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## **New Higher Education Institutional Types in South Africa: A Missed Opportunity for Articulation and Differentiation?**

### **Abstract**

The Higher Education Amendment Act No. 9 of 2016 makes provision for the introduction of two new higher education institutional types. These are the higher education colleges and university colleges. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) is yet to provide detailed information about the purpose and nature of the two institutional types. Therefore, exact nature of these new institutional types and how they will fit into the higher education landscape, remain unclear. Will they introduce new educational pathways in the broader post-school education and training system? Are they the first tentative steps towards differentiating institutions by function or specialisation in the higher education system? If so, how will they be positioned in relation to the increasingly homogeneous and stratified arrangement of higher education institutions in South Africa?

This paper attempts to piece together a clearer picture of what exactly these two institutional types are before considering how they may change the configuration of the higher education sector, if at all. Paying particular attention to how these two new institutional types relate to existing higher education policy imperatives, the paper concludes that on the basis of information currently available, the two new institutional types may create new pathways to the labour market and could target skills that are currently in short supply, but they are also a missed opportunity to introduce greater articulation and functional differentiation into the higher education system.

**Keywords:** Articulation, differentiation, Higher Education Amendment Act, higher education colleges, institutional types, university colleges

### **Introduction**

In 2016, several amendments were made to the Higher Education Act in South Africa. Among them was the introduction of two new institutional types

within the higher education system: higher education colleges, and university colleges. During his state of the nation address in February 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that there were plans to establish two new public 'universities' in the country, one in Ekurhuleni and the other in Hammaskraal (Businessstech, May 2020). In August 2021 the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) appointed a manager for the project of establishing the two 'universities', and in 2022 it announced that it had set aside budget to undertake feasibility studies to establish the nature and scope as well as the geographical locations of the new institutions. One of the two institutions is expected to focus on science and innovation subjects, whilst the second one will focus on crime detection and fighting. It remains unclear whether these new institutions will be established as one of the new institutional types introduced by the Higher Education Amendment Act of 2016, or whether the DHET has already predetermined that they will be new public universities.

At the same time, very little is known about these two new higher education institutional types. As is to be expected, the Act defines both institutional types but it is short on detail. The DHET has not provided any additional clarity. Several questions remain unanswered: What purposes do the new institutional types serve? What niches do they fill? What is their relationships to the existing twenty six public universities? And do they have any bearing on the two new proposed 'universities' that government intends to establish?

This paper attempts to provide some answers to these questions. It begins by sketching the broader post-school education and training system as background to the relative position of the higher education sector. It also shows how the system has and is expected to evolve over time. Following the introduction, the paper provides important background in relation to the central and recurring issues of the expansion, articulation and differentiation of the post-school education and training system, and the higher education sector. The paper then proceeds to explore the more specific issue of the nature and purpose of the two new institutional types introduced by the Higher Education Amendment Act of 2016, drawing on secondary sources such as government reports and statements, media reports and the minutes of meetings of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Higher Education, Science and Innovation. The paper concludes by considering how these new institutional types relate to the policy imperative of a more equal higher education sector, as well as to the possible effects of their introduction with respect to articulation, differentiation, and development.

## Background

It was widely accepted in the 1990s that higher education in a democratic South Africa would have to correct the inequalities inherited from the apartheid system. Furthermore, South Africa's post-apartheid higher education policy has consistently emphasised the need for a responsive system that remains relevant to societal needs,

and contributes to the country's socio-economic development.

The government rejected a proposal by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in 2000 for a functionally differentiated higher education system as a mechanism for achieving a more equal and equitable system in favour of a strategy of programme-level differentiation (Essop 2020). It also opted not to massify the country's higher education system. At 1 901 enrolments in tertiary education per 100 000 of the population, South Africa has the lowest enrolment numbers compared with other lower middle-income countries (DHET 2021).

In 2019, there were 503 registered and established post-school education and training institutions comprised of 26 public universities, 131 registered private higher education institutions, 50 public technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, 287 registered private colleges and 9 community education and training (CET) colleges (DHET 2021: 22). The graph below captures the shift in the size and shape of the post-school education and training system from 2010 (the baseline used for the *National Development Plan 2030* [NDP]) through 2016 (the basis for the *National Plan for Post-School Education and Training* [NPPSET]), and 2030 (the targets set by the NDP). The data align with both the NDP and the corresponding NPPSET targets, with the exception of TVET enrolments – the NPPSET set a target of 2,500,000 compared with 1,250,000 TVET enrolments by 2030 in the case of the NDP.

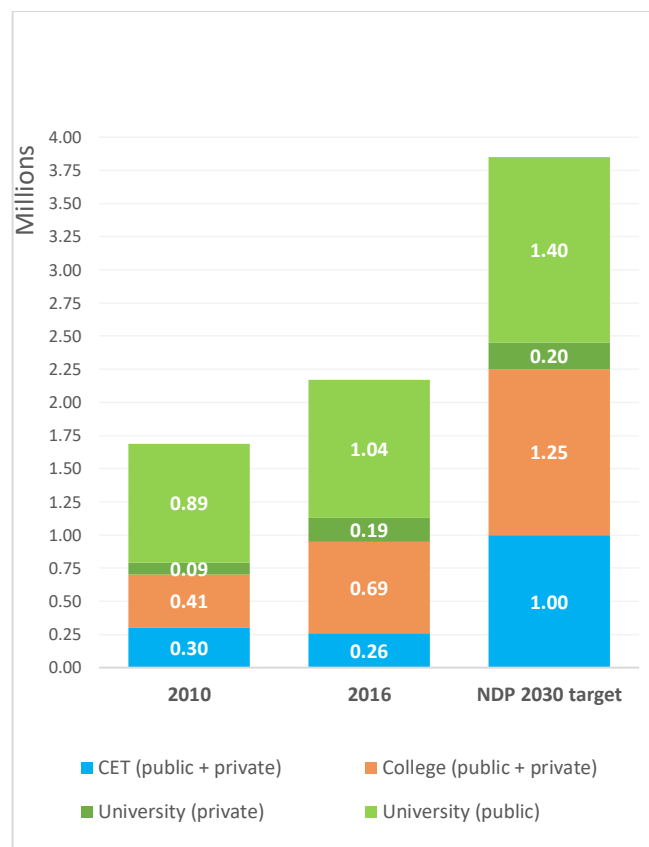


Figure 1: Size and shape of the South African Post-School Education and Training

Source: NPC (2020)

The diagram shows relatively stable growth in the higher education sector compared with higher rates of growth (actual and planned) in other parts of the post-school education and training system. Increases in post-school college enrolments in recent years are the result of more generous budget allocations to that sector, and demand brought about by larger numbers of Grade 12 graduates, particularly those who qualify to study for degrees or diplomas but who do not succeed to secure admission into public universities.

The recent per student cost increases in post-school education promotes South Africa from

being an average spender per student by international spending levels, to a country that is slightly above average (Van der Berg et al. 2020). Nevertheless, the figure shows that higher education has not grown substantially over the past decade. This applies to both public and private components of the higher education sector. One reason for the modest growth is that government prioritised sector wide quality and efficiency over unfettered expansion in the early 2000s (Cloete et al. 2004). Experiences in Latin America and elsewhere in Africa had showed how opening the system to private providers risks introducing high-fee institutions offering less quality higher education. The drive towards efficiency in higher education was aligned with the principles of the country's Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy (although, ironically, GEAR also advanced greater privatisation of the economy and of the public sector). The merging of 36 former higher education institutions into 23 universities during 2004 and 2005 further attests to the efficiency imperative while a scheme to reward the publication of top-quality research in journals and books attests to an attempt to promote productivity without compromising quality.

In order to grow the post-school education and training system (rather than the higher education sector on its own), the DHET is, however, committed to expanding provision in the TVET

college sector (DHET 2021: 18). Investment by the DHET in TVET colleges has driven the relatively recent expansion of the TVET college sector, underpinned by a strategy to expand access to higher learning, broadening the skills base of the economy, and protecting universities from mounting undergraduate enrolment pressures.<sup>1</sup>

According to the DHET's Strategic Plan for the period 2020 to 2025, enrolments at TVET colleges are expected to remain constant at 620 000 due to a funding shortfall,<sup>2</sup> while enrolments at CET colleges will increase to 388 782. Student enrolments at public universities will reach 1 131 000 by 2024 (DHET 2021). If TVET college enrolments stagnate for the foreseeable future, and if universities are only expected to expand marginally, then it is difficult to see how the post-school education and training system will expand to absorb more school-leavers.

What makes South Africa unusual is a combination of highly ambitious post-school education and training graduation targets, combined with little in the way of proposals around how funding sources can be diversified and therefore significantly increased. A country such as China, which has seen major growth in its higher education sector, has to a large extent achieved unprecedented growth by facilitating more private involvement in the sector (Cloete 2018). In South Africa, especially after the recent increases in public

<sup>1</sup> To illustrate, in 2020, the University of Cape Town (UCT) received eight times the number of applications (32 000) to the number of places available (4 200), with the pressure even greater for in-demand degrees such as medicine, engineering, education, accounting, law, and social work. Other universities

report similar pressures: the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) receives 10 times the number of applications (91 000) for 8 770 places, while Wits University receives 14 times the number of applications (70 349) for only 5 000 available places (IOL 2020).  
<sup>2</sup> See Naidu (2021) for an account of the budget shortfall.

spending per student, evidenced by the increase in National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) bursaries and redirecting of public funds to the Scheme, exploring other options has become vital if both the broader post-school education and training system, and the higher education sector within that broader system, are to grow.

## Articulation and differentiation

Globally, the evidence of what promotes long-term economic development has shifted the policy emphasis towards the quality of basic education. One strand of evidence focuses on the income returns to acquiring additional qualifications. This evidence supports the NDP's focus on ensuring that all South Africans obtain at least some educational qualification, and that a portion of those go on to acquire a post-school education and training qualification, either at a university or a vocational college. There is an acceptance that from a strong primary- and secondary-school base, school-leavers require multiple pathways towards attaining post-school education and training qualifications (Van der Berg et al. 2020).

Once in the post-school education and training system, students should, on successful completion of their initial pursuits, be able to move between components of the system. Being able to do so would make the system flexible with multiple pathways of progression. This is referred to as articulation. According to a report of a ministerial committee: "Articulation is an essential component of an education system that operates as the

centre-piece of an egalitarian society with a complex multidimensional economy. In the early years of the democratic era it was hoped that a differentiated and articulated education and training system would take root. ... Unfortunately, this has not yet transpired. ... What is needed then is a well-articulated PSET system that brings about linkages between its different parts, where there are no silos and no dead-end qualifications" (DHET 2013: 1).

One effect of the merging of higher education institutions referred to earlier in this paper has been the establishment of three main types of universities: traditional universities, comprehensive universities, and universities of technology. The 2014 *Policy Framework on Differentiation in the South African Post-School System* (DHET 2014: 12) states categorically that '[The] current three categories of universities will remain, and further categorisation of institutions will not take place.' However, in its *Strategic Plan for the 2010 to 2020 Period*, Universities South Africa (USAf), formerly Higher Education South Africa (HESA), cautioned that other less clearly delineated groupings of higher education institutions existed or were beginning to emerge.

It is clear from the higher education performance data available that the South African higher education system is highly stratified (Essop 2020; Muller 2013; Muller et al. 2017). Stratification refers to a process that arranges and categorises individuals or organisations into hierarchical positions that afford unequal levels of material and social rewards. It is based on cumulative

advantage resulting from history which made certain universities benefit from various opportunities for scientific inquiry as well as the subsequent symbolic and material rewards for the results of that inquiry at the expense of other universities (Hess 1997). In other words, the South African higher education sector is vertically differentiated or stratified by reputation rather than horizontally differentiated by function (Teichler 2008).

Horizontal differentiation is possible through specialisation – higher education institutions offering different and usually more focused academic programmes. This approach is what the DHET opted for in the early 2000s. Essop (2020: 8) argues that the situation on the ground is far from what the DHET had hoped for. Instead, higher education has become highly homogenous in terms of function (all universities teach and conduct research) and differentiated by reputation (all universities aspire to be world-class that excel at teaching and research), but inevitably some universities clearly outperform others and are more attractive to prospective students. This type of differentiation is not of the kind that is suited to respond to the country's social and economic needs.

The twin challenges of homogenisation vertical stratification of the higher education sector were to be expected in the South African system given at least two prevailing conditions. First, are the sector wide incentives introduced in 2005 to promote knowledge production and which have created the functionally homogenous sector. Competition for

scarce resources, including government funding forces universities to emulate and copy those that are perceived to be winning the competition. This results in them resembling the pacesetter institutions, a process that is referred to as 'organisational isomorphism'. This applies especially to the previously disadvantaged universities which tend to aspire to be like the more resource-endowed and therefore more reputable universities (Scott 2014). In general, homogeneity or isomorphism is driven by global aspirations to become 'research universities' (Geschwind & Brostrom 2021) because research brings in more income to institutions, and contributes immensely to the public images and reputations of institutions. An analysis of the mission and vision statements of the twenty six public universities confirms this, as all of them express aspirations to be world-class research universities. The DHET's 2014 policy statement on differentiation (DHET 2014) acknowledge the importance of funding as a mechanism for steering the system towards greater diversity (for example, more institutions in the system differentiated by function specialisation). However, to-date adjustments to how universities are funded by government have not been made, and concerns are mounting as more funding is directed towards providing student funding through National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Consequently, universities are looking to research as an avenue for increasing income.

Second, it is highly likely that at an organisational (university) level, stratification will become more entrenched and more pronounced as universities

in positions of strength, arising from historical and other factors, will accumulate more at the expense of those at the other end of the spectrum (the so-called 'Matthew Effect'<sup>3</sup>). As the DHET acknowledges: "The impact of apartheid-era underfunding and underdevelopment of those universities historically designated to serve the educational needs of black South Africans, continues to shape the institutional typologies within the higher education system" (DHET 2021: 32).

### Defining the new institutional types in South African higher education

One strategy to relieve enrolment pressure, grow the higher education sector, and, possibly ensure greater relevance through articulation and differentiation, is to create new higher education institutions. Two new universities were established by government in 2013 – Sol Plaatje University (in Kimberley) and the University of Mpumalanga (in Mbombela). In the case of these universities, relevance to society was ensured not so much by way of what the universities were intended to offer, but by locating them in communities hitherto underserved by the higher education sector. A third 'new' university came into being in 2014 when the DHET reversed a previous institutional merger

of the former Medical University of Southern Africa, and the University of the North, to create the University of Limpopo. The reversal of this merger gave birth to Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University.

The provision for the establishment of the new two higher education institutional types could be considered as an expression of intent to expand the higher education sector, and ensure greater relevance through articulation and differentiation. The Higher Education Amendment Act No. 9 of 2016 (Republic of South Africa 2017) defines the new institutional types as follows:

(i) by the insertion after the definition of "higher education" of the following definition:

" **'higher education college'** means a higher education institution providing higher education, but with a limited scope and range of operations and which meets the criteria for recognition as a higher education college as prescribed by the Minister under section 69(d) and—

(a) established, merged, converted, deemed to have been established or declared as a public higher education college; or

(b) registered as a private higher education college, in terms of this Act;";

(v) by the insertion after the definition of "university" of the following definition:

greater increments of recognition for particular scientific contributions to scientists or scientific organisations of considerable reputation, and the withholding of such recognition from those who have yet to make their mark (Merton 1973).

<sup>3</sup> The 'Mathew Effect' is a term coined by Robert Merton, a leading American sociologist of science in the mid-20th century. It refers to the biblical passage Matthew 13:12: "From unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath." The Matthew Effect is the accrual of

“ ‘**university college**’ means a higher education institution providing higher education, but with a limited scope and range of operations and which meets the criteria for recognition as a university college as prescribed by the Minister under section 69(d) and—

(a) established, merged, converted, deemed to have been established or declared as a public university college; or

(b) registered as a private university college, in terms of this Act;”.

(Republic of South Africa 2017: 4, 6)

At least two points are worth noting from the definitions provided in the Act. First, the Act says very little about the differences between the two new institutional types. Second, it is clear that the scope and operations of both higher education colleges and university colleges will be more limited than that of a ‘fully-fledged’ university. In what follows, these observations are explored in greater detail and in relation to the issue of the size and shape of the South African higher education system. Particular attention will be given to the possible effects of these institutional types on the system, that is, the issue of how the new institutional types relate to a more articulated and/or differentiated higher education system.

At first, and perhaps even second, glance it is difficult to see what the differences between the two new institutional types are. Both offer higher education qualifications more limited in scope and range of operations compared with universities. The only clear difference stated in the Act is that

only a university college may confer a professorship or an honorary degree, or use the title of ‘chancellor’ for its titular head and vice-chancellor for ‘principal’ (Republic of South Africa 2016: 42). The DHET further indicates that over a period of time, a university college may be established as a university once it has developed to the extent that it meets the requirements to be established as such (DHET 2021).

The minutes of a parliamentary committee meeting to discuss the amendments to the Higher Education Act provide some clarity: “University colleges are introduced as a mechanism to enable the developmental growth of new universities under the supervision of another identified university. Higher education colleges have a more limited range in anticipation of the incorporation of agricultural colleges into higher education” (PMG 2016a). However, the minutes of subsequent meetings reveal ongoing confusion and questions about the differences between the new institutional types: “The policy framework must be developed to clarify the roles and responsibilities between higher education colleges, university colleges and universities and the required co-ordination between these new institutional types” (PMG 2016b; see also PMG 2016c, 2016d).

Based only on the minutes of a parliamentary meeting rather than on the Higher Education Amendment Act itself (or any other official statement or policy), it can be assumed that university colleges will be linked to existing universities within the sector, and will be permitted to offer qualifications on behalf of the parent



universities. It remains unclear why this new type of higher education institution is necessary if, as reported in 2015, there were 13 memorandums of understanding between universities and colleges to enable the colleges to offer certificates that were recognised by the universities.<sup>4</sup> It is also unclear why a new institutional type is required to allow for the promotion of colleges to universities if it is possible for successful and ambitious private colleges to apply for university status.

It can also be assumed that higher education colleges will be more independent. Their introduction will create a mechanism for the migration of agricultural (and possibly nursing) colleges into the higher education sector. This can be seen as an attempt to move those colleges currently under the management of provincial governments into and under the control of the DHET. The rationale provided by government is that the move will allow students attending these colleges to access funding from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) (PMG 2021). This is an explanation that has not been accepted by all stakeholders, and has been contested by the Western Cape Provincial Government, in particular, amidst concerns over the increasingly centralised control by the DHET, a department of the national government, over the provision of post-school education and training.

<sup>4</sup> <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/24942/>

<sup>5</sup> See the recently launched Unfurling Post School Education and Training (UPSET) Project in which Durban University of Technology (DUT) will be playing a leading role in the development of Articulation Implementation Plans (AIPs). The project takes as its starting point the fact that articulation is a legislative imperative designed to enable applicants in possession of TVET Colleges qualifications to be admitted into

## Possible effects of the new institutional types

The introduction of the new two institutional types will certainly open new pathways for school-leavers to enter the higher education sector, and from higher education to the labour market. This development should be welcomed. However, the new institutional types do not appear to be designed to function as stepping stones from school system to universities. School-leavers are thus still likely to be presented with a horizontally-arranged, dual carriageway choice of either attending a university or a college rather than a combination of both horizontal and vertical options within the higher education sector, or with the option of easily transferring between colleges and universities specifically, and between some parts of the post-school education and training system and the higher education sector more broadly.<sup>5</sup> This could well be an overlooked opportunity.

The introduction of university colleges in particular could resolve a different aspect of system-level articulation regarding knowledge linkages between TVET colleges and universities.<sup>6</sup> Such linkages provide bidirectional knowledge exchange between colleges and universities, for example, making it possible for the most up-to-date research to be shared by universities, and the latest developments in the world of practice to be

cognate qualifications offered at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), should such applicants meet the requirements. <https://www.dut.ac.za/dut-receives-dhet-funding-of-r7-950-000-to-implement-upset-project/>

<sup>6</sup> The Minister has indicated that closer ties between universities and colleges could be introduced as the 'fifth mandate' of universities. <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/34734/>

shared by the colleges. It seems reasonable to expect that university colleges as progenies of universities are likely to share much closer ties with their parent universities.

The same close relationship between higher education colleges and universities is less apparent. Whether the exchange of knowledge between the institutional types materialises and is beneficial to both remains to be seen. As is the critical issue of whether the quality of the qualifications offered by the new institutional types will be attractive enough for school-leavers to select the new pathways on offer. If not, the establishment of new colleges may not relieve enrolment pressure on universities.

With a limited scope of programme offerings and higher education operations the higher education colleges will effectively be smaller in terms of enrolment numbers. It is therefore unlikely that they will take in significant numbers of students. This means they will not make much of a dent in alleviating enrolment pressure on universities. And, in cases where higher education colleges are established through conversions of existing colleges of agriculture and nursing, for example, they will also not contribute to the growth of the post-school education and training system. They will, however, maintain an alternate pathway through the post-school education and training system but under the auspices of the higher education sub-sector thereby maintaining a modicum of horizontal differentiation through specialisation.

University colleges may improve access but are unlikely to grow the system substantially if they remain limited in scope. They may also create new pathways and be more attractive to prospective students than TVET college sector by virtue of their association with established universities. As such, university colleges will be new organisations in the vertical differentiation and reputation-based stratification of the higher education system, and will not contribute to developing a more horizontally differentiated higher education system.

## Conclusion

The above exploration of what form the proposed new higher education institutional types may assume, and how they will fit into the post-school education and training system, in general, and the higher education sector, in particular, reveals that much remains uncertain about the value they will add to the higher education sector. There are indications that their introduction could create new horizontal differentiation in the system by introducing new specialisations which, in turn, could create new pathways to the labour market. However, these more specialised higher education institutions are likely to be smaller and will therefore do little to increase participation in higher education. Furthermore, it seems more likely that the proposed new institutional types will entrench a vertical differentiation within the higher education sector, which is against the national policy position adopted two decades ago. This raises the following critical question with regard to the introduction of the two new institutional types in the

South African higher education system: Are they intended to create a higher education sector that mirrors the country's unequal society, or are they intended to create a higher education system that will change society for the better?

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