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CHAPTER 6

Challenges relating to the establishment of comprehensive universities in the South African higher education sector

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The restructuring of the South African higher education system from 2001 onwards introduced a new theme to the second phase of the SANTED Programme. Provision was made for a project on the academic mission and nature of the comprehensive universities, a new type of institution that resulted from a large-scale restructuring of the higher education system in South Africa (DoE 2001; DoE 2002). Thus, in November 2005, the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), two of the six comprehensive universities that were created at the start of 2005, received an invitation from the director of the SANTED Programme to participate in a project that was funded by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), in conjunction with the national Department of Education (DoE), with the following broad aim:

*The development of a new academic structure and qualifications profile that brings together career-focused diploma-level programmes, career-focused and professional degree programmes and general-formative degree programmes with appropriate articulation pathways.*

This chapter reviews the SANTED Project at the two universities by considering the national and institutional contexts and challenges, the planning, organisation and implementation of the project, and its outcomes.
The national policy context

The creation of the comprehensive universities was part of a systematic process to reform the South African higher education system in order to address the legacy of fragmentation, inequality and inefficiency from the previous political dispensation. Since the election of the first democratic government in 1994, key reports and policy documents such as the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) (1996), the Education White Paper 3 (DoE 1997) and the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) (DoE 2001) developed a range of plans aimed at creating a single nationally coordinated system that is equitable, responsive and efficient. The system should be sufficiently diverse to provide all learners with optimal opportunities for access, as well as articulation and progression to higher levels of study. From a political perspective it is clear that one of the ideals of the reform process was to promote seamless mobility for learners between different higher education qualification levels and types.

As part of the reform process, in 2002 the Ministry of Education announced an ambitious plan to restructure the higher education landscape by means of a series of institutional mergers and incorporations (DoE 2002). Perhaps the most striking feature of the restructuring process was the creation of comprehensive universities that would straddle the binary divide between the university and non-university sectors. As is typical of binary systems, the universities focused on general-formative and professional education and basic research, while the non-university sector, which consisted of institutions called ‘technikons’ (similar in character to polytechnics) had a more applied character, offering vocational and career-orientated education and conducting applied research. While the binary system continued to exist until 2004, the Ministry’s intention was that the comprehensive universities should make a unique contribution to the ideals of enhanced access and student mobility by virtue of their ability to offer academic programmes across the full spectrum of higher education qualifications. According to the Ministry, the new institutional type would increase access to career-focused programmes for a greater diversity of students, improve
articulation between career-focused and general academic programmes, and foster greater synergies between basic and applied research (DoE 2002:24). What the ministerial statement failed to do was to provide an explicit academic rationale as to why and how the comprehensive universities would be able to achieve these goals, especially with respect to access and articulation. In this regard, three challenges in the national policy context deserve particular mention.

First, and most critically, the South African higher education system lacked adequate explanatory models relating to knowledge and the curriculum which could serve as a basis for decisions and practices relating to access and articulation. Internationally, little was available by way of actual examples and theoretical analyses that could support the development of such models. As a result, there was no clear basis for translating the ministerial statement from the realm of political aspiration to the practice of access and articulation. In other words, while the political ideals of the restructuring process associated the comprehensive universities with the promise of seamless mobility for students, the extent to which they actually could contribute to such a goal was by no means clear. In this sense, it is interesting to note that the comprehensive universities continue to face a similar challenge to that faced by the dual sector universities in the United Kingdom and Australia (Garrod 2009; Moodie 2009). While the latter institutions bridge the divide between further and higher education, and thus differ from the South African comprehensive universities, they illustrate how difficult it is to develop coherent articulation pathways between different types of qualifications. In principle, the dual sector universities provide a powerful mechanism for challenging the boundaries that separate further and higher education. In practice, however, they often continue to entrench the distinction between further and higher education, thereby failing to realise the promise of articulation between different qualification types and levels (Weelahan 2009:29-44).

A second challenge was the absence of a unified qualifications framework. Despite the dissolution of the binary system through the reclassification of technikons as universities of technology in 2004, and the creation of comprehensive universities, the South African
higher education system continued to be regulated by separate qualification structures for the university and technikon sectors. An integrated qualifications framework, namely the new Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF), was only promulgated in 2007 and implemented from 2009 onwards. The SANTED Project thus found itself in a rather paradoxical situation. In order to develop proposals on a new academic structure and qualifications profile it was dependent on the development of an integrated qualifications framework that could provide some guidance on the possibilities for articulation between different types of qualifications. However, the insights that the project was expected to develop on articulation were integral to the development of that framework.

The preceding remarks illustrate that while the political decision to create the comprehensive universities had already been taken, there was considerable uncertainty in terms of their academic nature and role. The assumptions were that the ministerial restructuring programme attached to them were untested and, in the absence of sound theoretical evidence, largely conjectural. In essence, the South African higher education sector was embarking on an experiment in which the comprehensive universities would have to explore the fundamental questions around knowledge and the curriculum that should form the basis for increased access to and articulation between different qualification types, as well as the development of an integrated qualifications framework. Clearly, the invitation to UJ and NMMU to participate in the SANTED Programme was strongly motivated by the expectation that the project work would contribute substantially to the clarification of these fundamental questions.

A third aspect of the national policy context that contributed to the uncertainty around the academic role of the comprehensive universities, was the need to clarify the manner in which the differentiation of the higher education sector should be achieved, as called for by the Education White Paper 3 (DoE 1997) and, subsequently, the NPHE (DoE 2001). As part of their engagement with the SANTED Project, NMMU and UJ would need to clarify the basis on which they should develop their academic structure and qualifications profile within a differentiated
system. The question was whether differentiation should be based upon institutional types or upon programme profiles. The national policy context provided two views on this question. In 2000, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) produced a position paper that linked differentiation to three distinct institutional types, which in the case of public contact universities were referred to (rather unfortunately) as comprehensive postgraduate and research institutions, extensive masters and selective doctoral institutions, and bedrock institutions (CHE 2000). By contrast, in its response to the CHE report, the NPHE argued in favour of programme differentiation, stating that institutions should pursue different missions based on differentiated qualification and programme profiles that were responsive to national and regional needs and commensurate with institutional capacity (DoE 2001). As part of the SANTED Project, UJ and NMMU would need to clarify whether the fact that they belonged to a specific institutional type was a relevant factor in determining their academic mission and profile, or whether, in the spirit of the NPHE, they, and the other comprehensive universities, should be allowed to determine their own development trajectories without being restricted by pre-determined parameters on the basis of this new institutional typology.

Institutional contexts and challenges

Two general challenges facing NMMU and UJ with respect to their establishment as comprehensive universities concerned the creation of a coherent academic mission, in the context of the continuing influence of the academic cultures of their legacy institutions. A brief outline of the formation of each institution and their enrolment profile during the course of the SANTED Project provides some perspective on these challenges.

NMMU and UJ were founded at the start of 2005 through the merger of traditional universities with technikons, which, as has been noted, were reclassified as universities of technology in 2004. In the case of the NMMU, the merger involved the University of Port Elizabeth (UPE) and the Port Elizabeth Technikon, pursuant to the incorporation
of the Port Elizabeth campus of the former Vista University into UPE at the start of 2004. Similarly, UJ was formed through the merger of Rand Afrikaans University (RAU) and Technikon Witwatersrand, pursuant to the incorporation of the Soweto and East Rand campuses of the former Vista University into RAU at the start of 2004.

During the period from 2006 to 2009, NMMU had an average enrolment of 23,415 students, with 88 per cent in undergraduate qualifications. Of these, 54 per cent were in diploma programmes and the remaining 46 per cent in undergraduate degrees where more than two-thirds of students were enrolled in professional programmes. Thus NMMU maintained a predominantly undergraduate enrolment profile, with a focus on vocational, career-orientated and professional education. It should also be noted that within the reconfigured higher education landscape, NMMU was the only provider of vocational and career-orientated higher education qualifications within its metropolitan area as well and in the western part of the Eastern Cape Province. The metropolitan and regional areas that it serves have strong needs in terms of skills for sectors including the automotive and petro-chemical industries, engineering, manufacturing, construction, logistics, healthcare and environmental management.

During the same period, student enrolment at UJ grew enormously, from just under 43,000 to 49,000 with about 6,500 of these registered for postgraduate qualifications. The growth, in other words, was almost entirely at the undergraduate level with growth in both diploma and degree programmes. Enrolment in degree programmes took 51 per cent of the UJ share in 2006, increasing to 54 per cent by 2009. As at NMMU, approximately a third of these students were enrolled in general formative programmes and the rest in professional qualifications. As important for its future trajectory was its location in Johannesburg, the financial and industrial heart of South Africa, and its inheritance from one of its legacy institutions of a fairly strong research platform.

This brief statistical sketch suggests that both institutions may have found it plausible to consider the provision of career-orientated and professional education as a defining characteristic of their academic mission. At NMMU, this option enjoyed considerable support, at least
during the early stages of its post-merger development. By contrast, UJ chose to maintain a wide range of programme offerings while also pursuing a more intense research mission.

Secondly, each university needed to forge a new culture from the distinct academic values, belief systems and traditions of its legacy institutions. It should be acknowledged that both universities and universities of technology harbour a diversity of academic cultures. Nevertheless, it remains useful to note Harman’s (2002) observations on the effect of different cultural traditions within cross-sectoral mergers in Australian higher education. According to Harman, academic staff members from universities and the non-university sector have divergent orientations towards the nature of their academic roles, their professional identities, the importance of research, teaching and learning, and governance. One of the biggest challenges in a cross-sectoral merger is to forge these cultures into a coherent educational community (Harman 2002). The same dynamic of different historical cultures would continue to exert a powerful influence on the work of the SANTED Project at both UJ and NMMU.

The specific academic challenges facing the universities are those that have already been mentioned in the previous section, namely the need to develop an adequate explanatory model or models relating to knowledge and the curriculum, the lack of an integrated qualifications framework as a structure for the development of articulation pathways, and the need to clarify their role within the restructured higher education system with its different institutional types. By way of further elaboration, it is necessary to make some comments about the complexities of the separate qualification pathways for universities of technology and traditional universities. The most contentious and significant issue, which continues to have sector-wide implications, concerned the substantive comparability of the qualification pathways within the two frameworks below the masters degree level. The mere fact that qualification types may be pegged at the same level on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) did not necessarily imply that they were equivalent in terms of the knowledge and skills that they developed. Therefore it was critical to address questions with respect
to articulation possibilities between the separate qualification pathways, and to clarify to what extent they constituted equivalent parallel routes for access to masters degree study. What was needed was a model of knowledge and the curriculum that would make it possible to move beyond naïve and sometimes ideological assumptions about equivalence, in order to explore and clarify the knowledge properties and curricular nature and purpose of different qualification types within particular academic fields and disciplines. As Wheelahan (2009:36) remarks ‘epistemological boundaries must be explicitly navigated, rather than ignored, if students are to be supported in crossing them’.

At the heart of the merger process at both universities, therefore, lay the challenge of understanding how knowledge and the curriculum work in different types of qualifications, so that the strengths of different qualification types could be maintained or re-established, and so that an adequate basis could be developed for making principled decisions on access as well as articulation and progression routes between qualifications.

Limitations and opportunities of the SANTED Project at UJ and NMMU

This section of the chapter considers the limitations and opportunities of the SANTED Project as a resource for addressing the challenges that NMMU and UJ faced in establishing themselves as comprehensive universities. One tension was certainly that neither institution could wait for the results of the project before making key decisions on their academic identity. However, while it may have been useful for the project findings to have been available at an earlier stage, the project still would have needed to demonstrate its usefulness as a resource in the process of identity formation. The more substantive constraint was that the project was an externally funded initiative, and therefore that it would need to negotiate the delicate balance between the interests of the national Department of Education and Norad, and those of institutional leadership. The risk was that the two universities might view it as an attempt to steer them in a direction that was not commensurate with
their own interests and aspirations. This problem manifests itself at each institution, though at different stages of the project.

From an early stage of the merger process, it was clear that UJ aspired to position itself within the top echelon of the South African higher education sector. This ambition was understandable, in the light of the reputational advantages that leading research universities enjoy internationally and the benefits accorded to them by the steering mechanisms within the national system. In particular, while the South African policy environment sought to promote diversity, it made use of a funding framework that applied equally to all institutions, and which was geared towards the recognition of the programmatic and research activities typically associated with the leading traditional universities. Therefore, it made strategic sense for UJ to adapt its academic mission accordingly, with the result that undergraduate diplomas were viewed more as access routes into university study than as important qualifications in their own right. In the light of the strategic sense-making process at UJ, the SANTED Project was viewed inevitably with some caution by its leadership, because of uncertainty around its underlying assumptions with respect to the academic role and profile of comprehensive universities. The apprehension around the motivations of the external sponsors was an important reason for the insufficient integration of the project into mainstream strategic and academic planning activities at UJ.

At NMMU, at least during the earlier phases of the project, institutional leadership was more open to exploring the possibility of creating a new kind of university. A factor that may have influenced the NMMU leadership was the university’s strong presence in undergraduate vocational, career-orientated and professional education, as pointed out in the preceding section. The different stances amongst the institutional leadership of the two universities provide one explanation for the greater extent to which the SANTED Project was embedded at NMMU. At a later stage, as a new leadership took over at NMMU, there was a greater concern to shape the university according to the norms of the traditional academic status hierarchy. Arguably, though the SANTED Project was still seen as a useful endeavour, it became less important in terms of the realisation of a newly emerging academic mission and strategy.
A further risk was that, as an externally funded initiative, the project might fail to have an adequate long-term impact on academic planning. On the one hand, it could be argued that each university could have done more to promote the longer-term integration of the results and perspectives generated by the project into relevant organisational structures and academic policies and process. On the other hand, both institutions have continued to draw on the insights gained from the project in initiatives such as the development of articulation pathways between further and higher education, curriculum development and reform, and the policies and strategies related to teaching and learning that have been informed by much greater understanding of the differentiated programme pathways offered by both of these universities. Perhaps it is necessary to take a longer view of the process by means of which the project findings find their way into institutional structures and policies. It may also be prudent to accept that difficulties with respect to the institutional integration of the project during its lifetime were part of the inevitable contestation around the academic mission and role of each institution, and that the perspectives that it generated constituted critical reference points in this process.

Thus, despite the challenges related to institutional integration, the fact that the project was externally funded had certain advantages. It introduced new voices into the sectoral and institutional dialogue, thereby opening up opportunities for critical engagement and research that could and did challenge dominant assumptions and agendas. For instance, at a sectoral level, critical questions could be raised about naïve assumptions linked to articulation, the steering instruments that are necessary to enable differentiation, and the role of comprehensive universities in a differentiated system. At an institutional level, similar debates could be held with respect to mission differentiation, the value of different types of qualifications, steering mechanisms to promote internal differentiation, and the role of comprehensive universities in promoting social justice by means of enhanced opportunities for access and articulation. An important factor in the successful promotion of such critical engagement was that the SANTED Programme Director regularly met with the project leadership to discuss its practical impact on the academic design of each university,
while both the director and representatives from Norad met on a number of occasions with institutional leaders to engage in a similar discussion. Equally important is the fact that while Norad expected demonstrable project outcomes, it consistently recognised the complexities of the project and gave the two institutions considerable latitude in the manner in which they conducted the project work. The understanding that Norad and its representatives demonstrated in their response to the regular project reports, as well as in meetings with institutional representatives, did much to undergird the project during the rather protracted period of uncertainty and slow progress that characterised the initial stages of its implementation.

Initiating the project: Development of a business plan and location of the project at each university

In response to the invitation from the director of the SANTED Programme, the two universities constituted a joint Project Steering Committee (PSC) to oversee the development and implementation of a business plan. To promote buy-in, the PSC was jointly chaired by a deputy vice-chancellor from each university, and consisted of various senior academic managers, including faculty deans and heads of academic support units. As a further strategy to promote understanding and engagement with the project, the two universities submitted the business plan for approval to their Academic Planning Committees, and in the case of UJ, to its Executive Management Committee, before submission to the SANTED Directorate. While it may not have been strictly necessary for the two universities to submit a joint business plan, the process did allow them to clarify the aims, scope and benefits of the project, to strengthen relationships and to explore possibilities for collaboration.

The business plan defined the aims of the project, which was to run from 2006 to 2009, as being to allow the two universities to:

- define the distinctive characteristics of their qualifications structure and academic profile within the institutional typology of the South African higher education sector;
• develop coherent approaches to curriculum consolidation and reconfiguration and academic programme models;
• develop appropriate access and retention models and strategies; and
• develop appropriate articulation pathways within and between various programmes.

These aims were clearly commensurate with the challenges at the national and institutional level, and provided a coherent framework for the project work. As an implementation framework, the business plan proposed that the project should be organised around three focus areas and a set of ten case studies. The focus areas concerned the academic mission and design of UJ and NMMU as comprehensive universities (focus area A), curriculum models and articulation (focus area B) and access and retention (focus area C). A joint task team consisting of staff members from each institution was charged with responsibility for each focus area.

The ten case studies related to disciplines and fields in which both or at least one of the universities offered undergraduate diploma and degree programmes. These formed the crux of the project, as they provided the platform for the empirical work that would need to be done in order to develop principled approaches to curriculum design, access and articulation. By means of the case studies, the project intended to develop a clearer understanding of the role that different forms of knowledge play within different academic programmes (and their associated occupational fields), ranging from those with a general formative orientation, to those with a professional or occupational orientation. On this basis, the case studies would contribute to the development of a framework for clarifying how knowledge works, or should work, in different types of curricula, especially those that prepare learners for particular occupational roles. In essence, therefore, the case studies intended to develop a coherent basis for comparing different types of qualifications within an academic field or discipline by means of an analysis of their curricular properties.

An important aspect of the work on knowledge and curriculum was
that the case studies should address the effect of academic and vocational
drift on the design of undergraduate diplomas and degrees at the two
universities.

Academic drift occurs when universities of technology compete
with traditional universities in terms of the academic prestige of their
qualifications and research, leading, inter alia, to a tendency to increase
the theoretical content of qualifications that are meant to have a more
applied nature. By contrast, vocational drift entails that universities
increase the responsiveness of their academic programmes and research to
practical needs, which, amongst other trends, may entail that programmes
that should have a strong theoretical orientation take on an increasingly
applied character (Codling & Meek 2006).

At NMMU and UJ, the result of academic and vocational drift
was reflected by a convergence between the curricular character of
undergraduate diplomas and degrees in some academic fields and
disciplines. While convergence led to some redundancy amongst different
qualification types within the same field, it also had negative implications
for student success and articulation. Inappropriate curriculum design
as a result of vocational and academic drift could lead to poor student
performance because, for instance, students with diploma entry could
not cope with the complexity of the modules offered in the first year of
a diploma, or because a degree with too little theoretical depth provided
an inadequate preparation for postgraduate study. Furthermore, the
blurring of the distinctions between the content of diplomas and degrees
could lead to a lack of responsiveness, as students with a specific type
of qualification might not develop the knowledge and skills associated
with their qualification profile. As will be observed later in the chapter,
the case study work found clear examples of convergence in various
disciplinary areas.

The work on the focus areas relating to curriculum models and
articulation, and access and retention, were strongly dependant on the
perspectives generated from the case studies. Due to the scale of the
case study work, it was proposed that dedicated researchers should be
appointed to take responsibility for them.

An aspect of the business plan that would pose challenges during the
implementation of the project was the tight model of collaboration that the universities proposed. While the terms of the project stipulated that it should include a collaborative component, the universities interpreted this requirement in a manner that was not necessarily intended by Norad and the DoE. Given the substantial geographical distance between them and the differences in their settings—in terms of specific merger dynamics, cultures and regional higher education landscapes—it may have been better to adopt a looser approach to collaboration. In other words, each institution may have progressed more quickly by using more of its own initiative to work on the project areas and then sharing findings and identifying opportunities for mutual support and collaboration as the work progressed. When the universities eventually moved to this kind of approach in mid-2008 it led to increased productivity in the substantive research work.

Two lessons flow from this point. Firstly, there was an understanding, at least amongst some members of the project leadership, that collaboration should be pursued in as close a manner as possible, while this was not necessarily the expectation amongst the funders. It would have been useful for the institutions to clarify expectations around the collaborative element with the SANTED Directorate and Norad as this may have avoided some tensions that subsequently developed between them. Secondly, collaboration should be managed in a creative and flexible manner and should not impose models that divert energy towards meetings and other forms of consultation that do not contribute to meaningful progress.

With respect to organisational aspects, at each university the project was located within the centre or unit that was responsible for academic planning, namely the Centre for Planning and Institutional Development (CPID) at NMMU and the Office for Institutional Change at UJ. This location made sense in terms of the project's focus on academic planning issues. Both universities also provided effective administrative support in terms of financial administrative systems, office accommodation and other infrastructural requirements such as the use of ICT services and technical services.
Implementation of the project

This section of the chapter reviews three areas of challenge that had to be negotiated in order to promote the successful implementation of the project, namely aspects of its practical organisation, differences in institutional approaches to the case studies, and the lack of expertise relating to the conceptual analysis of knowledge and the curriculum. Lastly, reference is made to arrangements for monitoring and reporting.

A first aspect of the project’s practical organisation is that the initial structures that were created for oversight and coordination purposes were over-elaborate. Thus there was a joint Project Steering Committee (PSC) that met on a quarterly basis, a PSC Executive, which was initially intended to meet on a monthly basis, as well as what was referred to as a Broad Academic Task Team (BATT) with the responsibility of coordinating the work of the three task teams on the focus areas. The project structures led to unnecessary duplication and in 2007 they were simplified through the elimination of the BATT, and agreement that the PSC Executive would meet less frequently.

Lack of capacity constituted another practical challenge. In some cases, the multiple commitments of the key institutional leaders who were involved in the project led to slow progress. However, their participation was a critical condition for its success, as only they could make the key decisions and recommendations around mission formulation and curriculum models, and relate the project to the broader process of establishing the new comprehensive universities. A more pertinent challenge was that both universities struggled to make appropriate appointments in the senior researcher positions for the case study work. It took until almost mid-2007 for these positions to be filled, causing a considerable delay in the start of sustained work on the case studies.

While the practical challenges with respect to project implementation could be addressed within the framework of the business plan, the different institutional approaches to the conduct of the case study work could not. The basic model for the case studies was the same at each university, involving the gathering, analysis and synthesis of information for the purpose of clarifying the curricular characteristics of specific
qualifications and programmes, and making proposals on a consolidated qualification structure within an academic field or discipline. At NMMU, concern that the responsible academics should take ownership of the case study process gave it a strong iterative character, with regular interactions between the project staff and participating schools and departments, and an emphasis on curriculum proposals that could be implemented in practice. One unintended consequence of the NMMU approach was that the case studies usually presented the first systematic process for engaging staff members from the two legacy institutions in substantive academic dialogue, thereby contributing to the formation of a new community from diverse cultures – as discussed in the section on institutional contexts and challenges earlier in the chapter. At UJ, by contrast, the case studies were approached as a research project by the project staff, involving the responsible academic staff members at important points in the process, but largely retaining a critical distance from them.

One possible explanation for the different approaches is that, concurrently with the SANTED Project, both UJ and NMMU were involved in another external project that fell under the auspices of the South African Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) with funding from the Finnish Government. The intention of the HEQC Project was to assist newly merged institutions to develop effective quality management systems. While both NMMU and UJ used the HEQC funding to conduct a programme review, the scale of the review at UJ was far more extensive and included recommendations on the development of consolidated qualification structures within academic schools and departments. By contrast, NMMU approached the programme review in a more modest manner and, importantly, emphasised that it could not be used as a basis for making decisions on consolidated qualification structures – as its purpose was not to serve as an explanatory framework for curriculum design and analysis. The result was that at UJ a perception took root that the SANTED Project was to an extent redundant, leading to a resistance amongst some academic managers to participate in it because, in their view, its aims had already been achieved by the programme review process. The
consolidation that took place was effected without the benefit of the deep curricular analysis offered by the SANTED Project and therefore had a technical character that really missed the opportunity that would have been available through greater coordination of these two initiatives. A factor that may have contributed to the different directions taken by the two projects at UJ is that two different organisational structures were responsible for the SANTED and HEQF projects, while at NMMU both projects were located within the same unit, which made it easier to clearly distinguish between their purposes and to achieve a meaningful relationship between them.

Various strategies could have been used to ameliorate the misunderstanding at UJ. At a system level, the DoE and HEQC could have ensured that they communicated adequately with each other with respect to the aims of the two programmes, and what funding was being used for at the participating universities. Secondly high-level institutional leadership at UJ would have been familiar with the developments relating to both projects and could have intervened to ensure a better alignment between them. Be that as it may, the resistance towards the SANTED Project at UJ made it more difficult to engage academic schools and departments in the case study work, and probably was a key contributor to the university’s decision to follow a more research-orientated approach, with the main source of evidence for the case studies being derived from the extensive programme review process.

The upshot of the differing institutional perspectives was that at a meeting in May 2008, UJ and NMMU agreed that they should continue to work separately on the case studies, with liaison as appropriate, and that in the final few months of the project they would again collaborate more formally in order to formalise the project findings into a consolidated report. This arrangement also applied to the work of the task teams on the various project focus areas. The SANTED Programme Director played a key role in guiding the institutions through the negotiation of this significant change to the business plan.

The third area of challenge, namely the lack of expertise relating to the conceptual issues around knowledge and the curriculum at both universities, posed the most significant barrier to the realisation of the
project aims. The South African higher education sector has a small pool of researchers in this area, and it was critical to source external expertise to provide theoretical and conceptual guidance to the project work. In this regard, the SANTED Programme Director made a critical intervention by inviting Professor Johan Muller of the University of Cape Town, a leading expert on knowledge and the curriculum, to make a presentation on curriculum and the binary divide at the formal launch of the project in June 2006, and subsequently commissioning him to write a paper, titled In Search of Coherence: A conceptual guide to curriculum planning for comprehensive universities, which was made available to the project early in 2008. Muller’s work provided a crucial reference point for both the case study work as well as the task of defining a coherent academic mission for the two universities, by pointing to the difference between knowledge gained through action (contextual knowledge) and through reasoning (conceptual knowledge), and the differences in the nature of knowledge in occupational, professional and general-formative qualifications (Muller 2008).

However, as the case study work progressed, the realisation took root that the universities required further assistance in translating Muller’s work into appropriate and theoretically justifiable proposals for the development of consolidated qualification structures and articulation models within the various case study areas. Late in 2008, subsequent to the change to the business plan that allowed the universities to work separately on the case studies, NMMU entered into a collaborative agreement with the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) at UCT, in terms of which a senior staff member at CHED would assist NMMU in the development of an explanatory model relating to knowledge and the curriculum on the basis of the case study work. This collaborative agreement proved to be the vital turning point in the NMMU project, and was largely responsible for the contribution that the NMMU case study work was able to make to the development of a theoretical model for curriculum design in different types of higher education qualifications.

Finally some brief comments may be made on the monitoring and review of the project. The mechanisms that were used for this purpose
were to a large extent effective. The system of annual reporting to the SANTED office, coupled with a mid-year progress report, ensured that project progress was monitored on a regular basis, and that any problems could be followed up in a timely manner. However, the structure of the progress report could have been simpler with a sharper focus on actual project work without the need to report also on project structures, lessons learned, and other issues which were all part of the annual report. The introduction of a system of bi-monthly reporting by the national SANTED office in 2010 was not helpful, as there is no evidence that it was used effectively. Internally, both universities made effective use of their internal project steering committees for oversight purposes, while the joint PSC played a similar role until mid-2008 as well as during the closing phase of the project. At both NMMU and UJ regular reports were submitted to the Academic Planning Committee and structures such as the Deans’ Forum, as a means of promoting awareness and institutional ownership. It must be admitted, though, that institutionalisation remained a challenge, especially in terms of the case studies where further empirical studies would be necessary before adequate frameworks and guidelines for curriculum design and analysis could be developed.

**Institutional and national outcomes and influences**

An intriguing unintended consequence of the project is that while the two universities have benefitted significantly from their participation in it, in some respects it has had as significant an impact at the national level as at the institutional level. The following remarks will review some of the key project outcomes and their possible implications for the sector, focusing only on two areas of the project work, namely the basis for external differentiation and the development of an explanatory model relating to knowledge and the curriculum.

In order to take the debate on diversity and differentiation in South African higher education forward, more clarity is needed on the current state of diversity and its key drivers. The SANTED Project undertook two analyses of external diversity and differentiation, one on study and research fields, and another on programme types. The notion of ‘study
field’ was defined as the number of enrolments in various qualification types within the 22 categories of educational subject matter used by the Department of Education, while the notion of ‘research field’ was defined as enrolments at masters and doctoral levels in the above categories of educational subject matter. The notion of ‘programme type’ was defined as referring to the three categories of occupational, professional and general-formative programmes. The analysis of study and research fields demonstrated that the sector as a whole is characterised by weak diversity, and that in terms of these criteria the traditional universities are the only clearly definable group of institutions. It also argued that the national debate on differentiation needs to make key decisions on appropriate diversity in terms of study and research field concentration amongst different institutions, taking national and regional needs and regional higher education profiles into account. The analysis of programme types demonstrated that there is considerable fluidity in the profiles of the three ‘types’ of universities in South Africa, the traditional and comprehensive universities and universities of technology, in terms of this criterion, and that there is no clear pattern of programme profiles according to institutional types.

An implication of both analyses is that further policy development around external differentiation should not be based on the current institutional typologies, but should rather use drivers such as study and research field concentration, as well as programme type, to negotiate an appropriate developmental path with each university. Another implication is that an enabling set of steering mechanisms needs to be created to support the realisation of differentiated institutional missions. To promote a higher education system that is sufficiently diverse, the necessary conditions such as diversified funding, support for specific institutional development plans, the recognition and reward of different forms of research, and adaptive systems for quality assurance, need to be in place. The absence of such conditions will tend to promote competition for status and resources within a vertically stratified hierarchy (Codling & Meek 2006; Teichler 2008; Reichert 2009; Van Vught 2009).

Turning to the problem of knowledge and the curriculum, the case study work made a significant contribution to the clarification
of how knowledge works in different types of higher education curricula, taking into account the different purposes that academic programmes have – namely preparation for a defined occupational role, a career in a specific profession, or the development of knowledge and understanding of a more general nature. It did so by developing a provisional curriculum model in which a primary distinction was made between modules or learning components of a programme that have a predominantly contextual or conceptual orientation. Modules with a contextual orientation draw their logic from external reference points such as professional or occupational requirements, while those with a conceptual orientation are based on the logic of the discipline. The primary distinction between a conceptual or contextual orientation was then refined in terms of the knowledge base of which modules consist, namely principles and procedures based on theoretical knowledge, or principles and procedures based on practical knowledge. Flowing from the distinctions between the orientation and knowledge base of modules, the following model of curriculum types was developed to explain how knowledge is re-contextualised into the curriculum. It should be emphasised that this model was based only on the findings of the case study work and therefore is necessarily provisional. The model identified five curricular types, three based on contextual coherence (C1, C2 and C3) and two based on conceptual coherence (C4 and C5).

Figure 1: Curriculum typologies:
Re-contextualisation of knowledge into the curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C1</th>
<th>Contextual coherence with procedural knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>Contextual coherence with principled procedural knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>Contextual coherence with procedural conceptual knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>Conceptual coherence with procedural conceptual knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5</td>
<td>Conceptual coherence with conceptual knowledge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The model acknowledges that there is a continuum in terms of the extent to which conceptual or theoretical, and practical or procedural knowledge is present in different types of curricula, but that the key difference lies in whether their logic is predominantly conceptual or contextual. The assumption is that general-formative programmes consist of a mix of C4 and C5 modules, professional programmes have a combination of C3 and C4 modules as their core, and that occupational programmes in higher education have a combination of C2 and C3 modules as their core. In this latter regard, it is important to clarify the distinction between C2 and C3 modules. The first curricular type has a practical knowledge base, while the latter has a conceptual or theoretical knowledge base. Thus it is possible that some occupational qualifications may have a contextual orientation but a largely conceptual knowledge base because they consist mainly of C3 modules, while others may have a contextual orientation and a largely practical knowledge base because C2 modules predominate.

In order to understand the relationship between different programmes, and the possibilities for articulation between them, it is important to understand their dominant curricular logic based on an analysis of the curricular types of their constituent modules. Programmes with a dominant contextual coherence do not necessarily contain an adequate conceptual base to serve as a platform for progression to programmes that have an orientation to conceptual coherence, but the reverse also applies. Learners who study programmes with a strong theoretical orientation may find it difficult to articulate into programmes based on contextual coherence and procedural knowledge that is rooted in practice. The model also distinguished between different levels of cognitive complexity within modules. However, within the confines of this chapter, it is not possible to provide a further elaboration of the curriculum model. A more extensive discussion of the model can be found in Shay et al. (2011).

The findings of the case studies pointed to the complexities of articulation, but also, and arguably more fundamentally, to the need to ensure that the curricular design of programmes is commensurate with
their stated purpose. Another important dimension of the case study findings, which cannot be elaborated upon here, is that they raised the question of whether all qualifications that are offered in higher education should not have a core of conceptual knowledge. Thus, in terms of the implementation of the integrated Higher Education Qualifications Framework, the case studies made a significant contribution to the work that needs to be done on the development of a credit accumulation and transfer system, but also developed critical perspectives on the curricular character of different types of qualifications that should be used to inform programme development and review activities. A particular aspect of the latter point is that the project contributed to clarifying the characteristics of what may constitute well-designed undergraduate diplomas. Recent national planning documents point to the importance of strong diploma provision for addressing skills needs. Thus, the National Development Plan emphasises that the achievement of its objectives by 2030 requires ‘plans and resources to increase career-focused higher education certificates and diplomas’ (NPC 2012:290), while the National Skills Development Strategy III commits itself to support ‘the production of priority skills in high-level occupationally directed programmes […] from universities to colleges.’ (DHET 2011:Section 4.2). Understanding the perspectives that contribute to appropriate and coherent curriculum design in diploma programmes is an important condition for achieving the goals of the national planning environment with respect to skills development.

Contributions of the project

The SANTED Project at UJ and NMMU was complex, both in terms of its organisational aspects and the substantive, conceptual problems that it sought to address. Initial progress was slow and hesitant, and various critical challenges had to be addressed along the way. The support of the SANTED Programme, and particularly of the programme director and Norad, was instrumental in allowing the project to achieve the results that it did. The contributions that the project made to the understanding
of diversity and differentiation as well as knowledge and the curriculum have significant implications for both institutions but also for national planning and policy development. The key challenge is how the project work will be taken forward at both of these levels.

**Endnotes**

1. The change to the external reporting requirements occurred after the resignation of the SANTED Programme Director and the placement of the programme under a part-time administrator. The lesson that flows from this experience is that a programme such as SANTED needs full-time leadership in order to avoid unnecessary forms of bureaucratic oversight.

2. In the curriculum model, preference was given to using the terms ‘conceptual’ and ‘procedural’ knowledge, rather than ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical’ knowledge.