

TOWARDS DEPICTING THE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE OF UNIVERSITIES OF TECHNOLOGY (UOTS): A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

South Africa should like the rest of the world embrace the Knowledge Age. This is not always an easy task as the country struggles with huge skill shortages that hamper progress. This is aggravated by the fact that national research outputs have declined since the 1990's and existing knowledge producers (scientists) are ageing fast. South Africa has classical universities (which focus on pure academic programmes), Universities of Technology (that focus on career oriented education) and comprehensive universities (which are a combination of classical universities and UoTs). This paper centers on Universities of Technology (UoTs) with its relatively recent emergence as universities. UoTs were previously known as Technikons and were re-designed as UoTs by the Minister of Education in October 2003. The focus of UoTs is mainly on technology-driven training, development and research, essentially dove-tailing theory and practice. This is in line with similar institutions of higher education world wide. UoTs assist classical and comprehensive universities in generating new knowledge, but with an added component – that of delivering knowledge workers to business and industry. It is thus reasonable that attention should be focused on creating sustainable research outputs at university level, as a mechanism for not only generating new knowledge but also to address the impeding skill shortages South Africa face (SATN Research Output Committee, 2008). In this regard organisational culture could impact on the sustainability of research outputs at UoTs, as it has the potential of unifying organisational effort which could lead to increased outputs. This article aims to trace the history of UoTs and to, by means of an explorative analysis, elaborate on the forces that shaped the overall organisational culture of UoTs in South Africa.

Key Words: *Universities of Technology (UoTs) in South Africa, organisational culture*

JEL Classification: M14

1. INTRODUCTION

In their book on 'Engaging the six cultures of the academy' Bergquist & Pawlak (2008) describes and analyzes the development of organisational culture in American and Canadian universities and colleges. The establishment of the universities and colleges in America and Canada was mainly based on the British model and later the German model of universities. As South Africa was also a British colony it could be expected that our universities would also be influenced by some of the same factors that influenced American and later Canadian universities. Due to a lack of literature on the South African situation the above mentioned book will serve as conceptual guide for the analysis of the organisational culture at UoTs.

The 'organisational culture' term boasts many definitions and consensus on a single operational definition on the term could until present not be reached. For the sake of this discussion the definition of Schein (1992) provides the necessary point of departure. Organisational culture is described as "a pattern of basic assumptions - invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation or internal integration - that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems...". The culture of an organisation or in this instance a university has the potential of unifying the efforts of individual employees which could affect sustainability and in the case of a university lead to higher research outputs.

2. HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

As indicated before, UoTs were formerly known as Technikons (1979-2003). The name Technikon is uniquely South African and as these institutions did not bare the name 'university' is was not recognized by international associations, professional bodies, government, educational institutions or students as tertiary institutions of much value (Du Pré, 2009: 12). This became a stumbling block which had to be addressed. Technikons were therefore re-designated as 'Universities of Technology' (UoTs) establishing them as technological universities in the national and international domain.

The concept that defines a UoT is the technology-driven nature of its focus. This implies the study of technology from the various viewpoints of different disciplines, as well as the effective and efficient arrangement of know-how, knowledge, skills and expertise (Du Pre, 2009: 16). The term 'technology' means to do or make something and the aim of UoTs is to find solutions to existing and/or new problems - mostly through the application of applied research. Applied research is directed at finding solutions to new and existing problems – this could include practical problems or determining possible uses and applications for basic research (which are the original investigations in comprehending a subject under investigation). Applied research contributes to an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon, adding value to not just business and industry, but also the community and humanity at large (SATN Research Output Committee, 2008).

UoTs are furthermore multidisciplinary and interweaves the contributions from various disciplines in finding solutions to practical problems. This directly supports the technology-driven focus of UoTs, which requires that solutions should be tapped from various stakeholders. This enhances the academic process ensuring effective technology transfer, innovation and entrepreneurship. In comprehending the cultural development of UoTs the following section details the six cultures of the academy as described by Bergquist & Pawlak (2008). A brief overview of each cultural type will be provided, after which it will be applied to the South African situation.

2.1 Collegial Culture

The development of the collegial culture had its inception during the colonial times in both America and Canada. The collegial culture was mostly shaped by the British and especially the German model of configuration. This cultural orientation values scholarship and research, sometimes to the detriment of teaching. It further emphasizes rationality and the autonomy of one's work, as well as long term relationships, non hierarchical structures and informal relationships.

The leadership of collegial universities is based on committee or group relationships with, as indicated before, an emphasis on research and scholarly work. As universities were basically reserved for the privileged in pre-modern times, individuals (usually from wealthy families) often enter them to keep with the elitism of the collegial culture, rather than for aspects like the compensation they would receive (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008: 43).

2.2 Managerial Culture

The managerial culture mostly emerged from the influence of Catholic colleges and community colleges in the United States. The emergence of the managerial culture was mainly due to the emphasis that was placed on management competence (like planning, goal setting, structuring, etc.) by the Catholic and community colleges. Community colleges also grew from the elementary and secondary school system and faculty members were mostly teachers, rather than scholars and academics.

It is for this reason that managerial components were emphasized, which became part of the faculty. The managerial culture therefore finds meaning in the managerial elements like organization, implementation and evaluation of work with a specific goal or purpose in mind. It further values fiscal responsibility and effective supervisory skills. The focus of the managerial culture is on cultivating knowledge, skills and attitudes amongst students that will enable them to be successful in the occupations they choose (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008: 43).

2.3 The Developmental Culture

This culture developed during the student movements of the United States of the 1960's. The Developmental Culture finds meaning in the programmes and activities that further the growth of all members associated with the higher education fraternity. It values openness and service as well as institutional research and curricular planning culminating in the cognitive, affective and behavioural maturation of students, faculty administrators and staff.

Faculty staff, administrators and students felt that traditional institutions (specifically with a dominant collegial culture) were not responsive towards their needs. Aspects like student life, moral development and critical thinking were cited as lacking – essentially a holistic perspective to overall student development and well-being. In this regard Nevitt Stanford (founder of Stanford University, Stanford, 1962) and his colleagues focused not only on what goes on in the classroom, but also on extracurricular activities. This cultural orientation also emphasized the development of lecturing staff and new forms of institutional research aimed not just at administrative issues like finance and student enrolment, but also on aspects like student learning and morale (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008: 75).

2.4 The Advocacy Culture

The Advocacy Culture had its inception in Northern American higher education institutions in the 1970's. This type of cultural orientation mainly emerged due to the inability of the managerial culture to meet the needs of faculty members and staff culminating in the increased unionization of universities. This included collective bargaining agreements about salary, job security and working conditions.

Just as community colleges provided fertile ground for the managerial culture to evolve, so too did the Advocacy Culture develop due to the influence of community colleges. During the timeframe (of the 1970's) people were very concerned with job security and especially issues surrounding compensation. It was further advocated that universities should consider economic accountability and civic responsibility in especially dealing with the resources allocated (like physical resources and funding) to them (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008: 111).

2.5 The Virtual Culture

The Virtual Culture is mostly a culmination of the increased accessibility to technology (like the internet) and restraints on the financial situations of many universities in the United States. The virtual culture is basically an open system and has no physical presence, structures or borders and involves mostly the internet and related technologies. The majority of children in the United States and Canada make use of the internet to do homework, to access a virtual library, interact with study groups and so forth.

This transcended into a virtual classroom situation in the form of on-line course work, internet-based education and distance education. The virtual culture symbolizes the post-modern world, especially with the notion of knowledge and the ever-changing nature of knowledge. As the Virtual Culture support global access to a university it broadens student access and learning, setting it apart from the previous four cultural orientations (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008: 147).

2.6 The Tangible Culture

The Tangible Culture typifies universities in the 21st century. It interesting enough incorporates the values of pre-modern universities (established in Europe in the thirteen century and in America in the late seventeen beginning eighteen century) and is more pervasive in nature than the aforementioned cultural types. The Tangible Culture represents the founding culture of universities and still emits its presence in contemporary universities (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008:189).

This culture orientation is rooted in its community, with a spiritual grounding that is rather religious than secular. It further values face-to-face education at a specific locality and sees the value of traditional values being incorporated into the functioning of the university. It tends to be more parochial which is in contrast with the cosmopolitan nature of the Virtual Culture. The influence of this cultural type is evident due to a reemphasis on standards (quality) and the alignment of a university with a particular religious doctrine or set of values. This is evident in aspects like environmental preservation and holistic health. As quality is crucial for sustainability, especially in the Knowledge Age, universities need to constantly be aware of its impact.

To summarize, it should be stated that cultural orientations in the academic world (as discussed above) developed and changed as a result of the dynamic changes that shaped mankind's quest for new knowledge (specifically involving universities as centers of knowledge). These changes were instituted by people (students and staff) to suit their needs at certain periods of time. It is therefore interesting to note that the Tangible Culture that represents modern universities is based on the values that shaped pre-modern universities, emphasizing that the values placed on universities have not diminished throughout the ages.

3. ANALYZING THE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE OF UOTS

The above description based on the six cultures of the academy shows that although the Collegial Culture represents a more traditional approach to university structuring, the Managerial Culture gradually become an important focal point for universities. The Collegial Culture has long been the typical model for most Western universities, including South Africa. In this regard the Collegial Culture characterizes most classical universities in the South African setting.

UoTs however come from a different premise in the sense that the previous Technikons could not award degrees, meaning that an orientation towards research and scholarly work had to be established at the newly formed UoTs. Even the infrastructure in terms of research (like a central research office, funding agents, industry partnerships, etc) had to be established at UoTs. Establishing a research culture at UoT's is currently a burning issue, especially for individuals that were part of the previous Technikon system, where the focus was mostly on teaching and learning. This corresponds with the American situation where teachers (not scholars and researchers) from community colleges became part of faculty staff at universities (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008: 44). This led, as indicated before, to an emphasis on managerial aspects typifying the Managerial Culture. It should also be noted that managerial principles (like organisational structuring, planning, organizing, etc) strongly applies to the functioning of UOTs (Moraka & Hay, 2010: 220). It is therefore evident that the Managerial Culture is, as in the case of American universities, prominently applicable to UoTs.

Concerning the Developmental Culture it should be noted that UoT's have a strong focus on community projects and engage communities on various levels (this includes for example projects on hygiene, food preparation and safety, etc). There are also various funding agencies that support these and other projects, like SANPAD (South African Netherlands Project on Alternative Development) which is focused on alleviating poverty in South Africa. These projects are also based on sound scientific principles and applicable research methodologies. Aspects pertaining to the Advocacy Culture are also present in UoTs. This includes unions, collective bargaining – essentially all actions that characterize organized labour.

The structures that support the Virtual Culture are also evident at UoTs. Although UoTs, generally speaking, do not offer e-learning courses they incorporate e-learning principles (like internet and the local intranet) into their programmes to support the academic activities of students. As UoTs are technology driven the technological components need to be emphasized and sustained and technology transfer is of utmost importance. This brings us to the prolific influence of the Tangible Culture that represents the founding values of universities since the thirteenth century. The values (like quality, community focus, spiritual grounding and face-to-face interaction) that characterized pre-modern universities still emanates in contemporary universities and are also evident at UoTs in the South African context.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Universities play a very important role in the South African situation with its harrowing skill shortages. In this UoTs fulfill a very important function in supplying business and industry with a labour force that are trained and able to perform. This could be attributed to the practical incorporation of the world of work into the academic programmes UoTs offer [mostly

accomplished by what is termed Work Integrated Learning (WIL)]. It further emanates from the above that UoTs do not really ascribe to strong research and scholarly principles, as portrayed by the Collegial Culture (which is in contrast to classical universities). This is mainly due to the fact that Technikons primarily had a teaching focus. UoTs therefore need to develop and sustain a research and scholarly orientation amongst students and staff. This could be done by putting infrastructure in place like fully functioning libraries and, as well as having adequate facilities, modern equipment and knowledgeable personnel. As indicated above, the Managerial Culture is prominent at UoTs as well as components of the Developmental Culture, Advocacy and Virtual Cultures.

As the values of the Tangible Culture could also be distinguished at UoTs it could be concluded that the cultural development of universities as identified by Bergquist & Pawlak (2008) apply to UoTs in the South African situation. As these values date back nearly 800 years, it could also be noted that universities are just as relevant today as in the thirteenth century.

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