Planning Complexity: Access and Retention at a Merging Institution

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Introduction

Academic management is a highly complex endeavour: increasingly, it must respond at the same time to the imperatives of globalizing higher education, to proliferating educational policy development, to national priorities in terms of human resource development, and finally to the demands of its more localized context, its stakeholder and its customers. This paper unpacks some of this complexity by focusing on the ongoing processes of conceptualizing, organizing and implementing a university-wide access and retention portfolio, within a huge and newly-merged institution. By reflecting on one set of institutional experiences and the processes involved, the paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of comparable challenges facing many of our universities.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) came into being on 1st January 2004, by means of a merger of the former Universities of Durban-Westville, and Natal. Its vision is to become the 'premier university of African scholarship', and its mission:

> a truly South African university that is academically excellent, innovative in research, critically engaged with society and demographically representative, redressing the disadvantages, inequities and imbalances of the past.

To achieve this mission, the University *inter alia* has declared widening access a core strategic initiative, as spelt out in the first of its declared goals:

Promote access to learning that will expand educational and employment opportunities for the historically disadvantaged, and support social transformation and redress.

As a means of working towards this goal, an executive-level Access portfolio, with responsibilities across the whole university, has been instituted as part of the University's Executive team.

Planning for this portfolio is of necessity planning complexity, in a context in which complexity accrues from a variety of sources. Firstly the context of merger – a context in which systems are being built which may still be tentative and liable to change, as their impact on each other and their consequences for institutional functioning become more clear. The sheer size of the merged institution (43,500 students) requires in itself complex management systems, to ensure efficiency. As Ramsden (1998: 35) has pointed out:

> Quite simply, mass higher education and knowledge growth have fundamentally altered the nature of university management structures. Smaller universities catering for academic elites were less complicated organisations to administer than large diverse ones. Management by unanimity and self-government is evidently incompatible with the efficient operation of huge organisations. It is too slow to respond, too unwieldy to direct, too focused on problems rather than outcomes, and too short on professional expertise to guarantee quality, financial probity, and on-time delivery to multiple customers.

Increased consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, both inside and outside the university, is now required, in terms of equity and procedural transparency. The desirability of conceptualising student learning holistically, in terms of both academic and social aspects of the educative experience, requires the integration of services from a range of campus services: Admissions, Student Management, Student Funding, Residences, Student Counselling. Further complexity accrues through ongoing policy development by the Department of Education, not least through the number and range of policy documents which are contributing to reshaping the

education system as a whole. At the same time, the familiar world of knowledge is also undergoing radical change: scholars now have to come to terms with what Watson has termed 'the changing map of knowledge, with its corrosion of disciplinary boundaries' (2000:3), and indeed, with new understandings of what is even meant by knowledge; this presents enormous new challenges to disciplines and the organisation of study programmes. (This is not being further discussed in this paper.) It is not surprising that the structures emerging at UKZN are themselves complex and require careful negotiation.

Starting-point for any discussion of Higher Education in South Africa has to be the policies of the Department of Education, as the framework to which institutions are seeking to respond[1]. The *National Plan for Higher Education* (2001) spelled out core strategic objectives for higher education: to establish indicative targets for the size and shape of the higher education system; to take steps to ensure the diversity of institutional mission and programme differentiation; to restructure the institutional landscape; to develop a new approach to research funding (CHE 2004: 28-29). Within this broader framework, institutional mergers formed part of the restructuring of the institutional landscape in terms of quality, sustainability and equity. The structures and strategic initiatives proposed by UKZN have sought to respond to these objectives, specifically within the KwaZulu-Natal context. Thus, in terms of the stress laid by DoE policy documents on equity considerations, the UKZN Council instituted two Executive portfolios which address issues of equity: the Equity portfolio, which focuses primarily on staff equity, and the Access portfolio, which focuses on student equity, and is to conclude its work by the end of 2007.

The label 'Access portfolio', however, has turned out to be something of a misnomer. An appropriately broad understanding of 'Access' must derive from the encompassing conceptualisation of student equity spelled out in various policy documents. For instance,

> Equity is about more than just formal access to higher education: it is also about substantive access to a variety of academic fields and

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[1] In the following I have drawn largely on the recent CHE publication: *South African Higher Education in the First Decade of Democracy* (CHE 2004).

disciplines, to postgraduate study, and to opportunities and outcomes in general, in all fields and disciplines, and at all levels of study (CHE 2004: 60).

The CHE review subsequently spells this out in more detail:

Three of the strategic objectives of the National Plan directly referenced student equity. First, the goal of producing graduates with skills and competencies to meet South Africa's human resources needs required increasing the participation rate (from 15% to 20% by 2010 – 2015), as well as the number of enrolments. It required increasing graduate outputs in line with specific benchmarks (e.g. 25% for three-year undergraduate programmes, and 33% for master's programmes); changing enrolments by field of study (from a humanities: business/commerce: SET ratio of 49%:26%:25% to 40%:30%:30%) recruiting non-traditional students (e.g. workers, mature learners and the disabled); and increasing student recruitment from the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Second, the strategic goal of achieving equitable student and graduate profiles required a range of planning and funding levers to increase overall access and success. Third, the goal of sustaining and developing research capacity required a range of planning and funding levers to increase postgraduate enrolments and success at master's and doctoral level (CHE 2004: 63-64).

The initial focus of the UKZN Access portfolio was on school-leavers from educationally marginalized contexts; and in the merger context, this was quite possibly justifiable as the most immediate need. However, over the past 18 months the scope of the portfolio has expanded far beyond this to include outreach activities into local schools, access into post-graduate studies, RPL and mature learners, and – crucially – issues of retention and through-put.

The CHE review makes mention of the three levers which will help position institutions to achieve these policy goals: planning, funding and quality assurance. In the following I focus on each of these in turn (while bearing in mind that the three are closely linked), to derive a more precise

understanding of 'access' and 'student equity', and how the portfolio has been shaped by and is seeking to respond to each of these levers.

The Framework: Departmental Policies
Planning: The Need to Plan
While the White Paper had identified the need for planned expansion linked to sustainability (as opposed to uncoordinated massification), the following five years saw a period of rapid (and unplanned) shifts in student enrolments, based not least on entrepreneurial initiatives by some of the former HAIs. As a result, the recent policy document: *Student enrolment planning in public higher education* (2004) states clearly that student enrolment cannot be left to what it terms the 'vagaries of the market, in particular, uncoordinated institutional decisions on student enrolments and programme offerings'. The document seeks to spell out student enrolment plans which the department considers will be affordable and sustainable, on the basis of three key factors:

- The imperative to match enrolment plans with available resources to enable the higher education system to deliver on its teaching and research mandate;
- The need to ensure that enrolment plans are linked to national human resources and research priorities. (Here the document mentions scarce skills fields such as teacher education and science, engineering and technology.)
- The need to enhance quality, in particular, throughput and graduation rates.

The enrolment parameters spelled out in this document have required the Access portfolio to reconsider carefully what had been inherited from the former two institutions. This included several alternative access programmes in Science, Engineering, the Humanities and Management Studies, together with a strong imperative to facilitate access to school-leavers from disadvantaged contexts; for some staff this also included the general awareness that the university must then offer alternative access students an enabling learning context.

The *Student enrolment planning* document presented the need for shifts in enrolments by fields and qualification level (to achieve the desired 40:30:30 spread); the need to focus on access to scarce skills fields, to increase PG access and success, and to enable access to hitherto neglected groups such as mature age students, workers, learners with disabilities – highlighting additional fields of endeavour for the Access portfolio. In addition, it spelled out the requirement of substantial increases in throughput rates, at all levels. In seeking to address this particular point, it would seem necessary for the Access portfolio to expand its focus beyond the needs of alternative access students only. In particular, the following comment from the CHE review is apposite:

> Equity of opportunity and outcomes will crucially depend on high quality provision in teaching and learning, curriculum innovation, and appropriate academic development and mentoring initiatives (CHE 2004: 90).

The *Student enrolment planning* document, however, added another issue to the UKZN debate: the recommended reductions in student registrations, together with the imperative to improve throughput rates, was by many considered to raise the question as to whether alternative access students should still be accommodated at all, if the school system was already producing enough qualified applicants to fill all available study places. By what justification were we to turn away applicants with, perhaps, 36 Matric points, on grounds of lack of capacity, yet at the same time to register applicants with 24 Matric points in a Foundation programme? This debate became of especial relevance to two Faculties, Humanities and Management Studies, in that institutional planning of student enrolments had substantially cut their numbers of entrants.

In this context, where UKZN is required to remain at 2003 levels, the Access portfolio cannot simply propose increasing the numbers of 'disadvantaged' and 'underprepared' students in the system (which had perhaps been an expectation in the early days of the merger.) Rather the focus must be on more limited numbers of alternative access students, but at the same time on ensuring that a higher proportion of these do indeed succeed.

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Funding: The Need to Stay Solvent

We now turn to the impact of DoE funding policies (and specifically the new funding framework) on the university as a whole, and as a framework for the Access portfolio.

The intention of the new funding framework is doubtless to fund universities equitably, while enabling institutional and social redress. Yet, given the 'perceptible decline' in government grants in the years after 2000 (CHE 2004: 207), and the very significant additional costs incurred by merging institutions, institutions will of necessity seek to position themselves so as to reap maximum benefit from the framework. The Access portfolio in turn will seek to use the funding framework to prioritise and maximize funding for alternative access initiatives, and for academic development more generally, within the overall straitened university budget and the legitimate demands of other budget-holders. Yet possibilities are limited: UKZN can seek to improve through-put rates (at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels), in terms of the incentives offered by the uncapped teaching output funds; to contribute to increased research output grants through research and higher degrees relating to access and AD; and can apply for the ear-marked funding for foundation programmes. (UKZN does not qualify for a Teaching Improvement grant.)

Rather than expect unlimited numbers of access students to be funded, a responsible approach must first ask the question: how many alternative access students can the institution afford? The impact on resources will include: resources in terms of staffing, supplies and services and infrastructure, Financial Aid packages (NSFAS) and residence places, but also a potential *loss* of resources from the teaching output funds, in that it can be anticipated that alternative access students will be likely to produce lower throughput rates.

It will be evident from this brief overview that parameters of both planning and funding are based, to a considerable extent, on the need for efficiency: and that efficiency and equity, at times, may not be easily juxtaposed.

Quality Assurance: Claims of Excellence

The quality assurance of Higher Education is based on the considered

definition of quality published in the HEQC Founding Document, with the following four components:

> *Fitness of purpose*: quality within the context of national goals for the higher education system, including equity, access, effectiveness and efficiency (responsiveness);

> *Fitness for purpose*: quality in relation to a specified institutional mission within a national framework that encompasses differentiation and diversity;

> *Value for money*: quality judged in relation to the full range of higher education purposes set out in the White Paper;

> *Transformation*: quality higher education that develops the capabilities of individual learners for personal enrichment, as well as the requirements of social development and economic and employment growth (and) educational and social effectiveness (CHE 2004: 147).

Consensus has been reached that

> QA should remain primarily the role of HEIs themselves in a model combining institutional self-evaluation and external validation by the HEQC (CHE 2004: 147).

Hence the HEQC's stated intentions are to 'balance improvement and accountability roles, and to build a culture of self-managed evaluation to support self-accrediting institutions' (CHE 2004: 154). This is to be managed, on the one hand, through accreditation: the development of a new system of accreditation, the accreditation of programmes of public and private providers, specific re-accreditation initiatives, and overall coordination. On the other, a system of institutional audit has been developed, with the following goals:

> encouraging and supporting providers to maintain a culture of

continuous improvement, by means of institutional quality processes that build on HEQC and institutionally-set requirements; enabling HEIs to develop reliable indicators that will assure institutional stakeholders and the HEQC that policies, systems, strategies and resources for assuring and enhancing quality in teaching and learning, research and community engagement are effective; and providing information and evidence that will enable HEIs and the HEQC to identify areas of strength and excellence, and areas in need of focused attention for planned improvement in the short, medium and long terms (CHE: 2004: 152).

As a merged institution, UKZN is to be audited in 2008, by which time it is hoped that the institution (under the guidance of the UKZN Office of Quality Promotion and Assurance) will have developed the culture and practices of self-evaluation and continuous improvement which will enable it to be granted self-accrediting status. The processes of reflection, self-evaluation and implementation of good practice will be lengthy, and staff are now gradually beginning on the necessary self-reflection, in terms of the various criteria and descriptors of good practice, as laid down in the HEQC programme accreditation and institutional audit documents.

While the 2008 audit will be at institutional level, the various foundation programmes at UKZN will be well advised to work with the *Criteria for programme accreditation*, which are directly applicable (even though they do not need to apply for accreditation). These include encompassing criteria which apply to student recruitment, admission and selection, staffing (both academic and support staff), teaching and learning strategies, student assessment policies and procedures, infrastructure and library resources, and programme administrative services.

In that the merger has necessitated considerable re-visiting of previously existing foundation programmes in the two former universities, it is appropriate that staff become aware of the various criteria and guidelines and seek to reflect on their applications during these developmental processes.

Potential Tensions within these Policies

While the importance of access and student equity is highlighted in all policy

documents, increasingly tensions with other imperatives are being identified. In 1994, NEPI had already focused on what it perceived as the challenge of balancing quality and equity. NEPI

> highlighted two questions ...: how could the demands of equity be made consistent with the need for a higher education system of high quality and how could the development needs of the country be met if priority were to be given to the elimination of inequalities in the system? (CHE 2004: 144).

This remains an issue today, with the new funding formula possibly nudging institutions towards a 'trade-off... between standards and throughput', which may become particularly important for academic development (CHE 2004: 154). The CHE review points to discussions which took place after the appearance of the *National Plan* in 2001, and which debated the

> extent to which an emphasis on system and educational efficiency (through a focus on throughput and equity of outcomes) was in tension with expanding participation rates according to principles of equity of access, and redress (CHE 2004: 29).

Similarly, the targets introduced by the *Student enrolment planning* document in 2004 have also been interpreted as limiting student equity. The CHE review comments that the intended integration of equity, efficiency and effectiveness may be 'slipping in favour of an efficiency focus' (CHE 2004: 29).

The Local Context: The New University
Structuring the New University

From the outset, the proposed merger of the former universities of Durban-Westville and Natal was understood as an opportunity to address the many challenges within higher education in KZN, in terms of the transformation imperative spelled out by the DoE. The merger brought together two universities with vastly different histories and institutional cultures; it created a new structure of 43 500 students and five campuses, spread across

two cities or sites. Within this KZN context, how has UKZN responded to and been shaped by departmental policies and the levers of planning, funding and quality?

In the pre-merger phase, leaders at both universities had decided to adopt the 'single Faculty single School' principle, in order to avoid duplication of academic governance structures and to ensure full integration of the two previous institutions, and the various campuses of the new university. When the merger took effect (January 1st 2004), the Interim Executive was structured with four Executive Deans who were responsible for academic governance in specific faculties, and a number of University-wide portfolios, for instance portfolios for Administration, Planning, Research, Students, Registrar, Access, Equity etc.

This preliminary structure evolved during 2004 and achieved some finality at the start of 2005, with the appointment of the substantive Executive. Midway through 2004, devolution was accepted as a core principle, and College model was implemented as organizational academic structure for UKZN, with four relatively independent Colleges consisting of clustered faculties (eight in all). In terms of this structure, academic and budgetary control was devolved to the four Executive Deans who subsequently took on the positions of DVC and Head of College. Each College consists of two multi-campus 'single' Faculties; Faculties in turn are constituted by multi-campus 'single' Schools consisting of either one discipline or a set of cognate disciplines. Colleges, Faculties and Schools are therefore likely to have staff and students on two, three or even four campuses. Within these structures, lines of management and reporting are vertical; but there is also of necessity ongoing horizontal interaction across sites and campuses. These core vertical structures are, however, now complemented by University-wide Executive portfolios and structures, by means of which other core functions are managed: Finance; Administration and Corporate Governance; Planning; an encompassing Research portfolio (Research, Knowledge Production and Partnerships); a Dean of Students; and more specialized portfolios for Institutional Culture, Equity, Outreach, Access and Public Affairs.

In this way, the merged university has become structured as a matrix, with intersecting vertical and horizontal lines of management and flows of information. These intersections of horizontal and vertical appear

essential to ensure that, on the one hand, Colleges do not become 'silos', self-enclosed units which are no longer available for inter-College activities and dialogue and which evolve independent policies and cultures, but that also, on the other, campuses receive equitable treatment in terms of resources and present an overall and cohesive image of UKZN.

The Access Portfolio: From 2004 to 2005

It is within this matrix that the Access portfolio is located, as a one + three-year portfolio: it is to exist until the end of 2007, by which time Access is to be fully embedded in Colleges and Faculties. By mid-2005, the Access portfolio has evolved into a 'virtual' Office, in that it has a minimal staffing complement. This points to its functions, as being primarily those of advocacy, policy development and monitoring; implementation of Access takes place at Faculty level, by Faculty staff. Relationships with UKZN staff are shaped by the network of horizontal and vertical structures: the Executive director relates horizontally with other members of the Executive, and especially the College Heads; vertically with staff who are involved in access initiatives. Line management functions, however, are limited to the three members of staff in the Access Office (an office administrator, a Coordinator of Testing, and a Researcher.)

It has taken a while for this present functioning of the Access Office to evolve. The year prior to the merger (2003) saw the development of what was to become the UKZN Access Policy. This took place through a series of Access workshops, which brought together colleagues from both former universities and served as one forum for emerging dialogue. Both universities had previously shown considerable commitment to access, but in rather different ways: at the former UN, alternative access had been managed by means of Faculty-specific access programmes (in Science, Engineering, Humanities and Commerce), with extremely limited academic support beyond these programmes. At the former UDW, in addition to a Science and Engineering Foundation Programme, students with lower Matric points were admitted rather widely, in terms of an 'open door' approach signaling 'opportunity'; somewhat limited academic support was made available in the shape of language courses. The need to reconcile these two approaches probably underpinned what became an exclusive focus on disadvantaged

school-leavers in the policy document; at the same time, however, the document did spell out the need for access to lead to success. The following excerpt gives a sense of the principles according to which Access for school-leavers was and is to be managed.

- Access-related activities and the widening of access to the University are fully acknowledged as integral to academic endeavour, and are held to be part of the University's core business.
- In widening access, redress is a core principle, requiring the development of those who have not had advantages in their earlier schooling, as opposed to those who have had every chance at school.
- Access is linked to success.
- Resources for access programmes will be especially directed towards degrees or qualifications that are consistent with current national needs.
- Access is managed and implemented at Faculty level (University of KwaZulu-Natal: Access Policy 2004).

It was this document which guided the work of the Interim Access Office during 2004, the first year of the merger. As a result, little policy work was done during 2004, and instead much time and effort was spent on interactions with teaching staff in Foundation programmes, both in building relationships across campuses, in bringing existing foundational programmes into alignment, and in developing appropriate new structures. This was doubtless a necessary stage in contributing to merger implementation, and was on the whole successfully carried through. At the same time, a rather less hands-on and much more selective start was made on the task of increasing student retention and throughput through curriculum innovation.

In 2005, however, the work of the Access portfolio has diversified, and much less time is being spent on interactions with staff at grassroots level. The Foundation programmes have been handed over to the Faculties, and are being managed from within Faculties. Of course, the strong sense of ownership at grassroots level may be less perceptible at Faculty management level, in that Deputy Deans may lack familiarity with access issues, and certainly have many other duties. This is, however, an essential stage in embedding Access within Faculties, and has freed up Access Office time for

other issues. The Access Office is now able to pay attention to student equity more broadly, as conceptualised by DoE policy: to RPL and access for adult learners; access into post-graduate studies; entrance and placement testing, and related institutional research; schools outreach; building relationships and partnerships with FET Colleges; issues of quality assurance and preparation for the institutional audit. At the same time, student retention and throughput (and, as a result, academic staff development) have been foregrounded, as a long-term ongoing initiative, and a current priority is to develop a model which will ensure that Faculties address this challenge.

Increasingly, however, it must be borne in mind that the Access Office is to close at the end of 2007, by which time all initiatives are to be fully embedded in Faculties. This shapes the trajectory of the existence and functioning of the Access Office: beginning with an initial period of brain-storming, planning, and setting-up of initiatives, with the Access Office creating a broad awareness of needs and requirements in terms of DoE policy and student preparedness; leading to widespread consultation and the development of policy and practices/strategies; followed by implementation at Faculty level, with Access Office support and monitoring; and finally hand-over to Faculties of both initiatives and the monitoring function. At the same time, however, those involved will do well to consider whether the whole business of access, teaching and learning is indeed best managed solely according to this decentralized model; or whether certain core functions should rather remain centralized.

Current Access Office Projects, and Implications for 'Planning Complexity'

Access for Adult Learners, and RPL

UKZN is late in developing an RPL policy: since 1994, RPL has regularly been identified as a means of redress, and the *White Paper* (1995: 15) spoke of RPL as

> open(ing) doors of opportunity for people, whose academic or career paths have been needlessly blocked because their prior knowledge (acquired informally or by work experience) has not been assessed and certified.

The former UDW had indeed developed a draft RPL policy, and at the former UN, the Nursing Programme had developed an implementation model. Some RPL is currently being undertaken, primarily in the Faculty of Education, but also at post-graduate level, for the admission of students who do not technically qualify.

The role of the Access Office in this regard, to date, has been policy development and advocacy. By means of a small expert group, a draft policy has been formulated, was taken to the Executive for initial consideration, and has now been sent through to Faculties for consideration by Faculty Boards. At the same time, however, advocacy will clearly be needed, as there appears to be little understanding of RPL and of the potential role of adult learners in university transformation: the Draft RPL policy is therefore accompanied by a position paper, which seeks to spell out this understanding. What will doubtless be much more challenging will be policy implementation by means of a centralised RPL office and complementary Faculty involvement. This will doubtless require considerable advocacy, individualised planning and direct involvement of the Executive Director.

Entrance and Placement Testing, and Associated Institutional Research

Interest in entrance and placement testing has increased substantially country-wide over the past decade. This interest arose initially from the awareness that Matriculation results are the outcome of vast differences in educational provision at school level, and that the sole reliance on Matriculation results was unfairly excluding many learners who might well succeed at university. In addition, Matriculation results were not proving very reliable in predicting success in HE – and the Department was requiring institutions to improve their throughput rates. And finally, whatever predictive value the Matriculation Exemption did have would disappear in 2008, with the introduction of the as yet untested National Senior Certificate. The first start was made by the Alternative Admissions Research Project at UCT over a decade ago; this was followed by the Tertiary Education Linkages Project's Standardised Achievement Test initiative; by the Admissions and Placement Assessment Programme at the University of Port Elizabeth; and by tests developed by the Health Science Faculties

Consortium. Given the general agreement that it is in academic and quantitative literacy and mathematics that the necessary academic skills are most frequently underdeveloped, these tests generally seek to assess these particular skills, in order either to admit selected learners who have not achieved the requisite levels of performance in the Senior Certificate examination, or to place learners appropriately for supplementary skills development.

Most recent is the SAUVCA/HESA national benchmark tests initiative, which differs from the other test initiatives, in that it proposes setting benchmarks of performance in the domains of academic literacy, quantitative literacy, and mathematics. The purpose of the initiative is

> to provide both sectors (schooling and HE) with important information on the skills and abilities of their exiting (in the case of schools) and entering (in the case of universities) students – information that does not duplicate the essential information delivered by the school-leaving examination, but provides an important extra dimension.

Benchmarks are defined as 'required minimum level(s) of achievement in some criterion referenced task with respect to a specific content domain', and the benchmarking function is seen as follows:

> the sector as a whole will develop, agree on, and hold to, the benchmark levels of performance below which students cannot be admitted directly to degree or diploma study (National Benchmark Tests... Concept Paper: 1).

UKZN is thoroughly involved in the full range of access and placement tests, and, given that many of these processes appear best driven centrally, a Coordinator for Testing (an experienced academic) has been seconded to the Access Office. At present, Faculties are being asked to decide whether they wish to participate in testing (with Faculties like Law and Medical School managing their own testing); it appears still too early for development of university-wide policy. The role of the Access Office at this stage is that of advice (based on an awareness of developments country-

wide) and coordination; liaison takes place, on the one hand, with Deans and Deputy Deans, on the other with Faculty admissions officers.

The entrance and placement testing initiative must, however, be complemented by research into the subsequent performance of students – students admitted both on the basis of Matriculation 'points', and by means of Matriculation 'points' plus an admissions test. (This is part of the validation process of the 'TELP-2' tests, the SATAP tests, which were piloted with the 2005 intake.) These processes, in turn, dovetail with research into student performance more generally, with the monitoring of throughput rates, and with the identification of both 'at risk' students and 'at risk' modules. At present this institutional research initiative is also being driven at a university-wide level by the Access Office, under the leadership of an academic colleague with expertise in academic development research. At the same time, pockets of research have long been undertaken in connection with various access initiatives: the leadership role involves, on the one hand, supporting and institutionalising these existing initiatives, and on the other the initiation of additional research, to ensure that a full picture is being obtained. A contract researcher with expertise in statistics is the fourth appointee to the Access Office, and serves as a university-wide resource in these processes.

Schools Outreach

An inheritance from the former University of Durban-Westville was Upward Bound Enrichment Project – a major schools outreach project with a five-year trajectory, which had been bringing large numbers of Grade 10 – 12 learners from disadvantaged schools to UDW for two-week residential Summer and Winter Schools. The core focus of this project was on Maths and Science upgrading and social and personal enrichment. The Access Office oversaw the final year of this project in 2004, after which funding was exhausted. At the same time, The Access Office provided funding for a small-scale Winter School initiative on Howard College campus. These two initiatives have posed questions, both as to the role of HE in assisting under-capacitated schools to deliver adequately prepared learners – especially in the 'scarce skills' domains of SET –, and also which model(s) are most effective and feasible, in terms of resources, both of personnel and money.

In this domain the role of the Access Office has varied between what became very time-consuming hands-on involvement in closing down Upward Bound (involving repeated meetings with Finance and auditors), and a satisfactory hands-off relationship with Fast Forward, involving an initial brief business plan and budget, and a final report and financial statement. While the demand is certainly enormous, the Upward Bound experience has shown that small-scale initiatives are certainly more feasible; and that serious Faculty ownership and involvement are crucial. Both initiatives, at the same time, raise the issue of the articulation between schools outreach initiatives and what the university can learn through them, and 'mainstream' curricula on campus – are universities simply trying to 'bring learners up to scratch', following which mainstream teaching can continue unperturbed? – or are universities seeking themselves to learn through involvement with the FET schools sector, in order to be able to respond more adequately to a diverse range of needs, competencies and interests, about which academics tend to know far too little?

What is the role of the Access Office in this regard? It has begun with information-seeking: how many schools outreach projects are actually being run at UKZN, and according to what models? But more broadly, what SET developmental projects (generally run by NGOs, but also by the Department – the Dinaledi schools) are currently in place throughout KZN? How might UKZN then best interface with what is currently in place? (A proposal currently under consideration envisages partnerships with a few, carefully selected rural schools, both to provide input for learners and teachers, but also to research means and processes of capacity development in such contexts.) Further Access Office roles will surely include advocacy and awareness-raising, possibly to be followed by a policy on curriculum, teaching and learning. The necessary liaison will involve Deans and Faculties, as well as the central Schools Liaison Unit.

With the introduction of the new National Senior Certificate curriculum from 2006, HE institutions will need to devote considerable energy to familiarising themselves with the new curricula in the various disciplines, in order to be able to articulate their curricula appropriately to the knowledge- and skills-base of incoming students. Within the university, experts from the Faculty of Education will be an essential resource; at the same time, colleagues will do well to remain in touch with what is happening

on the ground in schools.

Partnerships with Other Providers

Any attempt to impact more broadly on education in KZN will require support by means of partnerships with other providers. For instance, a partnership with a provider of pre-degree education for trade unionists in Durban (the Workers College) has been the means of developing a part-time degree programme for learners from trade unions and community-based organizations, most of whom would otherwise not have qualified to enter higher education. In this case, the Access Office has been offering support to a Faculty-driven initiative.

Partnerships with FET Colleges are a further possibility, especially given that the new vision for FET Colleges appears likely to position them predominantly post school, as a band between schools and HE. In an important speech in June 2005, the Minister spoke of the re-imaging of the FET colleges and announced their systemic development, lead by the DoE, with support from the government and private sector.

Strategies mentioned that are of particular interest to the HE sector include:

- Building a coherent framework of qualifications through the development of programmes that will **bridge** those offered by schools and by higher education institutions.
- Increasing the participation and success rates of persons in the **age group 16 to 24** in relevant, high quality FET programmes.
- Improving the **number of FET learners** achieving high levels of language, mathematics and science proficiency.

Possibly the HE sector might consider offering some of its current foundational provision (at Level 4) in partnership with selected FET colleges. As this would entail considerable capacity development, we would envisage exploring this initially through a pilot project. The Access Office might facilitate such partnerships, again in conjunction with Faculty Deans.

Access to Postgraduate Studies

A question frequently posed by members of all Faculties has been that of

access to post-graduate studies, which coincides with the need (in terms of the funding policy) to improve numbers, and success rates, at Masters and PhD levels. An audit carried out earlier this year confirmed what is widely perceived as the core issue: that many entrants (and not only those who are returning to post-graduate studies after years in the workplace) lack the appropriate academic literacy and research skills. At the same time, the application process in many programmes does not attempt to assess such skills, and many curricula do not build in the necessary development.

Most Faculties have appointed Deputy Deans with a research cum postgraduate studies portfolio; these will be appropriate liaison partners. UKZN does already have policy and procedures for the consideration of non-traditional applicants at postgraduate level; monitoring of these procedures is required, together with the implementation of strategies to ensure that all entrants do develop the necessary academic literacy and research skills. An appropriate model may, of course, differ from Faculty to Faculty, and range from a credit-bearing module, for instance in research proposal development, to rethinking the role of the thesis supervisor; but with increasing numbers of students, at least some form of generic approach may be advisable.

The Core Issue: Improving Retention and Through-put

All universities currently face the question of how to maximise the success of their students, at foundational, undergraduate and postgraduate levels; and this issue has been left to the end of this discussion, in that it interfaces with all Access Office projects. As is wide-spread in South Africa, educational innovation has flourished in access and foundation projects at UKZN with, in many cases, students being left to 'sink or swim' once they have entered mainstream. While the sector as a whole faces this same issue, responses must be made on the basis of each specific institution, its envisaged role in the HE sector, the students it typically caters for, the student body it wishes to develop and so forth.

UKZN can look back at a history of educational innovation, but this has seldom been at a systemic level. (One exception has been the development of 'core courses' for incoming students in the Faculty of Humanities at the former UN, which sought to address skills development on

a more generic basis.) Initiatives driven by committed individuals sooner or later tend to run out of energy and/or funding. Institutionalisation (which will require policies and monitoring) is required, but without sacrificing the enthusiasm of committed individuals.

What is the specific situation of UKZN in this regard? UKZN attracts many higher performance entrants, but through-put rates are still not adequate; for the majority of students the three-year degree remains a 'myth' (Ian Scott). Yet at the same time the UKZN mission commits it to redress: to ensuring that black students obtain access not only to Social Sciences, but also to selective and high-stakes programmes, and that overall outputs do not remain skewed. This means acknowledging the diversity of preparedness, and finding ways of addressing the articulation gap between school and HE, which does certainly exist for much of the student intake, even for those who obtain the requisite number of Matriculation points.

The model that is emerging at UKZN is premised on the need for close articulation between foundational provision and mainstream. Core foundational provision will be retained, but will increasingly be in the form of Faculty-based extended curriculum programmes rather than discrete foundation programmes; numbers of entrants to these will be limited, to ensure that quality provision remains a reality. Redress will be addressed, not primarily by taking in larger numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, but by ensuring learning environments and study programmes which will facilitate success. A flexible system of support must extend well into mainstream studies and become a required resource for any students whose performance indicates that they are at risk. At the same time, mainstream teaching staff must, in an iterative process, regularly review their performance and their curricula in terms of articulation with outcomes of school and Foundation study, and in terms of the teaching methodologies used.

For this model to function effectively, numerous conditions will need to be met.

- Student leaders must be involved in its development, to ensure student buy-in for what may initially *appear* to be longer degree times.
- University leadership must maintain continued high-level advocacy.

- A University policy on teaching and learning must motivate and spell out the commitments required of staff in terms of teaching duties and continued professional development. (In terms of this policy, teaching and learning must remain prioritised in promotion criteria.)
- Staff must become familiar both with school curricula, and with the diverse social backgrounds of UKZN students, in order to ensure adequate articulation of mainstream curricula.
- Incoming students must be carefully assessed, to ensure that appropriate skills development is included in their study plan.
- While some small group teaching should remain an integral part of provision, the development of suitable teaching strategies for larger groups, in terms of disciplinary requirements, must be prioritised, and possible roles of technology in ensuring support and peer learning must be explored.
- Personal and social support must remain available to all students, on request.
- Extended curricula and additional support must be integrated into the regular cycle of programme self-evaluation, internal and external audit.
- Adequate and sustainable funding must be secured for quality delivery, with the case for resources from the fund budget being made in terms of current financial wastage.

To institutionalise this new model, the Access Office will need to work on an ongoing basis with the various instances and structures which have now been put in place. The 2008 institutional audit is to prioritise teaching and learning, and the UKZN QPA has already begun to accustom staff to regular self-reflection around teaching and learning, within a five-year cycle of evaluation and accreditation. In addition, each College has in place a Quality Committee, which reports to Senate, and, as funding permits, will be appointing a College Dean for Teaching and Learning. Faculties have set up a variety of committees to address the teaching function: Faculty Quality Committees, Teaching and Learning Committees, Rules and Regulations Committees, and Schools have also been required to accommodate these functions in their committee system. Some Deputy Deans have been

assigned related portfolios. Importantly, Senate is soon to consider a proposal for a University-wide Teaching and Learning Committee, which would report to Senate; the proposed functions of this committee include policy development, policy monitoring (to ensure coherent implementation of policies across Colleges) and advocacy.

Fundraising

As an Executive-level portfolio, the Access Office has the profile to engage in fund-raising, for student scholarships, for access initiatives, and for teaching and learning projects more generally. While the long-term goal must be to ensure that initiatives are sustainable in terms of the fund budget, in the meantime new projects are often more easily initiated on external funding.

The Four-year Developmental Trajectory of the Access Portfolio

The developmental trajectory of the Access portfolio, projected over the four years from 2004 to 2007, can be summarised in tabular form as follows:

Year	Activities
2004: Year 1	Hands-on involvement in merging foundation programmes; gaining university-wide familiarity with procedures, programmes and services; unpacking the term 'access' to include teaching and learning, in terms of DoE policy
2005: Year 2	Reduced hands-on work; expanded understanding of 'access' beyond foundation programmes, to include post-graduate access and RPL; start of policy development phase; pilot phase of procedures and strategies for implementation
2006: Year 3	Completion of policy development phase; full focus on strategies for implementation, and on implementation, in collaboration with Colleges and Faculties; start of evaluation of portfolio achievements through self-evaluation
2007: Year 4	Closing down phase: final evaluation of work of the portfolio; completion of embedding of all aspects of access, teaching and learning in Faculties and Colleges. Possible residual central management: University-wide Teaching and Learning Committee; Entrance and Placement Testing; RPL Office

In Conclusion: Planning and Managing Complexity

The above discussion has identified a complex network of structures and relationships which underpin the wide range of work of the Access Office, as a centralised portfolio focusing on access, learning and teaching across the university, at all levels of study. It has also allowed the identification of a series of questions, which can now be provisionally answered on the basis of 18 months of experience.

1. *What aspects of this work are best managed centrally, what are best managed through Colleges and Faculties?* As spelled out in the UKZN Access policy, policy development and monitoring should be managed centrally, implementation must be managed and owned by Faculties.

2. *What relationships are available to sustain this work?* Regular collaboration with Deans is imperative; but collaboration with colleagues at grass-roots level also builds relationships and appears to offer welcome support. Foundation staff expect the Access Office to give them a voice; but this voice clearly has its limitations. In addition, ongoing relationships with the support sector are important: with Student Funding, Student Counselling, Finance etc.

3. *What tools are available?* It is essential that the Access Office work primarily through the existing committee system of Colleges, Faculties and Schools – and of the support sector. Additional committees and structures should be kept to a minimum.

4. *How best can collaboration with Colleges be managed, given that line management is embedded in Colleges, and the Access Office has no formal authority?* In any emerging system, there will be disruptions; it is important to use formal structures and agreements as much as possible.

5. *In what ways is the merger, with its various stages, shaping the work of the Access portfolio?* On the one hand, the merger provided the freedom and space for the university to institute the experiment of a central Access portfolio; one the other, by limiting this experiment to four years, it has added urgency for the Office to achieve the goal of embedding its functions

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within Faculties, during this period.

6. *At which times, and for which purposes, is policy development and monitoring most appropriate, where is direct involvement and intervention required?* In emergent stages of projects direct hands-on involvement can be extremely useful; once projects are up and running, management should be institutionalised, through Faculty structures.

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