

## Chapter Five

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# *Where Has My Department Gone? Curriculum Transformation and Academic Restructuring*

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*Transforming the curriculum ... involves more than subtracting some books and adding others ... It is serious business. It attacks received wisdom, wrenches internalized values, and contests assumptions held so deeply that to challenge them feels as if one is fighting nature.*

Ellen Friedman (Friedman, 1996: 2)

*If the faculty do not change, the curriculum does not change. Professors cannot teach what they do not know.*

Caryn Musil (Musil, 2000: 90)

## Introduction

As recently as five years ago, the average South African university would organise its academic structures around discipline-based departments in tightly confined faculties. Today the situation reflects an array of pluralistic institutional arrangements from a maintenance of discipline-based departments to a loose configuration of inter- and trans-disciplinary programmes in and across faculties. Faculties are themselves reconfigured and merged (in some cases renamed) to reflect complex academic relations due to their much more diverse composition.

If one assumes that academic restructuring follows or reflects altered academic strategies, the question arises as to what informed and shaped these strategies? And what effect did this have on thinking about curricula? This paper will focus on the micro-level of departmental restructuring and so-called programme-based curricula.

I wish to argue that at least four inter-related factors led the grassroots academic transformation of South African universities, as reflected in continuing restructuring of the traditional academic landscape. Thereafter I shall list and discuss four impediments on the way to restructuring, and note two major concerns with the present attempts at curricular reform. I then conclude with a short note on the institutional processes involved in such transformation efforts.

## Four Shaping Influences Behind Academic Restructuring

### An awareness of the historical and epistemic contingency of disciplines

Attempts to 'organise' knowledge date back to Greek antiquity: Plato distinguished *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, dialectic) and *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music), and Aristotle notes three *scientiae*, namely theology, law and medicine. In the middle ages the *artes serviles* or *artes mechanicae* were opposed to *artes liberales*. As we have come to know them from modern universities in Germany and the USA, the various disciplines are a fairly late creation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, according to Foucault (1966), a reflection of the need for an academic division of labour.

In the so-called *Postivismusstreit* of the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a broad distinction was made between 'hard' and 'soft' sciences. Disciplines in the latter aim at *verstehen* (qualitative understanding, value orientation) and the former focus on *erklären* (quantitative explanation, factual orientation). The differentiation between the humanities and sciences (still reflected in subsidy formulae today!) may be construed as an attempt by Wilhelm Dilthey (1957), amongst others, to create cultural and epistemological space for the 'humanities' in the light of spectacular progress in the sciences, especially physics.

The strength and unassailable image of the disciplines were derived from the fact that they were both epistemic and social constructs: epistemic because the discipline became a rubric to identify and differentiate '... distinct bodies of knowledge and modes of inquiry' (Du Toit, 2000: 1); social constructs, because disciplines were externalised in administrative organisational forms, such as departments, which came '... to represent something like the natural and inevitable order of the intellectual landscape and academic work' (ibid.: 2).

Two important shifts which blurred both the strict disciplinary boundaries and the twofold distinction between hard and soft sciences occurred in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. First, interventions in the philosophy of science debates by Karl

Popper (1968) and especially Thomas Kuhn (1970), clarified the fundamental historical nature and paradigm-dependence of all sciences. Progress in science is not necessarily an upward linear movement, but periods of 'normal science' are followed by paradigm switches that are prompted by more than just empirical or quantitative evidence. Kuhn goes so far to speak of a conversion or a Gestalt-switch to a new paradigm based on trust in the superior problem-solving abilities of such a paradigm.

Secondly, in the complex globalised world emerging from late industrial capitalism and the information and communication revolution, a narrow disciplinary approach quickly emerged as insufficient to grasp the multiplicity of skills required in problem solving.

Until the recent past development of all kinds ... was conceived of (and experienced as) linear; today, it is multi-linear and multi-dimensional ... Knowledge is hermeneutic, its subjects and objects increasingly jumbled. The result is much greater levels of complexity which even the most powerful computational techniques, and the most creative theories of chaos, struggle to reduce to order. (Scott, 1997: 33).

The old dichotomy of facts and values is also becoming obsolete: 'Thus, law has to take into account cultural specifics, engineering is faced with ecological concerns, and the supposedly factual site of economics is deeply grounded not in explanatory but interpretative systems' (Nethersole, 1992: 14).

The cumulative effect is an acute awareness of both the historical and epistemological relativity of disciplines and therefore a realisation that there is no necessary relation between the discipline and its traditional organisational structure.

### A shift in the modes of knowledge

There is no need to repeat in detail the arguments for a distinction between Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge as advanced by Michael Gibbons and others in *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies* (1994). The focus of this chapter is on academic structures as organisational forms of knowledge. What are the implications of Mode 2 knowledge in this regard? If one follows the arguments of Gibbons et al. (1994), Scott's summary (Scott, 1997: 35–36) and Andre Kraak's discussion (Kraak, 1997: 60; 66–67), the following points emerge:

- ▀ As Mode 2 knowledge is generated within the context of application, it supersedes the idea of 'applied science' and the anachronistic distinction between pure and applied science to constitute a molecular instead of linear production process. Clearly, this can only take place beyond the constraints of

disciplinary departmental structures, as Mode 2 is eclectic and, in terms of social organisation, inter-penetrated rather than autonomous.

- As Mode 2 knowledge is trans-disciplinary and may be construed as ‘problem solving on the move’, both theories and solutions are offered in real-world contexts, yielding solutions and new knowledge without any necessary recourse to standard academic disciplines housed in their traditional organisational forms.
- As Mode 2 knowledge is produced on diverse sites beyond the university and ‘internet-ed together’ (Scott, 1997: 36), both the cognitive and organisational terms of knowledge production change to become heterogeneous and trans-institutional.
- As Mode 2 knowledge is accountable to society at large and the markets that utilise knowledge, ‘the notion of accountability is “inside” the research design ... shaping the epistemological and methodological processes for producing “good” science’ (Scott, 1997: 36) which is no longer exclusively determined within the confines of academia.
- As Mode 2 knowledge strives to be quality science, peer reviews within disciplinary communities are superseded by professional, political and economic co-judgement on the merit of problem formulation and solutions offered.

Obviously one does not have to accept the ‘Modes-analysis’ uncritically, nor should South Africans and others from the developing world transfer its findings ‘directly’ to our context. The point, however, is that certain trends emerge, and these have a fundamental impact on the social organisation of our knowledge and thus on its structuring within – and beyond – the university. In place of single discipline departments in neatly defined faculties, trans-disciplinary programmes and schools emerge that are inter-penetrated by ‘outsiders’ via trans-institutional projects (for example) run by co-owned patented consultancies.

I am not sure where all this will lead, but the emergent hybrid knowledge structures pose interesting challenges to the continued privileging of disciplinary knowledge (see Kraak, 1997: 69).

### Responsiveness as a requirement of the new policy framework

Curricula are not value-free or ideologically neutral constructions. In fact, ‘curricula are the most tangible codification of the objectives a society wants to reach through its education system, and of the skills and values it wishes to instil in future generations’ (Weiler quoted in Lockett, 1998: 1). In other words, a curriculum is ‘the

offering of socially valued knowledge, skills and attitudes made available to students during the time they are at school, college and university' (Bell quoted in Luckett, 1998: 1).

It is therefore to be expected that educational policy driven by those wielding political power is a hotly contested field of values and objectives in any society. This is even more so in a society like SA that only recently made the transition to a full democracy. An intense programme of educational policy review was embarked upon, which resulted (for higher education, at least) in crucial documents like the report of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) of 1996, *White Paper 3 on Higher Education* (1997), the *Higher Education Act* (1997) and the *National Plan for Higher Education* (2001) – all preceded by the SAQA Act of 1995.

Although the NCHE report focused on broad policy guidelines and did not attempt to make specific recommendations on the micro-level of curriculum content (see NCHE, 1997: 110–111), I wish to point out that two recommendations did have a noteworthy effect on curricula and the social organisation of knowledge. The first of these was the requirement of responsiveness, and second, the shift to a programme-based approach to higher education qualifications.

The issue of responsiveness arises from both the attempt to redress the past and to build the future. Thus, on the one hand, the report states: 'There is inadequate consideration of and response to the needs of the South African context while the problems of the broader African context are almost neglected' (70). On the other hand, the three central features of the new framework are increased participation, increased partnerships and greater responsiveness (see NCHE, 1997: 76-80).

What is of particular significance is how the report argues for greater responsiveness directly in line with the 'Modes of knowledge' debate:

On an epistemological level, *increased responsiveness entails a shift away from closed knowledge systems controlled and managed only by canonical norms of traditional disciplines and by collegially recognised authority, to more open systems which are dynamically interactive with broader social interests, 'consumer' or 'client' demand and outside processes of knowledge generation* (NCHE, 1997: 79, my emphasis). (See also the argument against 'academic insularity' exactly in the context of responsiveness on page 70.)

Secondly, it is clear that this dynamic interaction between university and society cannot be realised through traditional institutional arrangements. The concept of 'learning programmes' is consequently introduced as an instrument through which institutional restructuring is accomplished (Third White Paper on Higher Education 2.2; 2.19) and responsiveness enhanced:

The Ministry's vision is of a higher education system that '... meets *through well-planned and co-ordinated teaching and learning programmes*, the high-skilled employment needs presented by a growing economy aspiring to global competitiveness' (Third White Paper on Higher Education 1.12, my emphasis). And these programmes, however contradictorily described (see Botha, 1997; Ensor, 1998; 2002), were seen from the beginning as multi- and trans-disciplinary vehicles to address the contextual problems of South Africa and our region (see Naudé, 1998).

### Financial imperatives linked to the commodification of knowledge

It might be seen by some as cynical to observe that academic restructuring was not motivated solely by philosophical and educational considerations, but was a response to (internal) financial realities and the (external) marketisation of higher education.

Concerning the latter, one could state that universities have always in one way or another responded to the institutions at the centre of power in Western society. In the middle ages, knowledge had a strong ecclesiastical orientation, while in the modern era it has a secular-social orientation. The powerful combination of the communication revolution and a globalised economy, has placed the financial markets in the centre not only of the West, but of the world. All other activities occur in relation to this centre and are determined by it – including the production of knowledge and its subsequent commodification.

At the same time, the ideal of massification in higher education has led to a decline, in real terms, of government spending on universities (for figures relating to the Commonwealth, see Lund 1999: 3–5). Helen Lund states openly that '... prospects of a brighter future beyond the millennium will increasingly depend on their [i.e. universities'] ability to do two things: to raise income from sources other than government grants and core student fees; and to manage their operations with maximum efficiency as to make the best use of scant financial and other resources' (1999: 1).

Governments openly encourage entrepreneurial activities and as universities' reasons for existing have to do with knowledge creation and dissemination, the only route is to exploit knowledge for financial gain. This is done in a variety of ways – including a drive for professionalisation and attractive curriculum designs marketed as 'hands-on and career oriented' with names that avoid a disciplinary focus at all costs. (Who would want to study an ordinary BA if you could enrol for Value and Policy Studies? And why market Anthropology and Geography if they

could form Development Studies, or Social Work if you could rename it Social Development Professions, and so on?)

‘Today’s university,’ writes Dennis Tsichritz (1999: 93), ‘is at a turning point, and turn it must. The time has come to recognise that education is a business and students are the customers.’ The mushrooming of private higher education providers in and from outside SA, and the involvement of institutions that previously offered only contact tuition, in so-called distance delivery, through the use of new technologies, are signs that we have already turned the corner. Needless to say, the curriculum and funding implications are grave.

## Four Impediments in the Way of Academic Restructuring

It has been suggested that to transform academic structures is akin to shifting a cemetery (see Chapter One). Why is it so difficult to embark on and successfully conclude such restructuring? The answer lies for the most part in the human factor. The reasons are manifold. I list only four:

- 1 Disciplines and their concomitant structural form, the department, assume far more than mere epistemic or social spaces – they are existentially shrouded in ontological terms, a *Heimat* without which I feel *unheimlich*. And precisely because they function at the level of social psychology, feelings of anxiety and resentment – concealed under rational defences – may become powerful impediments to change.
- 2 Academic restructuring, as sketched above, is also a power struggle. Not unlike other species, *homo academicus* is highly territorial. And with disciplinary territory comes power, privilege, career advancement and payment as Head of Department. ‘Certainly under Mode 2 conditions, the power of relatively autonomous and notionally disinterested, scientific communities governed by professional norm is reduced, and the power of “markets” (and those who dominate them, whether in the political or market arenas) is increased’ (Scott, 1997: 37).

Apart from this structural dimension of power, there stands a more integrative dimension, i.e. the realisation that academic development is not only meant for first years from disadvantaged backgrounds, but also for professors who need re-orientation and even further training. ‘If the faculty do not change, the curriculum does not change. Professors cannot teach what they do not know’ (Musil, 2000: 90). And this is tough to explain to people with years of advanced studies behind them and a certain status amongst disciplinary peers.

- 3 There is also an ideological point to be made: traditional canons of established disciplines represent the social construction of dominant knowledge forms. The positive notion of ‘custodians of knowledge-traditions’ has an inverted (negative) exclusionary function. As Adrienne Rich remarks in *The Feminist Classroom* (1994): ‘When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing’ (quoted by Musil, 2000: 91).

This is amply illustrated by social movements for cognitive justice which resent the ‘museumisation’ of indigenous or local knowledge (Visvanathan, 1999: 1–2). Civil rights movements, minority voices, and those promoting feminist thought were eventually successful in establishing regional knowledge forms of an inter- or trans-disciplinary nature, challenging the very social basis of disciplinary knowledge production. In this regard the discussion by Musil (2000: 94ff) of ethnic and women’s studies in the USA is instructive. Cloete and Muller conclude that the local-global divide is also not helpful when identity formation in the global world is simultaneously local and cosmopolitan (1998: 541; also Muller, 1997: 192–195).

- 4 There is an interesting interpretation of ‘academic freedom’ that equates the latter with ‘disciplinary autonomy’. No academic would deny the fundamental right to pursue the truth unconstrained and without fear of reprisal, but many find it difficult to grasp that science has become too pervasive to be the exclusive property of discipline-based scientists.

Trans-institutional sites of knowledge production imply a democratisation of curriculum reform. And it is this pluralistic notion of academic freedom that is sometimes resisted in the name of disciplinary autonomy. The University of Cape Town debate on Africanisation (see Breier, 1999: 41ff), and the constant debates in the University of Port Elizabeth senate about who ‘owns’ management courses, are practical examples in this regard. Blake points to the postmodern subversion of the modern university which, *inter alia*, means a disengagement of academic authority and disciplinary autonomy because academics have a much wider obligation than merely to themselves and the canons of their traditions (Blake, 1997: 164; Naudé, 1998: 7).

Let us now turn to two concerns regarding present attempts at curriculum reform at some South African universities.

## Two Concerns Regarding Curriculum Transformation

South African efforts at curriculum reform and concomitant restructuring – from departments, to faculties, to the rationalising or merging of institutions – are still very much in flux. My focus is on the level of departments and faculties where some restructuring has been implemented over the last four years. A number of concerns are being raised which we need to consider as we try to navigate our way into the future. For the sake of brevity, I highlight only two.

### Vocational rhetoric and the pressure to professionalise

The question of what skills are relevant for the knowledge economy is a crucial one for curriculum reform. The answer, one would think, lies in consulting prospective employers. Cloete and Bunting note, however, that: ‘There are two regularities in employer-talk: one is that employers are typically pessimistic about higher education’s capacity to produce what they need, and the other is that they extrapolate curricular prescriptions from their current preoccupations’ (1999: 46). This results in an emphasis on work-related skills linked to specialised competencies.

Two problems arise: in a knowledge economy the skills base constantly shifts, so that learners with a narrow skills base are quickly ‘left behind’. Secondly, where undergraduate degrees are under immense pressure to professionalise, concretely acquired skills are without the base of a broad recontextualising competency. Vocational rhetoric should be questioned from the key quality perspective: what is the cognitive demand of the programme? In other words: what generic knowledge *reconfiguration competencies* are expressly embedded in the curriculum? (See Cloete & Bunting, 1999: 47).

### Continuation of Mode 1-type knowledge?

A key question is whether the Gibbons or Scott thesis about the shift to Mode 2 knowledge production somehow assumes the continuation of Mode 1? The answer is probably yes and no: yes, because pockets of specialised ‘disciplinary’ knowledge will be required even in a problem-based learning process, and no, because both the access to, and production of, this knowledge need no longer be ‘discipline-based’. Two examples illustrate this point.

First, if medical schools teach students repertoires of problem solving, learners will have to acquire knowledge of mathematics, physics and biochemistry, albeit from a completely different angle and in a different social structure than if they had

begun with ‘pure’ introductions to these as stand alone disciplines. Secondly, in applied ethics (bio-ethics, business ethics, media ethics, ecological ethics, etc.) one introduces philosophical theories (eg. deontology, consequentialism, virtue or obligation ethics, etc.), not from a traditional philosophical disciplinary base (through the study of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, or Mill), but through exploring justification procedures derived from real or imagined case studies.

This approach is obviously suited to regional knowledge forms<sup>1</sup> and professional training. It is not applicable, however, to all types of programmes, especially not to those aimed at acquiring considerable depth in a specialised discipline. Smaller universities find it very hard to maintain all disciplines at all levels from under- to post-graduate, making regional planning (in the geographical rather than the epistemological sense) quite crucial. For more comprehensive universities, the obligation remains to provide future discipline experts, although it does not necessarily follow that the latter should be housed in a departmental structure.

One could assume that a mixed mode of academic structures – from disciplines to post-disciplinary forms – will for some time remain a hallmark of a higher education system coming to grips with curricular reform and its implications.

## Conclusion

Curriculum reform should not be taken lightly – neither intellectually, nor institutionally. Naivety concerning the latter must be strongly guarded against. The financial and administrative capacities of a specific institution should be carefully assessed before radical reform is embarked upon. Programme re-design requires quite extensive staff development efforts, flexible ‘curriculum design leave’, and a fairly sophisticated human resource and administrative system. It affects the whole set-up of the university from marketing and admissions to calendar rules and qualification structures.

At the very least, curriculum transformation is at the heart of higher education institutional reform and should in fact guide such transformation. How much of that will be realised in the new spate of take-overs and mergers, remains to be seen.

## Endnote

- 1 Joe Muller provides the following useful description of how regional knowledge forms evolve: ‘The traditional knowledge form is the discipline (both for research as well as for teaching purposes), and disciplines often grow towards each other. At a given point, although not yet fixed together, they become regionalised (a region of previous singulars) ...’ (Muller, 2001).

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## *Section Two*

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# *Institutional Case Studies*