

## Chapter Ten

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# *A Faculty Core: 'Bridging' or Shaping Minds in Light of Global Challenges?*

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### Introduction

The introduction of a Faculty Core Programme in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS) at the University of Namibia in 1995, was motivated by a desire to promote inter-disciplinary co-operation between academic departments. UNAM has a four year degree structure, designed to enable students to embark on MA studies if they successfully complete six fourth-year papers. The first year comprises three terms: the first exposes students to issues of wider concern such as HIV awareness and much-needed linguistic and numeracy skills. The Faculty Core Programmes of the second term are meant to expose students to inter-disciplinary teaching in the various faculties, while the third term introductory courses focus on the various subjects that students intend to pursue from the second to the fourth year of study.

Practical constraints, however, militated against realising this objective. Departments were grouped together in four clusters on the assumption that each would work out a programme of inter-disciplinary co-operation. Only the languages sub-group managed to achieve a degree of coherence and co-ordination in their programme. Other departments decided to present a brief introduction to their respective disciplines. The lack of inter-disciplinary focus in most presentations was one of the reasons why it was decided to reconsider the structure of the Faculty Core Programme.

The subsequent decision to introduce a semester system at the university in 2003 offered faculties another opportunity to re-conceptualise their core programmes.

Two approaches initially informed deliberations in the FHSS: one was analogous to approaches adopted in liberal arts programmes, while the other stressed the need to make students aware of the contingent nature of various academic disciplines. The idea of using ‘Great Books’ was floated, as the medium through which the first objective could be realised, but was soon discarded as impractical due to timetable and resource constraints (limited personnel, a shortage of books). It was therefore decided to adopt the second approach, according to which subjects were grouped into three units with a clear inter-disciplinary focus. The three groups are as follows:

- ▶ Languages and Visual and Performing Arts;
- ▶ History, Geography, Religion and Philosophy;
- ▶ Sociology, Social Work, Information Studies and Psychology.

Although a degree of enthusiasm was generated in the series of meetings that preceded the final adoption of a draft Faculty Core Programme, it was already clear at this pre-implementation stage that two issues would render the attainment of the objectives very difficult.

The first was the fact that a minority of the members of faculty failed to engage with the process at all, and even amongst the majority only a small group seems to have embraced the idea with any conviction. The second problem concerned resource constraints (literature, time-tables, venues and personnel) and possibly an inadequate conception of what was envisaged by the Faculty Core Programme. Departments tended to formulate their proposals in a largely add-on manner, i.e. core content was not conceptually integrated, and, with a few exceptions, structured as unrelated offerings.

The question that now needs to be asked, is whether it would be viable to use half of the first year of study for courses that would amount to an introduction to the various disciplines concerned. In other words, is a faculty core programme advisable, or even necessary? This goes beyond mere academic reflection and moves to the level of policy: the Namibia Qualifications Authority has expressed reservations about the status of UNAM’s four-year degree offerings, apparently considering the core programmes as ‘bridging’ courses, and therefore not an integral part of the degree programme.

This brief paper is an attempt to reflect on this matter against the background of global changes in the field of higher education. Three questions relating to cultural integrity, inter-disciplinary teaching and global capitalism, and that underpin the design of a faculty core, are posed below.

## Preservation of Cultural Integrity

In a reflection on modernity, Taylor argues that ‘an increasingly atomist and strongly individualist outlook on the world that involves a withdrawal from public life and a minimal sense of moral responsibility to others’, is characteristic of the modern age. An instrumental rationality that calculates the most economical or efficient means to a given end with scant regard for the moral or other human consequences, is accompanying these developments (see Nasson, 2001). Compounding the problem is the lack of traditional certainties. ‘The post-modern insight into morality is that in an era when the range of moral choices and the consequences of our actions are more far-reaching than ever before, we are unable to rely on a universal ethical code that would yield unambiguously good solutions’.

Nasson suggests that an ‘ethics of integrity’, would be helpful in this regard. This entails, first, the ‘principle of respect for the dignity of each other’s being,’ and tolerance of difference and diversity. Mutual respect for the ‘dignity of being’ and taking responsibility for moral decisions comprise the other part of the ethics of integrity (Nasson, 2001: 48).

These concerns are especially relevant in deeply fragmented societies, such as Namibia’s, where the absence of a well-entrenched civil society inhibits debate that could help to influence the nature and direction of higher education transformation. The problem for developing countries is how to preserve moral and cultural integrity when faced with the sheer economic power and cultural domination of the developed world.

For Louisy (2001), part of the answer may be found in active preservation of the cultural distinctiveness of countries and peoples in regions such as the Caribbean. This may be achieved by building national capacity, while on the other hand embracing harmonisation of policies and practices, and agreements to pool sovereignty into stronger centralised authorities. ‘It is not easy to avoid the dangers of “uncritical international transfer” if one lacks the national or institutional capacity to undertake the type of research or investigative inquiry necessary to “customise” the experiences of others, however tried and tested’ (Louisy, 2001: 433–5). Quist, writing from a West African perspective, argues for a narrower focus on the creation of a national consciousness to counter the political and cultural biases of Western education. In particular he has the development of national and ethnic cultures, the arts, dance and music in mind (Quist, 2001: 313).

In a perceptive article on the state of research in Africa, Paul Zeleza, quoting Archie Mafeje, argues that ‘the struggle for academic freedom in Africa and African

studies entails jettisoning Eurocentric theories and paradigms and developing authentic African intellectual discourses, without falling into the trap of an essentialising cultural relativism that homogenises Africa's diverse cultures and histories and poses them in binary opposition to other cultures and histories.' Instead of lamenting Africa's dependence on foreign paradigms and perspectives as a reflection of a desperate search for intellectual legitimation from academic systems and epistemological traditions that have historically dismissed and infantilised them, African academics should continue to engage with these traditions and help to enrich them.

The question then is how a faculty core could contribute – if at all – to the preservation of cultural integrity and the building of a national consciousness without fostering an ideological and exclusivist viewpoint in engaging with foreign academic paradigms.

## Promotion of Inter-Disciplinary Knowledge

One of the problems in the contemporary academy, as La Capra (1998) points out, is the high degree of subject specialisation. He identifies three types of specialisation: vocationalism (adaptation of one's education to the demands of a future job), tailoring of undergraduate education to the specifications of academics so as to reflect their own interests, and lastly, specialisation in generalities or in general culture. He argues that Comte envisaged that sociology would fulfil this last function, but it has since become extremely specialised, leaving the field to intellectual history or cultural studies.

The problem is how to relate these fields to each other. 'There is no quick fix such as that provided by a core curriculum or a list of common readings in the classics that can adequately answer this challenge.' He does not deny the possible value of a core curriculum, especially as far as basic competency in skills such as writing, reading and mathematics is concerned. There is, however, a need for specific mediations among areas of specialisation, mediations that require intimate knowledge of the areas to be related (La Capra, 1998: 46). This is the challenge facing those concerned with a broad, liberal arts education.

La Capra (1998) presents three propositions that may assist in breaking down boundaries between disciplines:

- He first proposes making a distinction between the narrow kind of specialised, pre-professionalised humanistic education and the necessary and legitimate

increase in complexity and difficulty that comes with the elaboration of newer methodologies and critical approaches to problems: 'What should not be lost in the movement from beginner to advanced student is the desire to make larger connections at least by learning how to generalise within cases, that is, to elicit the implications of what one reads or studies for processes of critical thought in other areas.'

- ▀ The second proposition entails cross-disciplinary investigation of problem areas – which should not be understood as merely combining existing disciplines. La Capra argues that there are good reasons to explore the relations among historiography, literary criticism, philosophy and social theory, all of which confront the problem of how to read and make use of texts (La Capra, 1998: 51–2).
- ▀ Finally, the Humanities are dedicated to keeping questions alive that have a bearing on public life, including, notably, ethical questions. La Capra's third proposition points to the need for intellectuals at universities who can offer countervailing perspectives, that are often profoundly uncomfortable to members of faculties. Academics should be evaluated not only on the basis of research, teaching and service, but also in terms of 'critical intellectual citizenship' (La Capra, 1998: 54).

These reflections indicate that positive outcomes can be obtained from the impact of post-modernism on higher education. The concerns raised, indicate a greater awareness amongst academics of the need to engage with debates across disciplinary boundaries.

The second question, then, is how to realise the ideal of this inter-disciplinary engagement in the core curriculum of a faculty.

## Responding to Global Capitalism

The apparent triumph of the global network economy has rendered developing countries vulnerable to dominating market forces. The most obvious inhibiting factor is the threat of increased economic marginalisation of poor countries. This has a serious impact on their ability to maintain sound education systems. Manuel Castells has pointed to the way in which structural exploitation of Third World countries during the colonial period has been replaced by a condition of structural irrelevance. Most Third World universities are dominated by ideological and political considerations, because elites are vulnerable and this requires that the university be used as an instrument of state control (Muller et al., 2001: 214).

Johan Muller argues that 'Europe remains the paradigm case of a society that both perceives increasing uncertainty as burgeoning risk, and the new technologies as exploitable opportunities. Africa, equally clearly, doesn't.' Instead of critically engaging with the challenge of the information society, South African elites appear to view it with a combination of scepticism and moral outrage (Muller et al., 2001: 275, 279). One of the consequences of this state of affairs is that most of the best Third World scientists are migrating to the United States or Europe because it is the only way for them to continue to do research on the cutting edge of their field of specialisation. 'The necessary distance and independence of academic research *vis-à-vis* the immediate pressures of political conflicts become literally impossible.' To countenance such a state of affairs is to lose sight of the fact that 'one of the key elements in the development of the universities as centres of discovery and innovation is precisely the cross-fertilisation between different disciplines (including the Humanities), together with their detachment *vis-à-vis* the immediate needs of the economy' (Muller et al., 2001: 215-6).

The ideological and political origins of most Third World universities cannot be ignored, but should not be permitted to suffocate the necessary evolution of the university towards its central role in modernisation and development, according to Castells. He admits that this can only be achieved if a 'multilateral tackling of the development process on a planetary basis' is undertaken (Muller, 2001: 221-2). It would be naïve in the extreme, however, to expect this to involve more than a tiny minority of educated people in developing countries who would be co-opted into joint, foreign funded and controlled enterprises.

This closes an exposition of the third generic question about a faculty core – and curriculum design at African universities in general – namely, an understanding of the structural inequities of global capitalism and their effects on the so-called two-thirds world.

## Conclusion

The issue of a core curriculum cannot be addressed in isolation from the question of what it means to be a university in Africa. Apart from basic skills-based models (reading and writing skills, for example), it seems that an engagement with cultural integrity, inter-disciplinary knowledge and the effects of a globalised economy, are unavoidable.

In retrospect, I would propose that this should not be restricted to a 'faculty core', but should permeate the undergraduate curriculum at Southern African universities as a whole.

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## *Section Four*

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# *Examples of Curriculum Transformation*