Review

David Cooper and George Subotzky (2001) *The Skewed Revolution: trends in South African higher education: 1988-1998*. Bellville: Education Policy Unit, University of the Western Cape

Trish Gibbon

'Empiric', Peter Burke reminds us, was 'a traditional English term for practitioners of alternative medicine, men and women innocent of theory' (2000:16) who based their practice on the observation of symptoms. Dismissed by Aristotle as mere description that could not rise to the level of true knowledge, it took Francis Bacon to elevate empiricism to the status of a serious scientific method, a method which followed 'neither the empiric ant, mindlessly collecting data, nor the scholastic spider, spinning a web from inside itself, but the bee, who both collects and digests' (Burke 2000). This also provides the terms within which Cooper and Subotzky's detailed empirical study of changes in the South African higher education system over the decade 1988-1998 must be assessed. What has been collected, and how has it been digested?

The authors describe their work as 'a reference handbook of higher education in South Africa based on detailed analysis of selected SAPSE data over the past decade' (viii). In this, it is also a final salute and farewell to SAPSE, the South African Post-Secondary Education data base of the Department of Education that has now been replaced by the somewhat more sophisticated Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS). The two areas on which the authors focus attention are student enrolment patterns and staff employment trends and it becomes immediately and abundantly clear that the real focus is on whether equity, a major transformation goal of the new South Africa, has been achieved in these two critical areas.

To reveal the patterns of enrolment, Cooper and Subotzky present their data in terms of institutional and historical type: universities and technikons are the primary categories, which are then broken down into their origins in the racial dispensations of white, African and non-African (the institutions specifically designated for Indian and coloured students). 1993 is taken as the key median point, and racial and gender shifts are often analysed from a pre- or post-1993 perspective. At the most general level, in terms of total population ratios, the data show that white and Indian students are still over-represented, coloured and African students under-represented in the higher education system. Nonetheless, Africans commanded over 50 per cent of enrolments in 1998 from a mere 21 per cent in 1984. Trends vary considerably over the sub-types during the period examined, with all the six African historically disadvantaged universities (HDUs) expanding up to 1993 and then experiencing a sharp decline in enrolments, while the Afrikaans historically advantaged universities had a huge surge in African enrolments post-1993. The authors are quick to point out what is now generally well known, that many of these enrolments are in undergraduate teacher diploma qualifications offered in partnership with private providers. By contrast, the five African historically disadvantaged technikons (HDTs) grew steadily over this period, while the previously white historically advantaged technikons (HATs) experienced tremendous growth, particularly in African enrolments, a phenomenon that has begun to reverse the 'inverted pyramid' of tertiary enrolments (inverted in favour of university enrolment) identified in the 1996 report of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE). Overall, African headcount enrolment in technikon programmes increased from 2 000 in 1984 to a staggering 127 193 in 1998.

From broad institutional enrolments, the enquiry moves to enrolment by qualification level and field of study based on six primary CESM (Classification of Educational Subject Material) groups and 22 first-order CESM categories. The finding that more than half of all masters and doctoral enrolments are at the 'big four' universities of Pretoria, Stellenbosch, Cape Town and Wits will not surprise anyone familiar with this system. African enrolments are still concentrated at undergraduate levels with marked gender skewing in favour of male students at postgraduate levels across all race groups. At the universities, African students are enrolled predominantly in social science and humanities programmes, particularly at the six African HDUs. In this respect, the technikons have been more successful at enrolling greater numbers of African students in science and technology programmes than the universities.

The authors conclude that there has been a significant revolution in student enrolment, albeit a skewed one. The changes in staff employment patterns are predictably far less dramatic: students form a constantly shifting, transient population allowing for fairly rapid change over short periods of time, while staff are inevitably more settled and permanent with longer career trajectories. There have, nonetheless, been some shifts with increasing numbers and proportions of Africans in all personnel categories, changing ratios of professional to non-professional categories, and widespread outsourcing of non-core activities.

The few observations reflected here represent a drop in the ocean of data presented in this book. The authors have attempted to organise their vast quantity of material in three categories, offering readers options as to the depth or detail they wish to explore: 'At a Glance' presents the data in the readily assimilated form of graphs and tables, 'In Detail' provides a descriptive outline of trends and pattern and 'Key Points and Commentary' summarises, analyses and offers possible explanations. Or so the theory goes. In fact, the book is divided into so many sections and subsections that the reader struggles to come away with any coherent picture of the system. It suffers at once from too much detail – a typical sub-heading is 'Comparison of African and White Lower Postgraduate FTEs at the Six Afrikaans and Four English HAUs across Fields of Study' – and from too little information in related data fields. Another reviewer (Bunting 2002) comments that Cooper and Subotzky have used only two of the 21 complex tables available in the SAPSE system, and although the authors explicitly say that 'other important aspects of the student and staff data have necessarily not been addressed' (viii) one cannot help but ask why not, especially as these include student throughput, success rates and graduation rates which are critical to any serious assessment of the achievement of equity.

This is not to underestimate the difficulty of embarking upon an assessment of this kind. The brief historical introduction provided in the first chapter is a salutary reminder of how young this higher education system is, and of its complex political roots – circumstances, one could argue, that make assessment more provisional and speculative than in older, more settled systems. We are reminded that up until the end of World War I, there was only one examining and degree-awarding university in South Africa, the University of the Cape of Good Hope, to which a number of university colleges were affiliated. This is probably the closest to being a 'single, co-ordinated system' that South African higher education has ever come, only to proliferate and fragment

into the 36 institutions that came to constitute the system by the late 1980s. In other words, many of these institutions are less than 50 years old, and change has swept through them, particularly in the period under review, at a dramatic pace. Nonetheless, as soon as the authors' account of these changes moves from the descriptive to the analytical, it becomes uncomfortably speculative in its need to draw on explanatory frames that lie beyond the parameters of its own empirical base.

This dissonance is felt most acutely in the 'Conclusion' where the reader is suddenly confronted with class analysis as the explanatory frame to account for the findings of the empirical study which has been based narrowly and exclusively on race and gender. The argument is broadly captured in the following passage:

> In the absence of the widely anticipated state-driven redistributive transformation, the class-based stratification of South African society has persisted, although it has been partially deracialised along with the institutions of state and civil society.
>
> The fundamental revolutionary change anticipated by the left has therefore been replaced by a partial, skewed transformation comprising the deracialisation of the ruling elite and the middle class....
>
> These conditions at once frame the transformation of higher education and are replicated within it. (232-3)

The writers do not go so far as to suggest that a 'straight' revolution (rather than the 'skewed' one of the title) would have corrected all the imbalances that their study has thrown up, but this remains a (highly questionable) implication of their argument. Would RDP rather than GEAR really have effected a complete transformation of the schooling system, the inadequacies of which lie at the heart of higher education's woes? Would it have made a significant difference to the numbers of African students entering higher education and the fields and levels at which they studied? These seem unlikely scenarios, and while the intention here is not to engage in counterfactual argument, it is important to stress that the complex problems of the South African education system are not adequately confronted by such broad brush strokes.

At other levels, more modest and apt explanations for some of the phenomena described in this book are ignored. The authors claim that there have been 'no levers for the effective steerage of policy and practice', and that the 'goals of the NCHE and White Paper have so far remained largely

at the level of visions and frameworks' (233). This is part of a larger argument that holds that there has been inadequate capacity for the implementation of policy. There is some truth to this argument, though it is insufficient, on its own, to account for what has happened. It fails to acknowledge, however, that one very significant policy instrument, individual redress, was implemented within months of the accession to power of the new government. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) as it is now known, provided bursaries to thousands of students, giving them both access to higher education and mobility (Bengu 2001, Van Rensburg 2001). Yet nowhere is this invoked as an explanatory cause for student movement in the system. Similarly, the accurate observation that inter-institutional competition is driven by 'the new market ethos in higher education' also obscures the role of the state in driving competition through its continued implementation of the old funding formula that bases subsidy of public institutions on general student enrolments (Cloete 2001). In a context of declining student numbers, this inevitably pits institutions against one another.

It is at the explanatory level that this book is most unsatisfactory. The empiric ant and the scholastic spider continue to operate in spheres that remain relatively discrete from one another, never quite achieving the metamorphosis into the synthesising bee of Bacon's analogy. Its wealth of information and the fascinating view it allows of shifts in the system, however, will still be of great interest to policy makers, institutional planners and readers with a general interest in changes in higher education.

References

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