

PART 2

STAFF AND LEADERSHIP

INTRODUCTION

Chapters 6 and 7 trace the changes and challenges that have confronted all those who work within higher education institutions – from institutional leaders and managers through administrators and academic staff, to technical assistants and service workers. Predictably, it is South Africa's massive social and political transformation that has prescribed the most overt of these challenges – the translation of the great principles of democracy, equity and social justice into the structures, practices, cultures and identities of higher education institutions.

At a national level, the process of entrenching the hegemonic position of social democracy in South Africa has moved its values and principles from manifestations in slogans and struggle to substantial embodiment in constitutional provision, policy intention and legal statute. The chapters on staff and leadership demonstrate a corresponding ideological shift on the terrain of higher education that produced an intense focus on issues of governance and equity in reallocating decision-making power and employment opportunity.

In relation to staff, the key policy thrust was for equity (strengthened later by the provisions of the Employment Equity Act of 1998) in order to change the demographics of all sectors of staff in line with national profiles. Transforming governance structures and practices to become more inclusive and participatory, in line with co-operative governance policy, has been a priority energised by the same political animus that won national liberation for a disenfranchised populace, but the evidence presented in the following two chapters suggests that this process has been experienced differently in different institutional contexts, with a range of consequences and effects. More importantly, the story that is told by these chapters suggests that other processes – associated with state fiscal policy and the operations of the market – may have had even more profound effects on the system and its institutions than the higher education policies formulated post-1994.

A recurring theme in both chapters is the complexity and contradictory nature of the challenges facing higher education: South Africa's internal transition corresponded with a moment in world history broadly captured in the term 'globalisation'. As higher education attempted to deal with the internal pressure for greater democratisation, it was subjected at the same time to global pressures from which it had been artificially cushioned – market competition, the commodifying of higher education products, and public accountability – particularly in the form of increased demands from the state for efficiency and effectiveness. In some instances, particular institutional histories led to such an intense pre-occupation with governance issues that the significance of these other

pressures was obscured, leaving institutions exposed and vulnerable to their most negative effects. In other instances, traditions (or institutional culture) and capacity enabled institutions to manage and resolve conflicts around the transformation of governance structures in ways that gave them space to respond effectively and strategically to new social and economic conditions. It is here that the analysis of leadership strategies situates itself.

That leadership is addressed as a topic in and of itself in the pages of this publication is noteworthy and suggests a certain 'coming of age' in South African educational discourse. Kulati and Moja reflect on the fact that leadership is not specifically addressed in the policy documents of the transition. Perhaps this is because policy itself is seen as providing the values, direction and guidance – the vision – denoted by leadership. But as they correctly point out, the interpretation and implementation of policy in widely differing institutional contexts require another kind of leadership, the parameters of which are clearly set by history, context, material resource-levels and human resource capacity. Another explanation for this hiatus in the policy documents (and elsewhere) is the tension that lies at the heart of democratic philosophy and practice between the principles of egalitarian participation and empowerment, and the implications of hierarchy and authority associated with leadership.

This tension is marked in the text of the chapter on leadership in what is perhaps a less than conscious slippage of meaning between leadership as the practice of providing vision, devising strategies, offering guidance and direction, and leadership as the person or group of persons providing the vision. Leadership is used as a substitute term for 'leader', or 'leaders' (terms that are very rarely used in the text). This has the effect of stripping the concept of any connection with individual personality or identity. Instead, the broader, more inclusive, participatory pole of meaning is emphasised. Anyone can contribute to leadership.

A fully conscious, and very telling, articulation of this tension occurs in the dominant leadership types presented in the argument. Transformative leadership, characterised precisely by its inclusive, consultative and participatory practices, is contrasted with managerial leadership which seeks the benefits of rapid response to competitive market conditions through the decision-making authority of a sharply defined group of executive managers. The former can be seen as responding primarily to the equity and co-operative governance demands of policy, while the latter form of leadership focuses powerfully on the efficiency demands of policy. There are too many variables involved to accurately assert that current conditions favour the latter rather than the former, but a number of factors (explored in the chapter on staff) suggest that divisions amongst different sectors of staff are growing, particularly between senior managers (including academic managers) and the broad body of academic staff.

One of these factors is the relatively new phenomenon of sharply differentiated salaries. Another lies in the provisions of new labour legislation now governing academic staff. Designed to protect worker rights and interests, and promote participation in workplace decision-making, these regulations, when applied on the academic terrain, have had the contradictory effect of emphasising contractual employment relationships above collegial community. The reader is left in no doubt that higher education

workplaces are changing rapidly, becoming more demanding and less secure, as more flexible forms of employment, in line with global trends, are finding favour.

Nonetheless, as Manuel Castells (2001) reminds us, higher education institutions, while taking on new roles and functions, retain many of their traditional functions. Successfully managing this complex and contradictory array of roles will be the critical test of the ability of institutions to perform within the demanding conditions of the global arena.

The real issue is ... to create institutions solid enough to stand the tensions that will necessarily trigger the simultaneous performance of somewhat contradictory functions. The ability to manage such contradictions, while emphasising the role of universities in the generation of knowledge and the training of labour in the context of the new requirements of the development process, will condition to a large extent the capacity of new countries and regions to become part of the dynamic system of the new world economy. (p212)

REFERENCE

- Castells, M. (2001). Universities as Dynamic Systems of Contradictory Functions. In J. Muller, N. Cloete & S. Badat (eds), *Challenges of Globalisation: South African Debates with Manuel Castells*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman.