CHAPTER 11

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THE EMERGENT LANDSCAPE

Ever since the South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) issued its report ‘Towards a New Higher Education Landscape’ in June 2000, the higher education community has been occupied with debates about reshaping the terrain. Although there was some debate about it, the CHE proposal was not the scenery envisaged by the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) and the White Paper on higher education transformation (Department of Education, 1997), which stated that: ‘The Ministry of Education favours an integrated and co-ordinated system of higher education, but not a uniform system. 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. … The risk the Ministry wishes to avoid is a laissez-faire proliferation of higher education programmes by an increasing range of providers, without the benefit of a planning framework and without adequate safeguards to ensure the quality of provision. This would almost certainly result in the unplanned blurring of institutional roles and functions …’ (2.37; 2.38).

Drawing on preceding chapters in Section 2, the analysis in this chapter shows that a proliferation of programmes by an increasing range of providers did indeed occur outside a planning framework. It also shows how institutions responded to the changing policy environment and the market, and describes the emergence of a new landscape that is beginning to break the apartheid mould. Appendix 4 provides a statistical overview of the 36 public institutions in the South African higher education system at the end of 2000. Figures are provided for each institution by student headcount, broken down by mode of delivery (contact/distance), black and female student enrolment, as well as enrolment by major fields of study.

1. HARD BOUNDARIES, REAL DRIFT

Prior to 1994, government policy made a clear distinction between academic and career/vocational programmes and the institutions within which these were offered – universities and technikons, respectively. A further boundary existed between institutions dedicated to providing ‘contact’ or ‘distance’ programmes. These hard boundaries between academic versus vocational, and contact versus distance started blurring in the post-1994 period.

1.1. Programme differentiation

As was discussed in Chapter 8 on curriculum, a number of institutions embarked on considerable curricular reforms, informed by the NCHE policy proposals and the new National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The net results of these efforts seem to have been both increased differentiation of curricula in the more enterprising institutions, including the development of many more interdisciplinary courses, and the beginning of ‘programme drift’: some universities started offering more vocationally oriented programmes in order to attract new students, and some of the technikons began offering B Tech and postgraduate degrees such as MBAs and other postgraduate courses that were previously offered only by universities. Modes of delivery became more flexible as some residential institutions began offering distance education programmes, and some institutions started mixing distance and contact delivery modes, thus breaking down the old rigid distinction between the two. In short, at the programme level in public institutions there was suddenly more differentiation in curricula and a much greater variety of programme options for educational consumers to consider. For the institutions, however, including the private providers, the price was increased uncertainty about their mission.

Clark (1996) and others argue that programme differentiation is not only inevitable; it is desirable because it has the effect of increasing access, responsiveness, and fiscal diversity – all generally regarded as ‘virtues’ of education policy. Where previously there had been a narrow range of programmes, there quickly emerged a wide range of course options and delivery options, particularly in the urban areas. By 2001 students had a range of programme and institutional choices unprecedented in the history of South African higher education.

Clark (1996) provides a useful conceptual guide to understanding the dominant trend towards higher levels of programme differentiation within institutions. This trend started in relation to the increasing specialisation of knowledge in the post-war years of the mid-twentieth century. Specialisation and the resulting processes of differentiation taking place at the level of academic disciplines have had the effect of making some institutions of higher education more capable of responding to increasingly diverse demands than others in a context where economic, political and cultural systems within nations have grown and become more elaborate in recent decades.

Chapter 8 suggests that it was not cognitive changes in the disciplines that provided a strong stimulus for the introduction of certain types of programmes, but market pressures to attract students and notions of what employers require, particularly within a context of globalisation. In some institutions this coincided with a certain reading, or misreading, of what new government policy prescribed regarding the introduction of flexible, modular programmes. The chapter also suggests that in the South African context, capacity is a crucial factor: institutions with effective leaders and well functioning management systems could choose to embark on curriculum reform, or choose not to, regardless of government policy or market pressures.

As the chapters on funding, students and curriculum show, however, these processes of differentiation and diversification have not been an unproblematic good. Institutions