are currently only 973 Black chartered accountants in South Africa (the first Black chartered accountant qualified in 1976), 522 Coloured chartered accountants, 2065 Indian chartered accountants, and 23 446 white chartered accountants (Ueckermann, 2008:3). The second issue that needs to be brought into the picture is that of the “brain drain” – the many qualified, highly educated (mainly, but not limited to Whites) who emigrate to developed countries. This is a problem in all developing countries, and is very acute in Africa. For example, less than 10% of the medical doctors trained in Zambia since its independence in 1964, are still in the country (Macfarlane, 2007:14). This leaves South Africa with a skills shortage (for example – almost 50% of ESCOM’s – the Electricity Supply Commission of South Africa – key posts are vacant (Styan, 2008:7), the hospitals in Gauteng-province – South Africa’s most populous province – have only 37% of the clinical technologists they need – a situation threatening sometimes even emergency operations (Naycê, 2008:7). This prevents higher education making its due contribution to the national project of societal upliftment, and thus undermines the achievements made in expanding and equalizing access to higher education.

## **Discussion**

The expansion of access to higher education in South Africa since 1994 has been nothing short of spectacular. Yet there is still huge scope for further growth. At present South Africa has a 15% gross enrolment ratio at tertiary education level, compared to a world average of 40% for upper-middle income countries (World Bank, 2006:30). The government's own target is for 2015 (a mere seven years from now) as a 20% gross enrolment ratio, i.e. an increase of another 100 000 students (Rademeyer, 2007:6). In pursuing the goal of equity in access to higher education impressive progress has been made as well, although in this case too, there is still much space for improvement.

For increased and equalized access to blossom, to attain its full significance, however, it should be followed by increased and equalized survival, certification and output. These at present, by all indications fall short, and there is also a dearth of research which could guide policymakers and educational planners. What would be of great value in this regard is comparative educational research, and historico-comparative educational research including – when taking into account the many contextual similarities between the countries – comparative educational research between Greece and South Africa.

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