THE CONTEXT OF DIFFERENTIATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A PERSPECTIVE

Saleem Badat

Differentiation Seminar: Components of a Framework

Cape Sun, Cape Town

Thursday 24 January 2013

Post-1994, 'differentiation' in South African higher education has been a contentious and difficult policy issue for a number of reasons.

First, historically, the apartheid higher education system was differentiated and diversified along lines of 'race' and ethnicity, resulting in the advantaging in various ways of historically white institutions (HWIs) and the disadvantaging of historically black institutions (HBIs). In this context there were legitimate concerns among HBIs that a policy of differentiation and diversity post-1994 could continue the historical patterns of disadvantaging them and advantaging the HWIs, especially if there were no strategies of institutional redress and no developmental trajectories for HBIs to address the apartheid legacy, and to enable them to take on new social and educational roles.

Second, there have been sharply contested and differing views on the kinds of differentiation that is appropriate for South African higher education, with support expressed for functional differentiation (on the basis of clear institutional types), and flexible differentiation (based on institutional missions and programmes). Buffeted by strong differences among key stakeholders, in 1996 the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) advocated acceptance 'in name, and in broad function and mission, the existence of universities, technikons and colleges as types of institutions,' and to allow a new system to 'evolve through a planned process which recognises current institutional missions and capacities, addresses the distortions created by apartheid, and responds to emerging regional and national needs' (cited in Kraak, 2001:113). The NCHE view was described as a 'middle-ground position' that 'fudged' the differences between what he describes as 'functional and flexible differentiation' (ibid.:112-13).

The 1997 *White Paper* made it 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' 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' (DoE, 1997:2.37, 1.27, 2.37

In 2000, the CHE came out on the side of institutional 'differentiation' and 'diversity'. 'Differentiation' was used to 'refer to the social and educational mandates of institutions, which were to 'orient institutions to meet economic and social goals by focusing on programmes at particular levels of the qualifications structure and on particular kinds of research and community service' (CHE, 2000:34). 'Diversity' referred to 'the specific missions of individual institutions' (ibid). Three distinct types of institutions were defined on the basis of the extent of their postgraduate teaching and research programmes and research, while provision was also made for a 'dedicated distance education' institution (CHE, 2000:8-9).

♦ Institutions which are the bedrock of the higher education system, whose orientation and focus would be
• High quality undergraduate programmes

- Limited postgraduate programmes up to a taught Masters level
- Research related to curriculum, learning and teaching with a view to application.

♦ Institutions whose orientation and focus would be
  - High quality undergraduate programmes
  - Extensive postgraduate taught and research programmes up to the Masters level
  - Selective postgraduate taught and research programmes up to the Doctoral level
  - Select areas of research (basic, applied, strategic and development).

♦ Institutions whose orientation and focus would be
  - High quality undergraduate programmes
  - Comprehensive postgraduate taught and research programmes up to the Doctoral level
  - Extensive research capabilities (basic, applied, strategic and developmental) across a broad range of areas.

♦ An institution whose orientation and focus would be dedicated distance education.

Four years later the 2001 *National Plan for Higher Education* committed the state 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.' It 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'.

Since then there have been two elements in the creation of a new differentiated institutional landscape. One has been institutional restructuring. In 1994, the higher education sector comprised of 21 public universities, 15 technikons, 120 colleges of education and 24 nursing and 11 agricultural colleges. By 2001 all the colleges of education were either closed or incorporated into the universities and technikons. Thereafter some of the 36 universities and technikons were merged and incorporated on the basis of various criteria to give rise to the present landscape of 11 universities, 6 comprehensive universities (one distance) and 6 universities of technology. 2 institutes of higher education were created, as facilities through which particular academic programmes of the existing universities could be provided in provinces that did not have universities.

The other element has been the negotiation of the academic offerings of institutions, in terms of which institutions are restricted to specific approved undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications and programmes, must seek state approval for the offering of new qualifications, and receive quality accreditation from the CHE.

The creation of a new institutional landscape has, therefore, proceeded 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.

More recently, the Ministry of Higher Education and Training's *Green Paper for Post-School Education & Training* has commented that

> a diverse university system steeped in inequality is the product of apartheid education policies, and that reality still confronts us today. While our leading universities are internationally respected, our historically black universities continue to face severe financial, human, infrastructure and other resource constraints. Universities of Technology are in some instances experiencing mission drift, losing focus on their mission of producing technicians, technologists and other mid-level skills at undergraduate level. This problem is also evident in the comprehensive universities (2011: 11).

The *Green Paper* proposes that:

♦ Key to strengthening the system is the principle of institutional differentiation, which has long been recognised in policy but has not always been supported through funding (2011: xi).
♦ The need for a differentiated system of university education has long been recognised. Not all institutions can or should fulfil the same role (2011:39).
♦ The following principles should be adhered to in creating rational and suitable differentiation among universities that is responsive to contextual realities, including history, policy, infrastructure and material conditions:
  • Further categorisation of institutions should be avoided. The current categories are relatively new, are useful, and should remain. It would be unacceptable and cause unnecessary conflict to create further categories on the basis of the levels of teaching and research specialisation.
  • A variety of institutions are required in order to ensure that the sector serves national interests. Important for any institution is to have a clearly defined mandate and to carry it out well.

  • Undergraduate and postgraduate programmes as well as academic and professional or vocational programmes are equally important to the country. The knowledge hierarchy that they represent should not be interpreted to represent a hierarchy of importance.
  • The university sector should comprise a continuum of institutions, ranging from specialised, research-intensive universities to largely undergraduate institutions, with

various levels of research focus and various postgraduate niches at masters and/or doctoral level.

♦ The mix and level of programmes offered at any institution should not be fixed, but should be capable of being developed over time to take in more or fewer postgraduate programmes or new disciplines.

Notwithstanding various shortcomings, the institutional restructuring that occurred after 2001 provided the opportunity to reconfigure the higher education system in a way more suited to the needs of a developing democracy. Still, building a new institutional landscape has been no easy task, and nor could it be. The creation of a new differentiated institutional landscape has had to address the issues of institutional identities, including the institutional missions and social and educational roles; academic qualification and programme mixes; institutional cultures; and the organisational forms, structures and practices of all institutions.

Gordon Graham has argued that universities should avoid aspiring to 'ideal(s) which they cannot attain.' Otherwise, 'no sense of worth will be forthcoming' and they can have no 'proper self-confidence' (Graham, 2005:157). He suggests that we recognise that there are many conceptions and models of the 'university' and that these have changed over time. We should also accept that the 'name "university" now applies to institutions with widely different functions and characters' (Graham, 2005:157), and that this means that the 'ideals each can aspire to' will be different (ibid:258). This is just one policy issue that has to be confronted.

Another policy issue is the trend towards institutional isomorphism, with 'institutions (aspiring) to a common "gold" standard as represented by the major research institutions, both nationally and internationally' (MoE, 2001:50). This is so irrespective of the current capabilities of institutions with respect to the kinds, levels and breadth of academic qualifications and programmes they can provide, and the kinds of scholarship and research that can undertake. There could be many drivers of institutional isomorphism: the influence of the Humboldtian model of the university; the assumption that status and prestige are associated solely with being a 'research' university; institutional redress conceived as an obligation on the state to facilitate historically black universities becoming 'research' universities, and the funding framework which funds postgraduate student outputs at significantly higher levels than undergraduate student outputs.

Be that as it may, Graham is correct that 'no sense of worth will be forthcoming' if universities aspire to 'ideal(s) which they cannot attain.' The 'ideals each can aspire to' and institutional mission and goals must be shaped by educational purposes, economic and social needs and available capacities and capabilities. Of course, academic capacities and capabilities are not fixed and can (and must) be built. However, where envisaged institutional missions are greatly at odd with existing capacities and capabilities this is a long-term project that requires significant financial resources. It also does not necessarily resolve the question of institutional missions appropriate to context.

Third, Newby has noted that 'today's universities are expected to engage in lifelong learning (not just 'teaching'), research, knowledge transfer, social inclusion…, local and regional economic development, citizenship training and much more. No university is resourced sufficiently to perform all these functions simultaneously and in equal measure at ever-increasing levels of quality' (2008:57-58). Institutions, therefore, have to identify niche areas of strength and increase the diversity of their missions. However, to the extent that differentiation is less the product of teaching excellence as much as of research performance, and if research of international quality is to be reserved for some institutions, what is the role of other institutions beyond these being considered as simply teaching institutions. This is a vital issue that he correctly notes has received little attention in the processes of state planning and steering.

Fourth, the creation of a new differentiated institutional landscape has needed to confront the historical burden of South African higher education: namely apartheid planning which differentiated institutions along lines of 'race' and ethnicity and institutionalised inequities that resulted in institutions characterised by educational, financial, material and geographical (white) advantage and (black) disadvantage. In this regard there were understandable concerns among HBIs that a policy of differentiation could continue to disadvantage them, especially in the absence of development strategies and institutional redress to enable them to build the capacities and capabilities to address social and educational needs. A key question, however, has been 'redress for what' (MoE, 2001:11). As the *National Plan* stated 'notions of redress' had to shift from being 'narrowly focused on the leveling of the playing fields between the historically black and historically white institutions' to one of capacitating historically black institutions 'to discharge their institutional mission within an agreed national framework' (ibid).

A fifth issue has been the efficacy of the instruments of planning, funding and quality assurance in shaping and settling institutional missions. Despite the professed commitment of the state to differentiation on the basis of institutional missions and programmes, it has through the process of determining the qualifications and programmes of institutions and other measures, pursued a policy of functional differentiation, which may account for the ongoing contestation between the state and some institutions.

Finally, the absence, until very recently, of significant new funds for higher education has necessarily caused anxieties and fuelled contestation. Post-2001 there has been inadequate financial support from government for the creation of effective developmental trajectories for all higher education institutions, given their different institutional histories and conditions, and the challenges these have presented with respect to the pursuit of new social justice imperatives and economic and social development goals. Fiscal and macro-economic policy especially affected the HBIs, despite the provision of merger and recapitalisation funding and a new funding formula that introduced aspects of institutional redress funding.

The allocation of some R 2.1 billion to universities for capital infrastructure and 'efficiency' during 2007-2010, R3.1 billion in 2010-2012, and R4.2 billion for 2012-2015 together with the commitment of additional funds for capital infrastructure in coming years means that

differentiation need not become a zero-sum situation. There is opportunity now for each university to negotiate with the DoHET its specific institutional mission, shape and size and qualifications and programmes mixes, and obtain a commitment from DoHET for 'Infrastructure and Efficiency' funds for its institutional development trajectory (support for academic buildings, student accommodation, equipment, etc.)

Of course, HBIs (and others that perceive themselves to be disadvantaged in one or other way) could argue that they have no in-principle objection to differentiation; simply that until their needs in terms of their negotiated missions and qualifications and programmes) are met, any and all new funds for higher education should be allocated to them. 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 HBIs, 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 also contribute optimally to social equity and redress and the economic and social development needs of South Africa and the continent.

Conclusion

There should be no opposition in-principle to a policy of differentiation and diversity and an institutional landscape comprising of differentiated and diverse universities. This is state policy for good reasons. South Africa's higher education history should not obscure the immense contribution that a differentiated and diverse higher education system can make to the 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.

That said, there will be no vibrant and high quality higher education system unless the issues that have been noted are addressed seriously. Taking into account institutional histories and on the basis of negotiated institutional missions, social and educational roles and programme mixes, it is imperative to create the conditions and opportunities and provide the necessary resources for developmental trajectories for all higher education institutions, and especially those that were 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.

References

Council on Higher Education (2000) *Towards a New Higher Education Landscape: Meeting the Equity, Quality and Social Development Imperatives of SA in the 21ˢᵗ Century*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education

Department of Education (1997) *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*. Pretoria, DoE

Graham, G. (2005) *The Institution of Intellectual Values: Realism and Idealism in Higher Education*. Exeter: Imprint Academic

Kraak, A. (2001) Policy Ambiguity and Slippage: Higher Education under the New State, 1994-2001 in Kraak, A. and Young, M. (ed.) *Education in Retrospect: Policy and Implementation since 1990*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council

Ministry of Education (2001) *National Plan for Higher Education*. Pretoria

Ministry of Higher Education & Training (2011) *Green Paper for Post-School Education & Training*. Pretoria

Newby, H. (2008) The Challenge to European Universities in the Emerging Global Marketplace in Weber, L.E. and Duderstadt, J.J. (ed.) *The Globalization of Higher Education*. London: Economica Ltd

Discussion
A framework for differentiation should include:
- **Principles and purposes – to realise a vision or address specific problems or both?**
- **Specify its parameters and boundaries – maximalist/minimalist; post-school or HE or university; hard vs soft**
- **Necessary conditions - political will, departmental capacity, etc.**
- **Mechanisms for achieving agreement**