Remodelling Cabinet Departments in South Africa: tracking the internal form and shape of departmental machinery

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Abstract

The internal organisational structure of government departments is the primary building block of any country's system of public administration. It is also intimately entwined with the politics of restructuring and reform. In South Africa, the organisational architecture of the public service underwent substantial changes following the country's democratic transition in 1994. This precipitated a major structural overhaul and incremental expansion in the number of Cabinet departments. This paper reviews findings from a study which tracked changes in the internal organisational structures of a sample of Cabinet departments in the national government between 2009 and 2021. This period also saw a pronounced expansion and instability in the departmental population as a whole, under the Presidency of Jacob Zuma. The study reveals that expansionary pressure at an inter-departmental level can lead to concomitant pressures at an intra-departmental level, with evidence of an aggregate expansion in the total number of internal organisational units. Moreover, the trajectory of growth in internal units reached its climax and started to shift downwards from 2019/20, which also coincided with a gradual decline in the total number of Cabinet departments following Cyril Ramaphosa's ascension to the Presidency.

Other data, however, revealed that it was far more difficult to attribute year-on-year shifts in the internal composition of departments to the impact of political changes, including ministerial changes. In addition, it was also difficult to discern any pattern for gauging which departments were more susceptible to internal structural changes, based on whether they were new, restructured or pre-existing. Departmental units responsible for strategic branch-level activities experienced notable growth, thereby increasing the oversight pressure on Directors-General, who shoulder relatively wide spans of control in most departments. Finally, there was a high degree of internal structural similarity between departments based on the general orientation of their activities, and their insulation from the effects of agencification. For the most part, however, the structural makeup of departments varied according to a host of other metrics, such as the average size and relative distribution of their units across levels, and a consolidated structural similarity measurement. It was also evident that policy-oriented departments tend to exhibit more compact and balanced

internal structural arrangements, although this can also vary depending on the strategic breadth and scope of a department's portfolio.

Introduction

The structural division of tasks in government departments has historically been viewed as a technocratic matter in public administration theory. It has been depicted as a cascading series of specialised tasks and accountability relationships that enable public and private organisations to efficiently achieve common purposes (Urwick, 1937). However, the machinery of government literature contends that the internal design of public organisations cannot be predictably confined or attributed to efficiency and performance outcomes alone (Hood, 1979; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Organisational structures do not remain fixed as implied by the 'machine' metaphor. They operate in and are subject to a variable and dynamic policy and political environment which affects how, how often and why structural change occurs *across* and *within* departments.

Recent work on the macro-organisation of government departments in South Africa (Naidoo, 2019) revealed that there was a mostly incremental but steady rise in the total number of Cabinet¹ departments between 1994 and 2014, punctuated by a steep rise in 2009 that marked a new equilibrium which had only slightly receded by 2019.² Concerns about the fragmentation of departmental machinery and political instability in departmental leadership³ has inevitably raised questions about whether similar tendencies are evident in the internal makeup of departments. Yet, there is an absence of empirical data on the changing internal configuration of Cabinet departments in South Africa, which has largely been overlooked in the literature on public service 'transformation'.

Efforts to track variation in the configuration of organisational structures is crucial for validating assumptions about the outcomes that restructuring exercises will bring (Hood, 1979). Moreover, a key theoretical question which underpins such an exercise is whether there is a discernible pattern of 'isomorphic'⁴ change in how Cabinet departments are constituted. That is, the internal structure of one department tends to resemble another department as a result of common environmental pressures, organisational peer-learning and the infusion of shared professional norms of conduct amongst individuals who occupy similar roles across organisations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Moreover, these enabling

¹ For sampling purposes, a cabinet department refers to a public organisation which is directly (i.e. at the primary level) overseen by a minister in cabinet. There are some organisations defined as national departments in Schedule 1 of South Africa's Public Service Act, which are indirectly overseen by a cabinet minister, or are once removed from direct oversight. These are not counted as cabinet departments.

² By 2014 there were 39 cabinet departments, a figure that remained the same until 2019 when it dropped to 36.

³ The presidential administration of Jacob Zuma, which began following 2009 parliamentary elections, was marked by a sharp increase in cabinet departments and a high turnover of cabinet ministers. See: Naidoo (2019) and Van Onselen (2017).

⁴ DiMaggio and Powell (1983) refer to different kinds of isomorphic pressures, including *coercive* pressures such as the imposition of new legislative and policy mandates in an environment of mutual dependency, 'mimetic' borrowing or imitation of structural models to enhance legitimacy and display a receptiveness towards innovation in an otherwise uncertain operating environment; and *normative* pressures.

drivers of structural change are neither motivated by, nor can necessarily be counted on to produce, greater efficiencies (Frumkin and Galaskiewicz, 2004). Conversely, does the internal structure of Cabinet departments display internal path dependencies that are resistant to these kinds of exogenous pressures? The interplay between the continuity of path-dependent organisational designs and external pressures that drive isomorphic change is a useful prism through which to interpret intra-departmental structural change.

Tracking the internal organisational ecosystem of government departments

The image of public administration is indelibly marked by organisational structures of various kinds, e.g. departments, ministries, units, bureaus, agencies, administrations and entities. These represent perhaps the most visible marker of government bureaucracy. Every country on earth hosts a population of organisational structures in its public service, which vary by size and type. There has been a sustained focus over many years to map or plot the changing configuration of organisational structures in the public service. This has been particularly prevalent at a macro or population-wide level (e.g. Hood and Dunsire, 1981; Boston, 1991; Davis et al., 1999; Boin, Kuipers and Steenbergen, 2010; Rolland and Roness, 2011; Mortensen and Green-Pedersen, 2014; Naidoo, 2019). Tracking changes in the population of departments can be informed by various inter-related approaches. Firstly, it can be seen through a quasi-biological lens, which studies the creation/birth, survival and death/termination of departments, similar to organisms in the natural world. A population ecology approach traces the organisational life histories of public sector bodies, focusing on the reasons behind their emergence, demise and alteration (Rolland and Roness, 2011). Boin, Kuipers and Steenbergen (2010) recount the 'life' and 'death' of federal agencies in the United States and examine whether structural design or environmental factors can help these organisations mitigate the threat of major restructuring on their survival. James et al (2015) study the 'survival' of executive agencies in the United Kingdom, by evaluating the link between agency creation and termination and changes in political leadership at a party, prime ministerial and ministerial level. Their findings suggest that ministerial agency is an influential factor in agency survival, compared to performance. Although these demographic approaches to organisational change raise existential questions about organisational mortality and survivability, they also highlight the importance of organisational adaptation and resilience in the face of pressures emanating from the political ecosystem.

Another approach for tracking changes in the population of departments probes the influence of elected political leaders on the changing organisational composition of government. Davis et al. (1999) undertook a long-term comparative study of the influence of prime ministerial prerogative on the configuration of departmental structures in Westminster systems (i.e. the U.K., Australia, Canada). Mortensen and Green-Pedersen (2014) adopt a more policy-centric approach, by investigating how issue saliency in the political arena can directly affect the ministerial structure of government. They test this empirically by analysing the creation and elimination of ministries in Denmark between 1953 and 2006. The impact that actors and issues in the political arena can have on the public service's organisational make-up exposes the powerful threats and opportunities that

organisational survival depends on. These threats and opportunities posed by efforts to politically reorganise departmental machinery belie the seemingly technical rationale of pursuing more task specialisation (i.e. 'structural differentiation of functions') or more integration. As Bezes and Le Lidec (2016: 1-2) observe, structural change represents an 'instrument for the redistribution of power, functions, and hierarchies, one that is central to the transformation of *forms* of state government...'.

A third approach to studying structural change examines the ambitious attempts by political leaders to rein in the bureaucracy through implementing transformative ideas in public sector reform. The New Public Management wave provoked significant organisational turbulence in the bureaucracies of many countries. Boston's (1991) evaluation of intra and inter-departmental restructuring following the implementation of 'state sector reform' in New Zealand noted that structural changes resulted in a dramatic remodelling of the entire civil service. This was driven by efforts to organisationally segregate policy development and advisory functions from operational and delivery functions. Another classic case of a major organisational overhaul resulting from a managerialist doctrine is the United Kingdom. Here, a shift towards agencification from the late 1980s resulted in a significant relocation of functions (and staff) out of Cabinet departments (White and Dunleavy, 2010). Hogwood (1995: 516) contends that it would be incorrect to characterise the 'Next Steps' executive agency drive as having dramatically altered the internal structure of Cabinet departments. He noted that even prior to the agencification drive there were Cabinet departments that had already effectively agencified internally, or had organisationally ringfenced direct delivery functions (i.e. 'clearly designated units') from among their other activities. In other words, there was already a process of internal organisational diversification occurring in the UK civil service prior to the Next Steps drive.

Several international factors can contribute to isomorphic change, e.g. public service reform doctrines such as NPM, membership in international organisations (i.e. European Union/Europeanization), and global economic crises (MacCarthaigh, Roness, and Sarapuu, 2012: 847). Moreover, structural reforms in the public service of developing countries undertaken at the behest of international donors can also produce isomorphic outcomes of the mimetic type. However, Krause (2013) argues that this need not degenerate into borrowing 'best practice' for borrowing's sake under donor pressure, which would push isomorphic change into the coercive rather than mimetic category. This is because the hard realities of institutional survival and donor dependency means that mimicry will almost inevitably occur, but may not necessarily lead to universally bad outcomes so long as borrowing countries maintain the agency to borrow and adapt.

The evidence on both scores suggests that international pressures have been largely muted in the macro-organisational configuration of Cabinet departments in South Africa. Firstly, a non-NPM logic seems to have driven an increase in the number of non-departmental 'public entities' since democratisation in South Africa (Naidoo, 2019). On the surface, these entities resemble NPM-style autonomous service delivery agencies which were hived out of Cabinet

⁵ Rolland and Roness (2011) also explain the vertical and horizontal directions of structural change, which correspond with efforts to induce greater 'specialization' or 'de-specialization' in organisational forms. This would affect both the total number and the scope of their internal activities.

departments. However, their existence has primarily been driven by an effort to circumvent departmental constraints rather than pursuing greater efficiency, cost savings and improved service performance (Cameron, 2009: 924). Moreover, the general trajectory of long-term (if varied) growth in the total number of Cabinet departments indicates that the increasing number of public entities did not result in a corresponding reduction in the latter (Naidoo, 2019). This research is interested in whether the increasing number of public entities has resulted in a corresponding reduction and relocation of internal functions (especially direct delivery and regulatory) out of these same Cabinet departments. Alternatively, have public entities simply augmented the departmental machinery without significantly reducing the size and scope of what departments do?

Secondly, it is unlikely that South Africa's membership in regional and international organisations has isomorphically influenced its public organisational design. South Africa's membership in the African Union has not had any direct impact on the structure of its bureaucracy, given the absence of a continent-wide 'Africanisation' model of public service design, or any known direct impact on the internal structure of member-state bureaucracies from AU initiatives, perhaps with the exception of ministries of foreign affairs. Finally, South Africa's relatively low level of aid and budget dependency on international development and financial institutions has also insulated it from externally-driven pressures for organisational reform. It is therefore far more likely that national and not international environmental and reform pressures would drive isomorphic change, to the extent that this is empirically observable.

Another perspective on tracking changes in the population of departments shifts the focus from the macro level to a micro-level analysis of how departments are internally structured, and how this is shaped by the wider political environment in which they operate. Lichtmannegger and Bach (2020) acknowledge the impact of administrative 'reform' as a driver of structural change in the organisational machinery of government. However, they observe that structural reform intentions pitched at a government-wide level are often articulated as a general set of aims designed to enhance the collective performance of the state's entire organisational apparatus. What is overlooked, they argue, is how (and the extent to which) macro-level reform intentions are translated into actual structural change at an intra-organisational level. They track the changing configuration of organisational units within a single department (Austrian ministry of Agriculture) between 1986 and 2015, by illustrating long-term changes in the ministry's organisational units, disaggregated by level.8 Kuipers, Yesilkagit and Carroll (2021) have looked at the effects of political changes in the internal organisational structure of a sample of twelve ministries in the Netherlands between 1980 and 2014. The authors directed a great deal of attention to what they described as the often hidden intra-departmental changes that occurred as a consequence

⁶ South Africa's Department of International Relations and Co-operation hosts a branch dedicated to African multilateral affairs.

⁷ Data on internal structural changes was not available for every consecutive year, hence the authors graphed the number of organisational units between 1986 and 2015 for twenty of the thirty-year timespan.

⁸ Level descriptors included 'divisions', 'subdivisions', 'sections' and 'subsections', which are hierarchically related.

of machinery changes higher up at the inter-ministerial level, explaining that '[t]here has been scant attention to the politics of structural choice that occurs inside public organizations' (Kuipers, Yesilkagit and Carroll, 2021: 900). The internal units of sampled ministries were counted at various hierarchical levels below the ministerial office, e.g. directorates-general and sub-directorates.

Bertels and Schulze-Gabrechten (2021) are even more explicit about the difficulties of discerning what lies within the 'black box' of departmental bureaucracy, by conducting a long-term (1980–2015) study of intra-ministerial structures in the German federal government. The authors are particularly interested in the degree of structural differentiation which occurs over time. They enumerate the total number of intra-ministerial units by classifying these according to the top two hierarchical levels below ministerial supervision. Finally, Rolland and Roness (2011) report on the construction of a State Administration Database in Norway, which has compiled systematic long-term data on the inter and intra-organisational structures of the Norwegian civil service. For ministerial departments, units are classified according to divisions, sections and offices and can be compared via an online portal⁹ and statistical tool that allows researchers to select the parameters for the time and type of ministerial sub-units, and generate an aggregate and disaggregated total of these internal units over a specific period of time.

Remodelling Cabinet departments in the context of 'transforming' the public service

The transformation of South Africa's public service following the country's 1994 democratic transition substantively altered the departmental landscape (Naidoo, 2019). However, there has been no attempt to examine the shape of organisational change *inside* individual Cabinet departments in the public service transformation literature. This gap is also evident in comparative writing on the topic, with Lichtmannegger and Bach (2020: 2) observing that:

much of the literature [on structural change in the public sector] takes a macro perspective on the entire population of a specific type of organization such as ministerial departments ... while case studies of long-term dynamics of structural changes unfolding within the same organization are largely missing.

The raft of new legislative and policy measures on public service transformation provided no explicit departmental restructuring blueprint. Apart from a need to 'rationalise' previously disparate organisational structures at a macro level, the reconfiguration of Cabinet departments was largely a by-product of an effort to repurpose government departments to fulfil a dramatically different policy agenda following the country's non-racial democratic transition. A government White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service (1995), which was the first major omnibus statement on bureaucratic reform, contained no clear strategic plan for how internal organisational reform should be carried out. The closest the White Paper came to commenting on internal organisational design was a reference to promoting more 'participative organisational structures'. However, this did not refer to the

⁹ https://www.nsd.no/polsys/en/civilservice/ (Accessed 22 January, 2022).

structural characteristics of these units per se, but to promoting a more consultative, collaborative (and less hierarchical) working relationship between officials staffing these units. Another major pillar of public service transformation was changing the personnel composition of the public service, which was pursued under the label of 'right-sizing' and which sought to strike a better balance between racial representivity and functional need (Ncholo, 2000). A series of follow-up white papers¹⁰ on the public service in the late 1990s continued to focus on personnel/human resource and organisational culture change in the bureaucracy, without delving into internal structural design.

The Public Service Commission (1997) produced a report which addressed the internal remodelling of national and provincial departments. The report advocated an approach to remodelling based on a general framework of principles pursued via an incremental process. The only structure that was explicitly designated within departments at the outset was that of 'Director-General', or head of department. The remaining departmental organogram was described as an 'empty shell', to be populated as units and staff were relocated as a result of the wider rationalisation process, and in accordance with new constitutionally-prescribed powers and functions. The report also referred to other designated management-level posts below Director-General, including Deputy Director-General, Chief Director and Director. These would subsequently come to define the top four management-level organisational units within departments. The question of 'how' departments would and should internally configure these new units was not explicitly answered, because it was overtaken by the exigencies of amalgamating departments across several layers of government. A year after the PSC report was published, a Commission set up by President Nelson Mandela to review the early phase of public service transformation made several bold recommendations on departmental restructuring. However, these were mostly confined to macro-level changes such as the disestablishment of some existing departments and the establishment of new or radically altered departments (PRC, 1998). To the extent that internal structural changes were mentioned, these were a direct result of proposed inter-departmental changes, which were largely not acted upon. Since the publication of the PRC's report, there have been no attempts to map how the internal structures of Cabinet departments have evolved. Given the absence of an explicit structural blueprint to direct how Cabinet departments ought to configure their internal structures, there is likely to be minimal evidence of isomorphic conformity in how the internal structural anatomy of departments has evolved. However, any evidence of isomorphic conformity is likely to be driven more by 'convergence' than 'compliance' (Ashworth, Boyne and Delbridge, 2007: 169). Compliance conformity differs from convergence conformity by exhibiting an explicit government reform programme which public organisations must (i.e. are required to) structurally comply with. Convergence, meanwhile, can generate the same outcome but without the intervention of a specific reform programme.

A final variable that must be considered in how public service transformation has shaped the internal organisational structures of Cabinet departments is the influence of political

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¹⁰ The White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (1997), the White Paper on Public Service Training and Education (1997), the White Paper on a New Employment Policy for the Public Service (1997), the White Paper on Human Resource Management in the Public Service (1997), and the White Paper on Affirmative Action in the Public Service (1998).

pressures. A fifteen year government review of the macro-organisation of the state (DPSA, Not dated: 41) between 1994 and 2008 cited findings from two studies on state capacity which suggested that organisational design was susceptible to political manipulation. This included posts being created 'with little attention paid to the purpose and functions of the department', internal structures being designed to benefit individuals rather than the interests of the department, and a duplication of roles. This risks undermining the integrity of the process and rationale through which departments configure their internal structures to deliver on the significant fiscal resources allocated through the government's programme budgeting framework. It also raises the spectre that dubious¹¹ motives behind the expansion of Cabinet departments under Jacob Zuma's presidency produced a similar effect at an intradepartmental level.

Research design and method

This study collected data on the internal organisational structures of Cabinet departments at the national level of government over a twelve-year period (2009–21). Unlike a previous macro-level survey (Naidoo, 2019) of South Africa's national department machinery, which covered the period 1994–2014, a more recent timespan was chosen based on a number of design factors. Firstly, it allowed the research to control for a highly fluid internal structural environment during the first democratic government (1994–99). This period generated most of the major policy pronouncements that subsequently created the framework in which Cabinet departments operate. Secondly, Cabinet departments underwent major restructuring after parliamentary elections in 2009, following several years of relative macro-organisational stability. This allowed the research to sample a mixture of departments that included organisations which pre-dated this period and did not undergo restructuring, along with departments which continued after 2009 in a new or restructured form.

Data was collected on the various sub-divisions or units which constitute the internal organisational structure of Cabinet departments. This was extracted from departmental organisational charts (organograms) contained in annual reports. Most annual reports were downloaded directly from departmental websites or retrieved via the South African government's main website: https://www.gov.za. Annual reports that could not be accessed electronically were obtained in hard copy from the Government Publications library at the University of Cape Town.

Departments routinely publish information about their internal organisational structures in their annual reports, which are important accountability mechanisms through which parliamentary and public oversight can be exercised. The Public Service Commission (2003) has long since acknowledged the shortcomings in annual reports, despite the fact that reporting guidelines are prescribed in various Treasury and Public Service regulations. The PSC has noted the limited extent of information that departments provide about their activities and the inconsistency of how it is presented. The Commission (2003: 4) made specific reference to the lack of 'consistency' in the level and detail of information provided

¹¹ Dubious in the sense that it appeared politically motivated rather than satisfying a purely functional rationale, as argued in Naidoo (2019).

by departments about their organisational structures, which was described as 'very schematic'. This remains a problem to this day, and had a direct effect on the limited sampling of departments for this study.

Despite these shortcomings, organograms provide a clear and useful internal x-ray of the distinct organisational sub-structures within Cabinet departments. It is, however, necessary to acknowledge some caveats about the use of annual reports as the primary data source for extracting organisational information. Concerns about the extent of the information provided in annual reports could raise questions about the veracity of the organisational information that departments publish in their annual reports, e.g. whether these charts accurately reflect a department's internal make-up. If, however, one adopts a more holistic picture of the information contained in annual reports, notwithstanding the criticisms, then it is possible to validate the existence of units appearing in an organogram by crossreferencing this with the description of a department's activities and budgeted allocations contained elsewhere in a report. The real issue is not so much whether the organisational structure published in an annual report accurately depicts how a department looks and performs on the inside, but the more nuanced distinction between the 'formal' versus 'informal' image that an organisational chart conveys about internal lines of reporting and accountability. This distinction has been at the heart of behavioural theories of bureaucracy for decades. I am under no illusion that the formal lines of reporting and accountability depicted in a department's organisational chart do not necessarily reflect how informal power relations operate in a department. However, this research does not set out to excavate intra-departmental behavioural dynamics which might run counter to the formal organisational chart. Instead, I work with the formal structures as they are published in annual reports to draw inferences and impressions about the internal composition of departments. I acknowledge this as a limitation which can only be fully addressed through more in-depth case analysis of individual departments.

Seven Cabinet departments were selected for this study, following a convenience sampling approach. The original intention was to sample a larger pool of Cabinet departments on the assumption that departments consistently published detailed information about their internal organisational units in their annual reports. However, as acknowledged in the PSC's (2003) earlier study, the vast majority of departments do not consistently provide information about units below the branch level (level two) in their organograms. In other cases, departments provided varied and inconsistent organisational information which did not allow for year-on-year tracking. This raises the issue of whether there is a risk of biased selection in the sampling. In other words, does the limited sample of only seven departments imply that those departments that have been selected exhibit, ipso facto, superior internal organisational designs? Conversely, do those departments which publish less detailed or inconsistent information about their internal organisational units, which were excluded, exhibit inferior organisational arrangements? On both questions, the answer is no, with a caveat. The limited sample of Cabinet departments was the product of a selection based on the practical viability of comparing the same level of detail about internal organisational units. There was no normative value attached to this. While it is disappointing to have not been able to include more departments in the sample, the absence of detailed organisational information does not necessarily denote a lesser structure. However, it does

raise legitimate questions about why most departments publish only a partial picture of their organisational charts. One such question, although somewhat speculative, is whether the failure to publish full and regular details of an organisational chart are indicative of contested or unresolved internal views about a department's organisational machinery?

The organograms of the seven departments sampled for this study provided the most consistent¹² information about organisational units down to level three (Chief Directorates), and in some cases even level four (Directorates).

The following seven¹³ departments were sampled:

- National Treasury/Department of Finance
- Department of Home Affairs
- Department of Social Development
- Department of Housing/Human Settlements
- Department of Transport
- Department of Basic Education
- Department of Economic Development

Due to the size and diversity in the core business, size and operating methods of departments, the sample cannot be viewed as representative of the internal structural dynamics of all Cabinet departments. However, the consistent level of detail provided about internal organisational structures down to level three in the organogram allowed this study to track both intra and inter-departmental structural change at a more detailed operational level than the published structures of most departments would have otherwise allowed. Moreover, the sectoral diversity of the sample, ranging from macro-economic policy and public finance, to social welfare and education, to infrastructure and business development, and civic services, allowed the study to test the relationship between sectoral diversity and structural convergence.

The data collection was primarily focused on enumerating the total number of internal organisational units in Cabinet departments¹⁴ over the study period, tracking year-on-year changes in this number and the annual number of structural change events, and how frequently change has occurred¹⁵. The unit count was disaggregated by level and type. The level count comprised the top three hierarchical layers below the Cabinet minister's office: level one (Director-General's office), level two (Deputy Director-General/branches), and

¹² I have indicated which departments and which years have been excluded from the aggregate count. This was due to annual reports either being unavailable or cases in which departments did not explicitly report on their organisational structure for that year.

¹³ The departments of Finance/Treasury, Home Affairs, Social Development and Transport were not directly affected by the 2009 macro-restructuring. The departments of Housing/Human Settlements, Economic Development and Basic Education were directly affected.

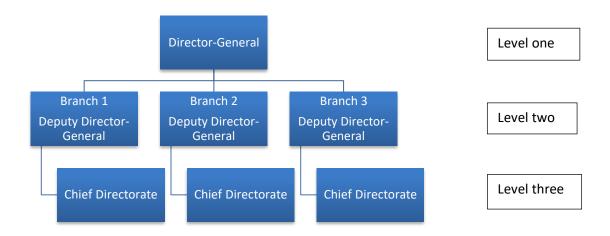
¹⁴ Lichtmannegger and Bach (2020) counted the number of organisational units (by type) in the Austrian Ministry of Agriculture between 1986 and 2014. They source data included organisational charts which were compared year on year, as well as reorganisation documents.

¹⁵ Kuipers, Yesilkagit and Carroll (2021) count and graphically illustrate the number of transitional events in twelve Dutch ministries between 1980 and 2014. Transitional events include the disappearance, name changes, movement or transfer of units hierarchically or laterally, as well as unit splits.

level three (Chief Directorates). The aggregate count revealed whether there has been a consolidation or rationalisation of internal operating units, or an expansion or fragmentation of these units. In addition, it was also possible to determine whether there was structural dislocation, where a Cabinet department transferred an internal operating unit to an executive agency¹⁶ operating outside its organisational boundary.

The office of the Director-General was initially excluded from the unit count by level, as other studies have excluded the top administrative structure below the ministerial level. ¹⁷ However, it was evident that the structural configuration of DG's offices varies across departments, as these units have acquired ancillary support structures over the years which do not fall under level two branches. Level two (branches) represent the primary line function divisions in all South African Cabinet departments. Each branch is headed by a Deputy Director-General and roughly corresponds to a strategic priority area linked to the government's programme budgeting framework. Chief Directorates serve as secondary and more operational line function divisions in Cabinet departments. These units fall under individual branches (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Generic organisational structure of a South African Cabinet department, below the Minister's office



The count by type assumed that not every Cabinet department contains structures that implement a unique set of functions. Hence, there would be some comparative overlap in

¹⁶ Like the experience of agencification in other jurisdictions, e.g. the United Kingdom, New Zealand. ¹⁷ For example, in their count of the internal organisational units within Dutch ministries, Kuipers, Yesilkagit and Carroll (2021) include entities at one and two hierarchical levels below the ministry. This includes what they describe as 'directorates-general' and 'sub-directorates', which correspond with divisions and sub-divisions. These appear to correspond with 'branch' levels in the South African case, as the administrative heads of Dutch ministries are designed as 'Secretary-General'. Lichtmannegger and Bach (2020) also exclude the 'Secretary General' unit, which falls below the office of the Minister, from their count of organisational units in the Austrian Ministry of Agriculture. In contrast, Rolland and Roness (2011) describe how Norway's State Administration Database maps the internal organisational units of ministries. The counting method employed by the Database includes the 'highest level' internal unit under a ministry, which assumes that it would include the South African equivalent of the Director-General's office.

unit type corresponding to similar sets of activities across departments. The count by type coded these units to distinguish between similar and unique sets of activities. Two classification categories were used: general management units and specialist portfolio units. The former included internal support services that could be considered common across departments, such as communications, HR and financial management, legal services and information technology. The DG's office was coded as an internal management unit by default, because Directors-General are the designated accounting officers for Cabinet departments in South Africa. Units coded as specialist portfolio entities encompassed a department's delivery of services to external constituencies in its particular field/sector. The other advantage of differentiating between units with an internal or external focus is that it challenges an overly simplistic binary in South Africa between 'policy' departments and 'implementation' or 'delivery' departments.

Tracking the changing internal composition of Cabinet departments also included a political dimension, by linking the frequency and degree of internal restructuring with changes in ministers. An overlap would suggest that organisational change is directly influenced, if not prompted or driven by ministerial prerogative rather than organisational learning and rationale. It was also possible to link changes in the total number of organisational units with changes in a department's staff establishment, by tracking the number of officials operating in these units. If there is an extensive overlap between ministerial changes and structural change events, then a positive relationship between the number of organisational units and staff establishment could be perceived as being evidence of partisan appointments.

Results and discussion

The size and internal composition of Cabinet departments

The first set of results in figure 2 shows that the total number of internal organisational units across the seven departments ranged from a low of 277 and a high of 315 between 2011/12 and 2019/20. There was an 11 per cent increase in the total number of organisational units between 2011/12 and 2018/19, with steady year-on-year growth until 2017/18, before a decline in 2019/20. Moreover, the decline of total units which began in 2019/20 would have been sustained in 2020/21 based on a forecast of the total number of units for the Department of Economic Development, when combined with known figures for all other departments. This seems to correspond with the broader macro restructuring of Cabinet announced by President Cyril Ramaphosa in 2019, which resulted in a reduced number of departments.

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¹⁸ This truncated time period was used because some departments did not report level 3 units in annual reports before 2011/12, and the Department of Economic Development did not report figures for 2020/21 because it merged with the Department of Trade and Industry.

¹⁹ The projected figure of total internal units for the DED would have been 26 in 2020/21. When combined with the known figures for all other departments, this would have resulted in total units of 287.

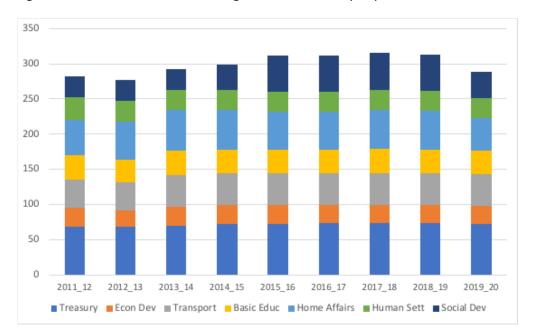


Figure 2: Total number of internal organisational units by department

The National Treasury accounted for the largest share of internal units followed by the Department of Home Affairs. Annual fluctuation in the number of units is visible across departments, but was especially pronounced for the Department of Social Development between 2015/16 and 2018/19.

A more detailed look at the growth in internal organisational units is shown in figure 3. This reveals that total growth in units was not evenly spread across the three levels, with units at level three (Chief Directorships) accounting for the biggest aggregate increase in numbers between 2011/12 and 2018/19. Although there was a more modest rise in level two unit numbers (branches) over the same period, the percentage change indicates that there was actually a 17 per cent increase in branch units compared to a 15 per cent rise in units at the Chief Director level, which factors in the lower base of the former. There was an aggregate decline in the total number of units at level one (Director-General), at -24 per cent.

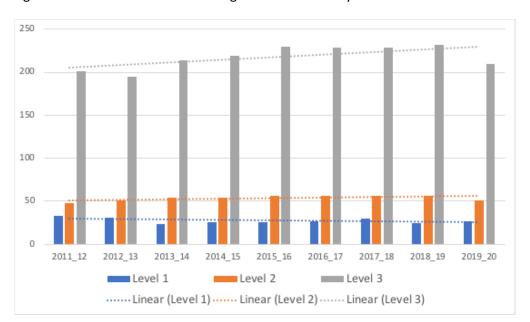


Figure 3: Total number of internal organisational units by level

There has clearly been expansionary pressure in the number of operational structures at level three, which perform specialised internal management and external service delivery and regulatory functions. However, this can probably be attributed to expansionary pressure in level two branches, which suggests that strategic organisational shifts were occurring during the period between 2011/12 and 2018/19, which had a knock-on effect on operational units. Moreover, this could also probably be explained by the inclusion of new or restructured departments in the sample. The level one figures show that while departments are routinely augmenting the Director-General's office with a variety of oversight and coordinating bodies, the number of units at this level has been kept very much in check. It was also evident that these auxiliary support structures often move between levels one and three, as well as two.

A more granular picture of the shifting number of internal organisational units can be seen in the departmental breakdown in appendix one. This challenges the assumptions linked to the aggregate shifts described above. It confirms that level two branch structures saw the narrowest year-on-year shift in absolute unit numbers relative to other levels, despite experiencing the largest relative percentage change. However, it also shows that this was not evenly spread, with the departments of Social Development, Home Affairs and to a lesser extent Basic Education seeing the biggest expansion in level two units, which in all cases contracted again by 2019/20. What was somewhat surprising is that level two expansion was most prominent in pre-existing departments. Moreover, in the case of Basic Education, a reduction in its branch level scope would probably have been expected given that the department was the product of a splitting of the former Department of Education, and therefore shed functional responsibilities. This indicates that branch-level expansion, which is indicative of a shift or redefinition in a department's strategic functional scope, is not necessarily triggered by macro-level changes, where pre-existing departments can also experience periods of strategic organisational flux. In the case of Social Development, which saw two significant shifts in level two units - expansionary in 2015/16 and a reduction in

2019/20 – some specialised issue areas were elevated to branch level status in the first instance, followed by a return to the status-quo ante.

There was considerably more movement in level three structures. However, this was confined to three pre-existing departments: Social Development, Home Affairs, and National Treasury, all of which saw level three units reach their peak in 2018/19, before declining the following year. A closer look at the data indicates that the expansion and decline in level three units for Social Development and Home Affairs can probably be directly linked to shifts in level two units in the same period. The same cannot be said for National Treasury, which saw an absolute expansion in its operational units as it experienced no change at all in level two units. This might be interpreted as an operational adjustment to the heightened financial oversight role played by the Treasury. All other departments in the sample either experienced no change or a decline in level three units over the period. As indicated earlier, departments saw a general decline in level one units, and the departmental breakdown shows that the organisational composition of the Director-General's sphere was mostly stable with the exception of Home Affairs and Basic Education, which experienced fluctuation at this level. However, shifting level one units seemed to be offset by changes in level three units for Home Affairs, with no consistent pattern evident for Basic Education.

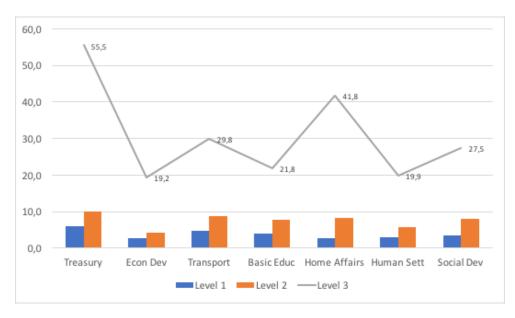


Figure 4: Average number of units by level, by department

Figure 4 shows the average size of organisational units at each level, by department. It reveals significant differences in the average size of operational units (level three), with a high of 55 units for Treasury down to a low of 19 units for Economic Development. The average unit size at level one also varied, although probably fell somewhere between three to four units for most departments. There is clearly wide variation in unit size at both the operational level and at the leadership support level for departments, which can probably be attributed to the specialised nature of departmental portfolios. The average size range of level two units is narrower, with most departments averaging out at about eight branch units, with the exception of Economic Development and Human Settlements with fewer branch units, and Treasury with the highest number at ten. This was somewhat surprising,

given that branch configuration is sensitive to the specialist nature of departmental portfolios. It is also evident that Directors-General in most departments are carrying relatively wide spans of control or overseeing large numbers of branch units.

Figure 5 shows a percentage breakdown in the average number of internal operating units by type. To reiterate, all departmental units were coded either as 'general management' or 'specialist portfolio', with the former comprising units that provide internal support services such as HR and financial management, communications, legal services, information technology. The latter comprised units which provided services specific to a department's portfolio to external constituencies, including the general public. It was assumed that units performing specialised portfolio services would predominate, given the heightened political rhetoric around 'service delivery' and 'implementation' in South Africa. The results mostly confirmed this picture, with about 70 per cent of units carrying out externally-oriented specialised portfolio services for five of the seven departments. The departments of Home Affairs and Human Settlements had a relatively higher proportion of units carrying out inwardly-oriented general management activities, with these units accounting for over 50 per cent in Home Affairs alone.

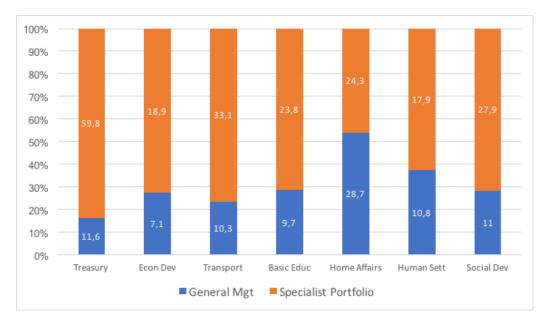


Figure 5: Average number of units by type, by department*

Apart from comparable general management functions such as HR, finance, legal, communication and IT, the reason for the relatively higher proportion of general management units in these departments seems to be driven by the degree of administrative complexity, risk management, regulatory compliance and oversight associated with their work. Home Affairs is an exclusively national competency whose staff operate in a routine but information-intensive administrative environment, interfacing directly with large client volumes. It is also a department that has historically been subject to public criticism relating to slow and dysfunctional internal systems that are susceptible to corruption. The department hosts many units dedicated to specialist staff training, information and process

^{*}Average number of units have been converted to percentages in the chart

management, and mitigating internal security risks. The higher proportion of units carrying out general management activities in the Department of Human Settlements was considerably lower than Home Affairs, yet also notably higher than other departments, coming in at under 40 per cent. Human Settlements is a joint national and provincial competency with most of the implementation burden and direct external stakeholder interface carried by provinces, as well as municipalities. Consequently, it would not be expected to carry anything like the internal management burden of Home Affairs. Its relatively higher proportion of general management units might therefore be a function of its comparatively small overall number of total units within a largely confined policy making and regulatory role. The significance of its general management versus specialist portfolio profile might then be more realistically compared with a department like Economic Development, which has a similar number of total units, but a more consolidated grouping of internal management units.

Figure 6 confirms that the general trajectory of long-term growth in the total number of Cabinet departments, coupled with an increasing number of public entities, did not produce a corresponding reduction and relocation of functional units out of Cabinet departments. Moreover, the research found only one genuine case of agencification which had a direct impact on the internal structure of a Cabinet department. This concerned the establishment of a Government Technical Advisory Centre by the National Treasury, which was created as a Government Component, and to which the Treasury transferred specific functions.

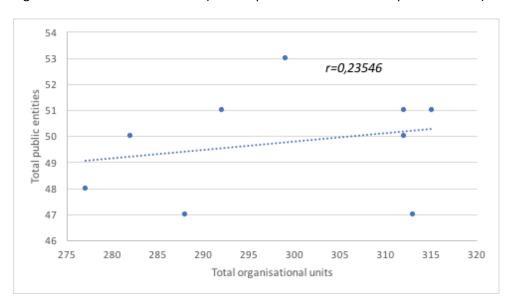


Figure 6: Correlation coefficient (total departmental units: total public entities)

Figure 6, which plots the association between the total number of organisational units in sampled departments and the total number of public entities overseen by these departments, shows a weak positive relationship. This confirms that agencification does not trigger the transfer or relocation of units out of Cabinet departments, and in fact seems to operate entirely independently from the changing (and expanding) internal composition of departments. If there had been a direct effect, there would have been a negative correlation.

Tracking internal structural change events

So far, the data shows an expanding trajectory of internal organisational units across most of the study period, including at least two hierarchical levels (i.e. levels two and three). The expansion of internal units also appears to operate in isolation from the number of non-departmental public entities being overseen by departments. A more disaggregated picture of the data at the departmental level also revealed considerable unevenness and somewhat surprising findings about where change was occurring, including strategic level two shifts in departments that had not undergone macro-level restructuring. The wide variation in unit size at both the operational level three and leadership level one, coupled with the predominately specialised and externally-oriented nature of work that units are carrying out, suggests that the internal organisational profile of departments is relatively distinctive. To test this impression in more detail, the number of annual structural change events was recorded for each department. This was derived from counting the number of year-on-year changes observed in a department's organogram. The results are shown in appendix 3, which also superimposes an 'X' for each year in which there was a ministerial change in a department.

The results show that all departments experienced at least one major episode involving a large number of internal structural changes over the roughly ten-year period. A single bigbang structural overhaul was visible for the departments of Transport, Human Settlements, National Treasury and Economic Development. The latter two departments also experienced periods of smaller structural changes which for Economic Development occurred prior to its major change event and for Treasury occurred after its major structural overhaul in 2009/10. In Treasury's case, there were several instances of mostly level one and three changes following its major change event, and for Economic Development, a brand new department created in 2009, we see smaller changes preceding its big-bang event which can probably be attributed to efforts in laying the ground work for major organisational design. The Departments of Basic Education, Home Affairs and Social Development experienced multiple big-bang structural change events, with Home Affairs experiencing three episodes. Sustaining multiple large structural change events inside departments with a heavy operational service delivery burden is concerning. This is especially acute in a case like Home Affairs, which manages a large and dispersed workforce of street-level bureaucrats. However, it is also difficult to discern a clear pattern for gauging which departments are more susceptible to internal structural changes based on whether they are new, restructured or pre-existing. The timing of changes for new or restructured departments such as Economic Development, Human Settlements and Basic Education - if excluding the latter's second big-bang event which occurred after a long period of stability – does however appear consistent with the passage of an initial lead time for planning a final organisational design following a restructuring or repurposing event.

This raises the question of whether ministerial changes offer any more clarity about when and why structural change events occur. This is particularly salient given the extensive ministerial changes which happened during the presidency of Jacob Zuma, which spanned nearly the entire study period. The data does not convincingly show that ministerial changes had an impact on internal structural change. In two cases: Economic Development and Basic

Education, there were no ministerial changes and one and two major structural change events respectively. Most of the ministerial changes, which totalled 24 and are denoted with an 'X' on the structural change charts, did not coincide with or trigger a large number of organisational changes – the exceptions were the National Treasury (2009/10), Home Affairs (2012/13 and 2018/19) and Social Development (2018/19). Two of these ministerial changes occurred in the year that Cyril Ramaphosa took office and were followed by major structural change events the following year, also the same year that a macro-restructuring of Cabinet departments was announced. The Treasury is an interesting case because it recorded the largest number of ministerial changes, at seven. However, with the exception of the initial change in 2009/10 (Pravin Gordhan), all subsequent changes did not coincide with or trigger large structural change events even during a turbulent period between 2014/15 and 2018/19, which saw the department change ministers every year amid increasing concerns about the capture of the Treasury.

Appendix 4 shows the correlation coefficient for the relationship between the total number of organisational units and changes in the total staff establishment for personnel working in levels one through three (i.e. senior managers). It has already been shown that there is no extensive overlap between ministerial changes and large structural change events. The largely positive but mostly weak to moderate scores suggests that an expansion of internal units generates a mostly contained and not inordinate increase in the staff establishment. The Departments of Social Development and Home Affairs generated higher scores (0,78 and 0,65 respectively), displaying relatively higher sensitivity between staff establishment and structural expansion. Interestingly, these were also two of the three departments (Treasury is the exception) which recorded ministerial changes that did trigger large structural change events. Curiously, the Department of Human Settlements was the only department to show a moderate negative correlation. This suggests that the department has experienced greater difficulty finding the optimal fit between its personnel and unit ratio, with the latter being underpopulated.

Does the internal structural profile of Cabinet departments display isomorphic convergence?

A final question concerns the degree of structural conformity between departments or, the extent to which isomorphic convergence is visible in how the internal architecture of Cabinet departments has evolved. Earlier it was argued that if isomorphic conformity was observable, it was more likely to be driven by a process of convergence rather than compliance, given the absence in South Africa of an explicit structural blueprint to direct how Cabinet departments ought to configure their internal units. One clear marker of convergence was the similar (and significant) proportion of units across most departments carrying out externally-oriented specialist portfolio services (see figure 5). While there were clear parallels in the proportion and types of internal management or corporate support services being carried out by departments, this was also clearly being kept in check.

Other measures of possible isomorphic convergence generated a very different picture. Departments were compared on the basis of their average number of units by level across the time period. This generated an indicative shape of each department's internal architecture, which when presented as a funnel chart mimics the hierarchical organisation of

structural units. The results, which are shown in appendix 2, show that no departments shared the identical average unit distribution across the three levels. It would not, however, be realistic to expect 'identical' average unit sizes across departments, given their specialised mandates. Hence, the question is how can we interpret the variable distribution (shape) of internal units within departments? Appendix 2 clearly shows that departments exhibit different distributional patterns and shapes. The Department of Home Affairs has the largest variance between the average unit size of level one down to level three. The department of Human Settlements appeared to show the most balanced distributional shape, with the most manageable overall span of control, if ancillary support structures at the Director-General level are excluded from the count.

Despite the variable internal distribution of units across departments, it was possible to cluster departments according to the nature of their work. A crude but common means of characterising the work of departments is to distinguish between policy-oriented (planning, research, advisory, regulation and oversight) and implementation/service-delivery-oriented departments. This is not a clear-cut distinction, because every department performs a mixture of these tasks. But, the distinction is a useful means of highlighting the relative weight or proportion of a department's resources (including structures and staff) that are allocated to these activities. Taking into account the varying distribution of units shown in appendix 2, it was evident that the departments of Economic Development and Human Settlements exhibited a very similar pattern, with the most balanced and compact distributional shape. These departments are also geared for policy development and do not manage an extensive service delivery network. A similar case can be made for the Department of Basic Education (DBE), which also showed a relatively balanced and compact average unit distribution. The DBE does, however, host a noticeably larger number of branches, which probably reflects a wider scope of strategic responsibility overseeing the public education system. A similar point can be made for the departments of Social Development and Transport, which are also policy-oriented departments that are primarily engaged in oversight and regulation, but whose portfolios are broad and multifaceted in scope. The anomaly among policy-oriented departments is the National Treasury, which has a more dispersed strategic and operational footprint. The reason might be attributed to the Treasury's even wider, complex and increasingly interventionist swathe of responsibility over financial governance in the state and the broader economy. The Department of Home Affairs is the only implementation/service-delivery-oriented department in the sample. Its internal distribution of units is similar to Treasury, with a more asymmetrical and expansive strategic and operational footprint that is consistent with its complex strategic portfolio and extensive on-the-ground delivery network.

Another way of evaluating the degree of isomorphic convergence among departments is to score them according to key characteristics of their internal structures. Departments were assigned a 'structural similarity score', which was derived from aggregating the following two metrics:

1) the average number of units at level one *plus* the average number of units at level two, divided by the average number of units at level three. This would show the relative distribution of structures between the upper and lower levels of the

organogram. A higher score would indicate a more **centralised** structure, and a lower score would show a more **decentralised** structure.

2) the average number of specialist portfolio units divided into the average number of general management units. This shows the proportion of units with an external service delivery focus, with a higher score indicating a more **specialist focus**.



Figure 7: Structural similarity scores by department (average for the time period)

Figure 7 shows the wide-ranging structural similarity scores across departments. These have been presented in a funnel chart spanning departments with the most centralised and specialised structural composition (e.g. National Treasury), to the least centralised (or most decentralised) and specialised arrangements (e.g. Home Affairs). The contrast between Treasury and Home Affairs becomes clearer, and helps explain the anomalous similarity between these departments based purely on the distribution of their internal units and their policy versus implementation focus.

When structural similarity scores are plotted on a year-on-year basis for each department, as shown in figure 8, it confirms a wide-ranging average variance and reveals distinctive shifts in at least five of the seven departments.

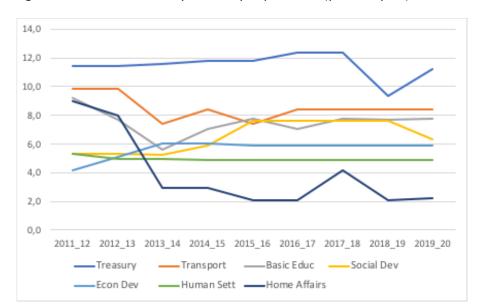


Figure 8: Structural similarity scores by department (year-on-year)

Conclusion

An analysis of the internal structures of sampled Cabinet departments showed an aggregate expansion in the total number of internal organisational units, in a period which also experienced macro-level growth in the total number of departments under Jacob Zuma's presidency. This trajectory of growth reached its climax and started to shift downwards from 2019/20, which also coincided with a gradual decline in the total number of Cabinet departments following Cyril Ramaphosa's ascension to the Presidency. Despite an overlap between shifts in the overall number of internal organisational units and an increase in Cabinet departments, other data revealed that ministerial changes, as a political act, did not for the most part coincide with or trigger large structural change events. It was also difficult to discern any pattern for gauging which departments were more susceptible to internal structural changes, based on whether they were new, restructured or pre-existing. This does not necessarily mean that the expansion and contraction of structural units is not susceptible to political pressure, which could also emanate from within the administration of a department. What was clearly evident, though, is that major internal structural change was not widely attributable to ministerial reshuffles and agency.

Unpacking descriptive data on the internal structural characteristics of Cabinet departments turned up some fascinating insights about how these institutions have evolved. Strategic (branch level two) and operational units (Chief Director level three) experienced the biggest growth, respectively, with wide variation in unit size at both the operational level and at the leadership level one. Branch level growth has a direct effect on how a Cabinet department organisationally delivers its strategic mandate, and increases the oversight pressure on Directors-General, who carry relatively wide spans of control in most departments. In addition, branch-level growth was most prominent in pre-existing rather than new or restructured departments, indicating that strategic shifts are not necessarily more prevalent in departments that have undergone macro-level restructuring or repurposing. Despite departments routinely creating ancillary support structures at Director-General level one,

there was an aggregate decline in the total number of units at this level. Moreover, units operating at the leadership level are also susceptible to being shifted and rotated down and back between levels one, two and three.

An assessment of isomorphic convergence in how the internal organisational units of departments have evolved revealed a mixed but mostly variable picture. There was a high degree of similarity between departments based on the type of activities their units were carrying out. The vast majority of units in most departments are carrying out externallydriven specialised portfolio services. This reflects positively on sustained political messaging about 'service delivery'. Although the preponderance of structures alone does not automatically translate into delivery performance, it signals that there is latent structural potential in place for South Africans to expect more from Cabinet departments. Another unsurprising area of commonality between departments was that agencification, which was only observed in one instance, does not trigger the transfer or relocation of units out of Cabinet departments, and seems to operate entirely independently from the changing (and expanding) internal composition of departments. This confirms that structural reform in South Africa's public service operates largely at an institutional, rather than at a more holistic, level. The consequence is that the bureaucracy as a whole becomes more susceptible to expansionary drift. Internal structural convergence was lacking when departments were compared on various other metrics, such as the average size and relative distribution of their units across levels, and based on a consolidated structural similarity measure. However, it was also evident that policy-oriented departments tend to exhibit more compact and balanced internal structural arrangements, although this can vary depending on the strategic breadth and scope of a department's portfolio.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that most departments still publish an inadequate level of detail about their internal organisational structures in publicly available documents like annual reports. This hampers the ability of Parliament and civil society organisations to conduct meaningful oversight and scrutinize the inner workings of departments on a regular basis.

My sincere gratitude goes to Laureen Rushby and her colleagues in the Government Publications library at UCT, for arranging hard copies of departmental annual reports that I could not source electronically. I would also like to thank Keenan Magiera, a Masters student in the Department of Political Studies, for his excellent research assistance.

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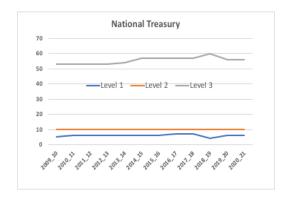
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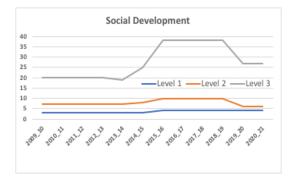
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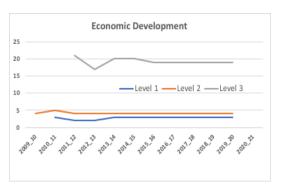
Appendix 1: Number of internal organisational units, by level and department

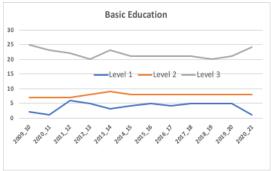


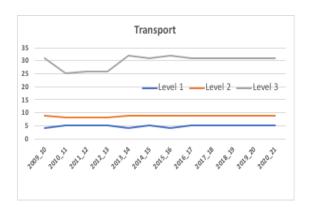




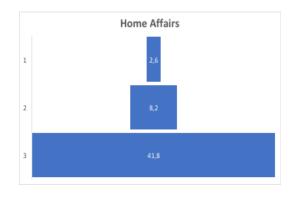


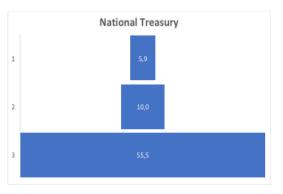




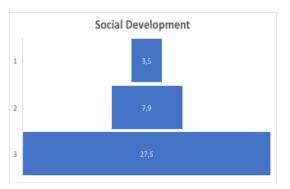


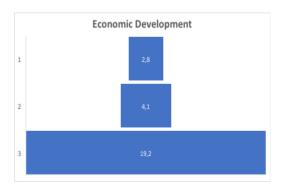
Appendix 2: Internal organisational shape of departments, by average units per level

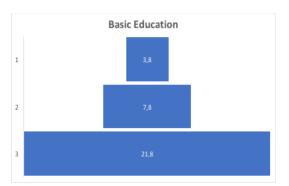


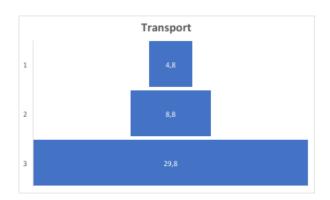




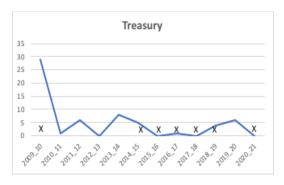


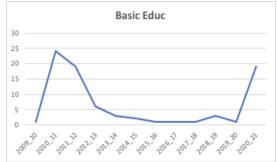


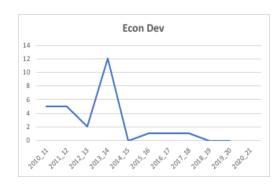


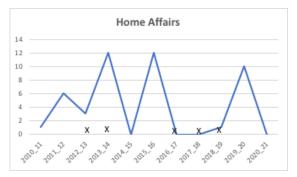


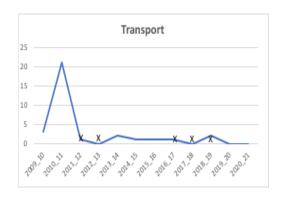
Appendix 3: Number of change events by department ('X' indicates change of minister)

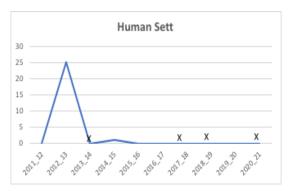


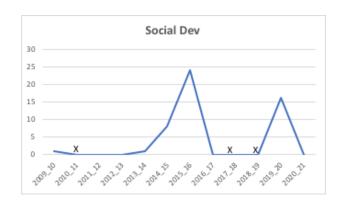












Appendix 4: Correlation coefficient (total number of organisational units by total number of senior management posts on establishment

