

Theses on Institutional Planning and Research at Universities

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Introduction

The President of the Southern African Association for Institutional Research (SAAIR), Prof. Jan Botha, members of the SAIRR executive, the Chair of the 2011 SAAIR Forum, Ms. Judy Favish, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

Thank you for the kind invitation to address this 18th SAAIR Forum hosted by the University of Cape Town.

The theme of the 18th SAAIR FORUM, *Enhancement*, aims not only to explore existing practices, but also to expand the boundaries of existing planning, institutional research (IR) and quality assurance (QA) approaches and their impact on the quality of higher education and student success in higher education. Forum 2011 is therefore designed to provide opportunities for critical self-reflection to institutional researchers, planners and quality assurance professionals and other administrators, as well as academics, on how evidence-based practices can be used to improve the quality of teaching practices and graduate attributes. Papers reporting on:

- the identification of strategic issues related to enhancement, evidence-based innovations,
 - using information to promote reflective and responsive practices,
 - new ways of approaching operational tasks,
 - investigations or evaluations of strategies or interventions at UG or PG levels,
 - the conceptualisation and monitoring of student outcomes,
 - the use of IR/QA/planning to improve the quality of the student experience, and
 - conceptual papers exploring the relationship between institutional research and quality
- are therefore specifically invited.

The theme is important because:

- institutions are having to operate more efficiently and effectively in a resource constrained environment
- Southern Africa needs systems of higher education characterised by a culture of continuous enhancement of quality and reflective practices
- sharing information on good practices can help strengthen the system of HE
- SA will need to start preparing for the second round of institutional reviews which will focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning at UG level. Institutional research can help identify obstacles to the improvement of teaching and learning and inform the development of strategies to effect improvements
- Student success is the ultimate indicator of institutional effectiveness, and effective institutional research is vital for assessing the impact of interventions designed to improve success

Institutional Planning

Thesis 1

The point of departure for any institutional planning and research must be the understanding that universities principally exist to serve three fundamental purposes.

The first is to *produce knowledge*, so that we can advance understanding of our natural and social worlds and enrich our accumulated scientific and cultural heritage. This means that we “test the inherited knowledge of earlier generations”, we dismantle the mumbo jumbo that masquerades for knowledge, we “reinvigorate” knowledge and we share our findings with others.

We undertake research into the most arcane and abstract issues and the “most theoretical and intractable uncertainties of knowledge”. At the same time we also strive to apply our discoveries for the benefit of humankind.

We “operate on both the short and the long horizon”. On the one hand, we grapple with urgent and “contemporary problems” and seek solutions to these. On the other hand, we “forage” into issues and undertake enquiries “that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit”.

As universities our second purpose is to *disseminate knowledge* and to cultivate minds. Our goal is to ensure that our students can think imaginatively, “effectively and critically”; that they “achieve depth in some field of knowledge”; that they can critique and construct alternatives, that they can communicate cogently, orally and in writing, and that they have a “critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves”.

At the same time, we also seek that our students should have “a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times”; should be “able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it”, and that they should have “some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems”.

Our final purpose as universities is to undertake *community engagement*. On the one hand this involves our students’ voluntary participation in community projects undertaken through our Community Engagement office. On the other hand, it involves service-learning, in which through academic courses our students and academics take part “in activities where both the community” and we benefit, “and where the goals are to provide a *service* to the community and, equally, to enhance our *learning* through rendering this service”.

Thesis 2

The *purposes* of institutional planning are threefold.

1. The first is to ensure that choices and decisions are made

- With respect to teaching-learning: the options of or balance between levels of provision (undergraduate and postgraduate), breadth of qualifications and programmes, the nature of programmes (the mix between general formative, vocational, professional, etc.), the mode of provision (correspondence, distance, e-learning, contact, etc.), and the scope of provision (local, regional, national, international).
 - With respect to knowledge production, the options of or balance between different kinds of scholarship (of discovery, integration, etc.) and the nature of research (fundamental, applied, strategic, developmental).
 - With respect to community engagement, relations with different kinds of communities (mining, manufacturing, agriculture, commerce, government, non-governmental organisations, social movements), which operate in different spaces (national, provincial, regional, local), and have different requirements (research, teaching).
2. The second is to ensure that at a University has carefully considered and formulated ideas of its academic and overall institutional trajectories and development.
 3. The third is that the University is not entirely or even largely shaped by historical patterns and contemporary currents and pressures but proactively and consciously shapes its future.

Thesis 3

The *goals* of planning are to ensure

1. That there exists an Institutional Development Plan, which is not a cast-in-stone, invariant, blueprint, as much as a compass that guides developments, prioritisation, decision-making and implementation at a university, while leaving room for pursuing new imperatives and exploiting possible new opportunities
2. That a university remains financially sustainable with respect to its current and future envisaged enrolments, academic programmes and operations, staffing and infrastructure requirements
3. That a university is able to effectively address and pursue new social and educational imperatives, identified goals and strategies
4. That there is an effective alignment between enrolment planning, academic planning, staffing, infrastructure planning and financial planning
5. That planning occurs on a longer-term horizon than tends to exist at universities.

Thesis 4

In the pursuit of these purposes and goals, the *objects* of planning are

1. Enrolments
 - The size of the overall student body of the University
 - The rate of annual growth
 - The mix between undergraduate and postgraduate students

- The mix between students in Humanities, Science, Engineering, Medicine, Commerce, Pharmacy, Education and Law
- The mix between local and international students (including short-term exchange students)
- The equity (class, race and gender) profile of the University
- The geographical origins of local students
- Is there an envisaged maximum size?

2. Academic programmes

- The current academic programmes (disciplines, fields, qualifications, extended studies) of the University
- The mix between undergraduate and postgraduate programmes
- The nature of academic programmes (formative, professional, disciplinary, inter- and multi-disciplinary)
- The breadth of programme offerings and possible course combinations
- The desirability and feasibility of new academic programmes
- Academic pass, throughput, success and graduation rates
- Research productivity

3. Staff

- The size of the University's academic and support staff bodies
- The rate of annual growth of the academic and support staff bodies
- The academic: student ratio
- The mix between local and international staff
- The equity (race and gender) profile of the academic and support staff bodies
- Developing a new generation of academics and transforming the social composition of the academic staff body

4. Infrastructure

- The available infrastructure to support academic programmes
- The available infrastructure for student accommodation and sports/cultural activities
- The available infrastructure for housing for academics
- The available infrastructure for administrative and other support services
- The backlogs with respect to infrastructure for academic programmes, student accommodation, sports/cultural activities, housing for academics and administrative and other support services
- The implications of future enrolments and academic programmes for different kinds of infrastructure
- The capability and capacity of local government to provide the necessary services to support larger enrolments and new infrastructure

5. Finances

- The available finances to
 - √ Maintain current academic programmes
 - √ Initiate new academic (teaching and research) programmes
 - √ Remunerate staff appropriately

- √ Ensure infrastructure backlogs are addressed and to support additional infrastructure related to growth and development
- The current and possible future mix of sources of funding
- √ State subsidy - including teaching input funds, teaching outputs funds, research (postgraduate outputs and publication) related funds, institutional size funds, student composition funds, teaching development grants, research development grants, academic development funds, infrastructure and efficiency funds
- √ Student tuition fee income
- √ Third stream income – including short courses, research contracts, endowments and gifts
- The effective and efficient use of available finances to address the social purposes of the University, implement agreed upon strategies and realise defined goals

Thesis 5

Myriad challenges face all universities. In the face of this, planning is a necessary condition for addressing challenges, for maximising on strengths and exploiting the available opportunities, for overcoming weaknesses and minimising constraints, and for dynamic and sustainable institutional development. *All* areas of institutional life and activities including, fundamentally, academic provision, require deliberation and conscious policy- and decision-making.

Thesis 6

Deliberation and conscious policy- and decision-making is essential for proactive, efficient and effective, and democratic making of institutional choices and decisions, which also includes a full grasp of the implications (short-, medium- and long-term) of choices and decisions.

It is also necessary for universities in making timeous and considered applications and submissions to the Department of Higher Education & Training (DHET) and other national agencies with respect to enrolment plans, new academic programmes, 'infrastructure and efficiency' funding, competitive submissions for research funding and research chairs and the like.

Thesis 7

Planning for greater efficiency and effectiveness in relation to institutional activities is not in competition with autonomy, academic freedom, democracy, equity and quality. There must be imaginative institutional innovation of structures, mechanisms and processes that balance in creative ways the core values that are fundamental to universities.

Thesis 8

In as much as planning is necessary, it must accord to departments and academics and researchers substantial freedom with regard to teaching and research matters. Planning must also avoid generating an institutional culture of dull, plodding conformity that stifles imagination, creativity and innovation. There must be space for academic and research programmes with different purposes, methodologies, pedagogies and modes of delivery, and that respond in distinct ways to our varied and changing intellectual, social, and economic needs.

Thesis 9

An important goal of planning should include inspiring, conceptualising, managing, communicating and effectively implementing change.

Institutional change is a demanding undertaking, whose complexity and enormity may not always be fully understood at the beginning. It requires sober, careful, detailed and realistic planning, that gives attention to strategies, structures and instruments, available financial resources, sources of expert staff, time frames, and so on.

At the same time that change is being undertaken in certain areas, various other areas of institutional activity have to continue to be steered, supported and maintained. In short, institutional change and institutional maintenance have to be managed simultaneously (not consecutively). If not managed effectively and efficiently, parts and areas of the institution that are functioning relatively well could also become dysfunctional and create new problems.

Thesis 10

It will be the case that during planning certain values, principles, purposes and goals and strategies related to goals, may exist in a relationship of intractable tension in so far as universities are, for good political and social reasons, obliged to pursue them *simultaneously*.

Paradoxes must be creatively addressed and policies and strategies devised that can satisfy multiple imperatives, can *balance* competing goals, and can enable the pursuit of equally desirable goals. If trade-off's are necessary, they should be made deliberately with respect to their implications for vision and goals, and consciously and transparently. The trade-offs and choices that are made should also be communicated in ways that build understanding and secure support from important constituencies.

Thesis 11

Allied to the need to make difficult choices, it is also vital to establish priorities with respect to institutional goals. This is more easily asserted than accomplished in practice. Yet a rational mode of prioritising, for the establishment of first order, second order and third order priorities, and for determining what changes are essential concurrently, what changes can be sequential and so forth, is crucial if the institutional agenda is not to be compromised and undermined.

Thesis 12

C. Wright Mills (1959) writes that

Freedom is not merely the chance to do as one pleases; neither is it merely the opportunity to choose between set alternatives. Freedom is, first of all, the chance to formulate the available choices, to argue over them - and then, the opportunity to choose. That is why freedom cannot exist without an enlarged role of human reason in human affairs. ...(T)he social task of reason is to formulate choices, to enlarge the scope of human decisions in the making of history. The future of human affairs is not merely some set of variables to be predicted. The future is what is to be decided - within the limits, to be sure, of historical possibility. But this possibility is not fixed, in our time the limits seem very broad indeed.

Beyond this, the problem of freedom is ...how decisions about the future of human affairs are to be made and who is to make them. Organisationally, it is the problem of a just machinery of decision. Morally, it is the problem of political responsibility. Intellectually, it is the problem of what are now the possible futures of human affairs (1959:174).

This wonderfully captures significant challenges. In a nutshell, how are we to 'formulate the available choices', how are we 'to argue over them', and how are we to innovate the 'just machinery' that provides the 'opportunity to choose' and to make decisions.

Thesis 13

These challenges also point to the necessity to build institutional cultures and configure internal governance in ways that holds fast to the values of institutional autonomy, academic freedom, academic self-rule and democracy, that concomitantly addresses the requirements for public accountability, efficiency and effectiveness, and that avoid an ideology and culture of 'managerialism' (while acknowledging that effective management is indispensable).

Thesis 14

The making of effective choices and decisions requires more than an institutional planning capability. However, critical too and, indeed, at the heart of any institutional planning capability is an institutional research capability. Choices and decisions have to be informed by appropriate data, and monitoring, evaluation and research.

Such monitoring, evaluation and research is necessary if a university is to rigorously analyse its social context, and is going to be aware of and to interpret national, regional and international economic, political and social dynamics, trajectories and trends that have implications for its institutional development.

An analytical capability to read the nature of policies and policy signals, and to fathom the trajectories of policies is vital if universities are not to be purely determined by context, but are to also pro-actively engage and modify their context.

The political terrain, economic conditions, macro-economic policy, the high-level knowledge and skills requirements of the labour market, budgets for higher education, including student financial aid, secondary school outputs, and the policy milieu all require close analysis for they impact on and have implications for institutional decision-making and planning.

Kinds of research – methodological, knowledge, disciplinary, epistemological issues

micro

macro

conceptual – equity and development eg

Challenges of institutional planning and research

we need to *understand* our university before we can plan its development and manage it effectively in the pursuit of goals

Finances

Personnel

Priorities

Management information systems and data collection, interpretation and use

Notes

Third, perhaps Wolpe's most decisive and powerful contribution was made towards the end of the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI). As he recognised, the entire NEPI investigation, of which he was an integral part, posed educational transformation only in relation to equality and redress. The effect was a failure to pose adequately the transformation of education and training in relation to economic, political and social development. Concomitantly, there was a limited sensitivity to the difficult choices and trade-offs that would be implied by any restructuring of education to contribute simultaneously to equality/redress and development.

If Wolpe was hostile to the unadulterated privileging of development over equality, he was equally wary of a focus simply on equality at the expense of development. As he put it, the concentration on either the equality or the development pole has extremely limiting effects on the shaping of policies appropriate to the contemporary situation in South Africa. The exclusive focus on equality leads to the formulation of policies which are abstracted from

the conditions in which the policies must be applied. That is to say, they are elaborated in isolation from the concrete conditions of society and the development programmes that may be appropriate to transform those conditions.

The exclusive focus on economic development, on the grounds that without the production of the skilled persons needed by an advanced economy the basic economic and social needs of the people cannot be attained, prioritises development and effectively retards or delays the equalisation process. This position is sometimes coupled with the contention that economic development necessarily entails equality, and yet this is far from self-evident.

His especial genius lay, however, in the argument that equality and development objectives are "always in tension", and stand in a relationship of permanent or intractable tension. Morrow has pointed out that when confronted with an intractable tension between dearly held values - such as equality and development - various 'simplifying manoeuvres' are possible. One simplifying manoeuvre is to refuse to accept the existence of a dilemma – a moral blindness if you like. A second simplifying manoeuvre is to elevate one value above all others making this the value in terms of which all choices and policies are made. A third simplifying manoeuvre is to rank values in advance so that if there is a conflict between them one will take precedence. In the latter two cases, the effect is to privilege one value/goal above another (Morrow, 1997).

As Morrow points out, simplifying manoeuvres can have tragic consequences. To his credit, Wolpe refused to flee from the intractable tension, confronted it, and forced others to do so. He argued that the way out of this impasse required the recognition of the competing, yet important, claims of both equality (redress of social structural inequalities) and development (socio-economic, political and cultural development and development of people). He further argued that in so far as "both equality and development are prized, but also exist in a relationship of permanent tension, the challenge for a new government and higher education was clear: *to find a path which to some extent satisfies both demands as far as existing conditions permit*" (cited in Badat et al, 1994). That is to say, a viable policy for the higher education system has to *balance* equality policies with development policies. To the extent that such an approach contributes effectively, and simultaneously, to equality and development, the consequence of this which is a relative slowing of the process of equalisation as well as a relative slowing of the processes of development would appear to be a small price to pay.

Theorisation, as Gerwel has noted was hugely important to Wolpe, and his

writing always had a very central concern with the nature and quality of discourse and modes of understanding. If there is a word and concept that has stuck with me out of conversations and engagements with Wolpe it is that of 'theorising'. Absence of or unsound theorising impaired understanding, in Wolpe's view of the nature... of critical conversation about societies and social reality (2002).

Global university rankings and institutional research and planning

Badat S, Wolpe H & Barends Z (1994) 'The post-secondary education system: Towards policy formulation for equality and development.' In Bronwen Kaplan (ed), *Changing by Degrees? Equity issues in South African tertiary education*. Cape Town: UCT Press

Gerwel, J. (2002) *Annual Harold Wolpe Memorial Lecture*. Cape Town

Morrow, W. (1997) "Varieties of educational tragedy". Paper presented at the Inaugural Conference of the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust, *The Political Economy of Social Change in South Africa*, University of the Western Cape, 1-2 April, 1997