

## PART 4

# THE NEW TERRAIN

## INTRODUCTION

In the next two chapters, the new terrain of South African higher education, that emerged after 1994, is examined through the lenses of several different sets of theories about higher education transformation that were explicit in the conceptual framework on which new policies were based.

Policy-making is a form of hypothesis testing, according to some policy analysts. And the period after 1994 in South Africa was a time for testing. But the critical question is: exactly what theories about higher education transformation were being put to the test? As seen in Section 1, the goals of higher education reform included increased access, responsiveness to the political, social and economic needs of a post-apartheid country, and a single, co-ordinated system that would be more efficiently and effectively run.

The prevailing theories of higher education reform in the early 1990s suggested that systems seeking these goals would need policies that promoted:

- Diversification of the types of institutions operating within the system (that is, increasing the range of types of institutions).
- Diversification in the structures of these institutions.
- Diversification in the types of research and teaching they carried out (that is, within any given type of institution, having that institution develop a greater range of specialised programmes in which it is engaged).

Goedegebuure (1996) summarised the case for diversity:

Diversity is seen as a good because it supposedly increases the range of choices for students, it opens higher education up to all of society, it matches education to the needs and abilities of individual students, it enables and protects specialisation within the system, and it meets the demands of an increasingly complex social order. (p9)

Consequently, in many countries policy initiatives have been advanced that seek to increase institutional diversity either by promoting the development of new types of institutions, such as the emergence of private universities and specialised institutes in Latin America, Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe in the later decades of the 20th century, or by the evolution of existing institutions through increasing differentiation of the types of programmes they offer and the modalities through which they are made available to new types of students, such as working adults.

The following chapters trace the contours of a differentiating dynamic within the programmes and institutions, both public and private, of the South African higher education system. They account for this in part by reference to Clark's (1996)

explanation that this is an inevitable (and desirable) consequence of the development of high levels of specialisation in knowledge fields in the post-war years, but also as a response to particular policy conditions (de-regulation) and market opportunities (widening access to non-traditional students; students at a distance; career-related short courses, etc.).

As Neave (1996), Meek (1996) and Van Vught (1996) point out, however, there are often factors that work against the growth of diversification and differentiation. These factors include the professionalisation of education and training and the rise of national accreditation structures. In some geographic regions, such as Western Europe, the growth of supranational structures tends to promote structural homogeneity in order to facilitate intra-regional co-ordination and collaboration among institutions and within economies of increasingly mobile workers and professionals. Professionalism and accreditation, because of their need for standardisation through quality assurance and other accountability procedures, tend to reduce curricular diversity (Goedegebuure et al., 1996).

So, while one set of theories offers reasons for expecting dynamic growth within institutions and systems, another set offers reasons why it may not happen. The result of pressures driving higher education systems and their constituent institutions to be more like each other is referred to as isomorphism, and it may result from mimicry (that is, institutions having similar programmes), or coercion. Mimetic isomorphism is the result of institutions mimicking the behaviour of each other in order to minimise risk in highly competitive environments. When institutions are highly dependent upon a narrow range of resource providers, such as an education ministry or a very homogeneous population, they will tend to have similar programmes, structures and operating norms. This is apparently what has happened in Australia, according to Meek (1996; 2001) and in Holland, according to Maassen and Potman (1990).

Coercive isomorphism is the result of pressures from the environment, principally government policies, that force institutions to become more similar, thus reducing diversity in a higher education system. Governments might act in this way in order to promote efficiency, on the assumption that too much diversity is inefficient. Another source of coercive or normative isomorphism is from academic cultures intent on preserving long-standing values and norms.

Either way, as Meek (1996; 2001) indicates, this tendency often results in less diversity and differentiation.

One way to gauge whether the terrain is changing is to classify institutions according to differentiating characteristics and observe whether there are shifts in the number of institutions in particular categories, or whether the number of categories change. Policies frequently will have the intention of causing certain shifts. But sometimes the shifts may be the result of other factors. In recent years, globalisation has been cited as a cause for shifts in the typology of higher education institutions in many countries. For example, the rapid rise in private higher education institutions in some countries, and in particular the growth of corporate universities, have been attributed to the pressures of growing international economic competition – pressures with which slow-changing public institutions have not been able to keep up.

Another source of institutional shifts across the categories of a typology have been changes in institutional leadership and institutional culture. The rise of the 'entrepreneurial university' in recent years is an example of a 'type' change in the terrain of higher education.

The next two chapters examine how the terrain of South African higher education has changed, and whether the changes were the result of new policies or globalisation or shifts in institutional culture.

In Chapter 10, Fehnel provides an assessment of the rapidly changing private higher education sector – a type of institution that was resurrected from extinction in South Africa by a combination of factors, the most important of which was new legislation that permitted private, degree and diploma granting institutions to be re-established after almost a century.

In Chapter 11, Cloete and Fehnel examine the dynamics behind shifts in the terrain and suggest a new, emergent typology of institutions. While this clearly differs from the apartheid typology, they question whether the new terrain appropriately meets the needs of South Africa, and suggest that while government policy has more influence with certain types of institutions, with other types of institutions, other factors may be more critical in bringing about desired shifts between categories.

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