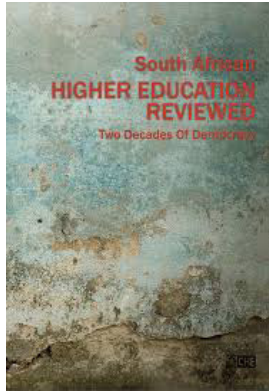


From the NCHE to #FeesMustFall: An incomplete but important story of a difficult journey

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South African higher education reviewed: Two decades of democracy



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The Council on Higher Education's *South African Higher Education Reviewed: Two Decades of Democracy* has to be seen as an important injection into our understanding of the performance of the higher education system over the last 20 years and its impact on the challenges facing our society. It has been a period of much change, expansion, rationalisation and experimentation and it is important that the Council has produced this collection of well-researched articles.

This book comes into circulation at a time when the South African higher education system is being severely rocked by the student activism that has so defined the 2015 and 2016 academic years. In multiple voices and forms this activism has raised two major themes: the idea of affordable access to higher education and the need for the transformation of the nature of the system's knowledge project – captured by the compositely expressed idea of free, quality and decolonised education. We must, however, constantly remind ourselves that the kind of instability that we have seen in the last year has been a part of the higher education system for at least 15 years and is driven primarily by the challenge of access for the poor. These student actions were restricted mainly to those institutions that have attracted large numbers of poor students and were driven primarily by insufficient financial aid.

Coming, as it does, about 20 years after the transition to democracy, the time of arrival of the book may be considered both appropriate and inappropriate. On the one hand, it comes at a time when there is an important need to reflect on the role played by the higher education system in post-apartheid South Africa and to assess the state of the system 20 years since the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) and the production of what has to be seen as the excellent *Higher Education Act* of 1997. It may therefore be important that this set of studies was concluded and published before the onset of the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall campaigns so that they serve the purpose for which they were designed.

On the other hand, nowhere in its 380 pages does this review foresee the unfolding of the instability that has beset the system over the last year – an indication perhaps that its writers may have held the common view that the long-standing instability at the historically disadvantaged institutions was caused purely by poor governance rather than by deeply systemic 20-year-old funding illnesses taking hold of the sector. What this means in essence is that this set of articles and analyses of the system may have glossed over or else simply missed some of the most critical issues facing the sector. So one may ponder the overall value of the analyses that constitute this review.

Having said this, the logical perspective to adopt would be to assume that one of the outcomes of the National Commission on Higher Education process in 1995–1996 was the crafting of the Higher Education White Paper and the *Higher Education Act* of 1997 – both of which provided the impetus for creation of the single, unified university system with clearly defined and progressive governance principles. The purpose of this review then was to measure the performance of the composite, complex system against the policy determinations that emerged in that process. As such, this is a valuable set of studies that draws on data and encompasses interesting and nuanced reflections.

The first chapter written by Denyse Webstock does as it states: it provides an overview of the sector. It contains a very substantial amount of data and interesting interpretations of them. What it does not do is set the scene or form a foundation for the focus of the rest of the review on the key challenges facing higher education. In other words, it does not quite create sufficient tension relating to key issues facing the sector as a way to galvanise a discursive approach to addressing them. Examples of such tensions would be that between institutional autonomy and accountability, enrolment growth and funding, articulation and differentiation, and so on. Even so, the relevant chapters do address the issues of regulation, governance, teaching and learning in an interesting manner, focusing on the interplay between the institutions, the Department of Higher Education, the Council on Higher Education, the world of work, etc. There are important aspects of the sector – such as student services, student affairs and student housing – that are not covered and which form a vital area of engagement at our universities as we focus on the intellectual, social and emotional development of our students.

The student activism of 2015–2016 has brought to the fore, in many and varied ways, two key issues: the overall funding of the sector and the complex, interesting idea of a decolonised education. The first is discerned in quite substantial detail in the last chapter, which describes some of the key impacts and drivers of funding. The second escapes attention.

The review points out that the system has been through tremendous change in the last 20 years, with a number of institutional merges, a reshaping of the funding model to admit higher levels of state steering aimed at the broadening of access, improving success rates and increasing research outputs. This last chapter points out that while the block grant and steering funding grew at a rate of 4% per annum, this rate was smaller than that at which enrolments grew – squeezing into negative growth the subsidy per full-time equivalent. This final chapter does raise the need for state subsidy in the form of the block grant to grow at a higher rate. What it does not do is explore the impact of the chronic underfunding of higher education over the last 20 years. An inevitable outcome of this underfunding is above-inflation increases in tuition fees that ultimately result in the unaffordability of higher education to the vast majority of South African families, thereby undermining one of the most important roles of universities – which is to contribute to the creation of a more equal society.

Student demands for 'quality decolonised education' is a call for the re-imagining of the knowledge project of our universities. This demand also is not new. While the NCHE recognised this call as a key part of the sectoral

transformation agenda, it linked the matter to more instrumentalist notions of the role of knowledge in the economy, in nation building, etc. The chapter on 'Teaching and Learning' addresses a number of important issues relating to how teaching and learning may be improved, but it shies away from any major discussion about the nature of the curriculum.

This review is an important addition to the literature on South African higher education. It suffers somewhat from stylistic variation as one progresses through it. And it does have serious gaps – the most important of which for me is the one regarding student development. What it does do is provide us with an opportunity to reflect on how we ought to think about the next 10 years of higher education in South Africa.

