

Source: WEEKLY MAIL AND GUARDIAN Date: 25-Aug-2005

Topic: 25

Ref No: 4536



1

ID: 03255070-01 Source Page: 10

Jonathan D Jansen reflects on the changes taking place at the University of Pretoria

Jou Ma!

In 1934 a "naturelle" made application to the University of Pretoria seeking admission to study at what was then one of only a handful of "colleges" in the post-Union period.

In a matter that occupied the senate of the institution, it was eventually decided to deny access to the naturelle. Some time later (1969) the daughter of the Japanese consul-general in Pretoria made similar application for access to the campus; this was allowed, provided that she did not seek to take any courses (a number of students would voluntarily qualify under this ruling today).

One more tantalising morsel might fascinate those who understand institutions as both sociological and historical concepts. In 1948 a senate committee of the University of Pretoria, convened by one WWM Eiselen, proposed to the minister that 'n Bantoe-universiteitskollege onder die beskerming van die Universiteit van Pretoria gestig word (a Bantu university be launched under the protection of the University of Pretoria) on 15 acres of ground in a place called Vlakfontein. That place, today, is called Mamelodi.

I raise these seemingly absurd cases only to demonstrate that the same kinds of concerns about access and incorporation (then called *inlywing* [incorporation]) continue to haunt this (and other) institutions in South Africa, even though the political imperatives of the present conjuncture and the administrative detail about who gains access might have changed the response to the question of access — both physical and epistemological.

But the question itself remains as powerful as ever almost 100 years later. And it is the question about access — culturally, linguistically, racially, politically — that occupies

my reflections and analyses.

It is not the very obvious and dramatic changes in the institutional environment that I will dwell on — after all, my presentation to you in this place, today, would not have been possible about 10 years ago.

What intrigues me are the continuities: the obstinate character of institutional culture, the staid patterns of academic and administrative behaviour and the disease that continues to bedevil race relations. Yet I pose the question not in the politically shallow sense of betraying non-change, but in the intellectual sense of understanding continuities with the institutional past.

Unlike the other Afrikaans universities (such as the old Potchefstroom and Stellenbosch), the University of Pretoria is forced to change dramatically by virtue of three factors. First, located in the diplomatic capital of the continent, the institution is caught within the fervent cross-currents of national and global cultures, languages and religions. It is shedding, overnight, its character as a traditional Afrikaans-dominant institution.

Second, the growing urban and cosmopolitan student base has altered the most sensitive political and cultural powder keg in these institutions, namely the Afrikaans language. For the first time, the dominant home language of the almost half of the more than 40 000 students is not Afrikaans; more intriguing, though, is the fact that most students now prefer their instruction in English.

For the students from Afrikaans homes this is a simple and practical decision based on part-perception and part-reality. The perception is that white graduates are likely to be marginalised in the domestic economy in favour of affirmative action, and that English would therefore

enhance the portability of their skills beyond South Africa; the reality is the unprecedented mobility of professional labour under conditions of globalisation — something that white graduates (English and Afrikaans) are more likely to take up than black graduates.

Third, sitting under the watchful eyes of the Union Buildings, enjoying less Afrikaans-empathy from the ruling elite than Stellenbosch, engulfed by a host of national bureaucracies that seek "compliance" with policies claiming transformation, and entrapped in an institutional culture that readily yields to state power (any state, for that matter), the University of Pretoria is forced to change — and change at pace.

And so at first glance, the University of Pretoria looks very different from anything imaginable 10 years ago. There are several black men in the senior management of the institution. The senior management meetings are now almost exclusively conducted in English. Few would have noticed the fact that at the 2005 opening and welcoming ceremonies on the various campuses, the Christian Bible and Christian prayers were, for the first time, not imposed on the diverse audiences attending these events.

Last year the president of the SRC was a woman, two of the faculties are led by women deans, and the powerful position of head of human resources is also occupied by a woman. Also for the first time, the chairperson of the university council, the most senior governance authority in the institution, is a woman with significant professional and academic achievements. In an institution with serious attachments to patriarchy, such appointments are not inconsequential.

But the most radical changes are

Source: WEEKLY MAIL AND GUARDIAN Date: 25-Aug-2005

Topic: 25

Ref No: 4536



1

ID: 03255070-02

Source Page: 10

happening from the ground up, and despite institutional directive. The most obvious in this case is the last front of institutional culture — the residences. In these hotbeds of cultural preservation there is a silent revolution under way.

Consider the following event at one of the residences during early February. The first-year male students stood for what seemed forever, feet apart, in serious military pose as they were roundly instructed and routinely insulted by the senior male, white, Afrikaans leaders walking among these rows of freshmen speaking Afrikaans, mainly, and making sure that these willing conscripts knew their place in the institutional culture relative to these alpha males.

They were instructed to sit down, eventually, and listen to the invited speaker. I proceeded to explain the differences between a university and a prison, and encouraged them to defy this military zone through original and creative thinking. The alpha males were clearly annoyed. They had no choice but to thank me as guest speaker, but then the kingpin, to counter my speech about their imagined differences, offered the freshmen some insightful advice: "*Menere, ek is 'n Afrikaner; en 'n Afrikaner is nie 'n Engelsman nie* [Gentlemen. I am an Afrikaner; and an Afrikaner is not an Englishman]."

I then moved to a women's residence to deliver a welcoming address to the first-year students, which I recall as follows. The first-year women students stood to attention in identical clothing uttering identical mantras about residence culture. The clapped hands rhythmically, received announcements in Afrikaans, and were duly informed about the *bok jol* (party) later that evening with one of the male residences.

Then something really strange happened: on hearing this announcement, as if on cue, they all replied: "*Dankie, mej Yolandi van der Merwe* [Thank you, Mrs Yolandi van der Merwe]." They were then instructed about the dress code for the *bok jol* and neatly filed out of the room.

What these two vignettes do not reveal is who exactly was in the audience, and who (at least in the case of the women's residence) constituted the leadership. To begin with, the stu-

dents in these residences were decidedly diverse in terms of race, religion and language — including international students. They no longer represent a decisive majority from the traditional white, Afrikaans-medium schools. These students come from diverse traditions of private and public schooling in national and international contexts.

To many (though certainly not all) of them, the militarised performance of traditional rituals and the Afrikaans-medium of communication were as bizarre as they were anachronistic. Even more significant, the student leadership now included — whether by quota or by choice — a visible black leadership voice which, again, included non-traditional and non-Afrikaans experiences.

And it is at this critical juncture that the residence culture is being changed; another way of putting this is that the "tipping point" has been reached — one in which an Afrikaans dominant white culture has been decisively challenged, if not transformed, by a more cosmopolitan undergraduate student culture.

The dislocation for traditional students and traditional student leadership is painful to observe: and unless there is an academic and residence leadership that demonstrates to the traditional student leadership that there are other ways of building loyalty to the *koshuis* (residence) and bonding among members, the Afrikaans students will be left stranded and disillusioned — and for a few with a poisonous dose of inherited white nationalism, this will create the inevitable cultural pressures that lead to public acts of provocation such as the painting of the Vierkleur on university walls and the circulation of *Jou Pa* (Your father) Valentine chocolates (depicting Paul Kruger) to black members of staff.

And yet, on closer inspection, the continuities of culture, behaviour and symbolism are more powerfully visible than any changes that

might be observed. The entire academic senior management consists exclusively of men; six of the eight deans are men; the institution has appointed more white men since 1996 than any other category of appointment — despite the commitments made to employment equity; the university choirs remain largely (and voluntarily) segregated by race and repertoire; the institutional emblem remains a partial representation of the rich diversity that composes the student (and to a lesser extent, the staffing) demography — surely the oxwagon cannot remain as the exclusive symbolic reference of who constitutes this campus?

The social patterns of interaction among staff and students are still rigidly segregated by race and, around key events, by gender. The art, library and museum collections are distinctively white and European, with occasional "special" exhibitions that fleetingly acknowledge others. The administration of routine functions — personnel, finance, facilities, security — are deeply embedded in a *staatsdiens* (state service) mentality that values compliance over consensus, authority over logic, hierarchy over democracy, rank over reason, and coercion over compromise.

This is the principal reason why it is so difficult to market an otherwise impressive institution — the constituent parts contradict each other, loudly, in the public domain.

And this is also the main reason why the incorporation of the Mamelodi campus of the former Vista University is a challenge not so much in terms of physical and financial *inlyfing* (incorporation) but in terms of cultural and political *inlyfing*.

One way of understanding the spectacular upheavals on the main campus when black youth trashed the institution, attacked some of the students and wandered off the orderly path of protest planned and approved in advance, is to argue (with some legitimacy) that the mergers and incorporation completely underestimated the cultural,

Source: WEEKLY MAIL AND GUARDIAN Date: 25-Aug-2005

Topic: 25

Ref No: 4536



1

ID: 03255070-03 Source Page: 10

social, economic and political terms of incorporation.

Another way of understanding this problem is that the institution itself underestimated the complexity of incorporation — preferring to deal with the administrative and programmatic details of incorporation rather than cultural and political dimensions of this process; both positions would constitute, in my view, fair criticism.

The incorporation faces its most stark challenge in the sense that the two cultures both present undesirable entities. The Pretoria culture, as described, is still largely untransformed in terms of its cultural, symbolic and social make-up. While there is undeniably a strong managerial culture that allows it to balance budgets and forecast enrolments with alacrity, there remains an underlying social culture that continues to alienate and antagonise newcomers. There is no other way of meeting the challenges of change without addressing both dilemmas simultaneously.

The University of Pretoria has a strong, predictable and fair policy that applies to students in financial need — black and white. But it also has a strong, predictable and fair policy that applies to students who fail in their academic programme.

If you pass and find yourself in financial need, the institution generally finds ways of supporting deserving students. If you fail and have the added problem of financial need, the institution (as with the National Student Financial Aid Scheme) denies the student further academic participation. This is consistent institutional behaviour among universities anywhere in the world, including those whose societies struggle with inequalities of all kinds.

This is where the Mamelodi campus represents a conundrum to University of Pretoria managers. As with many other black campuses, the Mamelodi campus had, over time, become a veritable social wel-

fare net for all kinds of students — both academically failing students and financially needy students. The combination of the two problems constitutes the hub of the problem. To understand why this problem is significant for future change, it is important to recognise clear cycles of behaviour on these campuses.

The academic year begins. The students who do not qualify for readmission — on the basis of failure to pass and failure to pay — begin to protest on campus, disrupt campus life, and beat down weak management to the point that all sorts of concessions are made to allow students back in — irrespective of performance or payment.

The year then continues, students fail again, and once more all sorts of concessions are made in response to demands for multiple examinations granting students two, three or more opportunities to pass a single examination in a module. The failing students begin, again, to make a new round of demands. This time, achieving a percentage point of 47%, 48% or 49% (rather than the required 50%) becomes the target of protest: an automatic condonment is demanded — after all, such marks (actually, percentages) are so close to 50 that anyone denying a leap to the official minimum pass cannot be anything else than a tantalising racist who brings black students so close only to fail them.

The management relents, and a small group of students slides through to the next academic year. Then the cycle starts all over again with another round of protests and demands for re-admission irrespective of academic performance and capacity to pay.

What had happened in the meantime is that a pattern of institutional behaviour had become entrenched to the point that any efforts to interrupt such corrupt, unethical and dishonest educational practices would be met by a formidable force of resistance that, sadly, invokes the moral authority and political discourses of heroic struggles

in the past and, if that does not work, invokes that most debilitating of charges against the “white” academic manager or instructor — “racist”.

And this is exactly what the University of Pretoria faces with the incorporation of the Mamelodi campus: a student culture that balks at the idea that academic performance matters, and that performance counts (alongside financial need) in making assessments of who qualifies for initial or continuing financial support.

Again, if the problem were simply a matter of meeting the financial needs of otherwise promising and performing students, there would be no protests, since I know of no faculty that has not run serious financial risks in finding the resources to support needy but deserving students.

It is the fact that the visible face of protest, and indeed the written demands of the student leaders, demand admission irrespective of academic performance or the ability to pay, that defines the challenge.

And this is where the University of Pretoria faces its biggest crisis: if it makes political concessions on the academic mandate of the institution, then the university has no future since it would simply have incorporated a campus culture and transferred a cycle of student behaviour that would recur on the basis of what students would regard as a moral victory.

Put differently, what the students are testing is the resolve of the institution to institute on all its campuses a strong and unrelenting model of academic merit and mission.

What makes the University of Pretoria vulnerable, however, is precisely the substance and symbols of continuity in the face of such challenges by black students, albeit a minority of disaffected youth: For what the challenge of the student protests did was to throw the proverbial spanner in the works of an orderly, well-maintained,

Source: WEEKLY MAIL AND GUARDIAN Date: 25-Aug-2005

Topic: 25

Ref No: 4536



1

ID: 03255070-04 Source Page: 10

predictable, stable and rule-bound institutional culture. And what the spanner of protest uncovered was not pretty.

In what must rank as one of the most poetic descriptions of campus politics at the University of Pretoria, the following event was narrated by several observers. As the black students marched through and trashed the campus, a group of about 200 khaki-clad white men appeared out of nowhere and marched in step-wise military formation in "defence" of the campus. They locked arms in the symbolic pretense of "protecting" the campus and heartily delivered their rendition of the apartheid *Stem* — "*Uit die blou van onse hemel...*"

The leader of the SRC reports, with some emotion, that when this event happened, for the first time students felt safe in the face of the failure (he claims) of campus security. I must say, parenthetically, that I wonder how a neutral black student witnessing this military display of white power could feel "safe" or "safer" under the circumstances.

But the point I wish to make is that we would never have known that such a grouping existed and that such racially provocative confrontation was even possible behind the otherwise calm exterior of campus life. Yet it is this image of the University of Pretoria that convinces outsiders and insiders that there are unspoken and unaddressed behaviours that remain powerfully concealed behind the glib managerialism that treats racial headcounts as evidence of change.

The university is made vulnerable by the fact that its campus politics remains organised along party political structures that have their origins outside of the campus. There is now clear evidence that the campus political organisations, like the Freedom Front, are directly connected to — if not instructed by — their parent organisations outside of the campus.

When the white student organisations run their annual election cam-

paigns with the most provocative racist and sexist poster demonstrations, it reinforces in the minds of the broader public an image of UP as a retrograde, stubborn culture that shuns transformation. When the Freedom Front Plus (FF+) therefore wins the student elections — largely because of low student turnout and provocative advertising — the media has a field day exploiting the image of UP as a place where hardline, white conservatives remain *baas* (boss) of the Tukkies *plaas* (farm).

What does this mean for the future of the University of Pretoria? At the heart of this struggle for change lies a deeper question about what kind of university Pretoria wishes to be. I believe that it must insist on being a world-class research university built on a curriculum (especially in the humanities, social sciences and education) and a culture that are unashamedly global, inclusive and competitive in its orientation towards the pressing problems of national, regional and continental development.

To attain this status, the university leadership has to overcome the problem of white guilt (towards black students) and racial timidity (towards white students). In the former case, Tukkies has to transform itself through an unashamed recruitment of only the most promising and the most talented black students throughout South Africa (and beyond); this means stating clearly that the University of Pretoria will not bow to demands to regurgitate Bantu Education on any of our campuses — black students deserve the same high quality of

The university leadership has to overcome the problem of white guilt (towards black students) and racial timidity (towards white students)

education as any other student.

And this means that academic performance and potential (in the case of new students) alone should become the basis for financial or academic support. This must not be negotiable.

In the latter case, Tukkies has to immediately dismantle the structures and symbols that enable racial provocation and racial exclusiveness to persist. This means changing the content of the public displays of institutional tradition and accelerating the appointment of leading black and women intellectuals and leaders at all levels of the institution — but especially in the middle levels of academic appointment (professors, heads of department, lecturers) and in the lower levels of university administration (secretaries, administrators). It will mean dissolving student organisation on the basis of external political party structures and enabling student organisation that takes place on a more inclusive basis.

In both cases, the respective message has to be delivered early and presented clearly to student constituencies. To be sure, there might very well be some fallout in the public stakes, but I believe that this will be minimal and that it will "come to pass".

But this cannot be done without the credibility of institutional leadership. It is very clear to me that the overwhelming majority of students at Tukkies, black and white, are ready for clear-speak and for immediate action; they are less impressed with voluminous statements of "values."

Most Pretoria students and parents of all complexions are less concerned with the mere political positioning of the campus and deeply concerned that the quality of education is absolutely world-class in character, content and delivery. And that is the common ground on which the future of the university can be secured — for both black and white students.

Professor Jonathan Jansen is dean of education at the University of Pretoria. He presented this paper to the university's Interdisciplinary Seminar Series in February