20 Years of higher education curriculum policy in South Africa

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Abstract

This article revisits teaching and learning policy in South African higher education from the 1990s to the present, against the grain of the student revolt that started in 2015, in order to focus on curriculum. The paper distinguishes two moments within this period, one developed around the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) that concentrated on the structure and purpose of qualifications; the other starting around 2003 that focused on the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching and learning without regard for the curriculum. It argues that the overall policy choices made by the democratic government, together with the preoccupation and the reaction of academics to some of the underpinnings of the NQF, did not create the space for an investigation of knowledge and pedagogy in the curriculum that had sufficient range to talk about the transformation of the curriculum beyond the concern about responsiveness to national needs in relation to economic and developmental goals. If South African universities want to address the unrealised aspects of institutional transformation that students have been raising it is necessary to explore more carefully the relationship between curriculum, knowledge and identity.

Introduction

This article was written in the context of two very different events in the history of South African higher education. The first one was the commemoration of 20 years of democracy in the country and its manifestation in higher education. This created the space for the production of a series of reflective and evaluative papers on different aspects of higher education policy development and implementation. A good example of this type of reflective interventions is the volume produced by the Council in Higher Education (CHE) to mark the 20th anniversary of democracy in the sector, which gathered the writings of a number of specialists on South African higher education. The second event was almost the reverse of the first. It consisted of a student revolt that started at the University of Cape Town in

early 2015 and lasted until October/November 2016 as it extended to other universities and reached national scale with its epicentre at the University of the Witwatersrand in Gauteng. The revolt, which had different phases, took shape around what students regarded as the unfulfilled promises of higher education policy since 1997, with the greatest emphasis on the demand for free higher education (Booysen, 2016).

The celebration of the second decade of democracy generated reflections on the achievements and failures of the higher education system, and, in particular, provided a status report on South African higher education in the present. Its tone was at the same time evaluative and prospective, but it did not provide radical critiques of the shortcomings of existing polices or point out to gaps in policy development or implementation. The conversation stayed mainly within the institutional space whether universities or government, and the voices foregrounded were those of academic specialists in higher education. The second event spilled over from the formal space of the classroom to the open spaces of the university and off the campuses into the streets of the cities in which universities were located. The voices coming to the fore were angry in tone, and the media used to transmit the message was not the academic paper but a variety of representations outside the 'academic code' mostly sustained by the use of social media. The student revolt focused initially on the dissonance between a changing student population and universities stuck in a colonial frame both intellectually and aesthetically. It demanded the recognition of black students as black and the decolonisation of the institutional space, of pedagogies and curriculum (Godsell and Chikane, 2016). Soon enough the material reality of the majority of black students gained pride of place in the movement and the call for free education became a rallying cry that galvanised the movement nationally (Bond, 2016; Pillay, 2016). This article revisits teaching and learning policy in South African higher education from the 1990s to the present, against the grain of the student revolt, in order to focus on curriculum. It investigates what the higher education policy framework had to say about curriculum, and, in particular, curriculum transformation, and with what effect.

Given the focus of this article, it is essential to provide a working definition of curriculum to make clearer the main argument of the paper. Curriculum is the process of engagement of students and staff with knowledge, behaviour and identity in different disciplinary contexts. Here knowledge refers to the specialist professional or disciplinary knowledge that universities offer in a variety of combinations. It includes conflicting traditions, research

approaches, notions of method, focus, boundaries, etcetera, and more than anything else, contains the rules of making knowledge and sense in that particular discipline (Barnett and Coate, 2005).

With this definition as scaffolding, my argument is that during the early part of the period under review higher education policy was more interested in the exoskeleton of the curriculum, that is, the structure and purpose of qualifications as presented in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) than in the actual curriculum. After the first decade of democracy, in the context of poor system throughput at undergraduate level, the preoccupation with teaching and learning policy moved to focus on the efficiency of teaching and learning, leaving out once again the engagement with knowledge from the agenda of work. It is important to note that neither the CHE publication on the first decade of democracy (CHE, 2004), nor the twin volume celebrating the second decade (CHE, 2016) indicate any systemic, sectoral or institutional attempt at engaging with the transformation of higher education curriculum.

The paper concludes by arguing that the nature of the political settlement together with a trend to global isomorphism (Ozga and Lingard, 2007; Singh, 2011) in policy resulted in a particular choice of policy goals and priorities that did not encourage direct engagement with curriculum and pedagogy. This, in a context of deeply engrained institutional cultures, allowed for the continuation of largely unexamined curriculum and pedagogy at institutional level.

This does not mean that for 20 years the curriculum has been completely beyond the horizon of research or preoccupation in the higher education system in South Africa. On the contrary, issues of knowledge and curriculum have appeared in the context of the academic development movement, in the debate about mode one and mode two knowledge, and in the fleeting discussions about the Africanisation of the curriculum. In 2008 the Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions (known as the Soudien report), the work of which stemmed from the Minister's preoccupation with failed (or lack of) transformation at institutional level, raised the importance of curriculum transformation:

> It could be argued, given that the primary function of higher education is the production and transmission of knowledge, that epistemological transformation is at the heart of the

transformation agenda. And at the centre of epistemological transformation is curriculum reform – a reorientation away from the apartheid knowledge system, in which curriculum was used as a tool of exclusion, to a democratic curriculum that is inclusive of all human thought. (Department of Education (DoE), 2008: p.90)

Yet, I think it important to understand and to accept that even after the Soudien report, with exceptions already mentioned, there has been no serious engagement at institutional level with knowledge as epistemology, with knowledge as different frames of understanding, with knowledge as a necessary critique of knowledge, and with knowledge as creator of identity. It is my contention that the overall policy choices made by the democratic government, together with the preoccupation and the reaction of academics to some of the underpinnings of the NQF, did not create the space for any investigation of knowledge and pedagogy in the curriculum that had sufficient range to talk about the transformation of the curriculum beyond the concern about responsiveness to national needs in relation to economic and developmental goals.

This inevitably created an epistemological vicious circle in which lack of examination of curricula supported a lack of examination of institutional cultures, especially in relation to academic and student identity. If South African universities are to get anywhere in terms of addressing the unrealised aspects of institutional transformation that students and some staff are raising (Booysen, 2016; Nyamnjoh, 2016; Mbembe, 2015) it is necessary to explore more carefully the relationship between curriculum, knowledge and identity as currently they are being defined and see where universities stand in relation to these.

This article is organised based on a periodisation of policymaking in South Africa that was developed in 2014 with the objective to analyse governance and management in South African higher education between 1994 and 2014. The periodisation uses four analytical categories to examine any given period at system level. These are: focus, policy, instruments, and governance structure. Focus refers to the predominant object and purpose of a policy. Policy itself refers to the actual legislation or policy document that shapes the chosen priority. Instruments refers to the tools developed or established by the state for the purpose of policy implementation. Finally, governance refers to the structure responsible for the implementation of a specific policy that sits at the top of the accountability chain. This article will not make use of all of

these elements in the analysis, but it is important to understand what underpins the proposed periodisation (Lange & Luescher, 2016).

This article is organised into three sections and a conclusion. The first section covers the period 1990s–2001 and looks mostly at the implementation of the NQF, its impact on curriculum and the debates about knowledge that took place at the time. The second section focuses on the impact that the preoccupation with teaching and learning had on the debate about curriculum and it provides a detailed analysis of the CHE 2013 proposal for a flexible curriculum. The third section looks at the work of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) (2001–2015) as a crucial instrument in the implementation of a national system of quality assurance, and focuses especially on the role of the HEQC in relation to curriculum. From the point of view of the periodisation that organises this paper sections 2 and 3 fall within a period of heightened policy implementation and establishment of a strong systems of accountability (Lange & Luescher, 2016). In the conclusion I interpret some of the questions raised in the first part of the #FeesMustFall student movement in relation to the issue of curriculum, knowledge and identity in order to highlight the importance of engaging with these issues if transformation of knowledge and institutional cultures of South African public universities is to have a deeper dimension than the one we have observed up to now.

Access and democratisation: the ascendancy of the NQF, 1990s-2001

This period has as its main focus access, equity and redress. The policy frames that were produced with a view to addressing these objectives were the report of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) (1996), White Paper 3 (WP3) (1997), the Higher Education Act of 1997 and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act of 1995 that created the NQF. From the point of view of the policy instruments used at the time, there is no doubt that the NQF itself was a fundamental element in the realisation of notions of democratisation of knowledge and access to higher education institutions (HEIs). At the level of governance the Department of Education was responsible for all education in the country including higher education, while the Department of Labour was responsible for training and skills development outside higher education.

The evolution of the NQF over the full period under review, and particularly the immediate contestation that erupted between aspects of the NQF's and the HEIs' understanding of knowledge and qualifications, is a good example of the kind of tensions that accompanied the implementation of the NQF. The notion of the NQF itself posed contradictions between global trends and pressures and the local needs and realities of the South African education system (Allais, 2012). The democratisation of knowledge that was one of the main objectives of the NQF required, as Ensor has aptly put it, the breaking of three sets of boundaries "between education and training, between academic and everyday knowledge, and between different knowledges, subjects or disciplines within the academic domain" (Ensor, 2004a: p.340). Consistent with this, the initial purpose of the NQF architecture was to achieve outcomes-based qualifications independent from the institutions that delivered them.

The organisation of the NQF, based on stakeholder participation in standard setting across 12 domains and first eight and then 10 levels, never quite took place, but it certainly was underpinned by an understanding of knowledge that was not shared by the universities. Even if outcomes-based education did not touch higher education the impact of the NQF was definitely felt in the outer form that curriculum had to take (McKenna, 2016).

The overall intention of the NQF to democratise education and training was not politically isolated. The main documents framing the future education and training system in South Africa – the National Education Policy Investigation (1992); the ANC's 'A Policy Document for Education and Training' (1994) and the National Training Board's National Training Strategy Initiative (1994) – took as their point of departure the impact that the systematic lack of training and education among the working class had on economic development and democratisation. An educational system that had been designed to maintain racialised capitalist accumulation needed to be replaced by its opposite. The White Paper on Education and Training (1995) and, especially, the SAQA Act (1995) were supposed to bring about this necessary change.

Warnings about the implications of the suggested policy choices to respond to this problem were voiced as early as 1992 by Harold Wolpe, who, although understanding that "to educate and to equip the people with the skills to participate in the management of the economy (. . .) has become a matter of particular urgency", was also concerned that this was leading to "a

preoccupation with human resource development outside the context of political and economic development strategies" (Unterhalter, Wolpe and Botha, 1992, p.5).

As Ensor has argued, in all the documents prior to the constitution of the NCHE "there is the desire to steer South Africa through the high-skills high growth path of economic development" (Ensor, 2004b: p.180). Essential for this to happen was access to higher education for large numbers of young South Africans but also the possibility of training, and recognising the knowledge of the working class on the job. The ideal of 'from sweeper to engineer' permeated the debate about education and skills development in the country through the first decade of democracy.

Time was going to demonstrate that Wolpe's concern about political obfuscation was misplaced. This was not a moment of confusion but the setting out of a strategy that was to guide human resource development in the country for the next two decades (Bond, 2000; Hart, 2010 and 2013; Motala & Pampallis, 2001; Vally & Motala, 2014). Human capital theory ended up framing education and training policy in South Africa (See Allais, 2003 and 2012; Kraak, 2000 and 2008; Motala, Vally and Spreen, 2010). This choice prevented a direct and serious engagement with the relationship between curriculum and knowledge and displaced the conception of curriculum as process for a focus on outcomes and structure although, as already mentioned, higher education was not subjected to the crudest version of outcomes-based education.

It must be noted that far from being a South African problem, the displacement of knowledge for skills and the marketisation of higher education are a global trend studied by specialists in a variety of national settings (See Barnett, 1997 and Barnett & Coate, 2005, and Young, 2008 for the UK; Mollis, 2003; Coraggio and Vispo, 2001 for Latin America; Giroux and Giroux, 2004, and Brown, 2015 for the USA; Mamdani, 2007 for Uganda; Marginson, 2004a, 2004b for Australia, to name but a few. For a broader view see King, Marginson and Naidoo, 2011). Few works show as clearly this trend as the research report done by Allais, Raffe, Sthathdee, Wheelahan, and Young (2009) for the International Labour Organisation on the impact and effectiveness of national qualification frameworks in 17 countries (See also Allais, 2007). What in later work Allais (2014: p.xvii) calls the "intertwining of education and economy", that is the notion that education can solve social and economic problems such as unemployment,

has led to governments in many countries developing policy on qualifications reform, qualifications frameworks and outcomes-based education that were supposed to address issues such as unemployment and poverty.

The NQF was the chosen tool in South Africa to respond to the government's commitment to the democratisation of knowledge and the articulation between professional, formative and vocational knowledge. It was designed to respond to the desperate need for skills development among the majority of South Africa's population. The discussion about knowledge generated by the NQF revolved around the structure of knowledge in the professional, formative and vocational bands of the framework and the obstacles and objections to the realisation of the 'from sweeper to engineer' dream.

Underpinning the desire for high growth was an economic model that was as much influenced by globalisation as it was by the terms of the political settlement (Bond, 2000). Market liberalisation in a neo-liberal cast accompanied the democratisation process, shaping in more ways than one the terms of the debate between training and education. Added to this were the tensions between the ministries of education and of labour for the control of the NQF and its complicated architecture. Higher education's rejection of the first version of the NQF led to an independent investigation in 2001 which resulted down the line in the creation of a sub-framework for trades and occupations and in the development of the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) in 2008.[1]

The focus of the NCHE (1996) and the WP (1997) on teaching and learning and on curriculum specifically were shaped by the need to increase South Africa's ability to compete internationally by increasing the number of 'knowledge workers' and the concept of lifelong learning that would allow students vertical and horizontal mobility across the NQF. Both documents stressed the need for higher education programmes to be responsive to local and regional development challenges including labour market needs.

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[1]   This is not the place to expand on the history of the NQF; suffice it to say that political tensions both in the state bureaucracy and dissatisfaction with the NQF architecture and functioning accompanied the first decade of democracy including an independent investigation in 2001, the introduction of sub-frameworks in 2008 and a reorganisation of the bureaucracy in 2009. For a sharp and detailed critique of the NQF see Allais, 2014.

As I have argued elsewhere (Lange & Luescher, 2016), higher education policy during this period was particularly concerned with establishing a diagnosis of the state of the system, identifying values and principles to shape transformation. It is then unsurprising that policies lacked detail about how to implement the proposed solutions. This led to institutions interpreting policy frames by themselves. In the specific case of the introduction of programmes and modularisation there were a variety of institutional responses.

In particular, the introduction of programmes as different from qualifications with one or two majors translated into a conceptualisation of knowledge acquisition and 'transmission' that had different impacts at different institutions depending on a variety of elements from resources to the characteristics of the student body (Ensor, 2004a). This policy did not result in a focus squarely on knowledge and curriculum transformation but rather on a new structure for the curriculum.

As mentioned earlier, the policy frame did not impede debate about curriculum and knowledge, and, as it will be seen by the dates of publication, this debate has been more or less constant over two decades but, with few exceptions (development of the foundation and extended programmes), it did not influence policy. The topics of debate during the early period were knowledge, identity and curriculum transformation in Africa, introduced by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation (Cloete, Muller, Makgoba and Ekong, 1997), and the critiques of mode two knowledge presented in the work published by the Human Sciences Research Council (Kraak,2000). Topics of extensive debate were social constructivism, Bernstein's notions of knowledge, the role of language in knowledge acquisition and even at times what/whose knowledge was being prioritised (Ensor, 2003; Hall, 2009; Moore and Muller, 1999; Muller, Davies and Morais, 2009; SAUVCA, 2004; Young, 2008). These debates remained more or less within the circle of the academics dedicated to sociology of education and, from the point of view of curriculum transformation, it operated above the disciplines themselves. In this sense the debate did not filter down sufficiently to disciplines other than education. In this sense it can be said that neither did academics lead a discussion about curriculum transformation.

The argument in this section is not that a curricular review should have been led by government but that the policy choices made by government allowed for curriculum, as defined here, to remain unexamined. Institutions were struggling to modularise curriculum and translate syllabi to NQF speak. The

access, redress and democratisation sought in the policy were to existing knowledge, behaviour and identity but did not question the fundamental epistemologies and values underpinning this knowledge.

As we will see in the next section, policy development entered a new phase from 2001 in which the influence of human capital theory on the country's education and training policy framework was centred unequivocally on high-skills development. This per force left curriculum and the interrogation of disciplinary knowledge out of the policy equation.

Throughput and efficiency: the preoccupation with teaching and learning, 2001-2016

As can be seen this period comprises more than a decade and includes the creation of a separate minister and department for higher education and training in 2010. From the perspective of a system level analysis of higher education policy, the period until 2009 was characterised by a strong implementation drive including mergers and incorporations, the creation of tools to aid the realisation of policy objectives and a variety of initiatives to improve what were regarded as higher education inefficiencies and lack of delivery, especially in relation to the required graduates. The second part of the period, 2010–2016, saw an increase on the demands for accountability and reporting to government, the production of a new White Paper (2014) and major student protest around higher education fees (Lange and Luescher, 2016). All of this, as explained below, had a bearing on teaching and learning and therefore on curriculum.

Bridging the gap: the rediscovery of articulation and transition

By the 2000s institutions and the state knew much more about higher education performance through the data generated by the new management information system set up in the Higher Education Branch of the then Department of Education. A new funding framework and a national system of quality assurance were, together with planning, the acknowledged steering mechanisms of higher education policy. It was the combined effect of these instruments that added one more layer of complexity to the problem of access to higher education. It was not enough to increase the access of black students to higher education (the focus of the first period of policy development) if

they did not graduate on time or at all. Not only was this defeating the goals of the democratisation and redress but it was financially wasteful (Scott, Yeld and Hendricks, 2007). The notion that South African higher education was failing to meet its commitment to access, supported by the publication of the first cohort study of the 2000 student intake, rang alarm bells in both institutions and government. While it is true that the effectiveness of teaching and learning had been already a focus of the academic development movement, the expansion of the higher education system created a problem of both scale and funding. It is important to remember that until the establishment of the Teaching Development Grant most academic development programmes were externally funded or remained on the fringes of HEIs (Walker, 1984; Boughey, 2007).

It was at this stage that the preoccupation with the effectiveness and efficiency of the higher education system shifted its gaze to teaching and learning to discover that success rates were poor and that extra support was needed for students to be successful in bridging the articulation gap between schooling and higher education. The solution for this conundrum was sought in the domain of teaching and learning where extended programmes were introduced and where improved teaching practices were seen as the answer to the failure of large numbers of students.

These interventions dealt with knowledge through structure, that is, a different organisation of the programme (foundation and extended programmes) was designed for those students who were identified as not ready to negotiate the mainstream curriculum. The new structure provided extra scaffolding, especially in the areas of language and academic literacy, in order for students to be in a better position to master successfully university knowledge. Once again it was the exoskeleton of the curriculum that received attention. Neither the universities nor the Department of Education engaged with the type and purpose of knowledge embedded in the curriculum, and there was no discussion about the meanings of curriculum as a whole.

Epistemological access was the fundamental concept around which the effort of the extended programmes was built. This concept had its roots in the academic development movement of the 1980s and its application in subsequent years can be seen as the closest approximation that the HEIs were going to have to knowledge and the curriculum. From Morrow's (2009) formulation to the many elaborations that followed it (Boughey, 2000, 2002, 2008 to cite a few) it seems possible to draw two main conclusions. First,

epistemological access is a useful shorthand to describe the articulation gap between, especially, first generation university students, and the tacit assumptions of knowledge made in the 'mainstream' university curriculum. Second, the acceptance of epistemological access as a problem has resulted in the creation of special programmes offered by special lecturers to 'special' students who need extra help to succeed in higher education. Once again the focus on curriculum is displaced; this time by a focus on the 'special' (disadvantaged) students.[2] This notion moves away from the knowledge embedded in the curriculum and focuses on building student capabilities to access that knowledge.

Ballim (2015) has argued that the very notion of epistemological access seems to be confined to this special environment while the university as institution abdicates its responsibility to "teach properly", as he puts it, all students. Ballim's critique makes two useful points; first, he is suggesting implicitly that providing epistemological access is the task of the university and not of academic development/extended programmes. Put differently, everybody who enters the university has to be initiated into the construction of academic knowledge within specific disciplinary fields. Therefore, university education, especially at undergraduate level, is to a very large extent an exercise to make transparent the 'black box' of knowledge construction within the disciplines. Students thus taught were not only going to be able to make knowledge in those fields but would also acquire the behaviours, practices and identities expected from them as engineers, doctors, historians, etc. Second, and no less important in Ballim's argument, is the inversion of the notion of epistemological access as something staff, particularly at historically white universities, need to be helped with in order to understand the variety of ways of knowing and making sense of the world that their students have and which can actually constitute the point of entry for epistemological access to university knowledge instead of its opposite. I will come back to both points later in this article.

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[2]   It is interesting to note that the Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions, 2008, mentioned in its analysis of the students and the learning experience (Chapter 4) the complicated perceptions that extended programmes seemed to have among some students from those who bemoaned the fact that foundation programmes were discontinued to those who find the set up discriminatory.

The bull by the horns? The flexible curriculum proposal

The report of the CHE Task Team on Flexible Curriculum published in 2013 (CHE, 2013) was the last attempt at dealing with knowledge and the curriculum from a policy perspective. The report was based on new more reliable cohort data as well as on studies of the impact of different types of extended programmes, augmented or foundation. It argues that: a) it is necessary to create more space in the curriculum in order to support students to negotiate successfully the articulation and transition gaps within the curriculum; and b) that more space is needed for improving the quality of the curriculum itself by providing enriching learning experiences. Thus the CHE proposed to extend the undergraduate degree for another year at level 8 of the HEQSF, to allow the re-structuring of the existing curriculum taking into account the obstacles to student progression previously mentioned.

While this proposal went a long way in actually addressing some of the most vexing issues about the current structure of the undergraduate curriculum, it fell short of introducing much needed radical change in the manner in which universities look at higher education qualifications in South Africa and at the knowledge embedded in the curriculum.

The proposal did not engage with knowledge except in the sense of a better scaffolding for teaching existing (accepted) knowledge and did not address the critique of epistemological access raised by Ballim. Moreover, the proposed curriculum is not for everybody but for the majority who need extra space/time to achieve the expected outcomes. The enticement for the other students is an enhanced curriculum; one that offers supplementary skills that can make graduates more competitive in the labour market and the possibility of being 'RPL-ed' for first-year modules (CHE, 2013).

The flexible curriculum proposal reflects the understanding that academic knowledge has a vertical organisation and that scaffolding is needed for the grammars of the different disciplines to make sense to students. At the same time, the proposal leaves untouched again the prickly matter of whose knowledge is presented in the curriculum and how.

The notion of the enhanced curriculum, from which the majority of students would benefit, stops before falling into the trap of the skills discourse but nods to added activities that will result in the development of graduate attributes such as critical citizenship and laying the foundations of

postgraduate research (CHE, 2013). All of this is added to a curriculum that has been restructured around articulation and transitions, without tackling the knowledge underpinning it and the pedagogic possibilities of infusion instead of addition of, for example, critical citizenship.

A second problem with the CHE proposal is that it changes the structure of the undergraduate degree without addressing the problems in the structure of the HEQSF, that is, without challenging the status quo sanctioned in 1995 and in 2008. In particular, the proposal does not want to touch the honours degree, that is, the fourth year of study that follows a three-year first degree and that South Africa inherited from its British colonial past. The purpose of the honours degree, seen as the first echelon of postgraduate education, is the initiation of students into research in a particular discipline and constitutes what is seen as a necessary articulation with the master's degree. In this proposal the structure of the NQF trumps engagement with knowledge and prevents the radical review of the undergraduate degree through the introduction of, among other things, the teaching of and carrying out of research at undergraduate level in the longer degree. This option would require confronting the perception that the staff have of undergraduate students and interrogation of the actual purpose of the longer degree.

As it turns out this proposal was not accepted by government, apparently based on the costs of implementation.[3] It is my contention that the CHE proposal could have provided an interesting point of departure for a radical rethinking not just of the structure of the degree but also of its curriculum.

The role of the HEQC in curriculum renewal

The HEQC is a permanent committee of the CHE, which was created through the Higher Education Act 1997. According to the act, the responsibilities of the HEQC were: to promote quality assurance; to audit the quality assurance mechanisms of HEIs; to accredit programmes of higher education; and to coordinate and facilitate quality assurance activities with other Education and Training Quality Assurers. The HEQC was officially launched in 2001 and developed a quality assurance system taking into account international trends

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[3]   This despite the fact that the report included a thorough analysis of the costing of teaching and learning and the impact of low throughput on the DHET budget.

and practices while seeking to address national objectives and local needs. For the last 15 years the HEQC has worked to implement this mandate.

In tune with the national objectives of access, equity and redress, one of the HEQC's main preoccupations in its founding moment was to ensure "a quality-driven higher education system that contributes to socio-economic development, social justice and innovative scholarship in South Africa" (HEQC, 2004: p. 5; Lange and Singh, 2010). In order to implement this, the HEQC deployed the characteristic tools and methodologies of international quality assurance: institutional audits, accreditation of programmes, and a variety of activities that supported the promotion of quality and institutional capacity development for quality assurance.

Teaching and learning were a fundamental focus of the HEQC in all its methodologies (HEQC, 2004a; HEQC, 2007). The criteria for both institutional audits and programme accreditation gave primacy to teaching and learning. Together these criteria looked at the existence of policies, processes and structures that support tasks such as assessment, curriculum design and programme management, or academic governance, but did not specifically address curriculum.

The two main objectives of the HEQC audit system were to encourage and support institutions to maintain a culture of continuous improvement and to ensure that institutions had internal systems that allowed them to assure the quality of their core functions (HEQC, 2007). The main objectives of the accreditation system were to ensure that programmes satisfied minimum standards of provision, to protect students from poor quality programmes and to increase public confidence in higher education programmes and qualifications (HEQC, 2004).

The HEQC conceptualisation of quality implied more than minimum standards; it linked the concept of transformation as an emancipatory socio-political change process with transformation as an individual change process and argued that the "fitness for purpose" of HEIs depended on them seeing the three core functions (teaching and learning, research and community engagement) as the sites of transformation (HEQC, 2008, p.17). The manner in which this was done was left to the institutions for them to exercise their academic freedom. Therefore, the concerns of the HEQC with 'fitness of purpose' and transformation in relation to teaching and learning were generally focused on the responsiveness of HEIs to national needs and

did not entail the explicit encouragement of curricular review or the notion of curriculum transformation.

The closest the HEQC came to look at the curriculum in the first decade of its existence was the conduct of its 'national reviews', which were processes of re-accreditation at system level of selected programmes. The review of the MBA (2002) and the review of teacher education qualifications (2005 –2007) are cases in point. However, in neither case was the outcome of the reviews a revision of the curricula in these disciplines, a task necessarily left to the academics. It is possible that the overall analyses of these reviews published by the HEQC (HEQC, 2003 and 2010) could have been used as a point of departure for an interrogation of at least some aspects of the curriculum content and organisation in these fields, but this was not an explicit intention of the HEQC.

Given the possible outcomes of accreditation (accreditation, conditional accreditation which requires the fulfilment of HEQC-established conditions, and no accreditation), and the outcomes of national reviews (accreditation, conditional accreditation and withdrawal of accreditation), the attention of institutions would in most cases be on compliance with the minimum standards and not critical engagement with the curriculum. This was beyond the scope and the purpose of quality assurance.

The second phase of the quality enhancement project that since 2013 has replaced institutional audits in the CHE's approach to quality will now be focusing directly on curriculum. It is still too soon to say what impact this will have on institutions' practices in relation to curricular review and transformation and how will this sit with the compliance-focused and bureaucratised accreditation system still in operation.

Whatever happens in the future it is important to understand that quality assurance in whichever incarnation (enhancement or improvement) can encourage institutions to pay attention to a particular issue, but it is not an appropriate tool with which to approach curriculum transformation. This is so not only because of methodological limitations already mentioned but also because curriculum transformation needs to originate in the critical engagement of academics and students with their disciplinary fields and not as the imposition of a national agency.

Conclusion: the curriculum as question, 2015- . . .

The policy choices of the last two decades did not create the space for an examination of the curriculum from the point of view of epistemology and identity. If anything, what academics regarded as an assault on the organisation and grammar of academic knowledge during the early unfolding of the NQF reinforced the closing off of academic departments to critique and engagement with that very knowledge. The national quality assurance system was oriented to an unpacked broad notion of transformation (Report of the Review of the HEQC, 2009). This, combined with an understanding of quality as the responsibility of HEIs and the limitations of the classic quality assurance methodologies, resulted in the HEQC having little, if any, impact on a critical engagement with curriculum. The closest the policy frame came to touch the curriculum was when it became clear that formal access to higher education was being jeopardised by the lack of epistemological access. However, as we have seen in this article, the revitalisation of the spirit and experience of the academic development movement in the mid-2000s did not include a full-blown critique of the knowledge being accessed.

The focus on teaching and learning, although much more successful in terms of its own objectives – improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the educational process – did not concern itself with curriculum but with teaching and learning practice. It is interesting that only in the most recent proposed revision of the Teaching Development Grant is curriculum reform included as a possible project within the parameters of the reframed University Development Grant (DHET, 2016). The fleeting moment of deeper reform proposed in the CHE 2013 report suffered some of the same limitations of its predecessors: functioning within the already problematic conceptualisation of knowledge embedded in the NQF. Yet it did come closer to a way out, which was unfortunately not to be.

Almost 10 years ago the Soudien report showed how fossilised institutional cultures and untouched curriculum were obstacles to the transformation of higher education and were alienating black students and black academics. Twenty years into South Africa's democracy, the call for the democratisation of the curriculum is coming from them. It is students and black academics who have put the issue of university knowledge on the political horizon. The calls for the decolonisation and the Africanisation of the curriculum that were the focus of the first #MustFall movement pointed not only at the content of the curriculum, which they did, strongly, but also, without

articulating it in these terms, to the curriculum as institution (Jansen, 2009; Lange, 2012a); that is, the tacit assumptions about knowledge and the identity of the student and of the university that permeates the social fabric of the university as institution and that has, in general, gone unexamined during the last 20 years.

The questions about disciplinary knowledge and institutional knowledge raised in different ways by the #MustFall movement at each of the universities involved, puts squarely on the table two problems: the nature of the South African public university in the 21st century, and the identity of students and academics at the university.

Under the first heading we are faced with issues such as what is the nature of the university in Africa today? What does this nature say about the process of knowledge production; the relationship between knowledge and society; knowledge and the state; knowledge and development? These questions are not new; they were raised during the 1960s and 1970s as African universities emerged in newly independent countries. To these questions, it seems, students added issues about academic authority and its origins, the meaning of democracy, as well as about equity inside the university and in the classroom. The fact that the 'social epistemological' moment of the student movement was overtaken by the 'political economic' moment meant that existing joint initiatives to review the curriculum at different universities have been overshadowed, but they are there; some institutions have established participative processes for this purpose, and new proposals for curricula are emerging.

Regardless of, or in fact precisely because there is, mounting pressure on the universities on other fronts, it is necessary that institutions engage with the questions put by students. These questions involve institutional culture from the administration to the lecture hall and affect curriculum in terms of purpose and content.

Under the heading of identity, the student movement has raised in forceful ways the issue of blackness and the perceptions of black students' identity at the university and especially in the classroom. While notions of intersectionality (Miller, 2016) seem to have made this protest rather different from a Black Consciousness revival, it is the issue of black identity as a 'collective' that especially affects the curriculum debate. Who are the, mostly, black students that, mostly, white academics teach at these universities? How

do academics engage students in the pedagogic process in such a way that there is an acknowledgement of the identity of these black students as something that matters educationally?

In the 1980s the academic development movement started combating the notion of all students as autonomous, self-sufficient learners in order to open up the space for the access of black students into higher education by providing necessary scaffolding; hence, as we have seen, the notion of epistemological access. This did not mean that because black students did not have white middle class cultural capital they did not have any that could help them negotiate university knowledge. The call 'look at me I am here' in the #RhodesMustFall student movement seemed to be asserting precisely that. It appeared as a cry for a fuller recognition of the student as individual whose collective 'genealogy' has been one of oppression and subordination. Understanding the meaning of this call and searching for ways of responding to it require the interrogation of the pedagogies that are used at the university as much as the question about 'decolonised' knowledge requires the interrogation of the curriculum as content.

Under this second heading, there is one more element that has been hidden throughout the protest and in the ensuing discussions. Academic identity has been unspoken except obliquely as it refers to the plight of black academics at historically white universities. Yet, academic identity, that which defines an academic as academic, has not really been engaged with. If, as most research suggests (Belcher and Trowler, 2001; Henkel, 2005 and 2007; Marginson, 2008), academics identify primarily with their disciplines, and these disciplines are being called into question by the proposed decolonisation of the curriculum, how does this affect academics' sense of self? Does this, supposedly, 'crisis of identity' affect equally white and black academics? Moreover, the struggle to define what is Western, what is global, what is local and how is knowledge constituted, does not seem to be only a 'white thing', as suggested by some of the interventions in the decolonisation debate (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012; Mbembe, 2015; Dhawan, 2014). What kind of relationship can be established in the pedagogic environment between academics and students as they confront each other's search for personal, social and intellectual identity in a new institutional environment?

None of these questions can be answered by a new policy framework. It is not the government's role now to develop a blueprint for the transformation of the curriculum in the same way that it negotiates free education for the poor. This

is a university responsibility that has to be exercised by all academics and students and that will not be fulfilled very soon as it requires bold self-examination, the unbalance of power and the creation of instances of dialogue and debate to which we are not used.

The mere fact that these questions have been raised publicly suggests, as Mbembe (2015) put it, that "the age of innocence and complacency is over". It is the responsibility of institutions, and especially of academics and students, to sustain the moment by making knowledge the permanent object of collective reflection if South African universities are to address the unrealised aspects of institutional transformation.

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