Accounting for change: the micropolitics of university restructuring. 
Part one: balancing books and ideas

P Gibbon, A Habib, J Jansen & A Parekh
University of Durban Westville

ABSTRACT

In this first of three articles on "the micropolitics of university restructuring", the authors examine the political processes which shaped the restructuring of a single university (the University of Durban Westville) in the period 1998-2000. Under external pressures (e.g., declining student enrolments and increasing institutional accountability) and internal forces (e.g., high repetition and dropout rates and high student default rates with respect to tuition), the University was forced to engage in a comprehensive process of strategic planning in order to improve efficiency, promote equity, and enhance effectiveness in its core business. This article develops an analytic narrative of the restructuring process in order to show how the unfolding of the planning process led to the kinds of outcomes which cannot be understood outside of the recognition of the interplay of conflict, compromise and consensus building in changing universities. The first article also identifies the various roles of key stakeholders, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of the case studies (the second article) and the theoretical interpretation (the third article) that follow in successive publications on this theme.

Changing a university is like trying to move a cemetery; you get no help from the inhabitants (Anon).

The only thing holding together a university is the central heating system.

The university can be thought of as a series of individual faculty entrepreneurs held together by a common grievance over parking.¹

INTRODUCTION

The three quotations reflect widely held views about the difficulty of changing universities. Yet, in recent times, university “restructuring” has been a widespread phenomenon not only in the North (Roberts 1999) but also in developing countries of the South (Bundy 1999; Fourie 1999; Court 1999). There are few studies, however, of the processes of restructuring within universities especially within the realm of what is called “the micropolitics of change” (Blasé 1998).

This article is the first in a three part series, to appear in successive issues of the South African Journal of Higher Education that analyses the process of academic restructuring as it occurred at the University of Durban Westville. The first article provides the contextual ground for the other two mapping the key features of the planning process in a narrative that describes and evaluates led to particular restructuring decisions, and the factors that shaped them.

The second article will focus the lens more sharply on three case studies (engineering, political science and public administration; under subscribed disciplines in the humanities – languages and the performing arts) that generate specific tensions and dilemmas in the micropolitics of institutional change. What emerge in this close up view are critical questions about knowledge production, the ideological contours of discrete disciplines under threat of disaggregation, the politics of academic leadership and governance, and the ethical dilemmas raised by costly and under subscribed Arts disciplines.

The third and final article in the series will move to a meta level of explanation and analysis by exploring some of the antinomies that characterise the higher education sector at the moment. These would include issues such as the demand for public accountability in
a context of institutional autonomy; the pressures on curriculum direction of the global economy as opposed to the reconstruction and development demands of the nation, and the limits of regionalisation in a highly competitive institutional environment, with the advent of new private providers. In other words, in the last article we link institutional micro-politics to the wider macro-political context (see Hoyle 1999).

ON THE MICROPOLITICS OF CHANGE

There is now a fairly significant literature on the micro-politics of school change (Ball 1987; Hoyle 1986; Blasé 1991; Malen 1994) but relatively little on the micro-politics of change in higher education (Birdsall 1995). We seek to contribute to and expand the understanding of the micro-politics of universities within the context of an historically black institution (the University of Durban Westville, South Africa) after apartheid.

The traditional notion of university planning as a rational, objective and linear process enjoys little currency in recent higher education literature (Marcus 1999:46). At the same time, it may be too simplistic to dismiss strategic planning and change as “a blend of rational and economic analysis, political maneuvering, and psychological interplay” (Keller 1993:148). The concept of micropolitics is not very useful when understood simply as cynical, conflict ridden, self-interested political behaviour. Rather, we concur with the broader conception offered by Joseph Blasé (1998:545) which includes co-operative and conflictive actions and processes: “Micropolitics refers to the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organisations. In large part political actions result from perceived differences between individuals and groups coupled with the motivation to use power to influence and/or protect. Although such actions are consciously motivated, any action, consciously or unconsciously motivated, may have political ‘significance’ in a given situation.”

Our analysis of university restructuring works within this framework on the institutional micropolitics at one university that embarked on a comprehensive strategic planning process in the period 1998 – 1999. Our starting assumption is that micropolitical processes, common in the daily life of institutions, intensify during periods of change and play a significant role in the outcomes of such plans.

THE CONTEXT

The University of Durban Westville (UDW) is an urban but historically disadvantaged South African university serving approximately 8 000 students with about 500 academic staff and about 700 administrative staff.2 Established under apartheid as an institution for South Africans of Indian descent, the university was effectively governed by and subjected to apartheid legislation since its inception as University College, Durban, in 1961. The appointment of Vice Chancellor Jairam Reddy in June 1990, however, enabled UDW to embark on a process of transformation that democrotised the governance structures of the university and changed admissions policies to enable large numbers of disadvantaged black South African students to enter the university.

In January 1998, the University appointed Professor M F Ramashala as Vice Chancellor of UDW. The appointment of Professor Ramashala coincided with major changes in national policy, financing and enrolment patterns in higher education. The provisions of the White Paper on Higher Education (A Programme for Higher Education Transformation 1997) were being implemented, especially the requirements for programme based education, new qualification standards, greater efficiencies in the use of public resources, and focused institutional planning in the form of “three year rolling plans”. At the same time, student numbers were in serious decline in the national system of higher education, resulting in greater competition for students among public institutions and the growing private higher education sector (Cloete & Bunting 2000). Caught between national policy imperatives for programmatic change and a dwindling state subsidy tied to student enrolment and progression rates, the University of Durban Westville embarked on an urgent process of strategic planning. Vice Chancellor M Ramashala appointed an eight person Strategic Planning Task Team (SPTT) in March 1998 to develop a comprehensive strategic plan for UDW. This was the first indication of a new style of management in that the members of this team were selected, not elected or nominated.

Whereas the Reddy period concerned the democratisation of university governance and admissions under apartheid, the Ramashala period was focused on the reorganisation of university “structures” for purposes of long range planning after apartheid. Moreover, the Ramashala period unfolded in a national context that required that all universities demonstrate greater accountability for change as public institutions.3

16
THE ACADEMIC AUDIT – COUNCIL CHAMBER
17–26 JUNE 1998

The first real step in the process of academic reform began in June 1998 with an extensive audit of all academic departments initiated by the management. The intention of the audit was to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the university’s academic offerings and to intervene with strategies that would strengthen the position of the University as a whole. In the process, heads of departments, academic administrators and ordinary members of staff were presented with a comprehensive digest detailing statistics of staff and student profiles and performance. In addition, detailed financial records for each department were made available. Intensive interviews were conducted in the Council Chamber with members of the academic staff that enabled them to address problems and potential within their own fields. A sensitive area in this process was the situation of the minority languages and religions that had previously served Indian students at the University. The student clientele for these disciplines had diminished radically, with many of these students now choosing to register at the University of Natal. On the basis of the information generated through this process, decisions were taken to close the Faculty of Theology, and certain language and religious studies departments within the Faculty of Arts. The disciplines formerly housed within these units were re-grouped into an Interim Centre for Religious Studies and an Interim Centre for Languages, and with the staff re-deployed into these Centres and into foundation teaching modules. A key consideration was the dramatic decline in student numbers against constant staffing levels throughout the period of decline.6

The significance of the audit was three fold. It represented the first intensive engagement between management and departments on academic plans, priorities and programmes. It generated intense contestation by academics about the meaning and accuracy of financial data, until this time held in relative seclusion in the university administration. And the audit provided the first hint of which areas of academic activity were likely to be the focus of restructuring in the strategic planning process. More immediately, the audit was required to provide critical information for the development of what came to be known as ‘three year rolling plans’.

THE FIRST THREE-YEAR ROLLING PLAN – STRATEGIC PLANNING UNIT

At the same time the first major strategic planning document was produced in response to a requirement from the Department of Education that institutions submit three year rolling plans. This was to be one part of the development of comprehensive institutional strategic plans. The three year plan had to show in particular, student enrolment projections, and equity targets for both students and staff. These plans, in turn, were to inform the development of a national higher education plan.7 The Strategic Planning Office at UDW produced a sophisticated document, drawing on the statistical data available within the administrative system, but without consulting the wider university community. The Senate did not see the plan before its submission, although it was immediately hailed by the Department of Education as exemplary. The haste with which this document was produced and its circumventing of any consultative process can probably be explained, in part, as a response to the phrase in the Department of Education (1998:1) document that the approval of institutional plans would be “the trigger for funding of higher education institutions” and the unrealistic time deadline set by the Department. In political terms, the lack of a consultative process led to strong public contestation about the document, especially in the University Senate.

The SPTT began its work in earnest guided by the results of the Academic Audit. An informal “exco” of the SPTT (three to five persons) later established itself as the steering mechanism for directing change and managing conflict on a day to day basis in the struggle to keep the restructuring process on track.

The following account traces the path of two distinct but parallel processes that were set in motion by this group: restructuring and curriculum development. Restructuring took place at two levels, the macro level of reorganising the Faculties, and the micro level of reshaping academic units within the Faculties.

THE RESTRUCTURING OF FACULTIES – SENATE CHAMBER

To initiate the next phase of planning, the SPTT circulated a discussion document that outlined various scenarios for faculty reorganisation (SPTT Nov 1998). The question that now arose was where should one begin? Should the form follow the function? Or was it possible to transform academic structures and engage in significant curriculum development at the same time? The bias in the document was clearly towards dealing initially with the macro Faculty structural changes. The rationale was that this would facilitate the optimal use of infrastructural resources and the decentralisation of
academic administration. The other factor was the establishing of disciplinary groupings that would work together in the construction of new academic programmes.

The first major move to emerge from these discussions was the decision to collapse the existing seven faculties into four large faculties. These were to be the Faculty of Science and Engineering, the Faculty of Humanities, the Faculty of Health Sciences, and the Faculty of Law and Management Sciences. A primary motivation for this move was to improve efficiency with respect to the use of limited resources, create academic units of comparable size, and enhance interdisciplinary collaboration (Parekh 1999:4). This process was intensely consultative.

**THE RESTRUCTURING OF SCHOOLS AND DEPARTMENTS – DEPARTMENTAL VISITS**

Before the next phase was embarked upon, it was recognised that very clear lines of communication needed to be established between the SPTT and the Faculties. To this end, Faculty Restructuring Committees (FRCs) were appointed through the Deans and their executive committees, to work in close contact with the SPTT and to be a conduit of information back to the Faculties. This somewhat larger group of people began to meet on a weekly basis. This third phase of the process took as its key objective the discussion, debate and conceptualisation of new academic structures within the reconfigured faculties, for the efficient delivery of programme based academic offerings. At these discussions, the focus was less on financial viability, than on the appropriate structures within which to house inter and multi-disciplinary academic programmes, facilitate the optimal use of infrastructural resources, avoid duplication and develop creative synergies. Related to this were questions of governance and academic leadership.

The outcome of this part of the process was to achieve broad consensus on the location of disciplines within the new faculties, the nature of the new academic administrative units, and the overall Faculty governance structure. This phase of restructuring was by far the most contested. One expression of this contestation was the debate between the SPTT and the Faculty of Science about the dissolution of traditional Departments into reconfigured Schools. The “Department” had become the academic identity of the discipline and provided status and external referencing for distinguished scholars as “Heads”. Despite numerous meetings, the matter could not be resolved. The “exco” of SPTT then entered into what can only be described as “horse trading” by presenting a trade-off that allowed for “Disciplinary Chairs” to exist alongside School Co-ordinators in the future Faculty structures. Another expression of contestation involved the SPTT and the University Council. Individual Council members, while approving masses of restructuring recommendations from the Senate, became personally involved in academic decisions where this affected either their political interests or professional backgrounds. For example, an external member was insistent that public administration be located within a Faculty of Commerce rather than Humanities as its “natural home”. The academics, on the other hand, sought to integrate public administration with conventional humanities disciplines (like political science and philosophy) in an attempt to create a new identity for public administrators in a transforming civil service. Eventually, a compromise was reached allowing for a joint location of the discipline across two Faculties.

**THE HIGH RISK DEPARTMENTS – KAPENTA BAY SUMMIT**

Before the restructuring of academic units could be completed, however, the Vice Chancellor called for a summit of key members of the University community to be held at the Kapenta Bay Resort in Port Shepstone. The purpose of the summit was to force the university community to face some of the critical factors that threatened its existence, and to take some of the hard decisions that would ensure its financial survival and the quality of its academic offerings. There were a large number of participants invited from the Council, the Management, the staff unions, the students and the academic sector. (As a result of a dispute over representation, however, the students declined to attend.) It was hoped that the summit would identify priority areas of existing excellence in which the university could make further financial and academic investment. But the University also had to confront the legacy its being a disadvantaged institution. It suffered the consequences of a relatively high failure rate amongst students, a shrinking state subsidy, declining student enrolment, a negative public image and a lack of demand for some of its academic programmes. In some areas UDW’s graduate employability also fell below the norm. Financial information was also presented indicating that the university’s operating reserves fell by over 80% between 1994 and 1996, and were entirely depleted by the end of 1997. Similarly, the University’s discretionary reserves diminished by over 50% between 1996 and 1998. The message given was that unless the University took immediate action, it was unlikely to survive into the year 2000. The revelations
made here were not entirely new or surprising. Much of this information had already been made available at the academic audit completed the previous year. Nonetheless, there was a sense of shock and a realisation that business could not proceed as usual.

What the summit did achieve was to achieve two things. One was to inject a sense of urgency into the restructuring process on the basis of financial alarm. And the second was to create a set of criteria by which to establish University wide priorities. Along with these, it listed the criteria for determining the viability of academic programmes. Financial cost was considered to be only one of the criteria to establish viability. The Strategic Planning Task Team was requested to set up a subcommittee with the specific task of looking at high risk areas of academic activity, about possible closure, retention in present or reconfigured form, regionalisation or privatisation. The recommendations were to be guided by the criteria established at the summit and were to be made to the management, within a period of two weeks of its constitution. Any threatened department was to be drawn into discussion with this committee and permitted to present its own case (see Ramashala 1999).

A significant tension in this period was to constantly emphasise the academic merits of restructuring rather than simply the financial imperatives which loomed so large in the minds of academics after Kapenta Bay.

INVESTIGATION INTO “HIGH RISK” ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS – A STUFFY ROOM IN THE REMOTE RECESSES OF THE ADMINISTRATION BUILDING

In its preliminary meeting, the “high risk subcommittee” decided that it would take as an initial step, the identification for further investigation of those of academic units with an historical or projected loss of R500 000 per annum or more. Through this procedure two Centres, 13 Departments and two entire Faculties (the Faculties of Education and Engineering) were identified for immediate investigation. On the basis of financial data, interviews with the staff of the affected departments, and the criteria formulated at the summit for assessing the academic and financial viability of academic programmes, the sub committee tabled its recommendations, which were subsequently approved by the University Planning Committee, Faculty Boards, Senate and Council. The following are among the key recommendations:

- that regional solutions be found for the offering of Drama, Music and Fine Arts. A credible regional plan, that is financially viable for the University, was to be in place by the end of September 1999, failing which the university should close those departments. This regional solution envisaged joint arrangements with other universities and technikons in KwaZulu Natal.
- that the Faculty of Engineering be closed. The implementation of this recommendation was suspended to allow time for the university to develop a credible business plan for the offering of engineering education, that would not only address the development needs of the country but also indicate a significant reduction in the deficit of the Faculty within a specified timeframe. (The resolution to the problem of engineering will be explored in more detail in the second of these articles.)
- that the following languages would no longer be offered: Arabic, Urdu, Persian, Hindi Gujerati, Tamil, Telegu, Sanskrit, French, German, Latin and Greek.

Once again, a significant outcome of the investigation was the discovery that the accounting systems used by the University were complex, unclear and some times in clear conflict with information held by academic departments. The contestation around the meaning of data held within the Administration became a major rallying point for the affected academic departments.

THE RECONFIGURATION OF ACADEMIC PROGRAMMES – HILLCREST, FEBRUARY 1999

In addition to its internal imperatives for restructuring, the University had to satisfy the external programme requirements of the Department of Education and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). The first important gathering to initiate this part of the process was a workshop held at Hillcrest, just outside Durban, in February 1999, to determine the UDW understanding of an academic “programme”.

There were two significant outcomes of the work shop. The first was the UDW definition or under standing of programme as a coherent set of courses and/or modules that advance knowledge, develop critical thinking, promote social responsibility, and skill individuals with particular competencies which increase their employability.

Secondly, participants generated a set of organising questions that were to become the basis for pro gramme design and the template in which form all the
programmes offered by the University were submitted to the Department of Education for approval. “Prac-
tice” exemplary programmes produced by participants gave them a hands on feel for the nature of an outcomes based and possibly inter or multi disciplin ary programme.

Faculty representatives returned to their faculties to present some of the major issues relating to the context and practice of programme design. An attempt was made to reach and involve every member of the teaching staff and to begin to set in place the timeframe within which curriculum planning was to take place. From July 1999, the development of programmes and any related issues and problems became the subject of the weekly SPTT/FRC meet ings with the group now expanded to include the co ordinators of programme design. Among the criteria established to guide programme development, were the following:

- Programme relevance vis à vis the development needs of the country
- Learner centred ways of articulating the objectives of the programme
- Mechanisms for ensuring quality in both teaching and learning
- Opportunities for graduate employability
- Improved ways of dealing with diversity in the learner population
- Improved student recruitment and marketing stra tegies.

A significant tension throughout this period was the need to design programmes in accordance with SAQA and Department of Education regulations while at the same time establishing the intellectual justification for the curriculum within the community of teachers and learners. A soft interpretation of SAQA guidelines was adopted rather than the more mechanical interpretation followed especially by many of the technikons.

Another tension in this process became evident when the UDW conception of a programme inevitably led to the challenging and even collapsing of established disciplines. For example, should educational psychology be located within the School of Education or the School of Psychology? These programme level de bates led to intensive discussions and bargaining between the SPTT (and especially its “exco”) and the Faculty Restructuring Committees.

In January 2000 the new programmes came into effect.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS – TENSIONS AND CONFLICTS, CONTRADICTIONS AND RESOLUTIONS

Steering a path between consensus seeking and direction-setting

Any institution engaged in major change has to walk a tightrope along the divide between change that is driven top down, and change driven bottom up. What is at stake here? On the one hand, successful implementation of change depends on a high level of consensus around the vision and direction that change is taking, and an equally high commitment to, and ownership of, the forms and practices in which it will be concretely manifested (see Opatz & Hutchinson 1998 9). To achieve these goals requires consensus building through broad consultation and participation in decision making. It is inevitably time consuming but brings major gains. It is also open ended in that the vision and the goals are established by the process, not as a prelude to the process.

On the other hand, managerial leadership can usefully set the direction for change when the change envisaged represents a direct challenge to the vested interests of the status quo, and the alternative route of seeking a consensual goal could produce nothing at all. This kind of change can threaten established power relationships within an institution, threaten established identities and entrenched practices, producing high levels of insecurity, fear, hostility, anger and outright intransigence.

Broadly speaking, one could characterise the restruc turing exercise as shaped by a political decision on the part of the UDW management to lead the process top down. This is evident in the Vice Chancellor’s initial articulation of a “vision”, and appointment of a handpicked team (the SPTT) to set it in motion. From this point on, however, there was a consistent effort to broaden participation and win consensus. By contrast, the curriculum development exercise was largely driven bottom up, within the parameters established centrally by the SPTT. Nonetheless, the two processes intersected at times and impacted on one another, sometimes quite negatively.

In this context, one of the major challenges facing agents of change is managing the political, intellec tual and emotional fallout of the process.7 At UDW this fallout ranged from representatives of the Science Faculty walking out of, and boycotting some of the SPTT/FRC weekly meetings in protest against the proposal to dissolve departments as the primary academic administrative units, to intense and (at times) bitter intellectual debates about the nature of
knowledge and conception of quality. There were tears, insults and recriminations. And then there was the response of the Unions.

There are two registered unions operating on the UDW campus: the Combined Staff Association (COOMSA) and the Academic Staff Association (ASA). Both unions interpreted the entire exercise as motivated principally by a desire on the part of the university management to retrench staff in order to effect savings. Restructuring was a dishonest ploy to exploit those aspects of the Labour Act that allow for positions to become redundant as a result of restructuring. The unions responded rather slowly (but when they did, with outrage) to the recommendations of the “high risk” investigation.8 Dispute centred on the interpretation of the term “contemplation” in the Labour Relations Act. For the unions, the appointment at Kapenta Bay of the committee to investigate “high risk” academic departments already indicated that the management were “contemplating” retrenchments and they should have been informed and consulted. For the management, they could only begin to “contemplate” retrenchments once they were informed of the outcomes of the investigation. Unionised academic staff were being told on the one hand to regard all planning with deep suspicion as disguising a hidden agenda; the Academic Office on the other hand was telling staff that this was the implementation of national policy directives that stress public accountability, effectiveness and efficiency. The problem was to try to persuade people to engage in broad restructuring and deep curriculum reform when at least some of them were convinced that what they were really doing was digging their own shallow graves.

The inception of the weekly meeting (with what turned out to be a growing number of participants) was the route taken to extend consultation and deepen participation. These weekly meetings were also invaluable in keeping the SPTT alert to what was happening on the ground, and enabled it to intervene timeously when problems arose within the Faculties. This was probably the richest and most fruitful part of the entire exercise. It was the first time that a fairly large group of academics from across a range of Faculties and disciplines, had entered into an extended intellectual conversation about what it meant to be a university in the modern world, and in contemporary South Africa in particular. Participants challenged one another from a variety of positions in relation to the purposes of education, the politics of governance, the insularity or not of disciplines and entrenched conceptions of pedagogy. There was very little that escaped scrutiny in this process, including sensitivity to issues of status when people saw the proposal to dissolve departmental structures into School structures as undermining their authority (as Heads of Department). It was not simply a matter of doing the work it involved making very hard decisions, debating issues at length, and persuading Faculty members to go along with the process of change despite huge resistance from many quarters for a range of reasons. The academic community had never before engaged in such a sustained intellectual debate about its own role and nature, and about the substance of what it offers its students. The weekly meetings and report back from Faculties were characterised by hard debate, frequent disagreement and intense soul searching. Few came out unscathed or unchanged. It was an astonishingly invigorating and energising set of exchanges and everyone learnt a lot and grew a lot.

But there were still moments when decisions had to be forced or the debates would have gone on forever. Judging those moments, in relation to the gains of pushing the process forward as against the potential alienation of disaffected individuals or groups, is one of the trickier skills of managing change.

Resistance to the corporate style elements of the restructuring process emerged sharply in relation to the new conception of the position of Dean. The proposal from the SPTT, in line with the practice now adopted at many other universities both local and international, was to make the Dean’s post an essentially managerial one with primary accountability upwards to the senior management and only secondarily downwards to the Faculty. It was to be an externally advertised contract position with a substantial financial package. The Dean would be expected to meet the demands of an elaborate job description that reads more like the description of a corporate executive than an academic leader. This was a radical departure from the existing conception of the Dean’s position as a leader elected from amongst members of the faculty on the basis of their collective confidence, respect and trust.

The justification offered for this new role was that the Deans would now be performing in a fast changing environment that demanded strategic planning, aggressive promotion of Faculty strengths, active intervention in areas of weakness, and a keen awareness of a national, even global, perspective. To provide the academic/intellectual, administrative, and, in a sense, entrepreneurial leadership envisaged here, the Dean could not afford to be bound and limited by the need to seek popularity amongst the faculty electorate.

In the Faculties and at Senate, however, resistance was so deep that in the end the decision had to be
taken by the Council of the University, and it decided in favour of the managerial conception of the Dean’s post. The currently serving Deans were noncommittal, not wanting to be seen as opposing the popular sentiment of their Faculty members, but acknowledging a kind of inevitability in the outcome from their own experience of the demands being placed on Deans.

Whole-hearted participation and half-hearted implementation

Related to understanding the source or impetus for change, is analysing reasons for the ambivalence that manifested itself in staff behaviour when it came to participating in restructuring processes and implementing decisions. For example, while members of staff recognised the need to examine areas of academic activity that were extremely costly to the university, and even took part in the “high risk” investigation, they were unwilling to be part of the implementation of its recommendations. The explanation must in part be sought in the different roles individuals were being asked to perform. As part of the “high risk investigating committee” they were asked to operate in terms of the broad interests of the institution as a whole and its continued survival rather than in terms of the interests of a particular unit within the institution. In their other roles, however, as members of departments, faculties, the Senate and the unions, other loyalties and value systems came into play. This is critical to analysing and understanding what at times appeared to be almost schizophrenic behaviour: the stakeholder groups in a university intersect and overlap and there are often a number of individuals who play significant and active roles in a variety of forums. The formal terms of their engagement depend very much on the locus of that engagement, with the structural location or setting foregrounding certain issues rather than others. What had seemed acceptable on financial grounds in one location became unacceptable (to the same people) on political and academic grounds in another.

In curriculum development, however, that tension did not arise in quite the same way. Instead, what became clear was that different Faculties interpreted and implemented the principles of curriculum development in different ways. Disciplines in the Humanities proved to be most creative and innovative in programme design, moving flexibly across disciplinary boundaries in new and productive relationships. In strongly vocational and professional programmes, however, there was little evidence of any rethinking or change (with the exception of one or two new Law programmes). The strictures of professional body demands were often invoked to justify this state of affairs as well as the volume of “content” that had to be covered.

The response of some of the Science disciplines was interesting. Not strictly vocational or professional in their own right, they nonetheless provided many service courses to that kind of programme. Within their own programmes, what was felt very intensely was a strict sense of disciplinary identity and boundaries. While disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences had little difficulty recognising their own historicity and the completely permeable nature of their disciplinary boundaries, this was not so for the “hard” sciences. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Physics and Chemistry presented themselves as being as much a part of the natural order of things as gravity and gas. Along with this, they put up a spirited resistance to any incursion into their curricula (packed with “content”) of any foundation modules that would address language proficiency and critical social issues. Space was only conceded after a long battle.

Another factor, not immediately apparent, but brought into sharper focus as the process unfolded, was that the role of all academics was undergoing profound change and redefinition. The extent to which the professional role of the academic was being completely overhauled was probably not clear, initially, even to those driving the process. Demands for expertise in a whole range of areas such as academic development, quality assurance, assessment, strategic planning, recruitment and even marketing, that were unthinkable ten years ago, were now a necessary part of the professional domain. Some accepted the challenge with energy; while others threw their collective hands in the air: this was all too much, too soon, and the timeframes were impossibly short.

Time was a much debated factor in relation to implementation. There were options. Should we ride on the momentum generated by the process and push for programmes to be finalised and available to students by January 2000, or allow more time for planning and putting the new systems and structures in place? There were strong arguments on both sides. It seemed a shame not to capitalise on the creative energies released in the process and have them materialise in new programmes; fine tuning and further planning and development of courses was meant to be ongoing anyway. On the other hand, some aspects of implementation depended on administrative functions outside the ambit of the Academic Office and no guarantees could be given that these would be in place in time or working efficiently. In the
end it was decided to stick to the goal of January 2000 and work hard at bringing together all the administrative requirements for successful implementation.

**Weighing financial against educational considerations**

The Kapenta Bay summit marked the moment of negative intersection of the restructuring and curriculum development processes. This was clearly an intervention by a fraction of the Management, particularly in the form of the Chief Director of Finance, supported by the Vice Chancellor and a section of the Council. The purpose of the intervention was a reiteration of the financial parameters within which restructuring had to take place. No one came away from that summit without a sense that the closure of some departments was inevitable and imminent, and with that, the possibility of retrenchment of academic staff. The anxiety and fear that this engendered greatly undermined the morale of staff, and until the recommendations of the “high risk” subcommittee were produced, the academic planning process more or less ground to a standstill.

To imagine that the investigation into “high risk” academic departments and the recommendations that emerged from it did not in some quite fundamental way compromise the curriculum reform and development process would be naive. At the same time, however, it must be remembered that financial issues had been placed at the forefront of people’s minds the previous year when the academic audit was conducted. Furthermore, the Vice Chancellor had reiterated on a number of occasions that a primary goal was to make UDW’s academic programmes market-able and its graduates employable. The language of the market—products, clients, customers, consumers, cost effectiveness, efficiency, performance indexes, promotion, marketing—was already so deeply entrenched in the discourse of change that many interpreted this as a directive to design programmes in relation to the labour market. The “Investigation” merely added a further edge to this mindset by making academics feel that their jobs were on the line, and that if they could not prove that they were performing adequately in relation to a set of market oriented criteria, then they and their fields of study were unlikely to survive the change.

Turf warfare ensued, based on the notion of survival of the fittest. Fed by speculation and rumour, ideas developed of what constituted a minimum and maximum critical staff component in a School, and attempts by anyone outside the magic circle to muscle in on what was calculated to be a sustainable number, were stoutly resisted. Lecturers in Religious Studies expressed an interest in becoming part of the newly proposed School of Social Science and Development Studies as much of their work now lay in that field. Staff from the Departments of History, Anthropology and Sociology, however, had already made proprietary claims to the School and closed the doors to anyone wanting to ride on their strength. One was even heard to say, “This is our boat. If you jump on it, we’ll all sink.” The Religious Studies academics were a “high risk” group, weak in terms of student numbers. The potential richness that experts in indigenous religions and general religious practices could bring to anthropological and sociological study, was sacrificed in favour of shoring up the financial viability of a narrower grouping of staff.

**Oscillating between critique and compliance**

None of this is peculiar to UDW. It is a recognisable feature of national and international trends in the provision of higher education. What has made it particularly difficult to negotiate in the context of a South African university, and more especially one that has seen its mission as providing access and opportunity to educationally and economically disadvantaged students, is that the State has played an ambiguous role. On the one hand it has produced what are being called “Rolls Royce” policies that stress transformation and development goals for education, that see education as instrumental in promoting social justice, cultural richness and diversity, the civil values on which a healthy democracy depends, and open, critical thinking. On the other hand, it has not provided an implementation frame work for change, or any resources to support higher education transformation. In the absence of those measures, it is inevitable that market forces will hold sway. Academics felt themselves torn between critical engagement with government policies and the obligation to implement the policies of a democratically elected government.

The tension was felt acutely in the Humanities. This was the only Faculty that had already experienced the closure of some departments and was now threatened with even more. Why were these departments so at risk? The answer was relatively simple: dramatically declining student numbers. Over and again, academics in the Humanities stressed that the strength of their disciplines lay in the transmission of critical and analytical thinking, cultural richness and diversity. These are not directly marketable skills, and most programmes leading to a BA qualification are for mative not vocational. This is all entirely in line with
policy expressed in *Education White Paper 3* (p 15) and reinforced in the Department of Education’s review of the first round of “rolling plans.” But the very same Department had effectively closed off one of the major fields of employment for humanities graduates: education. The consequence was rapid and substantial decreases in humanities enrolments, with students quick to realise that there were better employment opportunities if they qualified themselves for careers in the civil service, the private sector or the professions. In this context, the exhortation to “provide the full spectrum of educational opportunities necessary for social, economic, political and cultural development” rings hollow, as do warnings about making programmes narrowly vocational. How else are the humanities to attract students and survive?

The tension between critique and compliance became evident at Kapenta Bay in the circulation amongst some of the participants of “alternative” documents to those officially issued. The official documents were the Department of Education’s *Overview of the First Planning Phase*, a UDW *Financial Report*, and Report No 2/99 from the SAUVCA representative on SAQA. The alternatives included an interview by John Higgins of UCT with visiting British Marxist literary and cultural critic Terry Eagleton that included statements by Eagleton such as:

> There’s a big difference between permitting the humanities to do their own thing, and hoping that some social good may come of it, and forcing them to submit to the logic of technocracy. That strikes at their very core, and is extremely dangerous.

You can end up with a grim parody of the humanities ... If humanities departments can try to resist what I would call, in my own context, Thatcherisation, or instrumentalisation, and keep open that rather precarious space of critique, then they will be doing a power of good. (p 30)

Another was Eve Burtelsen’s *The Real Transformation: the Marketisation of Higher Education* that constructed a devastating critique of the way in which universities have uncritically adopted the discourses and practices of corporate management and the “free” market. The challenge, therefore, was to create a climate of engagement with restructuring that allowed for critical interrogation of policies even as the SPTT led discussions about the modalities of implementing state requirements.

**Winning and losing – co-operation and competition**

Attempts to find solutions to the situation confronting the costly Arts departments, Music, Drama and Fine Art, threw into relief another tension between co-operative regional resolutions to problems and competitive positioning of one’s home institution. It seemed that the mechanism for finding a regional solution to this problem existed in the form of the regional consortium, the eastern seaboard Association of Tertiary Institutions (esATI). Despite the expenditure of enormous time and effort on the part of both the staff of the esATI secretariat and the staff from departments in member institutions, a solution was not found. Why not?

esATI is a voluntary association formed by the Vice Chancellors of tertiary institutions in the region. It therefore depends entirely on the goodwill and commitment of those Vice Chancellors to effect any significant change. While the Association is very often used as the platform to mouth the rhetoric of co-operation (in line with national policy see *White Paper 3*), the reality on the ground is that some of the member institutions see the pursuit of regional configurations for the offering of academic courses as directly counter to their own individual institutional interests. Again, the logic of the market place that forces institutions to compete fiercely for students, fundamentally undermines any rationale for co-operation.

Restructuring a single institution, a part of the whole system, in isolation from any restructuring of the whole, is likely to produce consequences that are detrimental to the whole in the long run. Decisions taken at an institutional level to ensure institutional survival are not necessarily the best for the region, but without the power to force regional players to the table, there is no other option. National goals remain an idle pipe dream as long as the State is unwilling to enact its own policy.

**CONCLUSION**

The narration of the restructuring process has focused on the important role of institutional micropolitics in shaping change outcomes. In this regard, the roles of key stakeholders, and their respective power bases, were critical in influencing both the restructuring process and its consequences. The role of all key stakeholders — the unions, the Senate, the SPTT, the Council, the Heads of Departments and their staff, the Deans, the FRC’s, the University Management, the regional universities and technikons — facilitated,
redirected and impeded the restructuring process at various points and on various issues in the process.

In the second article in this series, we will further demonstrate how these stakeholders influenced the institutional restructuring process. The University of Natal both resisted movement towards a single regional institution for the performing arts disciplines (when it seemed that this involved an amalgamation of staff) and yet willingly incorporated students from UDW once these departments were closed. Members of the academic staff union (ASA) actively cooperated in the restructuring process yet stopped short of participating in the implementation of key recommendations related to staffing changes. The Council of the University largely approved restructuring proposals from the Senate yet intervened on key issues that intersected with the personal interests and backgrounds of individual Council members. The University Management created space for the academics to lead the restructuring process yet provided constant redirection (such as through the Kapenta Bay Summit) and framing of the issues at critical points. Deans were both leaders of the restructuring process in the SPTT and yet (as in the case of the Faculties of Law and Science) stood aside from the SPTT decisions when their staff presented serious objections to critical recommendations. The Department of Education was both advocate of institutional mergers while at the same time influencing the process in favour of a simple hand over of UDW students to the University of Natal in the case of the performing arts. Academics, especially in the humanities, launched articulate critique of the technocratic demands of state policies and yet were coerced into redesigning curricula for greater market relevance eg. the BA in Heritage Tourism. The role of the executive of the SPTT (five persons) became critical in steering the process of restructuring in ways that kept all stakeholders on board while at the same time moving the process forward.

A process that allowed compromise and conflict, consensus and challenge, was therefore important in ensuring successful completion of the strategic plan. In the third article we will demonstrate that even with a good strategic plan, the politics of implementation can seriously undermine the early gains made in the restructuring process.

REFERENCES

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**FOOTNOTES**


2. A more precise breakdown of staffing and student distribution over time, including three year forward projections, can be found in the *Three Year Rolling Plan, 1999–2001* (Strategic Planning Office, University of Durban Westville, 1999).

3. The double entendre (accounting for change) suggests the inevitable ambiguity of a planning process that is easily interpreted as a financial accounting process rather than an academic or intellectual accounting process, and one in which “change” might simply be reduced to short-sighted cost reduction rather than the change implied in transformation.

4. The micropolitical dilemmas of such action are explored in the second article in this series, through the medium of one of the case studies on restructuring.


7. The University of the Witwatersrand is currently in the process of managing the “fallout” from its own restructuring process carried through this year. A very negative article, “Rock bottom morale at Wits”, that appeared in the *Weekly Mail and Guardian* (19-25 May 2000) elicited a tightly orchestrated full page response (“Changes at Wits benefit everyone”) consisting of a number of statements from a range of academics and administrators (*Weekly Mail and Guardian* 26 May 1 June). Only the small skeptical statement from the South African Students Congress marred an otherwise uniformly enthusiastic response.


