Chapter 7

Policy discourses about teaching excellence in a transforming South Africa

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Introduction: the South African policy context

The past 12 years have seen a number of sweeping changes in South African higher education, both in response to global trends, and also as part of the restructuring processes needed to remedy the multiple problems created by apartheid. In 1994, when South Africa had its first democratic election, the higher education system was highly fragmented, segregated and differentiated. The new government inherited a three-tier system of universities, technikons and colleges, with different institutions within each tier catering separately for different racial groupings: Indian and coloured, African and white. These institutions had been funded differentially. The geographical locations of African institutions further isolated them and created particular difficulties. In addition, students entering the system came from a much more varied educational background than previously, many from schools which were part of the under-resourced Bantu education system and who were thus underprepared for higher education in many ways. At this time of transition there came a flurry of higher education policy and discussion documents. This chapter looks at some of these texts and asks questions about the ways in which teaching excellence is positioned through the documents.

In this changing landscape of South African higher education a number of interesting tensions now exist which are reflected in both policy and practice. Kraak (2001: 88), for example, examines the tensions and contradictions in key policy documents such as the 'Size and Shape' document (CHE, 2000) and the *1997* (DoE, 1997) which are the result of different ideological positions. He identifies the pull as being between the driving forces for economic development and the imperative for social justice. Moore and Lewis (2002: 1) describe these possibly conflicting demands which seek to restructure higher education (and influence the ways in which teaching takes place) as: 'a response to developments in the global economy and the changing role of higher education internationally, and a local concern for economic development, social reconstruction and equity'. Managerial and accounting discourses, now prevalent in higher education policy, focus on efficiency,

effectiveness, audits, viability and throughput rates, indicating a strong drive for South Africa to enter the world arena on a competitive and equal footing. These discourses tend to overshadow and work in contradistinction to the discourses, particularly important in the South African context, of redress, social justice, equity and non-racism.

The introduction of a suite of mechanisms such as the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the Higher Education Qualifications Committee (HEQC) have allowed for the development of a single unified higher education system, registration of degrees and accreditation of degrees and a level of equivalency between qualifications which is very different from the fragmented and unequal system that existed previously. This unified system works towards providing widening access, and better opportunities for all, although it will take much to address the under-resourcing and other problems embedded in the previous system. In particular special attention has had to be paid over the past 12 years to the quality of teaching and learning at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. However, the NQF, SAQA and other such mechanisms also greatly increase government control and introduce a level of bureaucracy that may become stifling (Bundy, 2004). It is clear that the mechanisms and policies intended to shape and guide higher education may be used in a variety of ways, and there is certainly a tension between development and compliance, between autonomy and control and how these develop over time.

These tensions seem to be resolving and there is a subtle pendulum swing in the role of South African universities away from socio-economic transformation towards becoming a producer of resources for national competitiveness and economic growth (Kraak, 2001; Fataar, 2003). Thus, in South Africa, as elsewhere, 'the national Higher Education agenda has been made subservient to the global reform agenda' (Maassen and Cloete, 2002: 22).

When the economic and social sanctions against South Africa were lifted as apartheid ended, international trends such as massification, mergers and increased student diversity hit our higher education sector all at once, and at a point in time when the challenges of rectifying a severely skewed system were paramount. Increased student diversity was immediate and quantitatively greater in South Africa than elsewhere (for details see: Hall   ., 2002; Bundy, 2004; Cooper and Subotzky, 2001). The simultaneous imperatives of social justice and economic development, and the need to enter the global market on a competitive basis, has created a complex higher education environment within a multifaceted society. The implication for teaching of the global reform agenda is that it is increasingly being seen as an activity primarily aimed at producing human resources for economic development. The pressure to produce such resources in an efficient manner results in a severe challenge to individual academic professionalism, academic freedom and transformative, responsive and reflective teaching.

Framework of analysis

Our analysis underpinning this chapter attempts to deconstruct the ways in which teaching is framed within various national policies and documents in the South African higher education arena. The documents we have considered are the (DoE, 1997), (known as the 'Size and Shape' document, CHE, 2000), (NPHE) (DoE, 2001), the new (DoE, 2004), the C - (HEQC) A C (CHE, 2004a, 2004b), and the C (CHE, 2004c).

In looking at these texts we wanted to consider not only the ways in which teaching is positioned in the South African context but also the implications of such positioning for the classroom. Foucault (1980: 100) uses the term 'discourse' to describe how institutions name, define and regulate their practices such that a discourse is the place where 'power and knowledge are joined together'. Discourses are thus very powerful in structuring both knowledge and social practices. The discourses of teaching that we refer to in this chapter are not only direct references to teaching but also the ways in which teaching practices are framed and constructed within the documents. For example, (DoE, 2001), describes in detail the multiple aims of higher education but makes scant reference to the role educators should play in realizing these aims.

The transformation of higher education, within an emergent democracy, positions all discourses as being 'in transition'. Because the norms and values of our society are in a general state of flux, so too are the discourses constructing education. Kraak (2001), in describing four overlapping policy phases between 1989 and the present, illustrates the transitional nature of the policy discourses. During the first phase (1989–1994), it had become evident that a negotiated settlement was possible. The anti-apartheid agenda shifted to that of preparing policy frameworks for the new democracy. Tensions between 'popular democratic' and 'economic rationalist' discourses 'were muted by the consensus-building dictates of the day' (ibid., p. 87). The second phase, which Kraak (2001) calls the legislative era (1994–1997), culminated in the Higher Education Act of 1997 (DoE, 1997), which represented a 'compromise set of policy propositions that balanced the demands of the competing discourses'. A 'policy implementation' phase began in 1994 and became more evident between 1997 and the present. During this period 'the limits of state power begin to surface and … policy idealism in education is inevitably mediated by the structural constraints and political limits facing the new state' (Kraak, 2001: 87). The current period, which Kraak (2001: 87) terms 'a vacillating state', is one in which there is 'significant policy doubt, retraction and reversal'. These shifts in policy discourses have great impact on the ways in which teaching excellence is constructed nationally, institutionally and by individual educators.

We have used four 'ideal-type' understandings of teaching excellence – traditional, performative, psychologized and critical (see Skelton, 2005: 21–37) – as a framework for analysing the documents. In using Skelton's understandings as a mode of analysis, we ran the risk of forcing data into discourse categories that we already had in mind rather than letting them emerge from the data. But we used various methods (such as peer review) to critique our analysis and sought validity in Carspecken's sense of the soundness of argument rather than the truth of statements (1996: 56). As this chapter shows, there is some evidence of all four of these understandings in the documents but, in the light of the implementation of national quality mechanisms, the National Qualifications Framework and an outcomes based approach to education, we raise particular concerns about the implications of a performative discourse.

Traditional understandings of teaching excellence in the South African context

Teaching excellence, as a phrase, has largely been avoided in the new South African policy context. This is understandable in a country undertaking massive social reconstruction; terms like excellence carry connotations of privilege. Like so much else in the transformational context of South African higher education, the notion of 'excellence' is contested. The idea of teaching excellence is often dismissed for its traditional associations with social elitism and the aim of cultural reproduction. As Skelton points out, teaching excellence in a traditional understanding is 'associated with mastery of a discipline' through the 'careful digestion of approved knowledge' (2005: 27). Within this limited traditional understanding, teaching excellence in South Africa can be seen as the domain of the more elite institutions, whose student body comes from the top socio-economic sector of society; student groups which racially remain predominantly white. Verkleij (1999: 2) maintains that 'institutions which are regarded to be the best, based on their reputation, act as role models. This makes "excellence" something practically unreachable (and frustrating) for all other institutions having different histories, cultures and funding opportunities'.

Whilst the importance of 'bright students' for success in higher education continues to dominate mainstream thinking, it is tempered by a growing critical awareness that 'brightness' relates to the degree to which students' cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1973) is acknowledged within the value system of the South African higher education environment. The debate about student preparedness and access has engendered an ongoing curriculum debate about, for example, whether it needs to be more Africanized and whether there needs to be more acknowledgement and exploration of indigenous knowledges. The call for higher participation rates in higher education (for example, DoE, 1997, 2001) is often collapsed into a call for more locally situated teaching and learning. This politicized debate is taking place at the same time as there is a recognition that higher education must contribute to national performance in the global

economy. The tension between these two competing discourses – between economic imperatives and social justice concerns and between local and global concerns – is thus often played out in discussions about curriculum and pedagogy (Nkoane, 2005). A Council for Higher Education colloquium report indicates that:

> The political imperative is manifest in calls for developing indigenous knowledge and acknowledging the African context in professional education: We don't want a situation where simply because Oxford University focuses on this type of curriculum that in South Africa we simply do that.
> (CHE, 2002a: 88)

One of the consequences of the politicization of higher education discourses is that educators, institutional managers and national policymakers focus on the drive for equity, and distance themselves from terminology which could be linked to old regimes and troubled ideals. In a society where access to education was systematically controlled according to race group, any notions, such as 'teaching excellence', that could be interpreted as harking back to the apartheid regime must be rejected for more politically neutral terminology, such as 'teaching quality' and 'best practice'.

The term 'excellence' is thus rarely used in reference to teaching in any of the documents we considered in this study. Where it is used, there is a subtle specification that the term is not to be understood in an elite, traditional way but is meant in an inclusive and contextualized manner. For example, the HEQC Founding Document which sets up the National Quality Council, states that their hope is that a minimum standards context will 'provide the foundations for the development and support of   of higher education and training' (CHE, 2001a: 8, our emphasis). The HEQC Audit Criteria document outlining the criteria for auditing institutions asks institutions to consider a general open-ended question about excellence: 'What are the   - in which the institution enriches and adds excellence to the higher education sector and society – nationally, regionally and internationally?' (CHE 2004a: 10, our emphasis).

Psychologised understandings of teaching excellence in the South African context

The existence of a psychologized understanding of teaching excellence within the documents is very limited. Skelton (2005: 31) characterizes this understanding as:

> associated with the establishment of universal procedures for teaching and learning, their successful implementation in practice and the achievement of specified outcomes.... Psychologized understandings of teaching excellence focus primarily on the transaction between individual teacher and student.

Teaching is rarely presented in South African higher education policy in terms of the individual relationships between learner and educator. However, some evidence of a psychologized understanding of teaching excellence can be found in national documents related to the implementation of outcomes-based approach to education (OBE).

OBE has been strongly critiqued in South Africa (see, for example, Jansen, 1999), given its basic behaviourist underpinnings. Luckett and Webbstock (1999: 3) raise the concern that:

> outcomes or competency-based education is premised on an out-dated behaviourist psychology which assumes a certain uniformity and pre-dictability in human behaviour. The outcomes based method of curriculum design epitomizes linear, instrumental reasoning in which micro-level action and behaviour in the classroom is meant to be determined by pre-specified learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

Essentially, students are expected to demonstrate outcomes determined by teachers, ensuring that far from being student-centred, control remains with the teacher. The reductionist tendency of the outcomes approach may engender a system which ignores the learning that emerges from educational encounters which have not been pre-determined, but which may be every bit as important. With the specification of intended outcomes, many of the unintended outcomes become undervalued. There may be a tendency to teach to the outcomes, especially with the pressures for throughput in limited time periods.

The outcomes-based framework of education in South Africa has generally been interpreted in fairly technicist ways within higher education institutions, with great emphasis on performative systems. For this reason, we return to OBE later in the next section.

Performative understandings of teaching excellence in the South African context

Efficiency discourses in policy

The policy tensions between discourses premised on social transformation and equity, and those premised on accountability and efficiency in the higher education context discussed in the introduction to this chapter have implications in terms of performative understandings of teaching excellence. Skelton states (Introduction, this volume) that 'A performative teaching excellence is attractive to policy makers and institutional managers given its emphasis on the three 'E's of economy, efficiency and effectiveness'. The White Paper on Higher Education of 1997 captured the 'equity/efficiency' tension clearly:

> The South African economy is confronted with the formidable challenge of integrating itself into the competitive arena of international production and finance.… Simultaneously, the nation is confronted with the challenge of reconstructing domestic social and economic relations to eradicate and redress the inequitable patterns of ownership, wealth and social and economic practices that were shaped by segregation and apartheid.
>
> (DoE, 1997: 5)

The RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) was published in 1994 as the macro-economic policy framework during the period of transition and attempted to develop the economy while simultaneously reallocating social goods. 'However, by the mid-1990s it had become clear that the RDP was unrealizable. The limitations of South Africa's very narrow tax base and pressures to open up the economy to the global market led to a shift to a neo-liberal, monetarist, macro-economic policy Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR)' (Luckett and Webbstock, 1999). One of the consequences of this shift is that higher education has now been constructed as a vehicle for economic growth 'under the influence of the steering media of money and administrative power' (Kemmis, 1998: 22).

But while higher education has a clear responsibility to meet the current demand from industry and government for skilled labour (see, for example, DoE, 1997; Skills Development Act No 97 of 1998), this demand should not result in the development of a skilled labour force that is unable to meet the need for the advancement of knowledge. 'Invoking notions of efficiency to make Higher Education less wasteful and self-indulgent may well produce important pedagogical and social benefits', writes Singh (2001: 9). But she goes on to express apprehension about the trend of narrowing the higher education context 'and the disturbing implications of such trends for achieving this and for the broader values and purposes often associated with Higher Education'. In particular Singh expresses concern that the bid to make higher education more efficient should not detract from the goal of developing a critical citizenry.

The shift in   (DoE, 2001) to a discourse more overtly economically driven was, according to Fataar (2003), indicative of attempts to align higher education policy to the macro-economic policies of GEAR. By the time   was released in 2001, 'an economic rationalist discourse had come to settle on the Higher Education discursive terrain' (Kraak, 2001: 86). Kraak tells us that 'Contestation has occurred over the extent to which globalisation and the forces of economic modernisation should be ceded a major role in the reconstitution of postapartheid HET' (Kraak, 2001: 85). This contestation may have done some good in that transformation issues remain in the National Higher Education Funding Formula, but by and large the efficiency discourse seems to have won over the equity discourse and is expressed through an increasing concern with accountability.

110 R. Searle and S. McKenna

After highlighting the economic and social challenges facing higher education, the   (DoE, 1997) tells us that:

> Against this backdrop, higher education must provide education and training to develop the skills and innovations necessary for national development and successful participation in the global economy. In addition, higher education has to be internally restructured to face the challenge of globalisation, in particular, the breaking down of national and institutional boundaries which removes the spatial and geographic barriers to access.

It would seem, therefore, that excellent teaching in higher education in South Africa in increasingly seen in terms of economic development rather than social transformation. This is further exemplified by the frequent calls for curricula to be responsive to the needs of industry.

A performative approach to teaching excellence is a particular danger given the macro-political tensions discussed. The pull towards an economic rationalist discourse brings with it strong pressures to teach that which industry or government demands. Sometimes this is understood as being an immediate set of skills necessary for a specific job. Researchers (see, for example, McKenna and Sutherland, 2006) have raised concerns about whether the technical training of students ignores their capacity for critical engagement, problem solving and other flexible practices that industry ultimately requires in today's knowledge-based world.

A 'high-skills' or 'economic rationalist' discourse not only leaves little space for discourses of equity and transformation, but can also easily be misinterpreted as requiring teaching that simply transfers a specific set of workplace skills to a set of learners. Economic rationalist discourses sometimes translate into production-line teaching and learning, more progressive discourse is appropriated and used as a mask in a way which ensures that critical engagement can be shut down as anti-transformation. Thus it is difficult to resist notions of efficiency or effectiveness, which often run counter to any argument for more developmental teaching processes, smaller classes or more time without seeming to be unproductive or dilatory.

The economic needs of post-apartheid South Africa, coupled with the increasing demand for globalized knowledge and skills, make it difficult to argue against the primacy of performative training practices. 'The role of Higher Education in facilitating social benefits is viewed mainly through the prism of responsiveness to the "market"' (Singh, 2001: 11). Participation in a global economy cannot occur under terms that take no cognizance of our country's history or social development needs.

Outcomes-based education

In performative understandings of teaching excellence, systems are reified and the actual learning process becomes invisible. The collection of evidence and the

production of policies – these become quality in and of themselves, distanced and neutralized from the ideological terrain of the classroom. 'Tensions arise when the functioning of the system and sub-systems start to over-ride the logic of what makes sense to individuals in their local contexts and the demands and constraints of the system begin to colonise people's lifeworlds' (Luckett and Webbstock, 1999: 11).

A possible example of such an 'overriding' system was the introduction of OBE in South Africa. OBE was part of an attempt to align education to national and labour needs through a single integrated curriculum structure. But within the national move to OBE has come a subtle framing of teaching as an input within an industrial model premised on inputs, outputs and throughputs. Programme outcomes are registered nationally as part of the accreditation process. Outcomes, therefore, are predetermined and inherently problematic. Teaching excellence then becomes very rooted in the economic production process and systems are highlighted over contexts. This is reinforced in the funding policy for higher education in South Africa where the formula is based on terminology such as on 'teaching inputs' and 'teaching outputs' (DoE, 2004).

Quality assurance through institutional audits

The quality movement in South Africa, like that in the UK, also grapples with an inherent tension, that of being both evaluator and developer. This tension manifests itself through the terminology as it shifts between 'quality assurance', 'quality promotion', 'quality management' and 'quality enhancement'. On the one hand, mechanisms for tracking, monitoring and evaluating, that is, all the judgmental aspects, are a central focus within the national quality documents. On the other, there is constant reiteration in these documents that enabling and supporting development is key, and that bodies such as the HEQC see this as part of their mission. Webbstock (1999) outlines the need for institutions to balance these aspects:

> Universities will need somehow to strike a balance in whatever quality assurance systems they implement, between satisfying external authorities that they are being accountable, and in putting effort into bringing about improvements in quality where they think it is necessary. These are directions which are potentially antithetical; too much time spent on satisfying external bodies can lead to a 'culture of compliance', in which many quality assurance activities are undertaken to comply with demands, and which use up much time which could otherwise have been spent on improving the core functions of the university.
>
> (Webbstock, 1999: 16)

Although the institutional audit framework document, developed through the HEQC, stresses the developmental aspects of audit processes, there is a very real

tension inherent in HEQC documents (in particular between the audit framework document and the audit criteria and programme accreditation documents) between quality enhancement for development and the need to use quality assurance processes to address serious issues of mismanagement, incompetence and corruption evident in several institutions. The two key areas of institutional audit focus are governance and teaching and learning. In the compliance model that seems to be developing within some institutions, the letter of the criteria are being fulfilled (down to the smallest example provided) rather than the spirit of quality development which is so emphasized in many of the national quality documents (such as the audit framework document).

A key concept underpinning the introduction of the HEQC and the idea of institutional audits has been stakeholder inputs. The criteria were drawn up by academics from across various institutions, and all other institutions and stakeholders were called upon to comment on the process at various stages. The audits were piloted, resulting in amended criteria and audit procedures. The entire process is based on the notion that audits are undertaken by a 'panel of peers'. This inclusive process was intended to ensure ownership by the sector and reduce a performative approach to quality. The view was taken that an active involvement and iterative process would lead to a more critical engagement with the audit criteria and prevent institutions interpreting the criteria in reductionist ways.

However, Bundy (2004: 15) is cautious in his discussion of the introduction of institutional audits in South Africa and wonders whether 'South African Higher Education [will] become subject to the negative aspects associated with "the audit culture" elsewhere?'. Bundy proposes a need to be alert to the unintended outcomes associated with national audit procedures where the response to the policy becomes one of providing documentary evidence bearing little relation to classroom practice, or of educators who comply with 'correct' procedures but with little thought or enthusiasm, choosing rather to expend time on other aspects such as research. An example of this may be in completing templates for the registration of programmes or modules, or writing learner guides for students in courses because such documents are mandated, rather than because they are necessary for the learning process. Completion of such document templates, after a while, may be done quite automatically, copying from previous examples rather than as a reflective activity.

It is our view that if institutions enforce a performative approach to institutional audits, they run the real risk of suppressing teaching excellence. Teaching decisions become systems-driven rather than based on sound educational reasons, and in contexts such as these, there is no space left for contextualization and reflective teaching.

Quality monitoring through programme accreditation

Despite the attempts to ensure a participative and consultative process, as described above, the HEQC has the very real power of closing down

programmes. The effect this has had on institutions has been to increase the tension between developmental discourses and a more authoritarian approach to monitoring teaching practices. In 2003, the HEQC reviewed MBA degrees and the resultant de-accreditation of a number of programmes sent shockwaves

to dictate not only how resources are allocated but also what is valued in terms of teaching. In some cases the new managerial style has co-opted the audit process and used it as a threatening lever over academics. Any documentation that arises from the HEQC is interpreted as commands rather than as an opportunity for critical dialogue.

The HEQC discourses in themselves, however, seem to encourage a degree of criticality and are facilitative of change. For example, the Improving Teaching and Learning Guides produced by the HEQC state that 'self-evaluation can produce useful knowledge for reflection and improvement and contribute to curriculum innovation and creativity. The need for reflection and deliberation by those who teach should be recognised and encouraged by institutional managers' (CHE, 2004c: 27). But institutions can subvert these national documents and use them as rules and regulations. There is a panic around the audit and accreditation process that has little or no link to debates about teaching excellence.

The HEQC seem aware of the need for discussion around what constitutes teaching excellence and have not fallen into the trap of defining teaching excellence in the form of a performative checklist of criteria or 'tips for teachers'. In their Improving Teaching and Learning resources (CHE, 2004b: 9) they state that '"good practice" is contingent, context-dependent and defies generic description'. But sadly, in our experience, HEQC documents such as this one, and even the Audit Framework document, are read with far less scrutiny than the list of institutional audit criteria and programme accreditation criteria. The lists of criteria, with their examples of evidence, are not only poured over but read as being for literal implementation.

We therefore cannot assume a shared critical understanding of the term 'teaching excellence' in this politically volatile environment. If an institution, department or educator calls for 'excellence', we believe they need to overtly contextualize it as being within a framework that sees excellence as a hallmark of diversity and equity.

Conclusion

Within policy there is a precarious balance between encouraging developmental and formative approaches and more technicist approaches to teaching excellence. The forces at play in the transforming South African higher education landscape are pulling in a variety of directions. Within national policy and institutional processes, there remains the potential for critical engagement with notions of teaching excellence, but educators need to assert their professional authority to realize this potential. While traditional understandings of teaching excellence are not particularly visible at present due to the political incorrectness of elitism in our society, there is nevertheless the possibility that these will gain ground in an environment that encourages comparison on a global level and competes for scarce resources. A psychologized understanding of teaching excellence remains embedded within specific staff development programmes,

where educators may be encouraged to implement generic procedures to ensure that learners demonstrate set outcomes. With the introduction of national quality mechanisms in the particular macro-context of South Africa, the most prevalent understanding of teaching excellence appears to be a performative one. Educators may find themselves being pushed into compliance mode in a way which works against teaching excellence. Teaching becomes focused on providing specified evidence rather than being creative, responsive and reflective. While there are evident tensions within the flurry of higher education policy shifts in South Africa, space has been made within quality documents for critical engagement. Academics at all levels now need to claim these spaces, to consider the implications of policy implementation and to resist any construction of teaching excellence that is conceived in reductionist ways.