Differentiation and Diversity

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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 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 institutional restructuring that occurred after 2001 provided the opportunity to reconfigure the higher education system so that it was more suited to the needs of a developing democracy. While various challenges remain, the foundations have been laid for a new higher education landscape.

The 1997 *White Paper* made clear that "an important task in planning and managing a single national co-ordinated system was 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). Four years later the *National Plan* reaffirmed its commitment to these goals. (MoE, 2001:49). Since then there have been two elements in the creation of a new differentiated institutional landscape. One has been institutional restructuring which reduced the precious 36 higher education institutions to 23 through mergers and incorporations based on various criteria. The other 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. Nonetheless, differentiation has been and remains a difficult and contentious policy issue for a number of reasons.

First, there have been sharply contested and differing views on the kinds of differentiation appropriate for South African higher education, with support expressed for differentiation on the basis of clear institutional types, functional differentiation and differentiation based on institutional missions and programmes. Buffeted by strong differences among key stakeholders, in 1996 the 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). Kraak terms the NCHE view as a "middle-ground position" that "fudged" the differences between what he describes as "functional and flexible differentiation" – the latter being institutional mission and programme based differentiation (Kraak, 2001:112-13).

The *White Paper*, as noted, in 1997 proclaimed its intention "to diversify the system in terms of the mix of institutional missions and programmes". 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). In terms of their mandates three 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).

Second, the creation of a new differentiated institutional landscape has had to address the issue of institutional identities, including the institutional missions, social and educational roles, academic qualification and programme mixes, institutional cultures and organisational forms and structures and

practices, of all institutions. 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). It must also be recognised that there are many conceptions and models of the 'university' and that these have changed over time. It must be accepted 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).

In as much as it may be acknowledged that the new socio-economic and educational goals and development challenges of democratic South Africa require a differentiated and diverse higher education system, in practice the trend has been towards institutional isomorphism, with "many institutions (aspiring) to a common 'gold' standard as represented by the major research institutions, both nationally and internationally" (MoE, 2001:50). This has been so irrespective of the current capacities and capabilities of institutions with respect to the kinds, levels and breadth of academic qualifications and programmes that can be provided, and the kinds of scholarship and research that can be undertaken. 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, as well as the new 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 South African universities aspire to "ideal(s) which they cannot attain". Instead, 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 even if these capacities and capabilities may need to be enhanced in order to facilitate the effective undertaking of the institutional mission and goals.

Third, the creation of a new differentiated institutional landscape has also 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 historically black institutions that a policy of differentiation and diversity 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. The key question 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).

It is clear that the achievement of a differentiated and diverse institutional landscape has been bedevilled by a number of issues. Newby argues 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. He also suggests that "different activities in universities have different geographical frames of reference" (Newby, 2008:57). That is to say, that research tends to be more globally oriented, undergraduate teaching and learning more nationally focused and knowledge transfer and community engagement more regionally and locally focused, which, of course, has implications for different kinds of universities. 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.

A second issue has been that while the "name 'university' now applies to institutions with widely different functions and characters" (Graham, 2005:157), and there are today 'universities', 'universities of technology' and 'comprehensive universities' this has not fully settled the issue of diversity or

institutional missions. If, as an advocate of what he terms "flexible differentiation" (based on missions and programmes) Kraak contends that the NCHE "fudged" the issue, his own preference and that of the *White Paper* and *National Plan* could arguably also be fudging of the issue. What is required, as Kraak himself has argued elsewhere is "simultaneous consideration of both the intrinsic and institutional logics of a policy" (Young and Kraak, 2001:12). Can 'functional' differentiation or differentiation based on institutional missions and programmes be entirely unhinged from the question of institution and organisation, and do not both result in de facto institutional differentiation, even if through planning flexibility is accommodated and rigid institutional types that constrain responsiveness to economic and social needs are avoided?

Another issue has been institutional aspirations, notwithstanding current academic capacities and capabilities. Certainly, academic capacities and capabilities are not fixed and can be built but 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 resolve the question of institutional missions appropriate to context. A fourth issue has been the efficacy of the instruments of planning, funding and quality assurance in shaping and settling institutional missions. For all the expressed commitment to differentiation on the basis of institutional missions and programmes, it can be argued that through the process of determining the qualifications and programmes of institutions and other measures the state has pursued a policy of functional differentiation (de facto institutional differentiation?), which could 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 and the new economic and social development needs and goals of the *White Paper* and the priorities of the *National Plan*. "Fiscal restraint and a shift towards conservative macro-economic policy" (Kraak, 2001:104) especially affected the historically black institutions, despite the provision of merger and recapitalisation funding and a new funding formula that introduced aspects of institutional redress funding. In such a context, differentiation and diversity become a financially a zero-sum situation, with certain clear winners and losers. However, the recent allocation of some R 2.0 billion to universities for capital infrastructure and 'efficiency' during 2007/08-2009/10 as well as the commitment of significant additional funds for capital infrastructure in coming years means that differentiation need not be a zero-sum situation and can now potentially be pursued without any necessary financial disadvantaging of historically black institutions.

The creation of a differentiated and diverse institutional landscape is unlikely to succeed unless all these issues are effectively addressed. It remains to be seen whether the state will pursue differentiation and diversity explicitly and openly on a planned systemic level or opt to do so at the level of individual institutions using the levers of planning and funding and quality assurance.