

Editorial: Can Policy Learn from Practice?

Rubby Dhunpath

Nyna Amin

Thabo Msibi

At the best of times, higher education is known to be in a state of unbridled turbulence. That it should be any less so, remains (thankfully) a point of unresolved contention. What we do know from the South African experience, is that during times of discomfort, institutions take refuge in policy formulation, policy reform, and less frequently, policy dialogue. This was evident in the decades preceding what has been typecast as the ‘pre-democratic era’, when education policy units were the heartbeats of universities, some boldly located in the portals of campuses – supported by their university communities, others hovelled in more perilous enclaves, often at the mercy of the state security apparatus. Singularly and collectively, these units exposed the brutality of a divided and divisive education system, characterized by governmentality, geared for social engineering. Policy units envisioned a new future of possibility in which universities nurtured human talent for the greater good.

In the years following ‘liberation’, policy units redirected their energies from activism and advocacy to an evidence-based approach to systemic reform, providing the signposts for reform and identifying benchmarks to measure the success of transformation agendas. During this period, many of the policy units quietly faded into the landscape, being either absorbed into mainstream academia or into government departments. The ensuing period was one of vigorous policy development by government, accompanied by an emerging evaluation culture, often associated with performativity. This was an era characterized by state policy fetish. The new ruling elite, eager to legitimize its existence to its impatient electorate engaged in what Hans Wieler (1990) called ‘compensatory legitimation’: using policy tools and processes which saw education in a perpetual state of reform, in its

attempt to deliver demonstrably new policy symbols. It was a period of policy borrowing, policy re-scripting and policy cascading, much of which was benign, as the policies and reforms lacked coherence and continuity.

The higher education sector, which was hitherto relatively insulated from overt interference from the state, witnessed a significant re-alignment through mergers and closures under the equity and transformation banner. It was a turbulent period for higher education, as the country pinned its hope for tangible change and economic prosperity on the ailing Academy. Yet, universities remained isolated monoliths often in competition with each other – exacerbated by the era of institutional audits and an emerging rankings culture, which privileged individualism over collectivism, and elitism over development.

Institutional audits were critiqued as instruments of accountability rather than as drivers of quality; but there was a tacit acknowledgment by many in the academy, that it was time for universities to shift the gaze onto themselves and to take responsibility for outmoded organisational cultures still locked in 19th Century rituals of practice. Herein was a glimmer of hope: that the era of policy fetish was being displaced by policy pragmatism. It was in this spirit that the Council on Higher Education's (CHE) Quality Enhancement Project (QEP) was conceived, with the potential to demystify academic environments, providing opportunities for institutions across the economic, geographic and organisational spectrum to view themselves through the eyes of their peers in open and supportive dialogic spaces. These spaces are now stark reminders that while each institution is a product of an unequal past, it is no longer defensible to bemoan historical 'legacies' when prospects and possibilities for innovation and change abound in the organisational cultures within the country and elsewhere.

However, we need to be clear about the intellectual project underlying the quest for quality enhancement. We need to be clear that this is not an exercise in sustained isomorphism, where institutions mimic each other's organisational models, or where the more articulate ones establish new normative canons of practice, or where the CHE becomes the new de facto coercive agency in organisational control. Through the process of policy dialogue, the QEP can interrupt the imperceptible but pernicious slide towards anti-intellectualism currently being led by the ruling class, which has come to typify civil society. It is not entirely clear what the QEP will ultimately accomplish, but it would be a complete travesty if universities allow mediocrity

to continue to be entrenched as the new standard as envisioned by the ruling elite.

While we cautiously embrace the focus on quality of the new policy landscape where policy peer review is valued over policy legitimisation, we need to pursue an agenda of a counter-rankings-culture which privileges diversity and differentiation and affirms the call of Dr Van Jaarsveld (the new Vice Chancellor of UKZN) for ‘disruptive innovation’ (coined by Clayton Christensen in 1995) as a university’s distinctive competitive edge. We no longer have the luxury of dedicated policy units to drive innovative policy agendas, but we have each other and the dialogic approach to systemic organisational development. Because this systemic approach is organic rather than interventionist, it allows all institutions to articulate their distinctive voices, without having their voices diluted or muted, but modulated - particularly those that have been reluctant to respond to changing realities and changing times.

Some institutions will continue to masquerade their conservatism as preserving academic ‘standards’, and others will indulge in elaborate window dressing to show-case their transformation facades. While academic fashion shows do have their place in the world, universities that adopt a disinterested approach to quality enhancement by relegating the dialogic opportunities to technocrats and staff who have no decisional power and influence, risk squandering a potentially liberating opportunity and will be judged harshly by the emerging precariat (Standing 2011) amongst their students.

The opportunity presented by a dialogic approach to policy development and enactment is that it has the potential to steer the higher education discourse beyond conventional conceptions of policy formulation and policy dialogue, towards reimagining possibilities for policy implementation derived from delegates’ lived experiences of policy as practice to demonstrate that policy can, indeed, learn from practice. Of note here is the watershed policy on institutional mergers and the experience of restructuring to solve problems of duplication, fragmentation and lack of access, and to improve the quality of education in South Africa.

By the start of the new millennium, South Africa began a radical restructuring of the higher education sector with the aim of reducing the number of universities from 36 to 23 through institutional mergers, amidst resistance from some, reluctant to relinquish their individual identities. At the time, academics asked crucial questions such as: Can mergers, in fact, address

iniquities in the higher education system? In what ways do mergers impact on the curriculum of combined institutions? Are certain kinds of mergers (like voluntary mergers) more successful than others? And why do mergers so often fail to meet planning expectations? In addition, the merger process was said to suffer under-theorization and reliance on the facile transfer of lessons learnt from very different international contexts. Ten years on, mergers have impacted higher education in both anticipated and unanticipated ways, with some institutions reporting positively on the process and others now agitating for de-mergers. Yet others bemoan the destruction of a once functional FET sector. It is now prudent to re-visit these questions and ask new ones such as: Has the higher education policy agenda delivered on its promise? What have we gained and what have we lost in this process? What have we learnt and what have we not learnt? What are the imperatives and challenges we now face to advance our gains and cut our losses? The papers in this special issue go some way to disturb, disrupt, surprise and even confirm obliquely or directly, the issues we have raised.

The Impact of Mergers of HEIs in South Africa

In *Taking stock thirteen years later: An investigation into the impact of mergers on institutions in the higher education landscape in South Africa*, Lekhoto investigates the impact of institutional mergers in the South African higher education landscape. Adopting a content analysis approach, the author reviews 30 articles between the year 2002 and 2013 with the aim of understanding how institutional mergers have shaped higher education in South Africa. The reviewed literature suggests a complex set of dynamics resultant from the histories of merged institutions and the complex processes of negotiating new identities and cultures in the newly merged institutions. The paper suggests that South African mergers have had both positive and negative effects in shaping the South African higher education landscape, with challenges resultant from the mergers dominating post-merger discourses and experiences. Such challenges have included staff attrition, quality problems and a confusion in terms of epistemic focus, particularly in cases where the mergers involved traditional universities and technikons. With the complex and challenging dynamics highlighted, the paper shows the critical need for more empirical research in merged institutions.

Quality Assurance Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa

If quality is an enduring, aspirational ethos in academia, and if assuring it enjoys primacy on the developmental agenda at universities, the Ugandan experience is instructive. Nabaho, et al zoom in on the limited literature on quality assurance systems in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa to spotlight the practices and experiences of stakeholders at the student-academic interface in assuring the quality of teaching at Makerere University. The study is anchored in the neo-institutional theory which posits that organisations operate in environments dominated by rules, assumptions, beliefs and procedures about what constitutes appropriate forms and behaviour. Under this gaze, organisations are under pressure to adapt their structures and behaviour to the institutional environment in order to ensure their legitimacy and survival. The authors cite Neo-institutionalism to assert that organisations submit to external influences in adopting to new practices through strategies and practices that are coercive, mimetic and normative in nature.

Employing a case study design and using content analysis, the findings demonstrate that the university employs five practices to assure the quality of teaching, namely, recognition of teaching, student evaluation of teaching, pedagogical training, monitoring and supervision of teaching, competence-based deployment and interfacing. The authors conclude with the caution that when student evaluation is skewed towards the accountability function rather than improvement of teaching, universities in developing countries should be wary of donor-driven and project-managed quality assurance initiatives which undermine the project of internal quality assurance.

Innovative Approaches for Enhancing the 21st Century Student Experience

We can perhaps learn from the experiences of universities abroad. For instance, in order to improve the student experience, Coates *et al.* discuss insights from a project that aimed to bring about sustainable strategic change through improving institutional capacity in Australia. They devised new concepts for understanding Australia's higher education students, identified new data sources and approaches for measuring the student experience, and engaged institutions in enhancement work involving conversations about students. Coates *et al.* propose a model to

reconceptualise qualities of a successful experience. They offer two enhancement strategies developed to seed new practices.

First Generation, Disadvantaged Students' Experiences of Higher Education

If one is to take seriously the narrative emerging from higher education institutions around student quality, one can easily be convinced of a system in crisis and in urgent need of rescuing. So dominant are these narratives of crisis and sustained student failure, that a veiled discourse of racism has prevailed and taken a space of legitimacy. In their paper entitled *Exploring the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged students at a South African university*, Norodien-Fataar *et al.* confront this narrative through their exploration of first generation university students enrolled in an extended curriculum programme offered to students interested in science but who did not attain requisite scores to enter a science bachelors programme directly, in one South African university. Using Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital, the paper analyses how students engage with university education ('the field'). The paper finds highly agentic students who are not paralysed by their state of disadvantage draw on multiple resources in order to succeed in their university studies. Despite the uneven educational support available at the university, the seven purposively-selected student participants are found to establish productive engagements in order to succeed with their academic endeavours. These include tentative engagement with University support structures, engaging with, and at times challenging, their lecturers and working directly with their peers through study groups. This paper offers an important contribution to the scholarship of teaching and learning in that it looks beyond the deficit gaze, away from the lack of higher education cultural capital, to recognising the multiple resources that disadvantaged students can draw on in order to succeed. The paper also speaks to the need for higher education institutions to intensify their support systems to enable a better accessing of higher education cultures and knowledges by students.

University Sexual Violence Policy Silence and its Impact

Sexual violence remains one of the most pressing challenges in post-apartheid

higher education spaces. This challenge has emphatically been brought into public discourse through the recent bra-less student demonstrations at Rhodes University, as part of the Fallist movement. The problem, as has also been seen in the recent string of lawsuits and urgent institutional reforms in American higher education institutions, is not peculiar to the South African higher landscape; it also happens to be wider in reach. Responses from higher education institutions have been particularly criticized given the defensive tone and the ‘soft’ approach institutions have had towards perpetrators. The article by Singh *et al.* on the perspectives of students in so far as policy on the prevention of sexual assault on campus is concerned is therefore a very important and timely contribution to the scholarship and research on teaching and learning in higher education.

The paper draws on survey data from 265 undergraduate students from the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. While the authors are clear that though not representative, the data generated suggests an urgent need for the institution to introduce more policies with a particular focus on sexual assault. The data shows an endemic and normalised culture of violence and assault on students, with the majority of students (72%) arguing for the need to introduce a dedicated policy focusing on sexual assault within the institution.

If there exists this compelling need for sexual assault policies in South African higher education institutions, what then are the implications for teaching and learning within such higher education spaces? This question is minimally explored in the paper, suggesting more research on the responsibilities of teachers (higher education educators) within institutional settings rife with gendered violence. The paper opens an important avenue for dialogue and serious introspection, not only for the managers who have to develop the policies, but also equally for the teachers and students, who are also implicated in the violence and aggression ingrained in South African higher education institutional cultures.

The Persistence of Post-truth Politics about Women Leaders in Higher Education

The article by Ramohai revisits an issue that is extensively researched, viz., about the ways in which the ‘second sex’ (Beauvoir 2011/1949) is *othered*, marginalised, vilified, made invisible, exploited and oppressed. The

description, ‘second sex’, belies the violence and vulnerabilities that females court on account of social reinvention that deem them inferior, emotional and illogical beings fit for nurturing, care-giving, housekeeping work at home and as substandard and lesser associates or labourers in the workplace. Although it may seem to be an overworked scholarly endeavour, it remains a critical focus that needs to be constantly monitored, highlighted and reported, especially in the light of recent events in the United States of America, which is a reminder that the rights women have fought for and gained can be swiftly lost. The election of a president in that country this year (2016) serves as a nodal point to examine the treatment, reception and acceptance of the incumbents, a female (Hillary Clinton) and a male (Donald Trump). It became clear that a deep, well-hidden patriarchal disposition was in operation, pitting a vitriolic misogynist against a woman regarded as ‘nasty’ because she displayed competence and, rational and logical thinking that were interpreted as too masculine and unbecoming. We should point out that these are the same attributes that are valued in men and yet, if a woman displays them, then the interpretation that she should not be trusted emerges.

We conclude, therefore, that the present state of post-truth politics (recurrent assertions of falsehoods in the face of contradictory evidence) is particularly vicious to women, and services agendas aimed at keeping them out of high office in the political arena and elsewhere, and most importantly, to deprive them of power. It is against the aforementioned background that one should read Ramohai’s study on the experiences of women in senior positions in higher education institutions. The findings are not unexpected; the women face enormous challenges in the workplace because of distortions that stereotype them as unsuitable for higher education leadership, dishonest constructions of their leadership styles and mistreatment by male peers. The study serves as a fact-checker against truths that are ignored and the flow of fabrications that are repeated countless times. Thus duplicate evidence from countless studies is needed to reverse the insurgency of untruths. It means, too, that the scholarship on women in higher education needs to be intensified until we reach the point of post-distortion women politics. Ramohai’s study is instructive in that vein.

Linguistic Discrimination in Higher Education

Symbolic violence in various forms and guises continues to be an intractable

feature in higher education, especially as it relates to the continued denial of linguistic rights or what Skutnabb-Kangas (1995: 1) calls linguicism. Linguistic discrimination is enacted through 'ideologies and structures that are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources between groups which are defined on the basis of language'. Students' language of learning, language policy, personal preferences, and professional identity are brought into the spotlight by Ted Sommerville in this volume as he explores medical students' preference to study in English rather than their home language as an index of identity formation at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

An analysis of their class's assessment marks according to demographic characteristics showed a statistical and sustained difference between first- and second-language English speakers. However, the latter preferred English as their medium of teaching and learning. They saw terminology as being more problematic than language, stated that their own languages did not have sufficient technical vocabulary, and felt that their professional interactions would be conducted largely in English. The author concludes that language influences, and is influenced by an individual's identity. Professional identity is a powerful shaping force in young adulthood when one's personal identity is being de- and re-constructed. The status of English, and the developmental state of other South African languages, are also salient factors. While these findings support policies to develop the technical vocabularies of indigenous languages, they also signal the ways in which language use may be constrained by students' personal perceptions and professional goals.

Indigenous Knowledge as Transgressive Knowledge

It is alleged that the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education has been slow to engage seriously with the question of transgressive pedagogies and knowledges. It is argued that higher education continues to be dominated by western narratives of teaching, which privilege particular types of pedagogies and epistemologies. In the article entitled *Engaging Indigenous Knowledge Holders in Teaching Preservice Teachers in IKS Food Production and Practices: Implications for Higher Education*, Govender *et al.* initiate an important conversation about the role of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Indigenous Knowledge Holders in higher education.

Through a study that uses critical multilogicality as a framework, the paper reflects on a study involving 49 purposively selected preservice educators who were introduced to two IK holders in a project that explored the role of IKS in food production and environmental sustainability. Through inviting two knowledge holders, individuals defined by the writers as ‘intellectual fringe dwellers’ (borrowing from Dudgeon & Fielder 2006) within the academy, the authors initiate a serious attempt to trouble the rigid ways in which higher education epistemes and pedagogies are thought of and engaged with. The authors draw on data from questionnaires and written essays from students reflecting on their experiences of being engaged with by IK holders. The paper showcases the benefits of exposing students to transgressive knowledge, i.e. knowledge that goes beyond established Western conventions, and highlights the innovative ways in which such knowledges can be passed on. In the context of the persisting calls for a decolonised education, the paper is an important contribution that offers practical ways in which both the curriculum and pedagogies can be decolonised in higher education institutions.

Re-thinking Community Engagement

A crucial dimension in addressing the phenomenon of the intellectual fringe dwellers is, potentially, linking it to the domain of university community engagement (CE), which has been the subject of a conceptual re-think, particularly over the past 15 years. Its origins lie in the tradition of many university cultures which share three missions – teaching, research and service. Preece, in exploration of *the porous university: re-thinking community engagement*, attempts to stimulate a conceptual re-think around the nature of community engagement in higher education by outlining the evolution of community engagement. It questions some of the ideological rhetoric of the construct in which the university is presented as a collaborative partner and co-creator of knowledge, particularly through strategies such as service-learning. The paper highlights issues of power relations, ownership of the engagement process and knowledge generation. It offers a theoretical framework for community engagement, drawing on the capabilities approach, asset based community development and dialogue. The framework is then presented as a heuristic which can be used as an evaluative tool for assessing how metaphorically porous university boundaries can facilitate a more mutually accessible relationship between community and university. In this way, she

argues, the engagement relationship can build on community assets, rather than following a deficit model of intervention which is premised on community need.

A key imperative in the community engagement discourse is to elevate it to more than volunteering in episodic project interventions designed to tick compliance boxes. Community engagement is meaningful and generative when the pursuit of learning opportunities is fueled by a pedagogy of possibility, where the university is the catalyst for interdisciplinary commitments that seek to engender a more authentic approach to knowledge generation. Authentic explorations in rapidly changing knowledge landscapes must, of necessity, transcend arbitrary disciplinary boundaries which bear little semblance to the realities of inter-disciplinary living. This purview of knowledge generation calls for an epistemological revolution which values contradiction, uncertainty and multiplicity as expressions of authentic living. This suggests that our research agendas too can no longer be sanitised to bracket out conflict as a symptom and expression of the (post) human condition. A key challenge in this endeavor is constructing interdisciplinary conceptual frames that are simultaneously durable and pliable to accommodate harmony and affirm multiplicity.

A Conceptual Framework for Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning

An example of interdisciplinary explorations that transcend prosaic disciplinary enclaves is the work of Burch *et al.*, who reflect on their incursions into developing a *conceptual framework for interdisciplinary teaching and learning dialogues in higher education*. In this article, Teaching Advancement at Universities (TAU) Fellows and their mentor reflect on the development and early validation of a conceptual framework for learning-centred teaching. In this exploratory project, six academics, each representing a different higher education institution and a different discipline use a grounded theory approach to construct the framework. Its potential utility value was explored through the use of six teaching innovation projects conducted in undergraduate South African university programmes in law, medicine, education, and the arts. The project revealed that interdisciplinary dialogic spaces can be initiated and nurtured through opportunities offered by communities of practice such as the TAU Fellowship when academics suspend their exclusive disciplinary

preoccupations to open up possibilities for a generative, emancipatory scholarship. The authors argue that the conceptual framework is useful to facilitate and promote dialogues across and between the multiple discipline specific ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies offered in higher education.

A Meta-analysis of Writing Retreats

In recent times, there has been a narrow focus at some higher education institutions to pursue improved rankings as research-driven entities. As a result, the push to improve qualifications and to increase publications has been on the rise, particularly the latter as it is a source of much-needed income. Additionally, the losses incurred and the damage to university infrastructure by the *#FeesMustFall* movement in the 2015-16 period has intensified institutional resolve to disrupt the ascent of anti-intellectualism and to reassert the traditional roles of the academy. The aim has been thwarted somewhat by large numbers of employees without doctorates and low research outputs by those who, seemingly, prefer teaching to research. The consequence has been a proliferation of writing for publication endeavours and doctoral support programmes and concomitantly, an increase in researching these endeavours and programmes as exemplified by The Castle and Keane article which reports on the outcomes of one institution's unexpected boons from writing for publication ventures. Using a methodologically sound approach, the authors investigated the outcomes of writing retreats undertaken over a five-year period. The positive outcomes (increased collegiality, improved writing ability, enriched writerly identity and enhanced agency) can be attributed to the judicious selection of the retreat as opposed to say, seminars, workshops or colloquia. The outcomes of writing retreats, we surmise, could not have been noticeable had just a single case-study been offered. Indeed, the meta-analysis of email-generated data of 27 retreats revealed its hidden benefits. The article suggests that the narrow *publish or perish* agenda can be positively subverted by making wise choices in respect of professional development activities.

Assessing Integrated Learning from the Legitimate Code Theory Concept of Autonomy

Of late, there has been much interest, and even scrutiny, from the public in the

role, value and relevance of institutions of higher education pertaining to increased student aspirations to acquire higher qualifications and issues of affordability, curriculum relevance and contextual realities. There are also intense desires by government and industry for universities to produce a workforce with abilities that are commensurate with employment goals and industry needs to stymie rising discontent and political unrest. Of special interest are qualifications that involve internships, work experience and placements during the period of study and assessment of the efficacy of such learning opportunities and activities. The coherence and intersection of the needs of potential employees and prospective employers is paramount to harmonise employee-employer relationships. In view of the potential for industry to lose faith in the programmes of institutions of higher learning, lecturers cannot risk assuming that students will make connections between theoretical learning and its application in the workplace. Careful and thorough evaluation of work placements should thus be rigorously tracked.

The article by Garraway and Reddy is an exemplar of research rigour. Integrated learning, a career-focused education, forms the heart of their inquiry which compares the impact of the university and industry on the kind of integrated learning that occurs in the fields of Environmental Studies, Chemical/Biological Sciences, Mathematical Sciences and Agricultural Studies from lecturers' perspectives. The usefulness of the study is the deployment of the Legitimation Code Theory concept of Autonomy for the purposes of analyzing the connections students make between place of study and place of work as it is judged by lecturers. Fine-grained analysis revealed some integration, and a surprise, that writing and presentation skills has the potential to be 'integrated with science learning'.

References

- De Beauvoir, S. [1949] 2011. *The Second Sex*. Borde, C. & S. Malovany-Chevallier (trans.). New York: Vintage Books.
- Phillipson, R. & T. Skutnabb-Kangas 2014. *English Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Standing, G. 2011. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury.

Rubby Dhunpath, Nyna Amin & Thabo Msibi

Wieler, H.N. 1990. Comparative Perspectives in Educational Decentralization: An Exercise in Contradiction? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 12,4:433-448. doi: 10.3102/01623737012004433.

Rubby Dhunpath
Director: Teaching and Learning
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Dhunpath@ukzn.ac.za

Nyna Amin
School of Education
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Amin@ukzn.ac.za

Thabo Msibi
School of Education
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Msibi@ukzn.ac.za