
The nature of knowledge and organisation: the case of four institutional types in South Africa

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Abstract

The article contributes to the continuing debate on changing roles, functions and goals of higher education in the twenty-first century in general and in South Africa, and how the changes are impacting on the knowledge production and the organisation, planning of learning programmes and the role of academics in the current global economy. I argue that there has been a significant shift from critical inquiry encapsulated in disciplines, towards utilitarianism driven by performativity in higher education. This shift, it is argued, has triggered new thinking about the nature of knowledge and its production in the current global and market economy and in South Africa. I further claim that the shift has shaped the nature of knowledge, the role and goals of higher education, how learning programmes are organised, and the role of academics. The discourses I argue tend to underplay the social responsibility of higher education, the development of disciplines that are central to development and encroach upon the unique role of academics in universities.

Introduction

The socio-economic changes of the second half of the twenty-first century continue to impact on the higher education sector, shaping its roles, functions, goals and the nature of the knowledge produced and its organisation. This article seeks to make a contribution the extent to which the current socio-economic conditions are directly or indirectly driving the current changes in the higher education sector. It is argued that the elevation of a utilitarian aspect of higher education has been buttressed by the discourses of performativity, mercantilisation, commercialisation and commodification of knowledge. Similarly, the article also examines the extent to which the discourses identified above have shaped debates about the place of distinctive disciplines on the one hand, and the apparent support for an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum contrition and knowledge organisation on the other.

The question I am responding to is: ‘How have the socio-economic changes of the second half of the twenty-first century impacted on the roles and goals of

higher education and how have these changes impacted on policy and practice?’ Issues discussed are shifts that have occurred in the role and goals of higher education in the current socio-economic conditions, and changes in the nature of knowledge and its production, curriculum construction and the organisation of knowledge in learning programmes.

The discussions in this article draw from works of, *inter alia*, Lyotard (1984); Castells (1997; 2000) and Bernstein (2000). Lyotard’s thesis is used because, even though his work appeared 25 years ago, this work resonates with the current technological, network and informational society postulated by Castells as well the conditions of global competition predicted in the second half of the twenty-first century.

Thus Lyotardian post-modernist condition discussed in this article refers to a period typified by a paradigm that questions the grand narratives of the Enlightenment ideal, which in turn claims neutrality and stands aloof from the contamination or influence of power relations (Zembylas, 2000). The post-modernist paradigm therefore recognises the diversity and heterogeneity that characterise twenty-first century societies (Zembylas, 2000). In this sense, post-modernism resounds with the values of multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies and the promotion of the politics of differences that symbolise the democracies of twenty-first century (Kumar, 1997). Mercantilisation, however, is a metaphor that portrays knowledge as a marketable and saleable commodity.

According to Crook, Pakulski and Waters (1992, p.31 in Bloland, 1995, p.536) performativity is the “capacity to deliver outputs at the lowest cost and replaces truth as the yardstick of knowledge” where the technical usefulness of knowledge is determined by its efficiency and its transmutability into information (computer) knowledge. In this environment, therefore, effectiveness and efficiency have become exclusive criteria for judging knowledge and its worth in colleges and universities.

Embedded in the input/output model, performativity has engendered a new genre of epistemological questions about the nature of knowledge and the notion of responsiveness of higher education. Consequently, the question: “Is it true?” is replaced by: “Of what use is it?”, and in the context of the mercantilisation of knowledge, the question becomes: “Is it saleable?” (Bennington and Massumi 1984, pp.4–5, p.51). Similarly, “Is it just?” and “Is

it morally important?” are reduced to “Is it efficient?”, “Is it marketable?”, and “Is it translatable into quantities of information?” (Bloland, 1995, p.536).

Methodology and approaches

The data for this article was obtained from a case study comprising twelve academics at two historically advantaged and two historically disadvantaged higher learning institutions in South Africa. The sample comprised: three senior male managers in three institutions and one female at the fourth institution; five male senior and junior academics, and three senior and junior female academics. Purposeful sampling was the preferred means to select a small number of participants who, because of their daily involvement with the issues that are the focus of this paper and also their experience, would be able to provide the required information. Thus it should be noted that their responses do not represent the views of other academics across the entire higher education sector but rather underline the idiosyncratic characteristics of the chosen institutional types. A literature review theoretical, philosophical sources and South African policy documents are also sources used in the data gathering process.

The participants were academic planners, senior and junior academic staff members, and staff managing the various learning programmes at these institutions. They were initially requested to respond to ten semi-structured questions on the changes in higher education in South Africa, the changing discourse in the sector, the place of disciplines and the organisation of learning programmes, discipline-based as opposed to interdisciplinary-based planning including the effects of rationalisation and influence of markets and professional bodies on the organisation of learning programmes. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with eight informants while four interviews were conducted telephonically.

Theoretical-conceptual frameworks and related literature

Knowledge in computerised societies

Lyotard (1984) postulates that the status of knowledge has changed as economies enter the post-industrial age and culture enters the post-modern era. Through the computerisation of society therefore, knowledge has become the principal force of production while simultaneously being itself transformed into a commodity. According to Cowen (1996), Lyotard's thesis pioneers a unique philosophy on the ways in which knowledge is linked to technology, but also on the way in which it becomes a technology subject to performativity rather than the test of truth.

In terms of Lyotard's thesis, knowledge was legitimated by metanarratives at the close of the modern era, but is legitimated by the performativity-based technological criterion of the technological model within the postmodern context. Based on the technological model, performativity advocates measurement of the input/output ratio of performance and has shaped, and continues to shape, the nature of knowledge and its production (Woodward, 2006; Zembylas, 2000).

Hutton (1995, p.21) asserts that, in this environment of performativity, institutions of higher learning have been turned into "factories" that produce degree holders, and their teaching staff are being "controlled" by the ranking of their publications in specialised journals in a competitive system of performance tests upon which funding, and even job prospects, depend.

In the industry-driven research therefore:

knowledge is, and will be produced in order to be sold and will be consumed in order to be valorised in a new production. . . knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its 'user-value' . . . knowledge has become the principal force of production over the last few decades (Bennington and Massumi, 1984, pp.4–5).

Subotzky (1997) agrees with the above perspective that the discourse of global economy and technological advancement has given rise to a new discourse in higher education. This discourse is captured in the notion of a 'market university', and means that knowledge may now be manufactured and sold, with students becoming commodities essential to the survival of universities.

Similarly, Castells argues for the acknowledgement of the interrelatedness of the new economy, informationalism and informational technology, globalisation and networking in the twenty-first century (1997, 2000). According to Castells, the twenty-first century society can reasonably be typified as knowledge-based, informational and network-based, global-driven and technology-driven (Castells, 1997, 2000).

The competing perspectives on the nature of knowledge and how it is legitimated conjures up the notion of a university in different historical epochs. For instance, the Humboldtian University of the German tradition, which is the prototype for the classical notion of a university in the European context was founded on the classical humanistic concept of *bildung*, which distinguishes general education from usefulness and target-oriented education (Hartwig, 2007). *Bildung* can be translated as the formation of the person (ality) and refers to the cultivation of the inner life of the human soul, mind and human person (Biesta, 2002). *Allgemeinbildung* that characterised the Humboldtian university advocates the acquisition of competence to achieve self-determination, constructive participation in society, and solidarity towards persons, limited in the competence to participate in the process of deepening democracy (Elmore and Roth, 2005; Bauer, 2003; Prance 2004; Elmore and Roth, 2005).

The notion of the Humboldtian university has engendered two diverse and competing approaches to the roles and functions of a university. In terms of the first, higher education should impart skills for careers and professions, and in terms of the second, higher education has a formative role necessary to develop critical thinking and reflective inquiry.

Another key feature of the Humboldtian university is the value it places on unrestricted academic freedom that allows academics to determine the topics they wish to research and teach (Doepke, 2008).

However, Hartwig (2007) reminds us that the traditional Humboldtian university was never designed to equip a mass of people to fill specific occupations but rather focused on a minority of students who were to take a deep interest in the science and research that were the basis for its success.

The discussions so far have highlighted diverse and competing perspectives and approaches on what the roles and goals of higher education should be in different contexts and historical epochs. A phenomenon that is clearly

emerging is the over-exaggerated distinction between the utilitarian and the critical inquiry dimensions of higher education.

The decline of distinctive disciplines and the rise of interdisciplinary in curriculum planning

In defence of distinctive disciplines, the Humboldtian university tradition asserts that each science has its own place in the system and any encroachment by one science into another's field of study creates confusion, or 'noise', in the system (Bennington and Massumi, 1984).

Under the banner of interdisciplinary studies, higher education must provide skills, transmit knowledge, and offer training in all procedures capable of connecting fields jealously kept separate by the traditional organisation of knowledge (Bennington and Massumi, 1984). Thus, interdisciplinary curriculum planning has become a widely accepted approach to organising knowledge in higher education in the areas of teaching, research and the planning of learning programmes in order to make the sector responsive to the conditions of the twenty-first century. In this paper, interdisciplinary planning epitomises curriculum planning involving a close collaboration across disciplines or faculties or schools or units. Transdisciplinary curriculum planning is typified by greater horizontal rather than vertical articulation, by reduced but not completely eliminated insularity between disciplines, and sometimes by fragmented disciplinary offerings in modules that are more or less strongly insulated, vertically organised subject areas (Ensor, 2001). Transdisciplinary planning on the other hand refers to collaboration across faculties, fields or areas of studies, courses and programmes while multidisciplinary planning refers to a curriculum constructed around a variety of disciplines (Ensor, 2001).

Interdisciplinary planning stems, first, from the assertion that intellectual problems lie at the conjunction of different forms of thought and, second and separately, from the assertion that the problems of the contemporary world do not present themselves neatly according to the disciplinary formations of the academic world, but instead call for an integration of intellectual forces (Barnett, 2000).

Despite the nuanced difference between multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary planning, in practice the three are often conflated.

Accordingly, the term interdisciplinary planning is often used to cover everything including teaching and the design of curriculum by a group of academics in the same discipline with little consideration of epistemologies underpinning the horizontal and/or vertical articulation that may be at play in the process.

Advocates of the Humboldtian university would therefore take issue with the interdisciplinary approach to knowledge production and research that seems to have permeated curricula in higher education in the second half of the twenty-first century.

Liotard (Bennington and Massumi, 1984), however, takes issue with epistemology underpinning interdisciplinary planning for the following reasons:

1. In terms of the interdisciplinary approach, knowledge is not articulated in terms of the realisation of the spirit or the emancipation of humanity, but in terms of conceptual and material machinery and those who benefit from its performance capabilities.
2. The motive behind teamwork in the interdisciplinary approach suggests the predominance of the criterion of performativity in knowledge production.
3. Teamwork improves performance only if carried out under certain conditions described long ago by social scientists, and is successful in improving performativity within a given model's framework for the implementation of a task.
4. The advantage of interdisciplinary planning is less certain when there is a need to 'imagine' new models on the level of their conception.

It is also instructive to draw from Basil Bernstein's (2000) analytical framework comprising three elements of curriculum construction. His framework comprises (i) The singular which cover traditional subjects including sociology, psychology and mathematics. This mode according to Bernstein encourages the formation of identities centred on 'inwardness'. (ii) Regionalisation encompasses marketing studies, nursing, educational evaluation studies, and educational studies that has assumed qualitatively different significance in recent decades. Bernstein argues that regionalisation

is a discursive procedure that “threatens pedagogic cultures dominated by singulars and raises issues of legitimacy for such cultures”. (iii) The generic pedagogic form characterised by “key skills”, “thinking”, “team work”, “learning skills” (2000, p.189).

Bernstein’s framework is useful in understanding the ongoing-discussions on disciplined-based, interdisciplinary and programme-based planning and organisation of learning programmes within the context of curriculum restructuring in higher education in post-apartheid environment (Moore, 2000) and Ensor (1998; 2001). Moore distinguishes between “the macro-level of broad disciplinary knowledge structures and the micro-level of curriculum structures within a particular institution” (2000, p.186). It is necessary to differentiate between curriculum construction comprising of collection-type and the integrated-type curriculum (Ensor, 1998, 2001; Moore 2000). Collection-type curriculum refers to an arrangement where content/disciplines remain insulated from each other and contents stand in a closed relation to each other. On the other hand, an integrated type curriculum is where classificatory boundaries are weak and “where the contents stand in an open relation to each other” (Bernstein, 1975, p.88).

The South African case

Programme-based, qualification-based and discipline-based design

Policy documents developed after the first democratic elections of 1994 acknowledge that the South African society is increasingly becoming knowledge, information and network-based, global, and technologically driven and that the restructuring of curricula in higher education should reflect these changes. In particular, the synthesis report of the Department of Arts, Culture, Sciences and Technology (DACST) highlights the need to advance information technology, biotechnology and new materials technology, and to integrate science and technology as a means of supporting emerging knowledge (DACST, 1996, pp.6, 199). This position is both directly and implicitly supported in the Education White Paper 3 (1997) and The National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa (the Plan) (Department of Education, 2001).

Conceding to the pressures brought about by changing socio-economic conditions, the National Committee on Higher Education Report Curriculum

recommended that learning programmes in higher education should be based on programme-based planning, as opposed to being based on qualifications-based planning in order to diversify access, promote acceleration, as well as vertical and horizontal mobility (Human Sciences Research Council, 1996). Embedded in the recommended changes is the assumption that programme-based planning will encourage the required shift from collection-based what? to integrated-type planning (transdisciplinarity) currently considered to be reflective of the current conditions permeating higher education.

The programme-based approach differs from the conventional qualification-based approach in that the former recognises that higher education takes place in a multiplicity of institutions and sites of learning, using a variety of methods, and attracting an increasingly diverse body of (Department of Education, 1997a, p.17).

A programme is a purposeful and structured set of learning experiences that leads to a qualification and all programmes have broad areas of specialisation (Department of Education, 1997a). A programme may be interdisciplinary, discipline-based, professional, career-focused, or trans-, inter- or multi-disciplinary in nature, and therefore offsets narrow conventional discipline-based planning (Department of Education 2007a).

However, a qualification is the formal recognition and certification of learning achievement awarded by an accredited institution. A qualification should include critical cross-field or generic skills to promote lifelong learning as well as discipline, domain-specific or specialised knowledge, skills and reflexivity.

Prior to the abolition of the binary policy, learning programmes in the South African technikon sector were governed by the general policy for technikons and formal technikon instructional programmes and therefore designed in terms of a programme-based approach (Department of Education, 2007b). The term 'binary' refers to a policy that differentiates universities from other institutions of higher learning (technikons, polytechnics) in terms of mission, roles and goals, governance, etc.

Conversely, prior to the process of reconfiguring higher education, learning programmes in the university sector were governed by a qualification structure for universities in South Africa, the Revised Qualifications Framework for educators and norms and standards for educators in school education (Department of Education, 2007b). However, in practice, the nuanced differences between qualification and programme have been less clear in

higher education in South Africa. It is hoped that the Higher Education Qualifications Framework of 2007 that currently governs qualification higher qualifications framework will shed light on this issue when it states that learning programmes should be disciplined (Department of Education, 2007).

Two studies conducted at the University of Cape Town provide useful insights into the continuing debate on curricula construction in the context of the transformation of higher education in South Africa since the 1994 democratic elections.

Moore (2000) examined a case study based on the foundation course in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Cape Town (UCT) using collection-type and integrated-type curriculum construction. The findings from this research highlight issues on curriculum construction and therefore are germane to this paper. First, the disciplinary framework of the original course in History that was constructed to enable the deconstruction process of contemporary political symbols (black and white) was not recontextualised into the foundation course. This was partially because of local socio-politics, and somewhat because of the pressure towards to produce generic form of knowledge. Second, the “process of trying to derive generic competences in the academic context runs the risk of silencing the necessary disciplinary basis for the achievement of such performance” (Moore, 2000, p.192). In defence of a disciplinary foundation, Moore makes an interesting comment that “although we may be able to describe skilled performances in generic terms, these skills may be the result of detailed training in specific disciplinary methods” (p.192).

In another study, Ensor (1998) argued that the implementation of programmes at UCT created a pressure to shift, and in some cases a weakening of classificatory relations, in order to achieve a greater openness of subject areas in relation to each other and a weakening of framing relations so as to promote greater responsiveness to the needs of students. Furthermore, the shift from the previous degree structure to academic programmes remains controversial as it raises questions about the university and its modes of academic and administrative organisation.

Results and discussions of the four institutional types

The participants all endorsed the view that South African society in the twenty-first century resonates with many characteristics of Lyotardian and

Castellian society. Accordingly, they affirmed claims in the literature that in the same ways as the Lyotardian and Castellian societies shaped higher education, so do the socio-economic conditions of the second half of the twenty-first century. According to the participants, these social-economic conditions have clearly led to performativity becoming a criterion to judge the nature of knowledge.

The participants expressed misgivings about the current changes arguing that these have triggered the discourses of mercantilisation and commodification of knowledge, and have reduced universities to businesses and turned academics into managers of higher education in South Africa. A senior academic had this to say about this issue: “Academics have become functionaries and administrators and not academics any longer and this reduces true academics to production machines in a production process.”

There was a general consensus among participants that with the technological model of education planning dominating higher education, the utilitarian role of higher education has been implicitly elevated above its developmental and critical inquiry role. In the literature, a senior academic articulated the competing perspectives of utilitarianism and critical inquiry thus:

I am not sure whether truth is still a common denominator for all programmes in the faculty and what works seems to be pragmatism. For me when individual learners learn better they become successful in the examination (a measurable) of life. These contrasts with the views of my colleagues who argue that education should promote social justice.

The view articulated above underscores the ongoing contest between the utilitarian justification, and the developmental and critical inquiry role traditionally played by universities through the ages. Also consistent with reservations in the literature on the utilitarian role of higher education, participants all argued that the proposed notion of a ‘market university’ de-professionalises academics and researchers, turning them into administrators and managers instead of confirming their status as scholars and co-creators of knowledge.

Another feature of the current changes mentioned by the participants was the increasing use of performance appraisals as a tool to confirm tenure and promotion of academics in many South African universities. The participants all expressed strong reservations about performance appraisals arguing that this system that was clearly borrowed from industry was incompatible with the academic profession. One of the participants pointed out that at her institution,

matters of academic concern were largely determined by administrators and managers whose interests were cost-effectiveness and efficiency.

Performativity driven programme rationalisation

Participants endorsed fears in the literature that performativity has not only shaped discussions about the roles and functions of higher education, but also the organisation of knowledge and learning in faculties, departments or schools. One participant echoed these apprehensions about the effects of performativity as follows:

. . .as part of their cost saving and efficiency, institutions have cut down the number of programmes, collapsed divisions between originally distinct faculties and created colleges, schools and departments to reduce duplication in newly merged institution or in institutions that have survived the merger elsewhere and in South Africa.

Accordingly, programmes are retained only if they are considered viable, that is, if they appear to promote efficiency, effectiveness and financial sustainability within an institution. In this regard, the participants expressed disappointment at the continuous pruning of 'unviable' programmes such as African languages in universities. They contended that African languages should be retained and not downgraded as is currently the case because these programmes add value to the government's social development agenda (including upholding equity and social justice).

Influence of professional bodies

The participants raised the alarm at the extent to which the various professions and employers disproportionately influence the construction of curricula at universities. One academic had this to say: "We feel we have no option but to follow a programme-based approach because that is, in our view, what the National Department of Education is demanding." In the area of teacher education programmes, participants expressed some discomfort about the increasing tendency to underrate the significance of philosophy and pedagogy in teacher training programmes and the corresponding prominence given to the acquisition of technical teaching skills needed to implement the moribund Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) and its modified, National Curriculum Statement (NCS). Hence, when responding to the question about forces driving curriculum in teacher education, one of the participants complained that: "Curriculum of teacher education is driven by primary and secondary

education school curricula and problems and external factors including social justice and global influences.”

The general agreement among the participants was therefore that, while the ‘how’ is undoubtedly important, the what (content) and especially the underlying pedagogy and philosophy are indispensable if the system is to produce transformative teachers capable of deepening democracy and human rights values. An academic from the Law Department was even more explicit than that, explaining how the Law Society, for example, often tries to persuade universities to produce students who can function in very specific aspects of law instead of teaching general principles of law to enable students to deal with general problems of law.

Accordingly, the participants argued that while universities have to be responsive to the communities in which they are located; this should not lead to a situation where universities blindly follow the wishes of employers and professions.

Decline of distinctive disciplines and the rise of interdisciplinary

Interviews with participants revealed different interpretations about the nuanced distinction between interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and discipline curriculum construction, and the confusion between the implications of programme-based and qualifications-based planning. One participant responded as follows about the criteria for grouping learning programmes:

Programmes are grouped according to whether they fall in one of the following areas: natural sciences, health sciences (medicine), law, management and commercial sciences, languages and communication, social sciences and agriculture.

Based on the responses of the participants it is clear that ‘interdisciplinary’ means different things to different people. For some, ‘interdisciplinary means all staff members are involved in designing the programme’. For others, ‘interdisciplinary refers to the design of academic programmes by teams’. The above suggests that programmes qualify as interdisciplinary if they are conceptualised and designed by a team or group of academics or people. Clearly lacking from the discussions with the participants were epistemological (vertical and horizontal) articulations that are at play when talking about interdisciplinary programmes.

Other participants were more concerned about what they perceived to be a decline of discipline-based departments recommended by the Department of Education. This concern was expressed thus by one of the participants:

We are now expected to adopt interdisciplinary approach to teaching and research that we were not implementing a year ago. However, despite this world trend, I still strongly believe in academic excellence, a strong discipline based approach is paramount. A good example is the training of FET teachers – in no way must we allow non-discipline based departments to provide the academic content for our teachers.

In support for the retention of sub-disciplines in university programmes, including in teacher education programmes, participants raised the concern that sub-disciplines such as philosophy and history of education have been ditched in favour of technical teaching skills. The participants attributed this worrying trend to the proposed programmatic approach as part of the curriculum restructuring process recommended by the Department of Education since 1994. One of the participants in teacher education explained the pressure from the Department of Education thus: “Since 1994, we have moved away from a discipline-based to programme-based approach and this is clearly a managerial response to forces outside the university.” From the responses of participants, there seems to be potential conflict between producing teachers well-grounded in pedagogy and philosophy, and teachers who can function efficiently to implement the new school policy. Furthermore, the UCT case study on collection and integrated types of curriculum constructions reveals the gap between policy intentions on curriculum construction and practice not only at UCT, but at other institutions in South Africa, including the four institutional types that form the sample in my study.

Conclusion

In this paper I examined ways in which economic changes of the twenty-first century are shaping the direction of higher education policy and practice and how the sector has been responding to these changes using four institutional types in South Africa.

I argue that policy and practice in higher education are shaped by the requirements of performativity and thereby compromise the development of self-determination, self-reflection and constructive participation in society. The issue seems to be the tendency to overdichomise the distinction between

utilitarian and critical inquiry dimensions of higher education. This over-dichotomisation is simplistic and misleading in that it underplays the synergy between public and private good, and the indivisibility of the social and private rates of return of higher education.

Firstly, higher education needs to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills for various careers and professions in our technological and information-based society. Secondly, higher education should contribute to the development of the *Allgemeinbildung and Bildung* to cultivate the inner life of the human soul, mind and person thereby *equipping* students with the necessary self-determination and self-reflection to participate constructively in society. It is therefore necessary even in the current economic situation to retain and preserve elements of the Humboldtian university while, at the same time, ensuring that the higher education sector is responsive to the changing economic conditions of the twenty-first century. Hence, the position espoused in this paper is that the two roles are mutually inclusive. Accordingly, it is necessary to ensure that the optimisation of performance and the associated emphasis on low-cost efficiency are not overzealously pursued to the extent of undermining the formative and critical inquiry dimension of higher education. This can be achieved by developing and designing curricula to provide broad generic, transferable skills and competences to empower students to contribute not only to economic growth, but to also contribute to the improvement of society as a whole.

Similarly, it is imperative for academics to deconstruct the discourse of performativity, including its underpinning epistemologies on the nature of knowledge in the current context of global economy. The deconstruction implies that, in validating knowledge, academics need to revert back to questions such as: ‘Is it true?’ ‘Is it just?’, and ‘Is it morally important?’, and not on whether knowledge promotes efficiency, marketability or whether it has specific utilitarian value. The proposed rephrasing of questions enables academics, researchers and students to function better in the current environment characterised by diversity, heterogeneity, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies, and the promotion of the politics of difference.

This deconstruction process will also hopefully create space for academics to reclaim their academic freedom and the pursuit of the truth in the current environment where academics are pressurised by university management to produce tangible and quantifiable research output. It is therefore necessary for academics to examine the epistemological and philosophical implications

underpinning the input/output model embedded in performativity and generally embraced by university managements.

Performativity-driven rationalisation of programmes

The author endorses the belief of the participants that the common practice of reorganising curriculum construction in post-apartheid society is clearly motivated exclusively by imperatives of efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Thus, the common practice of rationalising the so-called non-viable programmes such as African languages ironically makes a mockery of the rhetoric of developing parity between indigenous languages and English and Afrikaans. The lesson from this is that policies that at face value appear to promote efficiency do not necessarily advance equity and social justice.

Furthermore, relying too much on the advice of employers and the professions, especially those that relate to specific professions such as law, teacher education and engineering, when deciding what student should learn is counterproductive. While the needs of employers and professional bodies are an important consideration when determining curriculum, these needs are often based on narrow approaches that seek to predict the supply and demand for skills but clearly undervalue the effects of pervasive fluctuations between oversupply and acute shortage of person power. Conversely, higher learning institutions should seek to achieve a balance between the development of critical inquiry, broad general principles and generic skills suited for the various forms of employment and professions.

One also understands the anxiety of participants regarding the practice of performance appraisals at many universities in South Africa. This appraisal system is just another example of how performativity is impacting negatively on the academic profession. The encroachment of the language of industry is evident when higher education institutions are regarded as service providers, students as clients or customers, and heads of Department, who ideally should provide both management and academic leadership, as line managers. It must further be added that in filling posts for head of department in many universities, management skills are taking precedence over academic leadership and scholarship.

Laurillard has a point that universities are not businesses, and neither students, nor the other stakeholders in our society, are customers (2000). We therefore

cannot reduce academic work to measurable products in pursuit of cost-effectiveness and efficiency.

In defence of distinctive disciplines

Laurillard raises an interesting point that while universities have to respond to changing economic conditions, they should also sometimes respond to the demands of the disciplines (2000). This is necessary because the development of an independent understanding of our modern society and its world can only be guaranteed through the continued development of disciplines and this will be difficult to achieve when the process is driven exclusively by the requirements of markets (2000). However, in defence of disciplines, it is difficult to go to the extent of supporting Humboldtian disciplines that characterised the classical European university by devaluing interdisciplinary approach in curriculum planning. What is advocated is a quadrangulation of disciplines, interdisciplinary integration and transdisciplinary competencies rather than embracing interdisciplinary approach as is the case in some institutions in South Africa.

Framework to examine curriculum construction

The analytical frameworks that distinguish the singular, regionalisation the generic pedagogic form, and collection-type and the integrated-type curriculum construction offer a strong pedestal to defend the chosen theory and practice in the current debate on curriculum restructuring and change in South Africa. Specifically, these frameworks can assist to improve practice by revealing firstly that the proposed shift from qualification-based to programme-planning and the promotion of interdisciplinary curriculum is complex. Secondly, frameworks used in the UCT study suggest that the anticipated shift from the previous degree structure to academic programmes as part of the discourse of a university and its modes of academic and administrative organisation has not occurred as was intended. This revelation helps us to reflect more carefully at our own practices on academic structures that we are advocating. Further, the frameworks reveal diverse interpretations of curriculum construction and also semantic confusion about disciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches in various higher learning institutions in South Africa. More importantly, this phenomenon is not unique to the four institutional types but can safely be generalised across the system.

By highlighting the issue of a generic form of knowledge in curriculum construction, these works show the continuing challenge of translating theory into practice. The work also underscores epistemological questions about what constitutes generic modules and the justification for grouping modules that make up a course or qualification. To this end, the grouping is, more often than not, arbitrary and adopted for convenience. Furthermore, the UCT experience sensitises academic planners to an epistemological issue that curriculum construction and the grouping of disciplines around generic competences may undermine the necessary disciplinary basis when trying to achieve such performance.

Two epistemological concerns inherent in the proposed shift from qualifications-based to programme-based planning, and from courses and departments to programmes need to be highlighted. First, while programme-based design facilitates student mobility and credit transfer, it tends to reduce learning and knowledge to products that can be pre-packaged into discrete pieces of knowledge in the form of modules and credits that students can accumulate at different times and different places to make up a qualification. Second, in practice, the proposed shift towards programme-based planning dilutes and trivialises disciplines which, in turn, fundamentally influences the nature of knowledge.

Lastly, it is hoped that the new policy of the Higher Education Qualifications Framework that directs qualifications in higher education should go a long way to rekindle the debate about the place of disciplines and interdisciplinary approach in organising learning programmes in higher education.

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