

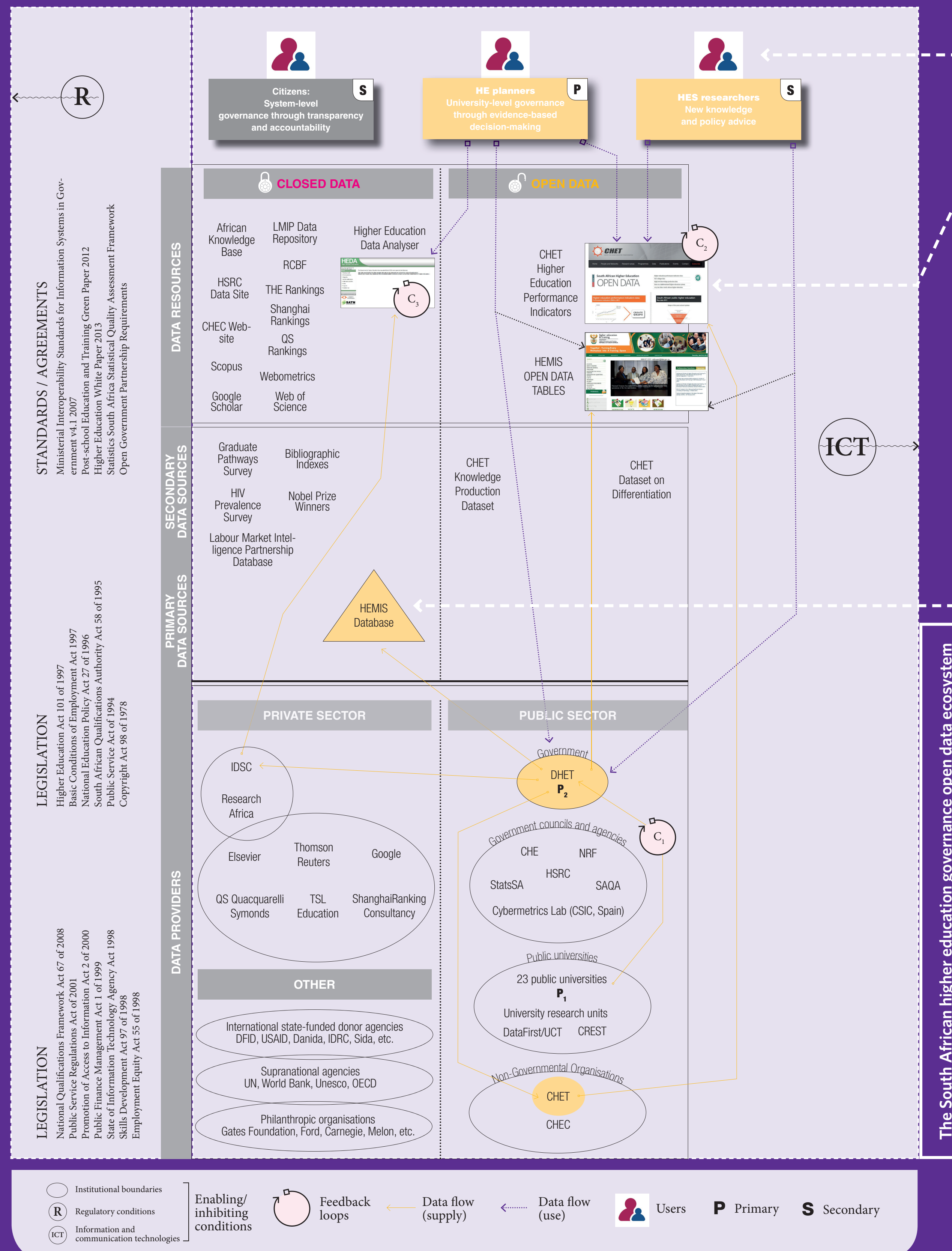
Open Data in the Governance of South African Higher Education

Primary research question

What is the level of use and possible impact of open data in the governance of South African higher education?

Secondary research question

What is the role of intermediaries in the supply and use of open data in the governance of South African higher education?



Background

The Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET) is a non-governmental organisation that conducts research on African universities at both institutional and systemic levels.

CHET's research focuses on issues of university governance, performance indicators, differentiation, knowledge production and the links between higher education and development.

The Department for Higher Education and Training (DHET) is the South African government department responsible for funding and steering the post-school system, including the country's public universities.

Universities are governed by their councils. Councils are advised on university performance by the university executive and the university's institutional planning unit.

Method

Case study

CHET Open Data Platform
www.chet.org.za/sahe-open-data/

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews with data users [university planners (7) + HES researchers (6)] and the primary data provider [DHET]

Data users

University planners (institutional-level policy)
Governance mechanism: university councils
Higher education studies (HES) researchers (national policy)
Governance mechanism: research—policy nexus

Primary data provider

Government (Department for Higher Education and Training)

Primary data source

Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS)

Findings

- CHET's open data is being used by university planners and HES researchers, albeit infrequently. Researchers expressed the need for richer data.
Recommendation: CHET should take note of these findings when planning any modifications to its open data platform; it may need to carve a more differentiated role for itself based on the needs of different user groups and given the presence of other intermediaries in the open data ecosystem.
- HEMIS is an isolated data source. Granting access to HEMIS by third-parties (under controlled conditions to protect personal data) could further stimulate the evolution of the open data ecosystem and relieve pressure on

capacity-constrained government departments. This could strengthen the impact of open data on the governance of South African public universities. **Recommendation:** Initiate discussions between DHET and other stakeholders on how to share HEMIS data or to improve the data tables currently made available online.

3 There are concerns at both government and university levels about how data will be used and (mis)interpreted, and this may constrain future data supply. **Recommendation:** Improve data literacy, particularly among journalists.

4 Open data intermediaries increase the accessibility and utility of data. While there is a rich publicly-funded dataset on South African higher education, the data remains largely inaccessible or unusable to universities and researchers in HES. Despite these constraints, the ODDC research shows that intermediaries in the ecosystem are playing a valuable role in

making the data both available and useable. 5 Open data intermediaries provide both supply-side as well as demand-side value. CHET's work on HE performance indicators was intended not only to contribute to government's steering mechanisms, but also to contribute to the governance capacity of South African universities. The ODDC research supports CHET's ambition to build institutional-level capacity. Further research is required to confirm the use of CHET data in state-steering of the South African higher education system, although there is some evidence of CHET's data being referenced in national policy documents.

6 Intermediaries may assume the role of a 'keystone species' in a data ecosystem. The ODDC research shows that intermediaries such as CHET play an enabling role of mediation and innovation within the ecosystem. CHET enables new connections and solutions

within the ecosystem. CHET is also located outside of the two primary institutions - the state and the university - thus enabling it to play a mediating role. 7 Intermediaries democratise the effects and use of open data. Intermediaries play an important role in curtailing the 'de-ameliorating' effects of disciplinary surveillance on open data. Intermediaries, as actors who may well operate outside of the boundaries of the state apparatus and of the institution of the university, have the propensity to challenge how data is collected, interpreted and shared. Their role as de-institutionalised actors could contribute to restoring the democratic value of open data. The ODDC research shows that CHET is already playing a unique role to ensure open data justice as it challenges existing, imposed norms in the collection and use of open data in the governance of South Africa's public university system.

Conclusions

- The HE governance open data ecosystem has evolved despite poor data provision by government because of the presence of intermediaries in the ecosystem.
- By providing a richer information context and/or by making the data interoperable, government could improve the uptake of data by new users and intermediaries, as well as by the existing intermediaries.
- Increasing the fluidity of government open data could remove uncertainties around both the degree of access provided by intermediaries and the financial sustainability of the open platforms provided by intermediaries.