

# Managing cultural diversity within higher education: a South African perspective

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## Abstract

The first democratic elections in the history of South Africa have taken place, the Government of National Unity has been installed, and as the country at last starts moving towards establishing a non-racial society based on a constitution that embodies equal rights for every person, the need to establish an equitable and effective higher education system becomes a top priority.

Redressing historical imbalances relating to staff appointments and student access is an imperative for South African higher education institutions.

One of the strategies that must be applied to accelerate that change process is affirmative action, yet affirmative action on its own is not the whole answer. It is essential that the diversity created by affirmative action be effectively managed, by using a strategic management approach.

**keywords:** non-racial society, higher education system, staff appointments, student access, affirmative action, diversity framework, organisational change, strategic management.

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## INTRODUCTION

The first democratic elections in the history of South Africa have taken place, the Government of National Unity has been installed, and as the country at last starts moving towards establishing a non-racial society based on a constitution that embodies equal rights for every person, the need to establish an equitable and effective higher education system becomes a top priority. This requires a transformation process that will necessitate the management of cultural diversity, and organisational changes within our institutions of higher learning.

## SEGREGATED EDUCATION

Education in South Africa was always segregated along racial lines, and the apartheid system of social engineering ensured that non-whites were denied equal access to white institutions and education of quality. The higher education system in South Africa is currently in a stage of transformation, and will for the foreseeable future be under pressure to provide access and quality education for all the people of the country. Student demonstrations, protests and campus unrest have already been experienced by many institutions of higher education. Much therefore needs to be done in redressing the imbalances caused by the apartheid education system, and although most higher education institutions have changed their admission and recruitment policies, they still do not reflect the demographics of South African society.

Redressing historical imbalances relating to both staff appointments and student access is therefore an imperative for South African higher education institutions. One of the strategies that must be applied to accelerate the change process is affirmative action, yet affirmative action on its own is not the whole answer. It is essential the diversity created by affirmative action be effectively managed by using a strategic management approach.

## DISTINCTION BETWEEN AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND MANAGING DIVERSITY

In order to appreciate the transformation process now under way within many institutions of higher education in South Africa, it is necessary to distinguish between the concepts affirmative action and diversity.

### Affirmative action

According to Kemp (1992:12), the main purposes of affirmative action are to eradicate discriminatory practices, and to promote the skills and abilities of those who have suffered as a result of discriminatory practices, i.e. redress the imbalances of the past.

This definition is supported by Fuhr (1994:9), who defines affirmative action as being "...aimed at creating a diverse workforce which, at all levels, better reflects the society in which it operates".

President Nelson Mandela, in an effort to allay the fears of white South Africans, stated that "the goal of affirmative action will be truly to achieve equal chances for all, and not amount to a vengeful turning of the tables of oppression".

### Managing diversity

Roosevelt Thomas (1990:107) defines managing diversity as follows: "Managing diversity does not mean controlling or containing diversity, it means enabling every member...to perform to his or her potential".

This holds implications for how institutions of higher education will handle this process of change, for as Havenga (1993:9) points out: "Diversity starts with a realisation of diverse interests...It is clear, unlike affirmative action which is a process for creating diversity, that the very essence of the organisation and its culture must be re-negotiated and re-conceptualised from a perspective other than the dominant culture".

## RESEARCH INTO AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND DIVERSITY

A visit undertaken to the United States of America in 1994 to study affirmative action and diversity issues at selected American universities revealed, among other findings, the following:

- \* Affirmative action programmes have attempted to redress the imbalances of the past, but have on their own not been successful.
- \* Of more importance now is the management of diversity created by affirmative action.
- \* For diversity to succeed, it must form part of an institution's strategic management process.
- \* For diversity to succeed, it must have the support of the highest ranking official on an institution, and must be managed by a highly qualified and respected academic who holds a senior position.

However, a comparative study conducted in August 1994 at seven traditionally "white" South African institutions of higher education revealed that there were no strategic management processes being applied that adequately addressed all the issues related to affirmative action, or the management of diversity.

## ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

Managing the diversity created by affirmative action, by whatever means, will be one of the biggest challenges faced by higher education institutions in the future. Accepting the challenge of diversity implies, among other things, changing the organisational culture, reconceptualising appropriate leadership styles, restructuring organisations, reformulating what constitutes good teaching, and developing staff and students to work and learn in an organisation that is very different from what it used to be (Havenga 1993:11).

Both affirmative action and the management of diversity that arises out of it must be seen as a long term process, for that is exactly what it is, a process of change that is well illustrated by Jackson and Holvino's research which describes three development stages that an organisation traverses as it moves from a monocultural to a diverse or multicultural one. These three stages are:

1. Monocultural which is characterised by either implicit or explicit exclusion of racial minorities or women.
2. Nondiscriminatory which is characterised by a sincere desire to eliminate the majority group's unfair advantage. However, this is done without the organisation significantly changing its dominant culture, but by ensuring that the climate of the organisation is not a hostile place for the new members of the workforce.

3. Multicultural which describes the organisation that is either in the process of becoming or has become diverse in the most visionary sense that reflects the contributions and interests of the diverse cultural and social groups in the organisation's mission, operations, products, or services. The organisation commits to eradicate all forms of social discrimination and shares power and influence so that no one group is put at an exploitive advantage.

These three stages can be related to the transformation process that South Africa is now facing and will have to grow through. The monocultural stage can be compared to the apartheid ethos, when the dominant culture was 'white-eurocentric' and open discrimination was practiced. This stage has now been left behind with the dismantling of the apartheid system and the election of a democratic interim Government.

South Africa is only now entering the nondiscriminatory stage, which can be linked to the implementation of affirmative action interventions which will be put in place to redress the past imbalances of the former stage. However, a 'white-eurocentric' culture still tends to dominate in many institutions.

Finally, the country will enter the last stage, that of multiculturalism which can only be brought about by the acceptance of a diverse nation and the eradication of all forms of discrimination.

It is when this stage is reached that a 'new' culture built on the country's diversity may emerge.

This emphasises the need for a paradigm shift in attitudes and behavior as suggested by Von Hirshfeld and Downs: 'The need for attitude change underlies much of the change in organisations today, and therefore, if one can change or enhance a person's understanding of a situation, and ensure that the environment supports that change, it is likely that attitude and behavior change will follow?.'

#### A DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

It has become declared policy of the South African Government to make access to a quality education a reality for all, and through applying affirmative action interventions, this process can be speeded up. Two major factors are propelling the process forward.

Firstly, internal pressures are being exerted on institutions of higher education to change and reflect the demographics of the country. These are coming mainly from the changing student body, as well as the trade unions and other interested stakeholders within the institutions. Institutions are having to abide by their affirmative action policies and redress imbalances through effecting affirmative action appointments.

Secondly, external pressures to effect change are being brought to bear on institutions by the community in which an institution operates, and through new legislation such as the Employment Equity Act which requires equity targets and time-tables and which will be monitored at both national and provincial level.

This is now resulting in a diverse student, academic and administrative profile within institutions of higher education. However, while it is accepted that affirmative action is the starting point, on its own it will not work, as the diversity that affirmative action creates will have to be effectively managed, and the management of diversity can only be properly executed if it forms part of an organisation's strategic management process.

Unfortunately, many institutions of higher education in South Africa believe they are applying a strategic management process, while they are in fact addressing only one factor of strategic management, that of strategic planning. Unless all that factors that form part of strategic management are addressed, the process cannot operate effectively.

The Diversity Management Framework presented here (See diagram 1) identifies six important factors that should form part of the strategic management process for institutions of higher education in South Africa. These six factors are:

\* Organisational culture

The historical 'white-eurocentric', male dominated culture that still exists in many institutions of higher education portrays the assimilation or 'melting pot' syndrome where the organisation remains the same and the minorities are expected to change. The organisation culture will have to change to reflect a diverse culture with revised beliefs and value systems.

\* Organisational/environmental change

Critical to the management of diversity, is changing the organisation to accommodate the diversity of the academic and administrative staff, and the students. This will entail becoming a learning organisation in which the appropriate culture is one which is capable of constant adaptation as the needs of the stakeholders change. Both organisational and environmental change need to be addressed simultaneously, as bring about changes in one will cause a ripple effect and require changes in the other.

\* Total quality management

This factor is playing an important role in the strategic management process at American universities, in order to address fears that increasing diversity might lead to a lowering of standards.

Total quality management, which is integral to the organisation's beliefs and value systems, must become part of the strategic management process within higher education institutions in South Africa.

\* Participative management/decision making

The issue of institutional leadership is addressed by this factor, and indicates that institutions of higher education will have to adopt a participative management style that involves all the stakeholders in an institution's decision making process. Traditional 'top-down' decision making is no longer acceptable, and will have to give way to participative and negotiated decision making.

\* Resource development

This is regarded as the key element in providing a well educated and trained workforce in the new South Africa. Within institutions of higher education these resources refer to students, staff, and other support systems such as bureaus of staff development, departments of public relations, human resources departments, and all services that contribute to the development of human resources.

\* Strategic planning

This is the factor that provides direction for the institution and is future oriented, but should never be regarded as more important than the other factors in the strategic management process, and should not be applied on its own.

The process of affirmative action reflects both internal and external pressures that will compel an institution to change, thereby creating the diversity which will have to be managed.

The process of strategic management, on which the management of diversity is dependent, requires interaction with the six other factors, to operate successfully. A change in one factor, or a factor which is not addressed, will result in changes in the other factors, and affect the process of strategic management as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

Application of the diversity framework presented here will ensure that all aspects of the affirmative action and diversity processes within South African institutions of higher education are addressed.

However, it will take a considerable commitment by institutions recognising the diversity they are creating through affirmative action interventions, to begin implementing the steps necessary to achieve a climate in which diversity can flourish.

South Africa as a nation is facing a new beginning, one that will be built on the diversity of its people. This future scenario is captured in the words of Loomis and Sharpe (1990:1).

"Diversity is a celebration of differences and an appreciation of the bonds that unite people. Experiencing diversity is a common component of a quality educational experience; to achieve excellence it is also imperative to achieve diversity".

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