How university academics respond to the introduction of new quality policies in
South African higher education

Vanessa Brown

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR (PhD)

in

EDUCATION POLICY STUDIES

Department of Education Management and Policy Studies

University of Pretoria, South Africa

Supervisor: Professor V. Pillay

September 2010

© University of Pretoria
ABSTRACT

This study explores the consequences for a historically black university (HBU) of the South African state’s focus on routine and strategic quality evaluation within a policy framework that views higher education as a lever for social change and economic development. It analyses the changing nature of academic work and probes the motivations and understandings of institutional managers and academics in an attempt to explain their responses to policy requirements.

The theory of the Evaluative State is employed to examine the nature and consequences of overzealous responsiveness by a historically black university in transition in South Africa. It suggests that the changing relationship between state and university is characterised by contradictions and ambivalence, a result of the interplay between a strong sense of loyalty to the state on the one hand and a recognition of the failure of the state to recognise and reward achievements valued by the HBU. This study suggests that state steering, through the use of output evaluation and efficiency-directed performance indicators, has resulted in failure to achieve central policy goals of development, equity and social justice.

The study is guided by one main research question: How do academics in a historically black South African university in transition engage with and implement internal and external quality assurance processes and policies?

The literature review reveals significant gaps in understanding the consequences of the rise of the Evaluative State in higher education. A major limitation has been a lack of focus on higher education systems in developing countries and on the consequences of imposing neo-liberal frameworks upon local realities which require redress to remedy historically constructed economic and social disadvantage.

The descriptions of academics and institutional managers that emerge in this study highlight stark differences between the two groups in perceptions of and approaches to quality improvement and university work. Significantly, institutional history, context and mission emerge as strong factors shaping academics’ and managers’ responses to change, factors that have largely been disregarded by state policy which focuses more on output achievement than on input variables.
Key words:

1. Quality
2. Evaluative State
3. Quality evaluation
4. Quality assurance
5. Audit culture
6. Performativity
7. Managerialism
8. Performance indicators
9. Historically disadvantaged universities
10. Academics’ responses
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

-------------------------------------------------

Vanessa Brown

21st day of September 2010
For KELLY-EVE, CLIO and KEENO
Completing this thesis would not have been possible without the help and support of so many people, whose perfectly-timed acts of kindness helped me through difficult moments. Special thanks to:

1. My children, Kelly-Eve, Clio and Keeno, for being tolerant of my absences and preoccupation with this dissertation.

2. My family, especially my parents, Ivan and Ruth, who made it possible for me to devote endless time and energy to this task.

3. Venitha Pillay, who rescued this project and supervised it with compassion and exceptional skill.

4. Valencia, Charmaine and Peter for their generous friendship and much-needed emotional support.

5. Joy Papier, long-time friend, who understood the challenges of this journey and was able to anticipate my needs at critical moments.

6. Sharman Wickham, for her wisdom and intellectual support, and for sharing her research experience and knowledge with me.

7. Lorna Holtman and the PET project at UWC, for making available high quality research training and mentoring.

8. Ramesh Bharuthram, who provided critical resources, including space and time, when I needed them most.

9. The Sisters of Schoenstatt for offering me a tranquil retreat, a place to think and write.

10. John Kench, for editing with intelligence and understanding.

The academics and senior staff members at UWC who participated in this research, for offering their time and sharing their experiences and thoughts so willingly and freely.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter One</th>
<th>Approaching the study</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two</td>
<td>Describing the context</td>
<td>12-42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three</td>
<td>Presenting the Argument</td>
<td>43-81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four</td>
<td>Controlling for quality through design</td>
<td>82-106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five</td>
<td>Reporting on the findings (1)</td>
<td>107-133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six</td>
<td>Reporting on the findings (2)</td>
<td>134-174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Seven</td>
<td>Communicating the findings</td>
<td>175-201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A</td>
<td>Interview protocol: Academics</td>
<td>202-203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B</td>
<td>Interview protocol: Institutional managers</td>
<td>204-205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td></td>
<td>206-223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>