

Curriculum Responses to a Changing National and Global Environment in an African Context

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Introduction

Across the world there is concern that higher education systems and institutions should be responsive to the changes that are taking place in society in virtually every country. The nature of the changes however differ between geographic regions. Even within each region the specific changes often vary from country to country. The concern to adapt higher education to changing needs has resulted in a variety of reform programmes, and it is significant that the reforms, which are mostly driven by external stakeholders of higher education, such as governments and society as a whole, have generally focused on issues of structure and goals, access or participation, governance, and funding. For instance, following the major political changes in South Africa a National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) has recommended a framework for a fundamental transformation of higher education in the country. The central features of the framework recommended are:

- ▲ increased participation by a more diverse constituency of learners;
- ▲ greater responsiveness to a wider range of social and economic needs; and
- ▲ increased co-operation and more partnership between higher education and other social actors and institutions.

The Commission's report recognises that the transformation will have major implications for the curriculum of higher education institutions in terms of the "content and process of learning", which is the primary business of higher education. However, like similar reforms elsewhere, these implications

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are not addressed in detail. The unstated assumption seems to be that it is the higher education institutions themselves which should draw on the creativity of their academic communities to design and deliver programmes in response to the framework and goals outlined by the Commission.

The recommendations of the NCHE are the latest formulation of a programme of transformation of higher education in a country in Africa, embodying the accumulated wisdom and experience from decades of debate, and updating the thinking on what purpose higher education should serve in Africa. It is particularly helpful especially in the context of the recent history of South Africa to be reminded who the majority of learners will be. A compelling corollary of the changed context is that to be able to carry out their traditional and universally accepted educational objective of the development of analytical and critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving skills, higher education institutions must be committed to ensuring that all students, irrespective of race, colour, gender or age, derive maximum benefit from their higher education experience. A central issue to be addressed must therefore be what educational experiences are likely to result in attaining the objectives set out as the purpose of higher education for the particular population of students in the institutions, including especially those who were previously excluded.

Given the approach that it is the educational experience that must be transformed so as to attain the objective intended, higher education institutions have the responsibility to review, among other things, what their programmes offer in relation to relevance and effectiveness for giving to the population of students concerned the learning experience that will achieve the educational objectives and the social goals intended.

To restructure their curricula, a challenge for the institutions will be the evaluation of knowledge in relation to the function of achieving the educational purpose intended in the context applicable to the particular population of students in the institution. Furthermore, a consequence of the contemporary rapid growth in knowledge

and how rapidly it also becomes obsolete appears to be a shift from the importance of acquiring a particular body of knowledge in a discipline to the development of the skill to acquire new knowledge and the capacity to use knowledge as a resource in the context of the needs of society and at a level commensurate with higher education.

Institutions will in particular also need to be able critically to evaluate whether, as is often claimed in transformation debates, certain bodies of knowledge in a discipline are global (usually referring to aspects of a discipline that relate to Western society and values) while others are local and therefore presumably of lower intellectual status.

The sovereignty and necessary benevolence of universal scientific knowledge is now greeted everywhere, not in Africa alone or only in the developing world, with increasing public scepticism, and demands for accountability and relevance are increasingly heard. This places a searching spotlight on knowledge in the public arena, and new forms of participative methodology, new forms of quality assessment, and new forms of evaluation arise to assure the public that public knowledge is relevant, useful, and is in the public interest. This public concern about knowledge, far from putting a brake on knowledge production, is accompanied by a vast increase in knowledge work, knowledge-based innovation, and knowledge communication. Technology has of course greatly facilitated this process as has the dramatic increase in knowledge-based occupations. New knowledge is seen as the key to innovation, competitiveness, and social development. The institutions must engage this challenge and especially the question of whether global competitiveness and local relevance, innovation and cultural congeniality, usefulness and meaningfulness, are incompatible.

In the historical circumstances in which contemporary higher education institutions were first created in Africa, through colonial rule, it was inevitable that not only were the institutions (including especially their curricula) modelled after those in the metropolitan countries, but their leadership and most of their faculty also came from these sources. Even the few local people who were on their staff had also received their education from the metropolitan country.

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For them, these higher education models were what they were familiar with and it was not unusual for them to be regarded as the 'practice the world over'. For instance, one of the principles which guided the creation of universities in British colonial territories in Africa was that training be directed towards qualifications that were capable of recognition in Britain and would be acceptable to the universities there for the purpose of direct entry into postgraduate programmes, without the necessity of further undergraduate study (Maxwell 1980). Although this did not "preclude special teaching arrangements to meet local conditions" in some subjects, the curriculum in most cases was in fact structured to be close to that of London University at the time. In spite of the changes that have since taken place in the curriculum in London University there are universities in Africa whose curricula are still today based essentially on the old London model.

University communities in Africa have always seen themselves as part of the universal community of learning. In some countries, notably South Africa, this has given rise to what has been described as divided loyalties between "belonging to the international discourse communities of their discipline or sub-discipline" and "commitment to their local institution and community", in which the latter takes second place (Lockett 1993). Elsewhere in Africa, however, universities have insisted that their role cannot be merely to propagate what has come to them from other peoples and cultures, but that they have a special responsibility to contribute uniquely African dimensions to the 'international discourse' in their discipline, based on African experience and creativity, and to apply them to address the concerns of their own country. In the process, important contributions have been made and significant transformations have taken place in several disciplines as a result of work on Africa in African universities and elsewhere (Bates et al. 1993). Linkages with other researchers globally helped to validate these endeavours in the international scholarly community and gave confidence and recognition to the leading African scholars in the disciplines. Consequently, much of the material has become reflected in the content of the curriculum of many disciplines in African universities, which now have an African orientation, and has also had an

impact elsewhere on the orientation of several disciplines particularly in the humanities and social sciences.

Related to all of these is the attractive and entirely legitimate and desirable concern for global competitiveness. The NCHE recommendations formulate the social goal as "meeting, through responsive programmes, the vocational and employment needs of a developing economy aspiring to become and to remain internationally competitive". As stated earlier, the indications are that the demand is increasingly for skills to acquire new knowledge and the capacity to use knowledge as a resource in the context of the needs of a society, rather than the possession of a particular body of knowledge in a discipline. The challenge for higher education institutions is therefore to provide through their programmes the educational experience that will lead to the development of such skills in the population of learners that they have, taking into account the particular cultural circumstances and environment of the learners. In a world in which development is increasingly driven by advancement in science and technology, the need for such skills is usually recognised as self evident. But no less significant is the implication that even for those whose major disciplines are in other fields, their learning experience will now need to include a minimum level of scientific literacy and numeracy as well as an understanding of economic concepts especially in the context of their own society and as they relate to the rest of the world.

The essential role of culture and identity in education is reflected in recent debates in Great Britain and in Australia, for example. In Britain the debate has focused on what being British means today in multicultural Britain. The Australians, in spite of their largely British roots, are working hard towards defining their own culture and identity away from Britain, having realised and accepted where their presence and future are located, that is, in the Pacific region and not in Europe.

Identity

Most countries in Africa, and South Africa is no exception, find themselves facing the task of building fledgling democracies, nations of citizens for whom particular atavistic allegiances too often seem more compelling than national citizenly ones. Strong national discourses of reconciliation

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and unity are called for. Yet the pull of the global marketplace of commodities and ideas is strong. Some would say that the universalising influence of globalisation destroys local cultures, local patterns of life and sociality; counteracts and undercuts the national discourses of citizenship needed to nurture democracy and a culture of human rights. Is there a way of casting the question of curriculum development and change in a frame that accommodates and nurtures local cultures whilst stimulating the expertise needed to compete successfully in the global mainstream? Can the curriculum both conserve multicultures and promote the global mono-culture?

It is instructive that the South East Asian Tigers, which for many are the role model of globally competitive non-Western, newly industrialising societies, have developed an efficient economic management with a productive work force, and have modernised their technology without having to westernise or abandon their cultural identity, but rather have preserved a strong Asian and national identity. A century or more earlier, the United States, in spite of its predominantly European roots, fundamentally transformed its higher education system from the model which it had received from Europe to fit its own society and its economic and agricultural needs. For the first time academic pursuits were directly linked with social responsibility; innovations in how teaching was carried out and in course examinations were introduced; and novel institutional types hitherto, and some still, unknown in Europe were set up. Was this the foundation for what was to become a globally dominant economic and military superpower?

The literature of curriculum development in higher education is replete with responses by institutions especially in the USA to the cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity in their campuses (for a review, see Bowser 1995). Before then, racial minorities, African-Americans in particular, had resented the "exclusive Eurocentric focus and thrust ... and the strong Western bias of the education" that they were receiving which did not acknowledge what they saw as their own roots or values and did not recognise their sense of self-esteem or feeling of self-worth (Woodson 1977). In a review of diversity initiatives in 19 universities and colleges in the USA, Musil et

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al. (1995) describe how the institutions responded to the challenge to become more "inclusive institutions" by "creating a climate where previously excluded populations could thrive and not merely survive". The dramatic social and political changes in American society brought about by, among others, the civil rights and other social movements had resulted in new access to higher education being opened to sections of the population including racial minorities and women who were previously excluded or restricted, and led to a significantly altered composition of the student population in most institutions.

One consequence of the development was enormous tension on many campuses including some violent manifestations of racial and ethnic animosities, with "heated and sometimes acrimonious debates about the need for reform". Some argued that the quality of higher education had declined and saw a "direct correlation between the new populations and the decline in quality". They therefore called for a return to the "proud traditions of the fifties" and preservation of older, more mainstream Western traditions. On the other hand there were others who saw the solution "not in recreating institutions of exclusion" but in "productive dialogue on how to build more inclusive institutions" and in acknowledging how new scholarship such as that on non-Western cultures is "redefining fields and opening up new exciting areas of investigation". The Ford Foundation in its 'Campus Diversity Initiative' announced in 1990, "challenged higher education to embrace the rich diversity of American life in a manner that enhances the educational experiences of all students". In a public statement it said that "diversity ought to be woven into the academic life and purpose of the institution: valued by faculty, expressed through the curriculum, sustained and nourished through cultural expression and extracurricular life ... Our world is pluralistic and education cannot responsibly turn its back upon that reality". The Foundation offered financial support for the diversity initiatives of many institutions which it challenged "to be creative and thoughtful about how best to review their goals and purposes as they linked diversity to quality" (Musil et al. 1995).

Although the situation in the USA differs in several significant aspects from that in South Africa, there are some

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similarities in the issues which confront higher education in both countries. It might be valuable for higher education institutions in South Africa to review what lessons there may be

The other position focuses on the curriculum and its role in identity formation. Broadly, there are two streams here. The one approach emphasises individual identity, which evokes debates about autonomy, critical thought, independent judgement and the promotion of culture. This is the central concern of the institutional autonomists. The other approach focuses on collective identity. A forceful expression of this position comes from the Director-General of UNESCO at the Dakar Africa regional consultation (April 1997) where he emphasised the importance for governments and international funding agencies to invest in higher education to promote peace and democracy worldwide "since this is the true foundation for sustainable human development, a process which requires that higher education institutions enjoy autonomy and freedom exercised with responsibility". Higher education is cast here as an essential factor in citizenship education. The future citizen will be both local and global, and higher education must educate professionals "capable of sound reflection and responsible action". Higher education is here seen as an investment for a 'world democracy' that will discourage ethnicism, racism, sexism, narrow nationalism and fundamentalism.

Those who want to focus on identity and citizenship privilege culture and identity as central determinants of which knowledge gets into the curriculum. Those who focus on knowledge and development assert that globalisation of the economy and its influence on new knowledge production and dissemination is what will make nations part of the new competitive networked world, and must therefore not only dictate the content of the curriculum, but also its form. Whilst these two approaches are not in direct conflict with each other they do generate a tension about the content and form of the curriculum which must be further explored.

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Biography

DONALD EKONG Current Position: Scholar-in-Residence in the Ford Foundation Office in South Africa (since 1996). Resident consultant with CHET.

Previous Positions: Chairman of the Planning Committee of the College of Technology, Calabar (1972-73) and first Chairman of the Governing Council of the college (1973-76); founding Principal of the Calabar campus of the University of Nigeria (1973-75), later the University of Calabar; founding Principal/Vice-Chancellor of the University/College of Port Harcourt (1975-82); Chairman, Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board for Nigerian Universities (1979-82); Chairman, Committee of Vice-Chancellors of Nigerian Universities (1981-82); founding Vice-Chancellor of the Cross River State University, now University of Uyo (1983-87).

Secretary General, Association of African Universities (1987-95); co-directed several association studies on higher education in Africa and SUMA training workshops for African university vice-chancellors/rectors.

NICO CLOETE

Current Position: Director of CHET

Previous Positions: Research Director for NCHE, Co-ordinator of the Post Secondary Education report of the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) and the Policy Forum of the Union of Democratic University Staff Associations (UDUSA). Worked at numerous South African universities including the University of the North, Transkei and Witwatersrand where his teaching and research was mainly concerned with psychology and student services.

Research interests primarily in education policy and the role of intellectuals in politics and knowledge production.

Was actively involved in academic staff organisation: General Secretary of UDUSA (1993/4) and President of the Wits Staff Association (1991/2).

Serves on the Advisory Council for Universities and Technikons. Prepared reports for government and NGOs on education policy and has published widely in psychology, sociology and education.