



Work-integrated learning at a comprehensive higher education institution

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ABSTRACT

Prior to the first democratic elections in South Africa, in 1994, education was questioned. Volumes of discussion documents, Green and White Papers, and Bills preceded the final report of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE). Higher education consisted of a binary system of 21 universities on a level higher than the 15 technikons (generally known in other parts of the world as *polytechnics* or *institutes of technology*). The NCHE report argued for the creation of a single, coordinated system.

As part of the transformation processes in South Africa, the erstwhile Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, instituted a restructuring of the higher education landscape in 2001, through the National Plan for Higher Education. Several institutions were obliged to merge: some strong universities with poorly performing ones; technikons with other technikons, for similar reasons; and some universities with technikons to form a new type of institution. Comprehensive institutions would offer a combination of university and technikon-type programmes.

In January 2004 the former University of South Africa (Unisa) merged with Technikon Southern Africa (TSA) and Vudec, the

distance education campus of Vista University. The billboard slogans on the campuses until recently read: 'three to one, the countdown has begun to comprehensive distance education for the nation'.

Technikons and universities face many challenges as they are obliged to merge. University academics often do not recognise the importance of career-orientated, professional and industrially-based courses. This article will deal with some of these challenges regarding work-integrated learning.

INTRODUCTION

Certain learning outcomes or competencies, of vocational or professional programmes in particular, are best (or could 'only' be) acquired through real-life workplace experiences. Therefore, the curriculum of such programmes includes relevant component of work-based/work-integrated learning in order to master the techniques and skills required by the specific profession or occupation. This learning does not just happen: it must be facilitated, steered/directed or guided. Mentoring plays a key role in this learning through experience, and as an element of the programme curriculum. This experiential learning is, ultimately, an academic responsibility.

This article commences with an overview of the developments in the higher education landscape in South Africa. The second section zooms in on the transformation of the newly established comprehensive distance education institution, that is, the University of South Africa (Unisa). The final section represents the challenges experienced by academics who are responsible for technikon programmes, which comprise work-integrated learning.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

The South African Universities Vice-Chancellors Association (SAUVCA) gives a brief history of South African universities (SAUVCA n.d.). The first university, University of the Cape of Good Hope, was established in 1873. It later became the University of South Africa (Unisa). Missionaries established the South African Native College in 1916. It became the University of Fort Hare in 1951. Several universities had been established by 1959 when the Extension of University Education Act, designed to exclude black students from historically white institutions (HWIs), was passed. Racially segregated 'non-white' universities, that is, Durban-Westville, Western Cape, Zululand and the North, were established instead. At the height of the apartheid era, universities were established in the self-governing territories of Transkei, Venda and Bophuthatswana. In the 20-year period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, several other universities were established, totalling 21 universities in South Africa prior to the transformation of the higher education landscape.

The South African higher education binary structure – falling under two separate

Acts (Gillard 2004) and separate funding arrangements – originated from Western European and especially British systems (Groenewald, Strümpfer and Lessing 2001; Louw 1996; Louw 1997; Posthumus 1997). Technikons originated from Colleges for Technical Education in 1967. Several colleges for advanced technical education (considered quasi-tertiary institutions at the time) were converted into technikons because of an absence of vocationally focused tertiary education (Groenewald 2003). The new name was introduced in 1979 with reference to a combination of the Greek root word ‘*techne*’ (meaning ingenuity, dexterity or skill) and the suffix ‘*kon*’ (Janse van Vuren 1995). In total, 15 technikons were established. In 1995 technikons were authorised by law to issue degrees up to doctoral level (Louw 1997).

Prior to the first democratic election in South Africa in 1994, resources in the higher education system were inequitably and inefficiently allocated; governance structures were undemocratic; access was highly skewed on racial lines; there was a lack of coordination, common goals and systematic planning; and there was an inability to respond to the economic and social needs of the majority of the population (Gillard 2004, 13). The Council on Higher Education (2004) and Gillard (2004) plot a line to the current policy context for higher education from the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), established by presidential proclamation at the end of 1994, to the Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation (December 1996), the related White Papers (April and July 1997), the Higher Education Act of 1997 and the National Plan for Higher Education (in 2001). Gillard remarks that the principal aim in all these initiatives was to address the racial differentiation and discrimination of higher education.

After extensive debate and documentation about higher education transformation, the erstwhile Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, announced his final restructuring proposals (Republic of South Africa 2002). The number of higher education institutions in South Africa would be reduced; a hybrid institution (called a ‘comprehensive’ institution and offering both university and former Technikon-type qualifications) would be introduced; and two national institutes for higher education in Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape would be established. The new higher education landscape would comprise 13 universities (two of which would be expected to develop career-focused, former technikon-type programmes to address regional needs), five technikons (henceforth called universities or institutes of technology); four comprehensive institutions (three of which would be established through the merger of a technikon and a university and one through the redevelopment and refocusing of an existing university), and the two national institutes for higher education already mentioned (Gillard 2004). Kotecha and Stumph (2005) remark that the mergers of different institutional types bring into existence new institutions whose qualifications are designed to be more responsive to labour-market and social needs. At the same time, the Committee of Technikon Principals (CTP) regards cooperative education as ‘a powerful element in the Technikon education paradigm, allowing students to benefit from both formal education and training at Technikons along with first-hand work experience in the marketplace’ (CTP n.d.).

On 1 January 2004 the former University of South Africa (Unisa), which was the only dedicated distance education university, merged with the former Technikon

Southern Africa (TSA), which was the only dedicated distance education technikon, to form the new comprehensive University of South Africa (Unisa). On 2 January the new institution incorporated Vudec, the distance education campus of the former Vista University. Until recently the billboard slogans on the campuses read: 'three to one, the countdown has begun to comprehensive distance education for the nation'.

This background sketch has reviewed the original binary landscape and the line of transformation of higher education in South Africa, and concluded with the establishment of the new comprehensive Unisa. The next section focuses briefly on the transformation of the latter, as precursor to the presentation of challenges experienced by academics associated with work-integrated learning, to form a single distance education institution.

TRANSFORMATION WITHIN A NEWLY FORMED COMPREHENSIVE INSTITUTION

This section provides a brief overview of the new integrated academic structure of Unisa, subsequent to the merger of the former three institutions. This section completes the background sketch; the challenges experienced follow in the next section.

Before the establishment of the new Unisa by merging Unisa, TSA and Vudec, each of the former institutions had its unique academic structure that reflected the arrangement of the different academic landscapes. Each of the institutions offered some unique academic programmes, but also programmes in similar academic areas. However, the last mentioned programmes were not necessarily the same, in that the programmes of the former Unisa and Vudec generally tended to be more academic in nature, whereas the programmes of the former TSA tended to be more vocational and applied in nature.

The academic structure of the new comprehensive Unisa is arranged into five colleges:

- College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences (CAES)
- College of Economic and Management Sciences (CEMS)
- College of Law (CL)
- College of Human Sciences (CHS)
- College of Science, Engineering and Technology (CSET)

Each of the colleges is, in turn, arranged into schools which comprise various departments and, in some cases, even sub-departments. Figure 1 graphically represents the number of work-integrated learning subjects within the various colleges. The largest number, 75 per cent of about 300 work-integrated learning subjects are within CHS. Of these subjects 67 per cent originated from the former Unisa, 26 per cent from TSA and 7 per cent from Vudec. The second-largest number (14%) of work-integrated learning subjects may be found within CSET, all of which originated from TSA. The CAES work-integrated learning subjects originated in the ratio of 65:35 from TSA and Vudec, respectively; and all but one of the CEMS work-integrated learning subjects originated from TSA.

CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY ACADEMICS

Against the backdrop of the previous two sections, this section focuses on the experiences of the former TSA academic staff who are responsible for work-integrated learning, as well as for the challenges they face.

This article came about as result of the authors documenting their own experiences, and as a result of unsolicited remarks by academic colleagues. The authors do not claim a representative view of all former TSA academics, since the sampling was purely ‘convenience’. However, the authors believe that the comments reflect a majority perspective. Table 1 summarises the challenges emerging from the comments recorded.

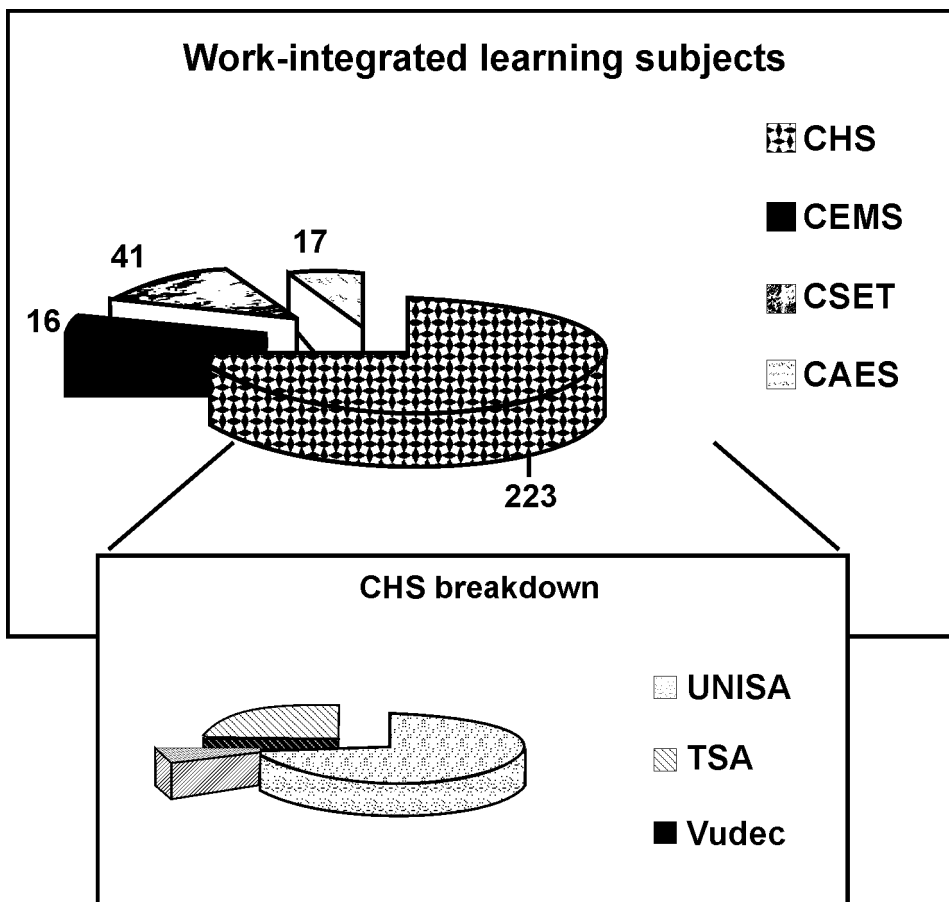


Figure 1: Graphic illustration of the distribution of work-integrated learning subjects

Table 1: Challenges experienced

Themes that emerged	Descriptions
<p>Difficulty of harmonising programmes that are different in nature</p> <p>Minority voice</p> <p>Resistance to work-integrated learning as teaching mode</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The practice of cooperative education, and in particular work-integrated learning as learning mode, has been a niche characteristic of technikon education. ● Only a few university programmes include clinical training, professional practice, supervised fieldwork or internships. ● TSA was a smaller institution than the 'old Unisa', with fewer programmes, students and academic staff. ● Several academic departments at the former TSA were subdivided and their few academic staff members absorbed into bigger academic departments of Unisa. ● Former TSA academics often experience their 'old Unisa' colleagues as <i>big brother</i>, with a <i>know-it-all</i> attitude. ● There is little room for teaching approaches that deviate from the 130-year-old 'tried-and-tested' former Unisa distance education model. ● The necessity of work-integrated learning and the associated resources required are questioned by 'old Unisa' academic management. ● The benefits of work-integrated learning are not recognised.

The biggest challenge facing academics is that work-integrated learning is the niche work-integrated learning of the former technikon sector, whereas it existed in only a few programmes within the university sector. Most of the programmes at the former Unisa do not have a work-integrated learning component. The proposed new Higher Education Qualifications Framework (Ministry of Education 2004, 37) illustrates the proposed relationship between certificates, diplomas and degrees, as well as suggesting the transferability of credits from one to the other. The new comprehensive Unisa needs to produce a single academic structure of the various qualifications it offers within a particular field of study. It is foreseen that harmonising the purely academic and the more vocational programmes that include work-integrated learning will present substantial challenges. This could result in the curriculum of the former technikon programmes being perceived as substandard, which could serve to justify resistance to work-integrated learning and the retention of separate streams of teaching.

Historically, universities in South Africa have enjoyed academic freedom regarding the curriculum development of academic programmes offered, whereas technikons had a prescriptive system of occupational-field consultation and convenor technikons. In this regard, Nkomo (2000, 7–8) remarks that the 'fundamental challenge of the NQF [National Qualifications Framework] to educators is . . . who is included in the decision-making process, and the relationship between different partners in the process, that is,

the social milieu in which the curriculum unfolds' and indicates that qualifications and standards must be 'developed through the participatory and representative structures and processes'. For the former Unisa academics to liaise with practitioners from the workplace in order to produce evidence of the participants in the curriculum development process is a new experience. Engaging with the learning of students in the workplace is totally foreign.

Selling the work-integrated learning concept to former university colleagues has already proven to be difficult, because many of the former Unisa programmes are purely theoretical. To change the mindset of the academic staff concerned is problematic, and for these academics to make the paradigm shift will entail a lot of convincing.

Work-integrated learning, as an element of the tuition of a qualification, is regarded as ridiculous and draft policy documents were perceived as frightening and irrational. There has been resistance to allowing for the operational, administrative and financial resources and it is recommended that work-integrated learning assistance should be purely voluntary.

Despite the resistance reported here, Senate – which is the highest level of academic authority – approved the new institution's work-integrated learning policy in May 2005. The implementation of the policy is under way.

This article is by no means an exhaustive description. While challenges have been identified, there are no ready solutions for them. Only when the programmes have been fully harmonised, will the impact of these challenges be fully realised. Attempts are being made to minimise negative effects.

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