

What's your niche?

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Of the 2 813 academic staff at South Africa's universities of technology, only 323 had PhDs and 959 had master's degrees, according to the department of education's 2006 data.

These figures were disclosed by Professor Chika Schoole, chief director of higher education policy, at the recent South African Technology Network (SATN) conference on the nature and characteristics of South African universities held in Durban.

Speakers from national and international institutions, with representatives from government, addressed the conference on issues, such as the impact of universities of technology, applied research and work-integrated learning.

Experiences from Australian universities of technology, the Australian Technology Network and universities of applied sciences in Europe were shared.

Universities of technology were born in 2004, following the mergers of some technikons with one another and with traditional universities.

Previously technikons provided vocational training and were known to have curricula that were specifically relevant to industry and trumped the employability of their graduates. In 1993 technikons were afforded degree-granting status.

Schoole said the qualifications of academics with PhDs and master's degrees represent "6% and 18% respectively of the total staff members with PhDs and master's in the system". He said there are many academics who teach with certificates, diplomas and bachelor's degree qualifications.

"The majority of those with postgraduate qualifications had completed their qualifications at the traditional universities and not at universities of technology."

He stressed that when these institutions were technikons, staff were not required to have PhDs, but they produced highly employable graduates. He said these institutions are continuing their work but the lack of PhDs is not negatively affecting the quality of students.

"As academics improve their qualifications, so will the content of courses they teach."

He told the *Higher Learning* that in the light of these institutions offering largely certificates, diplomas and undergraduate courses, "staff are not necessarily under-qualified".

But universities of technology need to pay special attention to the profile of staff qualifications because this sector is expected to have a student intake of 150 000 of the planned intake of 820 000 students in the system by 2010.

Drop-out rates are expected to fall and graduation rates are expected to increase, meaning that graduates from this sector must increase to 28 800 in 2010 from 25 000 in 2005.

"We are aware that, without an entrenched culture of research, universities of technology increasingly find it difficult to produce or contribute to national research at the same level as traditional universities. This requires us to put hands on deck and steer the system towards where we would like it to be," said Schoole.

Roy du Pré, vice-chancellor of Durban University of Technology and chairperson of SATN, said the academic sector in general has problems attracting highly qualified staff. But there is an agreement among universities of technology that a master's degree will be a minimum qualification and timelines have been drawn for staff to upgrade their qualifications.

He said "there is nothing wrong with the quality of our graduates as they are highly employable and lecturers have experience from industry. We prepare students for the world of work."

Errol Tyobeka, vice-chancellor of Tshwane University of Technology, said the department already has a special grant for academic development of staff but the allocation is small and "every time you meet a target, the amount becomes smaller".

Seehole said that in the context of limited resources, institutions should build strength in niche areas. Universities of technology have a unique challenge to differentiate themselves from traditional universities. "It would not be in the interest of the country to have duplication of missions and programmes offered, as was the case under apartheid."

Du Pré said Schoole was "absolutely right. We need horizontal not vertical differentiation of institutions, where we are all accredited equally by governing bodies but can't all be teaching the same thing. We have to produce different people for different parts of society."

Plugging the vet gap

North West University (NWU) is investigating the establishment of a second faculty of veterinary sciences in South Africa to alleviate a shortage of vets -- black vets in particular.

The move has the support of the Department of Education. At present the only faculty in the country is at the University of Pretoria's Onderstepoort campus, where 80 to 90 vets qualify a year after seven years of training.

Professor Moses Mbewe, director of the NWU's school of agricultural science, said multimillion-rand financial investments by both the NWU and the Department of Education has laid the foundation already for a faculty.

NWU has invested R18-million in the Centre for Animal Health on its Mafikeng campus, while the department recently contributed an additional R24-million to the allocation of R30-million earlier.

The Centre for Animal Health is the only facility in the country where animal health technicians -- formerly known as stock inspectors -- are trained. "When the department recently visited us they saw the potential of another faculty. Onderstepoort does not produce enough vets. They want us to look at plugging that gap and the basic infrastructure is here already," Mbewe said.

The faculty will consult Onderstepoort and visit other faculties in Australia and Zimbabwe, the only other faculty in the region.

Professor Gerry Swan, dean of the University of Pretoria's faculty of veterinary science, said he was aware of the developments at NWU.

He said he supported the feasibility study in principle but cautioned against the timing, given the cost of setting up and maintaining a faculty, because of the difficulties in recruiting academics.

But Swan said another faculty could bring different strengths to help serve the needs in South Africa.

Dr Rebone Moerane, president of the South African Veterinary Council, said the council will have to endorse a second faculty. "We have a responsibility to meet the country's needs. In other parts of the world there are a number of faculties and they have different strengths.

"Any institution that wants to provide training in these fields will have to liaise with the council," he said.

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