

# South African Higher Education in the 20<sup>th</sup> Year of Democracy: Context, Achievements and Key Challenges

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## Introduction

2014 will be the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of South Africa's achievement of the national liberation of black South Africans and democracy. The first democratic elections in 1994 were without doubt a dramatic and revolutionary breakthrough. Having been a racist, inequitable, authoritarian and highly repressive society, South Africa began its transition towards becoming a constitutional democracy, in which for the first time almost all its inhabitants became citizens. Critical here was a commendable Constitution, including a Bill of Rights, which held out the promise of an extensive range of rights that did not exist for all or at all prior to 1994. As a society, as social groups and individuals the people of South Africa, and especially black South Africans, made a significant transition and advance from being subjects to becoming free citizens.

This is an opportune moment to critically reflect on what has been achieved in South African higher education since 1994 and what continue to be ongoing challenges. It is not possible here to comprehensively analyse every aspect of higher education; such an exercise is underway under the auspices of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), and its report will be published in late 2014. I will confine myself to key issues that I consider are critical to the future health of South African higher education. In so far as the challenges that I discuss are concerned, they are not just *threats* to the vitality of higher education and its contribution to economic and social development and democracy. They also represent significant *opportunities* for creating a more vibrant, equitable, responsive and higher quality higher education system, and for higher education to contribute more effectively to the four-fold South African challenge of environmentally sustainable economic development with increasing social equity and social justice, and the consolidation and deepening of democracy.

### **1. Student access, opportunity and success: Expansion and greater equity, low participation, high attrition and low completion, and variable quality**

On the eve of democracy, the gross participation rate<sup>1</sup> in higher education was 17%. "Participation rates were highly skewed by 'race': approximately 9% for Africans, 13% for Coloured, 40% for Indians and 70% for whites" (CHE, 2004:62). In 1993, while black (African, Coloured and Indian) South Africans comprised 89% of the population, black students constituted 52% of a total of 473 000 students. African South Africans, although constituting 77% of the population, made up just 40% of enrolments. White South Africans comprised 11% of the population, but white students constituted 48% of enrolments. At 43%, there was also under-representation of women as students. These statistics, taken together with the patterns of enrolments by fields of study, qualifications levels, and mode of study, reflect the relative exclusion of black and women South Africans in higher education in 1994.

Post-1994, significant achievements have been the almost doubling of student enrolments, more equitable access to higher education and a more representative student body. By 2011, black students

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<sup>1</sup> The total enrolment in higher education as a proportion of the 20-24 age group.

comprised 81% of the total student body of 938 200, and women 58% (CHE, 2013). A number of mechanisms have supported greater equity and redress in higher education enrolments: the outlawing of racial and sex discrimination; affirmative action; alternative admissions tests to complement the national final secondary school examination; the recognition of prior learning to facilitate access for mature students; extended curriculum programmes for students that show potential, and a state-funded national student financial aid scheme.

The progress in equity since 1994 is tempered by certain realities. The 2001 *National Plan for Higher Education* set a target of a 20% gross participation rate by 2011/2016 (MoE, 2001). Since then there have been marginal improvements in the overall participation rate (from 15% in 2001 to 17.3% in 2011), and that of Africans (from 9% in 1993 to 14% in 2011) and Coloureds (from 13% in 1993 to 14% in 2011). In contrast, in 2011 the participation rate of white and Indian students was 57% and 47% respectively (CHE, 2014:3). It has been noted that “it must be a cause of concern, for political, social and economic reasons, if the sector is not able to accommodate a higher and more equitable proportion” of those social groups that have been historically disadvantaged and under-represented in higher education (Scott, et al, 2007:11). Enrolments at historically white institutions continue to reflect a lower proportion of black representation than their demographic representation, and white students remain concentrated at the historically white institutions. Conversely, the historically black institutions remain almost exclusively black. Social class is a factor at play here: if access, opportunity and outcomes were previously shaped by ‘race’, they are now also (perhaps largely) conditioned by social class.

Throughput, drop-out, undergraduate success and graduation rates all make clear that a substantial improvement in equity of opportunity and outcomes for black students remains to be achieved. For example, given a target national norm of 80%, the white student success rate in 2010 was 82% at the undergraduate level; that of African students was 71% (CHE, 2012:11;12). Internationally, the graduation rate norm for a three-year degree programme is 25% (DHET, 2013:32). In 2010, the graduation rate of African students was 16%, and that of white students was 22%, with an average of 17% (CHE, 2012:9). In so far as throughput and drop-out rates for a three-year degree at contact institutions are concerned, 16% of African students that began study in 2005 graduated in the minimum three years, 41% graduated after six years, and 59% had dropped out. In the case of white students the comparative figures were 44% of students graduated in the minimum three years, 65% graduated after six years, and 35% had dropped out (CHE, 2012:51). The figures for three-year diplomas at contact institutions were worse: after six years 63% of African students had dropped out and 45% of white students (CHE, 2012:50). A recent CHE study notes that “only about one in four students in contact institutions...graduate in regulation time”; only 35% of the total intake, and 48% of contact students, graduate within five years”, and that “it is estimated that some 55% of the intake will never graduate” (CHE, 2013:15 )

These realities “have the effect of negating much of the growth in black access that has been achieved” (Scott, et al, 2007:19). They are “indicative of a...higher education system...that is unable to effectively support and provide reasonable opportunities for success to its students. The situation reflects an inefficient use of the country’s resources” (DHET, 2013:2). They also have “central significance for development as well as social inclusion”, and “equity of outcomes is the overarching challenge” (ibid.:19). If universities “are to contribute to a more equitable South African society, then access and success must be improved for black (and particularly black working class) students who, by virtue of their previous experiences, have not been inducted into dominant ways of constructing knowledge” (Boughey, 2008). A key argument is that the under-performance of black students “will not change spontaneously. Decisive action needs to be taken in key aspects of the educational process – and at key

points of the educational 'pipeline' – to facilitate positive change in outcomes"<sup>2</sup> (ibid.:20). Moreover, "systemic responses are essential for improving the educational outcomes"; the "necessary conditions for substantial improvement include: the reform of core curriculum frameworks; enhancing the status of teaching and building educational expertise...to enable the development and implementation of teaching approaches that will be effective in catering for student diversity; and clarifying and strengthening accountability for educational outcomes (ibid.:73).

The Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) 2012 Green Paper *for Post-School Education and Training* acknowledges that "despite the many advances and gains made since 1994", higher education is "inadequate in quantity... and, in many but not all instances, quality", and that it continues "to produce and reproduce gender, class, racial and other inequalities with regard to access to educational opportunities and success" (DHET, 2012: x). It notes that "universities are in general characterised by low success rates" (ibid.: 11). It accepts that "university funding (has) not kept pace with enrolment growth", and that despite "attempts to bring about greater equity between historically black universities and those which were more advantaged in the past" a shortage of resources has compromised the historically black universities "properly fulfilling their prime function – providing good undergraduate degrees to poor, rural students" (ibid.: 42).

The National Planning Commission (NPC), whose *National Development Plan* has been accepted as government policy, comments that "despite the significant increases in enrolment a number of challenges remain" (NPC, 2011:16). For one, "throughput rates have not improved as fast as enrolment rates"; for another, under-prepared students have meant universities needing to establish academic development programmes and being sometimes "ill-equipped to do so" (ibid.:16). As a consequence, universities have not been "able to produce the number and quality of graduates demanded by the country" (ibid.:16). Since "race remains a major determinant of graduation rates", this has "major implications for social mobility and...for overcoming the inequalities of apartheid" (ibid.:16). The NPC recognizes that "the university sector is under considerable strain. Enrolments have almost doubled...yet the funding has not kept up, resulting in slow growth in the number of university lecturers, inadequate student accommodation, creaking university infrastructure and equipment shortages" (ibid.: 317). It appreciates that backlogs have "a major impact on the quality of teaching and learning", that "student accommodation in universities needs urgent attention", and the need to "expand university infrastructure" (ibid.:319). The NPC states that it is critical for universities to "develop capacity to provide quality undergraduate teaching" and calls for improving "the qualifications of higher education academic staff" – from "the current 34 percent" with doctorates "to over 75 percent by 2030" (NPC, 2012: 318;319). It emphasizes the need for "uniform standards for infrastructure and equipment to support learning, promote equity and ensure that learners doing similar programmes in different institutions receive a comparable education", special programmes for "underprepared learners to help them cope with the demands of higher education", and for these programmes to be offered and funded at all institutions (ibid.:318). The NPC

Looking ahead, the recently released *White Paper* proposes to increase participation rates from 17.3% to 25% and university headcount enrolments from about 950 000 in 2012 to 1 600 000 by 2030 (DHET,

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<sup>2</sup> "Such key points occur particularly at the interface between major phases of the system: between general education and FET, for example, as well as between FET and higher education, and, increasingly significantly, between undergraduate and postgraduate studies....(C)ontinuity in the system as a whole is necessary for improving graduate outcomes, without which meeting national developmental needs will continue to be an elusive goal" (Scott et al. 2007:20).

2014:30). It states that “as participation increases, universities must simultaneously focus their attention on improving student performance. Improving student access, success and throughput rates is a very serious challenge...and must become a priority focus for national policy and for the institutions themselves” (ibid.:31). More specifically, “the relationship between equity of access and equity of outcomes must...be a substantive area of focus” (ibid.:32). As adequate student funding is a major constraint in ensuring greater equity of access, opportunity and outcomes, the *White Paper* commits government to “progressively introducing free education for the poor...as resources become available” (DHET, 2014:xiv). The NPC proposes providing “all students who qualify for the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) with access to full funding through loans and bursaries to cover the costs of tuition, books, accommodation and other living expenses. Students who do not qualify should have access to bank loans, backed by state sureties” (NPC, 2012: 325).

There can be little quibble with the overall visions, intentions and approaches of the *Green Paper*, *White Paper* and NPC. They provide a good and accurate description and analysis of the problems and shortcomings that beset higher education. There is recognition of the need to hold firmly together the goals of “access and equity” and “high-level excellence”, the importance of undergraduate and postgraduate study, and teaching-learning and research and innovation. To their credit, both the *Green Paper* and the NPC are not shy to stress the needs of the “working class and poor” and rural students. However, like many other South African policy documents, they are expansive in vision but extremely short on details. Critical is how the priorities will be formulated and what these will be – always a difficult issue as it entails difficult choices between dearly held goals and presents social and political dilemmas. Paradoxes have to be creatively addressed and policies and strategies devised that can satisfy multiple imperatives, *balance* competing goals and enable the pursuit of equally desirable goals. Since trade-offs are inevitable, their implications for values and goals have to be confronted.

The honest acknowledgement of grave shortcomings and problems provides important opportunities for more concerted actions related to improving opportunity and success and quality and diversity. For one, there is greater recognition of the need (and possible new sources of state funding) for enhancing the academic capabilities of universities and ensuring that there are well-conceptualised, designed and implemented academic development programmes to support academics and students. The misguided naturalisation and associated neglect of teaching and learning is untenable and this domain requires serious attention. Given the range of challenges and tasks, the approach to teaching and learning that is required is not a focus merely on the improvement of ‘skills’ or ‘tips for better teaching’, as much as deep reflection on contextual realities, and rigorous theorisation and scholarship on teaching and learning. Otherwise, we will fall prey once again to the commonsense notions of teaching and learning. There is great knowledge, expertise and experience at some universities for enhancing the learning and teaching capabilities of academics and universities, which can be harnessed, expanded and applied for the benefit of all universities.

For another, the CHE’s recent proposal for “undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa” deserves serious consideration as a way of overcoming the current scenario of “high attrition and low graduation rates (which) have largely neutralised important gains in access” (CHE, 2013:9). The CHE argues that “modifying the existing undergraduate curriculum structure is an essential condition for substantial improvement of graduate output and outcomes”, and advocates “a flexible curriculum structure for South Africa’s core undergraduate qualifications” (ibid.:16). In practice, this would mean that “to meet the needs of the majority of the student intake, the formal time” of all current undergraduate qualifications would be increased by one year, and “to provide effectively and fairly for diversity in preparedness, the new curriculum structure (would) be flexible to allow students who can complete a

programme in less than the formal time to be permitted to do so" (CHE, 2013:20). In order "to ensure the maintenance or improvement of the standards of qualifications, curricula in the new structure (would) retain or improve upon existing exit standards through utilising the additional curriculum space afforded to ensure realistic starting points and progression paths, and to introduce valuable forms of curriculum enhancement" (ibid.:20). The CHE is well aware that such a new curriculum structure will entail significant transformation in the field of learning and teaching – which needs to be linked to building the academic capabilities of universities.

Whereas the current poor success rates are a tragic wastage of youth talent and potential and scarce financial resources, their improvement and meaningful opportunities for disadvantaged students to succeed has great value for diversity and quality within universities. Diversity and difference, whether social, geographic, national, cultural, sexual or linguistic, are powerful well-springs of institutional vitality and personal, intellectual and institutional development. Diversity is a necessary condition for "human learning, understanding and wisdom", and a powerful means of "creating the intellectual energy and robustness that lead to greater knowledge" (cited in Moore, 2005:8). It "enriches the educational experience", in that students "learn from those whose experiences, beliefs and perspectives are different from" their own, "and these lessons can be taught best in a richly diverse intellectual and social environment" (Moore, 2005:9). Appreciation of diversity facilitates democratic citizenship and is vital to forging greater social cohesion in deeply fractured societies. Conversely, the quality of education is diminished by an absence of diversity and "educational opportunities are drastically limited without diversity, and that compromises an institution's ability to maintain its own missions and goals" (ibid.: 2; 9).

## **2. Research and postgraduate education: expansion and greater equity, low participation and graduations, and possible stasis**

South Africa, especially relative to the rest of Africa, has considerable strengths in science and knowledge production. It produces the bulk of scientific research in Africa, and ranks 33<sup>rd</sup> in world publications outputs (Pouris, 2012). Since 1994, research and publications outputs, the enrolments of postgraduate students and the numbers graduated have all been generally on the ascendancy. In 1995 there were 70 964 postgraduate students, comprising 13.7% of the total student enrolment (CHE, 2004: 281-2). By 2010, there was a virtual doubling of the number of postgraduate (postgraduate diploma/honours, master's and doctoral) students, the 138 608 students making up 15.5% of the total student body. 99 224 (71.6%) were black students and 77 957 (56%) were women students (CHE, 2012: 20). During the same year, there were some 40 124 graduates: 30 083 postgraduate diploma/honours graduates; 8 618 masters and 1 423 doctoral graduates. 25 404 (63.3%) of these graduates were black and 23 782 (59.3%) were women (ibid.: 21).

There are also shortcomings and constraints. Postgraduate student enrolments and outputs remain low in relation to national economic and social development needs, and between 1995 and 2010 there was a marginal increase of 1.8% in the size of the postgraduate student body. There are relatively poor graduation rates for masters (19% against a benchmark graduation rate target of 33% established by the 2001 *National Plan for Higher Education*) and doctorates (13% against a target of 20%) (NPC, 2011). There are also differing graduation and success rates between black and white students: in 2010, graduation rates were between 24% and 34% for black students and 37% for white students; postgraduate success rates were between 65% and 74% for black students and 80% for white students (CHE, 2012.:10;12). Whereas South African universities produced a total of 1 423 doctoral graduates in 2010, the University of Sao Paulo in Brazil alone produced 2 244 doctoral graduates. Korea and Brazil

produce 187 and 48 doctoral graduates per million of population respectively, compared to South Africa's 28 doctoral graduates per million of the population.

Only 34% of academics have doctoral degrees, which is generally a prerequisite for undertaking high quality research and supervising doctoral students. The research performance of universities is highly uneven, with 10 universities producing 86% of all research and 89% of all doctoral graduates. South Africa also lacks the dense networks between universities, state and business that are found in other countries, which facilitates the movement of people, knowledge, expertise and experience between universities and the public and private sectors and innovation. It has been suggested that "there is every indication that knowledge output (as measured in terms of article production) may have reached a plateau at around 7 500 article equivalents per year (which constitutes about 0.4% of total world science production)"; that it is doubtful that doctoral graduations can be increased unless "a number of systemic constraints such as the size of the pipeline from Honours onwards and the limited supervisory capacity in the system" can be addressed, and that "both the volume of output and overall productivity of institutions will decline" unless the academic work force is broadened considerably to include "many more black (and to a lesser extent female) academics who publish and regenerate the workforce" (Mouton, 2010).

The 2012 *Green Paper* acknowledges that "the number of overall postgraduate qualifications obtained, particularly PhD graduates, is too low." (DHET, 2012: 11). One "significant constraint on the ability of many students to obtain masters and PhDs" was poverty, "as poor students are under enormous pressure to leave university and get a job as soon as possible" (ibid.: 13). It is recognised that "overall postgraduate provision deserves attention and that we need to drastically increase the number and quality of both the masters and the PhD degrees obtained" (ibid.:42) It is suggested that "improvement of undergraduate throughput rates must be a key strategy for increasing graduate outputs...and providing larger numbers of students available for postgraduate study" (ibid.: 42). The NPC proposes that "by 2030 over 25 percent of university enrolments should be at postgraduate level" (15.5% in 2010) and emphasizes that "the number of science, technology, engineering and mathematics graduates should increase significantly"; more specifically, by 2030 there should be "more than 5 000 doctoral graduates per year" (1 423 in 2010) and "most of these doctorates should be in science, engineering, technology and mathematics" (NPC, 2012: 319).

The target of 5 000 doctoral graduates by 2030 is ambitious. A major constraint is that funding for postgraduate study (especially full-time study) through the National Research Foundation, and the size of the awards provided is severely inadequate. If South Africa is to ensure greater opportunities for participation by indigent students in postgraduate study, significantly more investment will be needed in postgraduate and especially doctoral level study. At many South African universities the availability of research infrastructure, facilities, and equipment is a constraint on the greater enrolment and production of postgraduates and especially doctoral graduates; this is so even at the 12 universities that produce 95% of doctoral graduates and the bulk of peer-reviewed scientific publications. The challenge of the enhancement of institutional capacities is, however, not reducible to infrastructure; it also relates to the academic teaching and supervision capacities to expand current and mount new doctoral programmes, and the institutional capacities for managing substantial expansion in postgraduate programmes. In these regards, there is great scope for inter-university collaboration, though the nature, terms and conditions of such collaboration are important issues.

In so far as improving the proportion of academics with doctoral qualifications, the NPC target of 75% by 2030 may be extremely ambitious, not least for the reasons noted above. It will require a dedicated

national programme, supported by adequate funding. Yet, it cannot be assumed that academics with doctorates will be accomplished supervisors of doctoral students; attention has to be given to equipping academics to supervise effectively through formal development programmes, mentoring and experience in co-supervising alongside experienced supervisors. More effective supervision could contribute to improving current below benchmark postgraduate throughput and graduation rates.

### **3. Epistemological transformation: critical issue yet poor progress**

A key challenge at the heart of higher education transformation in South Africa is engaging effectively with the historical “legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialization” and patriarchy (Du Toit, 2000, 103). Du Toit argues “that the enemy” in the forms of colonial and racial discourses “has been within the gates all the time”, and that they are significant threats to the flowering of ideas and scholarship (ibid.:103). He links these discourses to institutional culture and academic freedom: cultures characterised by colonial and racial discourses endanger “empowering intellectual discourse communities” and “ongoing transformation of the institutional culture” is therefore a “necessary condition of academic freedom” (ibid.). Higher education transformation entails decolonizing deracialising, demasculinising and degendering South African universities, and engaging with ontological and epistemological issues in all their complexity, including their implications for research, methodology, scholarship, learning and teaching, curriculum and pedagogy. It presents the challenge of creating institutional cultures that genuinely respect and appreciate difference and diversity – whether class, gender, national, linguistic, religious, sexual orientation, epistemological or methodological in nature – and creating spaces for the flowering of epistemologies, ontologies, theories, methodologies, objects and questions other than those that have long been hegemonic in intellectual and scholarly thought and writing. Thus, Mamdani argues that “the central question facing higher education in Africa today is what it means to teach the humanities and social sciences in the current historical context and, in particular, in the post-colonial African context” (2011). Moreover, what does it mean to teach “in a location where the dominant intellectual paradigms are products not of Africa’s own experience but of a particular Western experience” (Mamdani, 2011).

This highlights that questions of social exclusion and inclusion in South African higher education extend well beyond issues of access, opportunity and success. They also include issues of institutional and academic cultures, and largely ignored epistemological and ontological issues associated with learning and teaching, curriculum development and pedagogical practice. While there have been various changes related to curriculum, insufficient attention has been given to a number of key issues. These include: How have the dominant discourses that characterise the intellectual space of higher education developed and been reproduced historically? What are the implications of the dominant discourses for social inclusion and social justice in higher education, for the affirmation and promotion of human dignity and rights, social cohesion and respect for difference and diversity? What are the prevailing conceptions of epistemology and ontology and to what extent have these been or are being deracialised, degendered and decolonised. There is frequent reference to providing students with “epistemological access” rather than just physical access, but to which epistemologies? How do the dominant cultures of higher education affect student learning, progress and success and social equity and redress? Similarly, how do these dominant cultures also affect the development and retention of next generations of academics that must, in the light of historical and current inequalities, be increasingly women and black? Finally, how permeable is the currently constructed social space of higher education to a critical reflexivity, learning and innovation and institutional change?

#### **4. Securing the next generations of academics: strong consensus, clear development programme, lack of state funding**

Racism and patriarchy as key features of colonialism and apartheid profoundly shaped the social composition of academic staff. In 1994, academics at South African universities were overwhelmingly white (83%) and male (68%). The sheer inequality of representation is highlighted by the fact that although black South Africans constituted 89% of the population they comprised 17% of academics. The under-representation of Africans was especially severe: making up almost 80% of the population, they constituted 10% of the academic workforce. Over the past two decades the academic workforce has become more equitable, though in 2012 the full-time permanent academic staff of 17 451 academics remained largely white (53%) and male (55%). The distribution of academics across universities has continued to follow the historical contours of 'race' and ethnicity; in 2009, the proportions of black academic staff at universities ranged from 17% to 91% and the representation of women varied between 29% and 51% (DoE, 2010).

Post-1994, South African universities have needed to confront two challenges. The first challenge is reproducing and retaining the next generations of academics. The large increase in student enrolments over the past 20 years "has not been accompanied by an equivalent expansion in the number of academics" (DHET, 2013:35). Expanding higher education enrolments and the establishment of new universities mean that a larger academic workforce is required. Given the current retirement age of 65, in the coming decade over 4 000 or 27% of academics will retire, including 50% of the most highly qualified professors and associate professors. The second challenge is transforming the historical social composition of the academic work force through measures for advancing social equity and redress for black and women South Africans. It is necessary to emphasise the *simultaneity* of the two challenges. Reproducing the next generation of academics without attention to social equity and redress for black and women South Africans will simply reproduce the previous inequalities. There is, however, a third important challenge. To the extent that key goals include substantively transforming and developing South Africa's universities and enhancing their academic capabilities, this has profound implications for the *character* of the next generations of academics that have to be produced. The corollary is that the next generations of academics must not only be largely black and women South Africans, they must also possess the intellectual and academic capabilities related to teaching and learning, research and community engagement that are fundamental for developing South Africa's universities.

A failure to invest in and cultivate the next generations of high quality academics will have far-reaching consequences. Social equity and redress and the pace and extent of the deracialisation and degendering of the academic workforce will be compromised. The quality of academic provision will be increasingly debilitated, with consequences for the capabilities of universities to produce high quality graduates and knowledge. The goal of transforming and developing South African universities, including enhancing their teaching and research capabilities, will be constrained. The ability of universities to contribute to development and democracy through new generations of outstanding scholars that are committed to critical and independent scholarship and social justice will be hampered. The greater inclusion of blacks and women in knowledge production, a necessary condition for epistemological transformations, will be delayed.

It has long been considered that the remuneration of academics has seriously lagged behind equivalent posts in the public and private sectors, and was a major obstacle to building and retaining the next generations of academics. A major recent study shows, however, that in 2011 South African professors



earned on average \$83 000 per annum<sup>3</sup>; associate professors \$65 000; senior lecturers \$54 000, lecturers \$43 000 and junior lecturers \$32 000 (HESA, 2014). Another recent study indicates that South African academics are the third best remunerated in Commonwealth countries, surpassed only by academics in Singapore and Hong Kong (ACU, 2013:2). The remuneration package of full-time tenured academics usually includes a fixed annual salary as well as benefits related to pension, medical insurance, life assurance and housing; in some cases there are also rewards associated with research outputs. An academic occupation confers on academics a comfortable middle class lifestyle; and the new evidence that they are relatively well-remunerated is an important facilitating condition for building and retaining the next generation of academics.

So too is the Higher Education South Africa (HESA) initiative that has resulted in a *Proposal for a National Programme to Develop the Next Generation of Academics for South African Higher Education* (HESA, 2011). The proposal explicates the goals that should be advanced by a national programme, and the values and principles that should underpin such goals and a national programme; identifies strategies and mechanisms for developing next generations of academics, and especially black and women academics; outlines the conditions that are critical at national and institutional levels for developing next generations of academics, and proposes a funding model and budget that is cost-effective and sustainable. The National Planning Commission has embraced the proposed HESA programme, noting that it “deserves to be implemented” (NPC 2012, 319). This is a good example of an imaginative and well-developed programme currently constrained by the lack of state funding.

## **5. The higher education institutional landscape: *de facto* differentiation and diversity yet not fully settled policy**

Racial discrimination under colonialism and apartheid, and inequalities of a class, ‘race’, gender, institutional and spatial nature profoundly shaped South African higher education, establishing patterns of systemic inclusion, exclusion and marginalisation of particular social classes and groups. Apartheid ideology resulted in higher education institutions that were reserved for different ‘race’, ethnic and linguistic groups and allocated different ideological, economic, social and educational functions in colonial and apartheid society. Despite opposition at various times and in different forms from some historically white institutions and the historically black institutions to apartheid, both were products of apartheid planning and functionally differentiated to develop and reproduce the apartheid order. This racially structured differentiation was accompanied by a set of conditions, pertaining to academic programmes, knowledge production, staff qualifications, student access, opportunities and quality, infrastructure, funding and geographical location which disadvantaged the historically black institutions, even with respect to the narrow range of teaching and research functions that they were designed to perform. In 1994, the higher education ‘system’ comprised 21 public universities, 15 technikons (polytechnics), 120 colleges of education, 24 nursing and 11 agricultural colleges. These differed widely in terms of the nature, breadth and quality of academic provision, the adequacy of infrastructure and facilities, and the level of state investment and funding.

With the creation of a constitutional democracy in 1994, all South African higher education institutions needed to be liberated from the apartheid past to enable them to serve new societal goals. Planning had to take cognisance of and address the institutional and social inequalities and the distortions of the past, but also look to the future. The inherited public higher education institutions had to be recognised as

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<sup>3</sup> Using an exchange rate of R10: 1 US\$

*South African* institutions, embraced as such, transformed as appropriate, and put to work for and on behalf of all South Africans

The government's 1997 *White Paper 3, A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*, in noting the shortcomings of the structure of the inherited system was emphatic that "the system has no alternative but to re-make itself in order to realise the vision and achieve the goals set out" for higher education (DoE, 1997:2.3). It stated that "a vital task...is to assess the optimal number and type of institutions needed to meet the goals of a transformed higher education system. Many institutions either require consolidation or retooling for new missions and goals. Narrow self-interest cannot be allowed to preclude planning which may lead to institutional mergers and closures, and the development of new institutional forms where these are necessary" (ibid.:2.45). *White Paper 3* emphasised the need "to conceptualise (and) plan...higher education in South Africa" as an integrated "single, national co-ordinated system", "ensure diversity in its organisational form and in the institutional landscape", and "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" (ibid.:1.27, 2.37). A "uniform system" was not favoured, and it was recognised that there would be a need to "offset pressures for homogenisation" (ibid.:2.37).

Post-1994, there were two dimensions to the creation of a new differentiated institutional landscape. One was extensive institutional restructuring; the other was institutions being restricted to specific undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications and programmes, through mechanisms of state approval and accreditation related to the quality of programmes. Concomitantly, the creation of a new institutional landscape has had to proceed at two levels simultaneously: creating 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; and confronting apartheid inequalities which translated into a 'system' of institutions characterised by advantage and disadvantage. By 2001, the colleges of education were either closed or incorporated into the universities and technikons. Thereafter, some of the 36 universities and technikons were either merged, unbundled or incorporated, to give rise to the present landscape of 11 traditional universities, which offer largely degree programmes; six comprehensive universities (one distance), which offer a wide range of degree, diploma and certificate programmes, and six universities of technology, which are intended to be vocationally and career-focused. Two institutes of higher education were created in provinces without any universities, and became established as universities in 2013. The hope was that the post-1994 institutional restructuring would create a differentiated, diverse yet coordinated and articulated higher education system that was more suited to the knowledge and development needs of South Africa and the imperative of social justice.

The present higher education institutional landscape is a major advance on that of 1994 and is, *de facto*, highly differentiated with some diversity in missions. Notwithstanding 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. The issue of differentiation, however, has remained a difficult and contentious policy issue for a number of reasons. For one, there have been legitimate concerns among historically black institutions that a policy of differentiation and diversity could continue the old historical patterns of disadvantage and advantage, especially in the absence of development strategies and institutional redress to enable them to build their capabilities and capacities to address social and educational needs. For another, there are sharply contested and differing views on the kind of differentiation that is appropriate for South African higher education and the mechanisms to achieve this. Even when the value of differentiation has been acknowledged, 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 capabilities and capacities of institutions with respect to the kinds, levels and breadth of academic programmes and qualifications that can be provided, and the kinds of scholarship and research that can be undertaken.

A key problem has been that because of financial constraints the creation of a new differentiated institutional landscape has not adequately and fully resolved the historical burden of South African higher education: namely, educational, material, financial and geographical (white) advantage and (black) disadvantage. The continued under-developed institutional capacities of historically black institutions must be emphasised; providing access to rural poor and working class black students, inadequate state support for the historically black institutions to equalise the quality of undergraduate provision compromises their ability to facilitate equity of opportunity and outcomes. The *Green Paper* notes 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 (2012: 11).

If the thinking exemplified in the DHET’s 2014 *White Paper* wins support and there is determination on the part of the state to steer effectively using the instruments of planning, funding and quality assurance, there is a new opportunity to make progress on the differentiation issue. The *White Paper* states that it views “differentiation in a positive light” and sees it as “a way of ensuring a diverse system that will improve access for all South Africans to various forms of educational opportunities, improve participation and success rates...and enable all institutions to find niche areas that respond to various national development needs” (DHET, 2014:29). It proposes the following principles to “guide the focused differentiation of universities and the formulation of institutional missions”: no “further categorisation of institutions”; a “continuum of institutions” that range from “largely undergraduate institutions to specialized, research intensive universities which offer teaching programmes from undergraduate to doctoral level”; each institution will have “a clearly defined mandate”; the “mix and level of programmes offered at any institution should not be fixed, but should be capable of being developed over time, depending on its capacity”, and “the need for developmental funding in poorly resourced institutions” (DHET, 2014:29-30). The DHET’s Infrastructure and Efficiency fund, which since 2007 has allocated over R10 billion to finance the backlogs and new infrastructure needs of all universities as well as address the historical backlogs of specifically historically black institutions, is an invaluable opportunity to ensure that differentiation can be pursued more purposefully and need not be a zero-sum situation.

## **Conclusion**

In considering South African higher education, a large variety of issues can be analysed, including conceptions of the social purposes and roles of universities and higher education more generally; stasis and change, continuities and discontinuities and the dynamics and trajectory of institutional change; teaching and learning, including curriculum and pedagogy, and the cultivation of graduates; scholarship

and knowledge production; community engagement; access, opportunity and success; the responsiveness of universities to economic and social development needs; equity and social justice, academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability; state-university relations, governance and financing. I have confined myself to five issues that I consider have great salience for the future wellbeing of South African higher education, and also major implications for the extent to which it can contribute optimally to South Africa addressing effectively its diverse developmental challenges. These issues are, of course, connected to other issues in higher education and also interconnected.

While the apartheid legacy continues to weigh heavily on contemporary higher education, South Africa's higher education problems and shortcomings are not rooted entirely in the apartheid past; nor are they a consequence only of financial constraints. Both in higher education and more generally, the state and key actors appear to lack the will to act courageously and decisively at the levels of policy, personnel, and performance when it is clear that problems remain intractably entrenched. As the Governor of the Reserve Bank, a governing party stalwart, has put it, "South Africa faces significant challenges" that "require a co-ordinated and coherent range of policy responses" – "the government [needs] to be decisive, act coherently", demonstrate "a co-ordinated plan of action to address them" and "exhibit strong and focused leadership from the top."<sup>4</sup>

The development of higher education and the achievement of key goals require negotiating consensus, building legitimacy and ensuring that there are effective policies, planning and implementation. Realizing the ambitious transformation vision and goals of *White Paper 3* entails establishing new institutions, reconfiguring old ones, changing institutional cultures and practices and mediating numerous and difficult paradoxes that arise in the pursuit of a variety of equally desirable goals. It also involves ensuring the availability of well-qualified academics and support staff, infrastructure, facilities and equipment and adequate funding for undertaking effectively the key social purposes and roles of universities. Visions, goals, strategies, plans and people with the necessary knowledge, expertise, skills and appropriate values and attitudes have to be stitched and held together effectively to ensure progress and success.

On the final page of *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela writes: "The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning" (Mandela, 1994: 617). Realizing a transformed higher education system that builds respect for and enhances the freedom of all requires Mandela's qualities of unifying and bold leadership, commitment and keen sense of responsibility. There is still a considerable 'long walk' to a transformed higher education system in South Africa.

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