



**CHET**

CENTRE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION

# **Unleashing the Potential of South African Universities**

## **Assessing the Tertiary Education Ecosystem**

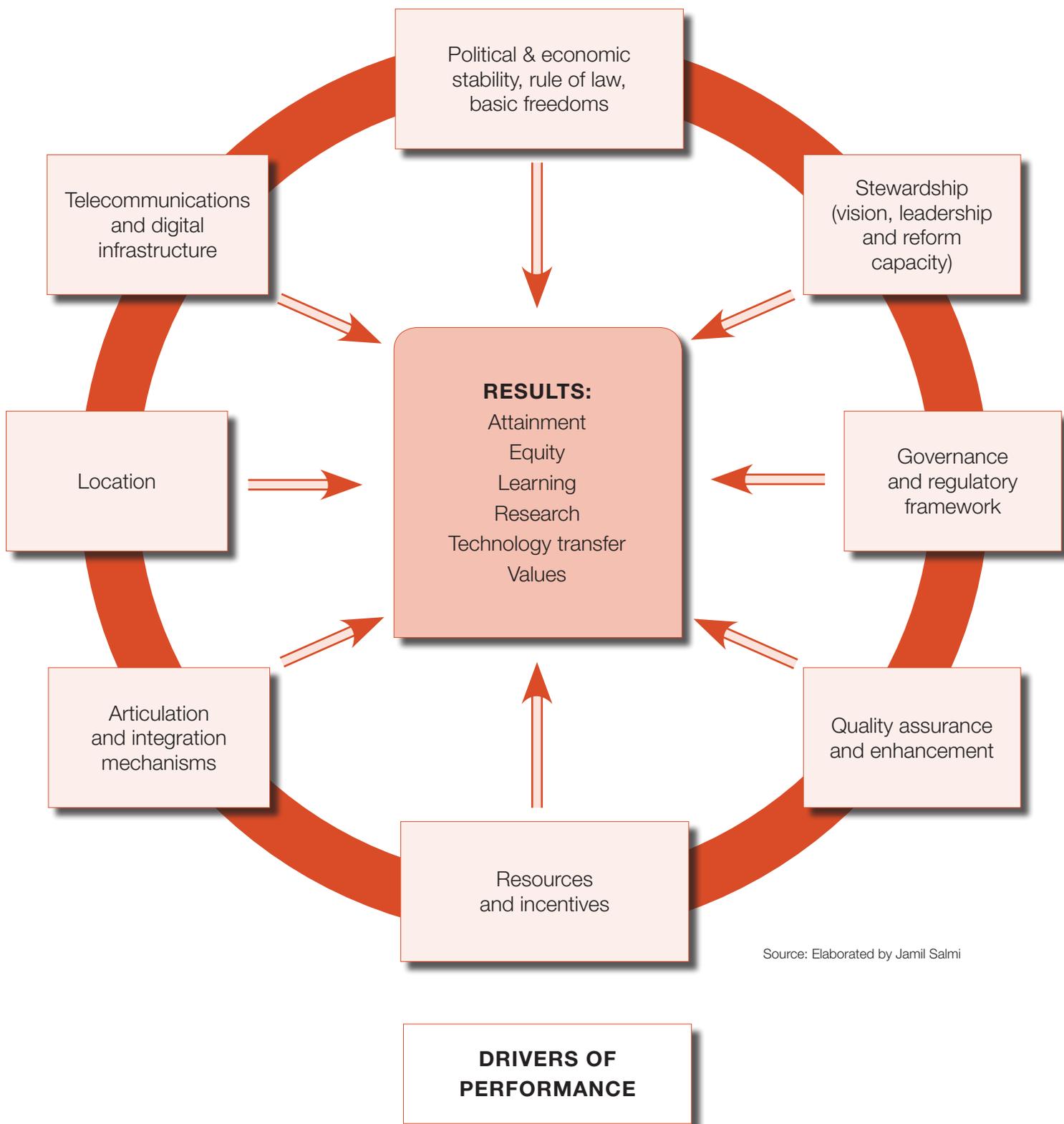
A short report produced for the  
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by Jamil Salmi, November 2012

## Importance of the Tertiary Ecosystem

Tertiary education institutions do not operate in a vacuum. Analyzing what happens at any South African university or any other type of tertiary education institution alone is not sufficient to understand the full dynamics of its achievements and its potential for improvement. The assessment cannot be complete unless it also takes into consideration key forces at play at the level of what could be called the ecosystem within which all South African tertiary education institutions evolve. These forces can have a facilitating or constraining effect, depending on the circumstances. As illustrated by Figure 1, the main dimensions of the ecosystem which influence the results of tertiary education institutions include the following elements:

- **Macro environment:** the overall political and economic situation of the country, together with the rule of law and the enforcement of basic freedoms, which influence, in particular, the governance of tertiary education institutions (appointment of university leaders), their level of funding, academic freedom, and safety in the physical environment;
- **Good stewardship at the national level:** leadership in tertiary education, translating into a vision and a strategic plan to shape the future of tertiary education and the capacity to implement reforms;
- **Governance and regulatory framework:** the governance structure and processes at the national and institutional levels that determine the degree of autonomy that tertiary education institutions enjoy and the mechanisms of accountability they are subject to (especially important from the viewpoint of the human resources policies and management practices that allow emerging research universities to attract and keep qualified academics);
- **Quality assurance framework:** the institutional setup and the instruments in place for assessing and enhancing the quality of research, teaching, and learning;
- **Financial resources and incentives:** the absolute volume of resources available to finance tertiary education in the country (mobilization of public and private resources) and the mechanisms through which those resources are allocated to various institutions;
- **Articulation and integration mechanisms:** the links and bridges between high schools and tertiary education, and the pathways and procedures integrating the various types of institutions that constitute the country's tertiary education system, all of which affect the academic characteristics of incoming students and their academic results as they move through the tertiary education system;
- **Location:** the quality of economic, social, and cultural characteristics and infrastructures available in the specific geographical setting of the tertiary education institutions that determine, in particular, their ability to attract outstanding scholars and talented students; these characteristics include public services, recreational amenities, housing, transportation, and environmental quality; and
- **Digital and telecommunications infrastructure:** the availability of broadband connectivity and end-user devices to support the delivery of educational, research, and administrative services of tertiary education institutions in an efficient, reliable, and affordable way.

Figure 1 – The Tertiary Education Ecosystem



## Assessment of the South African Tertiary Ecosystem

As happens in any country, the South African tertiary ecosystem has both positive and negative features. The colors on Figure 2 draw a picture of these contrasting aspects. Boxes in green reflect a positive situation. The shades of orange imply challenges and concerns with some of the drivers of performance.

The box in red represents the most problematic dimension of the South African tertiary ecosystem, even though the country seems to be relatively well positioned in terms of political and economic stability at the macro-level. The lack of safety in many South African cities is a serious handicap for tertiary education institutions, especially for the leading universities interested in building up their internationalization focus. The high level of violent crime makes it difficult for South African universities to attract foreign academics and students. It also creates an environment of fear for South African students. In some cases, university facilities are locked up like jails to prevent burglary and assaults.

With respect to the stewardship aspects, the momentum of the first decade after the end of apartheid seems to have run its course. Recent governments have not offered an ambitious vision of the future of higher education, and the capacity to design and implement reforms that would innovatively and effectively address the main challenges of the system – expansion with equity; quality improvement and knowledge generation – appears quite limited. The recent Green Paper has not resulted yet in any new major initiative to accelerate the development of the higher education system.

The governance arrangements in the South African higher education system offer a relatively favorable framework that allows the universities to operate with a high level of autonomy. The one part that seems to be the weak link is the national quality assurance system which needs strengthening to gain credibility and offer effective ways of enhancing quality and relevance in higher education institutions.

As far as the financial sustainability of the system is concerned, South African universities are well-off compared to most countries in the region, but at .6% of GDP South Africa's spending on tertiary education is way below the OECD average of 1.3%. The financial needs to expand the system with greater equity, to improve quality and to boost research are beyond what the government is able to contribute and opportunities for raising tuition fees are limited because of equity concerns. Even more worrisome is the fact that the allocation of public subsidies to the various tertiary education institutions, which follows enrolment, reflects historical trends rather than a performance-based allocation rationale. Considering the low levels of internal efficiency in most tertiary education institutions, this would be a priority element in any funding reform. Statistics published by CHET indicate that close to a third of the 2005 cohort of students dropped out before finishing their degree. Only 27% graduated in the regular four-year period and only 51% completed their studies after six years (CHET 2012: [www.chet.org.za/data](http://www.chet.org.za/data)).

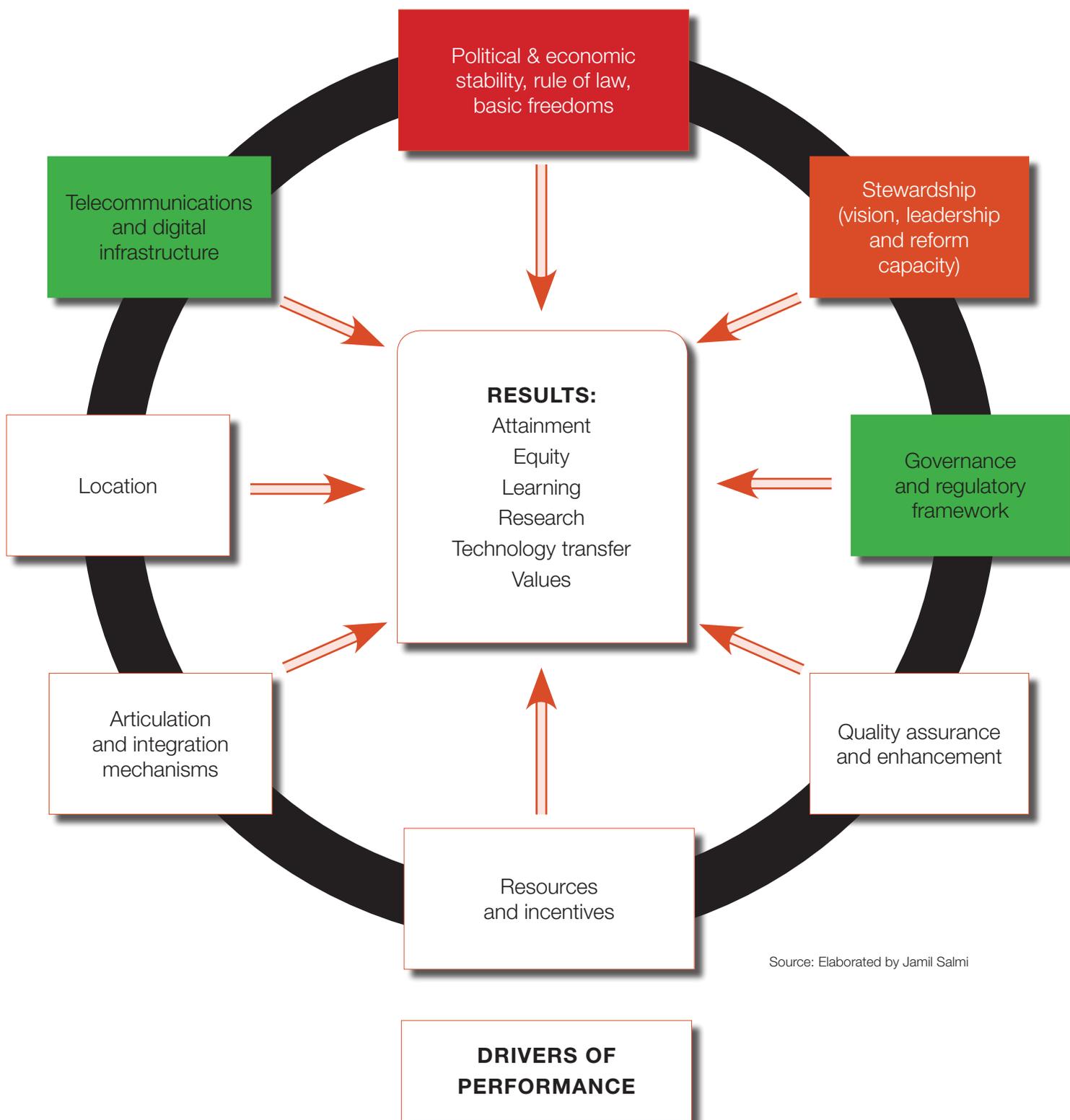
Articulation is another area of concern, across two dimensions: articulation between secondary and tertiary education, and articulation among tertiary education institutions. First, there is a general feeling in South Africa that most high school graduates are not well prepared for university-level education in terms of academic competencies, information, motivation and social capital. Second, in spite of a decade-long effort to establish a well-functioning National Qualifications System, much needs still to be done to facilitate smooth pathways from non-university institutions to universities, and across universities. Added to this is the fact that university enrolment is twice as high as enrolment in non-university institutions. As a result, the South African tertiary education system has the shape of an inverted pyramid, in contrast to industrial countries such as the US where college-level enrolment represents a much higher proportion of overall enrolment.

Despite the perceived remoteness of South Africa in relation to Europe and North America, location does not seem to be a major obstacle. As mentioned above, the real challenge is safety which can be a strong deterrent or even a push factor resulting in leading South African academics and talented students to leave

the country. At the same time, because of higher levels of salaries and the good quality of its universities, South Africa is well positioned to attract top academics and students from neighboring countries.

Finally, the country enjoys a good digital infrastructure which effectively supports the operation of tertiary education institutions as well as their participation in international research networks.

**Figure 2 – The South African Tertiary Education Ecosystem**



Source: Elaborated by Jamil Salmi