

## Chapter Eight

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# *From Campus by the Sea to University for All: A Review of Curriculum Transformation at the University of Port Elizabeth*

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### Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to set curriculum transformation at the University of Port Elizabeth (UPE) in the context of the wider transformation agenda at this university adopted since the early 1990s.

For reasons that will become apparent, UPE has been seen as one of the more interesting South African case studies of a traditional white university transforming to become a more responsive, inclusive institution. A number of studies ranging from historical analyses (see Rautenbach, 1995; Bowker, 1997<sup>1</sup>), to case reviews (see Brand, 2000; CHET, 2000; Ensor, 2001, 2002; Havenga, 1995; Kirsten, 1995; Snyders, 2001) and unpublished reports (see Hattle, 1997; Naudé, 1997), are evidence of the interest in developments at UPE over the last decade.

Like all interpretations, the very brief overview that follows is a social (re) construction of events, both restricted and enhanced by presuppositions inherent to an ‘insider’ or ‘participant’ view. Again, like all interpretations, it is therefore provisional, and open to contestation and further debate. In the belief that the ‘universal’ is in the ‘local’ and vice versa, a few general conclusions about curriculum transformation are drawn towards the end.

If the narrative below – outlined in consequential stages – creates the impression of easy, flowing, successive developments, it needs to be corrected from the outset:

other than religious institutions, universities are probably the most difficult to transform. This stems both from the nature of the institution as well as the specific period of our country's history with its encompassing social transformation in every sphere of life. Let it be clear: *transformation requires a super-human commitment and resilience, as well as an understanding that all stages of the process are always present in different forms and with different levels of urgency.*<sup>2</sup> *It is a spiral of increasing complexity, and not a step-like succession of completed stages.*

## First Stage: Political Transformation Toward Legitimacy and Participation

The establishment of UPE by 1965<sup>3</sup> must be judged in the broader historical context of South African politics at the time. Two features immediately spring to mind:

On the one hand, white Afrikaner nationalism reached one of its ultimate goals emanating from the long struggle against British colonial rule, namely the establishment of a Republic in 1961 (under HF Verwoerd's leadership). White politics at that stage was driven chiefly by an English liberal versus Afrikaner nationalist division. The founding of UPE was motivated by a number of factors outlined in Rautenbach, but it can be convincingly construed that the dominant discourse was provided by the ideological search for the realisation of a broad white coalition, and narrower Afrikaner ideals.

This is also the context in which the unique bilingual character of UPE must be assessed. Bilingualism was a compromise arrived at for practical purposes (there were not enough Afrikaans speaking students to justify establishing a new university), but it also emanated from an ideological concern advanced to convince the minister, Senator Jan de Klerk that: 'If we are going to make a success of this Republic, we must bring the two White races together' (Immelman as quoted by Rautenbach, 1995: 101). De Klerk (father of FW de Klerk), confirmed the cabinet decision in overt political terms: 'Since the honourable Dr HF Verwoerd has repeatedly called for co-operation between English and Afrikaans speakers – co-operation that may no longer be left undone if our Western white civilisation is to remain here at the southern tip of Africa – your city, through the establishment of a dual-medium university, now gets the unique opportunity to demonstrate that such co-operation is indeed possible'<sup>4</sup> (my translation of De Klerk in Rautenbach, 1995: 177).

It is difficult to prove, but this ideological act of nation-building, might have had the unintended consequence of sowing the seeds for a more diverse and open

community. 'The paradox was that in the process of trying to forge white unity, UPE's management had initially created the space for a group of white dissidents, who then undermined the ideology and contributed significantly to the demise both of the founding vision and of its proponents' (CHET, 2000: 15).

On the other hand, the black liberation struggle against white domination moved into a dramatic phase with widespread black opposition to the establishment of a republic,<sup>5</sup> with events at Sharpeville on 21 March in 1960, and with the World Council of Churches Cottesloe Conference at Wits in 1961.

Although Port Elizabeth and the Eastern Cape were core sites for the black liberation struggle, the university – like the rest of the white population – remained largely closed off from that struggle until the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Typical of an academic community, two seminal conferences laid the foundation for a serious strategic re-think of the university: *The Challenge of Change in South Africa* (February, 1990) as part of the university's 25th anniversary, and the more overt political conference organised in collaboration with the National Education Co-ordinating Committee (NECC), namely *Tertiary Education and Change in South Africa* (April, 1992).

The details of events that followed are interesting and well documented, and need not be repeated here (see Bowker, 1997<sup>6</sup>; CHET, 2000; Hattle, 1997<sup>7</sup>). The events since 2 February 1990 and the national elections of 27 April 1994 inevitably brought the question of legitimacy to the fore. Through its own innovative approach of 'negotiated transformation' that succeeded in setting up an acceptable structure for negotiation<sup>8</sup> alongside Senate and Council without jeopardising the latter's decision-making power, UPE was able to elect a legitimate vice-chancellor (in October 1993), and gradually set in place equally legitimate governance structures from 1994 onward. For the first time the university could call itself 'democratic' in the sense of both legitimacy and stakeholder participation, and this created the necessary framework for the important ensuing transformation agenda.<sup>9</sup>

## Second Stage: Academic Transformation Towards Access and Responsiveness

The strategic planning processes that started as early as 1987, gained momentum and facilitated the re-orientation of UPE from an inward-looking to an overtly development-oriented institution. This coincided with the ANC government's Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP), and had an immediate effect on

issues of access for previously disadvantaged learners, and on responsiveness to the socio-economic conditions of the new South Africa.

By 1996 the mission<sup>10</sup> clearly stated that the university ‘...is to provide tertiary education at the highest level for the community, with *admission on an equitable basis taking into account existing educational inequalities*. All students, irrespective of creed, race or sex, are afforded the opportunity of developing themselves to their full intellectual and personal potential’ (Hattle, 1997: 30, my emphasis). This had a direct bearing on the access policies of the mainly white university and subsequently led to the growth of African contact headcount enrolments from 21 per cent of the total in 1995 to 40 per cent four years later.

This is significant in itself. A more complex and fundamental issue is whether this type of ‘access-transformation’ has any effect on the curriculum. UPE understood the issue. It clearly articulates the view that to realise its mission, the university must strive ‘...to generate and disseminate knowledge relevant to community needs’ and ‘to achieve excellence in research’ (Hattle, 1997: 30).

The question of access was addressed in the following ways:

- The design of a university practice course (a mixture of academic and life-skills to support under-prepared learners) started in the Faculty of Arts in 1996 (see Snyders, 2001). It has since expanded with tailor-made curricula offerings into five of the six faculties as credit-bearing first year modules. The fact that research on the effectiveness of this course was conducted concurrently with its actual implementation, ensured quality feed-back loops with constant improvements. The core of appropriately trained and highly dedicated staff as well as the publication of the student and facilitator handbooks, contributed to the success of this venture which has often been derided by mainstream academics who either expect miracles or do not appreciate the development work required by broadening admissions.
- An elaborate ‘placement project’ was embarked on to redesign the entrance evaluation of all prospective learners so as to ensure rational ‘placement’ and ‘streaming’ of students with potential, but who might be at risk if admitted directly into full degree programmes. This project was completed and since 2000, it has been in its first implementation phase. There is national and international interest in its ‘prediction validity’ as it addresses an issue of great importance to all higher education institutions operating in societies with uneven secondary education provision.
- A major curriculum initiative that augments the two developments above, is UPEAP (UPE Advancement Programme, 1999). It focuses on limited modules

in Science, Commerce, Language and Social Science and has had a major impact on access to the BSc degree. It was, and is, a major financial commitment by the university to open opportunities for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, as the present subsidy formula does not make provision for non-credit bearing academic support courses.

The mission referred to above also mentions the issue of responsiveness, although in the more limited sense of relevance. The university is ‘...to generate and disseminate knowledge relevant to the community’. If read in conjunction with the first paragraph on admission, this ‘community-speak’ is a clear (although not exclusive) reference to previously disadvantaged communities. This was driven by national policy initiatives emanating from the 1994 change in government, of which the NCHE report (1995) and ensuing *White Paper on Higher Education* (1997) and *Higher Education Act* (1997) are the most important.<sup>11</sup>

A number of curriculum and delivery initiatives were undertaken to give effect to the new policy directives:

- A huge modularisation project was approved by Senate in 1998 for implementation as of January 1999. Apart from educational arguments (some heavily contested), the modularisation idea was strongly motivated on the basis of its structural responsiveness to the realities of student enrolment patterns. UPE realised that the old pattern of ‘year cohorts’ was overtaken by a much more flexible learning pattern suited to learners’ financial constraints and the practicalities of the labour market.
- The Department of Education’s idea of restructuring the institutional landscape of HE on the basis of a (vaguely defined) programme approach (see Botha, 1997), presented the opportunity to embark on a major curriculum revision exercise. This was reinforced by the first phase of SAQA registration that required all curricula to be written in outcomes education format, based on previously agreed competencies. Suffice it to say that the SAQA process was, for most faculties, a purely technical one, and that the programme idea was implemented only in a limited fashion in the faculties of Arts and Health Sciences where some innovative inter-disciplinary under- and post-graduate qualifications were introduced with significant ‘responsive’ success.
- Although varied in its origin and motivation, a huge ‘silent’ academic transformation took place at UPE through its response to urgent teacher upgrading needs via distance education and development of so-called ‘regional’ sites far beyond its own boundaries. This changed the ‘enrolment profile’ of the university almost overnight (when these students are included in the overall

total, UPE had a 79 per cent black enrolment in 1999). Despite legitimate questions about quality and complications that arose with private partnerships (which led to a moratorium by the Minister), there can be little doubt that UPE's distance education outreach was in line with its mission and policy to address a very direct need for teacher upgrading. The incorporation of traditional colleges of education into universities and technikons keeps this issue firmly on the curriculum agenda.

Although UPE was quick to respond to the new policy environment, there are two areas in which it was less than successful.

First, despite setting up an Academic Planning Committee in 1998 (which, for the most part, drowned in pools of policy documents), UPE never seized the opportunity to engage in the curriculum debate with sufficient breadth of depth. Curriculum debates remained within the smaller academic units or at faculty level, but rarely moved beyond, and equally rarely confronted fundamental questions such as the following: What epistemic values inform our debates about curricula? What does Africanisation or a development-driven curriculum entail for all faculties (and not only for the Social Sciences)? How do globalisation and the emerging knowledge society affect academic planning?

Second, the achievement of excellence in research – so vital to the reform of curricula – remains an ideal with only pockets of success. It is difficult to assess why UPE keeps hovering at the bottom rank of historically advantaged institutions in this regard (with about 100 publication units per annum at an average of 0.35 per senior lecturer). Could it be staff-student ratios? A more teaching-oriented staff? Lack of incentives? Intellectual in-breeding over the years? Or, by 2000, pure transformation exhaustion?

What is clear, though, is that UPE did capitalise on its political legitimacy to address – with a fair measure of success – the issue of access and concomitant policy requirement of greater responsiveness.

### **Third Stage: Financial Transformation towards Efficiency and Sustainability**

UPE lost its financial innocence with the introduction of a cost model in 1996. For the first time the actual income-expenditure tables and flow of money were transparently reflected. (We knew for the first time how much of the budget was top-sliced and what our research subsidy actually amounted to!)

The positive effects were greater insight into financial affairs and therefore greater ability to steer different units in a more efficient way. The role played by Council in its directive that it would only accept a balanced budget that made provision for all liabilities (medical aid, pension fund, student debt, and introduction of new state subsidy), is noteworthy. The present overhaul of UPE's financial and management information systems (long overdue), will undoubtedly increase the university's financial efficiency and sustainability over the next few years.

The negative effects were the cost model's historical orientation that yielded outdated information and therefore delayed response times for taking corrective action where necessary. It created an atmosphere of full-time equivalent (FTE)-protection and 'credit-creep' amongst staff, programmes and faculties, precisely at a time when creative and unfettered curriculum co-operation amongst disciplines and faculties was in fact required. Lastly, it also strengthened the erroneous belief upheld by some that 'financially viable' is equal to 'intellectually sound'.

There can be no doubt that curriculum transformation at UPE was not merely prompted by 'noble' political, policy and academic considerations: the financial imperatives of dwindling student numbers in certain fields of study in Music, Humanities, and Social Sciences, forced the Arts faculty, for example, to literally reinvent its undergraduate curricula in a period of six months (July to December 1998) and its post-graduate programmes over the next 12 months.<sup>12</sup> For an academic, it is difficult to admit that the 'noble' factors might not in themselves have been sufficient drivers of the process (see Ensor's remarks (2002: 283) about a similar situation at UCT). Perhaps the question is not how to distinguish between 'noble' and 'ignoble', but rather how to keep the values debate alive when confronted with forms of isolated free market thinking.<sup>13</sup>

The rapid marketisation or commodification of higher education also directly affected UPE in the form of an almost chaotic plurality of offerings by private education companies in Port Elizabeth and various forms of distance learning offered by contact institutions based in SA and abroad. Instead of awaiting an expected government intervention (which came with a limited moratorium period) or merely relying on historical enrolment patterns, UPE aggressively entered both distance and international education.<sup>14</sup> The first initiative led to a considerable increase in government subsidy income, whereas the second forms a significant part of the so-called third income stream.

There are some who construe the drive towards efficiency and marketisation at UPE and in most traditionally advantaged higher education institutions (Rand Afrikaans University and Pretoria, for example), as taking its cue from the ANC's

own shift from RDP (reconstruction and development) to GEAR (growth understood in capitalist terms). Political tension in the tripartite alliance over privatisation, the Reserve Bank's austere inflation targets, and New Partnership for African Development (Nepad) insistence on both political and economic models derived from the industrialised West, may be seen as a triumph for free market philosophies that also influence higher education practices in South Africa.

## Fourth Stage: Technological Transformation towards the Information Era

No university can ignore the paradigmatic impact on knowledge creation and dissemination of the information revolution since the early 1960s. This has become such a fast changing environment that it is difficult to determine the long-term impact on higher education of email, the Internet, CD-Rom technology, video-conferencing and satellite transmissions (to randomly list a few developments).

The obvious question in the context of this chapter is: What effect will technology have on curriculum design, content and delivery?

This, however, was not the question that brought the issue of information-era technology on to UPE's agenda. It was initially driven by a looming crisis in the university's own institutional information systems (separate data-systems for students, staff, and financial records, for example) and the opportunity for a partnership with a private software company (hotly contested by some academics).

A policy initiative was presented to heads of academic units as *UPE-Wise: An IT vision for UPE*. It clearly linked the business imperative to the educational one, where participation in a knowledge-based, information-driven economy was emphasised (Kirsten, 2001a: 2–3). A clear invitation was extended for curricular projects be embarked upon to enhance UPE's connection with the fast-moving world of information technology. However, two constraints seriously hampered this process:

First, there was the prohibitive cost for a small institution to set up and maintain the appropriate infrastructure (if you can find out what 'appropriate' means in this context!). Secondly, there was the cost (emotional and financial) of re-training staff (who came from a traditional, pre-information technology academic base) not only to use new technology, but to understand its curriculum implications.

Nonetheless, there have been some successes, beyond the obvious work required in a Department of Computer and Information Systems. The Media Studies

programme in the Faculty of Arts, the Human Resources programme with its extensive use of information bases, and the Music Technology stream in the B Mus-degree, required quite substantial technological input with a direct impact on curriculum design and delivery. This at least undermined the idea that ‘capital equipment’ is something that only natural scientists need! UPE, however, is still in a preliminary phase when it comes to thinking about and applying technology in relation to its curricular and teaching functions.

### **Fifth Stage: Institutional Transformation from University to ‘Comprehensive Institution’**

One would think that relentless pressure to transform, especially over the last 12 years, would at some stage lead to a point at which the institution could declare that it was now transformed in terms of agreed upon indicators, or could accept that transformation energies needed to be focused in specific areas (see CHET, 2000 and UPE’s response in Kirsten, 2001b). This very ideal was taken up in the so-called ‘size and shape’ debate, which led to the publication of the National Plan for Higher Education in 2001. *Inter alia*, it states that:

The National Plan proposes that the institutional landscape of higher education must be restructured to create new institutional and organisational forms to address the racial fragmentation of the system, as well as administrative, human and financial capacity constraints (Department of Education, 2001: 3).

It goes on to say that this may be achieved via collaboration at regional level and institutional mergers (to reduce the number of institutions). A national working group subsequently drew up a number of recommendations approved by the Cabinet in May 2002. In terms thereof, UPE will merge with the Port Elizabeth Technikon and the Port Elizabeth branch of Vista University to form a new comprehensive institution that offers both university and technikon-type programmes.

That such a merger will be highly complex and put huge pressure on leadership capacity is an understatement. This emerges from the following considerations:

- There are very few national or international benchmarks to guide the design and execution of such a process;
- Present policy statements are more in the ‘what is required?’ than ‘how to execute?’ mode, leaving a huge vacuum in the overall framework;
- The nature of a hybrid ‘comprehensive institution’ remains vague;

- ▶ The Minister in fact suggests a ‘take-over’ of Vista as well as the ‘merging’ of two other institutions across the binary divide at the same time!<sup>15</sup>
- ▶ As far as I could ascertain, there are no funding plans in place to secure the success of such a merger; and
- ▶ The political pressure for a quick success story in light of negative events elsewhere might put undue pressure on the Port Elizabeth merger process.<sup>16</sup>

In the context of this chapter, the crucial observation must be made that *the true character of such a new institution will be determined in essence by the programme and curriculum question*. The danger is that the focus will be on other obviously important issues, such as transitional arrangements, negotiation structures, followed by financial and infra-structural agreements, and that the core academic question is posed when some crucial decisions have already been made.

Posing the core curriculum questions is not only academically sound, but could prove to be strategically important. A merger process must be driven from ‘above’ and ‘below’ simultaneously. If synergies are created by the process from ‘below’ where academics, who for years have not even met one another, may find some exciting common or new ground, the natural fear of a merger could be partially allayed.

The conclusion regarding the latest policy initiative is obvious: UPE (in whatever new *Gestalt*) is at the doorstep of another important transition. As before, the political decision has been taken, and it is for the university to draw on its deepest resolve and creativity to discern the opportunities presented by the latest policy initiative. This time UPE faces the kind of transformation that is not directed merely at repositioning itself, but at literal trans-form-ation that will take the university beyond its present form of existence.<sup>17</sup>

Judged by its history, it is perhaps fair to suggest that UPE is well versed in the discourse and practice of transformation, and as well prepared as one could hope.

## Conclusion

As I remarked at the beginning, case studies have wider instructive application and can act as heuristic devices – or problem solving examples, in Kuhnian terms – to unlock hitherto unexplored terrain. Generalising from this specific case it would seem that successful curriculum transformation requires:

- 1 Accepted political structures and a clear policy framework to avoid questions of legitimacy, and enable participatory decision-making;
- 2 A sharp sense of contextuality and a vision of being responsive to that context;

- 3 A relatively stable and efficient administrative and institutional environment to support academics in their endeavours and make implementation possible;
- 4 Insight in the so-called knowledge era into the necessary technological minima, coupled with human resource capacity building, to ensure proper and efficient use of such infrastructure;
- 5 Strategic insight that appreciates that matters of curricula are indeed crucial to the character and status of any higher education institution; and
- 6 A philosophical sense to distinguish the apparently urgent issues from their underlying value base and to urge debate about those value-domains.

## Endnotes

- 1 These two PhDs are written from opposing frameworks: Rautenbach, a lecturer in History at UPE, follows a more traditional, objectivist or naïve-realist approach. Bowker, senior lecturer in English, chooses a post-modern, Foucauldian approach and, looking back on Rautenbach, actually develops her own view about the origin and transformation at UPE in oppositional terms (see Bowker, 1997: 28–61) as part of a broader study on discourse and representation.
- 2 Take the issue of racism for instance: one would expect this to be ‘dealt with’ at the initial stage of the big political transformation that occurred between 1992 and 1994. It remained ‘unnoticed’, however, until January 2001, when an open discussion on racism was held at the annual planning seminar. And the issue of a black deputy vice-chancellor to be appointed again required Senate to address this issue as recently as July 2002.
- 3 Rautenbach’s thesis is useful in providing a detailed account of events leading to the eventual establishment of UPE. A cabinet decision to this effect was already taken by February 1963 with first enrolments in 1965.
- 4 See Bowker (1997: pp. 47 and 52) for other examples making the same point. Liebenberg and Spies (1993: 373) note that Verwoerd introduced the Republic of SA Constitution Bill in Parliament in an emotional address by speaking in both English and Afrikaans “to indicate symbolically that the country was carrying in to the republic one of its ‘most valuable possessions ... our (two) official languages.’” There is clear evidence that some founding figures thought UPE would eventually become Afrikaans medium only (see Bowker, 1997: 47; Rautenbach, 1995: 116).
- 5 A national stay-away, for May 1961, was called for by an all-party African conference held in Pietermaritzburg. An extension of security legislation was pushed through parliament, thousands of blacks were detained, and all gatherings in SA and South West Africa were banned from 19 May to 26 June (see Liebenberg & Spies, 1993: 375–376).
- 6 See her interesting interpretation of the Eugene Terre’Blanche visit to the campus as one of the final events that destabilised the monolithic power structures at UPE (1997: 58–60).

- 7 Prof Jan Kirsten played a crucial reflective role during his term of office from 1993–2002. An article of his that appeared in *Fokus* (in June 1995), an official university publication, is taken up in Hattle (1997: 34–41) and includes an instructive historical section on the transformation process up to that point.
- 8 This was called the Joint Bargaining Forum (JBF) and included internal, as well as the most significant external stakeholders aligned with the Broad Democratic Movement (BDM).
- 9 This agenda was articulated by Kirsten and Du Toit in terms of a high and low road. The first related to negotiated transformation (high public visibility, high-profile participants and highly sensitive), and the second to ‘self-directed’ transformation (through an in-house strategic management process) (See Kirsten & Du Toit, 1995: 2).
- 10 It should be noted that UPE revised its mission three times in the period 1995–2001. A comparison of these and the accompanying core values is in itself an interesting study in transformational shifts.
- 11 For an analysis of the policy initiatives regarding the curriculum and responsiveness, see Ensor (2002: 272–282).
- 12 The Arts faculty increased its FTEs chiefly through an innovative outreach programme in Music and the design of cross-disciplinary Master’s programmes (see contributions by Nel and Haines in this volume). After limited success at undergraduate level, two flagships eventually emerged: the BA in Human Resource Management with a strong IT and Industrial Psychology component, a well as the Media, Culture and Communication programme with a strong language, skill and technology base (see Jordaan in this volume). The legitimate question of disciplines and their future is addressed by Naudé in Section One, above.
- 13 An interesting example of such a value discussion arose around the School of Music by 1999. Some senior members of faculty and Executive Management felt that UPE could not afford to retain such an expensive school. The idea was entertained that all staff be retrenched and then re-employed on an hourly basis to teach instruments and courses as required by self-paying students. Apart from obvious and glaring subsidy disparities (treating Music as part of the Humanities), the arguments that won the day centred on UPE’s mission to serve its communities and be a development-oriented institution. The story of subsequent developments in the School of Music could be an interesting case study in itself.
- 14 UPE set up an international office in 2001 to give dedicated attention to the recruitment of African and overseas learners. It is too early to judge whether this will have major curriculum implications. It is, however, interesting (and perhaps ironic) to note that this office produced the first attempt at a globalisation policy for UPE (draft only).

- 15 During a recent visit to Belgium (April 2002), it was clear that the reduction of institutions of higher learning via mergers or take-overs is complex, but indeed possible, as long as this process remains within the sectors of *hocheschool* and university.
- 16 Long before the latest policy initiatives, Naledi Pandor (1999), chair of the Council of Provinces, made a telling remark during a conference arranged by the Desmond Tutu Trust in Cape Town on higher education: 'The politicians in parliament, and specifically the Cabinet, are tired of negative publicity in higher education.' Unlike other suggested configurations, the Port Elizabeth proposals are not politically sensitive. UPE is in any case not strongly positioned externally, and does not have a clear public lobby on its side (for example, in the form of alumni). Seen from a national perspective, it will be a silent, but no less dramatic, institutional process.
- 17 The newly appointed vice-chancellor has the credentials to lead such a process and already alluded to the multi-faceted nature of the outstanding transformation issues at UPE (Stumpf, 2002: 2–3).

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## *Section Three*

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# *A Generic Social Sciences Degree?*