Flourishing through Adaptability: Reflections on the challenges facing South African Universities

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Story-Telling – Individual and Collective

*Any form of social reality can be approached from a number of perspectives. One of these is the stories the reality embodies. Stories can relate to individuals, to families and groups, and to institutions and nation states. Stories have three characteristic elements: the first is the **plot**, involving sequences of events, developments and flashbacks; the second is the **characters**, in terms of archetypal good and evil, heroes and villains, and the third is **themes or morals**, namely of hope and triumph, fear and tragedy. There is another dimension to stories, namely the 'beat' which I shall refer to later. Each narrative, whether raw or refined, has important turning points, moments of change for individuals, institutions and societies.*

As with any institution the story of private universities is a serial novel, with different authors writing different chapters, paragraphs and footnotes, and it would be nice to think that there will be full attribution of these sources in compliance with assignment plagiarism requirements!

One of the themes in all stories is that of *adaptability* - sometimes depicted as resilience or responsiveness to change, but I prefer the adaptability concept. In his first book, the great West African novelist, Chinua Achebe, who died recently, wrote the equivalent of what might, in the visual arts, be called a naïve painting. He drew his title from Yeats, namely 'Things Fall Apart', and showed the way in which remote villagers differed in their capacity to adapt to the changes reaching their isolated localities and modest lives through the forces of colonialism and the imperatives of technology and modernisation. Needless to say the novel points to adaptability as a key ingredient to survival and its absence as a contributor to adversity. I would like to touch on this theme in relation to South African Universities and the future, hence the title 'Towards Flourishing through Adaptability'.

Another dimension of all stories concerns their pulse or their beat, the rather indeterminate life force that sustains them. I would like to focus on four such pulses relating to the past and future stories of South African Universities. The

first is the normative pulse, embracing values, principles and standards. The second is the teaching and learning pulse, the conveyors of knowledge, discernment and wisdom, which are at the core of universities, both ancient and modern. The third is the business, management and financial pulse which need to be beating strongly for all the others to survive. The fourth is the community engagement pulse which relates to those whom the university reaches out to serve, whether local, national or international, and which in turn impact on universities. These pulses, arguably, all need to beat strongly, but they are not always in harmony with one another and thus 'pulse correction' is required.

The Normative Pulse

The first pulse in any institutional story is the normative one. It provides a centre of gravity, a guiding light and anchor. Just as there is no such thing as a regulatory vacuum, there is no such thing as value-free teaching and learning. Values can be explicitly articulated in founding documents, strategic reviews and marketing collateral, they can also be interstitial and unarticulated, despite being ubiquitously present.

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In an institutional context values can derive from multiple sources and can come into conflict with one another, requiring resolution, refinement and reformulation.

This tradition involves the University facilitating the integration of norms and standards into student's learning and their preparation for post-study work situations and relationships. Thus notions of individual ethical choices, public service and altruistic ideals, and ultimately the search for meaning itself, can be fundamental parts of the normative mission of universities.

Dialogue with local culture is also a critical part of this value orientation. In a context such as South Africa the diversity of cultures, languages and faith traditions, all represented in the student body, bring with them diverse value systems. In addition, one of the most sophisticated constitutions in the world mandates personal values and social norms, including societal transformation and the enforcement of socio-economic rights. Likewise, different professional codes of conduct and ethics are part of the social context in which teaching and learning have to inculcate a sense of capacity to reconcile contesting assumptions and prescriptions. Moreover, there needs to be accommodation with the market values which dominate the public discourse on growth and distribution, and funding public goods and costing externalities, all of which have deep but complex value assumptions. Finally there has to be an accommodation with developments in technology and the sciences which have made possible social and personal developments inconceivable even a decade ago, such as surrogate motherhood as a major new economic sector, such as the increasing neuro-awareness as to how the brain operates, and the ability to dump loved ones by Twitter. Many of these developments require the adaptation of policy and law after the event, which in turn would benefit from the value-based education of students who will have to determine their worth and validity in their future careers. While it is not possible to provide certainty on all social and professional issues involved in human progress, it is possible to develop a wisdom based on value traditions. This wisdom should be founded in neutrality, investigation and rationality, in a context of autonomy for researchers, students and the institution as a whole.

Teaching and Learning (Second Pulse)

The second pulse is that of teaching and learning, and the associated endeavours of research, investigation and knowledge dissemination, exchange and application. In terms of its original conception, a university it is the place for self and world discovery, for development through and for refining the findings through discussion, debate, analysis and synthesis.

It has often been observed that education is not well served by the use of different terms in the English language for teaching and learning, whereas other languages have only single term for both, symbolising that good teaching is intrinsically linked to good learning. It explains the paradox of professors who contend that they are teaching well but cannot understand why their students are not learning anything. Perhaps, after all, we should be saying that our aim as educators is 'to learn our students good', so as to close the gap between the two concepts.

Today we all acknowledge three dimensions of education. The first is cognitive in nature. Here the knowledge base of any discipline is important to master, sometimes without the assistance of the great gods Google or WikiLeaks. For a long time there was a shift in emphasis from learning through rote to the mastery of understanding. This is still a pillar of educational orthodoxy. However, I now insist that in subjects I teach there is repetition of key concepts, say on the law of foreign direct investment, so that it is retained in long term-memory. This is facilitated in one subject I presently teach on the law of globalisation where the second component of teaching and learning is the *practical*. While the plea from employers for work-ready graduates is considerably over-stated, and indeed rather naïve, there is still a contemporary reality of needing to connect all teaching and learning to the skills required for their application. Here I use application in the broadest sense to include not only the design of new apps but also the interpretation of a political event, the analysis of an economic report or the appropriate ethical response to corruption in sport.

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A recent survey of employers of law graduates in Australia revealed surprisingly little insistence on core substantive knowledge of any detailed nature, apart from obvious areas such as contract and torts. Instead the emphasis was on knowledge of concepts and principles within the field and, more apposite to this pulse, a wide range of generic and specific skills and attributes. In my own interpretation of this survey it involves an entirely appropriate shift from transitive substantive knowledge, which answers the 'What' question, to more enduring process knowledge, which answers the 'Where' and 'How' questions. Among the skills these employers sought from prospective employees were communication and presentation skills, research and investigation capabilities, relationship building and, the theme of this piece, adaptability. While it would be an attractive, but altogether too radical a step, to build degrees, subjects and substantive knowledge around these skills and capacities, it is quite possible for them to be taught in an integrated fashion in the foundation knowledge of the disciplines in question, with reference to their applications in different occupations and professional contexts. In my own current institution it involves a heavy emphasis on communication,
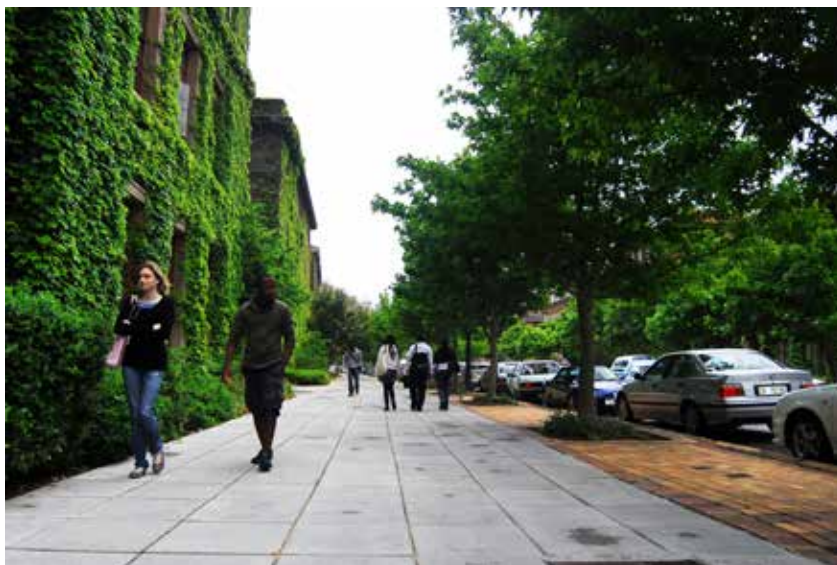
interviewing, negotiating, problem-solving and advocacy, all integrated into substantive subjects. The communication element, written, verbal and digital, cannot be too strongly emphasised, and even teaching the skill of using whole sentences to current students has much to commend itself!

The third component is the *formative* element, involving values, attitudes, ethics, awareness and other attributes. Importantly, the formative dimension operates both directly in the classroom and also more discretely within education institutions. The former dimension includes the explicit exposure to ethical, moral and professional standards relevant to life and work. Here I recall how unprepared I was from my own education having been quite lacking in this explicit formation only to find myself operating in a criminal justice system in which the death penalty was still operative. The University of Stellenbosch has improved greatly since those unpractical doctrinal days. In the second, more discrete, formative dimension are the relationships between students and academics and between students and the professional staff at a university. This is where more nuanced lessons of respect, reciprocity, commitment and other attitudes can be learned. These university-based relationships can be seen as formative apprenticeships for the many other relationships which graduates will encounter during their working lives – relationships with supervisors, colleagues, clients, those from other cultures, and ultimately with their own employees.

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Here I would like to introduce two potentially dangerous 'isms' to the discussion, namely 'educationalism' and 'pedagogicalism'. It has long been the reality of university professors that their identity and professional satisfaction derive from their research and scholarly activities, and that their teaching persona is not regarded as a professional one. The fact remains that research, empiricism and theory within the discipline of pedagogicalism has much to offer contemporary educators. It reminds us of the need to identify teaching and learning outcomes

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in advance, to accommodate different learning styles in the classroom, to align assessment with teaching objectives, to minimise student anxiety and monitor how students are experiencing their education, to encourage student dialogue with teachers and collaboration among themselves, to demonstrate a love of their subject and a love of learning - and to get assignments back to students on time. These may seem self-evident bullet points but the discipline involved has developed sophisticated theoretical frameworks and evidence-based knowledge of the subject-matter of teaching and learning. It also reminds us in its student-focussed approach that we are not just teaching subjects rather we are teaching students. Students have goals and aspirations, fears and vulnerabilities, and like so many other activities, teaching and learning is ultimately a social human activity. In short, academics at institutions have at least two professions, one in their discipline of speciality and the other as educators.

This leads to another dimension of student formation. In the legal profession, studies in several jurisdictions reveal that practising lawyers have much higher rates of stress and depression than the population at large. More to the point, law students in these countries suffer more from these maladies than their counterparts in medicine, business and information technology. This may of course be a function of the kind of personalities that are attracted to law in the first place, or it may be a kind of pre-emptive pay-back for the stress these students will cause others after becoming practising lawyers. More seriously, stress and anxiety among law students is sometimes attributed to negative community perceptions of their intended profession and to the analytical and-adversarial style of teaching these students encounter in a highly competitive environment. Whatever the contributory causes, the stress factor is accentuated by the fact that many students are under financial pressure and work part-time or full-time whilst they study as full-time students. The appropriate response to this difficult conundrum is initially to recognise that student well-being is, in part, a function of how a university operates. In respect of that part it is the responsibility of the institution to address wellness factors through appropriate support programs. In my own institution there is an attempt to change the focus and identity of legal training from that of

adversarial advocate to collaborative problem-solver, though not all colleagues are convinced of the need. Such is the cost of academic freedom.

Needless to say, like any other –ism, educationalism has its critics. They come in two kinds. The first comprises those who are quite ignorant about the concept and who find their professional identity in research and scholarship, regarding teaching as an inopportune extra duty. The second comprises of those who are conversant with the discipline but challenge its theory, methodology and prescriptive advice, as is normal with any academic discipline. Personally, albeit from a limited knowledge base, I am interested in how this discipline can challenge educators and provide potential benefits to learners.

Unfortunately the emergence of educationalism has coincided with other unstoppable forces in tertiary education around the world, namely university managerialism and corporatisation. With the best of intentions these developments have muddied the waters of pedagogicalism by latching onto its well-intended instruments for measuring teaching performance and learning outcomes. Quantitative measurement is much loved by managers and regulators, despite its overlooking important but unquantifiable 'stuff' that occurs in university life. The way it is applied by administrators in relation

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to research performance, teaching evaluations and service contributions has alienated many academics. Their resultant frustration is vented not on powerful university managers but on the innocuous purveyors of educationalism, although they might really have chosen another term to assuage their critics. In my own institution it has resulted in compulsory attendance at two annual compliance courses, involving the regulatory framework of education, but no requirements for professional development in teaching and learning. This is not to denigrate compliance training in the contemporary risk society, but just to argue for balance in its requirements. This, however, is a larger issue for another discussion.

Business, Leadership and Management (Third pulse)

The third pulse is that of business, leadership and management which requires some reference to organisational framework.

Complexity theory informs us that institutions such as universities are complex adaptive systems in which the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts. In this context *complexity* has a different connotation to that of *complicated*. Piloting an Airbus A 340 is a complicated task for pilots, but each intervention has a predictable outcome on speed, altitude, stabilisation and response. Complex systems, by contrast, lack this mechanical predictability. In complex institutions individuals and groups always act with some degree of adaptive individuality, regardless of carefully drafted organisational policies and procedures, and their activities have indeterminate outcomes. Neat descriptors in mission statements, position descriptions and professional reviews do not reflect the realities of organisational life, which are in part fluid and uncertain, with individuals sometimes responding more predictability to what colleagues do or say than to managerial directives. Thus communication and information dissemination takes place through many channels, both formal and informal, within organisations

and, to the consternation of boards and managers, it affects attitudes and changes behaviours in unexpected ways. A little like high frequency trading on stock exchanges, its influence can be instantaneous in effect, albeit sometimes only temporary in duration. The question arises as to how managers should cope with this organisational phenomenon.

I recently experienced an example of short-sighted responses to complexity theory. I was an external reviewer of an academic department in a large university in Melbourne. We were questioning managers from senior administration about the centralisation of all professional staff in a 'shared-services' model, with only minor delegations of personnel to profit-centres such as Faculties and Colleges. The project was based on the financial need for redundancies caused by global shifts in the educational market and it was undertaken on the basis of information in time-sheets completed by relevant professional staff. The information revealed a significant amount of 'excess capacity' in administrative services, thereby allowing the creation of 'an optimal allocation of resources'. Our rather unanalytical discomfort about this approach was captured succinctly by the project officer assisting the review. As she put it, in technical terms, what they were removing was *stuff*, the interstitial activities and services of staff which could not be neatly captured in time-sheets and which probably equated to the student experience – one of the most important features of contemporary universities. While *stuff* had no place in the organisational charts, performance indicators and balanced scorecards of upper echelon managers, it involved the lecturers, receptionists, advisers and tutors communicating information, values, and a little rumour and innuendo, throughout a system which adapted accordingly along complexity theory lines. Lost *stuff* is lost adaptability. At this point in the story Darwin is often quoted, and I shall not disappoint: what Charles observed was that it was not the strongest or the fittest that survived but the most adaptable. Complexity theory requires acceptance of and responses to the non- measurable stuff within complex organisations such as universities.

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The Business Plan

It goes without saying that the pulse of a business plan needs to beat strongly. On the revenue side private universities are dependent on tuition fees, donations and philanthropic commitments, and on the outgoings it is subject to good fiscal husbandry. Here I would like to comment on only two issues relating to business survival.

The first is the centrality of the student experience to the business of the contemporary university. The student experience has many dimensions, including the learning and formative elements referred to previously. It is also about student wellness. As indicated previously, surveys indicate high levels of stress and depression among students as a result of various pressures operating on, both within and outside universities. Regardless of the causes it has led my own institution to re-examine not only the pedagogical aspects of students' lives but also the pastoral, communitarian, social and sporting dimensions of their university experiences.

Whatever the loftier ideals regarding tertiary education and the values it can instil in contemporary South Africa, the reality is that there is also an exchange relationship between students and the university, and therefore between students and all members of staff. Far from contaminating an idealised notion of the proper role and virtues of education this relationship can enhance it positively. It does so by bringing consumer-like pressures from those paying good money for their education and vendor-like responsibilities to those providing it. Modern imperatives of consumerism and client-centred professional service bring important values to these relationships, including the need for responsiveness and adaptation.

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Management and Leadership

Much has been written about management and leadership in contemporary organisations and we live in an age of high expectations in this regard. Chief Executives are expected to be super-heroes, skilled in all facets of organisational need, from budgeting to human resources; they rarely perform at this level and the gap between expectation and reality always serves to disappoint. Airport stores are packed with books on the one-minute manager and change leadership strategies, rivalling only the self-help and 50 shades of everything industries.

My own management style is not manual-based but comes from experiences at the head of the table in bodies both within universities and without, and from some reflection thereon. It has a 'mediation' basis. This involves facilitative communication and negotiation skills designed to empower parties in conflict to make their own decisions in terms of a self-determination principle. Consultation

and facilitation along these lines is partially suited to a CE management position and acknowledges that management and leadership are collective and not individual responsibilities within the firm. However in these contexts more is needed than consultation and facilitation, namely rendering of authoritative decisions and 'selling' those to stakeholders. Here what I call 'managing to yes' is relatively easy since affected parties receive what they were asking for, but 'managing to no' is considerably more difficult. Here my approach is to provide three things: a courteous and respectful hearing, the acknowledgment of underlying concerns and feelings of the person involved, and the provision of reasons for the negative decision. Organisational life should be about accepting the reality of decisions made, and moving on, but not all academics have heard this mantra.

Finally on this pulse: a university is not only an institution of teaching and learning but also a learning institution. This is an important subject which entails responsibilities for all institutional staff.

Engaging with Communities

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The final pulse relates to a university's engagement with its several communities. While the circles are hardly concentric, these communities include the immediate South African community, the continental African community, and the geographically remote but virtually near global community.

Firstly, as an outsider I am not best placed to comment on the current and prospective engagements at the local level. Secondly, there is almost no limit to the needs for education, training, capacity-building and knowledge dissemination and sharing with the continent. About 12 years ago *The Economist* magazine referred to Africa as the 'failed continent', but it now refers to it in hyperbolic terms, replete with references to its economic opportunities, growing markets, human potential and, without any sense of irony, its exploitable resources. The world, in particular Asia, has not required this kind of belated advertising because it is already operating in Africa. South Africa has also not been sluggish in this regard, with over 1200 local companies operating in the rest of the continent and many educational institutions having ambitious African-themed and African-populated programs.

Recently I undertook a marketing trip to China and visited cities of 20 million people about which I had never previously heard. Leaving aside, for a moment, issues of rural poverty, urban exploitation and political repression, I was highly impressed by the mass transport systems, the residential and business arrangements were breathtaking, architecture and design were of the highest quality, English in the services sector was of an impressive standard, and the sense of industry was thriving. This is not to celebrate all that the Sino-pulse has on offer, but to underline the fact that it is part of the global reality in which Africa and South Africa will have to survive and thrive. For all hands to be on deck there is need for well-educated economics, sociologists, accountants, political scientists and lawyers, dealing inter-actively on matters of trade, investment, finance and competition. Ideally this will not be always a subservient situation of striving only to be included in global activities in terms of rules and institutions already

established, but to have some future influence on those rules and institutional processes through the AU, the G-20 and the BRICS group of countries, and with local expertise.

This invites the final comment on engagement with globalisation itself. How do South African universities position themselves in an increasingly fast-paced, competitive and changing world? One might also puzzle over the conundrum that while communication and computer technologies now allow South African universities to provide their services to the furthest parts of the globe, the same technologies allow rival institutions to penetrate into South African markets. Perhaps one consideration is more a factor of orientation and perspective than market development. This requires at least an awareness of the powerful imperatives of economic globalisation, of current affairs in politically important capitals of the world, and some degree of cultural awareness – if not learning Mandarin, Korean and Portuguese themselves. This might involve some international-specific knowledge in key subjects, but also the inculcation of a method of observing and evaluating global issues and actors.

Conclusion

I have ranged, at least half seriously, through a wide range of topics, with more breadth than depth – as we tell our students. Vision and missions can be grand and ambitious, as can KPIs, performance reviews and strategic plans. Beneath it all are simple truths. It would be nice for South African universities to be institutions with a waiting-list for student places because they provide value for money in their services, where staff, both academic and professional, had a sense of excitement coming to work on Mondays, and where students were still talking about their subjects after classes had ended. From this modest vantage they might become part of the international community of scholarship and inquiry.

In all stories there are turning points and choices. And as the old saying goes, when an institution comes to a fork in the road it should take it.