CHAPTER ONE

Approaching the study

1.1   Overview

This is a case study of a South African university in transition, from a historically disadvantaged and black university to a research-led institution, re-inventing itself as an institution of exceptional quality. It also explores another transition, in which the University evolved from an institution noted for its brave adversarial stance against state intervention during the apartheid era, to one which has shown itself eager to support the transformation and steering efforts of the post-apartheid state.

The study proposes that in order to understand the University of the Western Cape's shifting position, it is necessary to theorise the changing relationship between higher education and the post-apartheid state in South Africa, in which higher education has come to be regarded as a powerful instrument for economic development and social change. I argue further that the University's positive response to the demands of the post-apartheid state is mediated by its vulnerability, its close identification with the state's political goals, and its desire to claim advantage over its competitors.

In particular, I investigate the contestation between academics, state policy and university managers regarding different views of quality and the role of the state with regard to higher education. My study seeks to understand the role and impact of the Evaluative State on institutional change at UWC. I also explore the experiences of academics at this university, as they face new stresses and strains relating to their university's transition and the transformation demands of the post-apartheid state.

My central proposition is that academics' beliefs about quality are linked to both their views of the purpose of higher education and their beliefs about what the relationship between the state and the universities ought to be. I argue that, as the post-apartheid state begins to resemble the Evaluative State, it encounters different responses. It meets resistance from those academics who favour different models of state control, but acceptance from those who support the emergence of the Evaluative State, with its focus on quality seen as value for money, efficiency and fitness for purpose.

1.2   Research questions

The study will focus on the following 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 following sub-questions will guide the study:

- How do academics' views of quality differ from those embedded in state policy and those promoted by university managers?

- How do these competing conceptions of quality relate to academics' attitudes towards the implementation of quality assurance policy and practices?

- To what extent does the state's focus on routine and strategic quality evaluation engender tension and conflict between and amongst academics and university managers?

1.3   Rationale for this research

I have worked at the University of the Western Cape for 20 years. During this time I have experienced life as an academic, working in the Faculty of Education during the period 1988-1998, as a senior administrator involved in internal reviews of academic departments for eight years, and more recently as assistant to the Vice-Rector.

My experience at UWC began during the heady days of the anti-apartheid struggle. I was recruited after being arrested and imprisoned for a few months, a consequence of my activism as a high school teacher and member of a local teachers' union. This was a time when our fiery Rector, Jakes Gerwel, began actively staffing the University with ultra left-leaning academics, who may have lacked higher education experience and postgraduate degrees, but who had demonstrated a commitment to transforming schooling and education through various forms of anti-apartheid struggle. I began my career as an academic in the Education Faculty, with a four-year undergraduate degree and a teaching qualification.

My work in the Academic Planning Unit in later years (2001-2008) involved conducting internal quality reviews of academic departments. During this time, I participated in the reviews of 28 out of 35 UWC departments, across all seven faculties. These departmental reviews were mainly conducted on a rotational basis, although there were instances when departments were selected for reviews when Deans or senior university managers believed that a particular problem or set of quality problems needed to be investigated. The reviews attempted to evaluate the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, the degree of student satisfaction, and the effectiveness of departmental leadership and management.

With very few exceptions, the academics regarded these reviews with apprehension, fear, resentment and anger. Reviewed departments seemed excessively concerned about the possible consequences close scrutiny could have on their status in the university, on the resources they might be able to rely on in the future, and even on their continued existence as academic entities. Past experience of down-sizing through academic staff retrenchments (1997) and the closure of the University's Music Department (2000) following a review, were etched into the institutional memory; this ghost of the past, I believe, drove academics' insecurities, fears and anxieties regarding the evaluation dimension of departmental reviews.

Furthermore, the review teams, appointed by a Senate committee and approved by senior management, for their part seemed unaware that focusing significantly, although not exclusively, on quality as value for money and efficiency through the use of indicators like staffing costs, pass rates and throughput, had the potential to ignite simmering tensions and exacerbate conflict in the university. Reviews often left academics feeling misunderstood and unappreciated, believing that these quality evaluations failed to focus sufficiently on their achievements and on the aspects of teaching, learning and research quality that they valued most. In an extreme case, the head of a department resigned after a less-than-positive departmental review report was released.

These observations led me to a number of critical questions. How was one to understand a situation in which academics and management responded so differently to the needs and demands of quality assurance, and thought so differently about quality that it appeared they occupied two different worlds within the same university? How were these contending conceptions of quality to be understood and explained?

Having experienced the extent of academics' fear and negativity about internal quality reviews, I did not find it hard to imagine that the introduction of external quality evaluations by the post-apartheid government would stimulate even more intense conflict and contestation in the relationship between academics and institutional managers, and between these stakeholders and the state.

By 2001, seven years into the post-apartheid era, higher education policy suggested that the Ministry of Education wished to adopt a much more controlling role over the affairs of higher education institutions. This included using a new institutional funding framework, together with programme accreditation and external audits, as tools to ensure institutional compliance with state policy (DOE, 2001). It is conceivable that as higher education provision and the assurance of the quality of that provision became more tightly controlled and monitored by these external agencies, so opposition amongst academics and other institutional stakeholders grew and became more widespread.

This research examines the responses of academics to the new quality policy in South African universities, in order to illustrate how different conceptualisations of quality result in struggle and conflict around the evaluation of quality. The research literature has tended to focus on universities in politically stable systems, such as those in the United Kingdom and New Zealand. I am interested in exploring quality issues in the context of both social transition and political transformation, and in the major structural upheavals designed to change the nature and shape of higher education provision in South Africa.

1.4   Background to the study

What is quality in higher education? How do we know it when we see it? What happens when people look for quality in different places? And why is it that so many academics all over the world seem to resent the implementation of quality assurance policies in their universities? My research sets out to understand how academics think about and deal with quality issues, and how their views differ from the university management's orientation towards quality. It will explore the ways academics understand quality and will examine their responses and attitudes to the evaluation of quality in teaching and in research.

There is considerable disagreement amongst those interested in these issues, to the extent that it is impossible to imagine a common definition of quality (Doherty, 1994; Harvey and Green, 1993; Vroeijenstijn, 1995). It has also been argued that controversies about quality are rooted in conflict about the nature and purposes of higher education (Barnett, 1990). In this view, it is necessary to first uncover what people believe universities are for, in order to understand how they define quality.

Yet another view accepts that different understandings of quality arise simply from people holding different opinions and that quality is essentially a relative concept, meaning different things to different people (Harvey and Green, 1993). This argument holds that quality is a stakeholder-relative concept, with different interest groups holding different views of quality, depending on what their priorities are for higher education (Newton, 2007; Harvey and Green, 1993).

It is not difficult to imagine that these multiple views and definitions of quality could give rise to conflict and power struggles, as different positions demand to be taken into account in quality processes and policies (Tam, 2001). These struggles manifest as resentment and resistance, which invariably show up in quality evaluations and monitoring processes.

Competing views of quality exist within higher education in South Africa. University management and the state appear to favour a model of quality where the emphasis is on the achievement of value for money through the efficient use of resources. Academics on the ground counter this by arguing that this kind of efficiency really means doing more with less, which inevitably results in compromising on the quality of teaching, learning and research.

Little research has been done into the conceptions academics hold of quality, and those studies which do exist have attempted to slot these differences into the mainstream five definitions of quality offered by Harvey and Green. What other notions might there be? And what is the impact on implementation of quality policy of contestations between these ideological positions?

Responses from academics to the imposition of new quality regimes have been described in negative ways. Studies by Halsey (1992), Kinman and Jones (2003) and many other writers have identified a 'sense of loss' (Bundy, 2005, p.89) amongst academics.

Trow (1989) has described academics as being rendered powerless by their position in a rapidly changing higher education landscape. My own experience in a university, however, has revealed the opposite. Rather than surrendering and behaving passively, academics have demonstrated various forms of active engagement with quality policies, ranging from acceptance and adaptation to resistance, and from compliance to internalisation (Trowler, 1997).

My research therefore extends the existing literature by examining whether the earlier sense of despair and hopelessness, dominant in empirical research in America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand a decade ago, pervades South African universities at this time. Have working conditions changed so severely for South African academics as well? And to what extent have demands for greater accountability, efficiency and quality led to similar levels of job dissatisfaction, work stress and low morale?

1.5   Significance of the research

Sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases – not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something (Eysenck, 1976: 9).

My research examines the beliefs and points of view of academics - the practitioners in higher education who are responsible for implementing quality assurance policies. This research signals an attempt to understand the reality of policy demands and the impact of these on academics' lives as the South African state proceeds with its ambitious transformation of the higher education sector.

The disjuncture between policy and implementation has been widely researched (Fullan, 1998; Ball, 1993; Jansen, 2001a, 2001b; Street, 2001; Sutton & Levinson, 2001). Policy implementation research has shown that policy is more likely to be successfully implemented when it takes account of practitioners' values and beliefs; conversely, change is least likely to result from policy implementation when practitioners' beliefs are assumed or only partially understood.

While this theory of policy change is widely understood and accepted, there has been little emphasis in previous empirical research on uncovering and understanding the beliefs and behaviours of academics as practitioners and implementers of policy. This is an area in which I believe my study will be helpful.

My research will provide an in-depth analysis of a single university engaging in the complex process of transforming itself in accordance with both externally and internally devised policy goals. There is much to be learned from case study research which attempts to understand complex phenomona while generating rich descriptions, through which existing theory can be examined and new theory constructed.

1.6   South Africa's challenges

South Africa, like the rest of Africa, lags behind the world's nations in critical areas of science and technological progress and innovation. International statistics continue to show that the prevalence of malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS in Africa and South Africa outstrips the rest of the world, while enrolment in primary, secondary and higher education lags far behind other nations. The country's global share of new patents is minimal; in particular, the failure to provide telephone lines to facilitate global communication continues to haunt South Africa.

In terms of global Research & Development (R&D) expenditure, at 0.95% of GDP, South Africa trails far behind the OECD's GDP average of 2.26 in 2005. Planned growth took this percentage to 1% for South Africa in 2009, but the HSRC predicted in 2006 that South Africa would need to increase the number of researchers with doctoral degrees by 6000 by 2010 in order to create a R&D workforce capable of utilising the country's R&D budget of 1% of GDP. South Africa produces only 1 doctoral degree for every 500 students who enter higher education, and boasts a scant 23 doctorates per million of the population, compared with Brazil (43), the USA (140) and South Korea (157).

South Africa's world share of ISI (Institute for Scientific Information) publications declined from 0.79 in 1987 to 0.53 in 2006; when allowance is made for non-ISI (non-science) publications, these figures show stagnation in the country's world share during this period (Jeenah and Pouris, 2008).

These are some of the sobering national challenges facing the higher education system in South Africa. The universities have been charged with the responsibility of producing and reproducing knowledge, of growing the highly-skilled workforce the country requires to enhance its research and development capacity, in the interest of addressing the serious economic and social challenges.

The state's response to this national skills and knowledge crisis has been direct and forthright. The National Plan for Higher Education (DOE, 2001) has focused on the need to build high-level research capacity to address the research and knowledge needs of the country. State expectations are high: an increase in participation rates from 15% in 2001 to 20% in 2010 is desired; increased enrolments and graduate success in Science, Engineering and Technology are expected and an increase in the numbers of Doctoral and Masters graduates in the country is sought. It is expected that universities will respond quickly and decisively, to deliver immediate results on these key indicators.

South Africa in 2010 continues to face serious skills shortages which will require a significant increase in the production of highly skilled individuals in areas such as engineering, while graduate unemployment, especially amongst blacks, is on the increase (CHE, 2009). The state's Department of Higher Education is understandably frustrated at this persistent mismatch, more than ten years after launching intense efforts to address the serious gaps between the skills needs of the economy and the expertise of the universities' graduates. Sectors such as engineering, for example, continue to experience huge skills shortages.

The University of the Western Cape, the focus of this case study, has demonstrated a significant degree of responsiveness in addressing these national needs and challenges. With its roots as a historically black and disadvantaged university, it was created by the apartheid state for 'coloured' persons who were never expected to excel in areas other than those the state determined or those required by the development trajectories of their own communities. Its students were expected to provide the human resource needs of the coloured administration, together with the development needs of the coloured community as teachers, preachers, nurses and social workers. The University of the Western Cape was not designed and structured to engage in research, nor was it intended to produce highly skilled graduates in the fields of science, technology, engineering, medicine, business or commerce.

Yet by 2009, UWC had transformed itself to the extent that it graduated the largest number of black dentists and pharmacists in the country; it had moved its enrolment away from an overwhelming dominance of human and social sciences in 1995 to achieve the national target of 30% in the areas of science and technology in 2008.

This study investigates the relationship between the post-apartheid state and this particular University, characterised by zealous responsiveness and committed transformation efforts directed at becoming a university of exceptional quality. It further considers the gains that this change and transformation have wrought, the losses and sacrifices that have had to be endured, and investigates the ways in which academics on the ground have perceived and experienced the stance of their institution towards the state's demands, challenges and agenda for change.

All statistics for section 1.5 are from the NACI Annual Reports (2003-2004; 2005-2006) and DST/HSRC National Survey of Research and Experimental Development (R&D) (2005-2006; 2006-2007). Other references for section 1.5 are from NRF annual reports, CHE studies and DOE/DHET HEMIS data, and UWC's own records.

1.7   Organisation of the thesis

Atkins and Sampson (2002) present a conceptual framework for understanding the process of case study research, which was first proposed by Bronts et al (1995). I have found this to be a useful way of defining the case study process, presenting the case study in the form of a dissertation, as well as being a guide to ensuring a good quality process.

I have borrowed from and adapted the original framework, which incorporates ways of thinking, of controlling, of working, of supporting and of communication, to develop the presentation in the following way:

In Chapter One, Approaching the study, I provide a brief overview of the study and an outline of the thesis, which describes the focus of subsequent chapters. This chapter gives the background, rationale and significance of the study and presents the research question and its sub-questions. I also locate the study within the context of the local and global challenges facing South Africa.

In Chapter Two, <u>Describing the case</u>, I provide a description of the institutional context of the case study and examine the impact of policy in higher education in the apartheid and the post-apartheid eras on a historically disadvantaged, historically black university, the University of the Western Cape.

Chapter Three, <u>Presenting the argument</u>, consists of a comprehensive literature review that summarizes the research around key concepts such as quality in higher education and the role of the state in higher education provision. This chapter also describes the theoretical framework that guides both the research and the analysis of evidence.

In Chapter Four, <u>Controlling for quality through design</u>, I present the research design and methodology. I provide information on the data collection processes and describe a framework for the analysis of the data. The case study protocol and descriptions of tests and techniques to be applied to enhance reliability and credibility are also presented in this chapter.

Chapter Five, <u>Examining the evidence: Part 1</u>, introduces the evidence and presents the findings of the study regarding different views of quality and quality improvement amongst academics and institutional managers at the University of the Western Cape, by investigating patterns and connections emerging through analysis of the data. One key finding is that academics' largely prefer a view of quality which links transformation and fitness for purpose, while institutional managers espouse a view of quality as efficiency and value for money.

Chapter Six, <u>Examining the evidence: Part 11</u>, introduces the evidence and presents the findings of the study regarding the beliefs and actions of academics in the context of their implementation of both internal and external quality assurance policies. A major finding is that academics' behaviour towards the implementation of quality assurance policies reflects refusal and resistance, game-playing and compliance.

In Chapter Seven, <u>Communicating the findings</u>, I analyse four central findings in a coherent way, while presenting a synthesis of them to the research community. First, the imperatives driving transition Cape conflict with notions of quality espoused by the Evaluative State, leading to ambivalence as overzealous responsiveness encounters intransigence.

Second, academics' loyalty to the state's agenda for social change is severely challenged by their disappointment that the state's quality evaluation system is unable to address and evaluate their work with disadvantaged students. Third, quality assurance practices adopted at UWC in the interest of accountability result in an increase in monitoring performance rather than an improvement in quality. Fourth, there is contestation between managers' accountability to the Evaluative State and academics' accountability to student success, expressed in contestation around institutional mission