



**COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION**

**CURRICULUM TRANSFORMATION:  
CONTEXT AND KEY CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS**

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**ADDRESS TO THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN STUDENT  
REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL FACULTY COUNCIL MEETING**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Chairperson, colleagues, comrades

Thank you for the invitation to engage with you around the issue of curriculum transformation. An engagement with the student constituency is one that I seldom pass over since it is always stimulating and challenging and I look forward to a vibrant exchange with you.

I congratulate you on making the theme of my address 'curriculum transformation'. Curriculum is not as sexy an issue as institutional restructuring and mergers, which is the hot topic of the day. It is also not as sexy an issue as governance – who should make the important decisions and how, who should be on Council and Senate, what should be the role and size of representation of students on Council or Senate, etc.

These are clearly vital issues. Yet I believe that curriculum and the associated matters of learning and teaching and research are at the heart of higher education and there can be no transformed higher education unless serious and sustained attention is given to curriculum and learning and teaching and the transformation of these crucial aspects.

There is something to be said for learning for its own sake. However, learning, and teaching, and the curriculum associated with these activities, occur in particular historical and social contexts. Indeed, it should be expected that such learning and teaching should engage and even help to transform these contexts.

Thus, the social context of higher education and the social purposes that are defined for higher education in South Africa would be an unexceptional starting point for a consideration of curriculum.

## THE SOCIAL PURPOSES OF HE

The *White Paper* on HE identifies the various, and indeed diverse, social purposes that higher education must serve:

- Attention to the pressing local, regional and national needs of the South African society and to the problems and challenges of the broader African context
- The mobilisation of human talent and potential through lifelong learning to contribute to the social, economic, cultural and intellectual life of a rapidly changing society
- Laying the foundations of a critical civil society, with a culture of public debate and tolerance which accommodates differences and competing interests
- The training and provision of personpower to strengthen this country's enterprises, services and infrastructure. This requires the development of professionals and knowledge workers with globally equivalent skills, but who are socially responsible and conscious of their role in contributing to the national development effort and social transformation

- The production, acquisition and application of new knowledge: ...a well-organised, vibrant research and development system which integrates the research and training capacity of higher education with the needs of industry and of social reconstruction.

In terms of serving these purposes effectively, higher education is charged 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.
- Contribute to the creation, sharing and evaluation of knowledge.
- Meet the learning needs and aspirations of individuals through the development of their intellectual abilities and aptitudes throughout their lives.
- Contribute to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens.
- Promote and develop social responsibility and awareness amongst students of the role of higher education in social and economic development through community service programmes
- Produce graduates with the skills and competencies that build the foundations for lifelong learning, including, critical, analytical, problem-solving and communication skills, as well as the ability to deal with change and diversity, in particular, the tolerance of different views and ideas.
- Improve the quality of teaching and learning throughout the system and, in particular to ensure that curricula are responsive to the national and regional context

Clearly, the purposes defined for higher education and the contributions that are requested of higher education set up key challenges in the domains of curriculum, learning and teaching.

## **THE CONTEXT OF CURRICULUM TRANSFORMATION**

If the social purposes that have been defined for higher education must constitute one frame for curriculum in higher education, the specific contexts of learning and teaching must also frame curriculum transformation. These contexts include the following.

### **1. High level personpower shortages**

South Africa has half the number of professionals of other countries with similar economic profiles. Overall, the skills profile indicates a shortage of high-level skills, especially in management, engineering, medicine, mathematics, bio- and information statistics and information technology. Recent investigations by Statistics South Africa (SSA) and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) suggest strong future demands in management sciences, mathematics, information technology, the natural sciences and other high-skill areas. In addition, government experiences a shortage of skilled employees in the public service. One quarter of teachers remain under-qualified.

In each of these fields, it is estimated that we need to treble our current number of graduates in order to satisfy labour market demands. Estimates indicate a shortage of 300 000 skilled people in the managerial and technical sectors, and of between 25 000 and 50 000 in information technology. This is in line with continued growth in the retail and service sectors of the economy. These numbers are further likely to grow due to the anticipated long-term impact of HIV/ Aids. All the documents on HRD emanating from the Ministries of Education, Labour and Trade and Industry express concern around the shortage of high-level skills in the South African labour market.

There are two dimensions to this skills shortage. On the one hand, there is a structural skills shortage due to the small intake of students in a number of fields. The *National Plan* expresses concern that enrolment trends and graduation rates suggest that the HE system is not meeting the human resource needs and that this is likely to impede economic development.

## **2. The quality of graduates**

On the other, is the inadequacy of new and existing employed graduates to respond to the demands of the new economy. In relation to the latter, government, the public service and the private sector are increasingly questioning the quality of recruits from universities and technikons, the nature and appropriateness of their qualifications and training, and the international competitiveness of graduates in some fields. This means dealing systematically with problems of students' lack of preparedness for HE (academic development initiatives), improving the capacities of academics (staff capacity development) and exploring new curricular and pedagogic approaches. It also means addressing what are the knowledge, skills, competencies, capacities and attitudes required by the South African economy and society generally and by its different constituent parts specifically.

## **3. Globalisation**

Globalisation was expected to result increasingly in a shift in knowledge production, from Mode 1 (largely discipline-based, and located predominantly within universities) to Mode 2 (interdisciplinary research, conducted by teams of researchers based inside, and increasingly outside, universities). The proponents of Mode 2 knowledge production regard it to be more appropriate than Mode 1 to solve contemporary technological, cultural and social problems in the "information society". It is also regarded as particularly relevant to addressing the economic and social development problems of developing countries such as South Africa. In this view, HE institutions have a particular responsibility to adopt problem-solving curricula and to undertake the organisational arrangements to support Mode 2 knowledge production (see especially Gibbons, 1998).

For many participants in the mid-1990s policy debates, the shift from Mode 1 to Mode 2 knowledge production implied a shift from discipline-based to interdisciplinary curricula and a shift in curriculum organisation from an emphasis on courses to credits. Instead of registering for a traditional degree or diploma programme located in a single institution for a specific duration, students would accumulate credits for a qualification from, if necessary, different institutions and over more flexible time

frames. Modularisation of the curriculum, it was anticipated, would allow for this, and the portability this promoted would enhance equity and efficiency.

#### **4. The notion of programmes**

The NCHE defined a higher education learning programme as

The sequential learning activities leading to the award of particular qualifications can be called programmes. These are almost invariably trans-, inter- or multidisciplinary, and can be transinstitutional as well. (All programmes have a broad area of specialisation and it is possible to use wider or narrower definitions of programmes for specific purposes) (NCHE, 1996:84).

Following the NCHE report and in terms of the NQF, an academic programme came to be associated largely with the following core features:

- Interdisciplinarity: Programmes would comprise of a compulsory core, together with foundational elements and electives.
- Relevance or responsiveness - the need to address, to some extent at least, the needs of the economy and civil society.
- Efficiency: Institutions were expected to “niche” themselves around strong programmes, to avoid unnecessary duplication and promote quality.
- Portability: Students should be able to move from one institution to another, and accumulate credits over time towards a qualification.
- Coherence: Programmes needed to be carefully planned so that different aspects related meaningfully to others.

The above has had a major impact on how curriculum has been approached. However, different institutions have approached programmes in different ways. As a result there may be less mobility and articulation between institutions today than there was ten years ago.

#### **5. An emerging quality assurance regime**

A new national quality assurance regime is on the horizon and, indeed, is already undertaking certain functions with respect to the accreditation of learning programmes. The HEQC has set into motion numerous initiatives around programme accreditation and reviews, institutional audits, capacity development and quality promotion. Finally, it is also preparing to discharge responsibilities that have been accorded to it by the *National Plan for Higher Education*.

The HEQC does not intend to develop a national quality assurance system that is an external imposition with dubious value to the core business of higher education: learning, teaching, research and knowledge based community service. The emerging national quality assurance system must be one that yields substantial and continuous improvements in learning and teaching without unduly placing onerous burdens on institutions and academics.

The emerging national quality assurance system will have to be a partnership between us - the CHE, and stakeholders, institutions, academics and students. It must be, however, a principled partnership that is underpinned by a common commitment to high quality and excellence:

- In curiosity driven knowledge production and also that which grapples with the concrete problems of the reconstruction and development of our society;
- In teaching and learning interactions so that we produce graduates that are equipped with the knowledge, skills, competencies and attitudes to contribute to economic growth and development, to the social needs of our people and to building a vibrant civil society and consolidating democracy
- In community service that harnesses the intellects and skills of our academics and students in the service of our communities and people.

It must also be a partnership in which there is an uncompromising and unwavering commitment to equity and to the possibility for social advancement through higher education for those who were historically disadvantaged under apartheid - Black and women South Africans, and particularly learners of working class and rural poor social origins.

Quality and equity must not be seen as separate parallel vectors but must be brought together as two sides of the same coin.

The CHE has been vocal that the achievement of equity is being compromised by inefficiencies, the lack of effectiveness, and shortcomings in quality. It has also been firm that equity must mean considerably more than access into HE; that it must incorporate equity of opportunity – environments in which learners, through academic support, excellent teaching and mentoring and other initiatives, genuinely have every chance of succeeding.

Finally, the CHE has been insistent that to be meaningful, equity is also ensuring that our learners graduate with the relevant knowledge, competencies, skills and attributes that are required for any occupation and profession and for productive citizenship.

If it is not to be equity *with quality*, then we pay lip service to equity and we promote a distorted equity, which does not in any substantive and meaningful way erode the domination of high level occupations and knowledge production by particular social groups in this country.

If it is not to be quality *with equity*, then we remain trapped in and reproduce the social structure of our apartheid past and we compromise all that the struggle for liberation in this country was about.

The imperative of quality in higher education is about much more than public accountability. In the South African context it is fundamentally about higher education institutions becoming powerhouses of knowledge production and dissemination. It is about higher education helping to overcome the inherited social-structural inequities, contributing to reconstruction and development, and positioning South Africa to engage effectively with globalisation. It is about higher education helping to ensure

that South Africa will be both a better place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and will be better equipped for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **CURRICULUM RESTRUCTURING AT HEIs**

How have universities and technikons engaged with curriculum restructuring in terms of the call for programmes?

Universities responded in different ways, as did faculties and departments within them. Many professional faculties and departments, such as law, engineering, medicine, social work, pharmacy and journalism were stimulated by the transition to democracy in South Africa to reconsider and reconstruct curriculum offerings. Academic programme planning did not impact on them significantly, as their curriculum offerings were regarded as already 'programmatised'.

Humanities, arts, social science and science faculties, on the other hand, experienced great difficulties. Much of the difficulty stemmed from the belief that a programme had to be interdisciplinary and related to future graduate employment. Trying to fashion science, social science, arts and humanities undergraduate degrees accordingly proved easier on paper than in practice and, ultimately, for many academics and their students counter-productive.

Five years on from the NCHE report, a survey of university handbooks of science, social science, arts and humanities faculties indicates that curriculum reconstruction has taken place broadly according to different programme types.

1. The traditional bachelor's degree, constructed around one or two majors, pre- and co-requisites and a range of electives.
2. Essentially the same as (1) above but student choice is restricted, both in relation to majors and electives. Students cannot combine majors at will, but are required to follow a limited number of degree paths, which specify the major/s, and to a very large extent, co- and pre-requisites. Subjects are grouped according to academic cognacy (such as in a programme in historical studies) or applied cognacy (development studies). Those science faculties that do not allow students to follow a curriculum of (1) above offer this second type.
3. A compulsory core made up of modules drawn from different disciplines - for example economics, geography, sociology and politics, in making up a development studies core. There is sometimes a choice between modules. This is the closest the university sector has come towards 'integration' across the curriculum (except for existing areas such as Media Studies that are already established and recognised by many as new disciplines).

The NCHE proposed academic programmes that promoted interdisciplinarity, responsiveness (or relevance) coherence and portability. To what extent have these objectives been achieved or are being achieved following five years of curriculum restructuring.

In the university sector there may be less *portability* in the system than before 1996. While modularisation, which should favour portability, has taken place at most institutions, in practice this has been accompanied by fairly tight restrictions on student choice. Compulsory programme cores vary across institutions, being niched according to institutional strengths, thus limiting the possibility of students carrying credits from one institution to another (which they are able to do with relative ease with the traditional BA, B Social Science and BSc, as well as professional degrees).

*Interdisciplinarity* has been addressed in different ways at different institutions. Universities offering traditional BA, BSc or B Social Science degrees argue that they attend to the need for interdisciplinarity by allowing for a mix of majors and electives. Those universities stressing interdisciplinary programme cores have attempted to organise curricula around a common theme (such as development studies), drawing on modules from a range of disciplines (economics, sociology, etc.). Research in the area suggests that the overall vertical coherence of many of these programmes has been compromised.

The technikon sector has identified similar problems in relation to its own curriculum design. On some campuses, an attempt has been made to address *interdisciplinarity* (and hence *responsiveness*) through re-organising and integrating the knowledge base of the curriculum to align with the needs of industry. However, existing nationally registered curricula are subject-based, with subjects a mix of traditional and more contemporary disciplines, and constructed in such a way as to lead to specialised knowledge and skills achievement in a particular career field. In many cases, far less integration has been achieved than was previously anticipated. Assessment has remained largely subject-based, with “integration” occurring largely through experiential training and project work. Modularisation in many technikons, as in many universities, has come to mean little more than the semesterisation of discipline-based subjects.

To achieve greater *responsiveness* or relevance, a number of universities have “packaged” their undergraduate offerings as programmes, with titles that suggest a relevance to the world of work, such as tourism, translation and heritage studies. The extent to which this has been achieved in practice requires close scrutiny. Efforts to produce curricula that are more relevant and responsive have resulted in two main initiatives. One builds curricula mainly around disciplinary majors, but with less student choice. The other constructs curricula that are made up of modules from different disciplines. In this case, overall cohesion and coherence are very often problematic. In both cases, programmes are given names that suggest a strong orientation to the field of employment.

Different players in the HE environment have different conceptions about *coherence*. Coherence for those emphasising traditional BA, BSc and B Social Science degrees is largely an issue of vertical progression. For those emphasising the integration of modules into cores, coherence is defined more laterally. Both university and technikon sectors have pointed to the danger that attempts to achieve interdisciplinarity, especially in basic science and humanities, result in fragmentation and lack of cohesion of the curriculum.

Both the university and technikon sectors have attempted to meet the challenge of the NCHE to produce relevant, coherent, interdisciplinary programmes. Almost all universities and technikons have been involved in some form of curriculum review and renewal since 1996. Universities and technikons which retained the general structure of their qualifications (such as generic bachelors degrees in the case of universities) have encouraged re-examination of the content of their provision.

Both universities and technikons have struggled to construct “interdisciplinary” curricula and the difficulties encountered by academics to forge curricula on grounds other than on a discipline or subject basis are now more apparent than previously. The most general response has been to retain disciplines or subjects intact. It is difficult to see how this could have been otherwise. New fields of enquiry (authentic versions of interdisciplinarity that give rise to new disciplines) develop gradually over time. There is no evidence that this can be legislated through the construction of undergraduate curricula. Where attempts at interdisciplinarity have been attempted through combining modules from different subject areas, the results in many cases have been less than successful. It is now probably necessary to concede that the enthusiastic recruitment of the mode 2 knowledge production discourse into South African HE discourse was too uncritical.

## KEY CHALLENGES

As learners and students, you must have a deep interest in curriculum, learning and teaching issues. Ultimately, the quality and relevance of these aspects will powerfully determine your personal development and opportunities and your contribution to the economic and social development of our country.

There are a number of issues that you need to think about.

**First**, is what role you can play on behalf of yourself and fellow students with regard to learning programmes that are offered by your institution. There are a number of issues here.

1. Programmes that students enrol for are meant to clearly and explicitly specify the learning outcomes that are meant to be accomplished – that is to say, the knowledge, competencies and skills that a learner can be expected to possess on completion of the programme. You may want to consider how you as student officials can monitor and evaluate how and to what extent the outcomes in terms of knowledge (fundamental and applied), competencies and skills (information literacy, numeracy, written and oral communication, interpersonal, social, etc.) that are specified are indeed delivered.
2. More fundamentally, you may want to ask whether the outcomes that are specified are indeed appropriate for a particular learning programme in relation to the profession or career or purposes to which the programme is oriented. For example, is the programme purely oriented towards rather narrow technical outcomes in terms of mastery and proficiency in terms of the practice of a particular profession or career. Or does it also extend to issues of critical citizenship and the context of a transforming South Africa and the needs of the

African continent in which the profession has to be practised. Excellent technician and technocrat, or excellent technician and technocrat and *simultaneously* enlightened and critical South African and African citizen?

3. However, outcomes that are specified cannot be divorced from the content and delivery of the programme – from the curriculum, and from the modality of learning and teaching. You may therefore want to ask questions about the curriculum of a programme – does the curriculum indeed relate to and contribute towards the achievement of the outcomes that it is said the programme will deliver. What is in the curriculum? Equally, what is missing, what are the silences? What texts are being used? Where do these texts come from and who writes them?
4. Moreover, outcomes that are specified cannot be divorced from the delivery of the programme. You may also want to ask questions about the nature of the teaching and learning that is required and employed. Are these appropriate and congruent with the aims and goals and objectives of the programme. Are the academics tutoring and lecturing indeed suitably qualified and expert in the fields and areas being covered.
5. Finally, there must also be a congruency between the professed outcomes that a programme claims it wants to achieve and its assessment strategies and methods. Surely whether learners have indeed achieved certain outcomes may not be possible to assess by the traditional written examination or essay alone but require innovative and new assessment strategies and methods.

**Second**, it is necessary to ask tough and searching questions about the nature of our postgraduate programmes, the learning environments that are provided by these programmes, and especially the quality of research supervision that is received by learners.

**Third**, clearly then, there are a whole number of issues that one needs to think about, needs to monitor and evaluate in relation to the programme which is the central, crucial and common experience of every student. The thinking, monitoring and evaluation that I am pointing to obviously cannot be the burden of a solitary student official, no matter how committed and willing. It has to be an organised activity of the Faculty Council and around which there is leadership from the SRC.

Structures and mechanisms and personnel will be required for these activities, as well as organisational and individual capacity building and training. Communication will be required between such structures and those that relate to student involvement in Faculty Boards and the Senate so that the results and concerns of monitoring and evaluation can be fed into the deliberations of bodies like faculty Boards and Senates.

Partnerships will have to be entered into, perhaps with a body like the Centre for Higher Education Development, led by Prof. Martin Hall, to ensure that students/learners are well equipped to undertake the important activities of monitoring and evaluation of programmes, curriculum, learning and teaching.

**Fourth**, it is necessary to signal concern about the *White Paper's* notion of responsiveness and that which seems to have emerged since and continues to be emphasised today. The *White Paper* advances an extensive, broad and 'thick' notion of the social responsiveness of HE.

Developments in recent years suggest that 'social responsiveness in the discourse on higher education transformation is being thinned down and reduced to the terms of market responsiveness'. Further, 'the traditional knowledge responsibilities of universities (research as the production of new knowledge, teaching as the dissemination of knowledge, and community service as the applied use of knowledge for social development) are increasingly being located within the demands of economic productivity and its requirements for particular kinds of knowledge and skills' (*Kagisano, 2001*). The danger, of course, is that the 'the notion of responsiveness (could become) emptied of most of its content except for that which advances individual, organisational or national economic competitiveness' (*ibid.*).

HE is, of course, crucial for the production of skilled and trained personpower and for the production of knowledge for economic growth and development. However, the function of HE cannot be reduced to the production of graduates and/or research related to the needs of the labour market and business alone. The consequences of such a one-dimensional approach to HE responsiveness could be greatly impoverishing for the broader social role of HE. The responsiveness of HE to the general and specific needs of the economy can only be a subset of a more complex and multi-faceted notion of responsiveness. It is vital that, in a country like South Africa, where HE transformation is part of a larger process of democratic reconstruction, social responsiveness is not entirely subsumed to economic responsiveness.

**Finally**, we live in a conjuncture in which there is the great danger of a rampant and profane marketisation and commodification of higher education. In this context, it is crucial to hold tight to the moral basis of higher education - a moral basis that, I may add, our public policy documents both endorse and seek to promote.

Our policy goals require us not merely to advance all forms of knowledge and scholarship and to develop well-planned and co-ordinated teaching, learning and research programmes to address the diverse problems and demands of the local, national, Southern African and African contexts.

We are also implored to support a democratic ethos and a culture of human rights by educational programmes and practices conducive to critical discourse and creative thinking, cultural tolerance, and a common commitment to a humane, just, non-racist and non-sexist social order. We are especially challenged to ensure

- ◆ That the moral and ethical considerations of how teaching takes place and what is taught and taught towards is not ignored or becomes an after-thought
- ◆ That we produce professionals and researchers, who can think theoretically, analyse with rigour, gather and process empirical data and do all this with a deep social conscience and sensitivity to the diverse needs of our people and society, and

- ◆ We produce young men and women who will not just be good technicians and technocrats but will also personify good, and in this way ensure that in the years ahead the political, social and intellectual life of our country will not be banal, self-centred and mired in greed or desperate attempts at simply survival, but rich and vibrant, incorporating questions of social justice and intellectual and political actions towards a humane society.

I suggest that what you do in the arena of curriculum and learning and teaching will have a huge bearing on what kind of graduates and human beings our institutions of higher education produce.

You are not clients and customers of UCT and HEIs. You are vital partners in higher education and in the building of our society and country. You must help ensure that UCT and HEIs do not fail students and fail our country in producing the excellent and socially committed high level graduates that are so desperately needed for the reconstruction and development of our society. Your work around curriculum, learning and teaching issues could play a major role in ensuring that there will be no failure.

When we review the contribution of higher education to our society and the question is asked:

Where are the graduates, the learned professionals and intellectuals to whose education and training we have devoted considerable public funds? Where is their professional and intellectual engagement with the diverse problems of our society? Where is the contribution of our graduates to the development of an equitable, just and humane democracy?

We must be able to respond without hesitation. We must be able to say – here it is, there it is. It is everywhere to see.