

## Chapter Three

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# *Towards a Responsive Curriculum*

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### Introduction

Since the election of the first democratic government in 1994, there has been significant political and social transformation in South Africa. The major achievement of the first government was in the area of policy development and the creation of a framework to address past social and economic inequalities. The latter involved putting in place governing and institutional structures to oversee delivery. The challenge facing the present government is in policy implementation and effecting the delivery of services. While the government may use its electoral mandate to provide leadership, it cannot manage the challenges of delivery alone. This will require partnership with civil society and with the business sector. Some of the major socio-economic challenges facing us are poverty, illiteracy, alienation due to the extraordinarily high levels of unemployment, the provision of social services (in particular in education, health and welfare), skills shortages, the demand for high level human resources, and globalisation which threatens to increase the gap between rich and poor. The intellectual and expert resolution of these challenges falls squarely within the competencies of higher education. For this to occur it must be preceded by the systemic transformation of higher education.

The framework for this systemic change is encapsulated in the 1997 Education White Paper 3: *A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*, and the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) (Department of Education, 2001). The aim is to establish, 'a single, national co-ordinated system, which would meet the learning needs of our citizens and the reconstruction and development needs of our society and the economy'. In other words, the higher education system needs to be transformed so that it can contribute to meeting the political, economic and social needs of our society. Related to the above, is an ideological challenge. It concerns the theoretical underpinnings of the idea of a university.

In this paper we consider two of sets of challenges facing higher education, namely (1) the challenge of the current policy environment, and (2) the ideological challenge. (We do not consider the systemic challenge since if the others are met the overall aim of the former will also be met.) Lastly, we consider the implications of these challenges for the curriculum, particularly in the Social Sciences. We do not suggest that the curriculum be limited to the areas that we outline, but rather we suggest that these are crucial issues which cannot be overlooked when discussing curriculum development if we want to contribute to the government's agenda for the social and economic transformation of South Africa

## Policy Environment: Socio-Economic Challenges

The first set of challenges facing our universities lies with the current policy environment. Our universities are subject to the pressures of society and to the imperatives of the government of the day. There is now a public and governmental expectation that higher education institutions need to be held to account by the wider society, especially in view of the many competing demands on the public purse through which they are funded. They have to relate to the social and cultural development of society, and contribute to national development and nation building. Most of our institutions have mission statements to this effect. (Of course, whether they are put into practice, and if they are, with what degree of success, is another matter.)

The current policy environment in which higher education operates, with its requirements of fiscal accountability, consumer appeal, massification, meeting societal needs, and so on, means that the traditional notion of a university, and therefore of its academics, is no longer viable. The traditional role – the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake – has been found wanting. As a result, universities have to redefine themselves. (As we shall see below, this is in line with institutions elsewhere in the world. In South Africa this has become critical.) And academics have to acquiesce to a role that is increasingly being foisted on them, namely that of professionals who provide services that are socially relevant, and that place an emphasis on skills and vocational training. Furthermore, this has to be done in the face of performance indicators, quality assurance, financial appraisal, and an increasing managerialism. To the dismay of many academics, the old idea of a university has been abandoned. Let us consider in more detail what this role entailed.

Many of the things that human beings do are done for their own sake. For instance, we write poetry, climb mountains, discuss ideas, simply because we find

these activities to be intrinsically worthwhile. In the past, university education was typically justified in this way. The pursuit of certain kinds of knowledge and understanding – e.g. Philosophy, History, Literature, and Physics – was regarded as valuable in and of itself. Academics were expected not merely to encourage their students to pursue their studies rigorously, but to foster a love for the discipline for its own sake. In all of this, matters relevant to societal problems, financial viability, and the like, were usually not thought of as being part of their concern.

Research played a pivotal role in the traditional university. Consistent with the above, research was curiosity driven. It was, of course, concerned with the creation of new knowledge. But the kind of research undertaken largely depended upon the predilection of the researcher. It was not subject to public scrutiny, but rather was evaluated within the parameters of the discipline in question. It did not matter whether the research addressed the needs of society or had any practical relevance. If an academic wanted to spend his or her time speculating about, for instance, how many angels could fit on the head of a pin, he or she could do so without having to offer any explanation about why this was worthwhile research. In general terms then, research was regarded as being the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.

The above was the widely accepted role of the university and the academic within it. Why is it not viable today? The first point that needs to be made is that this is a world-wide trend. Universities have had to change from being ‘ivory tower’ institutions to multi-purpose knowledge organisations that are socially relevant, and thereby serve the communities in which they are located. Furthermore, due to the complexity of participating successfully within a global economic system and keeping abreast of ever-advancing technology, societies need not only a highly skilled workforce but also a greatly expanded one. Universities are expected to meet this requirement. This has resulted in an increased trend towards providing more vocational education within universities and a move away from traditional liberal arts education.

In addition, the demand by governments for more highly skilled graduates has led to pressure being exerted on universities to expand their student intake. Most countries have access policies to assist in the massification of higher education. But this has typically led to large numbers of under-prepared students being enrolled, which in turn, has led to a requirement for academic support programmes. All of this has led to universities having increased budgetary requirements. Governments, as the major providers of funds for these institutions, have, in turn, required greater administrative efficiency and accountability. The pressure from governments on universities to greatly expand student numbers, increase throughput rates, increase

research output, and put in place strategies for quality assurance, has greatly eroded university autonomy.

The above developments are a far cry from the traditional university. The traditional university, the roots of which can be traced to 13th century France, enshrined institutional autonomy and ‘academic freedom’ as its essential components. Since that time, this idea of a ‘traditional university’ has spread throughout the Western world and to its colonies. The basic organisation, patterns of governance and institutional ethos are patterned along this Western model. The traditions of academic freedom and institutional autonomy were, however, never extended to the colonies. Colonial universities tended to mimic institutions in the mother country.

We might ask why it is that the Western notion of a university has been adopted virtually worldwide? Altbach et al. (1998), give a possible answer:

Western universities were seen to be successful in providing advanced education, fostering research and scientific development, and assisting their societies in the increasingly complex task of development. Universities in both the United States and Germany were active in fostering industrial and agricultural development in the nineteenth century. The harnessing of higher education to the broader needs of national economic and social development was perhaps the most important innovation of this era. The idea that higher education should be generously supported from public funds, that the university should participate in the creation as well as the transmission of knowledge, and that academic institutions should at the same time be permitted a degree of autonomy was behind much of the growth of universities in this century ([www.press.jhu.edu/press/books/titles/sampler/altbach.htm](http://www.press.jhu.edu/press/books/titles/sampler/altbach.htm)).

If we take into consideration the increased participation of the private sector in university governance and the fact that it often provides the funds for research, it is not difficult to appreciate why the research agenda is increasingly being set by the needs of industry and commerce. This has led to an increase in Mode Two (applied research) knowledge production and a decrease of Mode One (basic research). It also means that research is not generally curiosity driven but driven by the availability of funds. The net result is that the production and dissemination of knowledge is not the result of the decisions of Senate or of the individual academic, but is subject to influences outside the university. All of which has led to the demise of the traditional notion of the ‘university’.

The situation sketched above is more pressing for developing countries like South Africa, which have enormous social deficits. Let us briefly consider these. The imperatives of democracy mean that important questions and considerations come

into play. Firstly, the concerns of various sectors in society impact on how the national budget gets distributed. This is critical in the light of the increasing and competing demands and challenges facing the country (alluded to earlier, such as infrastructural and social shortfalls in housing, health, job creation, etc.).

The second has to do with accountability. A democratic society is expected to justify its investment in education. Thus, the question arises: what return does the country derive from its investment in higher education? Needless to say, public higher education institutions are very costly items in the government's budget. This invariably invites scrutiny and attention by politicians to the core business – teaching, research and community service – of these institutions. They want to know what good its activities will be for society and especially what these activities will do for the country's economy. In a similar vein, students and their parents want to know what use the young person's university education will be when they leave and enter the world of work. In short, there is a growing public expectation that universities should contribute to the economic, social and cultural development of society.

Thirdly, the imperatives of democracy will invariably impact on the role of the academic. As we noted earlier, the traditional notion of the academic, with its emphasis on personal growth, implied that s/he worked in isolation from, or at least failed adequately to participate in, the wider life of society. Yet the very expertise and skills that academics have are desperately needed by society. Furthermore, as academics are paid from the public purse, society is correct to expect some return from this investment.

A further factor facing us today is that of globalisation. New technologies and world economic forces are influencing all aspects of our lives. Employers are seeking graduates who can appreciate and understand this global context and who are able to think critically and creatively within it. So universities need to give students the necessary skills and abilities that will enable them to function effectively when they take up positions in industry, commerce, government, and so on. We need to produce graduates, in particular African graduates, who have well-developed critical thinking skills and other skills that are needed for the development of South Africa so that we can successfully compete in the global market.

Another feature of globalisation is that it stimulates innovation. The source of innovation is knowledge; not new knowledge, but knowledge that is already available and which can be modified, adapted and applied to a particular problem in the local context. Thus it is imperative that apart from building our students'

knowledge base, we provide them with ‘a broad range of generic and transferable skills’ (NCHE, 1996) so that they can seize opportunities to develop innovative solutions to the myriad of problems facing our society.

To sum up: the changing demands of society taken together with the globalisation of the market place means that universities can no longer function as they have done in the past. The old idea of a university is no longer viable.

## Ideological Challenge

This brings us to the ideological challenge, an issue that lies at the heart of the transformation of higher education institutions and, by implication, the transformation of the curriculum.

Shull, in Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993: 16), writes:

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women participate in the transformation of their world.

As we all know, one of the pillars upon which apartheid stood was its education policy, which provided an inferior education to black people. In struggling to overcome this legacy, we also need to rethink the traditional nature of our universities. What should a university be in South Africa? What sort of curricula should we offer? What should the role of academics be, and what sort of graduates should we produce?

A similar discussion was held at a workshop in Ghana in 1972 under the auspices of the Association of African Universities. The question of what the role of an African university should be was raised. This was formulated in the context of a post-colonial situation. Twenty-nine years later, the answer that sprang from those deliberations is still pertinent to us in South Africa, namely that there is a need to ‘formulate a new philosophy of ... university education for Africa, in the hope of evolving institutions that are not only built, owned and sited in Africa, but are of Africa, drawing inspiration from Africa, and intelligently dedicated to her ideals and aspirations’ (Yesufu quoted in Wandira 1977: 21). But, what exactly does this entail?

As we have noted, universities perform multiple roles and serve many purposes. It is important that universities continue to perform their traditional functions, i.e. the pursuit, promotion, and dissemination of knowledge. If we are to be truly South African universities, however, we cannot be disconnected from the issues and

problems that are to be found in our communities, in our country and in the continent. We need then to place a strong emphasis on undertaking research that is relevant to the communities that we serve.

As far back as 1972, Yesufu (Wandira, 1977: 22) suggested that the African university must not pursue knowledge for its own sake, 'but for the sake of, and the amelioration of the conditions of life and work of, the ordinary man and woman'. It must be fully committed to active participation in the social transformation, economic modernisation, and the training and upgrading of the total human resources of the nation (African Association of Universities Conference: *Creating the African University*). For this to be achieved South African universities need to set themselves on a developmental trajectory that will result in their becoming world-class African universities. How might this be done?

This brings us to the National Plan for Higher Education 2001 and the endorsement of its proposal by the South African Cabinet. The NPHE aims to transform the higher education system so that we have higher education institutions that are neither black nor white but that are truly South African. These will accordingly meet the needs for the social and economic development of the country. The NPHE would have to directly confront the systemic disadvantage faced by black institutions and black students wherever they study. Systemic problems are not limited to matters relating to lack of efficiency, cost-effectiveness, accountability and coherence. They include economic and academic disadvantages in relation to access, as well as a geographic disadvantage with its negative impact on programme offerings and the creation of partnerships with industry.

A failure of the NPHE to address these systemic disadvantages will result in a failure to draw people of all races into a new consensus.

We now want to turn our attention to how the issues outlined above may be addressed. The first point to note is that no higher education institution can be excellent in all areas. Furthermore, the unhappy legacy of the past means that many South African universities, particularly the historically black universities (HBUs), continue to operate under severe financial, infrastructural, and human resource constraints. One way to ameliorate these constraints is for such universities to decide on their institutional niche – on what kinds of programmes they will concentrate their energies and resources. It may be that one will decide to develop excellence in developmental and cultural issues, another may define its niche in the field of technology, and yet another in health-related programmes. This does not mean that only courses in these broad areas will be offered. What it does mean is

that the bulk of the institution's resources will go to support the teaching and research programmes in its niche area.

Secondly, it is important that there is no duplication of programmes, and that inter-institutional collaboration takes place. Whilst all institutions benefit from collaboration with one another, it could be argued that the HBUs, in particular, would benefit from such collaboration. As we have noted, this is in large part due to the grossly uneven allocation of resources that were awarded to higher education institutions in the past.

## A Responsive Curriculum

What sort of niches might South African universities carve for themselves in the Social Sciences so that they meet the desiderata set out in the early part of this paper? We suggest they can be put under the broad category of *social emancipation*. This would include poverty alleviation, rural development, African renaissance, multi-lingualism, economic development, and the eradication of illiteracy and HIV/AIDS. Let us briefly consider these.

### Poverty alleviation

Due to the apartheid policy of separate development, HBUs are geographically located in the former homelands, on the periphery of cities, and in the townships. Extreme poverty afflicts rural, semi-urban and urban black communities. This results in the alienation of vast sections of the population. Given the strategic location of the HBUs, they are in a better position than the historically white universities to respond to the government's challenge of poverty alleviation and job creation by becoming centres of excellence in teaching, research and community service in, for instance, developmental studies and small business skills. This would assist us as a nation in attaining social emancipation. Another outcome would be that young Africans would have the opportunity to become agents of transformation and contribute to the strengthening of community support systems.

### Rural development

Vilikazi (2000) argues that since the majority of South Africans live in rural and semi-rural areas, the starting point of our development strategy should be the rural areas and not the city. He suggests that 'every major crisis in our cities has its roots in the unbearable poverty of rural areas'. It is this 'crisis of poverty that forces millions of Africans to move to the towns and cities'. Yet we are very well aware that

there is a sad lack of infrastructure by way of housing, schools, hospitals, and so on, in the urban areas. Thus the crisis of poverty is compounded. Rural universities like Venda, Fort Hare and Transkei, can rise to meet the challenge of agricultural and rural development and so, in partnership with the communities they serve, contribute to the social and economic empowerment of rural people.

### **African renaissance**

All South African universities, but in particular the HBUs, can make a meaningful contribution to the idea of the 'African renaissance'. There can be no renaissance without the revival of the cultural heritage of the African majority. Furthermore, where culture and identity are not clearly defined and articulated, or are skewed, societal tensions increase, and national reconciliation and success are stunted (Makgoba, 1998: 42). Hence there is a need to communicate as well as celebrate African culture, African traditions, and African civilisations. This is a necessary condition for an African renaissance.

### **Economic development**

It goes without saying that there can be no African renaissance that does not address economic development and its sustainability by African people. The South African economy remains largely in the hands of the minority white population. A further challenge facing our higher education institutions is to participate in the de-racialising of the economy. We need to ensure that ownership and management of the economy increasingly reflect the demographics of our society. By refocusing our programmes and widening access to black students, HBUs can make a meaningful contribution to economic development and black economic empowerment in particular. We need to encourage more African students to participate in economic-related disciplines, the natural sciences and in technology. A range of programmes should be developed to meet this need.

### **Multi-lingualism**

Another issue that needs to be addressed under the broad umbrella of social emancipation is that of multi-lingualism. We have 11 official languages, yet English and Afrikaans continue to dominate the public arena. And nowhere is this more obvious than in education. We have an educational system that forces African children, at an early age, to learn in a language that is not their mother tongue (most often English). This places the African child at a severe disadvantage, especially when

compared to his or her counterparts elsewhere in the world, where the language used in the classroom is the mother tongue. We do not find countries such as Germany, Sweden, France, China, Russia, or Japan, developing themselves and their economies in a foreign language. Let us consider the nature of the disadvantage.

If a foreign or second language is used, the child's education is disconnected from his or her cultural and social life in the language community outside of the school. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to suggest that the underlying message that is given to the African child is that the non-mother tongue language is the important language and their own language is used only as a means to access the former. The latter is seen as a means to an end and, as such, need not be given the same respect as the former.

The point is that by insisting that English be the medium of instruction at an early age, the hegemony of this aspect of Western culture remains. In this way, the skewed nature of education in South Africa remains as it was during the apartheid era. Unless the government's 'Language in Education' policy (Department of Education, 1997: 1) is implemented in which 'the underlying principle is to maintain home language(s) while providing access to, and the effective acquisition of, additional languages', the African child will continue to grow up in an alienating and disempowering environment.

HBU's are well equipped to assist the government in language policy implementation. They also have the human resources to assist the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB) in 'creating the conditions for the development and equal use ... of, in particular, the indigenous languages.' Furthermore, the HBU's are well placed to develop programmes and engage in research initiatives, which will assist the government in translating the fine statements in the Constitution about the equality of African languages into a reality.

### Illiteracy

A further challenge that faces South Africa is its enormously high rate of illiteracy. One consequence is that the majority of South Africans are becoming increasingly alienated from the economic, political and educational life of the country. This makes the entrenchment of a vibrant democracy difficult, if not impossible, to attain, and leaves the notion of 'active citizenship' empty of content. Unless appropriate interventions are made, the previously disadvantaged will remain disadvantaged. Again, universities need to address this problem. They can respond to the problem of illiteracy and make the notion of 'lifelong learning' a reality.

## HIV/AIDS

Lastly, and most importantly, all South African higher education institutions need to take their place in the forefront of the battle against HIV/AIDS. The frighteningly high rates of infection of HIV, which lead to the development of full-blown AIDS (in the absence of medical intervention), threaten not just the economic development of the country, but also the social fabric of society. Our universities need to exert leadership through the development of integrated teaching, research and community service programmes to address the pandemic.

The above are some of the areas in which South African universities can make an important contribution to meeting national priorities and regional objectives. As we have seen, these have implications for the curriculum. We need a curriculum that is responsive to the current policy environment as well as to the socio-economic challenges that face the country. Integral to the curriculum should be the development of the students' critical thinking skills, as well as the other necessary skills, that will equip them for the world of work. We also need a curriculum that assists our students to become socially responsible citizens.

Furthermore, we need a curriculum that will produce graduates who are able to assume intellectual and moral leadership within the country. To be an intellectual leader requires that one has the ability to reason critically but passionately, and that one has integrity and intellectual independence – not to look for reward for one's engagement with the burning issues of the day. Indeed, one must be able to challenge the dogmas of the day without concern for one's own wellbeing.

But most importantly, to have truly South African universities we need to ensure that the African student and his or her experiences are placed at the centre of the curriculum. The programmes outlined above should not be studied from 'the outside', so to speak, but rather 'should be reflective and be informed by the culture, experiences, aspirations of the [African] majority' (Seepe, 1998: 64). It is only when we have a deep understanding of our experiences that we are able to conquer knowledge and concepts that are not part of that experience. Given these desiderata, we will conclude this section with a set of questions that can be used as a template in constructing and evaluating relevant curricula offerings (Vista University, 2001):

- ▀ Is the curriculum design, and are the materials, relevant and culturally responsive?
- ▀ Does our approach encourage the development, promotion and use of indigenous knowledge systems?

- ▶ Do the programmes integrate teaching, research and community service?
- ▶ Is the curriculum relevant in that it addresses national objectives and societal needs?
- ▶ Does the curriculum provide the students with the knowledge skills and values required for cultural, societal and economic development?

## Conclusion

In this paper we have noted three broad sets of challenges currently facing South African universities. We have considered two of them. We have seen that if these challenges are to be successfully met, the traditional idea of a university has to be modified, as has happened elsewhere in the world. This does not mean that the core functions of the university will change; rather it means that they have to be reconceptualised in the light of these challenges. Furthermore, we have suggested that South African universities need to be sensitive to the developmental agenda of government and make a contribution to meeting the social and economic aspirations of the African people in particular. But there is more to the matter than this. We have seen that it is also necessary to examine the notion of a university within a South African context. Universities need to locate themselves firmly within African culture and value systems. More particularly, to meet these challenges successfully, universities first need to decide on their institutional niche. Secondly, they need to develop and offer appropriate educational programmes along the lines sketched above. Thirdly, they need to ensure that the African experience is at the core of the curricula. If the above are met, we will have an 'equitable, sustainable and productive higher education system that will be of high quality and contribute effectively and efficiently to the human resource, skills, knowledge and research needs of the country' (Department of Education, 2001).

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