

Student 'targets' may give boost to strategic planning in South Africa

Cape Town. Far-reaching changes to South African universities have been proposed by a national commission set up by President Nelson Mandela last year to advise, among other things, on revising the financing of tertiary institutions to keep the growth in student numbers in line with manpower requirements.

In particular, the National Commission for Higher Education, chaired by Jairam Reddy, a former rector of the University of Durban-Westville, has suggested that the research and teaching components of a university's support from the government be funded separately, with limits on the number of students in different disciplines — a move that might encourage more black students to take up science and engineering.

The commission, whose recommendations are expected to form the basis for future higher education policy, does not make any specific proposals about criteria for research funding, apart from saying that funds allocated for research be earmarked for that purpose.

But it does suggest that teaching funds should be allocated on the basis of fixed subsidies for each place on a degree course, based on the costs of training a student in the discipline concerned. The state would decide the overall number of subsidized places in each discipline, and individual institutions would negotiate their share of places through a new Higher Education Council.

Such a system would contrast sharply with the present funding system, in operation since 1982, under which university funding is based on a formula combining student enrolment and success rates, but with different weighting for arts- and science-based courses, and undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as research output.

With no limitations on student numbers in different disciplines, this system has led to uncoordinated growth in South Africa's universities, concentrated in the arts and social sciences. This is mainly because growth has reflected increased numbers of black students, most of whom cannot register for science, medicine or engineering courses because they have not been taught mathematics and science to school-leaving level.

Furthermore, the state has never fully implemented the subsidy formula. At present, for example, it provides only two-thirds of the entitlement of universities and technikons (see *Nature* 379, 666; 1996), which must make up the balance through fees.

The commission expects further growth in the numbers in higher education, and points out that overall participation rates for the 20–24-year-old age group in South Africa are low compared to those in industrialized countries. This is because, while participation rates for whites (53 per cent) and Indians (61 per cent) are higher than in any country other than the United States, that for black Africans is only 12 per cent.

Universities would still be able to levy fees under the proposed system. But the fees would have to be approved by the Higher

Education Council. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme, launched earlier this year to provide loans to students for both fees and maintenance, would be extended.

The commission recommends the establishment of a national clearing house for applications. But it is not clear whether this would be an independent agency, a collective effort by the tertiary sector, or the responsibility of the Department of Education, which at present lacks the infrastructure to operate this kind of system.

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Facing changes: students picket Gauteng's Education Ministry in Johannesburg.

A further proposal is that institutions should receive earmarked funds to extend their own student financial aid programmes. Earmarked funds are also proposed for staff development, building schemes and academic support for disadvantaged students.

These measures are aimed specifically at providing assistance to historically black institutions. Although all institutions in South Africa are now non-racial, universities with a higher proportion of black students tend to charge lower fees than their historically white counterparts, and on average receive less income per registered student on the basis of the current subsidy formula, on account of lower success rates and lower research output.

All those likely to be affected by such changes have until the end of May to comment on the discussion document, before the commission compiles its final report. Reaction so far has been mixed. In particular, those attending a conference of 'stakeholders' earlier this month reached a general consensus that the issue of financial aid had not been adequately addressed. If tertiary institutions are to continue to levy fees, some comprehensive system has to be devised for providing assistance to students who are ineligible for loans from commercial banks because their parents are too poor to stand surety.

Some student bodies have been strongly critical. On 10 May, for example, student members of the South African National Students' Congress marched to the Johannesburg offices of the Education Ministry in the province of Gauteng to protest that the commission had "failed to address the issue of transformation in tertiary education institutions". The protesters also complained that students had not been represented on the commission.

Michael Cherry

Republicans seek freeze on health research

Washington. Two Republican committees in the US Congress approved 'blueprints' for the 1997 federal budget last week that assume a freeze in spending on the National Institutes of Health (NIH) at its 1996 level of \$11.94 billion.

The blueprints are part of a seven-year strategy aimed at eliminating deficit spending, \$144 billion this year, by the year 2002. The plan would hold the NIH spending level constant over that period. In contrast, President Bill Clinton's 1997 budget request, submitted to Congress in March, had asked for an increase in the NIH budget of 3.9 per cent, to \$12.4 billion.

The two 1997 budget resolutions, passed by the House and Senate Budget Committees respectively, now go to appropriating committees, which will use them as maximum limits in drafting spending bills, although they can change particular allocations within their jurisdictions.

John Porter (Republican, Illinois), for example, chair of the House of Representatives subcommittee responsible for NIH funding, has vowed to raise NIH spending for the 1997 fiscal year. In particular, he wants to see an increase of 6 or 6.5 per cent for extramural scientists.

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