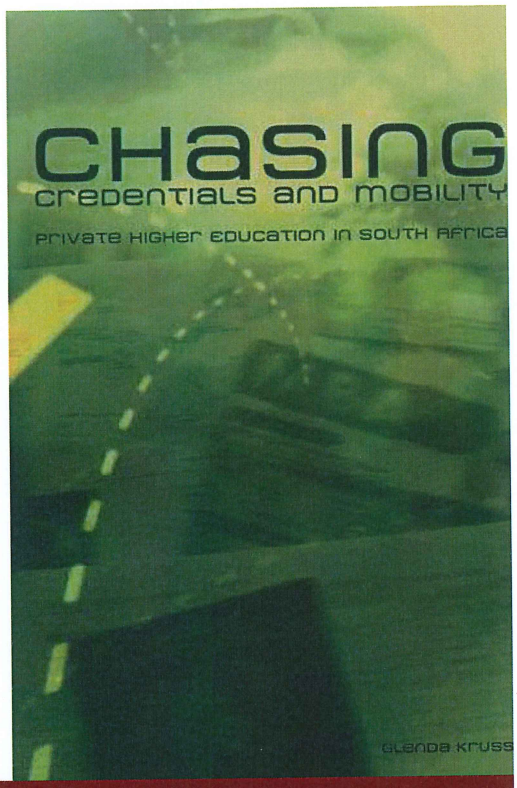
EXAMINING PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

By Glenda Kruss



A few years ago the debate around private higher education in South Africa centred on the issue of regulation: should private provision be allowed to exist in the light of its competition with, and potential impact on, the public sector? How should the state regulate it?

In an attempt to go beyond the logjam in this debate, a study was launched to determine what forms of private provision existed, and what demands they were meeting. The findings are set out in the book *Chasing Credentials and Mobility: Private Higher Education In South Africa*. It was assumed that such an empirical study would be able to inform the policy goal that private higher education should complement public provision, rather than operate in competition with it.

A few short years later, debate has shifted to issues of the quality of private provision. The HSRC study did not set out to study, systematically, the quality of private provision. But the conclusions of the study can speak equally to this concern, as they suggest terms of engagement with two distinct forms of private provision.

The first type of private institution claims to meet a demand for education that is "better" than that offered by the public sector. These institutions tend to be owned by large education holding companies and operate with a strong profit orientation that imprints on all their activities.

They function primarily to offer mobility to historically and newly privileged socio-economic groups, claiming to respond to a demand for education that will be profession and career-oriented and to prepare graduates directly for employment and the demands of the workplace in highly-skilled occupations, particularly in business and management.

They offer high-status undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, concentrated in the fields of business and management, comparable to public university and technikon qualifications.

For these institutions, questions about quality are closely linked to the regulation of provision to ensure that private interests and the potential for competition do not prevail to the detriment of the social good. These private institutions claim to do better than the public sector, and to offer equivalent programmes.

It is therefore appropriate that their focus and quality should be judged alongside and be expected to complement and match those of the public universities and technikons. It is also fitting that they should be subject to state regulation to guard against a proliferation of lucrative programmes, or a racial or gender imbalance in student profiles, to the detriment of the system as a whole.

Private institutions should be subject to state regulation to guard against a proliferation of lucrative programmes, and a racial or gender imbalance in student profiles

The second type of private institution offers education that is "different" to that offered in the public sector, in that it responds to a demand for recognised credentials with high status to ensure direct employability in a specialised occupational niche market.

Some of these institutions have existed on the periphery of tertiary education for some time, offering technical and vocational education through private colleges and professional associations. They target and attract non-traditional students to equip them with the formal credentials to enter new occupational fields, such as tourism and leisure, entertainment and the media, as well as new levels within occupational structures in business and management.

These institutions tend to be small, proprietarily owned and operating primarily for profit, but they also include a small number of not-for-profit providers, particularly those with a religious orientation. In their orientation and focus, these providers offer programmes mainly at the intermediate level, in the form of certificates and diplomas at National Qualifications Framework (NQF) levels 5 and 6, meeting a demand that universities and some technikons and Further Education Training colleges do not.

For these institutions, questions of quality are more closely linked to the co-ordination of provision, to ensure that they meet their potential to complement existing state institutions, and to contribute to intermediate skills development in the public interest.

Private providers may tend to focus on a limited range of lucrative fields or may offer poor quality, narrow-skilling programmes that do not turn out students who are fully employable – leaving critical gaps in provision at the intermediate level in key fields, across the education and training system.

Understanding these two forms of provision enables us to consider the distinct terms of engagement with private higher education anew. If the private higher education sector is to operate in a way that complements the public sector, the two kinds of institutions should be treated differently in regulation, co-ordination and quality control. •

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The book, Chasing Credentials and Mobility: Private Higher Education In South Africa *is available from www.hsrcpress.ac.za, or through leading booksellers.*

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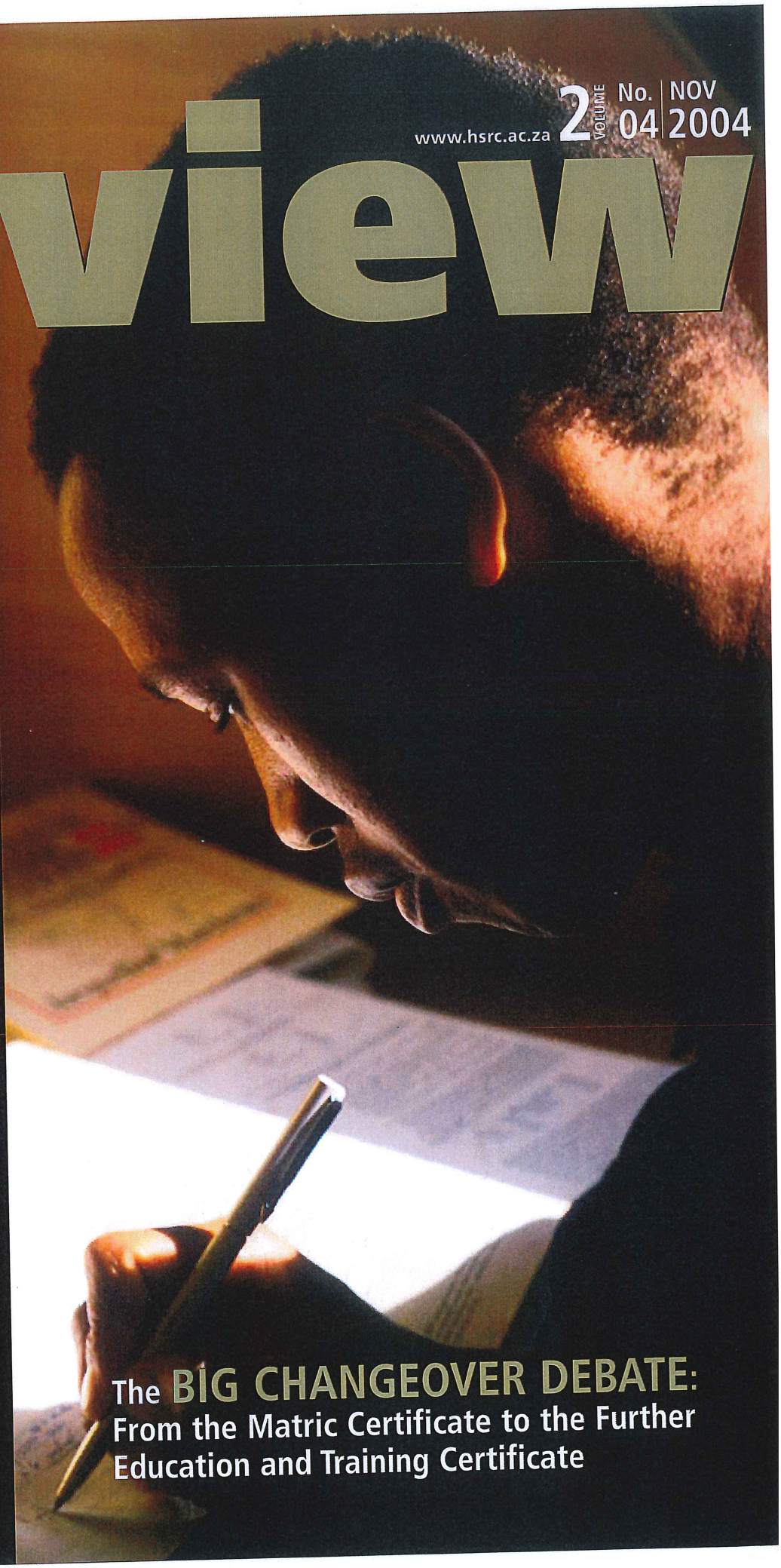

The BIG CHANGEOVER DEBATE: From the Matric Certificate to the Further Education and Training Certificate