'Addicted to the status quo': academic fantasies and the primary task in Faculties of the Humanities

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Abstract
The current state of the Humanities in South African universities is frequently attributed to the 1997 Higher Education Act and the new educational dispensation it initiated. This article discusses some of the pervasive fantasies inhibiting the effective management, and especially the management of change, in one Faculty of the Humanities. Several of these fantasies appear to prevent the Faculty from being able to manage itself adequately within the new tertiary educational system. It was to these inabilities and resistances that a research project was directed in 2000/2001. It sought to explore some of the perceptions held by Heads of Departments about the primary task at various organisational levels within the university. Some of the major findings are included in the article which, inevitably, is a mere skeleton of the complete research, running, as it does, to some 60000 words.

INTRODUCTION

I wish I were a messenger and all the news was good
(Eddie Vedder)

But it isn’t.
In his novel, *Flowers for Algernon*, Daniel Keyes speaks of some but not all kinds of academic/scientific research as ‘Money, time, and energy squandered on the detailed analysis of the trivial’ (Keyes 1989:109–110). I hope that what follows will not strike you as trivial, despite the necessity of resorting to detail at times.
It’s quite common – and there’s a nice ambiguity there – to blame the current state of the Humanities in South African universities on the new higher educational dispensation to be found, in essence, in the 1997 Higher Education Act. And, of course, it’s always much easier – and much pleasanter – to place the blame elsewhere, on ‘it’ – whatever that is – or on ‘them’ – whoever they are – than it is

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to accept that, as academics in the Humanities, we are partially culpable for the present situation, and that culpability reaches back many years.

So let me begin by contextualising the research, the results of which form the core of what follows. In 1989, I wrote a paper, ‘The management of change and the change of management in South African universities’ (Ulyatt 1989:159), which contained the following paragraph:

If we are to serve the society to which we belong and in which our students are expected to find a place for themselves, we must have a clear idea of our function in that society. We should be asking ourselves what sort of service should we be offering at tertiary level? We should ask whether society’s needs are being catered for by the various tertiary-level institutions. If society is changing dynamically, tertiary education must at least keep up with those changes. Better still, it should be initiating many of them. If we are preparing young people for tomorrow, shouldn’t we be asking what the South Africa of tomorrow will look like?

A little later, the argument continued (1989:160):

Another factor inhibiting the effective functioning of universities in this dynamically-changing society is the number of academics who appear unwilling to adopt a more business-like attitudes and procedures. I have heard many arguments against approaching university education in a more business-like way but very few in favour. This strikes me as a refusal to confront the realities of our situation.

That was 13 years ago – and eight years before the new Higher Education Act. At a conference a year later (1990) – one interestingly and ironically devoted to the theme of Enterprise in Higher Education: Breaking the Mould (which assumed that breaking the mould was something academics would want to do) – I posited the argument ‘that a university is no more unique in its purposes than, say, hospitals are in theirs’ (Ulyatt 1990:247). The argument continued: ‘[s]uch a premise presumes, therefore, that universities should be perceived as typical organisations committed to effective management of innovation and change through the use of appropriate models, systems and techniques’. Several members of the audience took umbrage at the assertion that universities are not unique enterprises. They were equally troubled by the idea that, like all other organisations, universities and their Faculties need to be run according to the basic principles of management, especially when issues of change, innovation, and/or transformation are being confronted. Indeed, some of my colleagues, it appeared, preferred to conceive of the university and the Faculty as something more akin to a secular monastery or nunnery, accountable only to higher and distinctly non-earthly powers. While the nobility of serving such higher powers is not to be deplored, it does not necessarily and inevitably provide an appropriate
modus operandi for effective and efficient university or Faculty management in contemporary South Africa.

Now, there are all sorts of nice, gentle, euphemistic ways of introducing what I want to say but, as one of my colleagues once observed, ‘Ons ordentlikheid is ons grootste struikeblolk’. So let’s get straight to the heart of the matter. This article is about some of the pervasive fantasies that inhibit the effective management, and especially the management of change, in Faculties of the Humanities. Several of these fantasies are likely to prevent Faculties from being able to manage themselves adequately within the new educational dispensation formulated in the 1997 Higher Education Act. Through conversations with colleagues, I came to realise that many of them were being sustained by fantasies which, in a variety of ways, kept them divorced from prevailing realities. It is not my intention to engage in semantic debate about whether we are referring here to fantasies, delusions, or ideals. I shall be using the term ‘fantasies’ throughout, not least to distinguish between these phenomena and those labelled ‘phantasies’.

It was to these fantasies I addressed a modest research project in 2000/2001. Using a questionnaire of 41 items as a data-gathering instrument, it sought to explore some of the perceptions held by Heads of Departments about the primary task at various levels within the university, and to seek answers to the research question which was articulated as follows: ‘What effects have the transformational processes had on the perceptions of departmental heads concerning the primary tasks of the university, of the Faculty, and of his/her department, and the resources and constraints impacting on its effective performance by his/her staff?’

This formulation was clearly necessary knowing that one was not going to get very far simply by asking individuals about their fantasies about the university or their work within it. It was presumed, correctly as it turned out, that by asking about present realities concerning the primary task at the three levels of institution, Faculty, and department, one could bring some of these unconscious fantasies to consciousness, even though the participants were rarely aware of them.

However, before we go any further, three caveats are essential. First, it is always dangerous to take findings acquired at one institution and characterise them as symptomatic of other institutions in the system. On the other hand, it would be careless not to consider the possibility. Secondly, the constraints of an academic paper necessarily prevent full and detailed explication of the model and the research methodology. What follows is a mere skeleton of research running to about 50000 words. Thirdly, this article’s focus necessarily excludes discussion of many other crucially relevant aspects of the university as a complex organisational system and their impact on its business as a purveyor of education.

What follows is divided into three main sections. The first deals with the Tavistock model since the precepts of this model were used to interpret the data gathered by the questionnaire. The second section present some of the fantasies that emerged with some brief observation about each of them. The third part deals
with the overt subject of the questionnaire: the perceptions about the various levels of primary task. The questionnaire itself is provided as an Appendix.

THE TAVISTOCK MODEL

We begin by looking at some of the basic presumptions of the Tavistock model of organisational analysis.

The open system: every organisation constitutes an open system interacting with other systems

The university is linked to numerous other institutional systems in relationships it cannot ignore from the state to food provisioners, booksellers, and the municipal water and electricity suppliers, to name but a few examples. Further, any changes in any other system or part necessarily requires a change in the university system. Consider the hypothetical possibility of the booksellers to the university going into bankruptcy and not being able to provide texts for the next semester. Within a university, its various component Faculties constitute parts of an open, rather than a closed, system, and changes in one Faculty can have consequences for one or more of the others.

The primary task: every organisation, or part, pursues a primary task, even if that primary task is assumed

Whether a primary task is explicit or implicit, each part of a university or a Faculty behaves according to its perceptions of the primary task. A departmental primary task may, however, be in conflict with the Faculty’s primary task while the primary tasks of individual members of the department may be in conflict with the departmental and/or Faculty’s primary tasks.

Resources and constraints: every primary task is defined in terms of the resources and constraints impacting upon it

These resources and constraints are both internal and external in origin, and may frequently vary with changing demographics and societal demands. In some instances, constraints may become resources while, in others, resources may become constraints. It is rare to have a resource or a constraint that remains consistently so. Within a Faculty, for example, a department’s staff may serve as a constraint on the Faculty’s primary task but a resource for the departmental primary task.
Tripartite operational process: the process may be diagrammatised thus: 
inputs → conversion → outputs

In a Faculty context, this process may be translated as: incoming students → teaching/learning/research → outgoing graduates (and failures). Any change in any part of this process will require necessary adjustments in the other parts.

The unconscious at work: every individual employee brings all his/her unconscious processes to the workplace

These processes affect the individual’s workplace behaviour because his/her fantasies are an integral part of these unconscious processes. Many of these unconscious processes may be traced to infancy, and many employees use the workplace to work through, albeit unconsciously, their early unconscious processes.

The holding environment and annihilation anxiety: employing institutions infantilise their employees and discourage any strivings towards adult autonomy within its structures

In pursuit of normal behaviour (conformity to its norms), the institution assumes a parental role which may serve as either a holding environment for the conformist or a source of annihilation anxiety for the non-conformist. Organisational processes are designed to reward conformity and compliance while discouraging behaviour that strives for adult autonomy within the organisation.

Routine work within institutions is generated at an increasing rate, often unconsciously, to prevent non-routine work from happening

This final process does not belong to the Tavistock model but is nonetheless integral to Faculty management. Because change in organisations demands the destruction of the status quo or some parts of it, and because that possibility evokes annihilation anxiety in the institution’s employees, the perpetuation of the status quo requires the organisation to do more and more of the same routine work to prevent innovation and change from happening on any but the smallest scale.

EIGHTEEN ACADEMIC FANTASIES

Turning now to some of the fantasies that emerged, it is not possible here to do more than list some of the recurrent ones, and then offer brief comment on each in turn:

- That outside institutions such as the government and/or the community should have no control of what the university does or how it defines itself

  This notion controverts the idea of the institution as an open system, despite the
reality that universities and their Faculties are heavily dependent on the state for subsidies and monies of various kinds.

- **That to remain ‘universities’, universities in South Africa should continue to model themselves on Eurocentric precursors**
  It is important to note that the respondents were white, Afrikaans-speaking academics. This may account for the presumption that an entirely Eurocentric model would suit present South African educational needs. It also expresses the fantasy that the way things were (prior to 1990/1994) constituted sound tertiary educational practice because it served the needs of both the minority in power as well as fulfilling the academic fantasies and career aspirations of those serving in that regime’s universities.

- **That universities and their organisational components – faculties, departments, etc – are unique institutions and therefore cannot and should not be managed by any of the conventional methods, processes, and procedures usually employed to manage other organisations**
  It is difficult to ascertain precisely the origins of this fantasy but it does strongly epitomise the infantilised dependent state that academics seem to prefer to adult autonomous responsibility in their relationship with their employing institution.

- **That the technikons will never prove a serious threat to the university system because the work of technikons is qualitatively and/or methodologically less scholarly**
  This assumption follows on logically from the assumption that universities are unique institutions. That technikons are now producing award-winning research has brought about some envy – as distinct from jealousy – within universities. Jealousy may be defined as wanting what someone else has, envy is wanting them not to have what they have while not necessarily wanting it for oneself. Thus the university system would not want to function in the manner in which technikons function – much is made of universities within the new tertiary educational dispensation remaining, first and foremost, ‘universities’; it would prefer the technikons not to exist so reducing the threat or challenge they pose.

- **That good academics appointed to institutional management positions will be effective leaders and managers because they ‘know’ the system**
  Knowing how the system works, and having experience of working within such systems over a period of years, tends to produce ‘organisational’ people, infantilised employees anxious to keep their levels of anxiety to manageable levels by perpetuating the *status quo*. The system, therefore, tends to be unsympathetic towards, and intolerant of, those employees who wish to strive towards adult autonomy through innovation and change. Parenthetically, it is worth noting that Faculties do not generally perceive the need for appointing
either managers or leaders with organisational business experience and/or knowledge.

- **That the institution will provide a secure, non-threatening place to develop one’s long-term career**
  This fantasy embodies the ‘good old days’ syndrome as well as the desire for a holding environment devoid of annihilation anxiety. It is perhaps this presumption that epitomises the idea of universities as unique institutions.

- **That each of us has ‘an institution in the mind’ which represents the ideal workplace where we can live out our ideal career fantasies**
  Every individual possesses fantasies centred on his/her work, and its career possibilities within an ideal work situation. Reality is sometimes measured or tested or against these fantasies. Such testing can result in manifestations of annihilation anxiety if the real working institution is perceived to be failing to provide sufficient sense of a holding environment.

- **That the institution (or other institutions such as the CSIR or the NRF) will be responsible for funding individuals’ work, conference attendance, research, etc**
  The underlying presumption here is that individuals in their infantilised state within a holding environment will have the financial needs of their research taken care of by someone other than themselves. This fantasy also presumes that, whoever adopts the parental role of taking care of those financial needs, will not discriminate between infantilised employees, and that, by implication, all research will be regarded as equally important. Through these processes, the idea of relevance in research is rejected or presumed to be irrelevant.

- **That there will always be research funds available for all research and conference attendance, nationally and internationally**
  Almost as a corollary to the previous one, this infantilised fantasy is rooted in the presumption that, since one does not know where the money comes from, there will always be money for everything, even though our early experiences should remind us that that was not the actual situation when we were small. We desperately hope it will be the case this time.

- **That the financial viability of the institution is someone else’s problem or responsibility**
  This is how it were when we were infants. Having someone else take care of, or worry about, money issues helped to keep us away from experiencing the annihilation anxiety associated with it.

- **That research is an academically superior activity to teaching**
  In most instances, research activities receive preferential rewards of one kind or another compared with teaching, often despite policies or public avowals that
teaching is as important an activity as research. The brutal reality is that brilliant teaching receives fewer accolades than average or even mediocre research. The prospect of more teaching touches off numerous forms of annihilation anxiety as it threatens comfort zones/holding environments.

- **That research is the unique identifying characteristic of universities and their faculties**
  While this may be a sustaining fantasy that some university personnel, the reality is that the technikons have entered the field of research with some considerable success. Consequently, they have deprived the university system of its unique characteristic and hence, the major portion of its identity.

- **That teaching is not the primary task of academics**
  This is simply one facet of the previous argument that research is the unique identifying characteristic of universities. Consequently, teaching is neither as highly valued nor as highly rewarded as research. Having to teach increased, and increasing, numbers of classes as well as increasing numbers in those classes, is a source of some resentment not only because it is a threat to the idealised institution in the mind but also it challenges the individual’s fantasy career within such an institution.

- **That increasing student numbers inevitably result in falling standards, so the trend should be avoided, leaving more time for research**
  The term ‘massification’ (with its historical resonances of unruly masses, of unmanageable numbers, of uncivilised hoards, of the individual’s inability to defend his/her elitist position against the democratic demands of the masses) constitutes a prospect few wish to acknowledge or ponder for long. The equation is unbecomingly rudimentary: more and more numbers = lower and poorer standards. While new educational methodologies would seem to offer effective ways of facilitating learning for increasing numbers of students, the costs involved or the technologies required by students themselves are usually seen as inhibitive or prohibitive. But most of the arguments are de facto justifications for persisting with the prevailing fantasy of the institution’s primary function as a research facility.

- **That the institution is responsible for finding more students to make courses with small numbers of students financially viable**
  The fantasy here is that if the institution employed you originally to teach the subject area X and there has been a decline in demand for that subject to the point where almost no student enrol, then it is the institution’s responsibility to give that subject/course the kiss of life; it is not the member of staff’s responsibility to find another area of academic interest or to retrain. This fantasy provides a fine example of how the infantilisation process, with its
concomitant dependence and rejection of autonomy, can contribute to resistance to change.

Paradoxically, having fewer students does not produce the higher standards that the elitist argument contends will be the outcome of having fewer students. Instead, having fewer students usually results in the radical downsising or closure of departments, thus diminishing the intellectual range of Faculties of the Humanities.

- **That academic work is an end in itself, and requires no further justification**
  Such a fantasy has its roots in the uniqueness-of-the-institution argument, while reinforcing the idea of the institution as a closed system not accountable to systems and authorities outside itself. It is closely linked to the fantasy that there will always be funding available for all research. It also ignores the reality that institutional funders are likely to want to know the outcomes their investments have produced.

- **That academic work does not have to be relevant in any of the ways defined or imposed by outside institutions including government**
  In essence, this is a corollary to the previous item, again reinforcing the fantasy that the institution can operate as a closed system. That the state is a major source of funding is, apparently, irrelevant.

- **That committees are the best way to manage faculties**
  Of course, committees constitute mini holding environments. They facilitate pervasive fantasies in academics that they are doing something useful and meaningful towards Faculty or institutional management by sitting on committees. Most institutional committees are merely advisory, making recommendations. They are, as we shall see, extremely costly and ineffective ways of passing recommendations through the system to the point where actual decision can be made. Committees also encourage the erroneous belief that the decision-making process has been democratised.

Obholzer (in Obholzer & Roberts 1994:170) argues that groups or committees are set up in such a way that the number of members (more than 12 is ‘ineffective’), or composition (varied/varying/variable members) results in such groups or committees not being able to get their work – the pursuit of the primary task – done.

And there is another facet of committee dynamics that has to included here. It is called the Ringelmann Effect. I shall not waste your time contextualising the experiment or discussing all the usual preliminaries because it is the outcomes that are crucial.

A single individual’s performance of a task established a performance norm of 63 units. This figure was then taken to constitute a 100% performance of the
task. When two persons were asked to perform the same task, the projected outcome was 126 units \((63 \times 2)\), although the actual outcome was 118, meaning that each individual was performing at a 93.85\% level of performance. When three persons were involved in the task, the projected outcome was 189 units \((63 \times 3)\), although the achieved performance figure was only 160 units, with individuals performing at 84.66\% of their capacity. When eight individuals were asked to perform the task, the projected performance outcome figure of 504 units \((63 \times 8)\) was far in excess of the actual performance figure of 248 units, at which level individuals were performing at 49.21\%. The conclusion may be stated thus: There is an inverse relationship between the number of people in a group and individual performance. Inversely, the conclusion may be articulated thus: the more people in the group, the lower the individual performance. This finding has serious implications not only the very process of for committee and/or team work but also for the costs involved. In a committee of eight members working at only 49.21\% of their potential capacity, the cost of accomplishing any task is doubled.

Although committees are extremely costly, few take cognisance of those costs in calculating their operational effectiveness. Let us suppose that a professor earns a hypothetical R150.00 per hour. Then let us suppose that there are 100 professorial members of the Senate. The cost of running a Senate meeting is then R15 000.00 per hour. Let us assume further that each Senate meeting lasts no longer than two hours, and that Senate meets normally four times per annum. The yearly cost of Senate meetings runs to some R120 000. Given the fact that Senate is a recommendation-making body, one must ask if these costs constitute money and time well invested.

In passing, it is also worth noting that many members of Senate, and Faculty too for that matter, are required to vote on matters entirely beyond their expertise or general common knowledge. As a professor of English, I have voted on matters uniquely specific to issues within Faculties of Agriculture, Medicine, Economics, and Education. I recall voting most enthusiastically for something to do with Rock Mechanics because I was under the impression it had something to do with 1960s music; to discover later its relationship with the rocks of geological studies brought about another bout of annihilation anxiety.

The costs of attending Faculty and departmental meetings are no less disturbing. If the average member of Faculty earns R70.00 per hour and there are 100 members in the Faculty, each meeting costs R7 000.00 per hour to run. If the average member of Faculty earns R70.00 per hour, and a departmental meeting of one hour takes place every week during a 28-week year, the cost of each member’s attendance for the year is R1 960 multiplied by the number of staff in the department. For financial reasons alone, one must conclude that, as a
means of managing and decision making, both Faculty and Senate are costly and irrelevant conclaves.

**SOME FINDINGS ABOUT THE PRIMARY TASK**

That the primary task of the university is

(a) teaching science (in the broadest sense of the term),
(b) the propagation of science (in the same broad sense) through research and good teaching,
(c) the transmission of high-level knowledge and the empowerment of students to obtain that knowledge.

The terminology of these responses is worth brief consideration. Only one participant mentions ‘students’, who constitute the institution’s major resource and input. Of course, it can be argued that students are implicit in those responses referring to ‘teaching’, a function that is specifically mentioned twice. One participant sees the university’s primary task as transmitting ‘high-level’ knowledge, the compound adjective reinforcing the scholarly status of the university in society; the participant is thus able to avoid the term ‘teaching’. Another adjective, ‘good’, qualifying ‘teaching’, raises issues about the appropriate, effective, and non-discriminatory evaluation of teaching. That teaching is mentioned while learning is not reveals an unconscious dimension to the role of the academic as the dispenser of knowledge rather than the facilitating mentor. The academic is perceived as being imbued with a range and depth of knowledge that gives him/her considerable academic authority. This authority places the learner/student in a dependent, infantilised relationship with the academic, a relationship which ironically replicates the academic’s relationship with the institution. It is a system that can be obviously be misused and abused in much the same way that parental authority can be misused and abused within the family context.

While research and teaching are generally perceived to be basic functions of the university, only one respondent mentions both of them specifically.

The next question sought to explore ways in which the technikon’s primary task is presumed different from the university’s. This insight is particularly important because of (a) the unified system of education envisaged by the 1997 Higher Education Act, and (b) the fact that the university can no longer claim research as its exclusive or predominant area of work.

The technikon’s primary task is perceived essentially as ‘practical’. Further, its work is about the *application* of concepts, enabling students to acquire knowledge of a more practical nature. The practice of science there (in the technikon) is directed more to the needs of certain industries or large firms or toward the training of students for a specific profession without the broad academically funded background in the various subjects.
By implication, students at the technikon lack, or are deprived of, the breadth of knowledge that university students gain; the practical specificity of technikon training explains this lack, absence, or deprivation. Conversely, it could be argued from these same perceptions that the knowledge acquired at university has breadth – does this mean at the expense of depth? – is non-practical and may even be impractical while lacking specificity and work relevance.

These responses appear to be arguing that the university’s *modus operandi* is to import young people from the community, put them through various teaching and learning (conversion) processes that provide them with breadth of knowledge in various subjects before exporting them back into the community where they may find themselves lacking the specific training and skills to get a job. Within the university context, the term ‘breadth’ may mean theoretical knowledge as opposed to practical skills.

By implication, what the technikon offers students should not be compared with what the university offers because the technikon students exported back into the community lack breadth. They are impaired, and might even be educationally inferior, even if they find it much easier to find a job.

These perceptions are necessary because of the *de facto* threat the technikon system poses to its university counterpart, a threat that translates into unconscious envy. A compounding factor may be found in the long-term possibility of competing tertiary educational enterprises having to amalgamate or merge, possibly with other tertiary institutions in the province as well. Such mergers and amalgamations are likely to demand even more reductions in funds and personnel in all the institutions involved.

In times of change, especially if it is rapid, the institutional primary task, together with its context of resources and constraints, requires at least an annual revision to ensure the survival of the institution. Question 15 was designed to explore perceptions about whether such revisions have taken place within the university.

According to one respondent, the university must acquire more and more strategies to survive; in the process, however, attention and emphasis can no longer fall on the primary task. Because the primary task is perceived as fixed, as a given – the furtherance of science through research and teaching – it cannot be redefined; it cannot be changed without compromising all that the university stands for. Consequently, developing survival strategies for the institution will inevitably result in the steady abandonment of the primary task.

Some participants perceived changes in the university’s primary task. One participant saw the change as a substantial increase in community work than had previously been required or done. Another respondent saw the change as an ever-increasing emphasis on bridging courses intended to empower the disadvantaged; standards have fallen to enable them to ‘catch up’ and to pass. The conflict, identified more than three decades ago, is between education for the masses and education to satisfy the specific demands being made by industry, science, and
technology for people with higher education (Titmuss 1965:360). The elitist position many academics desire, and perceive as the proper place in society for the university, may be untenable within both the contingencies of South African society at present and the requirements of the Higher Education Act.

That the primary task of the faculty is

(a) the handling of the broad interests of the disciplines under its control,
(b) the promotion or furtherance of the Humanities through research and teaching,
(c) the coordinated administration of all the different departments and programmes.

That the ‘broad interests’ remain undefined is regrettable; it would have been useful to have some insights into what those interests encompass, and whether financial matters fall within their ambit. The use of the term ‘handling’ instead of ‘management’ suggests a need for a management style that differs from the way things are done at present. It may express an unconscious need to be handled rather than managed, a way of being acknowledged as less dependent, less infantilised, more autonomous, and adult. Alternatively, it may express a need to be held within a more congenial holding environment devoid of annihilation anxiety.

The coupling of the two major functions of the academy – research and teaching – is restated here with research taking pride of place with teaching being placed second. It appears significant that community service, a third and increasingly important institutional function, is omitted. The articulation of the research/teaching dyad as the institution’s primary task contains a rejection of the newer roles being demanded of tertiary educational institutions. Taking the implications of the responses one step further, they assert a preference for the ways things were (prior to all the changes in both dispensation and institution) over the way things are and will continue to be. Inherently, the response constitutes a rejection of the processes of change.

The third response sees the Faculty’s primary task as the coordinated administration of departments. The Faculty may be being perceived as the boundary between university and department, hence its coordinating function. A further aspect of its task is administration, a term subsuming all but the research and teaching functions of its component departments.

It remains to observe that none of the respondents sees survival as the Faculty’s primary task – that seems to be taken for granted despite the drastic retrenchments that took place in 1997 – nor do they see its task as the execution of the university’s primary task within the contexts of Faculty and department. Thus it would seem safe to assume that the participants perceive the university and the Faculty as having different primary tasks. The management of the university is in the hands of the senior management team while the academic functions of the Faculty remain in faculty hands.
That the primary task of departments within the faculty is
(a) to develop (the department’s discipline),
(b) to open up of the knowledge of (the department’s) subject area to students,
(c) furthering the disciplines in their department through meaningful research,
good teaching, and community service related to academic disciplines.

Some smaller departments in the Faculty were amalgamated with larger ones as part of the turnaround strategy, hence the reference to ‘disciplines’ in the plural. The argument for such amalgamations was cost effectiveness. The smaller department could make use of the larger one’s infrastructure and technological resources. Yet, in at least one instance, the large department with which the smaller amalgamated was not significantly more viable financially than the small one.

One participant refers specifically to their subject by name while a second person mentions ‘my’ subject. Both articulations suggest a particular fondness the respondents have for their own areas of expertise. This may account for the tenacity with which they wish to cling to the previous academic dispensation – and the political one too, if only by implication – and to those times when their subject was as important to the Faculty as all the others. In the present circumstances of relevance and work-related outcomes for subjects/disciplines, it is difficult to justify subjects such as the ancient languages, some foreign languages, and a number of other disciplines. When the question being constantly asked (by individuals, the community, and the state) is, How will this help a student gain employment?, many alternative intellectual, educational, and academic arguments fall on deaf ears. It is futile to argue for the continuation of a subject on such grounds if students and the community support that subject poorly. If a subject is not compulsory for a particular degree or professional qualification, its future is at least as perilous as is the department’s that presents it.

The next question was designed to find out what adjustments departments have made to their primary tasks since 1994. Although course choices in a department have been drastically reduced because of the rationalisation process, the departmental primary task itself has remained basically the same; in another department, it has not changed at all. Knowing that a thorough reappraisal of the primary task is crucial when change, especially rapid change, is taking place in the environment the institution serves, it comes as a surprise to learn that neither department has changed its primary task for at least six years. This may explain the cognitive dissonances experienced and recorded in earlier responses. Because departmental primary tasks were not appraised regularly for several years, the speed and urgency of the changes demanded of the university after 1994 produced significant resistance, disillusionment, and resentment. These negative feelings are expressed in terms of falling standards, falling subsidies, and increasing dissatisfaction with the compromises that have had to be made.

A participant writes of the emphasis on Africa and the stigma attached to
anything European as well as the loss of a wider vision. One might wonder here whether the word ‘wider’ is intended to function as a synonym for ‘European’ in this comment. The respondent’s subject/discipline has been plunged into an absolute struggle for survival. They add that the drastic reduction in staff has made the achievement of the ideal just about impossible. We notice how the struggle for survival is juxtaposed with the ideal; the present is juxtaposed with the past. Unconsciously perhaps, the dream has been shattered by reality as the boundary between inner and outer worlds has become a battlefield in a struggle for survival. In the present circumstances, the respondent believes that basic research is no longer possible while the quality of teaching suffers in the process at the same time, while community service is paid for in ‘blood’ money; the battle takes its toll as its academic combatants bleed. In any sort of change process, morbidity is everywhere. By not changing the primary task of the departments, the respondents hope to avoid confronting that morbidity. They have created a self-imposed impossible task. In so doing, they have become their own victims.

That the primary task of academic work is the pursuit of the ideal, not reality

Despite their awareness, but not acceptance, of present realities, participants did not perceive primary task as something requiring frequent appraisal and adjustment, as the model presumes, because of changing resources and constraints. Instead, throughout their responses to the questionnaire, participants commented on the primary task – whether of department, Faculty, or university – as if it were fixed, permanent, unchangeable, unalterable, and various other adjectives and synonyms meaning or implying fixity.

The equation:

the primary task = the pursuit of the ideal

raises a number of questions central to any understanding of why Faculties as institutions are so rigidly inflexible and persistently unchangeable.

(a) How can the pursuit of the ideal have constraints put upon it?
(b) How can there be limits to the resources one allocates to the ideal?
(c) How can the present government demand outcomes and relevance when the ideal is not subject to debate or the constraints of immediate political policies?
(d) Why should any institution pursuing the ideal appraise that pursuit every year?
(e) Why should the ideal be subjected to interrogation in the first place?

The ideal is ineffable and beyond the reach of the merely mortal activities of organisational theory and practice. Academics do not – perhaps cannot – perceive themselves as employees within an institution. They are practitioners of the ideal, and that would appear to provide them with some sort of immunity from the basic processes of organisations and institutional life.

Consequently, the primary task becomes the pursuit of the ideal, the ideal that
our memory deceives us into believing really existed once upon a time, not very long ago, in another, and unconsciously preferable, set of social, political, educational, and economic circumstances. Admirable though the pursuit of the ideal may at first seem, pursuing it in the face of prevailing financial and educational realities may be construed as what Obholzer (in Obholzer & Roberts 1994:170) calls ‘an anti-task phenomenon’.

And even when the organisation seems to be doing all the right things to resolve its difficulties, the ways it chooses to tackle these difficulties work unconsciously as denials of reality. Individuals are molded to the institutional ways of doing things so that

[e]ventually the individual to a large extent loses his or her capacity to be detached and ‘see’ things from an outside perspective. Yet, to maintain some outside perspective is essential if one is to retain a capacity for critical thought and questioning. Without these, our institutions are doomed to operate more and more on a basis of denial of reality ... (Obholzer in Obholzer & Roberts 1994:178).

So, let us confront reality again by returning to the first question posed at the beginning: ‘What is the primary task of your institution?’ It is, quite simply: ‘the task an enterprise ... must perform, at any given time, if it is to survive’. But from the research, we know that survival is not a means of pursuing the ideal.

Throughout the responses, one was aware of the accuracy of the old adage that there is no truth, only perceptions. Yet if these are the ways and the things the participants perceive about the institution and what has been happening to it over the past years, then these are, for them individually, the truth. One does not expect consistency in dealing with perceptions, only insights. And, in confronting the perceptions these participants have offered, it is difficult to avoid noticing the frustration and aggression they have experienced as well as a profound and pervasive sense of loss, sadness, and nostalgia in no small measure; none of these are conducive to change.

What can we do about the future then? Well, first we need to acknowledge some of our shortcomings. First of all, there are a number of things academics aren’t very good at:

(a) perceiving themselves and their work from an entrepreneurial perspective;
(b) rapid decision making;
(c) living with the consequence of such rapidly-made decisions;
(d) the rapid implementation of decisions;
(e) understanding, accepting, and managing change;
(f) managing institutional monies;
(g) running organisations.

Secondly, they are quite fond of, and therefore deeply attached to, fantasies about
(a) their institutions as holding environments
(b) maintaining the *status quo*
(c) their work as the pursuit of the ideal, regardless of circumstantial realities
(d) the usefulness of committees

Now we know what things we need to change *within the institution* and *within ourselves*. In *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, Richard Bach (1975) writes: ‘It always works when you know what you’re doing’. These words suggest that (a) if you don’t know what you’re doing, you ought to ask why are you doing it in the first place, and (b) if what you’re doing isn’t working, you ought to find out what you should be doing that will work. If the pursuit of the primary task *cannot be* the pursuit of the ideal, then we have to ask what our primary task should be.

It is vitally important to note here that in offering their perceptions of the primary tasks of the university, the Faculty, and the department, not one of the participants mentioned the effective and/or efficient management of the institution. There was, it should be noted, a mention (at the Faculty level) of ‘the coordinated administration of all the different departments and programmes’.

**CONCLUSION**

Michael Frayn’s words (in Cohen & Cohen 1980:121) seem particularly relevant here: ‘What deeply affects a man’s experience of the world is his perception that *things could have been done otherwise.*’

The things that were not done differently often metamorphose into fantasies that always elude us. We regret our inability to transform, in some mysterious or magical way, the fantasies into tangible realities. To regain the lost opportunity to make the *other* choice is frequently perceived as the way we could have brought about the miraculous, and so avoid the depredations of reality. The words, ‘If only . . . ’, become the elliptical articulation of reality’s triumph over the dream or the fantasy. To enable the Humanities to survive, to endure, and to prevail, therefore, it is imperative for us, as members of such Faculties, to do things otherwise, to do more things otherwise more frequently, to acknowledge rather than deny the realities within which we live and work, and to accept responsibility for managing the survival of the disciplines we love so dearly – even if that means confronting the annihilation anxiety that terrorises each one of us so surreptitiously and so insidiously.

The English poet, Edwin Brock, in a piece he calls ‘The Bonsai Poem’ (1975:13), captures the dilemma this way:

And if when your dream ends
you find yourself
in proportion to the old-young tree
in some god-forsaken corner
gnarled, trimmed and ten times
your age, your years of patience
will have brought you
face to face
with the psychology of loss.

It is through our understanding of the psychology of loss inherent in the frustration of the fulfilment of one’s fantasies that we can acquire the means of escaping from our addiction to the status quo.

REFERENCES

Appendix

1. THE RATIONALE OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Within the context of the research, the questionnaire served as an information-gathering tool. However, it is important to appreciate that the information gathered consisted of individuals’ perceptions rather than factual data. One of the consequent implications is that there can be no replicability because each set of responses is unique. A further implication is that the reliability and validity of the responses cannot be allocated numerical value of any sort and so cannot be subjected to statistical manipulation. Which is precisely why the case study approach – with its emphasis on uniqueness and difference – was adopted as the preferred method.

The questionnaire, a copy of which is included as an Appendix, consists of six sections containing 41 questions. The first section, The University as an Organisation, consists of 12 questions intended to serve as an informational context within which the specific issues of the primary task are to be understood. The questions focus on the university as an organisation as well as on the institution’s financial position and the various strategies (with a variety of names) that have been initiated (with variable success) to deal with the institution’s changing financial situation. The reliability of the information provided by the institution about its own financial situation is dealt with in the last three questions.

The second section of the questionnaire focuses on the university’s primary task. The seven questions range from a simple definition of the task to the resources and constraints impacting upon it, and a final speculative question about what the institution’s primary ought to be. What distinguishes this section from the next two is the inclusion of a question about differences between the university’s primary task and that of the technikon.

Sections C and D concern themselves with the primary task of the Faculty and the department respectively. With the exception of the ‘university/technikon primary task’ question already mentioned, these two sections ask the same six questions that are asked in Section B.

The purpose of asking identical questions about different structural divisions of the university is to explore congruences and anomalies between perceptions about various hierarchical levels in the institution. This should reveal what relationships, if any, exist between the primary task of each level. The purpose in asking identical questions about different parts of the organisation is to ascertain whether the confidence with which one would expect different answers for different levels is justified.

Because heads of department serve at the departmental, Faculty, and university Senate levels, there are numerous possibilities for their roles to become quite complex. The final section of the questionnaire comprises four questions about those roles and the training provided by the institution to enable these HODs to perform their roles optimally.

The questionnaire is accompanied by a Preamble, which opens with an invitation to the participants to respond to the questions in either Afrikaans or English. This option is intended to offer greater flexibility and nuance of response to the participants by allowing them to answer the questions in their mother tongue, although the questions themselves are presented in English. Opportunities for the participants to clarify any of the questions and for the researcher to clarify any of the responses are provided for through the use of formal/informal structured/unstructured interviews.
2. THE QUESTIONNAIRE: PREAMBLE AND TEXT

2.1 Preamble

NB: Although the questions are formulated in English, please feel free to respond in either English or Afrikaans.

This questionnaire is about perceptions, not facts. It is an attempt to gather information about the ways in which heads of department or heads of disciplines perceive or ‘see’ the primary task of the university, the Faculty, and their department, and to understand these perceptions.

The research, of which this questionnaire and its responses constitute the empirical core, is being conducted as part of a Master’s degree. It is in no way connected to any of the strategies or processes currently under way at the university. Nor has it been ‘commissioned’ or requested by any body, division, committee, department, or individual at the University of the Free State, or anywhere else for that matter.

Because the questionnaire centres on the perceptions of individuals, and because perceptions are often personal in nature, I presume anonymity to be an important requirement. Your anonymity is assured since no identification of individuals or departments is required by the research. Letters and/or numbers will be used to distinguish between sets of responses (Eg Respondent A or Respondent 1).

Should you as a respondent feel that a question is unclear, imprecise, or lacking in clarity, you are very welcome to contact me. Similarly, should I feel that I am uncertain about a particular response, I may well contact you for clarification.

Since the return of the questionnaires by Monday 18 September 2000 is crucial to the completion deadline of the project, your help in achieving this deadline would be much appreciated.

Should you wish to receive a copy of the research outcomes when the project is completed, I shall be happy to provide one.

Thank you for your time in facilitating this project.

2.2 The questionnaire

A. The university as an organisation

1. Should the university as an organisation be run according to the basic managerial principles common in other organisations? Explain why or why not.

2. What do you understand by the term ‘transformation’?

3. Is the ‘transformation’ process the same as, or different from, the ‘rationalisation’ process, and, if so, in what ways?

4. In what ways is the present ‘turnaround strategy’ different from ‘transformation’ or ‘rationalisation’?

5. Is the transformation/rationalisation/turnaround strategy now necessary for the university, and, if so, why?

6. Was the transformation/rationalisation/turnaround strategy necessary for the university in the past, and, if so, why?

7. If transformation/rationalisation/turnaround strategy was previously necessary for the university, explain why you think it was or was not undertaken.
8. If the university is currently experiencing financial difficulty, explain in what ways this could have been avoided in the past.
9. If the university is currently experiencing financial difficulty, explain in what ways this could be avoided in the future.
10. Do you believe/accept that the university is in financial difficulties at this moment? If so, what sources of information have led you to this perception, and how reliable do you believe those sources to be?
11. Do you think this is the first time the university has been in financial difficulties? If not, when was it previously in this situation?
12. Explain briefly how you think the university’s current financial dilemma could be resolved.

B. The university’s primary task
13. What is the primary task of the university?
14. Explain in what ways the university’s primary task differs from the technikon’s primary task?
15. In what ways has the university’s primary task changed since 1994?
16. What resources are available to the university to facilitate the accomplishment of its primary task?
17. What constraints impact on the university to inhibit or prevent the accomplishment of its primary task?
18. What impact has the transformation/rationalisation/turnaround strategy had on the university’s primary task?
19. What do you think the university’s primary task should be?

C. The faculty’s primary task
20. What is the primary task of the Faculty?
21. In what ways has the Faculty’s primary task changed since 1994?
22. What resources are available to the Faculty to facilitate the accomplishment of its primary task?
23. What constraints impact on the Faculty to inhibit or prevent the accomplishment of its primary task?
24. What impact has the transformation/rationalisation/turnaround strategy had on the Faculty’s primary task?
25. What do you think the Faculty’s primary task should be?

D. The department’s primary task
26. What is the primary task of your department?
27. In what ways has the primary task of your department changed since 1994?
28. What resources are available to the department to facilitate the accomplishment of its primary task?
29. What constraints impact on the department to inhibit or prevent the accomplishment of its primary task?
30. What impact has the transformation/rationalisation/turnaround strategy had on the department’s primary task?
31. What do you think the department’s primary task should be?

E. The head of department’s primary task

32. What is the primary task of the Head of Department?
33. In what ways has the primary task of the Head of Department changed since 1994?
34. What resources are available to the Head of Department to facilitate the accomplishment of the department’s primary task?
35. What constraints impact on the Head of Department to inhibit or prevent the accomplishment of the department’s primary task?
36. What impact has the transformation/rationalisation/turnaround strategy had on the Head of Department’s primary task?
37. What do you think the Head of Department’s primary task should be?

F. The head of department’s roles

38. What are your current roles as Head of Department? You may list them if you wish (Eg: budget compiler, performance appraiser, career counsellor, Faculty committee member, etc).
39. What training did you receive to equip you for these roles?
40. In what ways have the roles of Head of Department changed since 1994?
41. What new roles, if any, have you acquired or found it necessary to acquire?