Council on Higher Education

Size and Shape Task Team
Discussion Document

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Introduction

South Africa has demonstrated its capacity to purposefully, energetically and creatively establish a democracy after decades of political strife. South Africa is now presented with a momentous opportunity to firmly establish itself as a developing democracy in Africa by building and consolidating its political transition.

Drawing on our location and the positive aspects of our history and experiences, higher education has a critical role to play in contributing to economic and social development, an equitable society and a robust democracy through ensuring excellence and equity in teaching, learning and research.

As a higher education leader has commented:

Today more than ever before in human history the wealth - or poverty - of nations depends on the quality of higher education. Those with a larger repertoire of skills and a greater capacity for learning can look forward to lifetimes of unprecedented fulfillment. But in the coming decades the poorly educated face little better than the dreary prospects of lives of quiet desperation.

This document sets out some of the ideas that inform the thinking of the CHE’s Task Team on the Size and Shape of the higher education system. It has been developed as a means to engage the key constituencies in higher education in a discussion about how to reconfigure the higher education system in South Africa.

The document is also available more widely to other interested parties and the public at large through the Internet.

As you are aware from the earlier communication with you, the Task Team has been charged with the responsibility of producing recommendations about the reconfiguring of the higher education system [now known as the Size and Shape question] by the 30 June 2000.

The Task Team believes that this presents us with an opportunity to make an important intervention in the process of reconfiguring the higher education system. The Task Team has little doubt that the higher education system must play a central role in national, regional and local development and also in the development of the continent. There is a vast potential in the institutions of higher education. We must harness this and collectively build on the many positive aspects and achievements of our institutions thus far.

The Task Team affirms that it regards the purposes and goals of higher education, as expressed in the legislation and the White Paper on higher education, to be binding on the Task Team and consistent with its mandate. The Task Team’s work must advance these goals and purposes and endeavour to give practical effect to these.
Systemic Dysfunction

The Task Team is however also aware that the pervasive dysfunctionality that characterizes parts of the higher education system reduces its great potential. There is wide agreement about these dysfunctionalities and their implications for cost-effectiveness and efficiency, and also equity.

In this document we do not set these out in great detail but point to the most notable characteristics of such dysfunction and other factors that impact on the system. These include:

- The very serious decline in the rate of enrollment of new entrants into higher education as a whole. The enrollments predicted by the NCHE have not materialised. Indeed, there has been a dramatic decline in many institutions. These declines are moreover likely to have crippling effects on the ability of several institutions to continue to fund their activities because of the relationship between enrollments and funding. And the serious decline in the retention rates of students from the first to succeeding years of study has compounded the problem of overall enrollment patterns.
- The extremely poor graduation and yearly pass rates relative to overall student numbers at most institutions.
- The problems of funding are exacerbated by the inability of many institutions to effectively collect student fees with the resultant increases in student debt.
- The largely unregulated growth of the provision of private higher education has had profound effects on the public higher education system.
- The skewed racial and gender distribution of students in the various fields of study and the skewed patterns of distribution of students in the various fields of study [Science, Engineering and Technology, Business and Commerce, Education and the Humanities]
- The extremely poor race and gender distribution [in aggregate numbers and in many disciplines and at different levels] of academic and administrative staff.
- The extremely low research outputs of most institutions and the uneven levels of outputs even in those institutions which evince a higher ratio of research outputs relative to other institutions.
- The fragile management and administration capacity in many institutions and the persistence of crises in some of these.

The Task Team wishes to stress that its orientation is not to direct its energies at resolving the many real or potential crises which affect many institutions, some more severely than others. It is to develop recommendations, which will have a long term, and sustaining value and which will hopefully also lead to the resolution of the causes of the crises in the first place.

A coherent, co-ordinated and integrated national system

In approaching its work the Task Team makes the assumption that a coherent, co-ordinated and integrated national higher education system must be achieved over time. Such a system is espoused in the White Paper because the country simply cannot continue to function on the basis of a fragmented and unplanned set of institutional roles.

The national system must respond to the requirements of a society emerging from a long history of structural inequality and underdevelopment. It must respond as best it can to the challenges of social, economic and cultural development and encompass development across a broad range of areas of knowledge. Higher education’s primary role is to develop the thinking and intellectual capabilities of our society and through such development to address and resolve the range of economic [including labour market], social, cultural, political and other challenges faced by society as a whole. It must do so at a
national, regional and local level and indeed contribute in some measure to the development of the continent.

Moreover, higher education must play a central role in meeting the difficult realities of international competition in an environment of rapid global change, driven, as it is, by momentous changes in information and knowledge production systems.

Important Principles, Goals and Outcomes

The Task Team is mindful of the specific context in which South African higher education institutions have evolved and of their geo-political origins. It is committed to the establishment of a system which strives to achieve equity and aspires to excellence as intrinsic to the achievement of meaningful equity. It is also committed to achieving vast improvements in the quality of higher education teaching and learning, research, community service and innovation. The Task Team is aware that dramatic improvements must be achieved in regard to the efficiency of the outputs of the system as a whole and that in order for this to happen the areas of dysfunction so pervasive to the system would have to be addressed.

A differentiated national system

A coherent, co-ordinated and integrated national system is not a uniform system. Differentiation in higher education is a characteristic of most national systems of higher education. In the South African context, differentiation has been either along socially unacceptable lines or has been essentially of a horizontal nature.

Differentiation, however, is necessary for a number of reasons. These include the need:

- To enable institutions to find their niches in a way as to enhance their ability to meet national needs and to compete in the higher education environment.
- To provide much greater levels of access to the diverse population of South Africa to address the historical barriers which characterized the system under apartheid.
- To increase overall participation levels in higher education in South Africa.
- To provide a diversity of programme offerings to learners across the system.
- To ensure that different methods of teaching, learning and assessment are encouraged in the higher education system.
- To provide for and to encourage diversity in the levels and contents of learning programmes.
- To provide for diversity in the modes of learning available to learners.
- To allow for different criteria for admission to the diverse institutions in such a system.
- To provide for flexibility and innovation throughout the system of higher education so that it can be continuously renewed and reinvigorated.
- To produce an educational system whose outcomes are qualitatively higher than the present system in South Africa.

It is the Task Teams belief that the establishment of a variety of institutions, which will meet the diverse needs aforesaid, can achieve such a qualitatively better system.
Institutional Types

The set of institutional types at present under consideration by the Task Team seek a meaningful realisation of higher education goals in relation to equity, quality and cost-effectiveness. This is achieved, by amongst others, increased institutional differentiation, increased and widened access to higher education, improved through-put and success rates and establishing a single co-ordinated higher education system with effective measures countering institutional drift.

Institutional differentiation is achieved by means of differentiation based on the levels of qualifications offered in institutions (vertical differentiation) as well as some measure of differentiation based on the types of qualifications offered at institutions (horizontal differentiation). In addition differentiation is based on a number of qualitative and quantitative institutional characteristics. The latter would include characteristics such as:

- The education and training focus of institutions, i.e. single purpose or multi-purpose;
- The sector (i.e. private or public) in which the institution operates;
- The NQF level to which qualifications will be offered;
- The types of qualifications that will be offered and what will be the main emphasis of the curriculum;
- The mix of bachelor and B Tech types of qualifications in institutions;
- The admission requirements that will be associated with the various types of institutions;
- The minimum full time equivalent (FTE) enrolment levels and, for institutions engaging in post-graduate study, the minimum post-graduate FTE enrolments;
- The minimum FTE enrolments in each of three broad fields of study i.e. science, engineering and technology, commerce and the broad humanities;
- For those institutions engaging in high level research, the minimum percentage of academic staff having doctorates and the minimum annual research output per academic staff member.

The institutional configuration being considered by the Task Team is based in large part on the introduction of a four year first bachelor's degree curriculated in a two plus two structure. Generally, the first two years of the four year first bachelor’s degree would provide for the development of required generic and foundation skills and would include some broad discipline and multi-discipline based knowledge. A number of two year curriculum packages are envisaged, from which those learners wishing to exit after two years of study, and those learners wishing to continue with the third and fourth specialization years of the four year bachelor degree, would have to choose. The curriculum of the two year associate bachelor's degree for those learners wishing to exit the higher education system after two years would include a strong vocational component.

Regarding higher education, some institutions will offer the two year qualifications only. Others will offer the two year qualification as part of a two plus two curriculated four year degree. Yet others would only offer the four year and higher level qualifications.

Admission requirements will differ amongst the various institutional types. For example, institutions offering the two year qualification only would have very open admission requirements. Students completing this qualification successfully would, if they desired, be able to transfer to years three and four of institutions offering the four year bachelors degree only. Similarly, institutions which offer the four year bachelor’s and higher degrees would have stricter admission requirements.
Years three and four of the four year bachelors degree would include a strong emphasis on single discipline and multi-discipline based specialization including an introduction to elementary forms of investigation and research methodology.

Since admission requirements will differ in accordance with the various types of institutions, the level of involvement in academic development programmes will also differ. Institutions with open or relatively relaxed admission requirements would be funded for extensive involvement in academic development programmes while those with stricter admission requirements would not receive such funding. This represents both a more efficient and a more effective way of dealing with inadequately prepared students.

The broad outlines of the set of institutional types presently being considered by the Task Team are presented in Figure 1 (see overleaf).

The Task Team has not, as yet, considered what the desired distribution of numbers of students in higher education should be across the various institutional types.

Figure 1: MODEL OF DIFFERENTIATION AND INSTITUTIONAL TYPES

Each of these institutional types would be established on the basis of specific criteria which include:

- the Missions of any such institutional type together with the outcomes which are envisaged in such a Mission and the ways in which the performance of the institution will be measured relative to its mission
- the admissions requirements to such an institution
- the institutional outputs and qualification levels of such institutions
- the nature of the curriculum
- the characteristics and level of its research outputs including requirements relating to critical mass in respect of the number of academic staff with doctoral degrees and a high level of research output
- the requirements in respect of minimum student numbers and their distribution across the fields of learning
- the qualifications and expertise of staff

It is crucial and essential to regard the work of each type of institution as of equal value. This would mean, for instance, that teaching costs would be calculated in the same way across the system.

The transition to a new institutional format
The Task Team believes that stringent procedures would have to be developed to evaluate the work of institutions as they presently exist against a set of redefined institutional missions, outcomes and performance measures. It will not be assumed that any institution will automatically qualify to be in one or other category of institution.

The Task Team is equally mindful of the fact that other developmental measures would have to be undertaken to support the transition to the institutional format described above. The Task Team is aware of the need to address the serious capacity constraints that could be impediments to the process of change.

The Task Team would, for instance make a case for the necessary resources for areas such as:

- the enhancement of academic development programmes
- the enhancement of leadership, change management and administrative capacity
- the development of the curriculum in a programme based system
- the enhancement of teaching and learning facilities, including access to information and communication technologies.

The Task Team is sharply aware that it must also argue the case for the resources necessary for the reconfiguring of the system. However, it has to adopt a realistic approach to the question of resources because of the limitations of the present budget for higher education.

Conclusion

The Task Team is mindful that the approach adopted here needs to be elaborated further, especially in certain crucial respects. First, whatever the model of differentiation, such model needs to be considered thoroughly in relation to the existing configuration of higher education institutions. Second, a detailed proposal needs to be developed concerning the possible modalities for bringing into being a new differentiated system.

We cannot avoid the difficult choices and tough decisions that have to be made in the national interest and in the pursuit of a higher education system characterised by the dynamic impulses of quality, excellence and equity.

This document seeks to foster meaningful and productive debate about the future of the higher education system and contribute to its long-term reconstruction.