



Credentials and Mobility: An Analysis of the Profile of Students Studying at Registered Private Higher Education Institutions in South Africa

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Abstract

Analysing the private higher education sector in relation to the public sector is not helpful, nor is aggregating student data to explain trends in private provision across a national system. This claim is illustrated by analysing the student target group identified by institutions, the profile of students enrolled and the perceptions of students of their motivation for studying at private institutions in South Africa. In South Africa, there are two distinct private sub-sectors, which target and attract a specific student base. Providers that claim to meet a demand for ‘mobility’ cater primarily for an historically privileged and newly privileged constituency, while those that claim to meet a demand for specialised ‘credentials’ cater primarily for non-traditional students. A superficial reading of race and gender, of historical advantage and disadvantage, can obfuscate more than it illuminates, because age, socio-economic status, education background and citizenship interact in complex ways. Understanding the patterns of enrolment in distinct forms of provision provides a useful way of understanding what private providers promise to offer, and why students are attracted to them.

Résumé

Analyser l’enseignement supérieur privé par rapport au secteur public n’est pas très utile, pas plus que le fait de regrouper les données des étudiants pour expliquer les tendances de la privatisation dans un système national. Cette affirmation s’illustre en analysant le groupe cible d’étudiants identifiés par les institutions, le profil des inscrits et la perception de leur motivation à étudier dans des établissements privés

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en Afrique du Sud. En Afrique du Sud, il y'a deux sous secteurs privés distincts, qui ciblent et attirent un type d'étudiant spécifique. Les établissements qui prétendent satisfaire une demande de «mobilité» répondent essentiellement aux besoins d'une composante historiquement et nouvellement privilégiée, alors que celles qui prétendent satisfaire une demande de «qualifications» spécialisées répondant principalement aux besoins d'étudiants non traditionnels. Une lecture superficielle des questions de race et de genre, de l'avantage et du désavantage historiques, peut assombrir plus qu'elle n'éclaire, parce que l'âge, le statut socio-économique, le niveau d'éducation et la nationalité interagissent de façon complexe. Le fait de comprendre les modes d'inscription aux différents types d'institutions permet de mieux connaître ce que les institutions privées promettent d'offrir, et pourquoi les étudiants sont attirés par celles-ci.

Introduction

The number of private higher education institutions in South Africa expanded rapidly during the 1990s, and there was widespread belief that these institutions began to attract a sizable student base, to the detriment of the public higher education system (Smit 2000; Mabizela 2002). Critical questions were raised about the profile of students, with a popular belief being that these institutions attracted wealthy, privileged students (Vergnani 2000). The first systematic quantitative research on the size and shape of the private higher education sector conducted in South Africa was an analysis of private institutions that were registered with the Department of Education in 1999. This study found somewhat surprisingly that at least 39 percent of students in private institutions were African (Mabizela et al. 2000). The authors claimed that this stark figure is 'higher than might have been commonly expected, given the commonly held assumption that private higher education is beyond the financial reach of many Africans'. They argued strongly therefore that the private higher education sector is not as strongly dominated by white students as commonly believed.

Such an empirical observation raised critical questions about who the students choosing to study at private higher education institutions in South Africa are, and why they have chosen to study at a private institution. Generalising on the basis of dominant trends in other developing countries, we might hypothesize that private providers are meeting excess demand for education, and absorbing in particular African students who cannot be accommodated in the public higher education sector. However, an empirical investigation of the private higher education sector in South Africa suggests that this may be too simple, and that explaining why students choose to attend private higher education in South Africa is more complex and multi-faceted. This paper will argue for the significance of understanding patterns of racial

and gender distribution across different types of private institution, fields and programme levels.

The paper will begin by outlining a conceptual matrix developed to understand different forms of private provision in South Africa. It goes on to describe the target group and admission policy, and then to profile the students who have indeed chosen to study at these different forms of private institutions, examining their motivations and perceptions of their choice. On this basis, it demonstrates the complexity in understanding the choice of private provision and the need for nuanced analysis. Analysing the profile of the student base in different types of private institutions provides a key insight into the dynamics of the private sector in South Africa.

The Research Study

The paper draws on a Human Sciences Research Council study of private higher education conducted in 2002 (Kruss and Kraak 2002). A systematic empirical exploration of the function, governance and finance of private higher education institutions was undertaken (Kruss 2004), drawing on concepts that have been used to analyse private sectors internationally since the 1980s (see Geiger 1986a, 1986b and Levy 1986a, 1986b, 1991, 1992, 1993). Fifteen in-depth case studies of registered private providers were conducted, involving interviews with management and teaching staff, institutional inventories and observation, focus group interviews with students and a student survey. Based on a reading of the emerging empirical trends in private provision (Mabizela 2000; Mabizela, Subotzky and Thaver 2000), four sets of cases were selected to enhance comparability and generalisability. The paper draws specifically on student enrolment figures provided by the institutions themselves, in most cases, based on their annual submissions to the South African Department of Education for the year 2001, as well as the results of a survey of students at each institution conducted as part of the project in 2002.

Understanding Forms of Private Provision

It became evident that the contemporary South African case was distinct in terms of a very different economic, political, social and higher educational context to many earlier comparative analyses of higher education (Geiger 1986a, 1986b; Levy 1986a, 1986b, 1993; Marginson 1997).

There is undoubtedly a great deal of convergence in the focus, mode of operation, staff complement and student base of registered private higher education institutions in South Africa, which arises primarily from their for-profit market orientation, and from the demands for greater access to higher education in South Africa. In a new era of globalisation and commodification of

higher education, these institutions are predominantly (but not entirely) businesses that have identified a market to supply higher education and training in response to a demand for graduates that are directly employable, equipped with the knowledge, skills and dispositions to contribute directly to the workplace and economic growth.

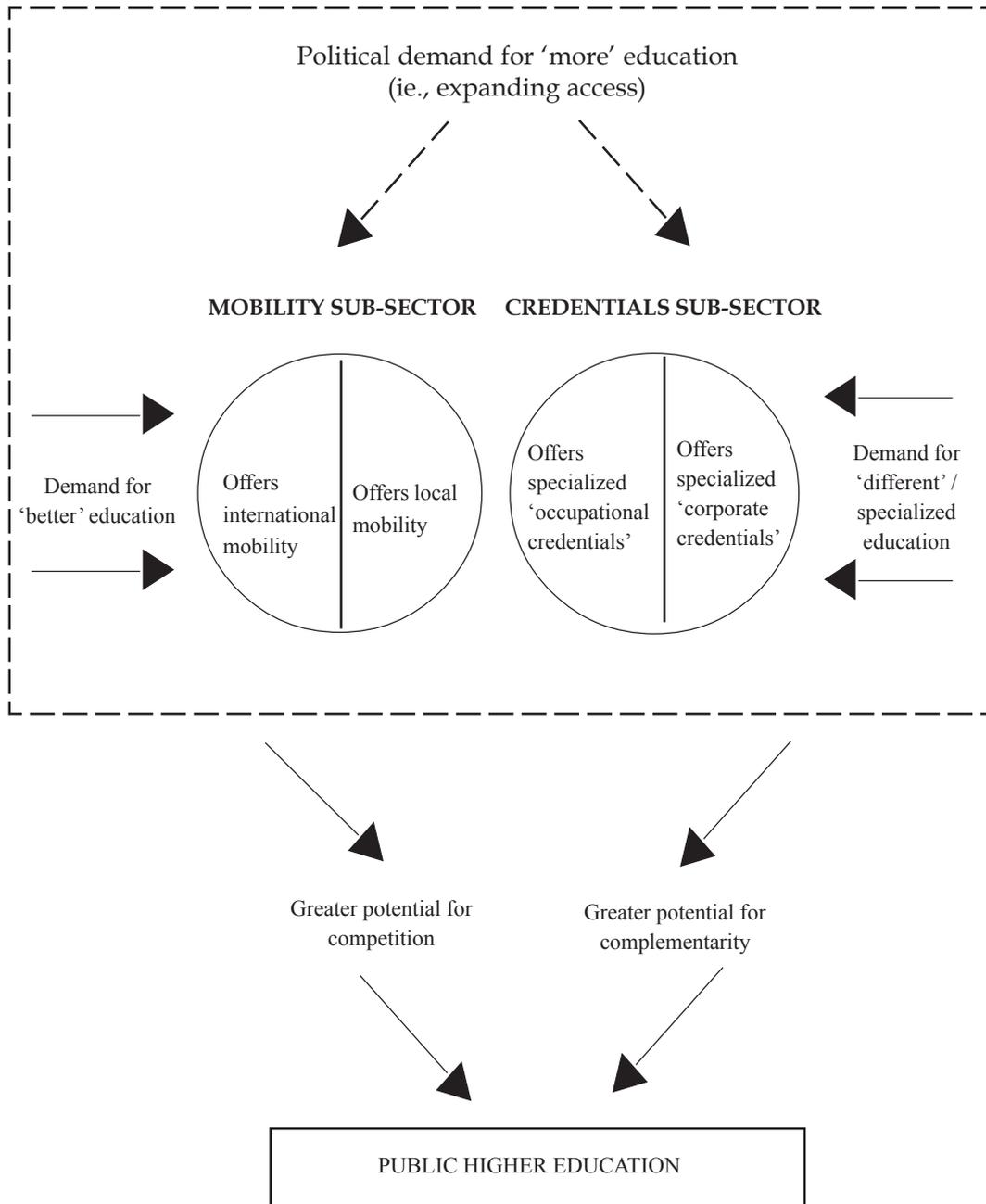
Nevertheless, the HSRC study identifies two distinct private higher education sub-sectors in South Africa, illustrated in Figure 1 (Kruss 2004). The distinction will be outlined briefly here, and will be elaborated throughout the article by comparing the student constituencies of each sub-sector. The mobility sub-sector attracts students by claiming to meet a demand for education that is 'better' than what the public sector can provide, commonly referred to as an 'elite' demand in the comparative private higher education literature. In the contemporary South African context, their qualifications promise mobility: whether in the sense of an internationally recognised and portable degree, or in the sense of a degree that is more oriented to the workplace and offers direct employability, and hence upward socio-economic mobility. This is not to say that these private providers *are* better than the public sector, but rather, that this claim accounts in large part for its appeal to a specific student constituency, as will become clear in Figure 1.

A second form, the specialised credentials sub-sector, claims to meet a demand for education that is 'different' to what the public sector can provide. In the international literature, this has tended to mean a religiously or culturally distinct education, but in the contemporary South African context, it tends to mean education that is occupationally specialised. These institutions hold out the promise of offering specialised credentials, accredited qualifications that prepare students to be directly employable in an occupational niche, or offer specialised programmes tailored to the needs of business corporations.

Unlike most developing countries, private provision in South Africa did not arise on a significant scale in response to excess demand, given sufficient capacity in the public higher education sector. However, alongside the demand for 'better' or 'different' education, there is a small and intertwined element of such a demand for 'more' education underpinning the appeal of a small number of private institutions (Kruss 2002).

The paper will demonstrate how these distinct forms of provider, arising in response to distinct forms of demand, attract very different profiles of students, and it will highlight the complexity of these profiles. It will do so by considering three sources of data from the 15 case studies. First, it will describe and compare the target group and admission policy of private institutions in each of these two sub-sectors. Second, it will analyse the complexity

Figure 1. Private higher education sub-sectors in South Africa



of the demographic profiles of students enrolled in each sub-sector. Third, it will add a final layer to the analysis by describing student articulations of demand, comparing the perceptions of students in the two sub-sectors, of their choice to study at a private institution.

Target Group and Admission Policy

In the majority of cases, only those who can afford the generally high fees can choose to study at a private institution. Nonetheless, there are significant differences evident in the target group, reflected in institutional admission policies, in the providers' promotional literature and student prospectuses. This section will compare the admission policy and target group of the private providers that claim to offer mobility, and those that claim to offer specialised credentials.

Targeting a (Relatively) Privileged Constituency

The providers that claim to respond to a demand for mobility primarily aimed to attract those in privileged socio-economic positions, or those aspiring to be in privileged positions. Some targeted school leavers and others, senior and corporate managers. There was one provider in the HSRC study that explicitly targeted those who have been 'previously disadvantaged', particularly women. However, in offering high-level MBA programmes, it was effectively targeting those professionals who are potentially upwardly mobile, currently in relatively privileged socio-economic positions.

Thus, formal entrance requirements were comparable to those of public universities, namely, a matriculation exemption (twelve years of schooling) for undergraduate degrees, and a Bachelor's degree plus experience for the MBA. So, for instance, at one of these private institutions, some 94 percent of the students surveyed claimed to have matriculation exemption. There was evidence of flexible entry criteria, both in formal policy, but particularly, in practice, which often diverged from the procedures and regulations stipulated formally in institutional policy. For example, one institution had a formal policy of accreditation of prior formal and experiential learning on the basis of a screening process, but the experience reported by some students suggested that these rules were somewhat flexibly applied, in the face of the market need to fill intake quotas. Only 62.5 percent of post-graduate MBA students at this institution claimed to have matriculation exemption, with a relatively high 25 percent having Grade 12 without exemption, and 12.5 percent having completed their schooling outside of the South African school system. This suggests that some of these private providers may be admitting those who may not

have qualified for admission to post-graduate study at public higher education institutions.

Nonetheless, there is little evidence that these private providers aim to broaden access to university level education on any significant scale. Analysis of their promotional brochures and advertising suggests that they aim to attract a (relatively) privileged constituency, more likely to be able to meet the formal requirements for entry into public higher education, and thus able to make an active choice to attend a private institution.

Targeting a Non-traditional Constituency

In contrast, those private institutions that respond to a demand for specialised credentials are distinctive in their stated aim to attract those who have not traditionally entered higher education. Key target constituencies are those who have been unable to gain access to public higher education in the pre-democratic South African past because of a range of racial, socio-economic and educational barriers. A number of examples will illustrate this claim. One institution claimed to have admission strategies to break through racial barriers to create a more representative student body, driven partly by a recognition that 'the most important stories South Africans have to tell are likely to be told by Black South Africans'. Another targeted historically disadvantaged school leavers who were not able to gain access to public higher education because they do not have the required entrance qualifications. Yet another case explicitly targeted 'previously disadvantaged individuals' promoted to supervisory and management positions in corporations.

Flexibility has been built in to the admission policy of most of these providers. For example, at one institution, the formal admission requirement of two years post-matriculation education plus ten years experience is flexibly applied, with the option of entry onto a lower level course, recognition of prior learning, or provisional admission conditional on satisfactory performance. There may also be internal differentiation, with programmes at different levels attracting different kinds of students, from entry level to those in senior positions, to facilitate progression and articulation. One provider had a system of recognition of prior learning through 'formal or informal and non-formal learning and work experience', and recognised its own Further Education and Training programmes for admission to its higher education programmes.

Unlike the private providers in the mobility sub-sector, private providers in this sub-sector aim to attract a non-traditional constituency, of potential students more likely not to meet the formal entrance requirements for public university level study. More significantly, they aim to attract students *making a*

different kind of choice than university study; that is, to obtain occupationally-related credentials that will directly enhance employability.

The Complexity of Student Profiles

What became apparent from an analysis of the demographic profile of the students who choose to attend private institutions is that a superficial reading of race and gender, of historical advantage and disadvantage, can obfuscate more than it illuminates. Indicators other than race and gender, such as age, socio-economic status, education background and citizenship interact in complex ways, and need to be taken into account in the contemporary South African context.

A Degree of Convergence

There is a degree of convergence in the demographic profiles of students enrolled for study in both sub-sectors, which again may be explained by the profit orientation of the majority of providers, but is also related to the fact that higher education is a positional good (Jonathan 2002). That is, all students attending higher education share the potential to be upwardly mobile and enter relatively well-paying professional employment by virtue of their educational achievements, particularly under the new global economic conditions. However, this opportunity is not available to all citizens equally. Indeed, the opportunity to enter higher education is related to prior socio-economic and educational advantage. Historically, participation in higher education in South Africa has been racially skewed in favour of privilege, with a predominance of white students. Since the late 1980s, pressures for massification of higher education have seen the implementation of strategies to meet national equity goals, defined in terms of racial and gender equity. There has been a steady increase of black students in the public higher education sector. In 2001, African students constituted 59 percent of the total headcount enrolments in public higher education institutions. Despite the strong demand for higher education, the participation rate of African students in public institutions remains a low 12 percent, compared with a participation rate of 47 percent of white students (Asmal 2002:14). Female students currently represent slightly more than half of the total national enrolment in public higher education. The presence of privileged students, and those who aspire to privilege, in all forms of private higher education institutions must be interpreted in this light.

Nevertheless, despite this degree of convergence, there are distinct patterns of differentiation evident between students in each of the private sub-sectors. Students at those institutions claiming to offer mobility are more likely to be historically or newly privileged, while students at the institutions offering spe-

cialised credentials are more likely to be non-traditional. Some examples of each will suffice to illustrate the divergence, in all its complexity.

New Forms of Privilege

Institutions that promise ‘international mobility’ typically offer the MBA as their flagship and, in some cases, the only programme. There has been an increase in both demand for and supply of MBAs in South Africa over the past few years (Financial Mail survey 2001), and a large growth in the number of degrees awarded by both local business schools and, increasingly, international providers.

The typical full-time undergraduate student at one such ‘international mobility’ type institution would be a young white school leaver, from a private school¹ and from an extremely affluent family; an exemplar of a highly privileged private student profile. The institution has 60 percent of its students enrolled for full-time under-graduate studies in an accelerated two-year programme (instead of the usual three years), and 40 percent enrolled part-time for post-graduate studies, the MBA. When asked why students had elected to study there, one student, in frustration at the tailored responses of other students, exclaimed

Let’s face it! We are all from affluent families. We’re all from private schools. We’re the same kind of people and that makes us comfortable. We all know where we are going and we plan to get there. Fast!

Academic staff who simultaneously taught in public institutions stressed the difference in privilege, arguing that for those students they teach at the private institution, ‘higher education is a right, not a privilege and the lecturers are there to help them fulfil this birthright’. These students know what they want from life, and they have made sure that they are equipped to get there: at a privileged pace, in a privileged educational environment.

In contrast to this youthful profile, the typical student in formal certificated programmes at another such provider would be part-time, a white male in his mid-30s, in a senior management position in the financial services and banking sector, sponsored by his employer. There are few women or black students enrolling in the formally-certificated MBA programmes, but according to academic staff interviewed, the demographic profile in short courses run on-site for companies is very different, as many black students are enrolled in line with companies’ equity development plans.

At a third case offering ‘international mobility’, there is a similar demographic profile, but given their stated commitment to enrol ‘previously disadvantaged individuals’, the student body reflects a slightly greater degree of

racial and gender diversity, attracting those who are ambitious and upwardly mobile in their professional life, in newly privileged socio-economic positions. As one manager at this institution described their typical student:

They are all managers with jobs, some are company sponsored, older than 26... Race is not high in my mind, but about 50 percent are black people...there are a growing number of women, but still more males.

When it came to the decision to study at a private as opposed to a public institution, these students identified the international stature and credibility of the institution as the key factor, along with the workplace practice oriented programme and pedagogy, especially given the policy of recognizing prior learning as a means of entry without a first degree.²

One of the cases that offer 'local mobility', catering primarily for young school leavers, appeared to differ from this pattern, in the racial profile of student enrolments. In 2000, some 60 percent of students were estimated to be African, with some 33 percent white and 7 percent Indian. However, new forms of socio-economic privilege come into play here, reflected in management's claim that the shift

...has to do with emerging wealth among our black population. I expect percent 95 percent growth rate among Black students by 2005.

Moreover, the high proportion of African students needs to be interpreted with care. Most students at this institution were drawn from the urban areas around Gauteng, but there are many students from South African Development Community (SADC) countries, especially Botswana, Angola and Swaziland, as well as from Taiwan, Japan and other Asian countries. Analysis of survey data revealed that at this institution, only 68 percent of the students are South African citizens and that a relatively high 14 percent of the total student body comes from Botswana. A cross-tabulation of race and citizenship revealed that just over half, 58 percent, of the African students were South African citizens, with a high 27 percent being Botswana citizens.

Further investigation showed that the institution is one of a number that has been selected to enter into an official agreement with the neighbouring Botswana government to provide higher education to its citizens. The Botswana government sponsors its citizens' fees and accommodation for study in South Africa, in the light of the limited capacity of their own national higher education system to absorb the demand for high-level skills. Effectively it is a means of extending wider access to higher education for Botswana citizens, by using the public and private resources of another country.

This pattern highlights that equity concerns need to be widened beyond superficial counts of students' race, and beyond the equation of race with disadvantage. Clearly here, the sizable group of Botswana citizens may not be categorized as historically disadvantaged candidates in the South African higher education context. They are privileged citizens, in that they are selected and funded by their government to contribute to future development in their own country.

Further analysis of the educational background of the students at this provider revealed a relative degree of prior educational privilege. Analysis of the school system in which students in the survey sample had been educated revealed that 40 percent had attended former Model C schools, schools reserved for whites that had integrated to a limited extent in the period of transition, before 1994. A further 39 percent had attended private schools, and only 3.5 percent claimed to have attended former Department of Education and Training (DET) schools, those formerly reserved for Africans. Moreover, students tended to come from families with relatively high levels of education, with almost two thirds of parents having post-school qualifications in the form of certificates, diplomas or degrees.³ Students strongly emphasized the secure environment as critical to their choice, citing the small campus size in a safe location, the small classes, individual attention and approachable staff leading to their preference of this institution over public universities, which were seen to offer the opposite.

A similar pattern of an internally differentiated, newly and historically privileged student body was also found at another such 'local mobility' case that primarily offered the programs of a public distance university. The students have relatively privileged education backgrounds, with almost half of the students surveyed claiming to have attended former Model C schools (48 percent) or private schools (38 percent) with 5.5 percent having attended foreign schools. There is a degree of informal segregation, where different campuses cater for distinct student constituencies, based on self-selection determined by socio-economic status, reflected in ownership of cars or reliance on public transport, as unwittingly highlighted by the founding manager:

Mainly at that time (1991–93) you had a varied student body with a lot of white students and very few black. At the moment the situation has turned around especially since opening other branches. Here, because it is closer to African townships and directly on the taxi route – you find students here are mainly black. Those students who have cars settle for the other campuses.

Most of the students study full time and are primarily enrolled for their first post-school qualification, but some reportedly chose to study part-time even though they were not working, as it was cheaper. Here too, migration across national boundaries in Southern Africa, from countries such as Angola, Mozambique and Democratic Republic of Congo, into private institutions, appears to be a small but significant dynamic shaping the nature of the institution in recent years, but as management remarked of their students, 'they want what they want and they demand what they want'.

The intersection of race, socio-economic status and education is evident in an emergent trend, of a newly privileged African student body that has been educated in Model C or private schools, coming from families with relatively high levels of education. The analysis of student profiles reveals that these students are more likely to be enrolled in private institutions that claim to offer mobility. The pattern of attracting young people from Southern Africa, both those supported by their own governments and those with private means to study, is a small but significant trend. It is evident that not only those who have been historically privileged, but also those who are relatively privileged in new socio-economic and political conditions, tend to be more strongly attracted to study at private providers in the mobility sub-sector.

Non-traditional Students

Analysis of the demographic profile of the cases in the private sub-sector offering 'specialised credentials' provides a contrasting set of trends and patterns.

The typical student at one case is likely to be mature, in full-time employment in positions ranging from shop floor to middle management, and to have progressed from foundation level to National Qualifications Framework Level 5 programmes, the level of certificates and diplomas. The majority of students attend contact classes part-time, either in the evenings or on Saturdays. The racial profile of students suggests that there have been attempts to train Africans and coloureds⁴ but that positions of leadership at all levels in production manufacturing and operations are still dominated by white males. The majority had attended public schools and many are the first to attend higher education in their families⁵, corresponding with the stated aim of the institution to cater for non-traditional students. The consensus is that students choose this institution because it offers a unique differentiated programme in innovative partnership with industry, where the private institution provides core skills, and companies provide industry specific technical training. As one manager explained:

Our offerings allow people into Higher Education via our Skills programmes. Furthermore, we don't just teach general literacy but quite specialized numeracy programmes demanded for the industrial work place, with specific examples coming from these particular environments.

Students clearly articulated a demand for specialized education and training in a career-oriented occupational niche. The private institution primarily offers the opportunity to obtain formal credentials at a recognized higher education provider.

Likewise, at one of the cases offering 'specialised corporate credentials', the majority of students were part-time, mature, sponsored by employers, technically educated but new to managerial positions, and predominantly male.⁶ In line with attempts to meet the equity and human resource development requirements of corporations, just over half the students were white and just over a third African.⁷ Again, closer inspection revealed that a significant proportion of the African delegates are Botswana citizens. While these students do not come from families with post-schooling qualifications, about a third of the students themselves have first degrees, usually in a technical area.

At another institution, the majority of students have progressed through its own Further Education and Training programmes, but here a very different constituency is attracted. Higher education programmes were only introduced in 2001 at 10 branches, and make up a very small percentage of the total student complement of 5,840, some 4 percent as compared to 84 percent enrolled in Further Education and Training programmes at this institution. There was a perceived need articulated by management to offer students registered at Further Education level an opportunity to continue to higher education, to offer students 'a one-stop shop', and develop the educational 'brand'. The majority of the higher education students are young African school leavers, with a relatively high enrolment of women, who had attended public schools and were the first in their families to enter higher education, with only a third of the students surveyed having a matriculation exemption. These students were not able to gain access to public higher education because of educational disadvantage, and clearly had far less choice than students at other cases in the study. For instance, students claimed that they enrolled at this private provider because it was too late to register at public institutions, or because the points system of some public providers acted to exclude them, given their low levels of attainment in school leaving examinations.

The majority were enrolled in Certificate programmes in Information Technology or Business Administration, which they believe enhance their opportu-

nities to enter the workplace. However, the exchange value of such credentials is not established. It was evident that students would have preferred to have been registered at a public institution, both for recognition and a perceived, better, cheaper and higher quality provision. Academic staff cited the fee pricing and rejection by public providers as the main reasons for students selecting the institution, and the bulk of enrolment took place in the period at the end of February, when most students were either refused entry or were too late to register for public institutions. Thus, while this institution primarily claimed to offer specialized, occupationally-oriented credentials, in terms of student perceptions and in practice, it also has elements of demand absorption, meeting a demand for access to higher education on the part of those experiencing educational barriers, directly related to historical disadvantage.

The exchange value of another institution that attracts young school leavers to prepare for the film industry appeared to be high. In contrast, this institution has made specific efforts to attract a student body that reflects the demography of South Africa, and although white students still predominate (69 percent), they have managed to attract students from other racial groups, with some 27 percent African students. A relatively high 33 percent of the students surveyed had attended private schools, with 25 percent of the African students having attended private schools and a low 10 percent of African students having attended former DET schools. It thus appears that African students are also drawn from an emergent socio-economic strata, with relatively high levels of education, most from families familiar with higher education.⁸ This educationally privileged African segment of the student body is preparing to enter new non-traditional occupational fields that were closed to black people in the past through formal and then informal job colour bars.

Students spontaneously highlighted the distinctive, specialized nature of the institution, and its real-practice orientation, where they were learning real, useful skills in a formally certificated programme faster than through working. They articulated a strong demand for career-oriented, practical professional formal qualifications that equips students for the workplace, personally, academically and socially.

A similar case was found at an institution with a predominantly white (90 percent), Afrikaans speaking, and female (99 percent) student base, drawn from all over the country. The gender skewing is in keeping with the general vocational field and clientele of the health and beauty profession. Most of the students were enrolled in NQF Level 5 certificates and diplomas. There was reportedly a 50 percent black student enrolment on a one-year certificate programme that was cheaper, did not require matriculation exemption and that was reported to be less demanding than the other courses. The perception of

lecturers was that this programme equipped those who are content with working for others, in less responsible positions, rather than owning and managing their own salons. Perhaps differences of individual ability or achievement led students at this institution to seek other kinds of higher education opportunities.

The element of demand absorption was strongest at one case in this sub-sector. In line with its stated aim to cater for 'the poorest of the poor', the enrolment pattern reflects that it attracts non-traditional students in the sense that they are not able to gain entry to public institutions because of financial constraints. Significantly, this provider operates not-for-profit, and students pay nominal fees. Students are drawn from poor, often rural communities and as part of the admission requirements, need to show that they are 'sponsored' by their community. All students are full-time, young African school-leavers, with approximately 60 percent being female. The majority is the first in their families to enter higher education, but almost 70 percent have matriculation exemption. The admission policy was quite clear that students should have matriculation exemption, and that 'bright and deserving' candidates should be particularly targeted, but the current enrolment patterns reveal that here too, students who do not have the educational requirements to enter the public universities are being catered for.

Students at cases with a religious orientation also tended to be young school-leavers in full-time study. In one case, students were predominantly white and male, from a relatively well-educated family background. Another case attracts an international residential student body through its church networks. Significantly it too, has attracted a sizable group of Botswana government-sponsored students. This has meant a shift for the first time from a student body consisting predominantly of white members of the denomination to a more diverse, predominantly black and non-denominational student body.

The notion of 'non-traditional' students in these cases responding to a demand for credentials and a 'different' education thus has a range of meanings, reflecting the complex intersection of race, class, gender, education and citizenship. In some cases, 'non-traditional' relates to those students in employment, often predominantly male, and increasingly black, who have extensive experience, but do not have formal education qualifications. In other cases, 'non-traditional' relates to those black students, perhaps relatively well-educated and from relatively well-educated families, who have in the past not had access to specific occupations, particularly in new kinds of service industry, and for whom broader opportunities are now opening up. In yet other cases, the meaning of 'non-traditional' student in higher education is closely linked

historically with vocational education and training, those students, black or white, often female, who are not academically inclined, who seek occupational credentials. And finally, 'non-traditional' relates to those students, often women, perhaps the first in their families to aspire to higher education, who have not been able to gain entry to public institutions because they lack the required entrance qualifications, but nevertheless, desire credentials that will enhance employability.

The analysis of the profiles of students enrolled in the cases thus reveals both a degree of convergence, but equally, a clear distinction between the relative privilege of students enrolled at providers in the mobility sub-sector, and the 'non-traditional' nature of students enrolled in the credentials sub-sector.

Analyzing Student Articulations of Demand

A further layer of complexity is added to the analysis by considering students' own perceptions of their choice to study at a private institution⁹ in more detail.

Student Perceptions of Choice: Mobility from sub-sector institutions

Some students have chosen to study at a private institution that promises to offer them internationally-recognised, quality programmes in a secure environment that will enhance employability. Again, the proviso must be stressed, this is not to claim that institutions indeed fulfil that promise. At the heart of this choice, lies an emphasis on education that will prepare young people for future mobility.

An internationally recognised qualification was typically venerated, simply *because* it is international and not South African, and thus seen to be more valuable and open up greater global opportunities than local accreditation. A sense was gained from young school leavers preparing to enter the world of work that they are clear about what they want from the future, and are making sure they are equipped to get there. For those already in the workplace, in post-graduate programmes, the workplace relevance and 'real life' practice orientation was stressed strongly during focus group interviews as the motivation for selecting the institution. One student summed up the point that was typically expressed, when he commented that the programmes 'add value to what I was experiencing, to take theory and translate it into something substantial'. Flexible modes of learning that accommodate employment needs were stressed, to equip these students for greater career mobility. A privileged, exclusive educational environment, characterised by opportunities for individual attention and personal safety, was seen by all students interviewed as critical to enable focus and quality.

In students' perception, they have chosen a private provider because of a promise of international mobility, closely linked to the opportunity for career mobility promoted in the workplace orientation and flexible modes of entry and provision, and to ensure upward socio-economic mobility. As students at one college in the mobility sub-sector phrased it, these providers 'prepare students for the world' and 'get you going where you need to go'

Student Perceptions of Choice: Credentials from sub-sector institutions

Other students have chosen to study at a private provider that offers them a different kind of specialised, niche-driven credentialing, oriented to the workplace. At the heart of this choice, lies an emphasis on specialised credentials.

Their choice was motivated by a strong desire to 'get the tickets', to obtain recognized formal credentials, in order to increase opportunities for employability. The private provider was seen to offer specialised credentials to prepare for specific occupations that are not offered at other institutions, particularly universities. The expressed concern was not for ensuring mobility. Rather, a formal, certificated preparation for the labour market, a career and practice orientation were all commonly stressed. As one student reflected

I have chosen (this provider) because it offers me the opportunity to reflect on what I have been doing every day for many years, and I am therefore going to come back to proceed with a Diploma after finishing this Certificate course.

The combination of formal credentials and the practice orientation, of 'learning real, useful skills', were seen as a route to acquire skills and ensure the future more effectively, to equip students for the workplace personally, socially and academically. For students at institutions offering corporate specialised credentials, the primary emphasis was on formal credentials to develop specialised job-oriented skills that will contribute to the corporation as well as the individual.

For those providers with an element of demand absorption, there was a slight variation. Students at one case clearly had less choice, and had made their choice based on more pragmatic reasons, that the fees are affordable, and that the flexible modes of learning and time can accommodate family and personal needs. In contrast, students at the non-profit case felt that given their life circumstances, 'we did not choose, we were chosen', and expressed appreciation for the financial opportunity afforded them to study further.¹⁰ At the same time, they shared the understanding that they were being prepared for employability.

For the private providers with a religious orientation, the strongest motivation articulated related to 'the Christian environment', to the comfort of the company of other Christians and that spiritual needs are taken care of.

The strength of all the students' belief that private providers can prepare more effectively for employability is thus evident, whether it is the belief of relatively privileged students that the qualification will ensure mobility or the belief of non-traditional students that the credentials will ensure employment.

Conclusion

Talking of the private higher education sector in relation to the public sector is thus not helpful, nor is aggregating student data to explain trends in private provision. The cases illustrate that in South Africa, there are distinct forms of private provision, and relative to the public sector, providers target a specific student base, and attract a specific profile of students, with a distinct set of motivations. The mobility providers cater primarily for an historically privileged and newly privileged constituency, while the credential providers cater primarily for non-traditional students. This is evident in their admission policies and target audience, in the demographic profile of enrolled students, and in students' articulated demand. What was also apparent from an analysis of the student profiles is that a superficial reading of race and gender, of historical advantage and disadvantage, can obfuscate more than it illuminates. Understanding complex patterns of enrolment in different forms of provision provides a more useful way of understanding what private providers are offering, and why students are attracted to them.

Notes

1. A high 82 percent of students surveyed at this institution reported that they had completed their schooling at a private school.
2. It was estimated that about 12 percent of students enter this institution through this route.
3. About 53 percent of the fathers of students at this institution had a degree, and 15 percent had a certificate or diploma, while 28 percent of the mothers had a degree and 38 percent had a certificate or diploma.
4. Institutional figures were not available but 56 percent of students surveyed at this institution were white, with 31 percent African, 10 percent coloured and 3 percent Indian.
5. Some 78 percent of parents of students at this institution had matriculation or lower as their highest educational level, and only 11 percent had degrees.
6. In 2001, 71 percent of those enrolled in the higher education programmes of this institution were male and 29 percent female.

7. In 2001, 56 percent of students at this institution were white, 35 percent were African, 5 percent were Indian and 4 percent coloured.
8. This was evident in that 73 percent of parents of the students at this institution had post-school qualifications.
9. This section relies on an analysis of items on the student survey that explored why students had chosen to study at a specific institution. Students were asked to rate a set of 16 reasons commonly cited in the international and South African literature, on a scale of 1–5, where 1 was very little influence, and 5 was strong influence. Means and standard deviations were calculated in order to compare the relative ranking and strength of the reasons cited. What stands out is that students at some institutions are much more emphatic on the factors that influenced them to study at a private institution, rating more than half the factors 4 or above on average. Here students appear to have made an active individual choice for study at a private institution for clear reasons. At other institutions, students were more equivocal, suggesting that they had less active choice. The trends emerging from the survey were triangulated with an analysis of focus group interview data that attempted to identify why students value higher education, and why they had selected their specific institution, aiming to identify the motivations spontaneously articulated by students for choosing to study at a private institution.
10. Management claimed that in 2000, some 10,000 potential learners had applied for 1,000 places, in response to word-of-mouth advertising.

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