Institution-driven Differentiation through the Development of the Academic Project

Abstract

This paper examines the possibility of institution-driven differentiation in public higher education in South Africa. It identifies that the distinctions between institutions of higher education, established for different social groups under apartheid, inevitably make any discussion of differentiation in a transformed higher education system extremely sensitive. It argues that while the history of higher education in South Africa seems a good reason to avoid thinking about differentiation, there is growing evidence that the system is moving towards homogenisation along global norms. Among other things, the paper also notes that the achievement of differentiation through leverage or as outcome of a self-managed dynamic process on the part of institutions is lacking. The paper proposes that the ability of universities to identify a niche for themselves in the higher education system through the identification of an academic project that draws on their context, location and history will better serve the South African system than adherence to global discourses constructing what a university should be.

It argues that doing this would avoid the negativity that has long been associated with the concept of differentiation in South Africa because of country's history, thereby empowering institutions and benefitting the system and the country.

Key words: *academic project, institutional differentiation, South African Higher Education, Transformation.*

Introduction

In South Africa, the distinctions between institutions of higher education established for different social groups under apartheid inevitably make any discussion of differentiation in a transformed higher education system extremely sensitive. While our history may seem a good reason to avoid thinking about differentiation in South African higher education, there is also evidence that the system is moving towards homogenisation along global norms. The question of whether this is the best outcome for a system intent on transformation is highly debatable.

This *Briefly Speaking* begins by exploring the concepts of diversity and 'diversification' (NCHE, 1996:X) and comparing them with that of 'differentiation'. It does this in the context of the South African higher education policy from the early 1990s onwards by looking at the way the concept of diversity has been privileged and that of differentiation largely avoided. In doing this, it

argues that the lack of will to move towards formal differentiation beyond the establishment of three broad institutional types of the traditional university, the comprehensive university and the university of technology (UoT), has led to the continuation of much of the negative diversity of the apartheid system, a situation that has largely resulted because of constraining conditions at global and national levels.

Given the apparent reluctance to engage with differentiation in a formal and structured way, this piece ends by looking at how South African universities could move towards identifying a unique niche for themselves by developing academic projects based on an analysis of their local contexts, their formal institutional type and what this means for knowledge and knowledge production. The argument is that this kind of dynamic process could lead to the emergence of 'new entities', new kinds of universities that would serve South Africa well in a diverse system that has long been the aim of post-apartheid policy. The argument that the system should differentiate itself through such a dynamic process rather than as a result of formal policy leverage is not new. It was made by the Ministerial Committee reviewing the funding of universities (DHET, 2013) for example. The contribution of this *Briefly Speaking* however is to address the way this could be achieved more directly by looking at the core functions of the universities.

Higher Education policy and the transformation of the system after 1994

Explanations of differentiation in a higher education system (see, for example, van Vught, 2007 DHET, 2014) often begin by calling on the work of Smelser (1959) who sees differentiation as a process involving the change of one social unit into two or more units. According to Smelser (1959:2), the new social units are structurally distinct from each other but, taken together, they are 'functionally equivalent to the original unit'. Rhoades (1990) differs from Smelser in arguing

that the process of differentiation can also encompass the emergence of completely new units, a position also taken by van Vught (2007). For van Vught (p.2), drawing on Huisman (1995:51),

> . . . [w]hile differentiation denotes a dynamic process, diversity refers to a static situation. Differentiation is the process in which *new entities* in a system emerge; diversity refers to the variety of the entities at a specific point in time (Huisman, 1995, p. 51) [emphasis added].

The critiques of South African universities emerging from the student protests of 2015 and 2016 suggest that the emergence of 'new entities' must surely be a key goal. In the protests, students cited the roots of South African universities in European models and claimed that the alienation they felt was due to this. In the protests, the call was for the emergence of 'African universities', institutions which acknowledged their location on the continent and the social and cultural contexts in which they were located, and which were relevant to South African society and the needs of its citizens. History continues to condition the system, however, and, as this *Briefly Speaking* argues, the result is that much of the negative diversity of the apartheid system continues in spite of the fact that the 'new entities' associated with differentiation are what it most needs.

The need for diversity has been a key feature of policy work since the early 1990s. The National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), appointed by President Nelson Mandela soon after the first democratic election of 1994 to advise the Minister of Education on the restructuring of the higher education, developed a 'framework for transformation'. Central to this framework was the goal of developing a single, coordinated system to replace what it terms the 'fragmentation and inefficiency' (p.9) of apartheid. The NCHE goes on to note that the challenge is to 'ensure diversity' within this single coordinated system (p.11). This

diversity would encompass not only a widening of access to 'a broader distribution of social groups and classes' (p. 5) but also, in the context of the need for higher education to be more responsive to socio-economic imperatives, would result in more attention being paid to the 'context, focus and delivery modes of higher education programmes' (p.6).

Birnham (1983 in van Vught, 2007) makes a distinction between external diversity, referring to distinctions between institutions of higher education, and internal diversity, or differences within institutions. At a system level, seven categories of external diversity are then identified. These categories relate to differences in:

- institutional type and size;
- the history and legal establishment of institutions;
- the programmes offered (type, level, comprehensiveness, emphasis and purpose);
- the way teaching and learning and research take place;
- the prestige and status accorded to institutions;
- the types of students served as well as to the constituent entities in an institution;
- the social environment and culture of institutions.

Even a brief analysis of the South African higher education system under apartheid allows for the identification of these different categories of diversity. For example, under apartheid, a distinction was made between institutions established for different social groups as well as between universities and technikons. Programmes offered at technikons and universities were different, with those at technikons aimed at vocational education and training and those at the universities mostly at professional and general academic education. Even more significant were restrictions on

programme offerings as well as on research and postgraduate study. In historically disadvantaged universities, for example, nursing programmes were common and medical education rare. The perceived status of institutions were also clear with those established for white social groups enjoying much more prestige than those founded for black social groups.

The final category of diversity identified by Birnham relates to social environment and institutional culture. Under apartheid, the establishment of different institutions for different social groups, and particularly the way some institutions were made to accept the status of being 'creatures of the state' (Bunting, 2002), meant that social environments and institutional cultures varied across the system with some institutional types being more susceptible to control from their managements.

If the government elected in 1994 inherited an externally diversified higher education system, to what extent has policy produced since then been able to address the injustices of the differences in it? One of the key goals of policy in the post-apartheid period was the development of a single education system that could serve all South Africans equally. The Education White Paper 3 on transformation in higher education (MoE, 1997) privileges the concept of *diversity*, noting, for example, 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' (para. 2.37) and that '[d]iversity of mission, programmes and clientele are essential features of a thriving, integrated system (para. 4.9).

The National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) (MoE, 2001) also emphasizes the concept of diversity noting that 'mission and programme differentiation based on the type and range of qualifications offered' (para. 7.1) as well as in the 'organisational form and institutional landscape of

the higher education system . . . thus enabling the addressing of regional and national needs in social and economic development' (para. 1.7) are key to the achievement of a system that will serve the country well. The NPHE, however, also juxtaposes the terms diversity and differentiation noting that 'a differentiated and diverse higher education system is essential if the transformation goals of the White Paper are to be met' (para. 4.2).

The value of diversity privileged in documents such as the NCHE (1996) and the White Paper (1997) was taken up in work done by the Council on Higher Education in relation to quality assurance. The definition of quality as 'fitness for and of purpose' (CHE, 2001) opened the way for institutions to develop mission and vision statements which defined the particular roles they wanted to play in the South African higher education system in order to achieve 'fitness of purpose' and to develop systems which would ensure that they were 'fit for the purpose' of achieving them.

If we return to the categories of diversity identified by Birnham (1983), however, it is clear that the change that has been achieved post-apartheid has not been entirely positive. As Cooper and Subotsky (2001) show, as access to the entire system opened up from the late 1980s onwards, black students (in all likelihood middle /upper working class young people who had benefited from access to slightly better schools in urban areas) moved quickly to secure places at what were perceived to be 'better' institutions. One of the shifts in enrolments identified by Cooper and Subotsky (2001) was the influx of African students into the historically white technikons. Many of these students came from the large townships on the edges of major conurbations and, according to Cooper and Subotsky, saw the attainment of a diploma from a prestigious institution as a secure route to employment. A second major shift identified by Cooper and Subotsky (2001) saw African students from working and lower middle class backgrounds in townships surrounding

Durban and Cape Town flooding into institutions formerly reserved for Coloured and Indian social groups. The net result of these, and other swings was that, from about 1996 onwards, enrolments at historically black universities fell (Cooper & Subotsky, 2001). In many respects, therefore, it is possible to see that, from the early 1990s onwards, the concept of 'diversity' has related to the types of students served by different institutions with black middle class students, often from urban areas, gaining access to better resourced and historically more prestigious institutions in major cities and the rural poor continuing to be channeled mainly towards the rural historically black universities (see also, Cooper, 2015). This situation does not exactly mirror the apartheid past but is still indicative of a system fragmented not only along the lines of race but also by social class. In addition, it is possible to see how some universities have been able to grow and thrive largely because of their location and their histories whilst others, most notably with their origins in rural located historically black institutions, have not had the same success.

Since the early 1990s, clear differences have also emerged in relation to programme type, level, comprehensiveness, emphasis and purpose. The 1997 Education White Paper 3 on transformation in higher education (MoE, 1997) identifies a number of purposes for higher education, one of which relates to the need to

> . . address the development needs of society and provide the labour market, in a knowledge-driven and knowledge-dependent society, with the ever-changing high-level competencies and expertise necessary for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy (para. 1.3).

Although this is but one purpose identified by the White Paper, arguably it is the purpose that has been privileged discursively and in practice. From the early 1990s onwards, institutions began to focus on the development of vocationally oriented

programmes, a process which was fostered by the promotion of the use of the learning outcome in programme design thanks to the South African Qualifications Authority Act (RSA, 1995) and the establishment of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). For many researchers (see, for example, Gamble, 2006; Young, 2008; Wheelahan, 2010; Allais, 2014) the use of the learning outcome for curriculum design has meant that the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge has been side-lined. In an outcomes-based curriculum (or indeed in a curriculum which uses problem-based learning as a design principle) only knowledge underpinning specific outcomes (or needed to solve particular problems) is taught. Students therefore might not come to master the structured, coherent body of knowledge of a discipline or disciplines. The problem with only teaching the knowledge necessary to master an outcome (or solve of a problem) is that the outcome and problems themselves tend to be context bound. In a rapidly changing world, these contexts may not continue to exist, and students will be required to work in new or changed contexts and have to face as-yet unimagined problems. Their capacity to do this is then limited by their lack of mastery of the entire knowledge structure. For the likes of Wheelahan (2010) and others, mastery of a coherent body of disciplinary knowledge bestows power on adepts who are able to work across contexts and even to imagine worlds which do not yet exist.

If the position of researchers such as Wheelahan is accepted, then many curricula in South African education continue to disadvantage students because, in privileging outcomes and the skills with which they are associated, they are 'knowledge poor'. Ironically, it is at the advantaged historically white universities that the disciplines have best managed to survive although, even here, many were weakened by the reorganization of departments into schools from the late 1990s onwards. Pursuing a 'knowledge rich' qualification in the disciplines is seen to bestow power but if the analysis presented above is accepted, it is the

historically disadvantaged who least have access to these given preferences for 'work ready' qualifications perceived to be most likely to lead to employment.

The diversity of apartheid can also be seen to continue in relation to the social environments and cultures of institutions. The susceptibility of different kinds of institution to managerial control has been explored widely in the literature (White, Carvalho & Riordan, 2011: Maistry, 2015; Boughey & McKenna 2017). Boughey and McKenna (2014) identify differences in the susceptibility of different kinds of institution to managerial control. The way in which enrolments are skewed by socio-economic status will also result in differences in culture, affecting some institutions on where they attract students from. It is also the case that some universities, particularly historically black institutions located in rural areas, are heavily reliant on the appointment of academic staff from the rest of Africa. This has resulted in some cases in xenophobic discourses prevalent in the country more generally being drawn upon within institutions themselves.

A more recent piece of policy work, the *Policy Framework on Differentiation in the South African Post-School System* (DHET, 2014:1), notes that the differences in the current system are

> . . . the result of historical legacies that have not been adequately redressed, resulting in a great inequality among the universities, some of which still find themselves with inadequate resources and capacity to provide for the basic needs of their students and other stakeholders.

One of the questions that needs to be asked, however, is whether it is only resources and capacity that are contributing to inequality. Is it not rather the case that the will to engage with the kind of critical thinking necessary to achieve a differentiated institutional system is also lacking either by using policy to leverage the system or by

institutions taking up the challenge to self-manage their own identities? The achievement of differentiation through leverage or as a result of a self-managed dynamic process on the part of institutions is lacking. In order to address this question, this piece now turns to the conditions constraining the achievement of policy goals related to diversity.

Conditions enabling and constraining policy goals

Across the world, globalisation and the development of the knowledge economy associated with it, have led to understandings of higher education which are not always conducive to imperatives for social justice. Dominant discourses construct the main purpose of higher education as involving the production of knowledge workers for the global-economy (Ashwin, 2020), thinking which has contributed to the emergence of, for example, outcomes based approaches to curriculum design and to teaching. The idea that higher education also has a role to play in the wellbeing of society, or the 'public good', is often neglected in the drive for 'work ready' qualifications serving the ambitions of individuals and economic development. The dominance of these discourses has led to relatively high levels of homogenization in thinking around the purpose of a university and the kinds of programmes it should offer regardless of its location and the peculiarities of its context. This has arguably also been the case in South Africa.

The demand for higher education, particularly in countries such as China with a young population and comparatively few institutions to serve them, has led to an increased focus on internationalisation. In many countries, it is now common for students to 'shop' for programmes internationally, choosing an institution and programme on the basis of reputation as well as the extent to which it will address what they perceive as their learning needs. As this has happened, the phenomenon of 'cross border'

provision has emerged with many institutions now operating offshore, often as private limited companies with the purpose of making profit. Private higher education more generally has grown with higher education systems in many countries now dominated by private providers. All this has led to increased competition between institutions of higher education, both nationally and globally. For Marginson (2007:138) dominant discourses increasingly construct higher education as being about 'reputation [and the] aristocratic prestige and power of the universities as an end in itself, and also about making money from foreign students', a process which has been fuelled by higher education ranking systems.

Badat (2010:122) notes that one of the earliest ranking systems, the Shanghai Jiao Tong Institute of Higher Education (SJTIHE) system, has its origins in the ambition of the Chinese government to 'create 'world class universities' as catalysts of economic development and enhancing China's position in the global knowledge economy'. He goes on to identify a discourse of 'world esteem' underpinning ranking systems with the notion of the 'world class' university representing the gold standard to which all universities are meant to aspire and by which they should seek to be measured'. As Badat also points out, the 'world class' university privileged by ranking systems bears many of the features of the 'research intensive' university.

All higher education systems encompass institutions with varying degrees of 'research intensity' and, in many countries, funding is structured to achieve this. What is clear is that not all institutions can, or indeed should, aspire to be research intensive not least because other purposes of higher education identified in the White Paper (MoE) are equally as important as knowledge production and run the risk of being neglected.

In spite of this, many South African institutions have subscribed to the 'world class' discourse

regardless of the fact that their histories, types and locations mean that achieving this status will be difficult. A more significant reason for South African universities not to aspire to a global norm created by ranking systems, however, is that their histories and locations afford them unique opportunities to take up other purposes, to identify other academic projects, which would arguably serve society better.

The dominant 'world class' discourse constructing higher education globally is that of 'excellence'. The notion of excellence has been problematised by many thinkers including Readings (1996:32) who argues that

> [e]xcellence is invoked ... as always, to say precisely nothing at all: it deflects attention from the questions of what quality and pertinence might be, who actually are the judges of a relevant or a good University, and by what authority they become those judges

Harvey & Green (1993) take up Readings' point about who gets to determine what can count as 'excellent' in relation to another contentious term, that of 'quality'. For Harvey & Green (1993) the term 'quality' is often treated as 'apodictic' – as something that is instinctively recognised. In doing this, they point to the lack of criteria that can be used to judge quality and the way using the term in this way obscures the 'political realities' about who can know what quality is. Barnett (2004:64) also critiques the notion of excellence noting that it stands 'for no purpose, no ideal and no concept in particular'.

In spite of these critiques, perusal of the mission and vision statements of South African universities shows the abundant use of terms such as 'excellence' and 'quality' (Behari-Leak & McKenna, 2017). In the context of the critiques offered by thinkers like Readings (1996), what does it mean for an institution to claim that it is 'driven by quality and excellence' or to 'promote

attributes of excellence'? How could excellence or quality be defined in ways that would distinguish institutions from each other in ways that led to the emergence of the 'new entities' van Vught (2007) identifies as distinguishing differentiation from diversification? Sadly, the hard thinking needed to engage with this question appears to be lacking.

Thus far, this exploration of conditions constraining the emergence of 'new entities' in the South African system has drawn on the world of ideas and values. It is also important to acknowledge the way structural arrangements, developed since the first democratic election, also work to constrain the emergence of 'new forms' of institution and lead to homogenisation. The introduction of the NQF and the impact on programme design has already been noted. However, arguably more constraining was the introduction of a new funding framework for public institutions of higher education in 2004 (MoE, 2004). The framework aims to link public funding for higher education to institutional planning and, at the same time, to use the funding structure to align institutional goals to those that had been developed at national level. Importantly, the framework is partially incentive driven in that the more efficient a university is in producing both teaching and research inputs and outputs, the more funding it will accrue.

The implementation of the funding framework has had an impact on institutional behaviour with many universities, for example, pushing staff for research outputs because of their perceived financial value. This is not the only reason for the encouragement of research because the 'world class' university discourse noted above has also impacted on institutional behaviour promoting research. All this has led to the concept of the academic as researcher being increasingly privileged at institutional levels. This has meant that those who, for example, are more interested in teaching or in Community Engagement (CE) are not valued as much as their high research output peers. This is in spite of attempts to increase the

status afforded to teaching as a result of initiatives such as the National Teaching Awards run by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA).

Teaching has not been entirely neglected, however, as the funding formula also rewards efficiency in the production of 'teaching outputs' or graduates. The desire to maximise outputs has led to the appointment of 'managers' of teaching and learning appointed at various levels from Deputy Vice Chancellor to Director and, also, to a focus on staff development. As Behari-Leak (2017) points out, however, many courses intended to enhance the capacity of academics in their roles as teachers in higher education construct teaching as generic. This is in contrast to understanding teaching as closely related to the nature of the knowledge of the discipline itself and which also acknowledges the type of institution in which it takes place as well as the kinds of students being taught. A failure to acknowledge that academic teaching is context specific not only means that it is reduced to being understood as a set of asocial, acultural, apolitical skills rather the intellectual act it is. It also means that teaching is not used to identify and develop a university's specific nature/academic project/identity.

Community Engagement (CE), often cited as the third function of universities, is not explicitly funded by the framework with the result that there is little incentive to drive its adoption as core to an institution's academic project. Many South African universities are located in historically deprived communities. Drawing on CE and linking it to teaching and learning and research can allow an institution to identify and develop an academic project which is relevant to its context and which acknowledges South African society.

The position taken in this *Briefly Speaking* is that the ability of universities to identify a niche for themselves in the higher education system through the identification of an academic project that draws on their context, location and history will better serve the South African system than adherence to global discourses constructing what a university should be.

The question, however, is how could an institution engage in thinking about its core functions in order to identify an academic project for itself which will ensure it comes to occupy a unique space in a diverse system? It is to this that this piece now turns.

The core functions and institutional context

This section of this *Briefly Speaking* provides examples in order to answer the questions posed immediately above. It does this by analysing the way institutional type and location could impact on the way core functions are drawn upon in the construction of an academic project. It begins with an example of the UoTs.

One of the main features of universities of technology (UoTs) and, to some extent comprehensive universities, is the focus on applied disciplines and on the production of applied knowledge. For Muller (2008:15), applied disciplines

> . . . deal in pragmatic and useful knowledge, knowledge marshalled towards a worldly goal. Their primary pedagogic aim is to produce practitioners, and their primary research aim is to produce useful know-how. Consequently they tend to produce far fewer research-oriented graduates, and less research published in scientific fora. They also typically turn out more unpublished (and unpublishable, because of intellectual property issues) contract research reports than either their 'pure' science or humanities peers.

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All this suggests, as Garraway and Winberg (2019) point out that an exploration of the nature of applied knowledge would be a useful starting point for a UoT to begin thinking about and developing its academic project. One key question to be asked as this process begins would relate to research outputs. If it is the case that institutions focusing on applied knowledge production and teaching are unlikely to be able to produce the same number of 'traditional' academic research outputs as universities that draw on different understandings of knowledge (Muller, 2008), what does this mean for aspirations to be a 'world class' institution when, as Badat (2010) points out, criteria used in the rankings suggest that 'world class' means 'research intensive'?

Collaboration with local industry would be key to the development of research which is 'useful and marshalled towards a worldly goal' (Muller 2008: 15) since it is industry which is likely to be able to identify the 'worldly goals' effectively. Such collaboration would also impact on research funding and make the institution less reliant on research subsidy from the state. This might then mean that the institution could focus more closely on gaining subsidy via its teaching outputs. Even more significantly, and as Garraway and Winberg (2019:50) argue, working with industry and local communities could also lead to UoTs 'having an impact on and the potential for improving society'.

The nature of knowledge a UoT aims to produce has profound implications for teaching and learning. Layton (1993, cited in Gamble, 2006) stresses that applied knowledge does not result from the simple application of theory to practical problems. Rather, it involves moving from theory to practice and back to theory whilst reflecting on what has been learned, a process requiring *reinterpretation* and not mere application. As a result of this movement between theoretical knowledge and practice, the nature of knowledge itself changes. Gamble goes on to cite others such as Mjelde (1993) and Young (2001) to note that the

need to move between practice and theory, possibly repeatedly, is what is often lacking in curriculum design and teaching.

In a UoT or areas of any university focusing on applied knowledge, curriculum design would need to include opportunities in the form of work-based learning, which would allow students to engage in the process of moving between theory and practice. Providing work-based learning experience alone is not sufficient, however, as structured support for the process of reflection necessary for the reinterpretation of knowledge would also be needed. One key way of providing this support would be through assessment which could be designed to promote the reflection necessary for the production of applied knowledge. Unfortunately, opportunities for work-based learning provided by the old 'co-operative learning' processes of the Technikons were dropped following the introduction of the new funding formula in 2004 (MoE, 2004) which required work-based learning to be curriculated formally. There are signs that work-based learning is being reintroduced as a feature of formal curricula in the UoTs though, with business and industry in the vicinity.

The location of a UoT also has implications for curriculum design since business and industry in the vicinity can inform not only programme design but also the kind of teaching that takes place. Teaching in programmes with a strong design focus because design is important for local industries, would arguably be very different to that which takes place in other knowledge areas. It would require more practical sessions, more studio sessions where students are coached and mentored as they engage with design itself.

This brief exploration of the nature of applied knowledge and its production along with a consideration of institutional context allows for insights into the way a UoT, or those parts of a comprehensive university focused on applied knowledge, could begin to develop a unique

academic project for itself and, thus, differentiate itself from other types of institutions and, even, other UoTs. Importantly, it has also aimed to show how differentiation can be achieved organically as a result of conceptualization of an academic project on the part of the institution itself and not as a result of policy levers and structures.

Another example aims to reinforce this point. Imagine a university that, historically, has been successful in producing research but which is not located in a major urban area. The nature of the institution as a research intensive along with its location would need to be considered in the conceptualisation of an academic project.

In the first round of institutional audits conducted by the CHE, a group of institutions identified as 'research intensive' at that time were asked to write about the 'research teaching nexus' in their self-evaluation reports produced as part of audit processes. As Boughey (2012) points out, institutions in the group defined the relationship between research and teaching in different ways. One claimed that the relationship lay in the fact that students were more likely to be taught by a research active academic in their undergraduate careers than at other kinds of institution and this would result in exposure to cutting edge thinking and methodology. A number of problems arise in relation to claiming this relationship between teaching and research the first of which is that the possibility of being taught by a research active academic cannot be guaranteed. The second relates to the nature of the undergraduate curriculum and the possibility of opportunities arising for academics to talk about work which is not directly related to it. This might be especially the case in the sciences where undergraduate work tends to focus on getting students to master a body of knowledge that is broadly agreed upon as a necessary basis for postgraduate work. An example of this occurs in the natural sciences where there is broad agreement about what needs to be mastered at undergraduate level as a basis for further study at higher levels (Bernstein, 2000;

Muller, 2008). The point, however, is that relying on the fact that students may be taught by a research active academic as a means of establishing the relationship between teaching and research is somewhat haphazard.

There is, however, another way to conceptualise this relationship involving understanding teaching not as a process of knowledge dissemination but rather as one of teaching students how to produce knowledge (Boughey, 2012). In the early undergraduate years, this could involve teaching students that their role is to make knowledge claims, statements about what they believe to be true, based on their reading of the literature (as is typical in the humanities) or on their own experiments and observations in practical work (as is typical in the natural sciences). Critically, it would also involve teaching students about the importance of evidence, of the fact that claims are always supported by and examined for the quality of evidence which is used to validate them. Developing students' understandings of themselves as 'knowledge makers' rather than 'knowledge consumers' could drive the academic project of a university aspiring to be research intensive much more effectively than other ubiquitous approaches to teaching such as 'student centredness' or 'active learning' however these might be conceptualized.

If we now move to location, what might the fact that the institution is located outside a major urban area in a town ridden with poverty mean for the academic project? Could both research and teaching not be harnessed and linked to what students see around them as they study in the town? How could service learning be promoted to ensure connections between learning in the classroom and understanding the world? How could extra-curricular CE activities be used to develop and enhance the learning of the main curriculum? This sort of thinking might result in the institution developing a niche for itself as developing research knowledgeable students who are attuned to the problems of South African

society and who are prepared and ready to serve it as they graduate regardless of the disciplines in which they have been trained.

In relation to research, the location of the institution would have obvious implications for engaged research, for collaborative research with local communities. This is not to say that the 'blue skies' research traditionally associated with research intensive universities would need to be ignored but rather that it could be produced alongside engaged research. This process could also result in the emergence of a 'new entity' identified by van Vught (2007) as characterizing differentiation in the form of a research intensive critically alert to local problems and developing its students to engage with them in socially responsive ways as individuals who understand knowledge as claims and evidence based.

This section has provided but two examples of the ways in which two very different kinds of institution could work with their contexts and histories to rethink and reimagine their academic projects and, in the process of doing so, identify niches for themselves in the South African system.

If engagement with a dynamic process involving the identification of an academic project at institutional level could lead to positive differentiation, what would need to be in place for the process to be kick started, for institutions to take up the challenge of differentiating themselves?

Taking up the challenge of self-differentiation

Institutional leadership that understands the value of developing a strong institutional identity through the development of an academic project that draws on characteristics such as university type, location and, to some extent, previous history is key to the dynamic process outlined above. For these ideas to be taken up by institutional leaders, however, the value of individualized identity

development needs to be affirmed and the dangers of homogenization for the system reiterated. Role-players such as Universities South Africa (USAf) and the Council on Higher Education (CHE) would be important in driving the discussions necessary to instigate what might be termed 'self-differentiation' as distinct from forms of differentiation imposed or leveraged through mechanisms such as the funding formula. The CHE has developed a new Integrated Quality Assurance Framework (IQAF) and is about to begin a new round of institutional audits. The audits would provide an excellent opportunity for leaders to engage with the concept of fitness of and for purpose and for the academic project of an institution to be revisited and developed further.

At lower levels, work would need to be done in order to look at the way teaching and learning and research, as core functions, could be differentiated. It is highly likely, given some of the dominant discourses explored earlier in this piece, that academics are all aware of the almost endless possibilities for differentiation. It would also be necessary to challenge some dominant understandings of teaching and learning. Some dominant discourses, drawing on constructivism, for example, see 'good' teaching as involving the use of an 'approach' such as problem-based learning, active learning or student centredness regardless of the nature of the discipline. As Maton (2014:4) points out,

> . . . the theory of learning offered by constructivism has become propagated as a theory of everything, including teaching, curriculum and research. Different knowledge practices have thereby been reduced to a logic of learning, based on the belief that 'the more basic phenomenon is learning' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:92). From this perspective, *what* is being learned is of little significance. Accordingly, research typically focuses on generic processes of learning and sidelines

differences between the forms of knowledge being learned.

If, as theorists such as Maton (and a host of others in South Africa such as Clarence, 2014; Mkhize, 2015; Ellery, 2016) are to be believed, then explorations of teaching need to begin with investigations of the nature of knowledge itself particularly if social justice is to be enhanced. Drawing on the support of other role players in the system such as HELTASA, this level of work might be directed at Deans, Directors and others with responsibility for managing teaching and learning. The same would be true for research with those involved in managing and encouraging research being prompted to engage with questions about the implications of the nature of knowledge an institution wants to produce for the academic project. As this process took place, CE and collaboration with industry would need to be considered as a means of taking institutional location and history into account. While all this would not be easy, engaging with this sort of thinking could lead to the emergence of unique institutional academic projects that would serve the system well.

Perhaps most significantly, however, encouraging a self-directed process of identifying an institutional project would avoid the negativity that has long been associated with the concept of differentiation in South Africa because of our history. Potentially, it would be empowering for institutions and of huge benefit to the system and the country.

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