

Accounting for change: the micropolitics of university restructuring

Part two: changing structures, contesting identities

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ABSTRACT

This second article in a three-part series published in the *South African Journal of Higher Education* describes the various ways in which "academic identity" informed the politics and shaped the outcomes of "restructuring" at the University of Durban Westville (UDW) in the late 1990s. The authors argue that while "restructuring" appears to be a process concerned with organisational and programmatic changes within the university, the effects of such reorganisation is to challenge established identities. At UDW the restructuring process generate an intense *micropolitics* across the campus because it had the effect of recasting ethnic identities (the case of the Indian languages) disciplinary identities (the case of political science philosophy, and public administration) and professional identities (the case of the engineering faculty). The authors conclude that without grasping the underlying shifts in identity that inevitably accompany restructuring, university leaders and administrators run the risk of alienating the very constituencies from which they seek "buy-in" for radical change proposals. And without taking account of the politics of identity, attempts to theorise institutional change might falter by mistaking formal or superficial reorganisation for substantive or deep change.

INTRODUCTION

The first article in this series presented a broad analytic narrative on "the micropolitics of university restructuring" at the University of Durban Westville (UDW), South Africa (see Gibbon *et al* 2000). This second article describes three case studies of restructuring during this intense period of change (1998-1999) to demonstrate the various

ways in which "academic identity" informed the politics and shaped the outcomes of change. The case studies selected for analysis are the Indian language departments; the Departments of Political Science, Philosophy and Public Administration; and the Faculty of Engineering. Each case foregrounds unique yet complementary perspectives on the politics of academic identity in university restructuring.

A CONCEPTUAL MAP FOR READING THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

Our thesis is that while "restructuring" appears to be a process concerned with organisational and programmatic changes within the university, the effects of such reorganisation is to challenge established ethnic, disciplinary and professional identities. "Academic identity" in the university expresses itself in many different ways (Kogan 2000). Academics hold a particular *racial or ethnic identity* and, where universities were historically created for particular racial or ethnic groups, such an identity could shape the terms of academic restructuring (Jansen 1999). Academics are often bound together by a *disciplinary identity*, since they are also members of a particular knowledge culture with a specific set of methods, discourses and standards (Becher 1989). Where disciplinary identity is challenged in academic restructuring, affiliation to such groups often emerge as a powerful bloc within the university. And academics share a *professional identity* with "their own moral and conceptual frameworks, but also performing a range of roles which are strongly determined by the communities and institutions of which they are members" (Kogan 2000:210). This article will demonstrate how academic restructuring generated an intense micropolitics at UDW not simply because of the physical or financial reorganisation of the University, but as a result of the altering of identities that underpinned the change proposals.

CASE STUDY I: CONTESTING INDIAN IDENTITY

The University of Durban-Westville is the only higher education institution in the country to have formally accommodated the religion and culture of the Indian South African community. Such recognition came in the form of University holidays honouring religious occasions, such

universities. Furthermore, even if Indian student numbers were to increase significantly, these students were more inclined to pursue careers in science, commerce and technology. Simply stated, there was no longer a demand even among Indian students for Indian languages.

- Relocating Indian Languages under a Centre for Continuing Education — this would have meant imposing a business model whereby these disciplines would have to operate on a cost recovery basis. Given the decline in demand for these languages within the broader Indian community, coupled with the cost of maintaining these disciplines, it was always unlikely that this option would have generated the kinds of revenue that would be needed to sustain the Indian languages.
- Retrenching staff— Indian languages is not a homogeneous grouping of languages. Rather, it is a composite of different vernaculars and dialects, each requiring its own specialists. As one academic noted during the course of a re-deployment interview, one cannot re-deploy a Telegu lecturer to teach Tamil, this despite assurances from the "Telegu" academic in question that she was competent to teach Tamil. One could argue that this was simply a ploy to protect language turf. Nevertheless, each Indian Language is highly specialised and it therefore was difficult to retrench staff, even if one or more languages were under-subscribed. There was another serious consideration: any decision on the part of the University to retain a few Indian languages and discontinue others would have caused deep divisions and acrimony *within* the Indian community across caste lines.

The ideological link between Indian languages and the Indian South African community proved, in the end, to be its undoing. Unable to attract Indian students, and not having marketed itself as languages that had mass appeal, meant that these disciplines more than others would be vulnerable to changes in student composition. The SPTT insisted that to be intellectually viable and financially sustainable in the long-term, Indian languages needed to be "de-ethnicised". They had to be re-packaged in ways that would make it an attractive option for all students, regardless of race and ethnicity. The linking of Indian languages to the training of students for the Foreign Service was one possible way in which these disciplines could have been "de-ethnicised". However, for this to succeed it required a new cadre of academics who (1) were prepared to think beyond the narrow confines of their ethnically-based disciplines, and (2) would declare themselves open to new forms of knowledge production that transcended ethnic claims. Many of the academics teaching Indian languages were simply not prepared or trained to confront these new demands.

The case of the Indian languages was particularly

susceptible to the charge that restructuring was in fact only about cost savings and operational efficiency. As this case study illustrates, it was not that simple. Restructuring "Indian languages" was, fundamentally, about restructuring identities. Challenges to the closure of Indian languages were as much a struggle for identity recognition in post-apartheid South Africa as it was a fight for the survival of the languages. From the perspective of the SPTT, Indian languages became the test case for affirming Indians, not as a minority group of South Africans, but as a fully integrated member of a democratic social order in which all citizens are accorded equal status and access to the disciplines.

CASE STUDY II: CREATING THE NEW CIVIL SERVANT

An equally contentious case in the restructuring process was the attempted merger of the Departments of Philosophy, Political Science and Public Administration into a single School of Governance. The merger was controversial for a number of reasons. First, it involved the amalgamation of related disciplines which, for political and other reasons, had over a number of years evolved into separate organisational entities with distinct staff, programmes and identities. Second, these departments resided in separate Faculties with strong and long-established disciplinary identities. The Departments of Philosophy and Political Science were housed in the Faculty of Arts, while Public Administration resided in the Faculty of Commerce. Both Political Science and Public Administration generated high levels of subsidy for the University, and all three disciplines provided much needed academic legitimacy and respectability to their Faculties. Third, all three departments had highly regarded staff (at least three of whom were represented on the SPTT) with strong personalities, deeply entrenched disciplinary identities, and who were not reluctant to voice their views on the subject of merger even in the case where it involved making a critical judgement on one of the other disciplines.

The SPTT proposed the structural merger on two grounds. First, the SPTT argued that the merger would enable the establishment of an inter-disciplinary academic teaching and research program that would be directed to producing the new civil servant, one with a progressive political vision, technical skills, and a commitment to democracy and the delivery of social services to historically disadvantaged communities in South Africa. Second, the SPTT maintained that the merger of the three departments was financially sensible as it pooled together the resources and facilities of related disciplines and forced them to engage with each other on the teaching and research programme established by the institution. Predictably, all three departments opposed the merger. In addition

to the general complaint that the restructuring undermined the disciplinary identities of departments, and was motivated by financial rather than academic concerns, some staff in the three departments raised questions about the academic credibility about their proposed partners. Staff in Philosophy for instance, questioned the academic credibility of Public Administration and even went as far as to suggest that it belonged in a technikon rather than a university. In response, Public Administration staff questioned the relevance of Philosophy to the contemporary academic enterprise, and suggested that its financial difficulties lay precisely in their academic irrelevance. In the end, disciplinary arrogance did not prevent the structural merger, as both Senate and Council approved the SPTT proposal.

Once it was realized that the structural merger was a *fait accompli*, the terms of the battle changed to the location of the School of Governance and the content of its programmes. Both the new Faculties of Humanities and Law, Economic & Management Sciences fought to host the School of Governance, in particular because of its actual and potential profitability which resulted largely from large numbers of black students attracted to Public Administration. This attraction of course arose from the realization that state departments were at the forefront of implementing affirmative action programmes and, as a result, an employment market was opening up for black graduates in the civil service. But finances were not the sole reason for wanting to host the School of Governance. Indeed, both the SPTT and academic staff within and outside the new school recognized that the faculty site would have an important impact on the substantive content of the curriculum. And the contestants in the debate on the school's academic programmes ultimately predicated their proposals on contested visions of the new post-apartheid civil servant.

These visions of the post-apartheid civil servant were never formally articulated. But they were implicit in many of the academic proposals advanced by one or other of the contestants. On the one hand, academics associated with Public Administration advanced an academic program that prioritized technical and administrative skills like budgeting, basic accounting, etc. In this vision, the civil servant need only be a capable administrator tasked with the responsibility of effecting decisions and administering public policy programmes determined elsewhere. On the other hand, academics associated with Philosophy and Political Science saw the civil servant as being more than a simple administrator — indeed, they prioritized the development of what they saw as a critical leader committed to democracy, and the service of society and all its citizens. The academic program thus advanced was designed to provide conceptual skills that would enable graduates to contextualize their role within their political and social environment, to

understand South Africa's location in a world community, and most importantly to understand how to service a critical citizenry.

Interestingly, the academic contestants in this debate preferred to be hosted by different faculties. Academics associated with Public Administration preferred to be housed in the Faculty of Law, Economics and Management Sciences, while the philosophers made no secret of the fact that their vision of a graduate would most easily be realized in the Faculty of Humanities. Political Science seemed to prefer the Humanities but, as a result of the pragmatism of its Head, tended to adopt a nonchalant attitude arguing that it would feel comfortable in either Faculty. The SPTT bent in favour of the philosophers and supported the placement of the School of Governance in the Faculty of Humanities. Two factors motivated this decision. First, the SPTT supported the vision of a critical civil servant and felt that this would most easily be realized within the Faculty of Humanities. Second, the SPTT was concerned about the financial viability of Humanities and hoped that a profitable School of Governance would balance that Faculty's books. The result was a motivation by the SPTT that the School of Governance be located in the Faculty of Humanities.

The University Council, however, felt differently. Some prominent council members stressed the technical skills required by civil servants and supported the proposal by public administration that the school be housed in the Faculty of Law, Economics & Management Sciences. Unable to decide, the Council meeting returned the matter for further deliberation to the parties involved. The SPTT balked at the council decision, with the result that an uneasy compromise was ultimately reached in discussions with the Departments of Philosophy, Political Science and Public Administration. The compromise involved listing the School of Governance in both the Faculties of Humanities and Law, Economics and Management Sciences. Administrative governance was to be rotated between the faculties, but it was decided to locate this responsibility in the first two years in the Faculty of Law, Economics & Management Sciences.

In sum, it would be a mistake to read this debate as a concern only about financial viability. The debate, at its roots, concerned contested visions of the identity of the new civil servant: a highly skilled technician or a critical administrator with both conceptual and technical skills to serve an emerging democracy. The kind of civil servant to be produced was intimately linked to a particular disciplinary identity. In Tony Becher's anthropological metaphor, this was classic warfare between "academic tribes" inhabiting bounded territories with their own values, beliefs and rituals. The disciplinary war point of the civil servant was at stake (see also Ylijoki 2000; McWilliam & Green *et al* 2000).

Ultimately, the structural location of Political Science, Philosophy and Public Administration could have a telling effect on what kind of civil servant emerges from the collective curriculum of these three disciplines. It is too early to tell.

CASE STUDY III: CHANGING THE IDENTITY OF THE ENGINEER

The Faculty of Engineering at UDW was a particularly strong candidate for "restructuring" — if not closure. On the one hand, student numbers were low, student failure rates were high (something penalised in the state subsidy formula), and staffing costs were excessive — in part because of salary subventions offered to professional engineers teaching in universities. The financial deficit was not only high (several million rands per annum) but was sustained over several academic years. A crisis loomed even as the university was burdened by the fact that closure would mean the end of the only historically black university offering engineering education. In searching for solutions, various university leaders stumbled on the Warwick Manufacturing Group that offered a model of engineering education showing promise within the South African context. Studied, refined and adapted to the South African context, the Morgan University Alliance took the lead in developing the so-called "Warwick Model" at UDW. The following represent critical features of this new model of engineering education:

1. the model represented a partnership between business and industry, a South African university (UDW), the Morgan University Alliance (a South African group acting as facilitator of faculty exchange programmes and university-business partnerships), the MUCIA Global Group (a partnership of several top North American Universities offering modular-based engineering and business training on demand), and the Warwick Manufacturing Group (offering technical assistance, consultancy support and accreditation). This model was recommended and supported by government, through the Offices of the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology — providing initial consultancy support and contact with Warwick.
2. the model brought together the UDW Graduate School of Business (GSB), the Faculty of Engineering, and the Faculty of Science. The GSB's involvement came as a result of the recognition of the fact that increasingly, an engineering graduate required business skills, including financial management and marketing, to be able to function effectively in the private sector.
3. the model is based on complementary functions and specialisations offered by different partners in what is called "the partnership programme".

The university (UDW) provides the professors who teach the modules. The Warwick alliance facilitates the travel of international consultants (Professors at USA and UK universities) to teach those modules for which local expertise is not readily available. The industrial partners provide the "live laboratory" within which engineering students (employees of the firm) "learn while they work" and "work while they learn".

4. the model means that the UDW professor who could previously assume tenure for life, now had a career shaped by the availability and relevance of his or her expertise to modules influenced and shaped by the demands emerging from industry. The professor is hired on a contract basis to fulfil specific tasks on pre-designed modules. But the professor also has the option of raising funds to establish a research "centre of excellence" and to attract post-graduate students into that centre for degree purposes.
5. the model assumes (as should be evident from earlier descriptions) that the engineering students are working employees of a particular industry. These industrial partners therefore do not lose their staff to five to seven years of theory-biased training on a distant campus. Rather, the students are trained in the workplace in application contexts immediately relevant to their daily operation.
6. the model is based on intensive and ongoing negotiations between the different partners. This is expensive and inevitable. Industry has to "deliver" the students to this innovative training programme and pay the costs of such development. The university has to agree to running an engineering programme from a distance, and the staff has to be persuaded that constant travel to and location within industry would displace the office- and campus-based tradition with which they are familiar and comfortable. Crucially, staff would have to be persuaded that short-term contracts would replace life-long tenure.

Over the course of about 12 months, the struggle to restructure engineering in terms of the Warwick model was fiercely resisted by the majority, if not all, professors in this Faculty. The real threat of closure did bring the senior professors of Engineering into countless numbers of meetings to discuss and design the partnership model. But the wheels came off for several reasons, the most important being two critical concerns of engineering academics at UDW.

First, the engineering academics were not prepared to abandon the four traditional disciplines (chemical, electrical, mechanical and civil engineering). They were trained and socialised within their disciplines, and any venture into trans-disciplinary opportunities would be made tentatively, and in limited ways, from the security of the discipline. It became clear that many (though not all) academics simply could not

comprehend, let alone buy-into, the new intellectual identity they would have to assume in the partnership model.

Second, the engineering academics understood that the new model required a more active role in recruiting students and funding for research centres of excellence. Their employment depended on the assumption of new roles and identities. Salaried, permanent or even long-term contract employment was now dependent on success as teacher, researcher and entrepreneur. And these centres of excellence typically required a broader integration of cross-disciplinary involvement than the "big four" fields. The new model, in short, entailed

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