

# **From the intellectual birthplace of Apartheid to a pedagogy of hope: How the renewal of its academic offering is transforming the identity of an African university (0230)**

**Botha Jan**<sup>1</sup>, **André Müller**<sup>1</sup>, <sup>1</sup>*University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch, South Africa*

## **ABSTRACT**

***From the intellectual birthplace of Apartheid to a pedagogy of hope: How the renewal of its academic***

*KEY WORDS: transformation, transformation in Higher Education, managing the university curriculum, institutional identity*

The political transition in South Africa in 1994 impacted significantly on public Higher Education with the introduction of new national policies and structures from 1996 onwards. In this paper the effectiveness of national initiatives, including the implementation of a national QA system, to prompt and steer curriculum renewal and identity formation at institutional level, is considered. Since the nature and scope of an institution's academic offering is a dimension of its identity, it follows that changes in institutional identity can be brought about through changes in the academic offering. Through an analysis of the new academic programmes introduced by the Stellenbosch University during 2001 – 2010 in the new national policy environment, it is illustrated how the identity of this university, once considered to be the intellectual home of Apartheid, has been transformed. The critical question is posed whether a causal link between this transformation and national HE policies can be demonstrated.

## **OUTLINE**

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At issue in this paper is the question whether and to what extent the transformation of the curriculum and the identity of a public higher education institution can be prompted and steered through national mechanisms such as a qualifications framework and a national accreditation body. Can a causal link be demonstrated? Are these mechanisms effective when evaluated against the ideals and intentions of the policy makers at national level? And if they are effective, is this necessarily a good thing?

The particular context within which this broad question is considered in this paper is interesting for a number of reasons. When South Africa became a democracy in 1994 the country emerged from a particularly painful history but it also did so in a fairly peaceful manner (Cameron-Dow 1994). A very deep divide in society had to be overcome by the democratically elected leaders of the new country led

by Nelson Mandela. This divide cut through all aspects of society, including higher education. Acutely aware of its historical responsibility national policy makers introduced a range of new policies and instruments aimed at steering the higher education system towards a closer alignment with newly defined national goals stipulated in key government policy documents. These goals were described in the White Paper 3 (1997) as follows:

“Higher education has several related purposes. In the context of present-day South Africa, they must contribute to and support the process of societal transformation outlined in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), with its compelling vision of people-driven development leading to the building of a better quality of life for all.

“These purposes are:

“To meet the learning needs and aspirations of individuals through the development of their intellectual abilities and aptitudes throughout their lives. Higher education equips individuals to make the best use of their talents and of the opportunities offered by society for self-fulfilment. It is thus a key allocator of life chances [and] an important vehicle for achieving equity in the distribution of opportunity and achievement among South African citizens.

“To address the development needs of society and provide the labour market, in a knowledge-driven and knowledge-dependent society, with the ever-changing high-level competencies and expertise necessary for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy. Higher education teaches and trains people to fulfil specialised social functions, enter the learned professions, or pursue vocations in administration, trade, industry, science and technology and the arts.

“To contribute to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens. Higher education encourages the development of a reflective capacity and a willingness to review and renew prevailing ideas, policies and practices based on a commitment to the common good

“To contribute to the creation, sharing and evaluation of knowledge. Higher education engages in the pursuit of academic scholarship and intellectual inquiry in all fields of human understanding, through research, learning and teaching.”

Incorporated in the new national policies and goals was the need to re-align HE in South Africa with contemporaneous developments in HE internationally, in particular the introduction of national qualifications frameworks in other places in the world.

Given this national context and these ambitious expectations it is interesting to consider the changes in the curriculum and the identity of one of South Africa’s premier research-led universities, the country’s second oldest university, the University of Stellenbosch which traces its origins to 1866. This University had a close association with the apartheid system at a conceptual and political level. Many of the intellectual leaders of apartheid were Stellenbosch student or faculty members, and the majority of the prime ministers during the apartheid era were Stellenbosch alumni (Stellenbosch University Self-

evaluation Report 2005). A study of curriculum changes and institutional transformation in the last decade in this education is therefore particularly interesting when the impact of national policy directives at institutional level is considered.

An important driving force for curriculum development in South Africa was the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework through the establishment of the South African Qualifications Authority in 1996. Unlike any other country at that stage, the South African NQF included the HE sector and it was premised on a “programme-based” approach to higher education”. At the institution considered in this paper, more than one hundred new programmes were introduced in the decade since 2001. Out of a total of about 700 programmes in total offered (undergraduate and postgraduate together) this represents a significant change in the curriculum and in institutional identity.

During Stellenbosch University’s quality audit conducted by the HEQC during 2005 the nature of the institution was debated intensely. At least three institutional identities were identified. The notion of a residential “*volksuniversiteit*” (people’s university) serving a traditional Afrikaans speaking community by providing access to higher education at undergraduate level was and is still very evident. In numerous cases these students were first generation higher education students. However, whereas the scope of this community used to be restricted to Afrikaans speaking white students, this was broadened since the 1980’s to include coloured Afrikaans speaking students. Through the introduction of a range of course work masters programmes the University increasing also assumed a second identity, namely that of a postgraduate school populated to a large extent by first generation black students in various professions and black civil servants in various field of study, ranging from the humanities and social sciences to agriculture and health sciences. Thirdly the institutional strategy to strongly promote the development of a research focus on science, engineering and technology (SET) turned out to be very successful. Building on research in SET new programmes were introduced at postgraduate level. Symbolically this third identity, the “high tech university”, was marked by the launch of the first satellite developed in Africa in 1997, designed and built by Stellenbosch University. The University’s identity has been broadened significantly in many respects.

This is demonstrated in this paper by reporting the results of a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the 111 new academic programmes introduced by Stellenbosch University in the period 2001-2010. The analysis consisted of a review of statistical information (enrolment figures, characteristics of the student body, graduation rates, cohort studies, retention rates) as well as reports of the outcomes of focus group interviews conducted with the academic coordinators of these new programmes. The transformation of the curriculum and the institutional identity is demonstrated. “Transformation” is understood in a broad sense to include demographic changes as well as responsiveness national HE goals and to the emerging new roles of universities in a global context.

The post 1994 national context and in particular the range of new policy directives and national mechanisms (including the NQF and the national accreditation system) set elaborate new requirements to introduce new programmes at public universities. In programmes proposals it now has to be indicated explicitly how the proposed new programme will contribute to the purposes for higher education stated in national policy documents. Through the new accreditation system, adherence to

these requirements is enforced. The effectiveness of the national instruments is evident in the case of this institution. However, it is not surprising that there developed a strong need to carefully reconsider and develop new understandings of the notions of institutional autonomy and academic freedom in such a strong centrally managed system (CHE 2007). The state can and does influence a university's curriculum development and bring about changes for the good in an institution's identity but it also calls for a careful redefinition and protection of institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

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