This chapter provides an overview of the shifting higher education landscape in South Africa. While the primary focus is on the period between 1994 and 2000, the chapter traces the historical relationships among public and private higher education providers, the role of government policies, and pressures from the political and economic environments. The interaction among these forces indicates that the conditions permitting the re-emergence of the private provision of post-secondary education and training in South Africa in the late 1990s were not new to the country. The chapter also takes into account what was happening among public higher education providers during the period after 1994 and the mercurial role of the government after 1998. It compares the development of private providers in South Africa with international trends and concludes by suggesting that revisiting policies and procedures concerning the regulation of the private providers may be in the country’s interest.

1. COLONIALISM, APARTHEID AND HIGHER EDUCATION: THE ROAD TO CHANGE

Conventional wisdom suggests that the rise in private higher education in South Africa is a recent phenomenon. However, a closer look at South African history indicates otherwise. The first private provider of higher education was the South African College, founded in Cape Town in 1829 by influential citizens who sought better quality of education for their children. Almost a century later (1918) this institution was granted university status and became what is now known as the University of Cape Town. Later in the 19th century a second private provider of higher education, the Kimberley School of Mines, was created to serve the needs of the rapidly expanding mining industry. The school moved to Johannesburg after the turn of the century and split into two entities in 1908. Both of these eventually became public institutions: one the University of the Witwatersrand (1921) and the other the University of Pretoria (1930) (Mabizela, 2000).

A third initiative to provide higher education had its roots in religious affairs, as colonial life became more deeply entrenched. Both the Anglican and Dutch Reformed Churches started colleges in several South African locations during the 19th century. Cape Town, Grahamstown, Stellenbosch and Burgersdorp were sites of private church-supported colleges, all of which evolved into public institutions in the 20th century. The early 20th century also saw the beginnings of racially segregated and privately supported
higher education. The South African Native College was founded in 1916; it eventually became the University of Fort Hare. In 1929 a private initiative led to the creation of a technical college for Indian workers in the Durban. This later became ML Sultan Technikon, a public institution (Mabizela, 2000).

The evolution of higher education from private initiatives into public institutions, and into divergent racial groupings was underscored by the passage of the Extension of University Act of 1959, which created separate universities for the ‘non-white’ population. Not surprisingly, given the framework of ‘grand apartheid’, racial separation also featured in the legislation in 1967 that created the Colleges of Advanced Technical Education. These colleges were upgraded to technikons in 1979. By 1980 the landscape of higher education in South Africa had stabilised into racially divided sets of universities and technikons the roots of which had long been forgotten.

During the post-war industrial boom of the 1950s and 1960s another set of dynamics in the provision of education and training emerged that would lay the bases for significant changes later in the century. The dual demand for professional training and alternative routes to matriculation fuelled the growth of private providers of professional, technical and vocational education and training programmes. By 1974 there were 32 registered professional institutes, the majority of which were privately run. Some of these private providers also responded to the demand for alternative routes to matriculation – a demand that had led to the creation in 1906 of Intec College, Lyceum College in 1928 and Damelin College in 1945. By the 1950s, all offered certificates and qualifications as well as alternative matriculation programmes (Mabizela, 2000). One can speculate about the linkages between Afrikaner capital in the creation of these private, skills-focused providers and efforts to develop an education and skills base for the Afrikaner population which had been marginalised by British governmental, economic and social powers in the Cape colonies. When the Nationalist Party took control of the country in 1948, it was able to shape education and training policies in a way that reflected its racial values.

As global attention focused on the apartheid policies of South Africa in the late 1960s and 1970s, international donors and South African non-governmental organisations (NGOs) began partnerships addressing some of the deficiencies in education and training opportunities for black South Africans. By the 1980s a number of initiatives of this nature were well established, including the well-respected South African Committee for Higher Education (Sached). It had started in the 1960s as a provider of higher education for black students through a linkage with the University of London. Later, it offered programmes in adult basic education and secondary education, and contact sessions for black students enrolled in the correspondence courses of the University of South Africa (Unisa), the mammoth distance education university that was essentially the only ‘non-racial’ provider of higher education in the country at the time.

A significant focus of many NGOs was the need to improve the competence of black teachers in South Africa’s primary and secondary schools. Research in the late 1980s and early 1990s indicated that more than 80% of these teachers were not adequately prepared for the courses they were teaching, in terms of educational qualifications. Many had little more than high school education; some even lacked that. All had been trained in the philosophy and pedagogy of Christian National Education, the value framework