


An interdisciplinary approach to theological studies in a public university

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Theological curriculum in South African universities is comprised of disciplines such as church history, the Old Testament, the New Testament, systematic theology, missiology and practical theology. Theology has been approached through these disciplines and their interaction with each other in an intradisciplinary way. This article argues that theology needs to be done beyond theological disciplines through an interdisciplinary approach to increase its influence in a public university such as the University of South Africa (UNISA). The limitations and drawbacks of this approach are discussed. A brief history of theological studies at UNISA is also discussed to understand how the curriculum of theology has been approached in the past. An interdisciplinary approach is proposed to maximising the research profile of theology through research outputs and postgraduate supervision. In addition, this approach can attract graduates from other fields such as law, medicine, commerce and so forth. An interdisciplinary approach is relevant in designing and developing short learning programmes to attract students to study theology. The development of interdisciplinary niche areas is also important in attracting postgraduate students. Lastly, the approach is pivotal in avoiding theology's possible dearth and death in a public university.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: an interdisciplinary approach to theological studies is proposed as an interaction between the field of theology and other fields such as law, medicine, commerce, and others for the maximisation of student numbers in undergraduate and postgraduate studies and research outputs.

Keywords: theology; curriculum; pedagogy; theological studies; interdisciplinary approach; public university; modality; University of South Africa.

Introduction

Theology is one of the fields that has been part of the sciences in public universities not only in South Africa but the rest of the world (Du Toit & Du Toit 1995:46). Questioning the place of theology in a public university is an unnecessary debate. This is not a big question. The challenge that other scholars have been addressing in the past is whether confessional theology has a place in a public university (Du Toit & Du Toit 1995). This article is not interested in debating the place for a confessional theology in a public university except to say that in a public university, there should be an endeavour to accommodate different Christian denominations in an ecumenical way. Instead of insisting on a confessional theology of a specific denomination, there should be a quest to bring more theologies to public universities. Theology in a public university is also expected to go beyond Christian theology to include Islamic studies, Jewish studies, African spirituality, and so forth. What then is the focus of this article? The article seeks to address the challenge of the sustainability of theology in a public university. In other words, how can theology position itself to remain relevant in public universities? That's the big question. When theology becomes irrelevant in a public university, it will die a natural death or continue to exist without influence. Therefore, the important debate is about the sustainability of theology in a public university.

The theological curriculum has been approached from a disciplinary and intradisciplinary approach in various public universities in South Africa such as the University of South Africa, University of Pretoria, University of Free State, University of KwaZulu-Natal, University of Fort Hare, University of North-West, Stellenbosch University and the University of the Western Cape. The theological curriculum in these universities involves various theological disciplines such as church history, the Old Testament, the New Testament, systematic theology, missiology, and practical theology. To a certain extent, the theological curriculum in these institutions also involves the interaction between one theological discipline and the other in an intradisciplinary way.

Hence, the integration of some of these disciplines into one discipline in many universities in South Africa is an important step in enhancing theological studies. The discipline of practical theology, for example, is integrated with the discipline of missiology given the close relationship between the two. To go beyond the theological disciplines, this article proposes an interdisciplinary approach to the study of theology in a public university with a focus on the University of South Africa (UNISA). This is important, timely, and relevant as UNISA turns 150 years. Theology at UNISA must be studied beyond its discipline and its interaction with one another. In addition, theology at a public university should engage with other fields in the enhancement of its scholarship, institutional influence and impact.

To achieve its objectives, the article will provide a brief history of theological studies at UNISA. It will carry on framing an interdisciplinary approach to theology as the theoretical framework. An interdisciplinary approach to theology will be discussed as a tool to increase the number of students in undergraduate studies. The article will also discuss how the approach can be used to increase research outputs and the supervision of masters and doctoral students. A Postgraduate Diploma in Theology will be discussed as a strategic qualification that targets students from law, commerce, medicine, engineering and other fields. The discussion will also focus on adopting an interdisciplinary approach interaction of theology and other disciplines in the design and development of short learning programmes as a fishing strategy to attract students to study theology, as well as development of niche areas by the academics in a public university. Lastly, the article discusses how the interdisciplinary approach is relevant to deal with the possible dearth and death of theology in public universities.

The structure of the article is as follows:

- The brief history of theological studies in a public university.
- Framing an interdisciplinary approach to the theological curriculum.
- An interdisciplinary approach to increase the number of undergraduate studies.
- An interdisciplinary approach to maximising research and postgraduate studies.
- Postgraduate Diploma in Theology: Attracting students from other fields.
- Interdisciplinary Short learning programmes: A fishing strategy.
- The development of interdisciplinary niche areas.
- Quality of academic staff.
- An interdisciplinary approach: Avoiding the possible dearth and death of theology.

The brief history of theological studies in a public university

As outlined in the introduction, theology is offered at about eight public universities in South Africa with few other

universities such as the University of Cape Town, the University of Johannesburg, and others offering religious studies. According to Botha (1990:14), Professor Johannes A. Lombard was appointed in 1960 by UNISA as a chair of theology with the task of establishing the faculty of theology at the institution. The aim, according to Botha (1990:14), was that 'The theology to be taught at Unisa cannot be contemplated behind the walls of confessional or ecclesiastical protection'. It is called to stand in the university amongst all the other sciences. It is for this reason that the faculty of theology grew and attracted numbers at that time. According to Botha (1990:23), 'In the Principal's 1967 report, he mentioned that the Faculty of Theology had 947 students'. In 1989, the faculty of theology had about 1268 students enrolled for the theological subjects at UNISA (Botha 1990:76). These numbers were not necessarily on par with the other faculties in the university, but were meeting the expectation of a faculty in a public university.

With the dawn of democracy in 1994, the faculty of theology at UNISA was changed to become the faculty of theology and religious studies (Kritzinger 1995:366). It was during this time that there were discussions that the faculty of theology and religious studies should become a school with other small faculties. According to the then dean of the faculty of theology and religious studies, Klippiess Kritzinger and his deputy Louis Kretzsmar, 'discussion centred on whether the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies ought to dissolve as an independent faculty and become a sub-faculty within the Faculty of Arts or whether it should remain a small, but independent, faculty' (Kritzinger & Kretzschmar 1999:241). These discussions came to light because the university's authorities were looking at the numbers of the faculty of theology and religious studies in comparison with other faculties, and thought that it was not justifiable to continue to have this faculty (Kritzinger & Kretzschmar 1999:244). Therefore, it became more the game of numbers than looking at the impact that theology as a field was making in the university and society. It is also an unfair comparison to benchmark theology with other fields which can attract more students given the demands of such skills in the industries.

The debate on integrating the faculty of theology and religious studies with the faculty of arts continued until the merger of UNISA and other institutions as initiated by the then Minister of Education, Kader Asmal. In 2004, UNISA merged with the Technikon of South Africa (TSA) and the Vista University Distance Education Campus (VUDEC) to form one entity but retained the name UNISA. It was during this period that the different faculties that existed in the old UNISA were dissolved in the formation of new colleges. According to Kretzschmar and Bentley (2013):

During the period from 2003 to 2004, the Faculty of Theology was dissolved into the College of Human Sciences. As a result, Theology lost its faculty status. Despite recommendations to this effect – in light of the economic viability of the theological disciplines and the high research output of theologians – the management of the University declined to group the many theological disciplines within a School of the new College. This

resulted in a marked degree of fragmentation and loss of academic and administrative coherence. Some degree of cooperation has been retained through personal relationships and the formation of ad hoc groups. (p. 3)

This means that theology at UNISA moved from being the faculty of theology and religious studies into different theological departments under the School of Humanities. The departments are: biblical and ancient studies; Christian spirituality, church history and missiology; philosophy, and practical and systematic theology. In this arrangement, theology exists as a cluster of various departments. But also runs the risk of becoming one single department if drastic decisions are not taken to change the status quo. One of the radical approaches to saving theology at a public university is an interdisciplinary approach. The next section discusses an interdisciplinary approach to theology as a theoretical framework and research paradigm.

Framing an interdisciplinary approach to theological curriculum

Both the disciplinary and intradisciplinary approaches to theological curriculum are inward-looking. It is for this reason that an interdisciplinary approach to theological curriculum is proposed as a modality of ensuring that theology is not just an interaction between its disciplines but interacts with other fields. Furthermore, an approach to theological curriculum in a public university should maintain its scientific rigour as opposed to becoming a confessional one. Theological curriculum in a public university cannot be designed to serve the interest of a particular denomination or Christian tradition but how different denominations interact with one another. Hence, a clarion call here for an interdisciplinary approach to theological curriculum. An interdisciplinary approach to theological curriculum is different from an intradisciplinary approach because it brings together different approaches from different fields of study in the understanding of a specific phenomenon. Ideally, an interdisciplinary approach is important in crossing faculties and disciplines. In the context of this article, it is important to cross the boundaries of the theological disciplines. According to Guo (2015):

An interdisciplinary approach involves drawing appropriately from several disciplines (or separate branches of learning or fields of expertise) to redefine problems outside of normal boundaries and reach solutions based on a new understanding of complex situations'. (p. 111)

It is different from the cross-disciplinary approach or even a multidisciplinary approach which is the use of two or more disciplines in a study. An interdisciplinary approach goes beyond the conventional disciplines of a specific field by engaging other disciplines. In this context, an interdisciplinary approach to theological curriculum means that theology is studied beyond its conventional disciplines such as church history, systematic theology, biblical studies, missiology, and practical theology.

The interdisciplinary approach to the theological curriculum will allow theology to address matters outside its precinct. However, this is possible without losing the theological basis of an argument to a specific study. This is possible because an interdisciplinary approach allows the interaction between disciplines without losing their focus or field of study. An interdisciplinary approach allows the theological curriculum to deal with complex problems in society by engaging other disciplines such as economics, politics, environment, justice and so forth (Repko, Szostak & Buchberger 2019). Manathunga, Lant and Mellick (2006) explain that interdisciplinary research can be partly characterised as:

Mode 2 knowledge production serves a vital role in the knowledge economy. Mode 2 knowledge is defined as research that is increasingly contextualized, applied, and transdisciplinary by contrast with Mode 1 knowledge which is described as pure, discipline-specific, accumulated knowledge. (p. 365)

Therefore, through the use of an interdisciplinary approach theology transcends its specific theological disciplines. In this way, the theological curriculum becomes enriched in both qualitative and quantitative ways through interaction with other fields in the context of a public university. It is for these reasons that in this article, an interdisciplinary approach is used to apply it quantitatively in the maximisation of student numbers in undergraduate studies. It is also used in the maximisation of research outputs and the postgraduate students. Ultimately, this approach is important in avoiding theology's possible dearth and death in a public university. However, before addressing these aspects of an interdisciplinary approach, it is important to highlight some challenges.

Some challenges to an interdisciplinary approach in the field of theology

An interdisciplinary approach has some challenges that need to be addressed if this approach is to be adopted within the theological curriculum. One of the challenges of an interdisciplinary approach is how adding disciplines from other faculties to theology can be done in such a way that retains theology's unique character (Van Deusen Hunsinger 1995). Therefore, for the successful implementation of the interdisciplinary approach, we have to ensure that theology does not stand the risk of losing its character, integrity, and uniqueness. Kritzinger (1995) suggests that we should identify the unique characteristics of theology and retain them in our quest for an interdisciplinary approach to theological curriculum. Another challenge of this approach is that theology might also stand the risk of losing its influence in the process of being studied with other disciplines (Cameron 2013). To deal with this challenge, there is a need for theology to remain the focus when studied with other disciplines. Theologians are expected to retain theology as the core discipline in the intersectionality of theology and other disciplines. Therefore, an interdisciplinary study should be done without compromising the theological discourse. The last challenge is that an interdisciplinary approach might not serve the purpose of equipping students for ministry or pastoral roles. In this case, the discipline-specific modules should be retained in addition to the

interdisciplinary approach. In the next sections, the article highlights the advantages of adopting an interdisciplinary approach to theological curriculum.

An interdisciplinary approach: Increasing the numbers in undergraduate studies

Manathunga et al. (2006:366) show that an interdisciplinary approach can increase the number of student enrolments. Although writing from the United Kingdom context, the same can apply in an African context too. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach is a relevant one for the attraction of numbers in undergraduate studies. The problem of numbers is not a UNISA one but a theology cluster one because the university has about 400 000 students. A study conducted by Letseka and Karel (2015) showed that:

‘UNISA is the biggest ODL institution on the African continent with an estimated total headcount enrolment of 400 000. Given that the rest of the twenty-four universities in South Africa share just around 1 million student headcounts, it follows that UNISA alone accommodates an estimated 40% of South Africa’s entire university student headcount enrolments.’ (p. 4)

These students according to Lombaard (2015) come from different 130 countries most of them located in Africa. Therefore, UNISA itself as an Open Distance Learning (ODL) institution can attract students from different parts of the world. The only challenge is that these students are not necessarily interested in enrolling in theological qualification. However, the theology cluster can design specific modules that can attract these students.

Theology can do its best to attract at least 1% of these students which will be about 4000, shared between its different departments. This is possible by designing modules that can be relevant to law, commerce, education and other qualifications. This is already happening because one of the modules that attracts numbers within the theology cluster is a module in philosophy within the Department of Philosophy, Systematic and Practical Theology at UNISA. Modules such as educators in pastoral roles have been able to attract students doing Postgraduate Certificate in Education (Schoeman 2015). This is a module that places a teacher in a pastoral care role in addition to his or her responsibilities in educating the learners. This module is important as it can prepare the teacher to deal with other social aspects of the learner other than their educational needs (Schoeman 2012; cf. Hadebe 2023). And since the students in the education college are many, the theology cluster can have many students in their departments. If other departments can design similar modules, this will make the theology cluster attract more students for the sustainability of the field of theology. Potential collaborations exist in working with other fields such as the School of Business Leadership at UNISA in designing modules on the juxtaposition between ethics and business leadership or management.

An interdisciplinary approach: Maximising research and postgraduate studies

An interdisciplinary approach is relevant for the maximisation of the research outputs in the theology cluster at UNISA. In addition, research findings from an interdisciplinary approach are more likely to produce high-quality research outputs given the robust and rigorous interaction between disciplines (eds. Awasthi & Grzybowska 2019:193). In other words, when academics can do research beyond the disciplines of theology, they will become more prolific and produce high-quality research output. Put differently, theologians who think outside the box of their theological disciplines are more likely to become extra prolific in terms of knowledge production and research outputs. However, this does not mean that discipline-specific research is not quality research but points out that an interdisciplinary approach can enhance such quality. One of the strengths of theology is the research component of the field. This can be explored further by ensuring that more research outputs are produced for the sustainability of the field of theology at a public university. The theology cluster can maximise this strength by creating more space for interaction between theology and other disciplines with the hope of producing more research outputs.

Another potential exists in the supervision or promotion of masters and doctoral students, particularly if students are allowed to research the interaction between theology and other disciplines. This means that the theology cluster will be able to attract students who are not interested in confessional theology in undergraduate studies but in an interdisciplinary approach to theology at a postgraduate level. An interdisciplinary approach opens up opportunities for theology students to receive various grants through their focus on the interaction between theology and other sciences such as environmental sciences, health studies, and so forth (Lattuca 2001). In other words, a theology student doing research between theology and sustainable development goals, for example, is more likely to attract more funding than a theology-specific thesis or dissertation. In addition, other funding organisations such as the National Research Foundation (NRF) require the researchers to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to their niche areas. In addition, the NRF encourages research that demonstrates an interaction between disciplines for a better rating of researchers. Therefore, theologians who can juxtapose their niche areas with other disciplines outside the field of theology are more likely to receive higher ratings from the NRF.

Postgraduate diploma in theology: Attracting non-theological graduates

There is a market of non-theological graduates who might be interested in theological studies. Therefore, there is a need to create a qualification that will be able to attract these students who do not have to enrol for theology from the first year of study but at a National Qualification Framework (NQF) level 8. This kind of qualification admits students in possession of NQF level 7 qualifications other than theological

qualifications. The qualification is formally known as the postgraduate diploma in theology (Duncan 2018). This qualification is different from the honours degree because the latter will require a theological undergraduate degree as a requisite for the enrolment. In addition, this is different from a National Diploma in Theology as such a diploma will take 3 years to complete the qualification. The postgraduate diploma in theology at the NQF level 8 normally takes a year to complete the qualification (Jackson 2005). The qualification normally has 120 credits made up of about 10 modules of the theological disciplines. Students who are already pastors and church leaders in their own right and desire to qualify as theologians will be attracted to such a qualification. Therefore, a postgraduate qualification will be a good strategy for ensuring that such students obtain the necessary knowledge for ministry. Such programmes already exist at other institutions and UNISA will have to compete for a market share.

The qualification will be suitable for many neo-Pentecostal pastors who do not have theological training. Many of these pastors have been buying qualifications from overseas institutions that are not accredited by a proper body. And therefore they will have a problem in terms of gaining accreditation with the South African Qualification Authority (SAQUA) (Duncan 2018). Although the government has been able to close some of them with the help of media exposure to such institutions, many of them still exist in communities. The non-accredited institutions still take from pastors who are very unsuspecting of these institutions. Some of the pastors are willing to pay money to gain doctoral degrees and be ordained as bishops (Resane 2017). Therefore, an introduction to the Postgraduate Diploma in Theology might help to deal with some of these challenges. And since some of the pastors already have qualifications in other fields, they can easily gain knowledge in theology through this kind of diploma. Thus, as much as the enrolment for fake degrees is discouraged among these pastors, there is equally a need to provide an alternative to the same. In this article, a Postgraduate Diploma in Theology is one of the alternatives for attracting graduates from other fields of study other than theology.

Interdisciplinary short learning programmes: A fishing strategy

More than 20 years ago, the researcher used to go fishing at a Mokwababa dam, in Ga-Mamaila, Limpopo province. The researcher remembers that to attract the fish to the fishing area, there was a need to use berley as bait. Berley itself does not catch fish but attracts the fish to move from deep waters to a nearby fishing area. This is pivotal to fisher humans who do not have long fishing lines. When the fish is at the proximity of three to five metres then catching them becomes an easy task. The interdisciplinary Short Learning Programmes within the theological curriculum can be used to attract students who are not interested in pursuing a theology diploma or degree but a certificate (Todd & Verbick 2005). However, once they are closer by enrolling in one or two short learning programmes chances are high that they

may register for the diploma or theology in the long term (Materu 2007). The advantage of the short learning programme is that it can be completed within a short period as many of them are designed for a year or less. The short learning programme is important for granting an individual a specific skill or even for reskilling and upskill an individual (Fung 2020).

However, for this to happen the curriculum of these short learning programmes should involve additional disciplines other than theology. These should be disciplines from health studies, political sciences, educational sciences, environmental sciences and so forth. Therefore, short learning programmes need to be designed on theology and politics, theology and health, theology and the environment, theology and education, theology and entrepreneurship, theology and safety, theology and leadership, and so forth. When the students from these disciplines see their fields integrated with theology, they will be attracted to register for the short learning programme and ultimately for the diploma or degree in theology. However, this is not a given since there are other challenges such as the high cost of studies which may deter students from studying further. Therefore, short learning programmes will be a good start for many pastors and leaders who cannot enrol for a formal qualification. In addition, short learning programmes can be recognised as prior learning for the enrolment in formal qualifications. According to Haddad (2016:4), short learning programmes can be designed and developed to meet the needs of society in different aspects of social life. In addition, these programmes can be developed into proper learning areas that will be able to attract students from different communities. Furthermore, the programmes can be developed into master's and doctoral coursework that will also be able to attract postgraduate students as per the discussions in the preceding sections.

Developing interdisciplinary niche areas

Another way in which students can be attracted to study theology at a public university is when the academics can develop interdisciplinary niche areas. At UNISA, this could be done through the interaction with existing catalytic niche areas such as marine studies, aviation and aeronautical studies, automotive, energy, space study and square kilometre array, fourth industrial revolution and digitalisation, natural sciences (biotechnological studies), health studies and/or medicine (UNISA 2023). Postgraduate students are also attracted to academic supervisors who can supervise them in a niche area. Therefore, developing interdisciplinary niche areas will attract postgraduate students interested in such areas of study. This means that even if a subject is not taught at an undergraduate level, students might still be interested in pursuing such at the masters and doctoral levels. This means that academics at a public university such as UNISA must work hard in the development of interdisciplinary niche areas to attract a variety of students. Furthermore, academics in a public university should avoid duplicating niche areas within the

field of theology. The more theology has a variety of topics, the more students it will be able to attract for the enrolment in the field of study. Niche areas are also important in the development of research projects in the long term and attraction of external funding which are important in sustaining theological studies in the public university.

The quality of academic staff

The development of interdisciplinary niche areas also helps in ensuring that we have more influential theologians in public universities such as UNISA who can attract more students. One of the reasons that kept theology alive at UNISA over the years is the quality of its academic staff. The generation of David Bosch, William Saayman, Simon Maimela, Takatso Mofokeng, Mokgethi Motlhabi, Christinah Landman, Louis Kretzmar, Klippiess Kritzinger and others were able to maintain the influence of theology at UNISA because of the quality of their work. But also because of their active participation in Christian communities and engagement in public discourses. In addition, the above-mentioned scholars were prolific in the field of theology. It is a challenge in the 21st century to develop theologians of the same calibre. This can be done by ensuring that the academic staff have the doctoral qualification, produce quality research outputs, and develop teaching and learning materials. When this is done, it could be an important factor to maintaining the influence of theology in a public university.

Avoiding the possible dearth and death of theology in a public university

First, the move from a faculty of theology and religious studies to various departments under the school of humanities indicates that there is a possibility of theology losing its influence in the university. This downward spiral means that theology has lost the privileges of marketing itself and running proper administration for the sustainability of the discipline. This marks the dearth of theology, meaning theology continues to exist in a public university such as UNISA but with less institutional influence and impact. This means that the more theology loses its organisational structure such as faculty and so forth, the more it loses its influence. Secondly, the discussion around integrating the current three departments into one department indicates that theology might be kicked out of the system in the long term. If theology becomes one department at UNISA, the main question is what will be the next step? This might mean the death of theology, meaning theology will cease to exist in a public university such as UNISA. This is a possibility given the size of UNISA which can lead to such a decision that cannot be taken elsewhere. To avoid any of the two scenarios highlighted above, there is a need to take an interdisciplinary approach very seriously in increasing student numbers, research outputs, postgraduate studies, and the use of short learning programmes. In this article, these are the modalities and pedagogies of survival in a public university.

Conclusion

This article looked at the previous approaches to the study of the field of theology such as the disciplinary approach and the intradisciplinary approach. The article argued that for the survival of the field, there is a need to study theology beyond its disciplines and their interaction with one another. The article proposed an interdisciplinary approach as a modality that goes beyond the theological disciplines in the study of theology. This approach can be used to increase student enrolment in public universities because theologians will be recruiting beyond theological students. The approach was discussed as a tool that can maximise research because theologians will be engaging in discourses beyond theology. And will be able to supervise students with interests beyond theological studies but willing to approach their study from theological perspectives. The approach is relevant for the implementation of a Postgraduate Diploma in Theology as a qualification aimed at attracting students from other fields. An interdisciplinary approach was also discussed in the design and development of short learning programmes as a fishing strategy to attract students to study theology. Theologians are expected to develop interdisciplinary niche areas which could also lead to the quality of academic staff in the public university such as UNISA. Lastly, the approach was discussed as a relevant tool in avoiding the possible dearth and the death of theology in public universities. Thus, an interdisciplinary approach challenges previous approaches to the study of theology and promises to secure the future of theological studies in public universities such as UNISA and others. The approach proposed a theological curriculum that goes beyond conventional disciplines of theology. The approach suggested that theology should be studied beyond disciplinary and intradisciplinary approaches.

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Author's contributions

M.S.K. is the sole author of this research article.

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Disclaimer

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