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## HIGHER EDUCATION AS A FIELD OF STUDY AND RESEARCH

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### ABSTRACT

*In this chapter we address four issues concerning HE as a field of study and research. We start off by discussing the typical characteristics of a field of study as opposed to a discipline, then we trace a number of moments in the development of HE studies and research internationally and locally. Next we try to suggest a way to 'map' the field in South Africa against the background of international mappings and finally we suggest a number of issues to consider for possible future research to extend and promote HE as a field of study and research – particularly in South Africa.*

### INTRODUCTION

It is widely agreed that higher education (HE) in its variety of forms contributes to social and economic development through at least four major missions:

1. The formation of human capital (primarily through teaching)
2. Building knowledge bases (primarily through research and knowledge development)
3. The dissemination and use of knowledge (by interacting with the users of knowledge)
4. The maintenance of knowledge (inter-generational storage and transmission of knowledge)

(OECD 2008)













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Kassel in Germany and the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies in Twente, The Netherlands. Furthermore, a number of specialised scholarly journals, ranging from *Higher Education* to the *Journal of Higher Education* and *Studies in Higher Education* were prominent in furthering the field while members of societies such as the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), the Higher Education section of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) made important initial research contributions. Apart from these centres and associations, Fulton points to the nature of the field by highlighting the research approaches that were followed as well as the early book publications (the 'great books of HE') that influenced further research and writing. He concluded that at least in the early 1990s HE appeared to be a rapidly changing field where the changes in higher education systems and institutions happened fast enough to require constant reassessment. One of the advantages of the field was (and probably still is) that it can draw freely on other disciplinary perspectives it may find appropriate. At the same time, this is also a drawback, since new 'immigrants' to the field who are trained in 'core disciplines' will always tend to use and foreground their own preferred methods and issues.

In our view another developmental thrust was the contribution of the publication *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* that saw its 23<sup>rd</sup> edition in 2008. The *Handbook*, currently edited by John Smart and sponsored by the Association of Institutional Research (AIR) and the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) has been published since 1986 and none fewer than 242 excellent and in-depth articles have been included in these volumes. The collection ranges from Pascarella's seminal contribution on how college environments influence students' learning and their cognitive development (the very first article in the *Handbook* in 1986) to Feldman, Yang's most recent (2009) article on China's return into the higher education community. A brief inspection of the 242 articles indicates that the contributing authors were/are all leaders in their respective areas of specialisation, that the articles cover a wide range of highly relevant topics and issues and that their nature ranges between in-depth qualitative, quantitative, and mixed mode research as well as personal and analytical reflections over career spans in HE research. The value of these contributions is, in our view, that they represent in most cases ground-breaking research and ideas that assisted in major ways in shaping the research and publications that followed on them.

The last developmental instance we want to highlight is the publication series of the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) and Open University Press.



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The series has, over the past 10 or more years, published excellent scholarly and some very professional and practical works in HE, including a range of books in areas such as staff and students, theory and history, policy and content, planning and management, supervision and postgraduate issues, research skills and study skills. Authors such as Barnett (*Beyond all reason, The limits of competence, Improving higher education, The idea of higher education, Realizing the university in an age of supercomplexity*), Tight (*Researching higher education*), Biggs (*Teaching for quality learning at university*), Becher and Trowler (*Academic tribes and territories*) and many others have made relevant contributions by stimulating debate and research in the field of HE. Publications from SRHE and Open University Press are cited numerously at conferences and in publications worldwide. In our view they have made (and are still making), a substantial contribution.

A recent 'developmental moment' that needs mention, and has the potential to contribute widely to debates and further publications on HE research, is a report by John Brennan (UK), Jürgen Enders (The Netherlands), Chriatine Musselin (France), Ulrich Teichler (Germany) and Jussi Välimaa (Finland) titled *Higher Education looking forward: An agenda for future research*. The report, which focuses mainly on the UK and Europe and is sponsored by the European Science Foundation (ESF), questions the relationships and connections between contemporary social and economic changes, the changes happening in HE and the roles of academics. This also leads to other questions for which, according to the authors, new forms of social science methodologies will probably be needed. They include questions such as: How might new forms of comparative research achieve a better understanding of the interactions between HE and society, and the different forms these take in Europe and more widely? How do national, regional and local contexts help to determine the characteristics of HE systems? What is the role of public authorities? Do different types of HE institutions have different relationships with the wider social and economic worlds which they are part of? Must universities adopt new functions and blur their boundaries with other social institutions to retain their importance in the knowledge society? The report also characterises current HE research as small and theme-based with varied institutional bases implicating risks and dangers as well as challenges and opportunities. Some of these questions are reminiscent of those put (in a less sophisticated manner, though) by Professor Charles Kendall Adams in addressing the Phi Beta Kappa Society of the University of Vermont on the relationship between higher education and national prosperity (as far back as 1876!).

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These are but a few examples in scratching the surface of a wealth of resources that have enhanced and are still enhancing the international development of HE as a field of study and research. We shall now turn to developments in South Africa and again, these are merely examples that do not pretend to provide a complete picture.

**Examples of South African developments and contributions**

The aftermath of the first democratic election and a peaceful transition of power in South Africa in 1994 saw a proliferation of policy documents, workshops, conferences, papers and publications on HE (see Table 17.1). It may not be far-fetched to say that the newly elected ANC government and the so-called progressive groupings and leaders wanted to transform the whole of the educational dispensation as quickly and as radically as possible. While this position could be understood after many years of domination and missed opportunities, it was also an approach with risk, as education systems do not change easily and radically unless much energy and resources are invested in them. This was exactly the challenge posed to the newly elected authorities: Radical policies and plans were being set in place, but only limited funding was available for their implementation. Therefore, it was not before the 2000s that the implementation of transformational plans really began to take shape and that HE in particular started experiencing major changes. These changes, accompanied by new challenges such as broadening student access, increasing student funding and effecting equity brought new dimensions to HE research and study opportunities, as we shall try to explain (also see the chapter on policy analysis by Hay and Monnapula-Mapesela as well as other chapters on the university as a HE institution in this book).

**TABLE 17.1** A summary of key HE policy and publication initiatives at a national level (1990-2009)

Date	Initiative or process
1990	The National Education Coordinating Committee (NECC) starts HE policy proposals in view of the African National Congress (ANC) gaining the political power.
1992-1994	Policy proposals by the Union of Democratic University Staff Associations (UDUSA) and the Education Policy Unit (EPU) at the University of the Western Cape. Publication of the National Education Policy Initiative (NEPI) report: Post-secondary Education.
1995-1996	Promulgation of the South African Qualifications Authority Act (No. 58 of 1995). Establishment of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE). Publication of the report: A framework for transformation (1996).

























































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### ANNEXURE 17.3

#### CURRENT PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA (AS IN 2009 – ALPHABETICALLY)

Cape Peninsula University of Technology	Incorporating the former Cape and Peninsula technikons, the university is the largest in the Western Cape, with over 25,000 students on two main campuses, in Bellville and Cape Town. The university's IT Centre is the largest of its kind in Africa, housing 1,400 computers, various laboratories, a state-of-the-art video conference room and lecture theatre, and two e-business rooms.
Central University of Technology	Incorporates the former Technikon Free State and Vista University (Welkom campus). Although the language of instruction is English, the university plans to offer parallel instruction in Afrikaans and Sesotho. Over 100 courses are offered in three faculties: management; engineering, information and communication sciences; and health and environmental sciences. The university is based in Bloemfontein and has a number of centres that can provide research and other technological services to private companies, particularly smaller businesses. This fits in with the university's vision of engaging with its community and providing its students with opportunities for experiential learning.
Durban University of Technology	Incorporates the former ML Sultan, Natal and Mangosuthu technikons, as well as the former University of Zululand (Umlazi campus). The university has major campuses in Durban and Pietermaritzburg as well as satellite campuses in Umlazi.
Mangosuthu Technikon	Mangosuthu Technikon is a modern higher education institution offering superior quality, technologically advanced programmes and services in engineering, natural sciences and management sciences to almost 10,000 students.
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University	Incorporates the former PE Technikon, University of Port Elizabeth and Vista University (Port Elizabeth campus). The university has more than 20,000 students and about 2,000 staff members spread across eight campuses in the Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape and George in the Western Cape.
North-West University	North-West University has more than 45,000 students spread over four campuses, offers parallel instruction in Afrikaans, English and Setswana, and is experimenting with simultaneous instruction on its Potchefstroom campus.
Rhodes University	Situated in the Eastern Cape town of Grahamstown, Rhodes University has a 100-year history of academic excellence. Perhaps best known for its journalism department, Rhodes has around 500 academic staff and 7,000 students.
Stellenbosch University	Situated in the wine-growing region of Stellenbosch, 60 km from Cape Town, Stellenbosch University is one of South Africa's leading research institutions. The university's Centre for Invasion Biology, a Department of Science and Technology centre of excellence, studies the impact of invasive plant species on southern Africa's agriculture, biodiversity and ecotourism. The university has four campuses: the main campus at Stellenbosch, the health sciences faculty at Tygerberg Hospital, the business school in Bellville, and military sciences faculty in Saldanha.

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<b>Tshwane University of Technology</b>	Incorporating the former Northern Gauteng, North-West and Pretoria technikons, the university offers over 180 programmes, some of these unique to the institution, such as sport and exercise technology, equine studies, medical orthotics and prosthetics, and environmental management. The university offers masters and doctoral programmes in addition to degrees, certificates and diplomas, and boasts more postgraduate students than any other South African university of technology.
<b>University of Cape Town</b>	South Africa's oldest university, founded in 1829, has one of the most picturesque campuses in the world, situated on the slopes of Table Mountain's Devil's Peak and overlooking Rondebosch in Cape Town. The university is regarded as one of the top research institutions on the continent, with more "A"-rated scientists than any other South African university. According to National Research Foundation criteria, "A"-rated scientists are "leading international scholars in their field [known] for the high quality and impact of their recent research outputs". The university is home to Groote Schuur Hospital, where the world's first heart transplant took place in 1967.
<b>University of Fort Hare</b>	Fort Hare, dating back to 1916, is the oldest historically black university in the country. It has been the academic home of many of South Africa's most prominent leaders, including Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Govan Mbeki, and Mangosuthu Buthelezi. In 2005, the university was awarded the Order of the Baobab – SA's highest civilian honour – for its contribution to the country's leadership. Fort Hare has three Eastern Cape campuses, in Alice, Bisho and East London. The university offers a range of degrees and diplomas in its faculties of education, science and agriculture, social sciences and humanities, management and commerce, and at the Nelson Mandela School of Law.
<b>University of Johannesburg</b>	Incorporating the former Rand Afrikaans University, Technikon Witwatersrand and Vista University (Johannesburg campuses), the university offers both technical and academic programmes for around 45,000 students. The university has built a new School of Travel and Tourism on its Auckland Park campus, at a cost of about R70 million.
<b>University of KwaZulu-Natal</b>	Incorporating the former Durban-Westville and Natal universities, the university covers five campuses in Durban and Pietermaritzburg.
<b>University of Limpopo</b>	Formerly the University of the North, which was home to many prominent anti-apartheid activists of the 1970s and '80s. Situated in South Africa's northern Limpopo province, the university provides training in three faculties: humanities; management sciences and law; and sciences, health and agriculture.
<b>University of Pretoria</b>	Officially established in 1930 – but with roots stretching back to the founding of the Normal College for teacher training in 1902 – the university is one of South Africa's largest, with almost 40,000 students, including over 2,000 international students from 60 countries. The university's Gordon Institute of Business Science, established in Johannesburg in 2000, has already earned an international reputation, while its faculty of veterinary science at Onderstepoort is the only one of its kind in South Africa.
<b>University of South Africa</b>	Incorporating the former Unisa, Technikon SA and Vista University (distance education), the Pretoria-based University of South Africa offers distance education programmes – both academic and technical – to students across the country and the region. The university's Centre for African Renaissance Study is an interdisciplinary research institution with a mandate to develop outward to the whole of Africa and diasporic Africa.

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<b>University of the Free State</b>	Established in 1904, the university is home to around 20,000 students, 16,000 on the main Bloemfontein campus and 3,000 enrolled in the university's distance and internet learning programmes.
<b>University of the Western Cape</b>	Originally established in 1959 as an ethnic college for "coloured" students, the university has grown into an internationally recognised institution, providing facilities for over 12,000 students across 68 departments and 16 institutes, schools and research centres.
<b>University of the Witwatersrand</b>	Situated in Johannesburg, Wits University is one of the country's leading research institutions. A cosmopolitan campus close to the city centre, Wits attracts a large number of students from across Africa. Since full university status was granted in 1922, Wits has produced more than 100,000 graduates across a range of disciplines. The university offers degrees in the faculties of engineering and the built environment, humanities, health sciences, science and commerce. Wits hosts the Department of Science and Technology's Centre of Excellence in Strong Materials, the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, and the Wits Business School.
<b>University of Venda</b>	The University of Venda for Science and Technology, situated in Thohoyandou in Limpopo, offers career-focussed programmes in the fields of health, agriculture and rural development; humanities, management sciences and law; and natural and applied sciences.
<b>University of Zululand</b>	Based in KwaDlangezwa, the university positions itself as the leading local, rurally based comprehensive institution offering career-focused undergraduate and postgraduate education, including wide ranging research opportunities.
<b>Vaal University of Technology</b>	The university has around 15,000 students spread across its main campus in Vanderbijlpark, 60 km southwest of Johannesburg, and four satellite campuses, which include the Sebokeng campus of the former Vista University.
<b>Walter Sisulu University</b>	Incorporating the former Border and Eastern Cape technikons and the University of the Transkei, the university has around 20,000 students spread across its campuses in East London, Butterworth, Queenstown and Mthatha. The university offers a range of degrees, certificates and diplomas in 11 faculties, and hosts an MBChB programme in Mthatha.

(Source: <http://www.southafrica.info/about/education/universities.htm>)

**ANNEXURE 17.4****SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES THAT OFFER FORMAL POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMMES IN HE STUDIES AND THE TYPE OF PROGRAMMES ON OFFER (AS IN 2009)**

INSTITUTION	PROGRAMMES OFFERED	DESIGNATED FACULTY
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University	Postgraduate Certificate in HE	Faculty of Education
	MEd	Faculty of Education
	PhD	Faculty of Education
UNISA	Postgraduate Diploma in Tertiary Education	College of Human Sciences
	Master of Education with specialisation in Adult Education	College of Human Sciences
Tshwane University of Technology	Higher Diploma in Higher Education and Training	Faculty of Humanities: Department of Educational Studies
University of Fort Hare	Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education and Training (PGDHET)	Faculty of Education: School of Postgraduate Studies
Cape Peninsula University of Technology	Higher Diploma in Higher Education and Training	Faculty of Education and Social Sciences
University of Pretoria	Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education(PGCHE)	Faculty of Education
University of the Witwatersrand	Certificate Programme in Higher Education Management	Graduate School of Public and Development Management
	Master of Education in Tertiary Teaching	Faculty of Humanities: School of Education
University of KwaZulu-Natal	Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education	Faculty of Education: School of Adult and HE Centre for HE Studies
	Master's in Higher Education	Faculty of Education: School of Adult and HE Centre for HE Studies
University of Cape Town	Postgraduate Diploma in Education	Centre for Higher Education Development
	Master's in Education (ICT)	Centre for Higher Education Development
Stellenbosch University	MPhil in Higher Education	Faculty of Education
	PhD	Faculty of Education
	MPhil (Health Sciences Education)	Faculty of Health Sciences
University of the Western Cape	MEd in Higher Education – Policy Analysis, Leadership and Management	Faculty of Education
University of Johannesburg	MEd in Higher Education	Faculty of Education
	PhD in Higher Education	Faculty of Education

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INSTITUTION	PROGRAMMES OFFERED	DESIGNATED FACULTY
Rhodes University	Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education	Centre of Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning
	Master's in Education (Higher Education) PhD	Faculty of Education
University of the Free State	Advanced Diploma in Higher (or Further) Education	Centre for Higher Education Studies and Development (Faculty of Humanities)
	MA (Higher Education Studies)	
	PhD (Higher Education Studies)	
	Master's (Health Professions Education) PhD (Health Professions Education)	Faculty of Health Sciences

(Compiled by Nalize Marais, Centre for Higher Education Studies and Development, University of the Free State)