

## Chapter Thirteen

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# *Enhancing the Social Responsiveness of a Master's in Public Administration*

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*Without good governance – without the rule of law, predictable administration, legitimate power and responsive regulation – no amount of funding, no short-term economic miracle, will set the developing world on the path to prosperity. Without good governance, the foundations of society – both national and international – are built on sand.*

Kofi Annan (Address to the UN Association of Canada, 3 December 1997)

### Introduction

Public sector governance and management consist largely of building capacity in central, provincial and local governments in such areas as budgeting and financial management, human resources management, policy analysis and planning, and information technology. The Master in Public Administration degree – internationally known as the MPA – is a professional, post-graduate programme designed to educate and equip current and potential public managers to meet the challenges associated with public service delivery.

This is particularly significant in South Africa, in that it inherited the legacy of a public service that was constructed and managed for the purposes of regulation, control and constraint, and not for community empowerment and development. Serious challenges and constraints facing the transformation process included, amongst others:

- ▶ lack of racial, gender and occupational representivity;
- ▶ lack of clarity and communication in respect of the vision for change;
- ▶ centralised control and top-down management;
- ▶ a low level of service delivery, especially to the majority population;

- ▀ lack of effective co-ordination and communication among the key agencies of transformation; and
- ▀ persistence of rule-bound practices and culture.  
(Presidential Review Commission Report, 1998, Chapter One)

It was thus apparent that the instruments necessary to begin the process of reconstruction and development simply did not exist. A new machinery and a culture of governance therefore had to be created.

Overall, a major achievement has been the re-integration of a number of governing bodies. This involved the complex and difficult task of rationalising and integrating the 11 former administrative institutions of the RSA and the 'independent' and 'self-governing' homelands into a single unified public service, operating at national and provincial levels. Typically, these various administrations brought with them different accounting and financial systems, different levels of job grading, skills and experience and, in some cases, a different work ethic. The complex nature of this task accounts for many of the problems that continue to afflict the new public service, including corruption and the incompatibility of systems. Considering the abiding self-interest built into these former administrations, the act of consolidating them was no small achievement. In fact, in regions such as the Eastern Cape and Northern Province, many of the persistent problems can be attributed directly to this incorporation process (Presidential Review Commission Report, 1998, Chapter Two).

Given this situation, it was not surprising that one of the top priorities for the new government was the appointment of new senior public servants from within its loyal political ranks. The need for 'political appointments' within the public service is acknowledged as a protective measure against unsupportive public servants. However, the Presidential Review Commission (PRC) pointed out in its report that, due to their lack of skills, some of these appointees have not been able to offer much beyond political loyalty. The PRC furthermore emphasised that skill and competence, rather than political loyalty, should be the guiding norm in the future, especially as the threat of political sabotage diminishes (Presidential Review Commission Report, 1998, Chapter Two).

The purpose of this paper is to sketch the national policy imperatives guiding public sector transformation and how these, in tandem with other more global developments in the discipline, have informed the review and transformation of the MPA curriculum at the University of Port Elizabeth. The paper will commence with an overview of the guiding principles in national legislation that shape public sector

training and education in South Africa. Within this framework, the paper will proceed to a description of the MPA curriculum reform project currently being undertaken at UPE. The underlying vision and objectives of this project will be elucidated with the aim of sensitising stakeholders to the need for socially engaged and responsive university curricula, particularly those with a strong practical focus such as the MPA.

## National Policy Framework for Public Sector Transformation in South Africa

In the *White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service* (WPTPS), released in 1995, the Government outlined a broad policy framework for transforming the South African public service in line with the following vision:

The Government of National Unity is committed to continually improving the lives of the people of South Africa by a transformed public service which is representative, coherent, transparent, efficient, effective, accountable and responsive to the needs of all (WPTPS, para. 2.1).

In pursuit of this vision, the Government developed the following mission statement:

The creation of a people centred and people driven public service which is characterised by equity, quality, timeousness and a strong code of ethics (WPTPS, para. 2.1).

These statements were premised on a fundamental re-definition of the role of the state and its relationship to civil society, based on a partnership between them rather than the antagonistic relations that had prevailed in the past. The WPTPS served to set out the tasks required for the reform and transformation of the public service. The key themes envisaged by the WPTPS for reform and transformation included *inter alia*:

- ▶ improving the quantity, quality and equity of service delivery to all citizens;
- ▶ creating an integrated and unified framework for the operation of the public service at national and provincial levels;
- ▶ determining the right size for a productive public service, involving the re-prioritisation and optimal allocation of human and other resources;
- ▶ building new management and leadership practices, as well as new organisational cultures reflecting the diversity of South African society;
- ▶ prioritising individual and institutional capacity building through the development and introduction of appropriate programmes of human resources planning, development and training; and,

- ▀ developing a professional work ethic and eliminating corruption.

It was envisaged that such measures, if effectively implemented, would help to ensure the development of a new and effective culture of democratic governance in South Africa.

Chapters Three and Ten of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (Act 108 of 1996) make provision for an integrated, inter-sectoral, and co-operative approach to governance. These provisions commit all three spheres of government (national, provincial and local) to be transparent in policy making and inclusive in their approach to governance. The Constitution further stipulates that public administration should adhere to a number of principles including a high standard of professional ethics, impartial and equitable service delivery, effective resource utilisation, and responsiveness to people's needs. In 1997, this focus on 'putting people first' in terms of public service delivery was echoed in the *White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery* ('Batho Pele White Paper'). This White Paper introduced various principles to transform public service delivery, such as:

- ▀ citizens should be *consulted* about the level and quality of services they receive;
- ▀ citizens should be aware of the *service standards* set by national and provincial departments;
- ▀ all citizens should have equal *access* to the services to which they are entitled;
- ▀ citizens should be treated with *courtesy* and respect;
- ▀ citizens should be given full and accurate *information* about the public services they are entitled to;
- ▀ services should be delivered with *openness and transparency*;
- ▀ if the promised standard of service is not delivered, swift and effective *redress* must be effected; and
- ▀ citizens should receive best possible *value for money*.

It is acknowledged by the Government that competent public officials are an essential prerequisite for the achievement of the principles of quality service delivery outlined in the above mentioned policy documents. For example, the *White Paper on Human Resource Management* published in 1997 set out to give effect to human resource management in the Public Service that would result in '... a diverse, competent and well-managed workforce, capable of and committed to delivering high quality services to the people of South Africa'. Related to this is the *White Paper on Public Service Training and Education* (also released in 1997). This White Paper emphasises that programmes of public service training and education (PSTE) need to be carried out taking cognisance of principles such as access and

entitlement, a competency-based approach to learning outcomes, equity and empowerment, and effective design and delivery.

In terms of PSTE, the Government sees its mission as:

The creation of a co-ordinated framework for ensuring the provision of appropriate, adequate and accessible public service training and education that will meet the current and future needs of public servants, the public service and the public, and contribute positively to the realisation of the vision.

In pursuit of this mission, the *White Paper on PSTE* stipulates that the government, in particular, will seek to:

- ▶ enable all public servants to develop their knowledge, skills and attitudes in ways which serve to maximise performance in their current roles;
- ▶ allow them to regularly review their training and education needs and requirements, and to provide ways of meeting these;
- ▶ provide opportunities for them to prepare themselves for changing roles, duties and responsibilities within the public service;
- ▶ increase job satisfaction and facilitate career progression; and
- ▶ motivate and enable all public servants to contribute positively to the transformation and operation of the new public service in South Africa.

(White Paper on Public Service Training and Education, 1997, Chapter Three)

Thus it becomes apparent that programmes designed to educate and train public officials in the post-apartheid era need to be designed and implemented in ways that are:

- ▶ based on a comprehensive assessment of training and education needs at an individual and organisational level;
- ▶ capable of realising positive learning outcomes which add value to individual and organisational performance;
- ▶ based on the achievement of measurable competencies;
- ▶ systematically planned and strategically linked to broader processes of organisational transformation; and
- ▶ based on effective forms of certification and accreditation of training and education programmes.

The *Skills Development Act* of 1998 and the *Skills Development Levies Act* of 1999 relate closely to these ideals in that these policy documents enact a system of skills development based on the principles of lifelong learning, needs assessment, career pathing, and accreditation of training and education programmes and providers.

There is a strong emphasis on a competence-based approach to training and education, whereby a competence is defined as the application of knowledge, skills and attitudes required for effective work performance. Competencies are thus descriptions of performance which answer questions such as:

- ▶ What do public officials need to be effective in their jobs?
- ▶ How does an individual know that she/he is carrying out the job effectively?

These questions need to be critically analysed when designing curricula for public service training and education. There is a need to ensure that the outcomes of academic programmes are value-adding in the sense of producing graduates that are sufficiently competent and skilled to effectively realise the broad ideals contained in the various policy documents relating to public sector transformation. However, in a context of globalisation, it is not only national policy imperatives that guide curriculum transformation, but also global trends in the evolution of a discipline such as Public Administration/Management. This will be briefly examined in the next section of the paper.

## The Impact of Globalisation on Public Administration Curriculum Reform in South Africa

The trend toward globalisation affects the management of the public sector in that the spread of ideas and the impact of technology occur so rapidly that national barriers are becoming increasingly blurred. Furthermore, in a world of economic competition, the role of governments and the public sector can be important determinants for creating competitive advantage.

### National competitiveness and capacity development

There is a close link between the quality of public service delivery and national economic performance, particularly in the areas of health, education and training, taxation, and the encouragement of small and medium enterprise development. Given the role of the public sector in boosting national competitiveness, it is not surprising that there is a concomitant emphasis on building the capacity and competence of public officials.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) supports a 'governance approach' to capacity development. This approach maintains that capacity development designs and processes need to incorporate key characteristics of good governance in order to ensure sustainability and ownership. These characteristics include transparency, effectiveness and

efficiency, equity, stakeholder participation in decision-making, and responsiveness to the needs of the community being served ([www.magnet.undp.org](http://www.magnet.undp.org)).

### Paradigm shift towards managerialism

Hughes (1998: 1) furthermore points out that since the mid-1980s there has been a transformation in the management of the public sectors of advanced countries whereby the rigid, hierarchical and bureaucratic form of public administration is changing to a flexible, market-based form of public management. This is not merely a matter of reform, but a fundamental paradigmatic shift that poses a direct challenge to several of what had previously been regarded as fundamental and almost eternal principles of public administration. These principles include:

- ▶ the classical Weberian bureaucracy as the single best way of operating a public institution;
- ▶ public institutions should be regarded as the direct providers of services;
- ▶ politics and administration can be separated; and,
- ▶ public administration requires professionals who are employed for life to serve any political 'master' equally.

In contrast the New Public Management paradigm focuses on a managerialist and minimalist state. In terms of this paradigm, the role of the public sector is reduced, there is a focus on management in terms of producing results or outcomes and enhancing efficiency. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on the public sector, not as a sole service provider, but rather as a catalyst for other sectors – private, voluntary, community – to act in the interests of meeting community needs.

In this respect, Denhardt and Denhardt (2000: 549) note that public management has undergone a revolution in recent times in that public administrators are responding to admonishments to 'steer rather than row' and to be the entrepreneurs of a new, leaner and increasingly privatised government. However, these authors point out that, in giving public administrators more power through encouraging them to 'steer' public service delivery, essentially what transpires is that they forget who owns the 'boat'. It must be kept in mind that the government belongs to the citizens and public administrators should accordingly focus on their responsibility to serve and empower citizens as they manage public institutions and implement public policy. In other words, it is argued that with the citizens at the forefront, the emphasis should not be placed on either steering or rowing the governmental 'boat', but rather on building public institutions characterised by integrity and responsiveness.

The minimalist approach to the state is a key component of neo-liberalism which views the state as fundamentally inefficient with respect to service delivery, and state spending as a disincentive to private sector investment. The implications of this approach for the public sector include a vision whereby public institutions:

- ▶ are re-defined into 'core' administrative units which focus on strategy and serve to regulate service delivery rather than directly provide services;
- ▶ enter into a series of contracts, partnerships and network arrangements with a range of service providers both internal and external to the public sector; and,
- ▶ are urged to become 'internationally competitive'.

A further global trend impacting on the content of Public Administration/Management curricula is that of commercialism.

### Commercialism

The above conception of the public sector emphasises delivering those services that users can afford, rather than those services that users need. As a result, service delivery is commercialised through:

- ▶ turning citizens into consumers who have a commercial relationship with the service provider;
- ▶ expecting users to pay the full costs of services with very limited cross-subsidisation or other forms of subsidisation;
- ▶ public institutions continuing to provide only those services that are financially viable; and
- ▶ emphasising service delivery through partnerships with external providers, most notably with private companies.

From the above, it is clear that increasingly the boundaries between the public and private sectors are blurring. It is thus important for PSTE programmes to take cognisance of the above-mentioned trends so as to equip public officials with the skills required to manage the changing face of public service delivery effectively. One tool to facilitate such transfer of knowledge is technological innovation.

### Technological change and innovation

In ensuring that it enhances national competitiveness, the public sector needs to ensure that it is conversant with, and abreast of, technological change and innovation. According to Muid (1994: 125), the use of information systems and the way in which technology can be exploited to the benefit of the nation as a whole, gives rise to dilemmas and debates. For example, there is a need to balance the

natural concerns about 'big brother' with the potential benefits of the optimal use of information services. It must be realised that in the future, the concept of electronic government will entail issuing 'smart cards' whereby citizens can apply for passports, receive welfare benefits, enrol in training programmes, and receive public health benefits merely through the use of these cards.

Once again this brings to mind the need to ensure that PSTE programmes are equipping current and future public officials to utilise such technological advancements in terms of maximising the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery, especially in developing countries. Thus, an important aspect to consider when designing PSTE curricula is the inclusion of some form of on-line or web-based training to familiarise public officials with the advantages associated with acquiring knowledge through alternative modes of education.

With an overview of the national and international challenges confronting PSTE, it is important to consider ways of responding effectively and timeously to these challenges in respect of curriculum design.

## **Toward a Socially Responsive Curriculum**

In responding to the challenges posed by national and international trends in respect of PSTE, it becomes imperative that Public Administration/Management curricula are socially engaged and responsive to the needs of society in terms of producing competent public officials. The School for Public Administration and Management at UPE recognised the urgency of transforming its MPA curriculum to adequately reflect the broader context of public sector transformation in South Africa and abroad. With the aforementioned challenges in mind and utilising Ford Foundation funding, the School embarked on a process of MPA curriculum reform in late 1998. The aims behind this project are outlined below.

### **Aims of MPA curriculum reform at the University of Port Elizabeth**

When formulating the project proposal for the MPA curriculum reform project, it was envisaged that attempts would be made to revitalise the programme so as to enhance its relevance to the broader society in which it is situated. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the philosophical underpinnings of this curriculum reform project by referring to the work of Gibbons et al. (1994). These authors refer to the distinction between Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge production, and point out that a knowledge society is characterised by a shift from the former to the latter. This entails a shift away from traditional science, where knowledge is produced within a closed system by

scientific 'experts' in universities and research laboratories. Rather, a new form of socially distributed knowledge production is developing in an open system where 'producers', 'users' and 'brokers' mingle, and knowledge production is inter-penetrated by markets rather than being an autonomous space (Scott, in Cloete et al., 1997: 35).

Mode 2 knowledge production is furthermore differentiated from Mode 1 science in that it is socially accountable. In other words, it aims to address problems of social importance or commercial value, and is 'validated' by end-users. Secondly, it is generated within a context of application from the start. In this respect, science is no longer generated first within academic disciplines, generally in theoretical and abstract terms, nor is it driven solely by its practical applications. Rather theory and practice are elided, and the knowledge production process becomes molecular, as opposed to linear, in its structure (Scott, in Cloete et al., 1997: 35). Added to this, it is recognised that there is a need for these two modes of knowledge production to co-exist in a curriculum so as to ensure a cross-fertilisation of formal and tacit knowledge. This implies that the fundamental challenge with curriculum design is to create a dynamic synergy between formalised knowledge, as practised by scientists in universities, and tacit or experiential knowledge, as practised by professional and skilled practitioners in the workplace (Kraak, in Cloete et al., 1997: 58-59). A further characteristic of Mode 2 knowledge is that universities lose their sole monopoly over knowledge in the interests of gaining enduring partnerships with other key societal stakeholders.

Thus, it is evident from the above that there is a need to make higher education knowledge and qualifications more responsive to contemporary societal and economic needs. This implies reworking the intellectual culture of higher education, and universities in particular, away from elite and insular institutions towards more open and responsive systems of teaching and learning. This was affirmed by Schwella (in Theron & Schwella, 2000: 41-42) at the Mount Grace II Colloquium, held in 1999. Schwella writes:

We have to become professionally relevant and useful. We have to have capacity available or build such capacity in the areas of knowledge and information in our fields that really have value and/or add value to the professional practice of governance, administration and public and development management ... The pressures for delivery combined with the need for capacity to do so will take our clients to where they can find the best value. If we do not provide it, they will go somewhere else to get it.

Keeping in mind these important demands in terms of knowledge production in the information society, the UPE School for Public Administration and Management has aimed with its MPA curriculum reform project to ensure that this programme:

- ▶ responds adequately and timeously to assisting public institutions to transform public service delivery;
- ▶ is based on meeting the specific education and training needs of public institutions (for example, key areas expressed in the *White Paper on Public Service Training and Education*, 1997, include leadership, management of change, strategic planning, project management, information technology and human resources management);
- ▶ transfers knowledge, skills and competencies to potential and existing public officials in a manner that serves to enhance the productivity of the public sector, particularly in the Eastern Cape which is widely known as one of the poorest regions in South Africa. In this respect, the curriculum reform project attempts to creatively mix the formal knowledge of academics at the university and the tacit, experiential knowledge of skilled public sector practitioners who are experts in their field. The vision behind this is to generate and transfer knowledge to MPA learners in a manner which inculcates the ability to apply the theoretical knowledge they have obtained at the university to solve real-life problems in the workplace; and,
- ▶ forges lasting and productive partnerships between the university and key stakeholders in the public sector. This is facilitated through a representative Liaison Committee for Public Administration and Management, which meets regularly at the university with the aim of encouraging interchanges between academics and practitioners regarding curriculum design and meeting public sector training and education needs.

It can be deduced from the above that the MPA curriculum reform project at the University of Port Elizabeth aims to creatively mix formal Mode 1 knowledge with tacit Mode 2 knowledge. This constitutes an attempt to produce graduates who are multi-skilled and able to respond in an informed manner to the challenges of public service delivery in South Africa.

In the final section of this paper, a brief description of the main components of the MPA curriculum reform project will be provided.

### **Brief description of the MPA Curriculum Reform Project at the University of Port Elizabeth**

The purpose of this project was to revisit the curriculum of the MPA so as to enhance its social responsiveness to the needs and challenges being experienced in the public sector. In short, the Ford Foundation funding has been applied to

updating the following modules to ensure that the latest trends in the public sector are reflected and taught in these modules:

- ▶ Advanced Financial Administration;
- ▶ Advanced Municipal Administration;
- ▶ Advanced Project Management; and
- ▶ Administration for Development.

In addition, it was recognised that the MPA curriculum needed to include certain new theory-based modules to meet identified needs in the public sector. In this respect, a module on Advanced Provincial Administration has been introduced because the large majority of the MPA learners at UPE are employed by the provincial government in Bisho, and are in need of a theoretical background regarding, *inter alia*:

- ▶ the rationale behind devolving authority from central to provincial government;
- ▶ the nature of regionalism in federal versus unitary states;
- ▶ the role of provincial government in respect of co-operative governance in South Africa; and
- ▶ administrative requirements and processes for good governance and effective service delivery in the provinces.

A new theory-based module – Advanced Public Policy Analysis and Planning – has been introduced into the MPA curriculum as a result of the curriculum reform project. The intention behind this inclusion was to transfer much needed knowledge to MPA learners concerning the necessity to critically analyse public policies. With such knowledge, MPA learners will be better equipped to advise political office bearers on the continuation, amendment or repeal of existing policies, as well as provide information on the possible implications of new policies.

A final component of the MPA curriculum reform project aimed at revising the credit values of existing theory-based modules to include skills-based modules. In essence, what has transpired is that the credit value of theory-based modules has been reduced from 30 to 20 credits so as to make it possible to introduce complementary 10-credit skills-based modules. These modules are as follows:

- ▶ Financial Management Skills and Techniques;
- ▶ Municipal Meeting Procedures and Techniques;
- ▶ Mentoring Skills and Techniques;

- ▶ Practice of Inter-governmental Relations;
- ▶ Public Policy Analysis Skills and Techniques;
- ▶ Public Sector Information Technology; and
- ▶ Integrated Development Planning Skills and Techniques.

Each of these skills-based modules is presented in conjunction with a related theory-based module to ensure that learners are given a sound theoretical basis before being taught the hands-on skills. In addition, the above skills-based modules are presented and assessed by high profile public sector practitioners who collaborate closely with the academics teaching the theory-based modules to ensure a cross-fertilisation of theory and practice in the curriculum. In this way, an active attempt is being made to move away from the trend of internal self-determination or 'ivory towerism' in curriculum design towards an ongoing engagement with public sector stakeholders. In turn, by familiarising themselves with the latest trends in the public sector through communicating with the presenters of the skills-based modules, Public Administration and Management academics at UPE can ensure that the theoretical knowledge that they are imparting to the learners is not obsolete or outdated.

The introduction of these skills-based modules furthermore enhances experiential learning and is in line with what the *Skills Development Act, 1998*, refers to as 'skills programmes'. It is envisaged that these 10-credit skills-based modules will become skills programmes in that they can be used by the School for Public Administration and Management as the basis for a series of short courses offered each year which are occupationally based; completion of the courses will constitute a credit towards a qualification (in this case, the MPA) registered in terms of the National Qualifications Framework.

In this way, public officials who do not want to enrol for a complete MPA qualification can still enhance their skills by registering for and completing these accredited, skills-based modules. This has clear benefits for public institutions in that:

- ▶ in terms of Section 20(2) of the *Skills Development Act, 1998*, a public institution can claim back from the National Skills Levy on training and education programmes that are nationally accredited (as in the case of the MPA); and,
- ▶ their public officials, particularly those in management positions, acquire the knowledge, skills and competencies required to enhance service delivery effectiveness.

The MPA curriculum reform project at UPE aims to enhance the social responsiveness of this qualification by transferring knowledge and skills that are

required by public officials so that they are able to respond to the national and international challenges outlined at the beginning of this chapter. In addition to the above-mentioned components, the curriculum reform project has also introduced alternatives to traditional modes of delivery (that is, contact-based lectures on the university campus). For example, certain modules have been presented through on-line or web-based learning, attempts have been made to internationalise the qualification by exposing learners to the teaching of international experts through web-based technologies, and learners residing outside the boundaries of Port Elizabeth can study through a modular, semi-distance mode of delivery which includes 'block release' sessions once per semester. This is clearly in line with what Kraak (in Cloete et al., 1997: 66) highlights as transformations in higher education from elite to mass, open systems, in that contact-residential teaching in discipline-based degrees is replaced by diverse delivery modes, including those mentioned above.

## Conclusion

It is apparent that socially engaged teaching and curriculum reform in respect of public sector training and education promises collective advantages and benefits for the parties involved, namely the learners, academics, public institutions, and citizens. Added to this, it is imperative that the public administration academic programmes keep pace with rapid changes in the national and international context in an attempt to remain at the cutting edge of new technologies, knowledge production and modes of delivery. This is essential in light of globalisation and technological advancement, as it is becoming more possible for learners, with the support of their employers, to study an MPA programme abroad through on-line or web-based education.

In order to remain at the forefront of public service training and education, higher education institutions in South Africa, particularly universities, need to prove their ability to add value to society in terms of the knowledge they produce. These institutions have been repeatedly criticised by key stakeholders, including the Minister of Public Service and Administration, for being out of touch with reality and for lacking relevance to the real needs of the public sector. In an active attempt to redress these perceptions, it is critical that higher education institutions forge enduring partnerships with these public sector stakeholders in a process of designing curricula that include an adequate mix of formal and tacit knowledge. In this way, these higher education institutions will be seen to produce graduates who are employable and adequately equipped with knowledge and skills to contribute to good governance in South Africa.

Again, in the words of Schwella (in Theron & Schwella, 2000: 42), the challenge to academics is to enhance the social responsiveness of our academic programmes:

In summary, our current reality is one where we are increasingly being put under pressure for performance in terms of global and international competition as well as the very challenging needs emanating from our particular South African situation and mediated through what our clients expect from us, which is professionally and societally useful academic services.

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