

ON DIFFERENTIATION AND DIVERSITY

Revised 13 October 2009

1. Post-1994, 'differentiation' and 'diversity' in South African higher education have been difficult and challenging policy issues.

Historically the apartheid higher education system was differentiated and diversified along lines of 'race' and ethnicity, resulting in the advantaging in various ways of the historically white institutions and the disadvantaging of the historically black institutions.

In this context there were legitimate concerns among historically black institutions that a policy of differentiation and diversity post-1994 could continue the historical patterns of the disadvantaging of black institutions and the advantaging of the historically white institutions, especially if there were an absence of strategies of institutional redress and institutional developmental trajectories for historically black institutions as a way of addressing the apartheid legacy, and to enable these institutions to take on new social and educational roles.

2. The 1997 *White Paper* made clear that 'an important task in planning and managing a single national co-ordinated system is to ensure diversity in its organisational form and in the institutional landscape, and offset pressures for homogenisation' (2.37).
3. The 2001 *National Plan* proclaimed its commitments to 'achieving diversity in the South African higher education system', and 'to diversify the system in terms of the mix of institutional missions and programmes that will be required to meet national and regional needs in social, cultural and economic development'. The Department of Education (DoE) set itself the strategic objective of ensuring 'diversity in the organisational form and institutional landscape of the higher education system through mission and programme differentiation' which would be 'based on the type and range of qualifications offered'.
4. If there is an in-principle opposition to differentiation and diversity and a South African higher education institutional landscape comprising of differentiated and diverse universities, this would run counter to the thrust of post-1994 higher education policy and will require on the part of Higher Education South Africa major policy engagement and negotiations with government.
5. Higher education history should not, however, obscure the immense contribution that a differentiated and diverse higher education system can make to the new socio-economic and educational goals and objectives of democratic South Africa. The economic and social needs of South Africa are highly varied and diverse, and a responsive higher education system requires a diverse spectrum of institutions. There is no virtue in homogeneity where every higher education institution seeks to be the same and do the same thing, and all aspire to be a ('research') university.

6. Post-1994 there have been two necessary elements in the creation of a new institutional landscape: (a) *institutional restructuring* through different forms of combination of previous institutions, and (b) *the negotiation of new academic qualification and programme mixes for institutions*.

The creation of a new institutional landscape has, therefore, needed to proceed at two levels simultaneously.

On the one hand, it has required the creation of new institutional identities through the development of new institutional missions, social and educational roles, academic qualification and programme mixes, and organisational forms, structures and practices as appropriate for different institutions.

On the other hand, the complexity of the restructuring could not end simply with new identities for institutions. It has also needed to confront the historical burden of South African higher education: namely apartheid institutionalised inequities which translated into a 'system' of institutions characterised by educational, financial, material and geographical advantage and disadvantage.

7. No restructuring of the higher education system can succeed unless these issues are taken on seriously and proactively. In this regard, taking into account institutional histories as well as envisaged new social and educational roles it is imperative to create the conditions and opportunities and provide the necessary resources for developmental trajectories for all higher education institutions, and especially the historically disadvantaged. The capacities, capabilities and institutional profiles of higher education institutions are not fixed. All of these can be developed over time and serve vital social needs.
8. It may be the case that on the part of historically back universities there is no in-principle opposition to differentiation, but legitimate concerns regarding the implications of its implementation in the absence of clear policy signals regarding developmental trajectories, compounded by the absence of significant new funds for higher education.
9. Indeed, the problem until very recently has been that the creation of effective developmental trajectories for all higher education institutions, and especially the historically disadvantaged, has encountered inadequate financial support on the part of government. This is notwithstanding the provision of merger and recapitalisation funding and a new funding formula that introduced aspects of institutional redress funding.
10. In this context, differentiation and diversity have, not surprisingly, been considered by universities as financially a zero-sum game, with almost certain winners and losers.
11. However, with the recent DoE allocations to universities of R 2.0 billion (2008-2010) and R3.1 billion (2011-2013) for capital infrastructure and 'efficiency' interventions it is evident that differentiation need not be a zero-sum game.

12. New funds can help make possible the implementation of a policy of differentiation and diversity, in which universities through negotiation with the DoE pursue specific institutional missions and related qualifications and programmes and institutional development trajectories (related to their values, shape and size, infrastructure development needs, strengths and shortcomings), without any necessary financial disadvantaging of historically black institutions.
13. Of course, it could be argued by historically black universities (and others that perceive themselves to be disadvantaged in one or other way) that there is on their part no in-principle objection to differentiation; simply that until the needs (identified and quantified in terms of their negotiated missions and qualifications and programmes) of historically black universities and those that view themselves as disadvantaged are met, any and all new funds for higher education should be allocated to these institutions.
14. In this case, the issue is not differentiation as much as it is about: (a) institutional redress, or (b) the balance between financial support for institutional development trajectories of historically black universities and those that view themselves as disadvantaged, and support also for developmental trajectories for historically white universities, to the extent that these universities require support if they are in a differentiated and diverse higher education system to contribute optimally to social equity and redress and the economic and social development needs of South Africa and the continent.
15. In the light of the above, it seems to me that HESA has to:
 - *Openly and seriously debate the issues of 'differentiation' and 'diversity'.* Key questions include
 - ⇒ Are 'differentiation' and 'diversity' one and the same thing?
 - ⇒ If 'differentiation' and 'diversity' are different, wherein lies the difference?
 - ⇒ Is there a relationship between 'differentiation' and 'diversity', and if so, how are they related?
 - ⇒ Does a policy that seeks to promote the existence of a 'diversity' of institutions necessarily require 'differentiation'?
 - ⇒ Can 'diversity in the organisational form and institutional landscape of the higher education system' only be achieved 'through mission and programme differentiation... based on the type and range of qualifications offered' (*National Plan, 2001*), or are there other ways to achieve diversity?
 - ⇒ What might be other ways to achieve 'diversity'?
 - *Take a position on the policy* of the differentiation and diversity of universities
 - If there is *objection to the policy*, create an opportunity and fashion a mechanism for engaging with the Ministry on the policy of the differentiation and diversity

- If there is *support for the policy* of differentiation and diversity, identify whether, in what ways and to what extent we are, or are not, in agreement with how the policy is being implemented
- If we *are in agreement* with the implementation of the policy, there may nonetheless still be issues on which we may wish to engage with the Ministry
- If we *are not in agreement* with the implementation of the policy, there is a need to identify the substantive and procedural areas of disagreement, and to proactively formulate how the policy could be implemented differently and with what possible benefits and consequences.