A Reflection on Two Decades of Programme Differentiation in Higher Education in South Africa

Abstract

One of the goals of the post-apartheid higher education policies in South Africa is to have a differentiated and diversified higher education institutional landscape. In its 2000 report titled 'Towards a New Higher Education Landscape', the Council on Higher Education proposed a function-based institutional differentiation. However, government adopted a policy of differentiation based on institutional missions and programmes. It feared that function-based institutional differentiation would entrench inequality within the higher education institutional landscape and therefore hinder transformation. Academic planning and programme and qualification mix (PQM) clearance were adopted as the main mechanisms for promoting differentiation based on mission and programmes. This piece of Briefly Speaking reflects on two decades of programme differentiation in higher education in South Africa, and uses available data and information to make inferences on whether it has been a success story or not. The conclusion is that it has not been a success story. On the contrary, it seems to have encouraged institutional isophormism evidenced by the fact that universities of technology and comprehensive universities are pulling all stops to function like the major research universities, thereby resulting in a relatively more homogeneous higher education system. . The Briefly Speaking piece suggests that it would be in the good interest of higher education in South Africa if the debate on different options for differentiation were to be reopened as such debate could lead to identification a more appropriate the type of differentiation. This would be differentiation that could make universities operationally effective and efficient while also being more responsive to the socioeconomic and other societal needs within their respective geographical regions, as well as nationally.

Keywords: Differentiation, higher education, mission, programme, teaching and learning, research

Background

In the context of higher education in South Africa, the term 'academic programme' serves a strategic planning purpose It does not refer, for example,

to a specific undergraduate curriculum or to a set of individual courses. Rather, its meaning is closely tied to two features of the national Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS). The first is the system's Classification of Education Subject Matter (CESM) categories, and the second is its formal qualification categories, where 'formal' indicates that the qualification is registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which is defined as a comprehensive system approved by the Minister responsible for higher education and training, for the classification, registration and articulation of quality-assured national qualifications (Republic of South Africa 2008).

Section 27, (h) (iv)) of the National Qualifications Framework Act (Republic of South Africa 2008) requires the Council on Higher Education (CHE) as the mandated body responsible for the management of the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) to recommend qualifications to the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) for their registration on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The CHE is also responsible for accreditation of programmes leading to higher education qualifications (Republic of South Africa 1997). The CHE submits to SAQA details of programmes that it has accredited for recording against qualifications registered on the NQF (CHE 2022).

It is important to note that, after almost three decades of accrediting programmes, the CHE has decided to shift the unit of accreditation from programmes to qualifications. The purpose of this shift is to make accreditation a process of assessing and confirming that qualifications offered by higher education institutions meet the national standards of quality, and are internationally comparable. Qualification accreditation ensures confidence in the quality and integrity of the qualifications offered by higher education institutions in terms of national acceptability and international comparability (CHE 2022). However, this shift does not in any way demean the importance of programme as the fundamental academic planning unit in higher education, with much implication on how public universities are funded.

Section 3 of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, as amended (Republic of South Africa 1997) gives authority to the Minister responsible for higher education and training to determine higher education policy. Subsection 3 stipulates that the Minister has the authority to determine the scope and range of operations of higher education institutions. This effectively means that the Minister can determine the range of qualifications and programmes that specific institutions would be allowed to offer. Therefore the Act provides a legal basis for the Minister to use the approval of academic programmes as a higher education steering mechanism. The Minister exercises this authority through the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), using two sets of levers. One is academic planning and programme qualification mix clearance; and the other is enrolment planning. Both of these are inextricably linked to the funding steering mechanism.

In 2000, the then Minister of Education commissioned the CHE to provide a set of concrete proposals to shape the higher education system for the future. The CHE, in its report titled 'Towards a New Higher Education Landscape' (CHE 2000), proposed that the universities and other higher education institutions in the country should be differentiated. It argued that the higher education system should be reconfigured as a differentiated and diverse system so that there can be effective responses from institutions to the varied social needs of the country (CHE 2000). It went further to propose that there should be differentiated institutional types distinguished in terms of niche areas. In other words, there would be structural differentiation of institutions to create various institutional types which, in turn, would demonstrate level of specialisation regarding the three core functions of teaching and learning, research, community engagement). The rationale behind the proposal was that such differentiation would enhance institutional effectiveness and efficiency, just as it would increase the level of institutional responsiveness to issues of socio-economic development.

In 2001, the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) concurred with the CHE that a differentiated and diverse higher education system is essential to meet the goals of the Education White Paper 3 of 1997 (Department of Education 1997). However, the NPHE did not support differentiation based on niche areas and specialisation, arguing that it would require a regulatory framework to pre-determine institutional programme mixes and missions, and would, as a consequence, contradict the White Paper's programme-based definition of higher education. The NPHE expressed the view that differentiation implemented via a new regulatory framework would introduce unwanted rigidity into the system. Such rigidity would, it claimed, preclude institutions from building on their strengths and responding to social and economic needs in a rapidly changing environment. At the same time, the NPHE was not in favour of an 'open-ended institutional framework' that would carry the risk of institutional isophormism – a situation that would see universities across the system striving to function like the major research universities resulting in a highly homogeneous system.

The Department of Education stood fast by its commitment to a system differentiated according to academic programmes offered by universities. In this regard the NPHE proposed "to ensure diversity through mission and programme differentiation based on the type and range of qualifications offered. The programme mix at each institution will be determined on the basis of its current programme profile, including the relevance of the profile to the institution's location and context and its responsiveness to regional and national priorities" (NPHE 2001, paragraphs 7.1, 7.2).

The NPHE rejected both differentiation based on functional specialisation as well as the possibility of an open, competitive system. Resistance to the latter was, however, mainly symbolic as it did little in terms of state resource allocation to counter competition and other market forces.

Following the institutional mergers in 2004, programme differentiation was expected to play out across three university types (traditional university, comprehensive university, and university of technology) all of which would be both teaching and research universities, offering programmes from undergraduate to doctoral levels. Among other effects, this put paid to the horizontal differentiation between universities and technikons. At that time, the Department of Education compiled a detailed list of academic programmes for each public higher education institution, and, after a process of review and consultation, the list was approved by the Minister of Education in June 2006. Subsequently, each public university would be funded based on its approved academic programmes.

In 2012, following pressure from various stakeholders, the Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training (Department of Higher Education and Training 2012) flirted with the idea of niche-focused differentiation in the higher education system (while simultaneously paying serious attention to a more differentiated post-school system as it sought to bolster the country's college sector). It stated that the "… university sector should comprise a continuum of institutions, ranging from specialised, research-intensive universities to largely undergraduate institutions, with various levels of research focus and various postgraduate niches at masters and/or doctoral level … The process through which these principles will be realised must include both the universities and the DHET, working together to define the mission and role of each institution."

(DHET 2012: 40-41). The expectation was that following the Dutch model, universities and the DHET would enter into contractual agreements that define the mission and function of each university in the system, with funding from government determined by the terms of each contract.

In 2013, the following recommendation was put forward by a ministerial-appointed committee: "The most important principle is that the country needs the entire spectrum of institutions for socio-economic development. … A variety of institutions are therefore required, to ensure that the sector serves the varied needs of students as well as the national interests. … There is a need to reward equally the different roles of higher education in South African society, namely: teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. It is important to note that the aim is to continue to support the strengths of research-intensive institutions, and also to recognise other important functions of higher education institutions. … A national plan should be developed in tandem with differentiation – meaningful differentiation will need serious co-ordination, and differentiation needs to be accompanied by an appropriate funding regime, including funding for poorly resourced institutions" (DHET 2014: 24-25)."

Ultimately, however, niche-based functional differentiation was jettisoned in the 2013 White Paper: "A continuum of institutions is required in the post-school system, including universities with differentiated missions, in order to ensure that the sector meets national developmental needs. In the

university sector this continuum will range from largely undergraduate institutions to specialised, research-intensive universities which offer teaching programmes from undergraduate to doctoral level. All types of institutions are equally important to the overall system" (DHET 2013: 29). The changes are subtle and reveal a greater focus on differentiation at the level of the post-school system, and a shift away from various levels of research and from offering only master's degrees at the postgraduate level by some universities. The process for agreeing on how the higher system should be differentiated reads as much less contractual and relies on system-wide consensus which seems like wishful thinking in a system composed of twenty six unequal and competing public universities. In effect, the White Paper falls back on mission and programme differentiation across universities.

Two decades after the recommendations by the CHE, it seems reasonable to ask whether programme differentiation has been successful. To answer this question, this piece of Briefly Speaking presents three brief exhibits. The first responds to the expectation that programme differentiation is linked to the diverse missions of South Africa's twenty six public universities. The second exhibit is based on a report by Essop (2020) titled 'The Changing Size and Shape of the Higher Education System in South Africa, 2005–2017', while the third is also based on report by Bunting (2021) titled 'Analyses of the Academic Programmes of Traditional Universities in South Africa'.

Exhibit 1: University missions

In the NPHE (2001: paragraph 4.3), the Department of Education stated its intention to 'ensure institutional diversity through mission and programme differentiation'. It went on to assert that the 'balance between the broad fields of study and the qualification types linked to institutional mission will determine the precise mix of programmes offered at particular institutions. This would enable institutions to define their missions based on their location and social and economic context, including their capacity and future potential'. In other words, policy assumes a direct and important link between university missions and programmes, and because missions would be differentiated across the system, it follows that there would be programme diversity. An analysis of the current mission statements of universities should therefore provide some insights into the extent to which the anticipated differentiation has taken root. Table 1 below presents the mission statements of the twenty six public universities:

Table 1: Mission Statements of Public Universities in South Africa

University	Mission Statement
Cape Peninsula	CPUT transforms its students, through world-class researchers who inspire knowledge production and innovation that are cutting edge
Central	In aspiring to fulfil its vision, the reimagined CUT, as a university of technology: • delivers high-quality, appropriate science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) academic programmes, as well as those in management sciences, education and humanities, supported by applied research; • engages with the community for mutually beneficial development; • promotes access with success in attracting potentially successful students, and supporting them to become employable and job-creating graduates; • attracts and retains high-quality students and expert staff, and supports their development and well-being; and • forges strategic partnerships that are mutually beneficial.
Durban*	By 2030, Our people will be creative, innovative, entrepreneurial and adaptive to changes in the world; Our people will participate productively in the development of our region, country and the world; Our state-of-the-art infrastructure and systems will enhance an ecosystem to achieve this vision.
Mangosuthu	To offer technological, career-directed educational programmes focusing on innovative problem-solving research and engage with government/business/industry and communities as end-users.
Nelson Mandela	To offer a diverse range of life-changing educational experiences for a better world.
North West	To excel in innovative learning and teaching and cutting-edge research, thereby benefitting society through knowledge.**
Rhodes	In pursuit of its vision the University will strive to produce outstanding internationally-accredited graduates who are innovative, analytical, articulate, balanced and adaptable, with a life-long love of learning; and to strive, through teaching, research and community service, to contribute to the advancement of international scholarship and the development of the Eastern Cape and Southern Africa.
Sefako Makgatho	SMU is a dedicated health sciences university providing professional training and education in a range of fields through excellence in teaching, learning, innovative research and community engagement.
Sol Plaatje	To become an institution of higher learning uniquely positioned to: • graduate citizens competent and capable of realising the aspirations of society • produce new knowledge impacting on key challenges of the region • engage critically with communities of discourse and communities of people in order to search out pathways to equitable development.
Stellenbosch	Stellenbosch University is a research-intensive university, where we attract outstanding students, employ talented staff and provide a world-class environment; a place connected to the world, while enriching and transforming local, continental and global communities.
Tshwane	We advance social and economic transformation through relevant curricula, impactful research and engagement, quality learning experiences, dedicated staff and an enabling environment
Cape Town	UCT is committed to engaging with the key issues of our natural and social worlds through outstanding teaching, research and scholarship. We seek to advance the status and distinctiveness of scholarship in Africa through building

	strategic partnerships across the continent, the global south and the rest of the world. UCT provides a vibrant and supportive intellectual environment that attracts and connects people from all over the world. We aim to produce graduates and future leaders who are influential locally and globally. Our qualifications are locally applicable and internationally acclaimed, underpinned by values of engaged citizenship and social justice. Our scholarship and research have a positive impact on our society and our environment. We will actively advance the pace of transformation within our university and beyond, nurturing an inclusive institutional culture which embraces diversity
For Hare	To provide quality education and conduct innovative research focusing on niche areas that contribute to the advancement of knowledge that is socially and contextually relevant, with an overall emphasis on the application of digital technologies.
Free State	The university will pursue this vision through its goals: • Improve student success and well-being • Renew and transform the curriculum • Increase UFS contribution to local, regional and global knowledge • Support development and social justice through engaged scholarship • Increase the efficiency and effectiveness of governance and support systems • Achieve financial sustainability • Advance an institutional culture that demonstrates the values of the UFS
Johannesburg	Inspiring its community to transform and serve humanity through innovation and the collaborative pursuit of knowledge.
KwaZulu - Natal	A truly South African University of Choice that is academically excellent, innovative in research, entrepreneurial, and critically engaged with society.
Limpopo	A University which responds actively: • To the development needs of its students, staff and communities, • Through relevant and higher quality education and training, research and community engagement, and • In partnership and collaboration with its stakeholders.
Mpumalanga	To offer high quality educational and training opportunities that foster the holistic development of students through teaching and learning, research and scholarship, and engagement in collaboration with strategic partners.
South Africa	Unisa is a comprehensive, open distance learning institution that produces excellent scholarship and research, provides quality tuition and fosters active community engagement. We are guided by the principles of lifelong learning, student centredness, innovation and creativity. Our efforts contribute to the knowledge and information society, advance development, nurture a critical citizenry and ensure global sustainability.
Venda	The University of Venda produces graduates that are locally relevant and globally competitive
Zululand	To provide globally competitive graduates, relevant for the human capital needs of our country, by providing quality education which upholds high standards of research and academic excellence.
Pretoria	In pursuing recognition and excellence in its core functions of research, teaching and learning, and integrating engagement with society and communities into these, the University of Pretoria will use quality, relevance, diversity and sustainability as its navigational markers.
Western Cape	The University of the Western Cape is a national university, alert to its African and international context as it strives to be a place of quality, and a place to grow, from hope to action through knowledge. It is committed to excellence in teaching, learning and research, to nurturing the cultural diversity of South Africa, and to responding in critical and creative ways

	to the needs of a society in transition. Drawing on its proud experience in the liberation struggle, the University is aware of having a distinctive academic role in helping build an equitable and dynamic society.
Vaal	To produce employable and entrepreneurial graduates who can make an impact in society.
Witwatersrand	The mission of the University of the Witwatersrand is to grow its global stature as a leading research-intensive university, and to be a gateway to research engagement and intellectual achievement in Africa. It will achieve this by building on the principles of intellectual excellence, international competitiveness and local relevance. As an institution built on principles of intellectual excellence, we are committed to providing high-quality, internationally competitive education, founded on high academic standards, cutting-edge research, public engagement, and productive partnerships with leading institutions throughout the world.
Walter Sisulu	Through its core business, WSU responds to societal needs in ethical, scholarly, sustainable, and entrepreneurial ways, and delivers future-ready graduates.

* Statement of intent

** Purpose statement

Note: All mission statements sourced either from publicly accessible university websites, annual reports, or strategic plans.

From the analysis of the mission statement, it is found that the words in Table 2 below are the most frequently occurring in the mission statements.

Table 2: Most Frequently Occurring Words in Mission Statement of Public Universities

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research	20
engage	14
quality	11
community	11
world	10
innovation	9
development	9
learning	9
society	9
student	8
knowledge	8
education	8
graduate	8
excel	8
global	8
advance	7

A word cloud was generated to provide a visual impression of the frequency with which words appear in the mission statements of the public universities. This is presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Word cloud of the mission statements of the twenty six public universities in 2022

Basic analysis reveals that the word 'research' appears most frequently (twenty two times). This suggests a preoccupation with research across the majority of universities. Moreover, words such as 'world' and 'global', which appear ten and eight times respectively, suggest aspirations by many, if not most, universities to be players in the realm of global science. This is, however, countered by the appearance of words such as 'engage' and 'community' (fourteen and eleven times respectively) suggesting an equivalent preoccupation with local issues at many universities.

Most surprising perhaps is the relatively infrequent use of words related to teaching and learning in university mission statements. The word 'learning' appears nine times, 'education' appears eight times, as does the word 'student'. This finding runs counter to the DHET's stance on differentiation, that is, that all universities should provide excellent undergraduate teaching while only some focus on excellent postgraduate education and research. It also suggests that the DHET's concerns about possible mission drift and organisational homogeneity were justified and have been actualised.

Related to the relative absence of teaching and learning in university mission statements is the near invisibility of references to universities' role and ambitions in producing skilled and employable graduates. One would expect a differentiated system to comprise universities and other higher education institutions that are more attuned and

relevant to the needs of both the national and the more localised labour markets in which universities are located.

Exhibit 2: Funding, capacity and homogeneity

Essop (2020), following a detailed analysis of the changing size and shape of the higher education system, draws several conclusions related to differentiation and, in particular, the 'evident' failure of programme differentiation. Essop begins by pointing to the homogenising effects of research incentives in the funding framework which has resulted in a more capacitated system but also in one in which all universities, irrespective of mandate or mission, pursue research funding and offer postgraduate programmes. The result is a system of universities that look increasingly alike showing that system steering without aligned financial incentives have had little effect on creating a differentiated system.

Essop points to additional problems which have scuppered programme differentiation. These include: (1) a process for approving programmes that is subject to political pressures and gaming by universities; (2) programme approval that is not evidence-based and does not adhere to an institutional differentiation framework; (3) the lack of the requisite capacity within the DHET to undertake the rigorous assessments before issuing PQM clearance; (4) an inadequate understanding on the part of DHET regarding the operations of higher education institutions, and (5) political and bureaucratic inertia. Essop's (2020: 63) conclusion that "the NPHE's PQM-based

differentiation framework has not succeeded in precluding mission drift and academic drift through steering" leaves little room for ambiguity.

A matter of concern regarding Essop's system-level diagnosis is that while the reasons he provides for a lack of programme-level differentiation in the South African higher education system are well-articulated and compelling, the assertion that programme-level differentiation has failed is not supported by empirical evidence. In other words, from the 68 data tables presented in the report, not one is referenced as providing conclusive support for the assertion that the DHET's decision to implement programme differentiation in the early-2000s has failed.

Exhibit 3: Programmes for high-level knowledge production

If traditional universities are the institutions in the system that are to be more focused on the production of new knowledge through research, and on graduating postgraduates, then one way of interpreting the DHET's stance on programme-level differentiation is for traditional universities to show strong commitments to programmes that extend to the doctoral level. Within this context, it should be kept in mind that the approval of academic programmes functions as a steering mechanism which gives the Minister of Higher Education and DHET the power to determine programme qualification mixes at higher education institutions and to link funding – probably the most

powerful lever at DHET's disposal – to enrolments in particular programmes.

In 2021, Bunting (2021) conducted an analysis of the structures of the academic programmes of the eleven traditional universities in South Africa. The purpose was to assess each university's academic programme infrastructure. The basic element of an academic programme was taken to be a major field of study which is listed as a second-order CESM category.[1] The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Ranking of Academic Structure

Ranking	University	Academic programmes		Student head count enrolments	
		Total programmes classified	% Of programmes in doctoral-level	Total enrolment (thousands)	% of enrolment in doctoral-level programmes
	Strong academic programme structure				
1	Cape Town	89	53%	28.5	52%
2	UKZN	118	53%	49.3	51%
3	Rhodes	40	50%	7.8	56%
4	Stellenbosch	96	44%	30.5	56%
5	Fort Hare	47	40%	16.8	55%
	Moderate academic programme structure				
6	Witwatersrand	38	42%	39.8	45%
7	Pretoria	115	44%	49.9	36%
8	Western Cape	67	37%	21.7	45%
	Weak academic programme structure				
9	North West	97	37%	60.8	26%
10	Free State	90	38%	39.0	17%
11	Limpopo	82	13%	20.9	10%

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[1] An example of the application of the definition used is as follows: "Economics" is a second order CESM category linked to the first order CESM category "Business, Economics and Management Studies". Suppose that a university offers economics as a major field of study in the following five qualifications: 3-year undergraduate diploma, 3-year first bachelor's degree, honours degree, master's degree, and doctoral degree. This university would be recorded as offering one academic programme in economics

Based on both the proportion of academic programmes offered at the doctoral level as well as the proportion of enrolments in those programmes, Bunting (2021) concludes that only five of the eleven traditional universities have 'strong' academic programme structures, that is, more than 50% of programmes and more than 50% of enrolments are evident in programmes consisting of at least 30 students of which at least 8 are doctoral students, and the minimum proportion of doctoral students to all students is 4% and the maximum proportion of undergraduate students is between 85-89%. Three institutions were categorised as having 'moderately' strong academic programme structures, while the remaining three traditional universities (Free State, Limpopo, North-West) were categorised as having 'weak' academic programme structures.

The merits of the methodology aside, the findings reveal stark differences between the eleven traditional universities in terms of their academic programmes at doctoral level, rather than coherence with the group of traditional universities and, presumably, differentiation from comprehensive universities and universities of technology.

However, the report by Bunting (2021) while is rich in data, offers little by way of synthesis, commentary or analysis. The report remains silent on what conclusions can be drawn on the data and what the possible implications of those conclusions may be in relation to a differentiated higher education system.

Conclusion

In the early 2000s, against the advice of some, the DHET asserted its policy position on a differentiated higher education in South Africa: higher education institutions would not be differentiation by function but by the academic programmes. This paper has put forward three 'exhibits' as possible providers of evidence for or against a higher education system differentiated at a programme level. The first exhibit consisted of an analysis of university mission statements. It revealed a preoccupation with research across all universities. The second and third exhibits were recent reports that followed different approaches in their assessment of programme differentiation. Neither were found to be compelling.

One approach to a better understanding of the extent and effectiveness of programme differentiation would be to study the outcomes (career paths) of those who have graduated from the multitude of programmes on offer by the country's universities. In other words, it would be instructive to know, for example, whether graduates at different levels of qualification are successful in securing employment, and whether there is some alignment between their university qualifications and the jobs they hold. Such data is not available in the system leaving researchers and policy-makers to rely on once-off surveys which are often limited in scope. There may well be little by way of political gain for the ruling party to have data available on (un)employment. Nevertheless, there is a need for a national system that collects and publishes regular, timely and

comprehensive data on graduate pathways to reveal the linkages between programmes and employment. Without such data, the ability to assess the effectiveness of current levels of programme differentiation with regard to the university's function of producing relevant skills for the labour market remain impossible.

In the current national context of a decline and reprioritisation of resources in the higher education sector, differentiation, whether functional or at the programme level, remains a pressing issue. The DHET has, in the past, attempted to put the differentiation debate to bed. In 2014, it stated that there was "… an ongoing debate and discussion about the differentiation of the higher education system. This should be brought to a conclusion". And yet renowned international and local higher education scholars, as well as noted social scientists, have argued that differentiated higher education systems are critical for national socio-economic development. It is therefore necessary that the debate continues until differentiation that meaningfully serves the interest of higher education in South Africa is realised.

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