

**The stories we tell and the way we tell them:
An investigation into the institutional culture of
The University of the North, South Africa¹**

by

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Introduction

The paper reports on research into the institutional culture of the University of the North (UNIN) in the Northern Province of South Africa.³ The research was considered worth doing for four reasons. First, South Africa is in a process of transition, and one of the debates is about the kind of educational system we should have and the role of universities in that system. Secondly, there is growing debate on the conflict between Afrocentric and Eurocentric perspectives, and talk of an African renaissance. Universities, being centres of knowledge production and distribution, play an important role in this debate. Thirdly, as institutions of higher learning, they are part of a worldwide concern that higher education is becoming technicist and vocationalised in the interests of national and multi-national markets. Finally, there is the immediate concern that UNIN, one of the most volatile campuses in the country in the struggle against apartheid, is still, years after the democratic elections of 1994, in a state of crisis. One intention of this research is to find out why.

A university is a complex social and educational institution. The paradigms within which, and the methods by which society and its institutions may best be understood have been debated for some decades. Understanding a university requires making sense of what meaning human actors give to their actions in a socio-economic,

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² This paper is based on an original report which contained a chapter, on discourse analysis, by the coresearcher, Dr Aria Merkestein, University of the North. I remain responsible for the opinions and conclusions presented whilst acknowledging an enormous debt to Aria Merkestein for critical commentary and editing. I also wish to thank those colleagues who gave of their time, especially Adrian Roscoe and Petrus de Kock.

political and historical context and therefore this research was conducted in the qualitative research tradition. Conflicting traditions and expectations surround education, and major stakeholders in South African education have hitherto been voiceless. One purpose of the research was to 'give voice' to as wide a range of people as possible; another was to examine, through discourse analysis, the expression of those voices. Although the immediate focus was on the University of the North, broader issues were raised concerning research in South Africa, and, by implication, Africa. The world is dominated by a Western perspective, and from this perspective, Africa has been 'anthropologised', made into an object of study by others. Hence the substantial treatment of research methodology and the examination of the history of the African university.

This research was limited in several ways. Despite the use of research assistants who were students and the contribution of Welcome Sekwati who could interview local people in their own language, and who, as a past student of the university brought great insight to the project, the research was dominated by the principal researcher (with the exception of the discourse analysis conducted entirely by Dr Merkestein). Thus the research is limited by virtue of the identity of the researchers, by the power relations involved in representation, and by actual, as well as imaginative, access. It is also acknowledged that a fuller understanding of the institution would have to attend to gender, something this research did not do. Then there is the simple fact of progression and rapidity of events. At the time of writing this final paper, two years after the research began, there have been many changes in the quality of the institution and the issues it faces. There is now an Acting Rector, and in the opinion of many, a management crisis. There is new Higher Education Bill. The University is struggling to meet a deadline for restructuring.

The research merely scratched the surface in attempting to understand the institution. Almost all the issues raised, such as power, ethnicity, administrative effectiveness, perceptions of teaching, learning and knowledge, finance and students' budgets, and many more, deserve research projects of their own. One final note; this paper is based on an 80,000-word report on a research project that took two years to complete and entailed nearly 30 in-depth interviews, the analysis of hundreds of students' essays, hundreds of questionnaires, several extended self-reports by students and a substantial

number of pamphlets issued by staff and management. The research is summarised in this paper at a cost; there is more assertion than substantive argument, and extended quotations from respondents which were a major feature of the original report, included in an attempt to 'give voice', are not included here.

Issues in research

Understanding why research gets done, who gets to do it, and how the results are used is important in South Africa because of the highly skewed distribution of power in our society. What is considered worthy of research and who is chosen to do the research is usually decided by people who have status and funding. As a consequence, research often serves to maintain the status quo. Even when researchers are committed to social change and to using their research abilities to develop an alternative state of affairs, they need to take into account how they see the world and how that affects the way they ask questions; we all ask questions based on assumptions about what it means to understand something, what 'facts' are, and what constitutes valid knowledge. Research takes place in a network of cultural power and various conceptions of knowledge. In South Africa, status, wealth and the power to decide what constitutes valid knowledge have been the possession of a privileged minority. This group, largely white, sees the world from a Eurocentric perspective and has been largely positivist. *Positivism*, to put it very simply, assumes there is a factual world which can be known and understood through a process of observation and experimentation by an objective observer. When this Eurocentric positivist perspective, which is also male-centred due to the dominance of men in public power, is located in Africa, or any largely colonised 'Third World' country, a range of power relationships comes into play, usually expressed in a string of reinforcing dichotomies. Along an axis of superior/inferior, valued/devalued, we have the dichotomies of culture/nature, mind/body, male/female, metropole/colony, and then, especially in South Africa, white/black and manager/worker.

As the realisation grew that complex human beings and social processes could not be properly examined and understood using the positivist paradigm derived from the natural sciences, different paradigms, such as the *interpretive*, the *critical*, and more recently, the *postmodern* paradigm (although some would say this is oxymoronic) have given rise to different research approaches and methodologies, like for example,

action research. As more women and hitherto other excluded groups have gained the power to put their concerns on research agendas, different ways of seeing the world and understanding it have developed. So besides approaches like action research, some people speak of feminist research and methodologies. This was inevitable, since there is a relationship between paradigm and method. For example, surveys, by virtue of having large samples aimed at generalising results, will usually have questions that can be widely understood and therefore appear to be 'objective'. As a process then, survey research tends to examine, and reveal, the more stable elements in a society or situation. However, it may be, as is the case in South Africa and at the University of the North, that the most important things that are happening in a society are not stable, but changing all the time and very quickly. If it is *those* things that one wants to research, large-scale social surveys would not be the most appropriate method. It might be better to use participant observation or a series of in-depth interviews within an action research approach.

Any choice of approach raises the question of how we understand our own identities as researchers and how we construct the identities of others in the representations of ourselves and others. This in turn raises questions about validity. It becomes difficult to circumscribe validity in terms of objectivity and instruments measuring what they purport to measure when we take into account the possibility of fluid, even fragmented or multiple identities, which are socially constructed in a rapidly changing society. One may question the validity of constructs such as 'First World' and 'Third World', and 'oppressed blacks' and 'privileged whites'. But one may go further and attempt to develop more refined and complex notions of identity, representation and validity. The power to construct identities of self and others, represent self and others, and assert the validity of practices and findings are in the hands of the socially dominant group. The shifts in power - worldwide as well as in South Africa, not only means reprioritising research issues, but raising the issues of identity, representation and validity.

Methodology

In light of the above, the identity of the researchers is an issue. The principal researcher, Damian Ruth, is a South African white male, the coresearcher, Aria Merkestein, is a European white female. One research assistant, Welcome Sekwati, is

a South African black male. As a consequence of our identities, we had different access to people and material; only the research assistant could speak to local members of the community in their own language, some female respondents would say things to the coresearcher that they would not say to the principal researcher, the principal researcher could ask students to write essays and answer questionnaires, and so on. Given this relationship between identity, access and representation, we acknowledge the problem of validity.

To maximise representative validity, various techniques were used; literature surveys, historical enquiry, questionnaires, essay analysis, in-depth interviews and a discourse analysis of the institution. At first, small-scale enquiries were used which, through a process of action, reflection and action, were developed and extended. At various points respondents were invited to comment on work-in-progress. A touchstone idea was that of narrative, that is to say, the stories we tell and the way we tell them. Stories were collected from interviews with staff, with students, members of the surrounding the community, with a visitor, from essays by senior students, and essays by first-year students. The interviews with staff were intended to capture a spectrum of perceptions from different sectors of the university. Various factors of identity were taken into account when interviewing in order to ensure a spread of perspectives. These were used as criteria for selection for interviews, and are not used as variables for analysis. The factors of identity covered sector, gender, rank, length of service, politics, provenance, ethnicity, language, discipline and year of study.

Language has played an important role in the oppression or elevation of people in the history of South Africa. People interpret their experience through initial expectations about the world, and priorities of interest. What we actually 'see', however, is limited by what is looked at and focused on. Thus through language we impose our classifications on others, and on ourselves. In this way practices which appear to be universal and common-sensical can often be shown to originate in the dominant group. Particular attention was therefore paid to discourse used at UNIN, which revealed this problem, discussed in terms of legality versus legitimacy.

Education

This section considers the relationship between education and research and the role of

paradigms and presents the salient features of the state of South African education.

Since education is a social and political enterprise, to approach it in terms of the scientific method is not merely inappropriate, but distorts the object of inquiry. The positivist paradigm allows for a split between educational aims as the end product and educational processes as the instrumental means. However, the sort of relationship between 'means' and 'ends' which the positivist view of theory and practice assumes 'fails to recognize how, in education, aims, policies and methods are all intrinsically related... By treating basic features as 'natural entities', this kind of research will always be biased towards prevailing educational arrangements and its theories will be structured in favour of the "status quo" (Carr and Kemmis 1986:77-79). It is particularly this element of how a paradigm can work to maintain the status quo that is relevant to South Africa. The dominant paradigm in South African education was, until recently, that of Fundamental Pedagogics, an educational perspective rooted in the positivist paradigm. It is at one with the notion that social life can be engineered, an assumption that informed the creation of apartheid. Its influence at UNIN can still be felt.

Fundamental Pedagogics (FP) was an 'educational science' formulated in terms of Christian National Education (CNE). It was born of the Afrikaner political struggle and because of this its 'philosophy of education' is conflated with a political manifesto. Political manifestos by their nature tend to be fundamentalist, and as such they do not sit naturally with the idea of the educated person, when 'educated' is taken to mean the capacity to be critical. The same problem existed with 'People's Education' developed in opposition to FP - it was not a philosophy, but a manifesto. Too often, when opposition is mounted against an entity, it is in terms of that entity, and thereby the opposition ends up reproducing much of what it originally opposed. The link between CNE education and positivism is, as Morrow (1989:41) points out, that 'philosophies of education' type thinking reflects many of the problems of positivism. The purpose of the Positivist movement was, 'to distinguish between the sphere of thought in which the predicates ' "true", "rational" and "objective" can be used appropriately, from those spheres in which the use of these predicates is logically inappropriate and, at best, merely "persuasive"'.

When we pursue the implication of positivism and Fundamental Pedagogics for teaching practices at the University of the North, we can see that both underwrite the idea that there can be a scientific, and thus universal, framework of knowledge about education which must be accepted by, and is neutral between, diverse 'aims of education' or 'educational systems' (which are imbued with the cultural or other values) of various groups of people. (Morrow 1989:48) One consequence of this assumption, applied to education, is expressed in the notion of a canon of 'given' knowledge to be mastered. The extent to which its 'canonization' is a social and political process is obscured. Consequently the idea of the social construction of knowledge does not seem to make much sense. The process of curriculum construction then becomes - although of course it cannot be presented as such - a battle about whose knowledge matters and who has the power to implement 'their' curriculum. This battle will be implicit. The debate in South Africa about standards, which is a hot issue at UNIN, is usually a debate between those claiming an apolitical perspective, and social constructivists. It is the former who seem to hold sway at UNIN indicated by comments of educators and students such as 'There is a core curriculum which must be covered', and 'standards are dropping' and 'he does not give the scope of the test'. The model of teaching which this thinking inspires is the transmission model, and it is this model which is prevalent at UNIN.

The postmodern paradigm challenges the positivist conception of education and highlights the importance of language and discourse. In postmodernism, there is a loss of certainty in what is known and in ways of knowing. What we do have is a greater awareness of 'complexity and socio-historical contingency of the practices through which knowledge is constructed about ourselves and the world' and an emphasis on 'world-making through language, discourse and texts. All research is both a socio-cultural construct and is itself constructive or world-making' (Usher 1996:27). Knowledge remains always partial and perspectival. Postmodernity also subverts the dichotomy of subjective and objective as well as other binary coding (eg, male-female, rational-irrational). This has particular force in South Africa where these binaries articulate with the black-white, thinker-doer, manager-worker binaries. Postmodern theory claims that whereas social sciences conceive of themselves as representing the real, what they are actually doing is 'writing' it. Another important aspect of the postmodern, 'is a decentring of the knowing subject, the epistemological

subject with a universal and essential human nature - unitary, rational, consciousness-centred and the original point of thought and action' (Usher 1996:28). From the postmodern perspective, the alliance between a positivist paradigm and education becomes clear. Modernity implies a faith in rationality, science and technology, a belief in permanent change and the progressive unfolding of history. It is linked with an education that 'provides the socializing processes and legitimating codes by which the grand narrative of progress and human development can be passed on to future generations' (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991:64). The position of universities vis-à-vis these tensions has been addressed by Barnett (1990:4) when he points out that despite the interest in higher education, 'we have no modern educational theory of higher education' which makes it difficult to contest the concept of competence. In a different volume he argues:

The argument has been that there are two versions of the idea jockeying for position in the academe: one is an internal or *academic* form of competence built around a sense of the student's mastery within a discipline; the other - now being pressed robustly - is an *operational* conception of competence, essentially reproducing wider social interest in performance, especially performance likely to enhance the economic performance of UK Inc. From cognitive culture to economic performance, the changing definitions of competence are a microcosm of the changing definitions of the university. (Barnett 1994:159)

The idea of operational competence undergirds the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF), and the reconfiguration of UNIN is required to conform to the NQF. In this way UNIN is not facing the challenges of postmodernism, and perpetuating aspects of positivism and FP. It is very much part of the state of South African education today.

In the debate about education in South Africa at the moment it seems that there is broad consensus on the need for change, but the euphoria of a relatively peaceful transition is wearing off, and in the face of intractable difficulties like the clash between formulation and implementation of policy, lack of funding and hard choices about prioritizing expenditure, we are seeing that certain things have been lost (like

the socialist vision of People's Education) and that the assertion of certain discourses (New Right, globalization) returns us to some of the persistent differences regarding the nature and purpose of education. In fact, volumes such as those edited by Jansen (1991) and Taylor (1993), which offer analyses of education at a deeper level than structure and governance, have hardly dated, an opinion vindicated by the 'Makgoba Affair' at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1995/96 (Makgoba 1997). In a more recent volume, *Education after Apartheid* (Kallaway *et al* 1997) various authors identify the salient features of where we are now, such as

the loss of the socialist vision during the transition - as the period of transition progressed, more use was made of the expertise of agencies such as World Bank, Institute of International Education Planning (IIEP), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

the need to balance economic growth and international competitiveness with social development and equality

having to make educational policy in a political situation of ambiguous intent

economic and restructuring proposals with partly flawed conceptual frameworks and objectives which are too ambitious and biased towards the more privileged sectors of society

intervention/implementation strategies that are severely lacking

a need to resist neo-liberal New Right discourse and a technicist instrumental view of education, which is being introduced via the influence of the training aspect of the education and training integration efforts

a need to work out the relative power between the central government and provincial governments, and between the different sectors of the educational structure.

that part of the structure which concerns us most, higher education, must balance three key tensions; i) commitment to access and the expansion of enrolment (massification of the system), ii) commitment to quality, ie, maintaining standards (but what or whose?) iii) constraints of affordability, the redistribution/reduction of funds.

finally, and of particular interest to us, is the need to introduce issues of values and identity in the curriculum into the educational debate that has been dominated by a concern with structure, finance and governance.

The current consensus is that a dominant model for the new South African education and training system has not yet emerged.

Themes in the history of the African university

This paper merely mentions some of the issues discussed in the report: power and

discourse, the idea of community, the university as part of a larger social system, and the issue of Afrocentric versus Eurocentric viewpoints.

Power and discourse

Attempts to analyze the University of the North often take as their starting point the fact that it was created by the Apartheid regime to provide administrators for the homelands, and that as such, it was part of a larger educational policy which denied blacks access to relevant and empowering education. In short, the University was a tool of oppression which became one of the many sites of struggle against the apartheid regime. Whilst this simplification is not wrong, it is rather narrow, and therefore inhibits an analysis which could inform substantial transformation. Many issues facing UNIN predate the formulation of apartheid and are issues which have beset the African university throughout its history. There are also issues, such as an epistemological crisis and socio-economic and political pressures, which are not specific to the African university and beset universities worldwide. An appreciation of this larger tapestry can help us understand the current condition of UNIN and may help us to better explore what inhibits and enables transformation.

Paradigms and language are important issues in the African university, because of power. Many people talk of a crisis in higher education and the transformation of higher education. Now there is substantial transformation required, and taking place, in higher education worldwide. But transformation and crisis are not the same, and this is an important distinction in the South African context. For example, a sudden increase in access which brings into question the validity of teaching practices and assumptions about the purpose of higher education, as well as forcing a reassessment of curricula and means of assessing students, would be viewed as a crisis by those who wish to maintain the status quo; but from the point of view of those gaining control of the resource of education and who wish to put it at the service of a world-view different to that which maintains the status quo, such 'crises' are part of the process of transformation. Naming such changes as 'crises' or 'transformations' has to do with the power to control perceptions. This is the case with the University of the North, with education in South Africa in the 1990s and it has been true of African universities throughout their history of foundation and then successive domination by colonial powers and national dictators. What seems to distinguish the African

universities from universities elsewhere, is the extremity and persistence of the power struggles involved and the consequent damage and degradation to the institutions involved.

The university and the community

A comprehensive study of African higher education has been written by Ajayi, Gomah and Johnson (1996:1) who open their work by quoting the then President Kaunda at the Chancellor's Installation Banquet, University of Zambia, 1996. Kaunda spoke of the University as 'our own university in a very real sense... humble folk, illiterate villagers... gave freely and willingly everything they could... people see in the University the hope of a better and fuller life for their children and grandchildren...' (page 1). But they point out that the people come to the university and 'find that no one there knows their names or understands their language'. Linking, on the one hand, the issue of relevance to the community and access by the community, with, on the other hand, the issue of cultural, national or continental identity, runs the danger of both sides of the story being obscured. Parties or factions may argue that as long as universities serve the interests of Africans, they are serving the community, and that might obscure the extent to which those Africans being served are only a specific sector of the community. They could even be working against the interests of the broader community. It has been noted with dismay in South Africa how, to some extent, the recently created black elite seems to have severed their grassroots links and commitments. On the other hand, those who insist on relevance and service to the immediate concerns of the immediate community may weaken the intellectual role of the university in theorizing and debating the meaning of culture; this gap at the level of intellectual discourse opens the way for Western ideologies to label transformation as crisis, and to impose, as the World Bank has done, a specific sectoral interest under the guise of relevance to the community.

The university as part of a larger system

Addressing what Wandira (1977:9-19) has called the apex problem, the adaptation problem and the Gold Standard problem, must surely involve a radical rethink of what African universities are and can be. The apex problem arises out of the need to synchronise the stage of university development with the stage reached by the secondary system. It begs the question of what should be prioritised: a well-developed

secondary school system or a well-developed university? Should university entrance and university standards be set at some pre-conceived level apart from and irrespective of the school system? This concerns the relationship between the university as an institution and similar institutions in the world. Should universities depart from existing internationally recognised models and seek an identity of their own? Poor questions lead to poor answers and the situation where African university students could graduate without ‘an objective and scholarly understanding of the society from which they themselves have come’ and their education being seen by those who were paying for it as not ‘relevant to Africa’s need for high level manpower’. As Wandira points out, securing the Gold Standard of learning had built-in potential for conflict with the earlier policy of adaptation. But he goes on to observe something more fundamental; the Gold Standard ‘assumed that Western concepts of education had to be adapted and thus left no room for other choices’ (Wandira 1977:19). The conflict remains unresolved today, and the dilemmas of sixty years ago haunt UNIN, with masses of students entering the university system and being unable to cope with its demands.

It appears that the African university was created in the service of an external and often sectional interest, by missionaries, colonialism, economic imperialism and then nationalism, or by reactions between these elements, but not by the pursuit of knowledge *per se*. In other words, they have not been built on an epistemological foundation. One could argue that hardly any university has been. Witwatersrand University was founded as a mining college, Harvard was established as a clerical college, the land grant universities of the States were intended to provide education to fuel an agricultural economy, and so on. But in all these instances, there was a sense of universities being part of an idea of education rooted in a broad sense of social development. They were not required to serve immediate party policies or support the development of national identity, or later fought over as national assets or bases of political power. This legacy is felt at UNIN as a lack of institutional ethos, a point discussed below.

Afrocentric versus Eurocentric

The University is the most appropriate, possibly the only institution in a society that can have this role. There is a danger that in calling for an *African* university, however

'African' is defined, it begins to function in the same way as the earlier economic and national demands and that the enquiring, critical, intellectual role is subsumed under vested interest. As one reviews the influence of the World Bank's structural adjustment programmes in Africa, the entry of South Africa into the global market, and the entering into South Africa of Asian, US and European multi-nationals, one would do well to bear in mind that intellectual colonization is an integral part of domination. Information is a First World business; Africa does not read itself through its own eyes, but through publications and news agencies that 'look into' or 'at' Africa, route those perceptions via the First World where they are further 'orientated' and then broadcast back to Africa. As a case in point, the status of educational research in Sub-Saharan Africa has periodically been reviewed. In a comment on these reviews, Namuddu (1991:40) points out that they influence conceptualization, collection and interpretation of data (cf discussion on research and education above). Problems related to World Bank and other educational aid organizations have been criticized by Brock-Utne and others (Brock-Utne 1993, 1994, 1995).⁴ Brock-Utne (1993:60) points out, in an analysis of the World Bank Report No 6934, that although it acknowledges that the crisis in the educational sector is in part due to the larger economic crisis in Africa, they explain it in terms of population explosion, mounting fiscal austerity and tenuous political and administrative institutions, and not in terms of 'the deterioration of terms of trade, the rise in interest rates, the wrong technical choices encouraged by donor agencies or the lack of high level training and education for development and independence... the many devaluations enforced on the African countries by the World Bank/IMF conditionalities along with enforced policy of cutting down on public expenditure.'

Ajayi *et al* ask the question of how the African university can provide African development and *not westernization*. The difficulty here is in identifying what is 'not westernization' in today's world of Microsoft, General Motors, Philips, Toyota, the IMF and the World Bank. It is more complicated than a synthesis of Western and African. 'Westernization' dominates the world in quite specific and partial ways, even

⁴One cannot tar all agencies with the same brush. Consider, for example, the Carnegie-supported inquiries into poverty in South Africa, and support for this research, which has not imposed editorial interpretation and other grantmaking agencies such as Ford and Mellon.

though one may deplore the fact and argue that in many respects, it is to the world's detriment. For 'westernization' to be interrogated it needs to be understood. The retrieval and assessment of an African past has its place but it is a partial one.

The question is, "Do Africans deny their Africanness when they appropriate western culture?" It is a question of how the African intellectual interprets the community, and the fact that it is the African who should be interpreting it. But African intellectuals, like those of any other time and place, can be coopted. There is a danger of the discourse of Africanization being appropriated by the discourse of development (*al la* World Bank) and the curricula of African universities becoming synonymous with development studies. To respond to Ajay *et al's* point raised above, we may ask where in the world is university education accessible to illiterate villagers? The attempt to link the university to the community in any country does not necessarily mean direct access or provision. It is also important not to conflate open access with unlimited access, and to recognize the pernicious effects of providing formal access without actual access by having students in the university system who do not have and are not given the skills to benefit from the system.

Another consideration in the Afrocentric versus Eurocentric debate concerns the multicultural nature of South African society. The precariousness of our national unity is commonly realised and, given our findings at UNIN, probably underestimated. Differences in social manners are often based on fundamentally different world views. Whilst this may seem a trite observation, what is of consequence is that many South Africans do not go beyond this level of analysis, but view differences as a quaint or interesting set of facts to be noted. They are culturally illiterate and lack a sense of the relativity of their own culture. As South Africa moves towards greater regional and global interaction, "culture clash" in terms of nationality, race, language and gender will demand a much more sophisticated response than is currently in evidence.

Some African writers (Makgoba 1997, for example) would claim that the African worldview is holistic, infused with a sense of relationship, and attentive to due process, whereas the Western worldview is discretionary, individualistic, and centres on the identification of events. This difference in ethos can also be expressed (and the discourse analysis of this research highlights the difference, but with the complication that the race categories do not hold, since UNIN management and the opposition were largely black) as valuing legality, regulations and procedures, in contrast to valuing

legitimacy, equity and due process. In one of the most comprehensively referenced works on cultural diversity published in recent years, Cox (1993) examines cultural differences according to various dimensions. He gives a good indication of how complex and profound cultural differences are. It is not so much that different cultures may contradict each other - it is that at times they don't meet at all. They are different worlds with fundamentally different ways of understanding reality and explaining it: they tell different stories.

The University of the North

Firstly, a brief summary of the geographical and historical context of UNIN is presented. This is followed by the case study of discourse which revealed a tension between legality and legitimacy that pervades the history of the institution and the dominant themes identified for analysis. Those themes are; a fractured and contested institution, UNIN and the community, coming to UNIN, the institutional climate, and the nature of knowledge.

The geographical context

The University of the North is situated in the Northern Province of South Africa. In a 1995 report De Villiers summarises the main features of the province as follows:

- * a high population growth rate
- * a mainly rural population
- * a predominantly young population
- * a high dependence on external employment
- * a low absorption capacity of the economy in the private sector
- * a highly skewed racial allocation of agricultural land
- * agricultural resources and production concentrated in white hands
- * backlogs in education and health facilities
- * low level of labour skills

It is the poorest of South Africa's provinces with about 90% of its population in rural areas. (ANC RELCOM 1994:1) It has a literacy rate of about 53% which is lowest of all provinces and substantially lower than the national average of 62%. Sixty percent of the workforce is not in paid employment. It is estimated that the majority of the population of the Province who are employed earn less than R250 per month. (ANC RELCOM 1994:1) (A lecturer at UNIN could earn in the region of R3500 per month.)

The Province is highly dependent on external employment and incomes (mainly from the Gauteng area). From research by Van der Wal (1994) who developed a Socio-Economic Index (SEI) and focussed on Lebowa, a former homeland, and the provenance of most UNIN students, we discover huge disparities:

- * 2.7 hospital beds/1000 of population;
- * 42% of population with no formal education; and
- * a mean per capita income of R1,018.

A year-long study released by the Department of Education in 1997 reveals that 24% of the nearly 28,000 schools in South Africa do not have water within walking distance, 57% don't have power and 13% do not have toilets - and of those that do, 47% are pit latrines. Violence is endemic and evidence for this is regularly reported in the press.

The social tenor of the province is difficult to describe and one has to extrapolate from De Villers and Van der Wal the implications for educators at UNIN. For example, despite the poverty in the Province, the crime rate is about the lowest in the country; in the 1994 elections, it presented the highest concentration of AWB (the highly conservative largely Afrikaner party) and ANC (the most radical, largely black, party) votes. One might, from the above, tentatively suppose that many students at UNIN are rural, poor, and hence possibly socially conservative, but potentially politically radical. A student is likely to have had an absent father, illiterate parents, and poor schooling in the context of severe poverty.

A brief history

The University College of the North was established on August 1, 1959, as a college under the supervision of the University of South Africa, in terms of the Extension of Universities Education Act (no 45 1959). (It was built on a farm known locally as 'Turffloop', about 30km from Pietersburg and the university was commonly referred to as Turffloop.) Thus it followed the founding pattern of most universities in Africa, displaying the tensions between paternalism and control, the imposition of values, and the assertion of indigenous identity and values. The nature of the assertion was different in South Africa. In terms of apartheid education, it made sense to *provide* separate educational facilities for separate groups. Nkondo (1975:2) makes the point that whereas the English universities were inspired by the ancient ideal of the

university as a community of scholars and students dedicated to truth, and therefore tended to emphasise academic freedom and academic autonomy, in the Afrikaans view the university had to conform to national policy and the social order, and its primary aim was to serve the community in which it functioned: 'Of particular interest is that in this great national debate on the nature of the university, the black perspective could find no forum to state its case and had no share in political power to implement its conviction'.

In a comprehensive study of the UNIN White (1997) uses the idea of political versus educational necessity to explain the contradictory nature of the institution. It was, he claims, created as a political necessity and this meant that at all levels, from governance to buildings, and the activities of research, teaching and learning were a secondary consideration. 'Turfloop thus lacked legitimacy amongst the masses it was meant to serve. This lack of legitimacy was to have a negative influence on the entire teaching and learning process... it was the idea of culture, of tribalism, of division and of control which manifested itself in the very structure of Turfloop' (White 1997:73-74). The issue emerges again in the discourse analysis below.

In 1969 the various black university colleges were proclaimed autonomous by Acts of Parliament. But, as Nkondo (1975:3) points out, 'the initial pattern of power relationships between black and white in the control of affairs was not altered. They remained white-controlled black universities. They remained also, ethnic universities integral to the overall national framework of separate development'. He goes on to quote the Act stipulating that the University of the North shall serve specific national units (ie, Sotho, Venda and Tsonga). What this meant in practice was, to blacks, quite insulting, presenting as it did the 'conviction that the 'non-whites 'were too young and immature to manage their own affairs, let alone to be involved with their white compatriots in the all-too difficult machinery of responsible government... So here was created the spectacle of university institutions meant for 'non-whites' but controlled entirely by whites'.

There were glaring differences in conditions at UNIN. Whites enjoyed better facilities, in some cases were the only ones who had access to certain facilities, and these ranged from a cafeteria to better housing and luxuries such as a swimming pool.

(Some of the more crude expressions of racial privilege were removed in the 70s.) Pay and promotions favoured whites. Whites were even granted an inconvenience allowance for teaching at UNIN. Over and above many such structural discriminations, there was the patronizing and insulting attitudes of many whites.

Discrimination broke out into direct confrontation and fighting in the 80s. According to one respondent, in the 80s, what came through was a different approach in dealing with the government: 'One of the things was, if you are to bring down the SA government you can't do it in an orderly fashion. And therefore there was the whole Bishop Tutu's starting of civil disobedience, that was followed by students taking it up together with the whole concept of ungovernability... So those were the hot 80s here'. It was a kind of war, and in such a state, the options for conflict resolution were limited. The 80s are often considered the most turbulent decade on UNIN campus. Students claimed that a mathematics lecturer had said that black students did not possess the necessary intelligence to understand mathematics. This led to the burning down of the mathematics building. A similar incident over a lecturer in the Faculty of Agriculture led to virtually the entire Faculty building being burnt down. On another occasion a professor had acid thrown at him because of what students called an 'unfair and high failure rate'. Prefects were replaced by SRCs, female students protested against male abuse in a 'sex war' (*City Press* 17 November 1985). There were no public holidays, but the 'Revolutionary Calender' determined stay-aways. Turfloop was becoming a 'liberated zone' (*Star* 26 June 1986). There were splits within student politics, between South African National Students Congress (SANSCO) and the Azanian Students Movement (AZASM) and the Pan Africanist Student Organisation (PASO). The police and army reacted with force. Hostels were raided, and once the whole University was surrounded by troops. Armoured vehicles were used on campus. Initially the army was stationed at the main gate and, according to White, security forces had unlimited access to the University, and monitored all registrations. The security of buildings was upgraded, and in 1987 new security fencing was erected around the University. Security personnel were reinforced, and, claims White, after a crash course were issued with 9mm pistols. Staff, students and visitors had to permanently carry ID cards. In 1987 the army moved to a permanent base on campus. Troops forced students to study and invigilated exams (Ralekhetho 1991:106). The University closed down up to six times a year between 1984 and 1990

(Enterprise 1993:68).

Whilst black students expressed solidarity with their oppressed communities, conservative white opinion showed little sympathy. White (1997: 150) says that many white academics were looked down on by their fellow white Pietersburgers for 'being paid to do nothing'. The University bookshop was burnt down, other buildings such as the restaurant were smashed and broken into. In sport, clashes arose between the South African Council of Sport (SACOS) which was opposed to 'normal sport in an abnormal society'. Clashes were sometimes violent. This was what one respondent referred to as 'the old era' of 'turbulent times'. There were also divisions between the staff and White (pages 158-160) explains in some detail how the Union of Democratic University Staff Associations (UDUSA) and the University Academic Staff Association (UNASA) were formed and were 'constantly at each others throats with most of the Black Staff Association (BSA) siding with whichever side pleased them at the time'. The UDUSA branch at UNIN was much more progressive than branches at other universities, and both UDUSA and UNASA had black members. UDUSA was instrumental in the formation of the Broad Transformation Committee (BTC).

The BTC was created in 1990 and all sectors and structures of the University were represented in it. The convenor was Professor Nkondo, Deputy Vice-Chancellor in Professor Manganyi's rectorate. The BTC had a hand in the appointment of a new more representative Council and in the installation of President Mandela as Chancellor in 1991. It also has a profound influence on the strategic management process begun by Professor Ndebele, who was VC at the time of this research. The process of democratisation was now, many would claim, underway. Today much of the structural discrimination has been done away with, and the staff composition of UNIN has changed enormously. But we must not be naive about institutional transformation. Entrenched historical legacies can continue as undercurrents in the life of an institution long after persistent efforts at explicit change have won the day.

In summary we have a legacy of

- the impossibility of an apolitical perspective on the institution
- discrimination along racial and ethnic lines
- a fractured institution marked by radically different basic assumptions

- an adversarial, confrontational style of dealing with conflict.
- a conflict between legality and legitimacy.

Legality versus legitimacy

In 1996 the Concerned Lecturers and Academic Support Group (CLASG) and the Management of the UNIN were involved in a conflict that on the surface revolved around unjust labour practices. At a deeper level CLASG seemed to have other serious concerns, particularly about the slow rate of the democratization process at UNIN, disconcerting in the light of the post-Apartheid expectations. The Management of UNIN was accused of purposefully delaying the transformation of the university in order to secure and maintain power and financial gain at the expense of other sectors of UNIN. During this conflict a number of pamphlets and circulars were issued by CLASG, Management, other institutional groups such as the BTC and the Structures (student movements and the unions). Some of these documents were analysed in order to find evidence in the texts of the power relations and the ideological expectations of, particularly, CLASG and Management.

On the surface the CLASG documents appear to focus on challenging personnel policies; at a deeper level, however, the theme is 'practices of good governance'. Ideologically this is linked with UNIN having entered a post-Apartheid era. Good governance is then an expected implementation of the new system of democracy. CLASG seems to act as the moral conscience of the UNIN community, and regards UNIN as the site of a conflict between the old (Apartheid) system represented by Management, and the new (democratic) system defended by CLASG. CLASG reminds the wider UNIN community, including Management, of its moral duty to uphold the new democratic values and thus to support CLASG. At the same time Management attempts to gain support in the UNIN community by referring to CLASG's disorderly behaviour with its unsettling influence on the functioning of UNIN. Management's concerns are expressed in registers and metaphors describing recognised management procedures and practices, reinforced through pointing at regulations and the law. Through this an appeal is made to the UNIN community to be reasonable, law-abiding and, thus, reject CLASG's behaviour. Management states its position as a 'hiring, firing and coercing employer', and initially condemns only

CLASG; but in the later stages threatens *staff and students alike* that support for CLASG would have serious implications for them. If CLASG's perceptions are a reflection of a more general feeling, what inferences can then be drawn about the need for legitimacy as a basis for institutional power? How is it possible that Management can legally but 'illegitimately' stay in power?

This clash between legality and legitimacy revealed by the discourse analysis of the CLASG and Management conflict can also be understood by examining the kind of *volkekunde* (anthropology) which 'legitimised' Bantu Education. The first rector of the college that was the precursor of UNIN, Professor EF Potgieter, was an anthropologist, who resigned on June 30, 1969. We can get some idea of the kind of thinking involved from a personal interview White (1997) had with Potgieter:

Professor Potgieter was prepared to help establish a university for blacks in order to 'uplift and educate' them from a so-called third world to a so-called first world standard. He hoped to develop blacks from what he termed the 'African emotional' approach towards life to what he termed the 'first-world thinking' approach. (Personal interview with Professor Potgieter, Warmbaths 1988, in White, 1997:85)

Volkekunde was a major intellectual resource for apartheid. In 1970 the college was granted autonomous university status and on May 1 1970 the Council of the University of the North unanimously elected Dr WWM Eiselen, Commissioner General for the Northern Sotho Ethnic Unit, and an anthropologist, as the first chancellor. The SRC organized a boycott of the investiture of the chancellor and, in the words of Nkondo (page 4) 'took the opportunity to focus attention on the paradoxical nature of the university'. Gordon (1991:90) has pointed out how anthropology functioned as an intellectual resource for the apartheid state. The *volkekundiges*

'made their mark by professing *difference*... emphasizing local particularisms viewed within a framework based on a highly reified abstruse concept of *culture*...*Volkekunde* served to facilitate the transformation of power from vulgar control to management through co-optive domination of blacks.

Volkekunde did not liberate its audience from ignorance but merely gave rise to a new form of domination through social scientific endeavor. In the final analysis it is not a humanistic discourse but a science of social control’.

On this reading, authorization and legality replaces legitimacy as a key concern. In such circumstances ‘divorced from substantive ideals with universal content, normative regularity becomes a reified faith in procedures’ (Gordon 1991:91). The currency of this perspective is indicated by the views of many respondents indicating an obsession with rules and procedures. The rules in the first place did not have normative legitimacy, which is why they were so often broken. The resulting chaos can only be repaired, according to many respondents *both black and white, management and students*, by returning to a reified faith in procedures. This is why a sectoral analysis of UNIN can be so misleading; an Afrikaans HoD, a black HoD and a radical student can all have this deeper epistemological/ideological conviction in common. (The reader may also note how a professing of difference and a reified concept of culture connects with FP and ‘philosophies of education’ discussed earlier.)

A fractured and contested institution

Ethnic fractures are but one of the many fractures in the institution. However, since the institution’s very *raison d’etre* was an ethnic perspective, it is a logical point of departure. One of the first interviews conducted was with the then Vice-Chancellor, Prof N Ndebele, who was asked what role he thought ethnicity played on the campus. The question was inspired by the claim of a staff member who told Sekwati that, ‘Many a time students belonging to different tribal groups refuse to share rooms with each other’. On the same issue, a Tsonga-speaking senior student told Sekwati that as a first-year student, he was forced because of the great shortage of accommodation on campus to share a room with three Sotho-speaking students. He recalls that there was immense bitterness and hatred amongst him and his three room-mates simply because he was according to them, ‘noisy and ‘backwards’. He reports that up to now, he feels much more comfortable amongst fellow Tsonga-speaking people than with any other people on campus. Prof Ndebele stated that ‘I have not heard about this before, that a student refuses to stay with another one of a different ethnic group’ and that he

personally never came up against ethnicity, except when he attempted to get the African Language departments to form a unit and 'I sensed some colleagues feeling particularly threatened'. Tribal origin on campus is still an issue, according to another respondent: 'In the past there was this tendency to employ people who come from the same tribal and ethnic group as the [then] rector... So there is a tendency for people to pursue power on campus and that is done on an ethnic ticket. You can see it on campus, how people socialise, they do it in ethnic formations. And even with students there is that tendency.' This is related to urban/rural split. 'Because there is this belief that the students from the Reef, they regard themselves as the more sophisticated and cleverer ones rather than the rural. So even now, the students from the rural areas group themselves in ethnic and tribal formations.'masked. In the eyes of a different academic, racism is still an issue, 'but not that serious. You see...manifestations of that, you realise when we sit in the restaurant, we sit in racial formations'.

There is strong hierarchical stratification. A worker in a support services section, studying part-time, said 'We group, each according to our class/status. My people are the others on level X. I do not go to the people on the level above me. I'm afraid to go there. You see at a gathering, that corner is for secretaries... As long as a person's level is down, that person is the last who is going to be served. It's not a personal thing... If somebody is doing COURSE300 they can't get anything from COURSE100. She [doing COURSE300] can't allow me to explain as long as I'm in COURSE100.' Clashes in terms of ethnicity, language, status and gender interact and mark everyday life. A respondent reported that the students' chanting and shouting was strange to her and that 'management lets the students run the university' and 'in a strange way' this is also related to 'colour'. Students have less respect for black than for white staff. On relations between staff, she says that white staff have no respect for a black person's office, 'they will walk in and take over' and 'they don't even greet you. Even on the phone that is the case. Especially white males. White females are more sensitive though'.

Staff get frustrated about the actions of students, but it is important not to assume that students are a homogenous sector. Sekwati writes that 'What makes K--- despise campus politics in general is the tendency by some students to impose their own personal situation upon the entire student body... students were made to stay away

from classes because of a very small minority of lazy individuals who did not do their work'. It isn't easy for dedicated students. A student told Sekwati that during strikes the work of a Disciplinary Committee member becomes almost unbearable. One ends up having to side with the campus protection unit against one's fellow students and thus assuming in the eyes of the student body, the qualities of a spy. According to another student, leaders abuse their positions: 'The masses are there to be exploited in any situation. The masses are there to be used like tap water.'

Eventually one asks if there is a centre of power, a locus of control, a leadership point, in the university. In tracking this idea, the responses range from gentle and naive observations, like, 'Well, one hears that certain people have the ear of the VC, so in that sense there is a little bit of power distributed. But the VC has the ultimate power and I'm sure he could fire any of these people that are so-called in inverted commas 'powerful'.' Others are more pointed and speak of invisible forces which 'because they are a close-knit formation, it's not easy to get at them. But you can detect there is this cabal at work.'

UNIN and the community

Is UNIN is part of a larger academic community? According to one respondent, 'The faculty is part of a larger academic world. But the students, UNIN is accepting students that cannot be. Maybe UNIN's goal is to educate as many blacks as possible, but in the academic world, numbers never count, it's quality and UNIN has people here I would hesitate to call students'. The distinction between academic and social community is complex. The Vice-Chancellor's view of his task is to 'build bridges between the university and the outside community and country and also internationally, raising funds... providing a strategic direction... not really getting bogged down in day to day aspects of management'. There is a tension between the region and the academic nature of the institution and the production of knowledge. He points out that 'It's a geographic community firstly, the most immediate community... it's a source for employment, and all these houses around here really follow, come after the university. But the university seems to be in what I have called an oasis syndrome...' His view of the practical value of the University to the immediate community is vindicated by Sekwati's interviews with members of the Mankweng

community ranging from people in the business sector including vendors, and professionals such as doctors and teachers. But some respondents mention the issue of selfishness at UNIN, eg, 'I would come in here for the help of my colleagues to assist us with courses [in the villages] and they always demand payment. I realise, no these people are not meant to service the communities'. Yet another says 'I think UNIN can give a lot to the community. We have a couple of instances where we have phoned the community about the good things happening at UNIN and they weren't interested. They only wanted the bad news'. A student attacked Radio Turf for broadcasting in 'a language totally foreign to the local people, namely English'.

Another aspect is the negative perceptions of prospective employers. A common opinion was that 'People have appointed students with BComm and after appointing them they say to me "We will just not touch a UNIN BComm again. They don't know what they are doing"'. This is recognised by students: 'I don't agree with the repealing of rule A19 [students excluded after repeatedly failing] because it lowers the standard of this university... Other universities will not recognise this university. This will also make things difficult for us students who want to join the labour force'.

On the status of expatriates, which is connected with the idea of an international academic community, various opinions were expressed. A certain irony emerges on this issue. Whilst local attitudes vary from tolerance to xenophobia, many expatriates accept that they are here for as long as they are useful, and acknowledge that they ought not to stand in the way of local development. One expatriate said 'I don't think the university is doing enough for its local upcoming staff by giving local members incentives to pursue higher education; they have to do it under very hard conditions.' When asked if the University as a policy should employ expatriates, the reply was 'Since I am not local I find it difficult to say this, since I am not looking with the eyes of the local person'. In the eyes of some local persons employing expatriates is positive. One respondent felt that 'Expatriates are easier to relate to because they don't have stuff from the past. Blacks here attach blame to people (whites)'. In the opinion of another 'The more the better. There is definitely an anti-expat feeling, more from blacks, I think, because black SAs have much less confidence. Africans from other countries don't have that disability. And they are hardworking'.

Coming to UNIN; the students

Although anecdotal evidence suggests that the experience of being at UNIN is traumatic and marked by violence, this does not seem to be the experience of a substantial majority. In essays, 143 chose to describe their worst experience, and 132 their best. Perhaps this is shocking enough - more than half the students, given a free choice, chose to write of a negative rather than a positive experience. In terms of negative themes, crime (theft, attack, etc) and abuse of first-years rated most highly. Also high was the suffering caused by administrative incompetence; for example, there being no accommodation, having to spend days in queues to register, bad catering, and inadequate orientation. The lack of accommodation can be linked to rape. Female students report being preyed upon by males offering them their rooms, then later arriving with another key and friends. Students were also disturbed by disruption as a result of student unrest and by misrepresentation by the Students Representative Council of their interests to management. Ethnicity also featured negatively in terms of ethnic discrimination. Finally, several students reported dismay at failing their first test. In terms of positive themes the most dominant were increased independence, responsibility, and freedom of expression. Students also enjoyed the exposure to new learning experiences, and gaining knowledge daily. Ethnicity was reported in positive terms in the sense of meeting people of different backgrounds; and finally, the good social life of UNIN rates quite high. In general terms, students wrote variously of excitement, joy, a sense of achievement, hope, fear of failure, financial worries, and of being unclear about courses/careers. Thus, they are pretty much like students anywhere. However, according to my experience of four other universities, and the opinion of many colleagues with wide experience, the level of confusion and anxiety is higher here than at other campuses *and* there is greater *anomie* amongst staff and students. For example, in a questionnaire students were asked whether they think administrative staff care about them. Of 203, 172 said NO. The fact that 83% of students perceive administrative staff as uncaring does not mean that administrative staff *are* in fact uncaring, but students base their perceptions on their experience, and considering what the system imposes on them it is hardly surprising that they come to this conclusion.

It would seem safe to say that most of the students are rural and it is important to note

that students' sense of their own identity is particularly fluid as they move from rural areas to the relative sophistication of UNIN, at a time of life when many factors converge to threaten a stable sense of self. There are conflicting views of education in the rural areas. One student expressed opinions that seem common in rural and working class communities 'which does not take education into much consideration'. There is also immense family and community pressure: 'My family are also expecting high from me as the first kid to come to the university. In our community 'nice-time' play a dominant role. Teenagers there, do not like school and they think I am trying to be 'smart' and I will fall one day'. Another student provides an example of how home conditions motivate studying and influence perception. His father died when they were still young and his mother looked after five children, by selling fruit and old clothes. He is the eldest, and 'the main thing that motivated me to go to school even when things were tough and hard was because I did not want to find myself suffering the way mother is right now. I am the first in the family to come to university and I thank my teachers for helping me get a bursary. As there are no books at home, I would never have known even the addresses for bursaries'.

Many students report that they are only at UNIN because they couldn't get in anywhere else, and several mention applying to a Technikon first. Those who do choose UNIN often do so because the fees are lower than at other universities. Less than half would choose UNIN again and even fewer would like their children to come here. This could relate to a rural background versus the "party time" reputation of UNIN, and the perception of an academically inferior institution. Other reasons for students ending up at UNIN include lack of guidance, or lack of entry requirements to go elsewhere. There is an even split between students who perceive lecturers as caring and those who perceive them as uncaring. The most positive aspect of UNIN is that it is a busy place, full of fun and parties, and then that it is a place of learning. The most negative aspects are lack of security and maladministration.

The institutional climate

The focus here was on everyday experience and specific mechanisms affecting day to day life.

Weaknesses in administrative structure were identified, such as, according the VC, having elected Deans and hence loss of continuity and no strong quality control.

According to some members of staff, management is not effective. Management, says one, ‘focus on small things, like toilet paper, but funds disappear, their attention is not on large things. They ignore the bigger problems’. Poor communication is repeatedly mentioned. There are though, inevitable contradictions. One respondent ‘feels lost, it’s too big’, but is glad that ‘they are not breathing down my neck’. Some claim there has been a change in the student body, and ‘there seems to be a positive spirit of understanding and discussion amongst the present students nowadays’. Contradicting this view of a house mother, a student leader claims that ‘most people seem to be lost in time because they still use the kind of tactics we applied against the previous regime, that is militarism and radicalism’.

There is huge frustration over inconsistent application of rules: ‘If rules could be followed to the letter, then there will be an improvement’. Another academic says, ‘There is a lot of discontent in this place, but nothing happens, people just get resigned... there is no problem-solving in this university’. One student pointed out ‘a student’s survival depends entirely upon their negotiation skills and also their ability to stand for their rights’. Lack of support for those who insist on rules is not always there. Sekwati writes of one staff member, ‘Work as a security guard turned out to be a real challenge. On many occasions she found herself arguing vehemently with students who wouldn’t stop forcing their way onto campus even though they did not have the required particulars, namely the student card’. From a senior academic in an administrative position, the biggest single obstacle in the running of UNIN is lack of ‘implementation of decisions. And the number of meetings that are held!’ There are differences of opinion: ‘I know the place pretty well, feel quite happy, feel secure, and have a considerable amount of freedom... generally speaking, if you don’t make troubles you can live a wonderfully peaceful life. As long as you keep your nose clean’.

The nature of knowledge

There are profound differences in conceptions of teaching, learning, research and knowledge that exist among staff at UNIN, as well as between staff and students, and this can lead to attribution of malicious intent. A student, recalling her early years, told Sekwati her lectures were ‘very depressing because she wasn’t used to the method

of teaching at a higher learning institution. She also recalls having difficulties in following the lecturers as she wasn't used to being taught by white people. Thirdly, she also found it difficult to cope with the amount of work she was expected to cover. She goes on to say that her lecturers are really committed to their students and they try by all means to give a hand where need arises. But she always came across quite a number of lecturers who weren't [and] seemed to be all out to fail students and derive fun out of that'. (One must bear in mind though the history of the institution described above, and accept that students can sometimes be quite correct in assuming malicious intent on the part of lecturers.) Some methods of teaching mystify students: 'tests were designed in such a way that passing would in many occasions be matter of sheer luck rather than actual command of the subject concerned, the punch-card system was absolutely unacademic.' Another said that 'Because of their inability to deal with these massive numbers of students, lecturers end up applying a marking technique called impression marking whereby the allocation of marks is done according to how much the lecturer knows the student'.

Students come from a mark-oriented system, and, even amongst staff, marks seem to have a magical quality. This is part of Fundamental Pedagogics thinking - that knowledge is a quantifiable given - and it relates to some responses to the best/worst lecturer question; lecturers who do not indicate the exact and circumscribed scope of tests, preferably with notes and textbook references, are disliked and sometimes even seen as misleading students. Few students mentioned subject knowledge as a feature of a good lecturer. Caring seems to be the most important characteristic. The following student highlights the importance of expectations and affect (as reported by Sekwati, emphasis added):

She feels that she does not receive enough instruction *as she was supposed to*. She *feels betrayed* by lecturers who say to student "we are giving you keys with which you yourself should go on to open new doors". She missed the amount of instruction that she used to receive at high school level.

In asking staff about teaching and research, many staff were hard put to say exactly what teaching is. Perhaps this is not surprising since, like so many activities that are deeply familiar, it is taken for granted. The most dominant notion of teaching is that

of getting information across to students. This notion of teaching is based on a certain objectivist conception of knowledge, ie, discussed already, which allows for an easy linking of teaching and research: if research is “adding to the store of knowledge”, then teaching is transferring that knowledge from the store to the student. The claim that “just teaching misses the debate in the disciplines” seems to imply a highly circumscribed idea of teaching and of content. Occasionally “teaching” was extended to include teaching students to think, and even further, to develop the student as a citizen and person. Such a view of teaching would correlate with the idea of research as knowledge construction. A particular difficulty with teaching is its evaluation. Evaluation implies sanction and reward. One respondent replied that the reward for teaching was salary and promotions, *whereas for research there is a financial reward*. (South Africa seems to be unique in this respect.) A respondent was quite blunt about the problem: “There is no recognition or incentive for good teaching.” But another one asks, ‘How do you know that you are a good teacher unless you get valued by both your peers and the students...? And how can you improve yourself unless you get some feedback from both your peers and especially the students?’

Conclusion

From this discussion of research, education and themes in the history of the African university it seems that few of UNIN’s problems are unique, many of them are common to African universities, and some of them are common to universities worldwide. Understanding UNIN as an apartheid institution is too narrow. The struggle has had a long history and it would be naive to assume that it will have a brief future. Apartheid, in its deeper philosophy, was not the creation of post-war Afrikaners, and apartheid is not the only legacy that UNIN has to contend with.

I have sought to illuminate the complexity of the institution and the difficulties involved in attempting to grasp a sense of the institutional culture. The conclusion is that the University does not have a coherent identity with which a majority of people could identify. This is the result of many factors; historical, political and socio-economic. Many of these factors extend beyond the immediate history and environment of the institution itself. This lack of identity also presents a substantial

difficulty in transformation; what is it actually that requires transformation, and in whose interests? At one level, the University obviously does exist - there are buildings in a place, and thousands of people who will say they work and study at UNIN. But deeper enquiry reveals that those people are, in terms of everyday experience and sense of purpose, working and studying in different 'worlds'; they are, in a sense, in different institutions. Just as it is banal to simply conclude that the institution means different things to different people, it is banal to assume that a mission statement can appeal to all who are involved in UNIN, and that developing and announcing such a mission statement will have an impact on UNIN's overall effectiveness. It seems that the central purpose of UNIN as an educational institution has been lost, and that it has become a resource being fought over by sectional interests and those sectional interests have developed a life of their own. In a sense, the University doesn't exist. At another level, it is a university in name, but there are many who would say it is not a 'proper' university. What are the reasons for and consequences of such a situation? How can we begin to get a grip of the sense in which the University of the North exists? Unlike the earlier universities of Europe and the later universities of Britain and US and the historically white universities of South Africa who have had to defend their autonomy (granting that it is a moot point just how autonomous 'white' universities in South Africa were from business and state-economic interests), the Historically Black Universities never had any autonomy to defend in the first place. They have had to establish it, and this involves the creation of an institutional ethos. UNIN is fought over, from within and without. There doesn't seem to be an inherent, transcendent entity within it, to withstand the attacks, a position from which purpose, strategies and practices can be developed. This difficulty of identity is linked to the problems of the identity of the intellectual. As stated earlier, a university has an intellectual role that can easily be undermined. One could perhaps argue that there has been an ethos - the struggle ethos, born in the heady days of anti-apartheid. Now that, formally at least, apartheid is dead, the continuation of a struggle ethos without a clear focus of what the struggle is against, exacerbates the lack of identity.

The University cannot be understood without reference to its ideological inheritance; even though much of the structural discrimination has been done away with, and the staff composition of UNIN has changed enormously, one must be realistic about institutional transformation. Entrenched historical legacies persist especially when the

terms of transformation have been mechanical. Effective transformation is a matter of changing minds, meanings, values, and paradigms. Even this preliminary investigation reveals rapid and recent changes for better and for worse.⁵ It remains impossible to have an apolitical perspective on the institution, racial and ethnic discrimination seems to have increased, the institution is fractured by radically different basic assumptions, and an adversarial, confrontational style of dealing with conflict persists.

The University is in one sense an oasis in a desert. In another sense it reflects the poor condition of the Province which is marked by severe disparities of wealth, in which most families are not self-sustaining but depend on outside support and income. It is marginalised, isolated and there is a huge gap between the University and the regional community. The ‘community’ of UNIN can be understood in various ways, as an academic community (with its own divisions), a social community, or as part of a local community. All of these have their tensions, the tension between rural and urban being particularly pertinent to UNIN. At one level, it is hardly surprising that a university institution which was created in the service of political rather than educational interests should struggle to establish first of all a sense of itself as an educational community and secondly a sense of place in a larger community. Certainly it is *educationally* isolated, even though politically it might not be. The fact that it is split in particular ways (for example, white teachers, black students) requires that a special effort be made to *understand* staff and students, where they come from, what they think and feel, their experience of UNIN. This is not only educationally necessary, it is central to understanding the dynamics of the institution and getting a grip on its possibilities. But it is not as simple as one party, usually the dominant one, ‘examining them’, where ‘they’ are usually the historically subordinate group. There is the issue of how identity is constructed and parties are labeled. Perceptions, whether they are right or wrong, justified or unjustified, are real, and have a force. The educational experience of students seems to be dominated by affective aspects and here, the concept of disadvantage, and social prejudice among students needs examining. If, in the light of the history of the country, we consider the problem of

⁵The fact that there are many laudable initiatives at UNIN deserves acknowledgement, but they do not undermine the general thrust of the conclusion.

cultural sensitivity there is a need to design curricula that educate people to become members of communities larger than the ones in which they have grown up. Our secondary school system will not, even within a decade, alter to such an extent that we can expect students to arrive at UNIN prepared for the demands of tertiary education. These all point to a need for radically different degree curricula, a revision that goes beyond the ideas of bridging or support programmes or foundation courses. The lack of this level of understanding may be what is causing attempts to restructure to flounder. Restructuring seems to be seen as a matter of rearranging administrative functions with attention to the power of sectors and individuals, rather than a matter of reappraising the epistemological foundations of disciplines and asking why we have the disciplines we have and whether they are justified in their present form or at all.

Important as these considerations are, it is questionable whether the curriculum is in fact *the* crux of transformation at UNIN. Certainly it is crucial, and cannot be divorced from the question of what we consider knowledge to be, and by extension what (or whose) knowledge is worth distributing or nurturing, and since it has to do with assumptions about teaching and learning, both staff and students are in need of education. It could also, however, be argued that the real transformation of UNIN might be measured by the number of people who are subjected to disciplinary action or fired for not doing the job they are paid to do. Insofar as there is a claim to present findings, one such finding would be widespread maladministration. Although many elements interrelate and there are clashing basic assumptions, and although it is apparent that transformation *is* taking place, what is indicated is large areas marked by the lack of individual responsibility, and the lack of being held liable for action or non-action. It is this that contributes to selfishness, administrative chaos and power plays, and undermines effective rules, security and interpersonal relationships.

The task for UNIN is formidable; it has to justify huge investment by the Government, garner foreign support without being 'colonised', and establish an identity for itself which is contextualised without falling prey to vested interests. Whilst we may look forward to seeing reading lists that contain African texts, written by Africans in African languages, that seek to place the well-being of Africans at the centre of their concerns, whether those textbooks are in medicine, engineering or

economics, we need to be vigilant about the subtle and misleadingly benign forms that oppression and exploitation can take.

The question is whether UNIN can learn from reviews such as this. The need to do so can be gauged by the writing on the walls - well in one case, the writing on a tree actually. There was (until 1998) a wall at UNIN inscribed with the words "One settler, one bullet". There was also, chalked on a tree where many expatriate staff who work at UNIFY usually park, the words "illegal immigrants". In May 1998, the University, as part of a plan to cut costs, announced that the contract staff would not have their contracts renewed. In so doing the University rehearses long-standing debates in the history of the African university, but without, it seems, the wisdom of hindsight. The step against contract staff (i.e., expatriates, many from other African countries) confuses expense with return on investment, limits the diversity of academic staff and thereby undermines the status of the University in the academic community, and the step inhibits rather than contributes to the development of local, hitherto disadvantaged staff by depriving them of Afrocentric mentorship.

The overarching conclusion is that the question of identity is fundamental to transformation and establishing an effective institution. History seems to indicate that when a university comes under the control of politicians, unions or changing cohorts of students, it loses continuity and focus. This is what is happening at the University of the North. If the University is to have value in the new South Africa, it must be asserted as an *educational* institution, and be brought under the control of widely experienced educators.

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