

## **Reflections: PROF BRENDA GOURLEY**

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This is an edited version of an interview conducted by Richard Fehnel in the course of research for the book

### **TRANSFORMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION Global Pressures and Local Realities in South Africa**

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#### **On Institutional Planning and National Policy:**

Before I became Vice Chancellor [of the University of Natal] I was one of the deputies and 'strategy' was part of my portfolio. We went through a process that took two and a half years and as this was pre-'94, it was a hugely consultative process - we had unions, we had government-in-waiting, we had community groups, and employers, aside from staff and business and other community leaders. We had 84 non-governmental organisations [NGOs] housed on this campus at that time, which also changed the quality of the conversation.

We went through something like 27 drafts of our strategy document as we listened and heard and changed and reformulated. So by the time the new government came in, we had a document that has actually completely stood up to the test of time and is still the main document for the university. We've added a few things in. One of the strategic initiatives we added in was Partnerships; not that we didn't have partnerships before but that we wanted to give it a much higher profile. We obviously added in HIV/AIDS as a central, dominating feature of the environment.

But government policy didn't actually make any difference to the University of Natal because policy was entirely a reflection of this huge amount of research that we'd done. It would have been very odd if we'd done all that research and then suddenly along came a policy document that was completely different. I mean, we wouldn't have been sharing the same planet. And we were very involved. Our staff was involved in NEPI [the National Education Policy Initiative], we got involved in the NCHE [The National Commission on Higher Education], we were very close to all that stuff.

We waited for those documents to see whether we were on target and in fact, if you look at the record, the University of Natal got their demographics right long before any of the other historically white universities. Long before. And some of them are still trailing. And don't forget, of course, we also had a black medical school which also changed the nature of the conversation and the level of our engagement because we had this highly politicised, very, very strong faculty with some serious people, not only in the faculty but coming out of the faculty. So we had an alumni base, which was different.

From the point of view of the equity issues and the quality issues and the kinds of programme issues that were specific to government policy, none of those were big shocks to us. I would have been bitterly disappointed if there had been any. Bitterly disappointed in myself, bitterly disappointed in the process because we did such a lot of homework.

And of course, if you do something over the period of time that we did it, going through draft after draft after draft, of course, that in itself aligns the people in the institution because, as they engage with the issues and as you say, 'Well, hold on a minute. We agreed on this but now we've got a whole lot of extra stuff and we need to put this in,' you were bringing more and more people on board.

We were a university that had a lot of activists and the NGOs that were here had often been started by academics, who, over time, chose to emphasise these activities over traditional research. That fact helped to establish a community orientation as a key element in the dominant culture of this institution. But having 84 NGOs on campus that were refugees from apartheid created some difficulties. Difficulties for the executive, difficulties in terms of space constraints and resource complaints and dealing with the police and all the councillors.

At the same time, it helped to create an institutional culture that was very open to change. This was not an institution that was trying to hang on to old traditions - and I think that that was in many ways borne out by the subsequent events in terms of student upheavals and union upheavals because, geographically speaking, we should have been the most strife-torn university in the country. I mean, here we were, right in the middle of the IFP/ANC stuff, we were right in the middle of all sorts of cross-currents that other provinces didn't have to deal with, except perhaps the Western Cape to some extent, but that was a different kind of dynamic. You know, the IFP/ANC stuff was pretty tense - we couldn't even have our provincial elections when everybody else had their elections.

I'm personally quite sure that because of the presence of the NGOs and the work of the NGOs, the University of Natal had a different kind of name out there. We had put research and development (as in community development) on one of our main platforms.

### **On Globalisation:**

I want to distinguish between internationalisation and globalisation because so many people mix those two words up. We were very concerned that because there'd been an academic boycott and because we had been cut off, that we had to break out of that isolation in a very determined way and that's what made it a strategic initiative. We only had eight strategic initiatives and that was one of them, and it led to setting up an international office and signing linkage agreements and signing up international students.

I couldn't afford to send many staff overseas to study and get extra degrees. What I could do was get people to come into the staff room here, to bring overseas here, if you like. So at the moment I think we've something like 260-270 linkage agreements with universities all over the world. Not all of them are as active as others but, on the other hand, some of them are very, very active.

That's internationalisation and we've got about 7% or 8% of our students who are international students and that makes for a very, very, hopelessly overworked international office. It's an income-generation stream for us and it was improving the quality of the educational experience for the students and contributing to the quality of our own academic endeavour insofar as the staff was concerned.

Now they might not particularly have liked it expressed in quite that way but I think most of them would acknowledge that they were cut off. What they might not acknowledge is just how much damage that did. So that was the internationalisation, which is an entirely different matter to globalisation. I think the forces of globalisation, of course, are entirely different when it comes to policy and practice in higher education.

Globalisation is, of course, driven by the technology that makes it possible and creates this flow of services and ideas. I know one of the major services is education-- on-line education-- and how people imagine that they're going to stay untouched by that is a total mystery to me. I'm delighted by MIT putting all their courses on the web and I can only imagine the difference that will make to somebody in India who's struggling to present courses on Physics 1, 2, 3 and 4, probably all by himself in some Indian university, or other places, probably not very far from here. What an amazing resource that will be to people. So if people think in terms of 'shareware' I think that could have the most amazingly uplifting influence on the quality of education everywhere.

Now some people would say that it's just another form of colonisation and that's up to us, wherever we may be. If we're in India or in Africa or wherever, that's up to us. But the fact is in fields like maths and physics and chemistry, which are not exactly culture specific, it is a very liberating thing.

We have not reacted in any specific kind of way to globalisation. What we have done is move towards 'open learning', which is much more materials-based education so that we free people from the classroom. I think some very special and rare and few people inspire in the classroom and those we need to keep. But our classroom activities need to focus more on seminar material and less on lecturing. So we've actually worked quite hard at trying to get people out of the classroom and getting better materials.

When you talk of globalisation and its impact on an institution, what it means is you'd better be on a world platform of competitiveness and not just on a national platform. You'd better start thinking about the world platforms for innovation. So I think we, as a university, have had more innovation grants from the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology than any other single university. I think that says something about how we have tried to

engender a spirit of entrepreneurship throughout the university as a new element of our institutional culture.

### **New Landscape:**

South Africa's replete with wonderful policies. What we're not good at is implementation. Not for want of will but for want of capacity. We actually just haven't got the capacity on the ground to implement some very, very ambitious things. So to implement an NQF [National Qualifications Framework], to implement a SAQA [South African Qualifications Authority] - those are not trivial matters. I mean, we've got people buried in paper with SETAs [Sector Education and Training Authorities] and SGBs [Standards Generating Bodies] and I can't even remember the bloody acronyms anymore, it's a total nightmare.

You know, that whole ladder of learning where people know where they are on the ladder and get up the ladder - I am a big champion of that, I agree with it. What I don't agree with is trying to squash everybody into the same little mould. I don't know a lot about France. My daughter happens to be married to a Frenchman so I know more about it than I know about most other countries but their idea of liberty, equality and fraternity is if you can't change the curriculum across the whole system then you can't change it here because then it's not *équité*. I have a horror of trying to squeeze everybody into the same box, and we might end up at that distant point. Right now, we're a long way from there, mostly from a lack of organisation, not from want of trying.

So I like an articulated system, I like a unified system, which is different to a unitary system and I like students to be able to move through the system. I like the idea of social inclusion and making it easy for people. And I also like Kader Asmal's particularly well-phrased sentence that "we cannot leave the education system, defined as it is by the geo-political imagination of the apartheid planners."

But by the same token, you don't merge for the sake of merging. You know the Minister's brief to the National Working Group was not whether to merge, it was how to merge. Merging was a given. I don't think merging is a given and what worries me is that merging, whichever way you want to describe the landscape, changes the landscape. I believe our system is very fragile at the moment. We've been through enormous changes with enormous difficulty. We haven't been able to attract management. These are not jobs that are attractive and the idea that some well-managed institution can just absorb some other less well-managed institution is not sound.

There are lots and lots of mergers in the business sector. I actually used to teach mergers and acquisitions. The majority of merges in the corporate sector fail. They fail because the ethos of the two institutions don't match or the planned outcomes were unclear because nobody bothered to define them. They're usually the result of the ego of people who thought they had a vision in the middle of the night or wanted to extend their empire or whatever.

Will somebody tell me about the landscape? Are we actually concentrating on the right problem here? Is this our biggest problem, joining Natal and Vaal Technikon? Is that your biggest problem? I don't think so. So, for me, landscape is a much larger question and unless people are ready to take what is happening to us seriously and maybe would like to drive up and down Umgeni Road or go off into the townships this weekend and see the wall-to-wall funerals... There are wall-to-wall funerals. Who is paying attention? It's not discussed in our circles because the President says so.

### **On HIV/AIDS:**

The landscape is inexorably changed by HIV/AIDS and I cannot say it often enough and I've said it in a hundred different places and it's a nation that doesn't want to discuss it. In KwaZulu-Natal, we're one in three plus [infected people]; Western Cape, maybe one in ten. The prescription that applies to the Western Cape and the prescription that applies to KwaZulu-Natal is different. Merging here and merging there or doing combinations or doing whatever it is you think you're doing, you must ask yourself what does AIDS actually mean to the educational system for the production of teachers, the production of nurses?

The University of Natal happens to be growing its education faculty as opposed to most others who have closed their education faculties, which to me, is unbelievable in a situation where teachers are dying by the thousands. I just don't understand how they'll explain that at the Pearly Gates in answer to the question. We're gearing up to make education our biggest faculty and teacher education one of our highest priorities. Because why? Because that's on our list of challenges and how else can we meet it?

Then, how do you get them out of the schools into teacher education and how do you get them into science education and how do you get them into maths education? You've got to think about that as well. And if you want to talk about the landscape of higher education, you have to ask yourself from the beginning to the end, how it's going to be done. Because if all the schools collapse, where's this university system? And the schools are going to collapse.

There are 80 000 teachers in KwaZulu-Natal. 30 000 of them are going to die in the next five to seven years. Do you know how many graduates [in teacher education] graduated at our last graduation ceremony? Three hundred. That number doesn't even replace the ones who are retiring.

So what's landscape? What does landscape mean? Will somebody explain to me what landscape means in this context? I find myself a bit disappointed at the moment as to where the national effort is going. I would think that nothing is more important than paying serious attention to what HIV/AIDS means for the whole education system and then planning what to do about it across that whole education system.

### **On Partnerships:**

I see a huge potential for partnerships. First of all, I must tell you, it made putting together our programme mix document quite a simple matter. I mean, tedious, but relatively simple. But our partnerships, we have the most amazing partnerships and growing number of partners. Our contract research also went from R38-million to R142-million in five years.

You could also quintuple your operating income through expanding student numbers without doing anything to your research. But we've put together partnerships with local and national government, we've got partnerships with local industry and national industry, we've got partnerships with other universities, and with professional organisations. One of our best partnerships is in the Forestry research area because we started with Forestry in the Life Sciences - seeds, plants and so on. Then the Chemical Product-related people came in, through CSIR [Council for Scientific and Industrial Research]. (They used to have their Forestry research in Pretoria, and moved their Forestry research operation, the whole of it, onto the Wits Campus.) SAPPI [South African Pulp and Paper Industries] are about to move their research laboratory, their SAPPI site, here. And SAPPI, I think, is the largest or one of the largest companies in the world in paper production, and whatever. So that has come here. So what we've got is right from the seed to the product.

Ten of our Doctoral students are in the CSIR laboratory here, and in SAPPI, we have a lot of our Masters students. It is a huge, combined operation which feeds both teaching and research. It's a huge Centre of Excellence in Forestry and Forestry operation, from the perspectives of both student and research production.

### **Staff:**

I think that we are finding it difficult to attract academics into the system. The salaries are not good and if you're a very bright young person, black or white, why would you come into academia and condemn yourself to poverty for the rest of your life? So for a long time I have been concerned about where the next generation of academics is going to come from. I'm concerned about the fragility of the system. In six weeks we lost six of our top people in one faculty (humanities) on this campus because good people are mobile.

They left the country because of what they feared happening in higher education. And they're irreplaceable in the short-term. The short-term turns into the long-term if you're not actually growing trees, and if you haven't got those people who grow the trees, how does the short-term turn into the long-term?

**About Leaving:**

*Richard Fehnel: As you prepare to leave the South African higher education scene, do you have any parting words of wisdom?*

It takes a very, very, very long time to build up a good institution but it doesn't take a lot to break it down.

*Interview conducted by Richard Fehnel, August 2001*

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