Higher Education Pathways

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Published by African Minds

Case, M. and Paul Ashwin.
Higher Education Pathways: South African Undergraduate Education and the Public Good.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/63749.

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CHAPTER 2

TRANSFORMATION, THE STATE AND HIGHER EDUCATION: TOWARDS A DEVELOPMENTAL SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Introduction

The concept of transformation in South African higher education has evolved as a powerful motif with historical roots in the struggle against apartheid projecting into different phases of the post-apartheid era. Transformation in higher education has been framed by wider aspirations for transformation linked to the public good role of higher education. We conceptualise the contribution of higher education to inclusive development in South Africa as a particular component of the public good; and characterise South Africa as an aspirant developmental state. This chapter focuses on changing conceptualisations of transformation in higher education in the context of the changing developmental role of the state; and the extent to which government policies combine to empower higher education to contribute to goals of inclusive social and economic development.

We begin by outlining the characteristics of South Africa as an aspirant development state by focusing on transformation through various periods in the post-apartheid era. Next, we outline the state–higher education policy nexus before focusing on key conceptualisations and policies related to transformation in higher education. We conclude by presenting an assessment of how these conceptions and policies come together to impact on the potential for higher education to contribute to inclusive development.
Transformation in an ‘aspirational’ developmental state

Our understanding of the evolution of the concept of transformation in higher education is embedded in the state–higher education nexus, by which we mean the changing points of connection between the state and higher education, which are in turn related to the evolving political, economic and social strategies of the South African state economic. For the purposes of our chapter, we bracket out the relationship with civil society, as the state, higher education and society relationship is the focus of the next two chapters in this edition. The developmental role of the South African state, its relationship with national and global corporations, powerful governments, the trade union movements and its own citizens has, and continues to be, highly ‘contested ideologically and politically’ (Satgar, 2012, p. 34). We begin by introducing the notion of the developmental state in South Africa before focusing on three post-apartheid periods roughly divided by the Mandela, Mbeki and Zuma/Ramaphosa presidential regimes.

Ideological principles underlying the national liberation movement and popular democratic struggles envisioned an interventionist state which would play a central function in wholesale transformation leading to economic, political and social development. Encapsulated in the Freedom Charter, and then further operationalised through the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the democratic settlement was imbued with an activist role for the state in managing domestic and international pressures (Naidoo, 2017).

The notion of the developmental state first appeared in the African National Congress’s (ANC) 1992 Ready to Govern document (Gwaindepi, n.d; ANC, 1992), but was given greater political and policy centrality by the ANC after 2007. At the ruling party’s Polokwane Conference in 2007, the ANC noted that it was in the process of building a developmental state – this state form stood in counterpoint to the welfare state, ‘given that in a welfare state, dependency is profound’ (ANC, 2007). These 2007 ANC Conference resolutions permit an insight into the particular orientation and contours of an emergent South African development state. They display elements of both classic models of state intervention, but also critically aimed to play a capability-expanding role for citizens while building national and democratic consensus for development and economic growth. This conception of the developmental state was extended into South Africa’s long-term National Development Plan (NDP), which had the explicit aim of ‘[b]uilding a capable and development state’ (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2012). The NDP has recognised the centrality of capabilities-expansion for realising socio-economic and political development: ‘A development state builds the capabilities of people to improve their own lives, while intervening to correct historical inequalities’ (NPC, 2012, p. 27). The core capabilities identified are: ‘Political freedoms and human rights; Social opportunities arising from education, health care, public transport and other public services; Social security and safety nets; An open society, transparency, disclosures and a culture of accountability; Economic facilities, work, consumption, exchange, investment and production’ (NPC, 2012, p. 27). Critically, the NDP recognises the need for effective institutional capacity to function efficiently and recommends contending approaches to building a stronger and more efficient state apparatus.
While these policy statements provide a clear outline of a developmental state ‘in-the-making’ (and hence it can be described as ‘aspirational’) (Routley, 2012), critics contend that the ‘general approach to the developmental state in South Africa has been “propagandistic and declaratory”; it has “helped legitimate the state’s contradictions” and that while it has subscribed to a developmental approach, the state is deeply embedded in neoliberalism’ (Satgar, 2012, p. 37). To better understand the move towards a developmental state in democratic South Africa, we periodise its political economy by bounding state activity in different presidential administrations viz. the Mandela, Mbeki and Zuma/Ramaphosa periods. While such periodisation presents an artificial boundary between each presidential term, it nevertheless serves an analytical purpose to better understand the character of the South African state over time. Critically, however, it should not obscure the continuities across each of these periods.

**First period: Mandela presidential term**

The Mandela presidency saw the creation of a ‘policy state’ wherein the state undertook a ‘wide ranging policy review and formulation’ as it sought to rebuild a representative, inclusive and democratic policy and state apparatus (Naidoo, 2017, p. 13). The exigencies of post-apartheid state formation, and the awareness of the need to respond to ‘pent-up public demands’ saw both the reconstruction and expansion of the state apparatus to manage increased demands in an effective and efficient manner (Naidoo, 2017, p. 13). The Mandela presidency was expected to implement the social-democratic, corporatist Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), but by 1996, the RDP had been discarded and replaced by the more neoliberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy. Critics charged the ANC with duplicity of, in the words of the title of Bond’s (2004) book, ‘talk[ing] Left and walk[ing] Right’, while other analysts point to a number of local and international pressures that had forced the state’s hand in ensuring greater macroeconomic stability (Seekings & Nattrass, 2016), albeit in a neoliberal mould.

The adoption of GEAR exposed the ‘ambiguities’ in South Africa’s economic and social provisioning. While GEAR prescribed an orthodox set of tools to restrain public expenditure, the South African state also undertook a significant social protection agenda in which social transfers and welfare grants continued to function as important buffers against deepening poverty (Seekings & Nattrass, 2016). This provisioning has created a universal, transfer welfare state which, despite the ANC government’s reluctant implementation of pro-poor welfare programmes, has become ‘more (not less) redistributive over time’ (Seekings & Nattrass, 2016, p. 169). Discursively, the state has maintained that such welfare provisioning would be part of an individual empowerment agenda in which an enabling environment would be created for capability-enhancement. However, in practise, the growing reliance on welfare as a means to stave off poverty, together with the lack of macro-economic reform and employment opportunities, undercut any viable claim to empowerment.
Second period: Mbeki presidential term

The second period, the Mbeki presidency, did not see significant expansion in government departments to manage the functions of state; instead this period has been defined as one of ‘fine-tuning’ the existing configuration of the state with greater centralisation of functions and decision-making moved to the Presidency (Booysen, 2011). In addition, the shift to a ‘whole-of-government’ approach aimed to create a more functionally integrated state which could be better managed from the centre (Naidoo, 2017). Thus, greater emphasis was placed on the implementation capacity of the state and its ability to deliver on its developmental mandate. GEAR would maintain its centrality in economic policy; it was a precursor for a subsequent market-friendly economic policy agenda.

The interaction between the state and market was also more nuanced. Seekings and Nattrass (2016, p. 219) state that while the state was pro-market, it was less pro-business: white business was viewed with suspicion given their role during apartheid and thus, ‘The state’s priority … was more to “discipline” and to “transform” existing business than to work with it.’ The ambiguous nature of the state toward the market meant that

> [w]hile the state viewed markets with approval in various policy areas, not least because of the evident limits to state capacity, it also intervened in and subverted markets in other policy areas. … it institutionalised corporatist collective bargaining over wages and employment conditions, provided minimum wage setting in sectors where workers were weak and introduced industrial and other growth path policies that benefitted unionised workers. (Seekings & Nattrass, 2016, p. 220)

While adhering more toward these Scandinavian corporatist-style interventions, the state also undertook greater intervention in ‘corporate ownership and management through Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and affirmative action (‘employment equity’) policies’ (Seekings & Nattrass, 2016, p. 220). For the former, a preferential procurement framework aimed to support black business: rather than creating winners in key economic sectors, the state created winners through constituency politics. A clear, strong and symbiotic relationship between the state and capital was not established.

The capacity of the democratic state in this era to implement policy was uneven. While it succeeded largely in distributing social and welfare effectively, as well as undertaking critical economic functions such as tax collection efficiently, it ‘lacked the developmental capacity to direct economic growth and change in the same way as … the Korean developmental state’ (Seekings & Nattrass, 2016, p. 200). Instead, the creation of the aforementioned ‘transfer welfare state’ has been largely by ‘default’: the state’s ‘deficient policy and policy implementation in the areas of health and education leave its grants and social transfer policy as the effective social policies’, and given the enduring problems of adequate provision in these social fields, ‘there is little prospect for welfare-dependent
households to acquire much needed human capital to escape their welfare-dependent living conditions' (Burger, 2014, p. 176).

The challenges to human capital development remain particularly acute, especially when consideration is given to the changing nature of the South African economy since the 1970s away from primary sectors and into secondary and tertiary sectors and compounded by a distinct skills bias in favour of higher end skills (Bhorat, Goga, & Stanwix, 2013). While welfare provisioning may have supported some measure of capability-development, it did not go far enough in building a capability-expanding state.

Moreover, there has not been a singular, binding hegemonic vision that has driven a developmentalist orientation within the state. Policy shifts, historical and ideological differences within the party-political machinery, as well as a changing global context have functioned to nullify an overarching national vision to mobilise society. While the RDP and more recently, the NDP, have attempted to develop a binding vision, they have fallen short in articulating a clear developmental project with significant buy-in from all segments of society. In addition, the charges of neoliberalism have deepened fissures and factionalised the African National Congress, contributing to the lack of a cohesive developmental vision.

**Third period: Zuma/Ramaphosa presidential terms**

The third period, the Zuma administration, has attempted to give flesh to the bones of the developmental state, at least at a rhetorical level. The state has grown, and a number of new ministerial departments have been created in this period to effect greater implementation of key policy areas. A distinct politics was in play in the Zuma administration. Analysts have noted that patronage has functioned to shape the functional and organisational structure of the state (Naidoo, 2017). Departmental duplication and the lack of clear policy remits have led to a misalignment between the professed goals of greater developmentalism and the functional capacity of the state to deliver on it. Moreover, this expansionary state apparatus has also led to greater fiscal bloating. The South African state has been characterised as approaching a financial and political crisis, which has limited its ability to implement and reach its developmental goals (SOUTHALL, 2016). The Zuma period has been marked by a lack of distinct policy clarity, and while the overarching vision of the NDP attempts to provide a framework for a South African developmental state, there has not been sufficient, tangible progress on realising its core goals. Increasingly, the South African state is being hollowed out by a lack of leadership capacity and an inability to manage the economic, administrative and social levers required of a developmental state. It has also accelerated an enduring process of politicisation of the bureaucratic apparatus with negative consequences on capacity development and delivery (Cameron, 2010).

In February 2018, a change in the leadership of the ANC elevated Cyril Ramaphosa to the presidency of South Africa. Inaugurating the change as a ‘moment of hope and renewal’, Ramaphosa’s agenda has been marked by attempts to arrest the decline of state institutions, to improve the governance and operation of large state-owned enterprises, and to drive economic
growth and development through a renewed commitment to employment creation, increased foreign and domestic investment in productive sectors, and boosting industrialisation by stimulating the creation of black industrialists (The Presidency, 2018). The continued commitment to building ‘a strong and capable state’ informs these transformation processes. In response to Zuma’s expansionary state, the new administration has resolved to ‘initiate a process to review the configuration, number and size of national government departments’ (The Presidency, 2018). While there is a recommitment to building state capacity and effectiveness, strong neoliberal drivers are being maintained or strengthened. An analysis of the budget shows that corporate taxes have been set at half the level they were in 1994, while social programmes have been cut, and general sales tax has been increased, with the potential to disproportionately hit the poorest in society, while exchange controls for the country’s largest financiers have been liberalised.

The state in South Africa thus displays certain features of a developmental state, including being interventionist and shaping market-based policies as well as measures of redress and equity. However, these features are uneven and there are a number of challenges to the realisation of an effective democratic developmental state in South Africa. While the state has implemented a range of policies in the pursuit of economic growth, the interaction of such growth with poverty, inequality and unemployment has been complex. Structural and institutional factors have hampered state efforts at generating mass employment. The lack of a clear, hegemonic, developmentalist vision has hindered large-scale progressive societal mobilisation.

The state–higher education nexus and the question of transformation

We turn now to an analysis of the mutually constitutive relationship between the state and higher education in relation to the transformation imperative. Many of the tensions that exist in the state’s own conflicts and issues with transformation are replicated both in the state–higher education relationship, as well as in the state’s steering of higher education and the responses of higher education institutions across all three presidential regimes.

A key feature of a developmental state is the need to coordinate the different parts of the overall system, including higher education in order to ensure coherent policy formulation and implementation (Edigheji, 2007). In higher education, this process is facilitated by the Council on Higher Education (CHE), a coordinating body which interfaces between the universities and the government’s Department of Higher Education and Training. The state–higher education relationship has been characterised as ‘cooperative governance with state supervision’ (Cloete, 2002, pp. 54–55) or as ‘conditional autonomy’. This bi-directional relationship results in tensions with respect to autonomy and accountability. Changing alliances to accommodate or resist state steering are heavily dependent on historical hierarchies in the field of higher education and to university connections to dominant fractions in the field of political power (Lepori & Naidoo, 2017).

An analysis of the shifts and contestations in transformation needs to start in the context of the specific post-apartheid historic juncture. Jansen (2001, 2002) has asserted that
establishing the legitimacy and credentials of the government in the post-apartheid period required an overarching discourse about transformation which was largely symbolic and which would eventually undermine implementation when confronted with pressing local and global constraints. Thus the symbolism embedded in government policy generated unrealistic expectations about redress (Cloete, Fehnel, Maasen, Moja, Perold, & Gibbon, 2002) and left the government open to criticism for half-hearted implementation (Jansen, 2001). Throughout the various transformation phases, tensions emerged which were not anticipated by the key players in South Africa (Cloete & Moja, 2005; Kraak & Young, 2001). Ideological and political differences and the realities of limited resources underlay such tensions. Further tensions were caused by the gap between the high expectations that followed from the end of apartheid, the difficulties of accommodating competing priorities and demands and limited government and institutional capacity (Thaver & Thaver, 2009).

**Transformation as equity of access**

The Mandela presidential period was dominated by discussions of a break with the apartheid past and redress for past inequities. Government policies in this era, namely the NCHE Framework (1996), the Education White Papers and the Higher Education Act (1997) provided the rationale and the specific direction for the reconstruction of higher education. In the early years of the Mandela regime, emphasis was placed on achieving social justice through redress via a reconstruction and development programme which was envisaged to break with the apartheid past, achieve redress for past inequities and correct apartheid social engineering (Cloete et al., 2002). In higher education, the key transformative principle in this early period appears to be a narrow focus on demographic transformation particularly of the student body in relation to race, although this was extended to gender, age, and disability (Department of Education [DOE], 1997). As indicated in the report by the Council on Higher Education (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2016), hegemonic discourses on transformation were equated with equity, and equity was equated with race. There appears to be the assumption that access to higher education for those who were previously excluded would automatically contribute to development in general and the public good in particular. In contemporary times, race is still a key factor in transformation debates, but this is infused with new debates on whether race should remain a criterion, given the development of a black middle class or whether other indicators of disadvantage, such as quintile of school, would be more equitable (for further discussion on this topic, see Chapter 6).

**Transformation as massification**

As we see in the sections above, the redress of apartheid’s past in relation to equity of access in undergraduate education dominated the agenda in a relatively unmediated manner, particularly
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in the immediate post-apartheid era. In this context, discussions on what redress strategies would be most appropriate were raised. One suggestion was to award a disadvantage subsidy from the government block grant for each black student enrolled. However, this did not come to fruition (Cloete, 2014). Another concept linked to transformation focused on institutional rather than student redress. The intention here was to develop policy and funding mechanisms to transform the system so that the inherited inequalities between the historically black and historically white institutions were diminished rather than intensified (Badat, Barends, & Wolpe, 1994). This approach was not wholly successful. Cloete, Pillay, Badat, and Moja (2004) have noted that a complex set of circumstances led instead to a widening gap between the historically black universities and the historically advantaged institutions, with only the historically advantaged Afrikaans institutions gaining any real benefit.

The second redress strategy proposed that was linked to transformation was that of massification. The concern was, however, that rapid massification in a situation in which school preparation was unequal, and in which the staff to student ratio in higher education would become even greater, could result in an overall reduction in quality. Instead, the Higher Education Plan of 2001 called for ‘planned growth’ and in May 2002 a phased series of mergers was proposed to reduce the number of institutions from 36 to 21. The rationale for mergers was intended to transform the system to break historical patterns of advantage and disadvantage. It was noted that the historical legacy of apartheid, together with weak regulation and quasi-market competition, combined to entrench the crisis in historically black institutions, while historically white institutions ‘cream[ed]’ off the best students and staff. This resulted in historically disadvantaged institutions retaining the bulk of the most disadvantaged and under-prepared students (DOE, 2001). The rationale was that in a period of crisis, all institutions needed to be transformed to ensure that all take responsibility to redress past inequalities. Collaboration and combinations of institutions were thus two crucial mechanisms to transform the system (DOE, 2001). While funding levers to encourage collaboration have been developed, progress with mergers has been uneven (Arnolds, Stofile, & Lillah, 2013), and there are some indications of the reinforcement of stratification.

Transformation as differentiation

In 2012, the National Development Plan (NDP) set a target of 30 per cent participation in higher education by 2030, calling for massification with differentiation, in combination with robust quality checks. This policy initiative had strong links with the CHE commissioned report Towards a new higher education landscape, released in 2000, which made a case for higher education as a public good, and argued that transformation required the creation of a diverse and differentiated higher education system. In 2012 it was proposed that the system include a mix of research-led universities, mainly undergraduate teaching universities, a vocationally driven further education and training college sector and a market-driven sector, as well as increasing distance education. In addition, a new funding and planning framework by
the Department of Education called for a system-wide student enrolment planning exercise to facilitate the implementation of a new funding formula. The government’s argument was that, in order to maintain a sustainable funding level per student, and improve efficiency, student numbers should be capped and institutions should increase graduate output, by increasing throughput rates rather than by taking in more students (DOE, 2005).

**Transformation of knowledge and culture**

Linked to the ‘transformation debate’ on equity are the fault lines arising from the past but gaining increasing traction in contemporary times around the issue of institutional culture and relevant curricula. Lessons from countries such as Singapore indicate the importance of education in developing social cohesion and responsible citizenship (Goh & Gopinathan, 2008). In South Africa, many gains in relation to institutional culture and the Africanisation of the curriculum have been made. However, there remains a widespread perception amongst key stakeholders that elements of apartheid remain embedded in institutional cultures and in the curriculum, and that these vestiges of the past serve to alienate black and other disadvantaged students. Initiatives such as the institutional transformation forums have been set up with the aim of uprooting remaining vestiges of apartheid and transforming culture. However, success has been reported as uneven (Griffin, 2016). Protests by students demanding the decolonisation of the curriculum and the removal of apartheid symbols such as the statue of Rhodes has combined with high-profile cases to call for transformation charters for all institutions to ‘defeat racism and patriarchy’ at South African universities which is believed to be ‘rife’. The Ministerial Committee Report on Transformation and Social Cohesion of 2008 served to place the issue of the transformation of institutional cultures firmly on the agenda and led to the development of a national policy on social cohesion in the post-school sector. In 2013, Higher Education South Africa (HESA) initiated a project facilitating the development of Integrated Transformation Plans in which institutions put forward their understandings of the challenges of transformation and how they planned to address it. This process is reported to have led to a more nuanced understanding of transformation in relation to institutional culture, inclusiveness, diversity and redress (CHE, 2016). Codified knowledge has always been characterised by power struggles and specific interests (Collins, 1998) and clearly the curriculum in South Africa has been utilised as an ideological device for protecting privilege. At the same time, as Muller (2000) and Young (2007) warn, there are grave dangers with an uncritical acceptance of highly relativistic conceptions of knowledge. Moore and Muller (1999) show that it is all too easy to reach the point where academic knowledge can be perceived as being unable to make any epistemological claim to validity since it can only ever be an ideological device for maintaining positions of dominance.

Researchers such as Peter Evans (2010), writing in the context of the developmental state, have highlighted the importance of expanding access to the existing stock of ideas, increasing the effective utilisation of this stock and generating new ideas suited to a country’s specific
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circumstances. While high research performance and robust research infrastructure are present in elite institutions, this is not a characteristic of the South African system as a whole. The potential of research to contribute to inclusive development is hampered by the difficulty of maintaining a balance between research which focuses on the country’s specific challenges and the contribution to global and blue-sky knowledge. While both aims can sometimes be simultaneously met, often a focus on one undermines the other. In addition, innovation models such as the ‘triple helix’ which advocate strong relations between universities, industry, and government may not work well in the South African context as corporations may be unwilling to fund research and training and may not have sufficient capacity to utilise research findings or high-skilled knowledge workers (Naidoo, 2011). Many higher education institutions may therefore face pressures to perform low-level, routine, consultancy-type activities with the aim of generating income (Arocena & Sutz, 2005). In addition, in a national context where Mode 1 specialist disciplinary knowledge was never thoroughly institutionalised, high market demand for knowledge for narrow utilitarian purposes may constrain research to the point of squeezing out important explanatory and theoretical research (Holland, 2008).

The contribution of higher education to development

In this final section, we draw on the consequences of the policies related to transformation presented above to discuss the contribution of higher education to the overall social and economic development of the country. An analysis of higher education documents in the Mandela presidential period indicates that there was little focus on development (Cloete & Moja, 2005). Where development, particularly economic development, was raised, it was often counterposed, at least implicitly, to social equity. In other words, there was an analytical separation between economic development and racial equity, together with the potential for economic development to be perceived as ‘anti-transformational’. However, initiatives such as GEAR introduced substantial shifts and brought South Africa more in line with international neoliberal trends emphasising economic development, the need for fiscal restraint and structural adjustment (Bond, 2004). In the National Development Plan stronger links have been made between knowledge and development. The ten-year innovation plan (2008–2018) has also set out the aim of driving South Africa’s transformation towards a knowledge economy, in which the production and dissemination of knowledge is expected to lead to economic benefits and to enrich all fields of human endeavour. However, a close analysis reveals that there has been insufficient analysis of the role of higher education in such knowledge-developmental visions.

Various transformation discourses are related to important and visionary policies in higher education which have led to the successful integration of racially divided systems into one national system of higher education. Successes include an appropriate and relevant quality assurance system, established governance bodies, high research output in some universities and major achievements in relation to access with an 80% growth in the number of African
students, as well as implementation of a financial aid scheme (Baijnath, 2016). These successes are even more impressive against the backdrop of a historical system that was segregated and unequal, inadequate funding, rising poverty and student protests. These achievements could not have occurred without the vision, commitment and hard work of national policy-makers, institutional leaders, academics, and administrative staff and students.

However, as is the case in many other countries, there is also considerable dis-articulation between various policies leading to tensions, imbalances and contradictions impacting on the system as a whole. These are likely to lead to adverse consequences and we outline some illustrative examples below.

The development of a higher education system comprising a diversity of institutions offering high-quality academic and vocational choices with inter-connected progression routes is an important step towards both greater equity as well as holding out great potential for the contribution of higher education to wider social and economic development. However insufficient attention has been paid to developing policy and funding instruments that are genuinely differentiated to steer and reward diverse sets of institutions. There are also inadequate incentives for different types of institutions to excel in different missions. These factors lead to rising isomorphism and militate against a more inclusive higher education system contributing to inclusive development. In relation to access, for example, the logic of policies, when taken together, appear to offer the greatest rewards to institutions that maximise research output and demonstrate student success and progression in the shortest time possible. Institutions which have not traditionally included widening participation in their missions are therefore unlikely to develop admission strategies to recruit students from under-represented groups. Such students are perceived to be time and resource intensive and are therefore expected to threaten institutional arrangements around activities, such as research, through which academic status and financial resources are accrued (Naidoo, 1998). In addition, such students are unlikely to enhance the institution’s ‘output’ indicators. At the same time, as research in other contexts has shown, the institutions that absorb students from groups that are traditionally excluded from higher education are likely to be financially and reputationally penalised, since policy frameworks do not differentiate between categories of students with regard to social disadvantage and differences in prior educational attainment (Naidoo, 2000). Thus, while government measures are presented as devices for drawing diverse institutions into a horizontally differentiated system offering greater choice and quality, in reality, the impact will be to encourage the development of a sector in which status and resources are likely to be inversely proportional to institutional and student disadvantage.

Furthermore, expanding access to university whilst reinforcing a stratified higher education system could have negative effects on economic and social development. In highly stratified systems, the vast majority of students who face intersecting disadvantage could be recruited into low quality, cheap, standardised courses which would not provide an adequate base of skills in areas critically needed for development. Rather than gaining access to powerful forms of knowledge (Young & Muller, 2013), the vast majority of students will continue to receive
an education that has been reduced to narrowly defined core competencies. Disciplines such as Medicine, Engineering, Mathematics, Economics, as well as subjects in the Humanities and Social Sciences which are crucial to development may be placed in a vulnerable position, while degrees that are easier and cheaper to teach such as Business Studies may grow exponentially. In addition, programmes to build indigenous research capacity such as research degrees at postgraduate level or doctoral level work may be replaced by fee-based masters and postgraduate diploma programmes based primarily on coursework. Marginson (2001) has argued that such courses are often hard to distinguish from undergraduate courses and may in fact be augmenting credentialism rather than developing national capacity through the training of new generations of indigenous researchers. These factors could combine to lead to a shortage of programmes and graduates in key strategic areas which may be detrimental to development strategies.

An influential trend which has gained momentum worldwide is the competition for world class status. The assumption is that the transfer of the lion’s share of resources into universities identified as world class will contribute in a direct manner to the social and economic development of the country as a whole. However, the jury is still out on whether the training of an elite social segment in elite universities automatically contributes to national development, particularly since world class universities are often embedded in global networks with multi-national corporations and contribute to global rather than national innovation in developing countries. In addition, the argument that world class universities in highly stratified systems are the best route for higher education to contribute to national innovation is challenged by the success of the relatively non-hierarchical system of higher education in countries such as Finland and Germany. In addition, the research and prestige mission entrusted to elite universities is often diametrically opposed to enhancing equality. Few benefits trickle down to support institutions that admit large numbers of students from the most disadvantaged sectors of society.

Finally, there appear to be inadequate connections between higher education policy and wider economic and social policies of the country. Great faith is placed in the high skills thesis which contends that equipping higher levels of skill to the population as a whole, linked to technologically oriented mode of working, will unproblematically contribute to social mobility and economic development. However, researchers have pointed out that even in high-income countries, high performance production systems and high skills regimes are not all-pervasive and widely distributed (see, e.g. Kraak, 2004) and that in reality in most countries, mass producing manufacturing and low skill labour intensive production exist alongside high skill production techniques. Other analysts such as Keep (1999) go further to argue that Fordist and post-Fordist modes of production continue to flourish in advanced economies particularly in the United States of America and the United Kingdom as they are based on the expansion of low skilled, low cost jobs which give a certain competitive advantage. According to these analysts, the reality of high skill production strategies is that this only occurs in a few sectors, mainly in the leading advanced economies. The high skills rhetoric of the knowledge-based economy also prophesises that the growing importance of knowledge work would significantly
raise the demand for educated workers, who would enjoy greater autonomy in their work. However, as Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2011) show, bursts of creativity in capitalist countries are followed by the routinisation of work to enable profits to be made. Lauder, Brown, and Sin (in press) note that changes in the nature of capitalism, including skills replacing technology and the preference for corporations to move to high skilled low cost countries such as China, has fundamentally undermined the relationship between individual investments in education and higher paid employment. Thus, as Lloyd and Payne (2018) indicate, the policy preference for supply side approaches to skills for economic development based on human capital theory may be seen as more of a political device that acts as a poor substitute for more direct interventions in the economy and labour market which would genuinely enhance the demand for skills and job quality.

Conclusions

The uncertain and ambiguous approach to inclusive development adopted across various presidential periods in South Africa suggests major challenges to the realisation of a developmental state in South Africa capable of steering the country towards a model of inclusive development. While the state has implemented a range of policies in the pursuit of economic growth, the interaction of such growth with poverty, inequality and unemployment has been complex. The relationship between the state and higher education which has been characterised as cooperative governance with state supervision has in practice meant that universities have at times been faced with the state making far reaching decisions with no prior negotiation, such as President Zuma’s decision in 2017 to implement free higher education for poor students. At the same time, there is the potential for university leaders to invoke the ideal of institutional autonomy at certain times to protect institutional interests, while proclaiming that state control has curtailed their ability to act in other periods of prolonged conflict with civil society.

Transformation merely perceived as enhanced access in the absence of support mechanisms aiding students in overcoming structural, social and individual level barriers (in the context of transformed institutional cultures) is unlikely to work. The question of transformed curricula has to be grasped by the horn (see Walker and McLean, 2013, for an example of the transformation of professional education) at the same time as acknowledging that equating knowledge in a simplistic manner to the national context or certain cultures may result in the detachment of higher education from powerful global knowledge structures and from wider procedures for generating better knowledge.

In addition, undifferentiated governance and funding mechanisms are likely to lead to mission drift and isomorphism and the development of a dysfunctionally stratified system unable to contribute fully to inclusive development. An important paper by Carpentier (2018) drawing on historical data in comparative perspective suggests that the relationship between mission differentiation and social reproduction could be ameliorated by challenging
the cultural heritage which tends to undervalue vocational higher education and to encourage transfers across the various parts of the system thereby contributing to social mobility. In addition, a balance needs to be found between funding and governance mechanisms that protect the existing quality of research and teaching while incentivising a diversity of missions across different types of institutions. Further attention on how policy and funding can shape the relationship between different types of domestic institutions, as well as foreign and private institutions, in order to build capacity is vitally important. An important area for research consideration is the extent to which policy fosters collaboration, competition or functional differentiation between the different sets of providers. In addition, the assumption that publicly funded institutions are likely to contribute in an unproblematic way to the public good is misplaced. Universities have historically played multiple roles, sometimes contributing to the transformation of societies and at other times reproducing unequal relations in society and more often than not, doing both simultaneously (Brennan, King, & Lebeau, 2004). Research therefore needs to be conducted on which functions of the higher education system need to be publicly funded and protected. While regulation normally operates through rules and sanctions, it might also be useful to look at the provision of incentives so that institutions contribute to developmental goals. In most countries, governments have responded to the perceived insularity of higher education by implementing mechanisms to open up higher education to economic forces, to encourage higher education to contribute more directly to economic development and to foster closer relations with industry. However, while there has been a great deal of policy rhetoric, there has in general been little corresponding link between financial or performance incentives and the provision of public goods.

It is undoubtedly true that research-focused public institutions may be best able to succeed if the goal to provide certain levels of higher education on a mass scale can be met by other providers. However, at the same time for countries such as South Africa, given the national resources consumed, it could be argued that in addition to chasing prestige, elite universities should be tasked with a certain level of responsibility for building capacity in the South African higher education system as a whole. Scarce national resources could also be distributed to create world class systems of higher education that contribute to inclusive development, rather than world class universities that contribute to the development of an elite in higher education and to the reinforcement of stratification in the wider society (Naidoo, 2018).

Finally, a development strategy linking national, social and economic development strategies to higher education policy in the context of an appropriate measure of institutional autonomy is an important area to address. The idea of developing a skills strategy around the interlocking potential of low, intermediate and high skills to allow for greater variability and unevenness is persuasive (Kraak, 2004) and has implications for a mixture of investment strategies in higher and other levels of education, including vocational training. At the same time, such efforts to expand human capabilities through education have to be linked to the redistribution of material resources to South African citizens as a whole, while providing
incentives for individuals to invest in their own capabilities through joined up macro industrial strategies linked to equitable and dignified forms of employment.

References


