

The Future of South African Research Universities

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In recent decades a widely discussed aspect of higher education policy has been the relationship between universities at the center and those at the periphery—that is, between universities of the highly developed countries and those of developing countries. The debate has focused on the universities in developing countries and their disadvantage in the highly sophisticated, rapidly changing international or global knowledge network. The case of South Africa's research universities illustrates the dilemmas.

It is generally agreed that only a relatively few central, research-oriented universities are the producers in the international knowledge system. The peripheral higher education sectors in developing countries—thinly resourced, operating under adverse conditions and struggling with a lack of textbooks, libraries, and laboratory facilities—are identified as second- or third-level distributors of knowledge. Moreover, the higher education systems in countries such as South Africa often live a schizophrenic existence looking both outward and inward as they try to serve the twin masters of national relevance and international credibility.

Research and Development

South Africa is in a unique position on the African continent. Its wealth and academic traditions permit it to have “first world” universities if it wishes to do so. South Africa is a very minor player in the world of research and development (R&D). Its total R&D expenditure in 1992 was about 0.223 percent of the total world spending on R&D and it has about 0.282 percent of the world's R&D scientists and engineers. However, on the African continent South Africa is the major player, accounting for about 60 percent of all R&D expenditures and about 28 percent of all R&D scientists and engineers. As it does in R&D spending, South African universities dominate research on the continent. For example, South African university faculty publish approximately 44 percent more articles in the sciences than academics in Egypt, which is the second-most prolific country in Africa.

However, as is to be expected, the research capacity of South African universities is not evenly distributed but is, rather, concentrated in six universities: Cape Town, Witwatersrand, Natal, Pretoria, Stellenbosch, and the Orange Free State. It is evident these six universities dominate R&D in South African higher education. Moreover,

by most commonly accepted benchmarks (e.g., comprehensive faculties, extensive graduate and professional programs, R&D expenditures, faculty publications, etc.) several of South Africa's universities have the potential to be the only international-standard, research-oriented institutions, for the immediate future, on the entire continent.

Clearly several of these six universities, for whatever grim historical reasons, have the capacity, skills, and experience to provide support for policy development and implementation. These universities also have the infrastructure to supply an important portion of the basic and applied research needed to build the economy and help the nation meet the needs of its citizens. For South African higher education policymakers the questions are clear. Do you want to have institutions that seek to be at or near the center of the world knowledge system? Does the nation need such institutions? Can it afford them? Can South Africa prosper without them?

These six universities have the potential to become powerful economic engines and great magnets for attracting badly needed international investment capital. Maintenance and enhancement of their role would appear to warrant special consideration by both the South African government and the international donor communities. Unfortunately, this may not be occurring.

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The Impact of U.S. Assistance

U.S. Agency for International Development support for South African higher education may not help to ensure that South Africa will have institutions at the center of the world knowledge network. On the contrary, the effect of that support—as currently designed—may be to place South Africa securely at the periphery. In accordance with the South Africa's Higher Education Act, U.S. aid to South African higher education is focused on trying to improve the quality of education at more than 15 historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs). In many ways, this focus may be quite appropriate. However, because the agency excludes the research-oriented universities this approach may not provide a basis for a sustainable reform and enhancement of quality in South African higher education.

Enrollment in South Africa's 21 universities is dropping dramatically at a time it was expected to expand. In the two years preceding 1998 enrollments declined by ap-

proximately 10 percent, to 352,000, and are expected to drop even more in the next couple of years. The HDIs have borne the brunt of these declines, as far fewer black students are qualifying for university admission. Moreover, the black students who do qualify are deserting the HDIs and enrolling at the historically white institutions—especially the more research-oriented universities whose degrees are perceived (correctly, by almost any measure) to be of higher quality.

Increasingly, South Africa's more research-oriented universities are being called upon to educate the nation's

black elite while providing the technical expertise and research required for economic growth. South Africa needs to find a way to provide these universities with the support necessary to maintain their critical missions and to keep at least a few South African higher education institutions near the center of the knowledge system. ■

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Reform in Hungarian Higher Education

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Hungarian universities, like those in other Eastern European countries, have roots in the Prussian model of a strong state apparatus and a semiautonomous professoriate. During the four decades of Soviet occupation, state dominance was strengthened in an increasingly centralized system. A second important structural characteristic of Eastern Europe generally and Hungary in particular is a relatively high level of institutional fragmentation—that is, the existence of many small institutions offering a limited number of programs. The Soviet years saw a significant increase in the number of small, specialized institutions and also a separation of the research function from universities into scores of research institutes controlled by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. These legacies of state dominance and institutional fragmentation have important implications today for the shape of reform.

Hungarian higher education reform in the 1990s has been driven by two primary forces. The first is the government's desire to have *more for less*—to expand access to higher education but at a lower cost. Expansion has been driven largely by a desire to “catch up with Europe” in both economic and educational terms. The second driving force is a reform platform formulated by reformers in both Hungary and the World Bank. The bank's increasing interest in loans to develop human capital was welcomed by some in Hungary as a means to finance badly needed improvements in the higher education infrastructure. A World Bank loan of \$150 million, negotiated in 1997, was intended to fund infrastructure needs and technical assistance for programmatic reforms.

The objectives of the joint government-World Bank reform program were to increase higher education's respon-

siveness to changing social and economic conditions, to use resources more efficiently, to mobilize nonstate resources and to create a more equitable financing system. Elements of the reform program range from the integration or merger of smaller institutions to a more flexible and transferable curriculum.

One element of reform, and a major focus of controversy, is institutional mergers. The government and the World Bank have been interested primarily in eliminating duplication and achieving economies of scale. The government stipulated that mergers would be made on a geographic rather than mission basis—that is, dissimilar institutions in common geographical areas would be merged rather than similar universities in different locations. An important implication of geographically based mergers—one that is rarely discussed at the governmental policy level—is a breakdown of the binary system and merger of different organizational cultures.

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An interesting dynamic in the processes shaping integration is the issue of who decides on the specific mergers. Under the previous government, proposals submitted by institutions were reviewed by a newly established coordinating body for higher education, with the final determination then being made by the government. Believing that this essentially bottom-up process had produced less than optimal results, the current government took steps to centralize the process within the ministry to a greater extent. The current integration plan calls for 41 university-level institutions being merged into 17 universities and 22 college-level institutions being merged into 13 colleges.

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