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Relativism in national higher education policy documents: what is a university?

Several national higher education policy documents have been published over the past ten years. In spite of the impact of these documents on universities, nowhere do they deal critically with what a university is and what precise aspects of that identity should change. It is important to know what a university is since universities may be expected to undertake tasks which are not necessarily typical. The article points out that the process by which technikons were renamed universities of technology is the best example of relativism in higher education policy documents dealing with the concept of a university.

Relativisme in nasionale hoëronderrysbeleidsdokumente: wat is 'n universiteit?

Verskeie nasionale hoëronderrysbeleidsdokumente het die afgelope tien jaar die lig gesien. Ten spyte van die ingrypende veranderings wat dit op universiteite het, gaan hierdie dokumente nêrens krities om met wat presies 'n universiteit is en watter aspekte daarvan moet verander nie. Dit is belangrik om te weet wat 'n universiteit is omdat van universiteite verwag kan word om take te onderneem wat nie tipiese universiteitstake is nie. In die artikel word daarop gewys dat die proses waarin teknikons se name na universiteite van tegnologie verander is, die beste voorbeeld is van die relativisme in hoëronderrysbeleidsdokumente met betrekking tot die konsep van 'n universiteit.

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Despite the publication of several policy documents on the restructuring of South African higher education and its landscape, there is no clear definition of what a university is. The concept of a university is rather perceived against the background of what universities should be doing. This is evident from the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE 2001) and its forerunner, the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE 1996a; 1996b), as well as from planning documents such as the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI 1993) and the Shape and Size Report (CHE 2000). The Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997 and all its amended forms) gives no direction either (RSA 1997).

The importance of knowing what the policies consider a university to be, encompasses two issues.

First, all the policy documents have university change and transformation in mind, but it is not clear what has to change and transform: is it the concept of a university, the unique features of a university and/or certain practices in university education and administration? In addition, if a university changes and transforms, what will/must be left of the university as it has been known for centuries? Will it still be a university? Do post-modern societies still need universities? All these speculations require an answer to the question of what a university is. The latest policy documents on South African higher education are, however, silent on this matter. Examples that fit perfectly here are the debates on the nature of comprehensive universities and universities of technology. Are these institutions simply the result of merging (universities with technikons) and institutional re-labelling (technikons as universities of technology)? The policy documents leave us in the dark.

Secondly, the effectiveness of all new developments within a university's structure and function can be measured only on the basis of what a university is. This pertains to the notion of fitness for purpose: is the institution doing things right? An answer can only be given if it is known what the institution is supposed to be doing. Here too, a definition of what a university is is required.

Since South African policy documents identify a university only by its functions and not by its unique characteristics (as opposed to other institutions such as the church, the government, the school, etc)

a university may undertake assignments which may not be in line with its unique functions. This problem can only be resolved by achieving clarity on what a university is. The objective of this article is, therefore, to provide an answer to the question: what is a university? The hypothesis is that the policy documents typify universities according to their desired functions and characteristics, rather than that these functions and characteristics follow from the definition. In this sense the policy documents on higher education regard the nature of a university as relative in the debate on university change/transformation.

A brief overview of the latest policy documents will put this into perspective.

1. An outline of trends in national higher education policy documents

The national policy documents reveal two dominant concerns: the role that universities have to play in terms of social reconstruction and in terms of institutional reconstruction.

2.1 Social reconstruction

What is clear from the higher education policy documents is the role that universities have to play in social reconstruction. One cannot ignore the fact that the core values of higher education are more socially driven than supported by sound academic principles. The reports create the impression that academic principles have become relative rather than the *Sitz im Leben* for all academic institutions. To contextualise this remark: the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI 1993) proposed that a new (higher) education system replace the then apartheid education system. The significance of the NEPI report is that it proposed a system differing dramatically from the previous higher education system, which was based on race, culture, language and religious conviction. These criteria had dominated the functioning of all institutions of higher learning and led to inequity, racism, sexism and an autocratic style of management. The NEPI (1993) formulated the following criteria for a transformed higher education system:

- Democracy: an imperative move away from the political imperatives of universities in the past.

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- A unitary system: an integrated higher education system comprising universities, technikons and certain colleges.
- Redress: the imbalances of the past should be addressed with a view to empowering previously disadvantaged institutions.
- Non-sexism: no discrimination against women should exist. In the past, numerous women had been denied access to traditionally “male-orientated” programmes, including engineering, theology, and medicine.
- Non-racism: universities were constituted according to race, language and culture. Apartheid had denied black students access to white institutions, a system that led to segregation in higher education. This was not acceptable in a democratic context.

The principle of social transformation continued in the final report of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE 1996b). The NCHE (1996b: 28) states that

The report concentrates [...] on those characteristics of South African higher education that were largely shaped by the politics of that form of internal colonialism which was peculiar to South Africa, namely apartheid.

This report outlined a transformed higher education system based on the principles of the South African constitution and the goals of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (ANC 1994). These documents support a new policy on science and technology, economic growth, equity and a single co-ordinated higher education system. Central to this new system are the values of equity, democracy, development, quality, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, effectiveness and efficiency.

The Council on Higher Education’s *Shape and Size Report* (CHE 2000) takes social responsibility and national priorities as its point of departure, thus assigning a social role to higher education institutions. The drafting of an annual “social plan” is evidence of this understanding of higher education. The plan states that the role of higher education is to support the African renaissance and believes that without the supportive role of higher education it will not be possible to have African intellectuals, scholars, writers, dramatists, artists, musicians and critics (CHE 2000: 30). The *Shape and Size Report* (CHE 2000: 25) states:

Higher education itself has a vital role in producing the knowledge, generating the socially committed graduates and providing various services for enabling this country to pursue social equity, justice and higher standards of living for all and contributing to the revitalisation of the African continent.

A fundamental issue within the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE 2001) is its conceptualisation of higher education. Without an understanding of the philosophy underlying higher education, it would be almost impossible to understand the planned new higher education band. The higher education philosophy of the NPHE is a mix of academic, professional and societal needs. It is also evident from the plan that cost-effective programmes and market-related programmes (the economic imperative) are of equal importance. It is clear that the NPHE (2001) addresses higher education within the context of the reconstruction of South African society. Once again, universities are assigned the task of addressing these issues by means of their core functions. Yet nowhere is the question asked whether social responsibility is the primary role of universities.

2.2 Institutional reconstruction

The national higher education policy reports and their accompanying documents clearly regard teaching/learning, research and community service as the basic functions of a university. Nowhere, for example, is the issue raised as to why these three functions are highlighted. Nor is it clear whether community service is on an equal footing with teaching/learning and research or merely an appendage.

Instead of addressing these and similar issues, attention was paid to the reconstruction of institutions by means of external steering mechanisms such as funding, accreditation, merging and governance, as well as internal mechanisms such as three-year rolling plans, academic development and equity targets. Even in these matters the nature of a university is largely ignored when it comes to the targets set for universities (rather than the nature of the functions that determine what a university is). The reasons for mergers (whether among universities or between universities and technikons) are perfect examples of this. Reasons given include avoiding duplication, broadening access, redressing staff and student racial imbalances and creating new institutional forms (cf NPHE 2001).

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These reasons perfectly illustrate the merely relative role of the nature of a university in the policy documents. In the NPHE (2001) it is quite evident that universities and technikons are regarded as two different types of higher education institutions, yet it is possible for a university and a technikon to merge into a comprehensive university which will offer primarily technikon-type programmes. Stranger yet is that in the proposed Academic Policy (DOE 2002: 69) the previously unthinkable is suggested, namely that the “Tech”-nomenclature unique to technikons may (not must) be replaced by typical university nomenclature:

This means that providers may determine and apply to use whatever qualifier they think best reflects the specialisation of a particular qualification.

This relativism is not new. Similar examples can be found in earlier documents pertaining to the question: what is a university? The NCHE (1996b: 10) states that higher education programmes provide means of delimiting the boundary between higher education programmes and other levels of education. The definition of higher education programmes emphasises levels of learning rather than the institution or sector offering the programme. This indicates that the NCHE regards types of institution as unimportant; it is only the programmes that matter. The *Shape and Size Report* continues to promote this idea, considering also types of programmes and numbers of students. As a result, five types of university are recommended:

- Bedrock universities
- Comprehensive postgraduate and research universities
- Extensive Masters and selective Doctoral universities
- Distance education universities
- Private universities

The criteria for distance education universities are distance programmes (*sic*) while private universities offer privately funded programmes (*sic*). Qualitative requirements are set for the remaining three types of universities:

Minimum enrolment per field of study	Bedrock universities	Comprehensive postgraduate and research universities	Extensive masters and selective doctoral universities
Full-Time Equivalent Enrolments (FTEs)	4000	8000	6000
Humanities		15 %	25 %
Commerce		10 %	10 %
Science, Engineering & Technology (SET)	25 %	50 %	30 %
M & D FTEs		10 %	5 %
Academic staff with doctorates		40 %	20 %

In addition, the *Shape and Size Report* proposed that an institution could be a “technological university” depending on certain requirements relating to SET enrolment, varying from 25% (bedrock institutions) to 30% (extensive Masters and selective Doctoral programmes) to 50% (comprehensive postgraduate and research institutions).

The NPHE (2001) deviates from these recommendations and advocates primarily three higher education systems: universities, comprehensive universities and technikons. Once again the differences between these systems are based on programme offerings (as in the case of the NCHE). In line with its recommendations, the NPHE (2001) proposes 16 different outcomes for higher education. These outcomes are based on five strategic issues that will influence all future planning at higher education institutions:

- quality of academic programmes
- niche markets reflected in academic programmes (regional co-operation, collaboration and programme mix)
- social responsibility and equity
- financial sustainability
- meeting the requirements of the African renaissance.

As far as institutional differences are concerned, the NPHE (2001) espouses two fundamental perspectives: first, universities and techni-

kons differ in terms of institutional vision, mission, core values and programme offerings. A university and a technikon are two distinct types of higher education institutions, both delivering programmes on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) at levels 5 to 8, but with a different academic impetus to their curricula. Universities are career-relevant in their programme offerings and technikons are career-directed in their approach to academe. Secondly, the NPHE (2001) foresees a need for quality education and qualifications but not for qualifications on the same level or of the same nature. This has to do with the demands of the labour market and with national priorities linked to the global economy. In the words of the NPHE (2001: 51):

The Ministry recognises that the decision to continue to treat technikons and universities as two types of institutions with different functions and missions is likely to be objected to by some technikons to become universities of technology. The Ministry is, however, convinced that this decision is in the best interest both of the higher education system and the broader national agenda for social and economic development.

2.3 Discussion

The policy documents and accompanying reports make us aware of the difficulties associated with an ivory-tower image of universities. By contrast, the latest documents on higher education are more concerned with breaking down the boundaries between institutions of higher learning and with their potential contribution towards the new social role proposed by the NEPI (1993), NCHE (1996b), *Shape and Size Report* (2000) and NPHE (2001) reports and policy documents. This is supported by, among others, the framework of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (ANC 1994) and the Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997). The programmes offered should not only enhance a unitary system of higher education institutions, but should foster a learning society, integrate African and European cultures and resolve language, racial, gender and developmental issues. These policy documents should also be read in the context of the international paradigm shift from teaching to learning as well as the South African paradigm shift from individual empowerment to capacity-building.

Comparison of these documents indicates a difference in the understanding of the role and nature of a university. During the 1970s and

1980s it was a question of a structural understanding of institutions. This quest could be summarised in the question: What is a university? The current developments are more interested in how universities can contribute towards the empowerment of previously disadvantaged students; revitalise the idea of higher education in the African context, and globalise higher education institutions. The focus falls on their social role, which is further stimulated by new developments, such as the knowledge of society and global developments. As Hall (2001: 228) comments: “[...] it has long been recognised that schools and universities play a major role in the socialisation of work”.

Where the “ivory tower” idea embodies the ideals of the Humboldtian university (academic freedom at all costs), the new social role engages Newman’s ideal (personal development) and Napoleon’s ideal (state regulation). No model fully represents the ideal. A university is a public good and should therefore contribute to the social welfare of a community. Universities should have a social role. But to define a university simply in the context of its social role does not do justice to the fact that a university is an academic institution and that the best contribution it can make towards a society is to be a university of high quality.

The relativism in the policy reports and their accompanying documents on the question of the nature of a university will now be illustrated with reference to the process of renaming technikons as universities of technology.

3. Relativism in renaming technikons as universities of technology

The *Shape and Size Report* (2000) and the NPHE’s (2001) support for diversity and differentiation represents a known strategy to direct a university system to meet certain objectives. Huisman *et al* (1998: 1) state that diversity in higher education has been an important policy issue in a number of countries, such as the USA, the Netherlands and Australia. Governments throughout the world emphasise the need for diverse higher education systems (cf Meek *et al* 1996). Moreover, diversity has become an extremely important issue for countries rebuilding their higher education systems, whether after a revolutionary political change or not (Huisman *et al* 1998: 1; cf also Moja & Cloete 2001). Diversity

refers to the specific missions of individual institutions. Differentiation refers to the social and educational mandates of society. In fact, more institutional variation is expected in future (cf Muller 2004).

One can therefore understand why there should be a higher education institution such as a university of technology. What is difficult to understand, however, is the way in which the *Shape and Size Report* (2000), the NPHE (2001) and the Ministry of Education's announcement on universities of technology in 2003 deal with this issue. There appears to be a lack of understanding of what a university is, as well as of the relativity of university functions to social goals. The policy documents are simply steering documents which often lack conceptualisation of issues.

To illustrate my point: in 2000 the *Shape and Size Report* (2000) proposed that technikons could call themselves technological universities if certain criteria were met. The NPHE (2001) limits technikons primarily to awarding diplomas and offering degrees in certain selected programmes. During October 2003 the Ministry of Education announced that technikons would henceforth be known as universities of technology. No criteria were outlined. Why were criteria proposed in 2000, rejected in 2001 and done away with in 2003? Should one argue that in 2003 the Department of Education felt that it was not a matter of technikons actually becoming universities, but simply renaming themselves universities? If not, then this move was a political decision, with no academic merit at all. If so, then the logical implication is that technikons are already universities and do not need to become universities. As universities of technology they still have to offer programmes leading to graduation (teaching/learning) and be engaged in research. This is not unique since a university is characterised by teaching/learning and research. What differs is the specific ways in which the teaching/learning programmes are offered and the research pursued. In the case of universities of technology both the teaching/learning programmes and the research will be expected to focus on the needs of business and industry. Industrial, applied and commercialised research will be more important than basic and fundamental research (cf Du Pré *et al* 2004). At such universities the focus of study will also be on how to do something rather than on why. This follows from the definition of technology, which is the knowledge of how to do something (*techne* = making and

logos = knowledge). If the unique features of a university of technology become irrelevant, then differentiation and diversity will be meaningless.

The question is whether we really understand the implications of this type of university? If so, are the higher education policy-makers ready to treat technikons as the equals of existing universities, or will the technikons in South Africa experience the same difficulties as the former British polytechnics? (cf Pratt 1997, 1999). In this regard, I am thinking of the technikons' position on postgraduate study. At the moment, most technikons have limited enrolments in this category due to their short history in this area of programme offerings, specific facilities, fewer PhD-qualified staff, and the employment opportunities which technikon diplomands have after only three years of study. If technikons are not supported in extending their PhD enrolments, then they will always be seen as different from existing universities. If this issue is not addressed, then the relativistic approach of the NCHE Report (1996b) in avoiding the "university-technikon" issue by focusing on programmes instead of institutions will always be regarded as a failure in the history of the transformation of higher education.

4. What is a university?

In answering this question, neither the history of universities, nor the tasks assigned to them, nor policy directives are sufficient to provide a comprehensive definition. Certain perspectives may be provided to explore various conceptions of universities.

The history of universities can be divided into four stages (cf Lategan 1999a for a detailed analysis). From the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, the late-medieval universities at Bologna, Parma, Paris and Oxford specialised in the training of professional clergy and lawyers as well as clerical and lay administrators, and could be regarded as vocational schools. It is not strange that the curriculum consisted of the *trivium* (grammar, logic and rhetoric) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music) at the undergraduate level, and theology, law and medicine at the postgraduate level. The former is in line with subjects offered at the Academy of Plato, the Lyceum of Aristotle and education in general in the ancient Greek world. The fifteenth to nineteenth centuries were characterised by education for the elite.

Although the curriculum remained the same as that of the original vocational university, the function was not training but education. Following this period, during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, knowledge was fragmented in the Cartesian reductionistic fashion, whereby one may isolate a very small domain of possible knowledge and focus all one's energies on it. The intellectual world became isolated from the world beyond its boundaries. Everything was done for the sake of knowledge. The notion of pure knowledge could not accommodate mundane technological enterprises, with the result that engineering, for example, was at first avoided and only included in the late nineteenth century. The 1960s introduced a new era in the existence of universities. University life was characterised by economic growth, which led to esoteric study of an unimaginable number of subjects, as well as by democratisation, which led to open access and the development of the social conscience of universities.

Although much can be learnt about universities from their history, this does not yet give us an insight into the true nature of a university.

To identify the tasks of a university and then to conceptualise a university on the basis of those tasks is logically inconsistent. What happens in this approach is that the desired role of universities is projected onto the nature of a university. The correct approach would be first to obtain clarity on exactly what a university is (its nature) and then to indicate what its functions should be. One cannot use the characteristics of an entity to identify its nature; one must analyse the entity to identify its characteristics.

Previous policy documents and reports do not provide a comprehensive answer either. In South African reports such as the Van Wyk de Vries Commission (1974) and the Committee of University Principals' Investigation into Universities (CUP 1987), the emphasis was on universities as distinct from the other tertiary institutions of the day and on the relationship between universities and society. In this regard the CUP (1987: 5) is firm on the tasks of a university:

... the development of science should neither be subordinated to, nor replaced by the more pragmatic research goal of finding solutions to practical problems or problems of short-term, national or sectional significance.

Another trend in the documents of the Van Wyk de Vries Commission and the CUP was to note a distinction between the university as an institution of high quality teaching and research and achieved standards in relation to the international arena. As an example, I refer to an investigation into the macro-aspects of universities by the then CUP (1987) in which it was reported that academic standards at universities varied greatly, from high academic quality, comparable to that of the best universities abroad, to a level scarcely acceptable in higher education. Here too, the documents work with a perceived concept of a university without verifying the concept analytically.

Since neither the history, nor the tasks of a university, nor policy directives can assist us in gaining a comprehensive conceptual understanding of a university, I shall now undertake a cosmological analysis of reality, using the transcendental-empirical method. My reason for choosing this method is its recognition of the uniqueness of social structures and the order attached to them (cf Strauss 2000: 128, 136). According to this analysis, various institutions can be identified that are unique in themselves. This method acknowledges the universal and individual existence of entities within reality, that there is a structure to entities and that these entities can be known by that structure. It is possible to refer to these entities by means of conceptual knowledge.

Reality unfolds in various societal structures, for example, the state, the church, the school, the university, and so on. Each of these structures has its own individual and universal character. By “individual” is meant that only the form of the society concerned can determine the specific task. “Universal” refers to the influence of different forms of society on one another. The individual and universal sides of things can be explained in the following way: the church and the university both have a teaching function. The church undertakes religious instruction, while the university is responsible for academic instruction. Although the preparation of a sermon presupposes a particular exegetic methodology and academic grounding, the sermon should never degenerate into an academic lecture. Occasionally a lecturer may pass a religious judgement, but this should not change his/her lecture into a sermon. Even the presence of a Faculty of Theology does not turn a university into a church, any more than a Faculty of Law turns it into a civil court. Therefore, although different forms of society exert a

mutual influence upon one another, none can take over the functions of the others.¹

Before the essence of the university can be systematically explained, attention must be paid to its structure, its unique nature and the limits of its powers. The concrete actions of the university, exercised within the limits of its powers, are supported by the historical organisation of educational powers and qualified by the unveiled logical aspect of reality. Scientifically-founded teaching/learning and research form the speciality or task of the university. Scientific study gives direction to all typical university functions. The organisation of the university is completely subservient to the formation of academic university power, that is, power developed by means of scholarly thinking. For this reason, the university is generally known as an academic institution of higher learning. The encyclopaedia of science, and thus of the university, is inclusive of the entire creation. In actual fact, this implies that the university may concern itself literally, in an academic-reflective manner, with everything in reality.

Built on this conceptualisation, it may be concluded that a university is a social structure organised in a logically disclosed reality with a view to that which qualifies it, namely knowledge through scientifically-orientated research and teaching/learning. The university as a social structure is fused with a multitude of other social structures. In the light of this, the following definition of a university may be given:

The university is an academic institution at which research is conducted and teaching/learning is offered within the organised cadre of the contact between lecturer and student, and supported by networking, co-operation and collaboration with external academic partners to create, develop and transmit new knowledge.

In practical terms this means that knowledge creation, development and transmission are the core business of a university. New knowledge can be produced (research), transmitted to other people (teaching/learning) and applied (community services). Kerr (1996: 66) and Summers (2003: 144) are therefore right in saying that the task of the university will always relate to knowledge.

1 Compare the following metaphorical expression: *The university as new church* — Hazel Barnes 1970.

This does not mean that only universities are creating, developing and transmitting knowledge. Many businesses and industries are also active in knowledge development, yet the creation, development and transmission of knowledge are not their primary function. Knowledge does not qualify their individual character. It is for this reason that businesses and industries engaged with knowledge are not classified as universities.

5. Conclusion

This article has outlined the fact that neither history nor policy documents can provide us with a satisfactory answer as to what a university is. To conceptualise a university, a cosmological analytical approach was suggested. From this approach it was clear that a university is not known by its functions and that the functions of a university should be based on its unique structure (as opposed to other institutional structures such as the church, the government, the school, and so on). This article has identified the relativism in higher education policy documents dealing with the nature of a university. First, this relativism is evident in the social role and social reconstruction that is expected of universities. Secondly, it is recognised in the functions assigned to a university on the basis of meeting desired objectives, instead of the unique nature of a university. The article also points out that the process in which technikons were renamed universities of technology provides the best example of relativism in higher education policy documents dealing with the concept of a university.

The hypothesis of the article raised a concern about policy documents interpreting universities according to desired functions and characteristics instead of functions and characteristics following on the definition of a university. In this sense the policy documents on higher education in the debate on university change/transformation regard the nature of a university as relative. This conclusion validates the hypothesis of the article.

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