

A photograph of graduates in black caps and gowns with gold tassels, seen from behind, against a bright sunset background. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a strong lens flare and silhouetting the graduates.

THE STATE OF TRANSFORMATION IN SOUTH AFRICA'S PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

RESEARCH REPORT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



higher education
& training

Department:
Higher Education and Training
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



MINISTERIAL OVERSIGHT
COMMITTEE ON
TRANSFORMATION IN
SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC
UNIVERSITIES (TOC)



Ministerial Oversight Committee on Transformation in the South African Public Universities (TOC)

THE STATE OF TRANSFORMATION IN SOUTH AFRICA'S PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

RESEARCH REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prepared by the Human Sciences Research Council:
Thierry M Luescher, Bongive Mncwango, Samuel N Fongwa, Thelma Oppelt, Zama Mthombeni and
Mark Paterson on behalf of Ministerial Oversight Committee on Transformation in
the South African Public Universities (TOC)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Transformation Oversight Committee under the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) commissioned the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) to investigate the state of transformation in the public higher education system. Understanding how large a task this might be, it asked the HSRC team to focus on the complete set of 2018 and 2019 annual reports of South Africa's 26 public universities. This document presents the findings from the analysis of these annual reports.

Since the introduction of democracy in 1994, policy and legislative efforts have reconfigured the institutional landscape of higher education from a highly unequal, racialised and fragmented one to a more coherent yet diverse system. In the intervening 27 years, many advances and achievements in relation to access and success; equity; quality; and funding have been recorded by the country's public universities. However, context-specific transformation challenges remain in every university and a deep transformation of the sector, which has been shaped by the legacies of apartheid-era policies and structures, remains elusive.

Reflecting the scale and extent of the legacy inherited by the post-apartheid state, the "decolonisation" and #FeesMustFall student campaigns of 2015/16 as well as the Second National Transformation Summit of 2015 successfully brought to the fore the transformation issues which continued to bedevil the higher education landscape and underscored the urgency of the country's incomplete social justice agenda. Confirming this message, analysts have pointed to a number of other significant problems which suggest a broad failure to transform universities, including skewed student enrolments and a stalled transformation of student bodies in most institutions; inequitable academic progress and success by race, gender and academic discipline; high dropout rates; concerns over the funding and affordability of higher education; ongoing contestation around language policies practices; untransformed, irrelevant and Euro-centric curricula; outdated and ineffective teaching practices; parochial and exclusionary institutional and campus cultures impacting negatively on the student and staff experience; and the relatively small proportion of black and female academics, particularly at the senior and professorial level.

Beyond what happens in the university itself, a key issue has been inequitable employment outcomes for students. Analysts have expressed concern that massification within the context of global and national higher education systems shaped to meet the needs of business in a free-market economy could entrench inequality between elite universities, which may continue to produce liberally educated professionals with the international, interdisciplinary, and intercultural skills and sensibilities required to navigate an ever more complex and connected world; and less-resourced bedrock institutions, which will end up producing vulnerable, vocational functionaries whose job prospects will depend on their ability to service an increasingly unstable economic order.

Circumstances brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic have also exacerbated historic inequalities. Access, while theoretically unchanged relative to the pre-pandemic situation, has practically been compromised. The increased use of online and blended learning approaches during the pandemic

has shone a bright light on the large numbers of students who have experienced difficulties in accessing computers and other devices, as well as the adequate network bandwidth and sufficient data, to connect them to their institutions. While universities across the globe and in Africa sent their students home and implemented various forms of emergency remote teaching and learning models, many students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, were confronted by public infrastructure and online network shortfalls, challenging social-cultural expectations, and familial home environments which were not always conducive to higher learning.

In this context, the present study sought to produce research to foster a clearer understanding of the current state of the transformation in South Africa's 26 public universities, and compile a report that could advise the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation on appropriate policies and strategies to expedite the pace of transformation in the sector.

Transformation in higher education may broadly be defined in line with the core principles articulated in the 1997 Education White Paper 3: equity and redress; democratisation; development; quality; effectiveness and efficiency; academic freedom; institutional autonomy and public accountability. However, there remains considerable contestation and debate over what transformation actually entails, both as an intellectual and a programmatic enterprise. The term has been narrowly defined to focus mainly on staff and student equity in relation to race and gender, as well as class and disability. A broader definition, it is suggested, encompasses implications for staff and students' experience of higher education; institutional culture; teaching and learning; curricula and pedagogy; research content and methodology; and community engagement; as well as the production of citizens capable of promoting a democratic, ethical and prosperous society. While some analysts highlighted in the past what may appear as inherent contradictions between different transformation imperatives, other analyses have indicated that there is no such contradiction nor need for trade-offs between the principles of equity and development.

In relation to the foregoing context, this study found that South Africa's 26 public universities had adopted quite disparate approaches to the challenge of conceptualising, implementing and measuring transformation as far as evidence from their 2018 and 2019 annual reports indicates. The universities appeared to have produced a body of practice, which, while it may have been guided by the intention to operationalise definitions and related indicators found in higher education policy and the DHET's mandatory reporting requirements, indicated significant variance with the dominant prescriptions of the official transformation framework. The spectrum of implementation choices ranged from the adoption of rote compliance based approaches to the enactment of more holistic and innovative institutional responses. In this regard it should be noted that the challenge of assessing the extent and nature of comprehensive transformation at the institutional level was and continues to be complicated by the complexity and great number of indicators that is required and which is made more impenetrable by a lack of standard indicators and few agreed targets across the system. It is also important to place transformation in the context of the changes that are being wrought in higher education at the international level.

Efforts to transform the higher education sector in the last 27 years may be divided into three periods. During the first period from 1994 to 2003, there was a need to conceptualise transformation for operational purposes – intellectually and programmatically - which eventually turned to a focus on demographic equity in student and staff access in order to redress a legacy of past inequality, along with a number of efficiency and quality concerns. In the second period from 2004 to 2013, the focus was on establishing new institutional arrangements, structures and processes, along with contestation around their implementation, in order to introduce greater efficiency, effectiveness and quality, and produce more equitable configurations and outcomes in higher education in general. Eventually the third period, ushered in by the 2013 White Paper for Post-School Education and Training and reinforced by student movement demands and sector-wide dialogues, has focused on matters of what may be termed "deep transformation" in student and staff experiences of higher education; epistemological equity; and social justice in the context of a rapidly expanding post-school system. In this context, it can be argued that South African public higher education has arrived at the point where it is now addressing the roots of inequity in its quest for a transformed

system and institutions. It is within the context of this third period of “deep transformation” in the public universities that the present research by the HSRC was conceptualised and conducted.

In the context of the historical debate about the meaning of transformation in South African public higher education, five key dimensions of transformation can be distilled as starting points for an operational definition of the concept and its practice at universities, including how these institutions report on their transformation efforts:

1. Governance, leadership and management;
2. Higher education experience;
3. Teaching and learning;
4. Research and knowledge production; and
5. Societal relevance and community engagement.

These become transformation dimensions when cross-referenced with the key principles of transformation outlined by the 1997 Higher Education White Paper, as well as conceptualisations of transformation from the relevant policy and scholarly discourse which highlight the importance of social cohesion and justice; inclusion; and diversity. Broadly, the present HSRC report views transformation as a process of substantive democratisation within higher education to contribute to the broader transformation of society.

In producing its analysis of university transformation efforts according to the five dimensions, the HSRC adapted and augmented the indicators produced by Universities South Africa’s (USAf’s) Transformation Barometer, which is a reporting tool also increasingly used by some of the universities themselves. Substantial but highly uneven progress was reported in relation to transformation in these five aspects of higher education with reference to how the universities conceptualised transformation and their practices and interventions in this regard, as well as the kinds of challenges and successes that they considered relevant.

The different forms of reporting

In addition to analysing the contents of the annual reports in relation to transformation, the HSRC study also analysed *how* the universities reflected on transformation in their annual reports. Although the reporting appeared to be guided by the requirements outlined in the DHET’s Implementation Manual for Reporting by Public Higher Education Institutions of 2014, the universities demonstrated significant flexibility and autonomy in reporting according to their own priorities, contexts and mandate. This flexibility resulted in reports of various lengths, scope and depth. The annual reporting was used by the universities not only as a means of accounting to the Minister, but also as a way of validating their legitimacy, mandate and relevance to society. In this regard, the vastly different forms of presentation of the annual reports – some were glossy and professionally presented and others were little more than Word documents – indicated whether the intended audience was solely the DHET or a broader readership, including external stakeholders such as potential and actual funders and donors.

The extent of variation in reporting among the universities, coupled with the broad range of indicators and (limited number of) benchmarks they employed, made it extremely difficult to readily compare institutional performance across the system. Facilitating possibilities for greater comparability of reporting, it is emphasised here, would lead to the production of much more useful information in the system as the basis for effective decision-making and actions, including in relation to transformation.

The reporting on transformation in the annual reports indicated that most of the universities appeared to be grappling with similar issues. At the same time, it also seems clear that some universities appeared to be prioritising some transformation-related issues more than others. For example, in fulfilling their mandatory

obligation to report on transformation, some universities provided only a one-page account of the governance structures, initiatives and monitoring that they had established, while others provided detailed, extensive accounts of their structures, plans, policies and implementation efforts. Nevertheless, most universities produced content in support of their claims to social legitimacy as relevant and developmentally supportive institutions; or to show that they were addressing their critics and were demographically diverse and inclusive institutions or well on the way to become that.

Governance, leadership and management

The 1997 Education White Paper stated: “transformation of the structures, values and culture of governance” is a precondition for the successful transformation of the higher education system. However, two decades later, in 2016, a South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) report on transformation noted that “the lack of institutional will to transform university cultures in some universities and the poor integration of the transformation projects at all levels of the institutional life” remained a challenge. In relation to the universities’ commitments to transformation, the analysis of the annual reports found that there was a stronger emphasis towards internal matters of equity transformation in some cases and a stronger emphasis on outward-focused relevance in others.

Findings from the analysis of the 2018 and 2019 annual reports

Over the years, serious questions have been asked about the governance value of the Institutional Forums which were established under the 1997 Higher Education Act with a mandate to advise university Councils on equity-related issues and the establishment of rights-based institutional cultures. Many of these forums operate as little more than clearing houses for plans, policies and issues relating to transformation, occasionally offering an opinion on these, and often paying little more than lip service to their duty to provide advice to Council on them. About a fifth of the annual reports indicated that the Institutional Forums were not working as mandated or were actually dysfunctional. At the same time a few activist, diverse and autonomous Institutional Forums appeared to have had an impact, in part as a result of a membership which was anchored in the institutional governance machinery and participated in national structures; and in part due to connections with other key bodies concerned with transformation within the university, such as employment equity forums and transformation units.

Meanwhile, the reports indicated a proliferation of transformation-related structures at universities outside the Institutional Forums, as well as a broad lack of coordination among these, which may have significantly impeded their impact and further undermined the role of the Institutional Forums themselves. In a similar vein, there appeared to have been a proliferation of transformation-related policies, plans and projects/activities, but relatively little consolidation of these. Such proliferation can actually undermine governance. It can create confusion around whether the responsible authority at the institution, for example, the Council, is being correctly advised on the compliance or otherwise of the operational policies being proposed in line with national regulations *and* the university’s own transformation commitments.

One recommendation for creating greater clarity and efficiency at both the institutional and system levels may be for national bodies such as the DHET and the Council on Higher Education (CHE), which will be managing the transformation oversight responsibility in the future, to adopt a greater leadership role, in consultation with the universities, in producing practical policy prescriptions. These could take the form of generic policy templates on key issues, such as inclusivity in relation to sexual orientation and gender diversity or to combat gender-based violence and corruption. This may save the individual universities the effort of having to forge these policies themselves from scratch, which would release institutional resources that may be put to better use indigenising these policies, training champions and campaigning for their implementation. Such work could be undertaken by the Institutional Forum as the appropriately mandated structure.

In addition, system-level advice or guidance on producing a transformation organogram could help institutions to make their governance, leadership and management of transformation more effective, while also facilitating democratisation of the process. A good example of system-level leadership in this respect is USAf's Transformation Barometer, which is increasingly being used by universities to measure their progress – and has the advantage of offering a standard nationwide measure that can enable accurate comparisons among institutions.

The study found that universities' strategic, annual performance and transformation plans were operating within a maze of plans. Again, more effective coordination and consolidation is required. If well-developed and linked to the strategic and annual performance plans, an integrated transformation plan could become a tool for intentionally and systematically consolidating transformation-commitments across a wide range of areas. If it were linked to SMART indicators, dashboards and targets, such a plan could further ensure that the implementation of such commitments would become a mainstream operational priority.

The analysis also indicated that greater attention should be paid to the leadership role of university Senates and Councils, which shape the vision, mission and values of their institutions in promoting transformation. Particular attention should be paid to relevant diversity in the demographics of these bodies' own memberships.

The university reports also acknowledged that student and staff activism could have important transformation outcomes, enhancing access and inclusivity, governance innovation, social cohesion and social justice, and transforming institutional culture. Perhaps surprisingly, several universities reported that in their aftermath, the governance implications of the 2015/16 student protests tended to be positive. Some universities reported that they had improved their approach towards engaging with students; and some reported that the activism had promoted social justice policies including fee-free higher education for poor and working-class students and the insourcing of support staff, which had brought dignity to a "precarious class" (as one university put it). At the same time, the experiences of protest violence by students, security services and police were reported to have left lasting psychological scars among staff and students.

Making the point above about student and staff well-being, it was also evident in the universities' annual reports that a wide variety of strategic initiatives to address sexual harassment, gender-based violence (GBV) and unfair discrimination had been adopted. A number of the institutions reported reviewing and implementing new policies and establishing institutional mechanisms to address the problem with greater urgency.

The reports also revealed the universities' commitment to rooting out unethical and corrupt conduct through efforts which appeared to have produced some positive changes. Reported efforts to tackle corruption included establishing: stronger internal financial controls (including risk and audit committees); policies and procedures to ensure the integrity of Council members; whistle-blowing mechanisms; anti-corruption hotlines; and ombuds to deal with academic-related student complaints. The analysis also revealed that the anti-corruption procedures and tools deployed across the system varied widely; were not consistently applied; and were not always that effective.

Higher education experience

Statistics indicate that African students have gained much greater access to higher education since 1997. With respect to students, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and other funding and academic development initiatives have supported this massive demographic transformation to ensure redress. However, gross enrolment ratios indicate that Africans and Coloureds continue to be underrepresented, including in certain fields of study and certain institutions. In addition, Africans and women, particularly black women, are also underrepresented as academics and managers at the senior level. Creating equitable demographic profiles for the staff and student bodies is not only a transformation

goal in itself; it is also a precondition for changing the institutional culture of a university and the higher education experience for all.

Findings from the analysis of the 2018 and 2019 annual reports

Transformation is often reduced to the notion of equity; and the notion of equity to that of demographic representation. Under this conception, the staff and student demographics in an institution are considered equitable – and by extension, the university is seen as transformed – if they reflect the demographics in the broader society. This is not to say that the equitable representation of black and female students and staff is not an important goal *per se*; however, demographic changes in themselves are not producing a deep, lasting transformation – although at the same time, a lack of demographic change presents a fundamental obstacle to deep transformation, as the SAHRC has argued.

With respect to the question of representivity, the annual reports indicate that a number of universities had acknowledged the importance of diversifying their staff profiles and saw employment equity at all levels as a key aspect of their transformation agenda. The categories applied for determining the diversity of their staff profiles included race and gender; staff category and position; disability; level of qualification; nationality and so forth.

Some of the universities adopted quite fine-grained and yet easily understandable ways of reporting staff gender and race profiles against a set of criteria and benchmarks, which included statistics on provincial or national economically active populations (EAPs), as well as institutional employment equity (EE) targets. Others, however, seemed to adjudge their efforts to transform their staff profiles according to relatively easy targets which were set starting from a low base and bore little or no relation to the EAP. The universities using the more sophisticated measures tended to have a clearer idea of their actual progress with respect to EE and, as a result, had started to target specific population groups (for example, persons with disabilities or senior black women) in their recruitment. Beyond the issue of management, academic and administrative staff, a further important development at several universities was the insourcing of previously outsourced catering, protection, cleaning and gardening services.

The obstacles to maintaining a demographically representative staff complement seemed to vary according to the staff category and level of the positions in question. While the annual reports indicated that the universities had made some progress in changing the equity ratio among their executives, particularly in relation to improving black representation at a senior management level, such redress remained uneven across the universities. African academics were typically greatly underrepresented at historically advantaged institutions and merged institutions with an historically advantaged university (HAU) component, as well as at universities which were historically reserved for Coloureds and Indians. In this context, history seemed to weigh particularly heavily on some historically white universities, such as the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and Stellenbosch University (SU), where there had been insufficient redress in comparison with the successful efforts of newly established universities like Sol Plaatje University (SPU), which was able to establish a fairly demographically representative profile from scratch. Elsewhere, historically disadvantaged universities seemed to have undergone little change in the demographic composition of their academic staff.

Crucially, it should also be noted that although the racial profile of academic staff was a challenge only in some universities, gender parity seemed to be more of a problem across the board.

The universities reported having adopted various policies and interventions to enhance the diversity and quality of their academic staff, such as the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP). The universities also noted the various kinds of support that they offered academic staff members to acquire research qualifications and develop into active researchers (rated and funded by the National Research Foundation/NRF). In some cases, support for emerging researchers to further their studies was paid for by the DHET's University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP).

From the early 1980s and since 1994 throughout the democratic period, the national student body expanded greatly, with the gross enrolment ration (GER) for black students eventually reaching the level of massification in the first half of the 2010s. There has been, however, a lot of variation by institution, campus and discipline/programme that has been masked by such aggregation. Accordingly, the universities' annual reports for 2018 indicated that some campuses continued to reflect their historical student demographics in race terms, while class equity was also increasingly seen as posing a challenge and in some cases, ethnicity was mentioned. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, the criteria for, and thus achievement of, equity targets varied greatly among the institutions, as well as within them.

Reporting on the class status of students, for instance in terms of the percentage who received NSFAS funding, was highly uneven. The annual reports revealed, however, a distinction in the responses of the richer and poorer institutions in supporting NSFAS students whose grants were delayed or insufficient, with the former reportedly more able to provide financial relief and the latter reporting student protests caused by NSFAS-related problems. A number of the reports stressed the crucial importance of fixing NSFAS's administrative systems.

Some universities reported specifically on the range of facilities and services they offered students (and staff) with special needs and disabilities; and LGBTIQ+ students. In relation to the former group and notwithstanding the rise of a rights-based discourse which stresses the importance of "universal access", the disparate nature of what was reportedly offered by the universities indicated that specialised provision for students and staff with disabilities could benefit from regional and/or system-level coordination, particularly given the resource constraints faced by many institutions.

Campus-life interventions were mentioned as important to help level the playing field between rich and poor students, and to enhance all students' diversity, leadership and citizenship skills. Most of the universities reported on ways in which they had assisted students academically as they entered and progressed through higher education. First generation students were occasionally mentioned specifically; and first year students. Some of the universities reported closely monitoring student retention, progression and throughputs, and thus tracking students to ensure that those who were at risk received the appropriate supplemental support.

The universities also noted that they were increasingly addressing issues of prejudice and harassment more broadly and changing language policies and the names of places and buildings as part of efforts to transform their institutional identity and culture. The development of university infrastructure was also reported as a transformation issue with reference to student housing; the upgrading of learning amenities; and the repurposing of library spaces and a concomitant expansion of online archives. Despite the relatively high number of international students and staff within the South African higher education system, little was said in the annual reports on how the current institutional culture accommodated or failed to accommodate foreign students and staff.

Teaching and learning

Although massification has meant that a significantly greater proportion of black South Africans are managing to access higher education, the aspirations of many students have not been met. High attrition and drop-out rates especially in some universities continue to damage the livelihood prospects of a great many students and their families, especially those from low quintile schools in particular, whereas a higher education qualification would have the largest public and private returns in terms of individual, familial and social transformation especially for these students. In this context, there are many transformation challenges associated with teaching and learning which directly impact on the potential of higher education to contribute to the restructuring and transformation of South African society at large.

Findings from the analysis of the 2018 and 2019 annual reports

In relation to transformation in teaching and learning, it was found that increasing numbers of universities across the system were introducing credit-bearing first-year “grounding” modules and courses. These were frequently transdisciplinary and included modules on African culture and philosophy; decolonising understanding and knowledge; and humanising pedagogies; as well as guidance and practical skills on how to make the most effective use of the educational resources on offer. A system-wide evaluation of the effectiveness of these courses, which represent a massive aggregate investment but also have great potential, should be considered.

The continuous development of academics as university teachers represents an important way of responding to the multiple, complex demands placed upon academics by the massification and transformation of higher education and their expected role as agents of change. However, intentional policies and processes to professionalise teaching were reported to be underway only at some institutions, for example, by means of incentivising academics to take up postgraduate studies in teaching and learning and/or contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Language barriers can prevent students and even some staff from translating their disciplinary knowledge into public discourse. Although the development of South African languages other than English and Afrikaans has been pursued by the national government, this has apparently received insufficient institutional support. However, the annual reports indicated that more than half of the country’s universities had developed or revised, finalised or approved their language policies between 2016 and 2019. Some historically advantaged universities, such as those where Afrikaans was formerly a language of tuition, had adopted African languages in some form in teaching-and-learning language policies in order to enhance access to learning and increase their students’ prospects of success. Other universities, such as Nelson Mandela University (NMU), the University of the Free State (UFS), University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and Walter Sisulu University (WSU), reported having changed their language policies in response to shifting student demographics. Challenges, however, have persisted in relation to language transformation mandates. For example, some rural, historically disadvantaged universities which had formulated and approved new language policies reportedly lacked the human, physical and financial resources to implement them adequately; while other institutions with greater capacity appeared to be struggling to muster the political will (and support in the wider academic community) to put progressive policies into effect.

The annual reports also indicated that the decolonisation discourse promoted by the student protests in 2015 and thereafter, fostered transformation by invigorating debate. When reporting on decolonisation, some universities focused on the curriculum (although there were differences of opinion about what decolonising the curriculum meant in practice); some on pedagogy; some on both pedagogy and curriculum; and others still on the epistemological dimensions of knowledge systems. Finally, some focussed on issues of language and/or demographics. The decolonisation projects and processes reported by the universities were still generally in either their initiation or conceptualisation phase in the 2018 and 2019 annual reports, or in the early stages of implementation.

In relation to the integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in teaching and learning, notwithstanding the broad benefits of greater open access promoted by internet connectivity, moves towards digitally mediated learning can have the effect of deepening existing inequalities, particularly in relation to access to the required resources. This became particularly evident during the shift to online learning during the 2020 lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Some universities reported seeking to address the issue of equitable access to ICT-mediated learning. In addition, a number showed some consideration for the potentially transformative impact that digital technologies can have, particularly in relation to closing learning gaps; expanding access to education; and connecting with communities beyond the campus gate. These gains notwithstanding, the annual reports also showed that there was a wide disparity in the capacity of the 26 universities to integrate ICTs effectively in teaching and learning. ICT adoption represents an area where national leadership would benefit most institutions – not only in relation

to negotiating and providing technical solutions but also in ensuring system-wide training and support to promote the equitable implementation and use of the new technologies.

Research and knowledge production

Diversity and differentiation are part of the specialisations that can be expected in a growing and maturing higher education system. At the same time, the DHET has sought to ensure all universities contribute to the knowledge-production mandate and support the development of black, female and early-career academics towards the desired knowledge-production levels.

Findings from the analysis of the 2018 and 2019 annual reports

Almost all the institutions reported making plans to boost their research and knowledge production culture, activities, and outputs. The universities reported a substantial increase in knowledge outputs across the system over time and in most cases year-on-year. This included institutions which had historically not been research-focused, such as universities of technology and HDUs.

In seeking to strengthen their research and knowledge production capacity, universities further reported that the proportion of academic staff with PhDs had risen; and it appeared that, in relation to this metric for research productivity, the gap between the historically advantaged and disadvantaged universities was closing, albeit slowly. In terms of this, the universities as a whole appeared to focus on efforts to foster a more diverse complement of academic staff to contribute to knowledge production. The annual reports reflected on the urgency of supporting black and female, as well as early-career academics, not only in completing their doctoral studies, but also as they progressed through their academic careers. The reports referenced a number of significant interventions across the sector, frequently mentioning the NRF, to promote and advance early-career academics which had been funded by the government and its agencies.

However, these positive developments notwithstanding, there were a number of reported challenges which appeared to have frustrated plans to boost research outputs and knowledge production, including: a small pool of highly productive academics and researchers; and heavy workloads and time constraints which were inhibiting research and publishing. In addition, as much as transformation represents an institutional and national imperative, it was, of course, only one among a number of motivations to become more knowledge-productive which were cited by the universities. For example, international recognition was also reported as representing a key driver for some of the institutions.

It was evident in the reports that an increasing number of academics were engaged specifically in transformation-themed or transformation-relevant research. In this regard, the annual reports noted that various kinds of special research centres and programmes had been established, many of which focussed on knowledge transformation and sought to enrol a representative diversity of postgraduate students. A transversal theme across these centres and programmes was reported to be the need to foster interdisciplinarity and collaborative research; and new forms of teaching and learning. These initiatives also served as institutional resources to promote critical reflection on epistemology; curricula; and research agendas, and to generate knowledge of and for transformation itself.

Analysis of the annual reports suggested that the universities were increasingly recognising the value of institutional research. Although at present no common student experience survey has been implemented across the system, the annual reports noted that the information from a growing number of institutional student surveys had been used to inform interventions aimed at improving student engagement; the student experience; and institutional culture, thereby strengthening social cohesion and improving student throughput rates and the prospects of academic success. In addition, some universities reported recognising the value of collecting institutional data on students' school and home backgrounds and using this to inform the development of faculty-based student support. The universities also reported acknowledging the value

of studies that could identify high risk modules and at-risk students. They noted that they were further developing research and reporting mechanisms to identify the factors shaping the retention, progression and throughput of students. Meanwhile, staff surveys also emerged as a useful tool, which could produce a better understanding of the staff experience and staff satisfaction; and provide a snapshot of the institutional climate.

Societal relevance and community engagement

Community engagement has generally been found at the periphery of knowledge production and/or teaching in universities. The 2013 White Paper for Post-School Education and Training indicated that funding for community engagement may be restricted to programmes linked directly to the teaching and learning and research functions of universities, which may presage a sea change in the prioritisation accorded such engagement.

Findings from the analysis of the 2018 and 2019 annual reports

It was found that the universities were making increasing efforts to integrate their identity and core functions within their immediate and extended community-regions and were engaging with an increasing number of stakeholders in pursuit of developmental and social transformational objectives. However, the kinds of engagement varied widely among the institutions and little consideration was given in the annual reports to producing a comprehensive account of the transformative impacts of such efforts.

Many of the universities emphasised the importance of engaged scholarship, which proponents of the approach have argued should be integrated within the core functions of teaching, learning and research. At the same time, the reports also indicated diverse understandings of how best to address and implement community engagement across the country's universities. Accordingly, the institutions framed their commitment to society at large in a number of ways, some of which overlapped: as a response to calls for deeper transformation and decolonisation; as the fulfilment of a responsibility to deploy institutional resources to ensure social justice; as a response to local needs in the context of a global knowledge agenda; and as a form of collaboration that could produce interventions in support of the university's teaching and learning functions while also benefiting the population. The notion of a commitment to society beyond the campus gates was also expressed in the idea of universities as place-based "anchor" institutions and a growing number of mentions of "precinct development" in the reports of, for example, the Durban University of Technology (DUT), University of Pretoria (UP), University of the Western Cape (UWC) and WITS.

From a transformation perspective, although the universities seemed to be displaying greater responsiveness to the challenges facing communities, there appeared to be little consensus on the nature of the developmental paradigms and engagement approaches to be adopted. At one end of the spectrum stood the engaged scholarship ethos, and at the other a preference for community involvement with philanthropic overtones.

Similarly, universities across the country adopted different approaches to how they were seeking to integrate their identity and core knowledge-production and other functions into the surrounding socio-political and economic landscape at the local, regional and global levels. For example, for historically white universities adopting the notion of globally competitive and locally engaged research touted by the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the kudos that such work could bring at the international level was clearly an important driver. By contrast, other universities seeking to establish their local relevance placed the emphasis on a closer alignment with the priorities of external stakeholders in their immediate and extended regions.

A number of universities reported implementing curriculum-driven external engagements through their teaching and learning, and research activities. Initiatives such as service-learning; co-operative education

programmes; and community-based research may be seen as benefitting both the university, with students gaining credits, and the community. Continuing in this vein, and in seeking to enhance the impacts of service-learning, a way forward may be to promote this pedagogic method not only for its credit-bearing function, but as a reflexive approach that could support the broader transformation of students, staff and the university.

In addition to identifying the challenges posed by the diverse conceptualisations of what engagement entails, the analysis of the annual reports indicated a lack of proper coordination of engagement efforts by a central, institutional structure at most South Africa's universities. Although the adoption of an *ad hoc*, flexible and decentralised approach may allow the various institutions to produce their own, appropriate forms of engagement, it could also be perceived as evidence of weak coordination and a lack of recognition and support for engagement within the system.

Addressing a finding that there was a lack of effective mainstreaming of community engagement as an institutional goal, the report recommended establishing staff reward and recognition schemes in support of engagement activities and producing appropriate strategic plans and budgets. It further recommended that efforts should be made to implement reporting structures that could consolidate accounts of the relatively significant amounts of engagement already taking place within institutions and across the sector.

A further reporting challenge which was identified concerned the limited way in which the universities were measuring engagement activities by their transformative impacts. The extent to which community engagement efforts were contributing internally to the transformation of academia or externally to the transformation goals of communities was typically not deeply considered. Furthermore, international ranking systems were adopted by some universities as providing indicators for defining and assessing community engagement, although such an approach could lead to some relevant activities, which are not measurable using these rankings' indicators, being overlooked.

Mapping the state of transformation

Currently used systems for classifying universities are not that helpful as a frame of reference for understanding the various states of transformation reported by the universities. The analysis found that no particular transformation challenge was the exclusive realm of one distinct group of universities or any particular type of institution. All public universities faced significant transformation challenges – whether they acknowledged them or not - and none had apparently been able to transcend the legacy of their particular histories. In order to foster an improved understanding of the extent and nature of transformation efforts and progress at the country's public universities, the study sought to establish an institutional classification grounded in the transformation narratives that could be discerned from the annual reports. To this end, the report proposes that the universities' intellectual and programmatic transformation projects could be grouped into four types:

- Type 1: Universities that emphasise a commitment to equity, redress and diversity, and report on innovative approaches and practices in this regard;
- Type 2: Universities that emphasise a commitment to relevance and contributing to development, and report on relevant and innovative transformation approaches and interventions accordingly;
- Type 3: Universities that emphasise equity and diversity matters but do not appear able to translate their commitments into relevant interventions (their reporting is therefore limited and compliance-focused without significant evidence of transformative practices); and
- Type 4: Universities that emphasise relevance and a notion of transformation-as-development, but adopt a compliance-culture, "change-without-change" approach to transformation.

Applying this framework, the study proposed for analytic purposes that three main kinds of higher education institutions in South Africa could be identified: diversity-focused universities; developmentally engaged universities; and contested universities. The different emphases in the universities' transformation narratives, leaning either towards equity or towards development, should not be viewed as more or less correct, or better or worse; in both cases, however, they are limited and incomplete. In part, the different emphases arise from the various institutions' contexts, histories and mandates, indicating how they view their particular transformation priorities. They should also not be interpreted as indicating a need for "trade-offs" between the principles of equity or development.

The report concluded from this analysis that there was a need for a creative re-imagining of the public university in South Africa as a transformative institution which would take on a much more intentional, systematic, and comprehensive transformation agenda.

Recommendations

To conclude, the study proposes a range of recommendations to enhance the transformation project in public universities and how these institutions report on transformation. These recommendations reference the university system as a whole and the nature of the institutional landscape; the roles of the DHET and key statutory and sectoral bodies; and the five key dimensions of transformation in the universities which provided the framework for this report.

Governance, leadership and management

- The governance structures involved in transformation must operate in compliance with the letter *and* the spirit of the law and policy.
- The universities should report on the composition of their governance structures using a range of relevant demographic and other indicators such as gender, race, nationality, disability, qualification and relevant expertise, and potential conflicts of interest.
- The universities' reporting should provide organograms and descriptions of the structural interrelationships between all structures involved in the governance of transformation.
- A bottom-up approach to transformation governance should be considered, utilising mechanisms such as faculty board meetings and their representational forms, and, more critically, student faculty representatives and class representatives.
- Given the importance of student and staff activism in advancing the transformation discourse and social justice policies, new ways of giving effect to the principles of democratisation and academic freedom should be found to foster the co-operative engagement of the whole university community in governance.
- Every university should elaborate how they are conceptualising and operationalising the core principles of transformation through their policies and interventions and provide an assessment of the effectiveness thereof.
- The annual reports should describe the extent, kind and outcomes of the universities' participation in national transformation initiatives, such as those promoted by the DHET, statutory bodies and sectoral bodies. Such reporting should be standardised and should include relevant multi-year statistics to show how the interventions are translating into transformational outcomes. The DHET should specify the exact parameters of such reporting.
- All institutions should report on their policies and mechanisms for reporting and managing cases of discrimination/harassment/violence and graft.

Staff and student profiles and the higher education experience

- Every university should report staff and student demographics against national and provincial EAPs, as well as their EE plans, illustrate the alignment of their employment equity reporting with the different demographic compositions of the various provinces and catchment areas.
- Every university should indicate its goals, practices and progress towards achieving staff-related transformation, not only in terms of demographic equity but also in relation to subject qualifications; research ratings; research outputs; teaching qualifications; and community engagement participation. With respect to these goals and practices, universities will need to include criteria that are relevant to their specific mandates.
- All universities report their student numbers by race and gender, and by year of study and qualification, as well as nationality in some cases. However, they should also report on other indicators for the cohort, such as class composition.
- Numbers of students by province of origin (if South African) should also be reported. This will enhance the understanding of patterns and trends in student mobility; give an indication of proportions of students from the different regions attending local universities; and identify gaps in the provision of resources.
- The universities should also report on numbers of postgraduate students on NRF or other scholarships; students with disabilities; first-generation students; and students who require learning, academic-literacy or other kinds of academic and bio-psycho-social support.
- Every university should indicate the actual extent of provision of financial support to its students (from NSFAS, NRF and other sources) and provide statistics on financial exclusions.
- The universities should report on their policies and interventions to produce inclusive institutional cultures, including in relation to efforts to ensure that the visual culture on campus does not exclude members of the academic community.
- Student affairs and services divisions can play an important role in levelling the playing field for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and in fostering citizenship competencies and social cohesion among all students. Accordingly, the universities should report on the co-curriculum of student affairs programmes and the professionalisation of student affairs staff.
- All universities should establish mechanisms to enhance strategic international collaborations and partnerships through a range of programmes. To assess the effectiveness of the collaborations and the extent to which they align with the varied institutional strategies, the types, nature and rationales of these partnerships need to be captured and reported.
- Every university should report systematically and in a comparable manner on how they build social cohesion among residence and non-residence students, including through student development programmes, societies, recreational activities and sports codes. They should also report on infrastructure backlogs in this regard.
- Universities should report on the adequacy or otherwise of the off-campus accommodation and transport on offer.

Teaching and learning

- Given the importance of transition support for students to succeed in higher education and the high levels of investment in the system for such support, every university should report on:
 - Pre-admission information and advisory processes and programmes;
 - Gateway and first-year induction processes and programmes;
 - The provision of academic advice, tutorial systems and supplemental instruction; and
 - Mentoring and career guidance.
- In relation to these interventions, the universities should provide statistics on academic drop-outs and exclusions for every year. These numbers should be accompanied by comprehensive reports on the determinants of non-completion.
- The universities should indicate and describe the interventions they are pursuing to enhance the professional development of academics and professionalise teaching.
- The universities should report in detail on their institutional interactions with the HEQC.
- The universities should indicate how they have given effect to calls for curriculum renewal, transformation and/or decolonisation.
- All universities should indicate their commitments to transforming their language policies and whether and how these have been implemented.
- Every university should report on its extra-mural teaching efforts, including any open lectures and open-science engagement activities which have been held for the benefit of the wider community and the public at large.
- All universities should report on how their respective student affairs units are promoting residences as inclusive “living and learning” spaces.
- Every institution should report on their use of ICTs in teaching and learning and their efforts to ensure democratic access to online services for all registered students, both on and off campus.

Research and knowledge production

- The universities should use similar indicators for their reporting to those used by the DHET, that is:
 - Per capita research publication outputs;
 - Weighted per capita output;
 - Proportion of academic staff by highest degree or qualification against research outputs; and
 - Proportion of doctoral graduates per doctoral academic staff.
- The universities should provide a breakdown of research outputs by relevant staff demographic indicators, including race and gender.
- The universities should report on the number of NRF-rated researchers among their staff, including by relevant demographic indicators; their research and publishing awards and who has won these; and the ways in which they develop and incentivise research productivity.
- The university should report on how they support publishing and knowledge dissemination, including the extent to which this is open access.
- The universities should highlight their transformation-relevant research achievements.

- The universities should report on how they are generating knowledge for knowledge-based management, including in relation to:
 - What kinds of data are being collected, and how and for what purpose;
 - The data warehouses and data security tools being employed; and
 - The data dashboards used by the institution.

Community engagement

- Reporting on community engagement must indicate the policies, structures and processes which have been established to support this function.
- Reporting must adequately capture how engagement relates to teaching and learning, and research.
- The universities should include in their reports on community engagement:
 - Institutional engagement mission statements, policies and strategies;
 - Information on evaluation, monitoring and reporting systems at various levels;
 - Information on capacity building programmes for students, staff and external community stakeholders;
 - Literature or toolboxes on university engagement;
 - The number and kind of established programmes that include a community engagement component;
 - Case studies of engagement centres and/or projects;
 - Information on how engagement activities impact the community or benefit the university are large; and
 - Information on the forms of recognition and/or other approaches which have been adopted to incentivise engagement.
- Reporting on community engagement should also include the ways in which the university is intentionally contributing to place-based, local development.

Four broad recommendations

1. The 2014 Regulations for Reporting by Public Higher Education Institutions should be revised so that more comprehensive, standardised and transformation-focused annual reports are produced. The goal should be that such reports provide a trustworthy source of transformation-relevant information to the Minister and Department; system-level statutory bodies and sectoral bodies; and the universities themselves. Well-designed annual reporting can also have the effect of fostering greater critical engagement and assessment among the universities in relation to the nature and progress of their transformation projects. There should also be guidelines for reporting on system-wide interventions, such as the UCDF.
2. Transformation in higher education should be framed within a dual characterisation, recognising that the project is both an intellectual and programmatic enterprise. The aim of such an integrative approach should be not only to enhance knowledge about transformation, but also to help drive the process itself. The transformation project should become institutionalised, mainstreamed, and ingrained in the academic projects of institutions through the intellectual work carried out at different levels in the academic faculties, schools and departments; in student affairs and services; and in the management departments and provision of support services.

3. A wide array of transformation-related structures has emerged across the higher education system, which has highlighted the importance of promoting professionalisation among those appointed to champion and coordinate this project. The appointment of individuals charged with the responsibility for the transformation portfolio should be on the basis of an explicitly expressed set of skills and competency requirements. Professionalisation will also require specialised staff development and training programmes, ideally accompanied by certification aimed at harmonising transformation across the system.
4. There is a system-wide need for coordinated efforts towards mainstreaming transformation and resourcing transformation-related programmes and initiatives properly. Basic guidelines for the establishment of an adequate policy architecture, and programmes and best-practice interventions promoting transformation, should be drafted with the support of system-level bodies; and these efforts should be properly funded.

This report is a comprehensive overview of transformation in the public higher education system from a macro perspective. It offers an assessment of where the universities in the country stand in the current period in relation to key commitments they have made to transform themselves. It follows and builds on important developments and reports which have been published since the report of the 2008 Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education.

This report has two objectives, first, to analyse the current state of the transformation of higher education in South Africa; and, second, to advise the Minister and sector on appropriate policies and strategies which will assist in expediting the pace of transformation in the higher education sector. It was developed through a critical review of two years of annual reports, those for 2018 and 2019, which were provided by the country's twenty-six universities; and a study of the significant corpus of writing, commentary and public media reports on the developments that have taken place in South African higher education since the report of the 2008 Ministerial Committee. The institutions' reports provided the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) research team with the material and data necessary to understand where institutions found themselves in relation to the goals they had set for themselves; in relation to the sector as a whole; and in relation to what was happening elsewhere in the world. Important features of the report include:

1. An analysis of institutions' understandings of the term "transformation";
2. A timeline and periodisation of the transformation journey institutions have walked since 1994;
3. A proposed framework for operationalising transformation indicators;
4. An assessment of the state of transformation through the use of a transformation matrix; and
5. A set of thematic recommendations.

The Report shows that institutions have responded to the challenge of transformation in a range of ways – from compliance-based approaches to approaches which seek to deal holistically with the challenges of staff and student equity, teaching and pedagogy, and developing research trajectories for themselves, which address the country's major developmental challenges and building strong, collaborative relationships with stakeholders such as government, the corporate sector and civil society. As a closeout report of the Ministerial Oversight Committee on Transformation in the South African Public Universities for the Minister and the Department of Higher Education and Training, it is hoped that it meets the high requirement of being useful for how institutions should take on the challenge of constantly improving themselves and how the Department and the Minister exercise their oversight responsibility. It is hoped, too, that it will assist the Council on Higher Education to which the oversight responsibility for monitoring transformation has been handed from the TOC.

Prof. André Keet, Chair: TOC



**higher education
& training**

Department:
Higher Education and Training
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



MINISTERIAL OVERSIGHT
COMMITTEE ON
TRANSFORMATION IN
SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC
UNIVERSITIES (TOC)



science & innovation

Department:
Science and Innovation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



HSRC
Human Sciences
Research Council

