

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA LIBRARY: FROM THE SOWETO REBELLION TO THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF APARTHEID, 1976–1990

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the history of the University of South Africa (Unisa) library from 1976 to 1990. It situates the growth of information services in distance education in South Africa within the context of political protest associated with the Soweto uprising of the mid 1970s and the states of emergency of the mid 1980s. It traces the vicissitudes of the library as it charted a course through educational instability, rising student expectations, the declining value of the South African currency, and increased bureaucratisation and computerisation to offer an efficient and comprehensive service to a wider, more racially mixed, constituency than the apartheid government ever anticipated. This naturally earned Unisa considerable state approval because it could be paraded as a national, 'non-racial' university at a time when apartheid aroused universal opprobrium. An attempt is also made in the article to reassert the importance of library history as a credible field of research through a case study of South Africa's largest academic library. Its alleged political complicity and ambivalent reputation are examined on the basis of archival and published sources and assessed against the critical debates of the apartheid state which permeated historical, educational and information discourses from the 1970s to the unbanning of the liberation movements in 1990.

Keywords: academic libraries; apartheid; higher education; library history; University of South Africa (Unisa)

1. INTRODUCTION

Library history has been out of favour in the information science profession for some time. Its heyday between the 1950s and 1970s is forgotten in the

curricula of today. Archie Dick (2006) argues that since its displacement by information technology and management practice in syllabuses in the 1990s, library history has occupied only a small space within the more popular and growing field of 'book history'. The burgeoning of the latter is partly the result of postcolonial perspectives and a new interest in intellectual history, which has accompanied the impact of theorists, such as Michel Foucault and Jurgen Habermas, among others (Hofmeyr, Nuttall and Michael 2001; Hofmeyr and Kriel 2006). There is perhaps some truth in the judgement that library history's institutional captivity, similar to that of church history, for example, has exiled it from mainstream historical literatures and severely diminished its scholarly significance. Dick (2006) condemns library history in South Africa as 'inward-looking, descriptive, apologetic and ethnically focused'. The experience of library history in South Africa is, however, not unique; similar trends have occurred in Europe (Hall 1996; Rose 2003). Only in the United States of America is there still a robust library historiography (Wiegand 2000; Goedeken 2004).

My sense, however, is that it is attracting attention again as our democracy returns to examine our deeply conflicted past, instead of simply concentrating on the present (see, for example, *Innovation: A journal for appropriate librarianship and information work in Southern Africa* 28 (2004), special issue on 'Historical aspects of library and information work in Africa'). Nation-building discourses of the 1990s generally exhorted us to forget the past, or at least lay it to rest. Even the Truth and Reconciliation Commission aimed to make a better future rather than exhume the bones of apartheid's depravity; its processes were perfunctory and its outcome inconclusive, if not unsatisfactory – allowing amnesty to triumph over restitution (James and Van de Vijver 2000; Villa-Vicencio and Verwoerd 2000). Book history has provided the impetus to a re-invigorated library history (Rose 2003), and since it relies to some degree on the detail of the latter there is need for a refocused and sustained examination of libraries, individually and collectively, and their role in cultural formation.

There is even a case to be made for the 'institutional imperative' of library history precisely because of society's proneness to institutionalise education. The 'institutionality' of libraries discloses their plurality and diversity and often explains their contradictoriness, serving different constituencies and interests, accommodating conflicting and competing ideologies, apparently serving many masters. Researching libraries from the vantage point of social and cultural history is therefore likely to uncover such embeddedness of ideology and consciousness in library management and practice, not to mention its potential to identify intellectual and political currents.

To buttress my argument, I need simply point to the work of Peter Lor (1996)

on library history in South Africa for an American audience, of Irene Owens (2002), which explores the effects of political protest on libraries in South Africa during the 1960s and 1970s, Jacqueline Kalley's (2000) research on library services for Africans in the Transvaal during apartheid, Patricia Clark (2004) on the development of library services in the western Cape in the 1940s, Thomas van der Walt (2004) on the German contribution to South African librarianship, Nicole Brown (2004) on the impact of political change on public libraries in Cape Town, Archie Dick (2001; 2004) on the professionalisation of librarianship in South Africa and the complicity of South African librarians in the destruction of books during the apartheid era, and Christopher Merrett (2001) on civil rights and the library community during the 1990s.

This article is a sequel to a history of the Unisa Library (Suttie, 2005), which traced the formative years from 1946 to 1976, from tentative beginnings after the Second World War to its establishment as a well-resourced repository of information at the apogee of apartheid. The intention here, however, is to explore the more volatile period from the Soweto rebellion in 1976 to the unbanning of the liberation movements in South Africa in 1990, and my approach is chronological, in order best to show change over time. The Unisa Library was regarded by many as the premier university library during the 1980s, boasting bulging budgets and a new state-of-the-art building, but its critics queried its credibility, alleging profligacy in book selection, complicity in unpalatable state policies and a cavalier political expediency. 'Bigger is not always better', they argued, in answer to Unisa's 'information imperialism' and its 'avoidance of contentious and controversial issues' (Merrett 1988; 1988a). This ambivalence about the Unisa Library warrants historical examination; it calls for special treatment on account of Unisa's influence on distance education and its role as the educator of African students on a very large scale from the 1980s.

Its library was often at the centre as the provider of study material to its students and the reservoir of research to its own academics and an ever-widening circle of others, as well as a reference desk for the state sector, community interests and a growing readership of individuals. Unisa's attempt to establish itself as 'everyone's university' in the 1980s when it lowered its entrance requirements was largely constructed around its large information capacity and its correspondence reach (Van Wijk 1980:249–251). In many ways it reflected the demographic shift in student population, trends in contemporary scholarship – especially in the humanities and social sciences, theory and practice in librarianship and information studies, and struggles in education as apartheid discourses waned and new freedoms were on offer.

2. MAINTAINING CAPACITY; PRETENDING NEUTRALITY 1976–1982

The Unisa Library had grown dramatically in the early 1970s, on the back of cascading student enrolments and large book budgets (*Unisa Bibliovaria* 1976:1). The university was the beneficiary of government favour because it was generously funded in terms of a formula devised by the Department of Education which privileged white universities, despite its diverse constituency which mirrored a changing South African polity by mid decade. These incremental changes curiously inculcated a sense of political and educational security which elicited a rather mute response to the cataclysmic events of the Soweto uprising in 1976. The rebellion sparked nation-wide unrest and heightened campus activism at Bantustan and ‘liberal’ universities as well as secondary schools. Reading Unisa Council or library minutes for 1976–1977 one is, however, struck by the sense of ‘work-as-usual’. Hardly any mention is made of the momentous challenge to apartheid hegemony. Whether this was a conscious rebuttal of political protest or simply a naive attempt to construct Unisa as somehow ‘above politics’, because it had a more racially mixed population than other universities by virtue of its correspondence-based approach to higher education, is difficult to ascertain from written sources. The director of the Unisa Library, John Willemse, broached the national crisis only obliquely, emphasising the challenge of contributing to the ‘development of the people of South Africa’ through the expansion of the library’s services and resources (*Unisa Bibliovaria* 1976).

The oral record is more enlightening. African academic staff were still employed only on a temporary basis as junior assistants. They commented on institutional inequities, social alienation and political isolation at Unisa. Black library personnel experienced similar disaffection, if slightly less pronounced. The Unisa discussion classes, like the staff bus service, were still segregated as late as 1978 and ablutions were racially designated as staff experienced entrenched discrimination. The library, however, seemed slightly more amenable to black professional appointments and led the rest of the university in identifying possible future staff who trained at library schools around the country. Some attempt to recruit African librarians was also undertaken once the government permitted permanent black professional appointments which helped to neutralise the perception that Unisa was a conservative white Afrikaner university, despite its pretence of being bilingual (Afrikaans-English). But, for the most part, it was ‘business as usual’ as the library embarked on ambitious expansion plans.

A special grant by the Unisa Council to extend the Study Collection, which became a fully fledged department separate from Lending, and increase the capacity of the branch libraries led to considerable growth in 1976; 32 000

new recommended books were purchased and the book stock in the Durban and Cape Town branch libraries doubled. A library in East London was also begun in co-operation with the public library and for the first time a permanent librarian was appointed to run the flourishing Windhoek branch. At home, the holdings of the main Unisa Library grew to 662 387 items, which included nearly 60 000 volumes of journals. The Study Collection experienced a fifty per cent increase in the number of books issued, which emphasised the demand for literature among the plethora of degree courses offered by the university. The library's reserve fund had enabled this unbridled growth in 1976 despite the 30–50 per cent increase in many journal subscriptions and the average 24 per cent hike in book costs; a total of R559 959 was spent (Unisa Archives 1976; *Unisa Bibliovaria* 1976a:2).

Higher costs, however, forced libraries to co-operate in order to cut down on unnecessary duplication. This was achieved mainly through the offices of the Inter-University Library Advisory Committee of the Committee of University Principals, especially in respect of journal subscriptions. This initiative was launched because the National Library Advisory Council proved rather ineffectual in orchestrating co-operation among important libraries. The local branch of the South African Library Association (SALA) tried to achieve greater efficiencies among libraries in Pretoria, particularly the Unisa Library and the Hans Merensky Library at the University of Pretoria. The main obstacle to such plans was how to provide access to the unique subscriptions of each library to the users of both institutions (Unisa Archives 1976).

The migration of certain departments in the Faculty of Economic Sciences to the Skinner Street campus also meant that relevant book stock had to be moved to the Samuel Pauw Building, thus dividing the library's collections. This led to a sharp difference of opinion between lecturers in these departments and library management, which was opposed to the Balkanisation of the Unisa Library holdings. The library's annual report of 1976 recorded that the students would be most negatively affected by these developments (Unisa Archives 1976). The entire process from its inception to the eventual move was, however, slow.

The South African Machine Readable Cataloguing (SAMARC) Project, under the auspices of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), and designed to articulate South African databases with international catalogues, was resumed early in 1977 (Unisa Archives 1977). It became a national project and Unisa assumed a leading role. A range of other innovations was also envisaged in the 'Planning for the Future' programme that was introduced to anticipate further development. The new Audio-Visual Library was opened on the second floor of the library at the beginning of 1976. It experienced a steady growth in use, especially of cassette tapes, as audio-

visual materials assumed a more important status among the Unisa Library's holdings (Unisa Archives 1976).

1976 also saw a change in policy regarding government publications. All new commission reports were classified and placed on the open shelves in order to stimulate interest in their contents and cultivate their use in research. The same was planned for South African theses. The Unisa Archive was active in microfilming its collection of documents relating to the University of the Cape of Good Hope, the founding institution of higher education in South Africa and Unisa's own forerunner. The Unisa Documentation Centre for African Studies, an important repository of contemporary African sources for researchers, was given a fillip with the appointment of Annica H. van Gylswyk at the beginning of 1976. Among her first assignments was the inventorying of the A.W.G. Champion papers, reflecting his significant political life in Natal as a key player in the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU) and the African National Congress (ANC), as well as his close links with the Zulu royal house. Links with the Southern African Research Project at Yale University and the Centre for International and Area Studies in London foresaw wider use of the Unisa archival collections (Unisa Archives 1976) and the eventual autonomy of the Documentation Centre for African Studies by 1979. Another important collection that was later added to the Unisa Library's holdings was the Bloemfontein Diocesan Library which reflected the ecclesiastical history of the Church of the Province of South Africa from about the mid-nineteenth century to the 1950s (Unisa Archives 1977a).

A feature of the Unisa Library's sophisticated development by 1977 was its elaborate provision for the growing number of undergraduates, including the construction of readers for many degree courses, especially in Law and the Humanities. Henry F. G. Neethling, Deputy Director (Public Services) was an architect of this system which was designed to articulate with teaching requirements in subject departments and the production of learning materials produced under the aegis of the Department of Scheduling at Unisa (Unisa Archives 1977b). Various academic departments participated in the project to produce readers for their students, including English, Development Administration and Politics, Library Science and Social Work. It was found that readers offered an effective way of making international study material available to students in a convenient package, notwithstanding the time-consuming process of obtaining copyright permission and the laborious negotiations this entailed with publishers. The Head of the Study Collection, Garry N. Nader, opined that readers represented 'a pragmatic solution to the problems of mass supply and demand, and that, for first and second level courses, they offer a realistic solution to the problems of providing an

adequate library service to an ever-growing student population' (Unisa Archives 1978b:7).

Also in 1977, the Director of Unisa Library, John Willemse, noted the increasing reliance of students on its services. Not only did the percentage of those using library books (32,8) increase significantly, but also the number of issues per student, which he explained as a consequence of increased book prices and incremental growth in academic staff, many of whom were engaged in research towards higher degrees or the publication of books. To meet the higher demand for literature, the loan period for books in the Study Collection issued from the main library or its branches was reduced to increase circulation. Moreover, photocopying costs increased by a dramatic 44 per cent in 1977, but the number of select bibliographies compiled by subject librarians declined, mainly because of the decrease in students registered in Unisa's School of Business Leadership (SBL) (Unisa Archives 1977).

The United Party Archive in the library acquired the services of a qualified archivist in Mari Coetzee in 1977 which led to the profiling of this collection, and the Documentation Centre for African Studies boasted 150 donations, only two years after its inception in March 1975. Among its significant papers were those of W. P. Ndibongo and J. J. R. Jolobe, both influential churchmen in the Transkei, D. C. Marivate of the Valdezia Mission in the Northern Transvaal, and Dr S. Molema, a pioneering African historian whose collection included an unpublished romance by Sol Plaatje (Unisa Archives 1977; *Unisa Bibliovaria* 1977:2). The focus on African collections was a symptom of the Unisa Library's strategic plan to demonstrate intellectual relevance and lessen its Eurocentric connections. It was probably also hastened by the post-1976 reconfiguration of higher education as the apartheid government embarked on a reformist path sponsored by John Vorster's détente policy towards African states and P. W. Botha's embrace of trade union reform at the end of the 1970s. Most of all, it related to library politics, as archiving competed with other interests in the making of a premier research library. The African focus was, however, offset by the draconian censorship introduced by the government in 1977. The Unisa Library quickly set to work on a list of banned publications. Ms E. Olivier in Cataloguing identified 103 prohibited books on the open shelves after six weeks of thorough investigation. A new 'banned collection' was inaugurated to control access to embargoed material (*Unisa Bibliovaria* 1977a:9). Crucial texts disappeared from the open shelves and international critiques of racism in South Africa were relegated to archival vaults. Often librarians 'allowed deference to the state to override professional responsibility to users' (Merrett 1986:88; Suttie 1990).

Their action was entirely in line with the university's official response to

social protest after Soweto, largely conveyed in Theo van Wijk's speeches to staff. In his capacity as principal of Unisa, he expressed reservations about 'culturally relevant' Africanist approaches to education in place of Western knowledges, and anxiety about the populist demand for 'public accountability' by universities which he ironically construed as a threat to autonomy and academic freedom. For him, anti-apartheid agitation constituted an attack on the 'independence' of the university and he compared it with what he saw as the deleterious effects on higher education of rampant trade unionism in Britain. He criticised those who wished to draw the university into the 'maelstrom of social and political movements' (Van Wijk 1980:252–254). His view of the university as 'non-political' was shared by a large constituency within Unisa, of both staff and students, and the library management's policies, including those around censorship, mirrored this sentiment.

In 1978, Robert Poller, head of the Subject Reference division, investigated the particular library needs of various institutes at Unisa, focusing especially on the Bureau for Market Research, the Institute of Labour Relations, the SBL and the Institute for Criminology. The existence of these units in the university had led to the decentralisation of library services. Following the relocation of the Faculty of Commerce and Administration library to the Samuel Pauw Building, Poller recommended an amalgamation of the various institute libraries within the main Sanlam Library in order to offer a superior specialist service (Unisa Archives 1978a).

There was a growing concern that the Unisa Library would run out of book space by 1981 unless immediate measures were taken. Projections were submitted by the Director of the library which paved the way for a debate about the future development and housing of the fast-expanding Unisa Library during the 1980s (Unisa Archives 1978). Twenty new members of staff had been appointed in 1979, following the unprecedented growth of Unisa. This influx changed the dynamics of the library quite profoundly. Diversity of opinion increased and the gender ratios changed (*Unisa Bibliovaria* 1979:12). The patriarchy of management, however, remained and so did its chauvinism (*Unisa Bibliovaria* 1979b:1), but it was challenged by the appointment of a second tier of well-qualified white women librarians who assumed positions of influence in the evolving hierarchy. The top posts in the library were occupied by white men until the 1990s. Apartheid patterns of job reservation also maintained the racial exclusivity of the professional staff. Unisa, following the trend of government, adopted bilingualism (Afrikaans-English) in its communication with staff and students, a policy diligently pursued by Unisa's principal, Theo van Wijk, a product of Rhodes University College (Liebenberg 1988:4, 8), although the institutional culture remained strongly Afrikaans. The Unisa Library staff magazine tried hard to give English and Afrikaans equal representivity, but the *lingua franca* of the

library was Afrikaans. Staff and student growth was accompanied by the movement of people and resources to achieve greater efficiencies and more coherence among the libraries making up the main Unisa Library. The most significant development was the transfer of the economics and management books to the Samuel Pauw library (*Unisa Bibliovaria* 1979a:4). Despite these changing trends, John Willemse remained concerned about the relative knowledge deficit of South Africa's universities, most of which lacked even the most rudimentary library facilities. His ambition, therefore, was to steer the Unisa Library towards a national repository in order to fill this lack of scientific information (*Unisa Bibliovaria* 1979:1).

Perhaps the single most important proposal of 1980 was the planned integrated computer system for the library. This would entail a dramatic shift to the 19th edition of the Dewey Decimal Classification System, the Library of Congress Subject Headings and the second edition of the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, in order to achieve maximum advantage from standardised electronic information in MARC-data form. This proposal would initiate a veritable revolution in the computerisation of the Unisa Library and the motivation was presented in a detailed seven-page memorandum signed by Willemse. It represented an audacious plan to bring Unisa into line with international university library practice, and to abandon the idiosyncratic systems that had evolved at Unisa in the era of Heinz Zastrau, Willemse's predecessor (Unisa Archives 1980a).

The annual report for 1980 was pleased that the rationalisation of recommended literature undertaken by the Unisa Library since 1978 had begun to pay dividends. The escalating enrolments of the late 1970s had put an enormous strain on the library. By limiting the number of recommended books per assignment, the library had achieved significant economies of scale. Fewer undergraduates used its facilities because of the successful introduction of readers and more comprehensive study guides. The Director noted with satisfaction, however, that postgraduate use had increased as a result of the more focused bibliographical service provided by subject librarians whose access to international computerised databases had been enhanced. This section adopted a more specialised approach to the various disciplines in imitation of the service offered by many universities abroad. Inter-library loans also ensured wider use of Unisa's resources by users at other universities (Unisa Archives 1980).

As part of the systematic growth of the Unisa information services to its students, the Pietersburg branch library opened in 1980, and a regional office in Johannesburg also added to the library's reach. As its own stock increased, the main library took over space on the ground floor of the Sanlam building vacated by the Production and Despatch Departments (Unisa Archives 1980).

It was anticipated that the library building would be extended by 1984, an expectation which was not met.

The professionalisation of the library's staff was taken very seriously by its management in the 1980s, which meant that more and more librarians enrolled each year for courses to upgrade their qualifications. Many completed Honours degrees in Library Science, while others were encouraged to complete the Higher Diploma in Librarianship (Unisa Archives 1980). Others attended conferences, presented papers, served on committees and published chapters in books and articles in journals. The library became a mainstay of Unisa's intellectual life and its reputation often eclipsed that of other departments in the university; it was highly regarded in many library forums and in academic circles across the country (Unisa Archives 1986). The profession itself changed. On 23 October 1980, the South African Institute for Library and Information Science (SAILIS) was inaugurated, ostensibly open to all races, but restricted to qualified librarians which protected its 'white' character. Seth Manaka, the president of the African Library Association of South Africa (ALASA), was invited to the launch of SAILIS as an observer (*Unisa Bibliovaria* 1979c:1), emphasising the stubborn segregation of librarianship which persisted into the 1990s.

The archival acquisitions of the Unisa Library in 1980 included the Sonny Leon papers and microfilm copies of the South African Student Organisation (SASO) trial, which included the case against Steve Biko. The question of censorship assumed significant proportions as the government's Directorate of Publications declared an embargo on certain political (and other) publications. The journal subscriptions were increased and back issues of important titles were ordered; the periodicals collection assumed considerable proportions as 34 530 journals were circulated to teaching departments during 1980 (Unisa Archives 1980).

The Unisa Library effected a 4,4 per cent cut in its lending of books due to the decision not to recommend library reading for the first assignment at first-year level. Study Collection experienced an even greater decrease – some 13 per cent, which allowed for greater efficiency. A hugely worrying tendency in 1981, however, was the increase in book loss – up more than 100 per cent from R6 089 to R12 988 (Unisa Archives 1980).

A more positive trend was the increase in the number of academic staff from Unisa and other universities using the special collections in the library archives. The shift to postgraduate study and research seemed marked; this was confirmed by the greater demand for the services of subject librarians, who improved their performance by being grouped in four teams under the direct supervision of a senior subject specialist. In this way, in-service training was more focussed and more discipline specific, away from the more

generalised bibliographies of the 1970s. Book selection received more attention and collection development became a major preoccupation, especially in building a comprehensive southern African library.

For the first time, the library's holdings passed the million mark. Donations to the Unisa Archives grew steadily, making this part of the library an important research centre. The organisational structure of the library was also under the spotlight in 1981; this reflected the greater stability in staffing. Four posts of Assistant Director were upgraded to Deputy Director as the hierarchy became more elaborate. Staff issues dominated the life of the library following 49 resignations (Unisa Archives 1981). Unisa librarians were sought after in other institutions; this is confirmed by the 22 who took more senior posts in rival libraries in 1982 (Unisa Archives 1982).

In the early 1980s, the Unisa Library became profoundly bureaucratised; it introduced a range of policies to control its functioning and undertook a number of investigations to assess the effectiveness of its services. It upgraded the ranks of its staff, commissioned research to improve its participation in teaching and research initiatives in the rest of the university, and announced a mission statement to support the tuition activities at Unisa by providing access to knowledge and information and by working with other libraries nationally. Its mission statement and a set of accompanying goals and objectives, devised under the guidance of the Unisa Graduate School of Business Leadership (SBL), aimed at giving the various divisions in the library more autonomy. So began an elaborate evaluation process and re-organisation of library services. Each division had to score a minimum norm in the provision of information materials to staff and students (Unisa Archives 1982).

The Unisa Archive saw an increase in use following the acquisition of extra space in the library. The additional 2 100 square metres were incorporated during a ceremony on 5 October 1982, space which was originally occupied by the Production and Despatch departments of the university (Willemse 1988:58). The most important donation was the Frederick Wagener Africana Collection which was on permanent loan from the Department of National Education (Unisa Archives 1982).

The library staff grew to 182 full-time posts in 1982 and there was increased evidence of commitment to professional associations, both nationally and internationally. John Willemse began his long connection with the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and other staff visited British, European and American libraries on funded scholarships. The Unisa Library was establishing itself as a premier information resource in the country. The documentation on these visits is detailed and was designed to give Unisa an international edge, despite the constraining apartheid politics of the time and the intensifying academic boycott (Unisa Archives 1982).

Willemse had increased the profile of the Unisa Library by serving on ten university committees and nine professional boards or committees, including the South African Bibliographical and Information Network (SABINET) council and executive committee and the IFLA Standing Committee on University and Other Research Libraries. Nine other members of the Unisa Library staff served on a further twenty university or professional committees (Unisa Archives 1983) – testimony to Unisa’s imperialism in library circles, which was sometimes regarded with suspicion by ‘liberal’ universities.

Willemse was a hugely influential force in the expansion of the Unisa Library. He was often controversial and authoritarian, but he vigorously promoted the interests of the library and was largely successful. It is curious that, unlike his predecessor, Heinz Zastrau, and other ‘pioneers’ of academic librarianship in South Africa, he has not been honoured with a *festschrift*. He published prolifically during his career, especially on library technology and management (Willemse 1989; 1991; 1993) and his energies were concentrated on making the Unisa Library into a world-class research facility. He was made a part-time professor of Library and Information Science in 1981 and supervised a number of postgraduate theses (Le Roux 1988:16). Theo van Wijk was equally important (Suttie 2005:97). He was a prime mover in academic library planning and was appointed chair of the council and executive committee of SABINET after its establishment in February 1982, despite his not being a librarian. SABINET represented a huge leap forward in the provision of a national union catalogue for South Africa (Malan 2004; Man and Erasmus 2004). Van Wijk served three terms in the chair and was awarded honorary membership of SAILIS in recognition of his work (Willemse 1988:60–62). His role was supplemented by that of the chancellor, Victor Hiemstra, a judge of the supreme court who was a prominent, and controversial, member of the Afrikaner Broederbond. His *verligte* (politically enlightened) politics led him to support the Afrikaans poet, Breyten Breytenbach, oppose the border war against neighbouring ‘Frontline’ African states, which harboured anti-apartheid liberation forces, and ardently promote bilingualism at Unisa. His political and intellectual outlook therefore accorded with that of Van Wijk’s and profoundly influenced the ideological trajectory of the university as a whole (*Sunday Times* 2006:16).

The Samuel Pauw Library in Skinner Street gradually assumed an independent identity as an Economics and Business Studies Library (Unisa Archives 1982). It symbolised the maturing of the Faculty of Economic Sciences which expanded rapidly, especially as white students, many Afrikaans-speaking, gravitated towards careers in the private sector (Minnaar and Neuhoff 1982:14). The rest of the university experienced a flood of enrolments by African students. This was despite the establishment of Vista University, which was designed to provide a teaching university to South

Africa's urban Africans, almost in competition with Unisa's correspondence education. In many ways it reflected the death throes of apartheid social engineering, relying on the right-wing machinations of Andries Treurnicht in Parliament who had argued for the creation for an urban, black university in 1981 (*Debates House of Assembly* 1981; Seepe 2004:7–8).

Radicalised politics affected distance education in ways that were not anticipated by Unisa. More and more students regularly visited the campus and formed lobbies, mainly under the banner of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), proclaiming 'Liberation first, education later'. In 1983 the schools' boycott centred on demands for free text books, properly qualified teachers, official recognition of Students' Representative Councils (SRCs), the abolition of corporal punishment, and so on. Increasingly the conflict was about state control of schools versus 'people's power in education' (Alexander 1990:25–48). The hunger for learning and reading materials impinged upon the Unisa Library and put more and more pressure on the Study Collection to provide adequate recommended books for students.

3. ON THE PLATEAU, LOOKING OVER THE EDGE, 1983–1987

South Africa's increasing political isolation became noticeable in the straitened economic conditions of 1983 which led to a further decline in the value of the Rand and an increase in General Sales Tax (GST) levied by the apartheid government. These developments led to overspending on the Unisa Library's budget for the year. Contrary winds also heralded a new era in Unisa's life as it felt the buffeting of international disapproval. This was only slightly offset by the eventual introduction of the new ALIS computerisation system of the library in October 1982, after years of preparation. Naturally this necessitated extensive retraining of staff and caused a massive logjam in the processing of new acquisitions. The cataloguing function had to be profoundly modified to articulate with the SAMARC rubric. On the positive side, however, more books were issued and more people visited the library in 1983. The main library and the Johannesburg Study Centre were over-subscribed; seats were at a premium as users flocked to use the facilities. Handsome financial donations ensured another three-year hire of the Johannesburg Centre (Unisa Archives 1983).

The Unisa Library set various goals during 1983 and the following year it achieved a more than 96 per cent success rate in providing the recommended literature listed in tutorial letters for the full range of degree course offered by the university. Market surveys were also undertaken to measure the efficiency

of the library's services. These represented a pioneering approach to information provision by university libraries in South Africa. Despite higher budgets in the 1980s, the Unisa Library was forced in 1984 to begin pruning its standing orders; selection became more rigorous and 108 titles were cancelled. The unfavourable exchange rate continued dramatically to undermine the library's capacity to maintain its class-leading image. American book costs escalated by 55 per cent in a single year. Computer cataloguing and classification forged ahead as more staff were inspanned to worked overtime to add titles to the database (Unisa Archives 1984).

In 1984, the library benefited from the visit of Dr Richard Dougherty, former librarian of the University of Michigan, who offered constructive advice about how Unisa could imitate international trends in information provision. He was complimentary of the performance measures Unisa had adopted, but advised that they be refined to be more realistic. He was critical of the library's organisational structure which did not provide adequate staff support nor facilitate enough liaison between staff and the library's management (Unisa Archives 1984; 1984a).

As the political scene became tense in the wake of the education boycott of 1984–5 and the banning of COSAS in August 1985, more and more students and staff began to use the African Studies Documentation Centre to access important archival material on the struggle against apartheid. As townships were occupied by the South African Defence Force a political crisis was precipitated which culminated in the Uitenhage Uprising and the declaration by the apartheid government of a state of emergency. These events affected Unisa students no less than those at residential universities. Lives were disrupted, education was highly politicised, and the slogan 'people's education for people's power' heralded an intense interest in the content of education. Demand for cheap text books and more Africanist syllabuses combined to press Unisa academics towards more progressive courses and the library towards the furnishing of more relevant readings in quicker response times. These political and practical imperatives led to mixed responses. Entrance requirements were lowered at Unisa in an attempt to accommodate the aspirations of African students who wanted a higher education and wished to escape the inferiority of Bantu Education. Unisa's conservative principal at the end of the 1980s, Cas van Vuuren, insisted that 'Unisa has a moral responsibility to educate as many people as possible to the highest standard possible', but at the same time argued against Africanisation of the curricula because it would lead to a lowering of standards (*Financial Mail*, 1989:74). The die was cast: Unisa would admit more black students as long as they submitted to Eurocentric teaching. One way of cementing this agenda was to focus on technocratic innovation instead of curricular reform.

From the mid-1980s, the Unisa Library was in the thrall of performance measurement practices (Du Preez 1990; Willemse 1987; 1990) and every service was subjected to statistical evaluation to determine its efficiency. The results showed that users received 80 per cent of the publications they requested. A study to investigate the 20 per cent failure indicated that books were either in process or missing from the shelves (Unisa Archives 1985). But most of all the problem lay with the catalogue; the solution was the introduction of a new post tasked with providing more adequate user training. Technocratic or electronic elitism (Dalton, 1989) became an unexpected impediment to Van Vuuren's vision as African students from poorly resourced schools and Bantustan universities encountered the mysteries of hi-tech information systems.

Despite the special extra amount of over R400 000 voted by the Unisa Council, the library was forced for the third consecutive year to order fewer books. This represented a serious problem since the number of postgraduate student registrations had risen quite considerably. The strained budget also meant that journal subscriptions were at risk because they consumed most of the library's annual budget. American information resources had become the most expensive items as the US Dollar surged (Unisa Archives 1985; Willemse 1991).

SABINET's computer system software was also troublesome and only proved its worth towards the end of the year once its teething troubles had been sorted out. The Unisa Library's overloaded computer system, ALIS, felt the strain without SABINET's assistance and its reaction time was unacceptably slow. There was also a severe shortage of terminals which delayed the introduction of the user-information system, known as the Public Access Catalogue (PAC). This particularly affected the efficient handling of subject enquiries from users (Unisa Archives 1985).

The library services at the Pietersburg Branch Library and Johannesburg Study Centre experienced exceptional pressure as many students used their facilities; this was in contrast to the decline at other centres, including Durban and Cape Town. Study facilities in the Unisa Library on the main Muckleneuk campus were at a premium (Unisa Archives 1985). The building could not accommodate students who wished to use the library as a study venue. Such conditions were largely the result of educational upheavals in 1984-5 as disruptions forced students to seek superior learning materials and better environments in which to pursue their studies. Measures to exact overdue books from delinquent users proved successful and only 2 119 books remained unreturned at the end of 1985. This was largely the result of better co-operation between the library and members of the academic staff.

Photocopying machines were updated to provide a better service (Unisa Archives 1985).

Subject librarians were faced with upgrading their skills in accessing electronic databases and new information networks promised to open up a range of international sources once training had been completed. An alarming statistic emerged from the sample survey among students and staff to estimate the success in locating sources listed in the bibliographies compiled by subject librarians: on average only 65 per cent were available in the Unisa Library and in some fields the percentage dropped to 40 (Unisa Archives 1985). This surprised library management which had consistently believed that Unisa stock was comprehensive and superior to the holdings of other university libraries.

The Unisa African Studies Documentation Centre continued to attract a number of important collections, including the African Teachers Association of South Africa records and the papers of the Transkei Council of Churches (Unisa Archives 1985; Coetzee 2002). Such acquisitions were important in changing Unisa's image as an apartheid institution and invited the attention of a growing number of scholars from abroad.

The Science Library reported that it was operating at full capacity in 1985. Seating for students and shelving for new journals were at a premium, book issues had increased by 12 per cent over those of 1984, and the installation of a terminal in the small library had streamlined services considerably. The Law Library also experienced overcrowding, which forced the Law faculty to offer a separate study facility with 30 seats outside the library to relieve the shortage of space (Unisa Archives 1985).

Once again, the annual report of 1986 began with a discussion of performance appraisal of various services in the library, especially the supply of requested books to users at a distance. The overall satisfaction level reached 81,3 per cent as users received 78,5 per cent of the books they had requested. A member of staff was seconded to monitor the efficacy of the library and to eliminate the problems of users as far as possible (Unisa Archives 1986). This was deemed acceptable in view of the massive increase in student enrolments in 1986 (Boonzaaier and Rautenbach 1990:3). Unisa grew spectacularly because of the dissatisfaction with higher education at Bantustan institutions and their inferior educational reputations. The economic conditions of the country also made distance education more attractive because students were able to work and study at the same time. The annual report represented performance in graphic form, thus emphasising the 'scientific' approach to service delivery, which was also indicative of the research interests of Willemse and his senior library management team (Unisa Archives 1986).

The continuing decline in value of the South African currency led to an appeal

for an additional book budget of R275 000. The serious financial crisis necessitated a new policy to curb the extensive literature lists circulated by lecturers in many Unisa courses. This resulted in a distinction being made in tutorial letters between prescribed, recommended and additional reading – on the instruction of the principal of the university. The library investigation uncovered many references in study material that were not available in the Unisa Library itself, and had to be ordered through inter-library loans, which indicated the weaknesses of its research collections. A strategy was therefore inaugurated to raise more funds, to improve selection procedures, to increase co-operative arrangements among universities, and to improve the inter-library loan system (Unisa Archives 1986).

More sophisticated computerisation and an enhanced system which could be delivered by the Burrough's mainframe were a priority, together with a new programme of user training, including a workbook for first-year students and a manual for lecturers. S. S. (Audrey) Williams was responsible for the User Education and Library Orientation Programme which commenced in February 1986 (Unisa Archives 1986). Discourses on academic development became more fashionable at this time as universities addressed the educational lag associated with Bantu Education (Suttie 1990a). Noel Shillinglaw (1990:108) perceived a 'dualistic character' developing in South African libraries which would offer 'mass services in support of formal and non-formal education' on the one hand, and 'technologically advanced services to the developed sector of the population', on the other. His analysis mimicked the 'First-World – Third-World' bifurcation popular in much social theory at the time.

The succession of states of emergency in 1986 and 1987 was not directly addressed in any of the Unisa Library's official minutes or reports, which is curious given the direct effect they had on staff and students. Despite the exemption granted to libraries in the *Government Gazette* 10772, the censorship exercised by the apartheid state was extended to research and publications which were considered 'subversive'. The acquisitions policies of academic libraries were particularly affected because reports of political unrest, security force action, human rights abuses, detainees and conditions of detention, as well as boycotts and speeches as artefacts of social history were subject to emergency measures and could therefore be confiscated. By definition of their role as repositories of political materials, including those of progressive organisations, libraries were targets of government censorship (Merrett 1988).

The National Security Management System was a powerful tool in the hands of government in its campaign to control political information. Naturally, libraries became 'enmeshed in this system in terms of the material it [could] no longer acquire or disseminate' (Merrett 1988:128). The Unisa Library was

caught in this web of nationalist censorship when its archivist in charge of the Documentation Centre for African Studies, Annica van Gylswyk, was detained. Her work as a collector of oral and documentary evidence relating to political movements and her own activism within the Black Sash, especially its projects in the Winterveld region, adjacent to Pretoria, brought her into contact with liberation politics and the United Democratic Front and Mass Democratic Movement, among other progressive agencies. Ironically, she was interrogated by the Security Police about her travels on behalf of Unisa in terms of her archival post. Unisa's management, including her immediate superiors in the library, failed to furnish adequate documentary proof that her work entailed the collection and curation of political pamphlets, speeches and oral accounts of activities in the townships around Pretoria (Coetzee 2002:161).

It was reluctant to support her against the prying eyes of apartheid agents. In an act of surrender, it withdrew her salary during her time in detention and terminated her services when she was deported to Sweden after 30 years of residence in South Africa. Her case illustrates the risk of documenting political resistance to apartheid in 1986 and the Unisa Library's betrayal of its own dissidents (Harris 1986; Merrett 1988; Suttie 1990). That this episode has been erased from the institutional memory of Unisa, including its library annual report, is indicative of its own attitude to censorship. Willemse's version of the Van Gylswyk dismissal, conveyed to *Mousaion* in 2006, lays blame on Unisa's principal at the time, Theo van Wijk, who apparently had two discussions with the security police in which they claimed to have 'irrefutable evidence' that Van Gylswyk had been engaged in 'subversive activities'. According to Willemse, the Unisa management 'accepted this as the truth and acted accordingly . . . With hindsight this, of course, was a horrible mistake' (Communication with John Willemse 2006).

The Van Gylswyk case is perhaps ironic in view of Unisa's student diversity and the library's role in providing reading materials to political and other prisoners. Denis Goldberg, for example, was a founder member of *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, the military wing of the ANC in exile. He spent 22 years in Pretoria Central Prison after his conviction with Nelson Mandela at the Rivonia trial in 1964. He completed several degrees through Unisa, including one in librarianship, which produced a mini thesis entitled 'The public library as a communicator of information' that offered a political economy of public libraries in international and South African perspective, drawing on the rich resources of the Unisa Library and challenging the conventional wisdom of his lecturers in the Department of Library Science at the time (Dick 2004:17–21). Raymond Suttner (2001:70), also a political prisoner, wrote about his experiences of studying at Unisa and the reading opportunities provided by the library, as did Ahmed Kathrada (2004:215–216). Mandela (1994:398–

399) recounts that prisoners on Robben Island were encouraged to study through Unisa, but records that ordering books was subject to strict censorship.

Despite this, some ANC prisoners successfully obtained copies of the *Economist* and *Time* magazines. Neville Alexander (1994:58–60), one of the most educated prisoners and a member of the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), recalls the changing attitude towards university study on Robben Island from the mid-1970s and describes the Unisa book-lined cells which subverted the image of the inmates as uncouth criminals, propagated by the apartheid authorities. He emphasised the importance of both the State Library and the Unisa Library in supplying Robben Islanders with reading, even if they had to wait for weeks for the books to arrive. Alexander (1994:61–62) also recounts his subversion of prison censorship while studying for an honours degree in History at Unisa, and highlights the role of the Unisa Library in helping him to do so.

The turmoil of national politics in 1987 rubbed off on the psyche of Unisa. Theo van Wijk had uncharacteristically made speeches about unequal education (Van Wijk 1986:199–203), the difficulty of teaching across the vast class differences of South African society (Van Wijk 1987:219), and academic freedom and state power. But predictably, he espoused ‘neutrality’, arguing that ‘a university should not pronounce officially on controversial issues, largely because individual academic freedom is protected by institutional non-partisanship . . .’ (Van Wijk 1987a:221). In many ways, this reluctance to engage directly with the crisis in education was typical of his leadership and was imitated by the managers of the library, who discouraged open debate for fear of the differences of opinion it might elicit.

The effects of comprehensive sanctions against South Africa after 1986 meant that Unisa Library also felt the ill winds of financial austerity as well as political and cultural isolation. The most disruptive sanctions were implemented by University Microfilms International (UMI) which, in terms of the United States of America government’s comprehensive anti-apartheid legislation, suspended the supply of dissertations and other unpublished research materials to South Africa. The Unisa Library suffered the consequences acutely because it ordered several hundred doctoral theses each year (Haricombe and Lancaster 1995:46). Academic journals were similarly affected by sanctions because publishers – especially in India and Sweden – were reluctant, or refused, to supply South African institutions of higher education. Circumstances could, however, have been worse. The Unisa Library’s international suppliers, including Blackwells, continued to manage its account which softened the blow by providing books from many publishers on an unrestricted basis.

The library was also preoccupied with the beginning of a new era inaugurated by its new building on the east side of the campus which had been years in the planning. Developments had been on hold for a few years in anticipation of the move, staff shortages were exaggerated, and levels of efficiency had declined (Unisa Archives 1987). It was on the brink of a new phase, one which would establish it at the core of the institution, define its role as the 'frontier' of the university, thus profoundly changing its character from a dispenser of information to a place of intellectual and social interaction – a point of direct contact between staff and students.

4. BUILDING AGAIN: MEASURING, TINKERING, RE-ALIGNING, 1988–1990

1988 was a watershed year for the Unisa Library (De Jager and Malan 1989; Le Roux 1988). The new building was formally opened on 28 March by the Minister of Education and Culture, P. J. Claase. Its inauguration was accompanied by a flood of functions arranged by the principal, including a gala concert for members of the university's senate in the impressive atrium. Books were launched, exhibitions opened and congresses held as part of the celebrations (De Beer 1989; Kruger 1988). Its rich holdings and state-of-the-art facilities symbolised the relative prosperity of Unisa at a time when higher education was increasingly under pressure to meet the needs of more and more young South Africans hungry for advanced skills. The new building also gave substance to what was generally regarded as the best university library in the country in terms of its stock. In many respects it rose above the reputation of Unisa as a whole and almost assumed a separate identity. It was publicly acclaimed and academically affirmed in a retinue of events and media reports. The naming of various sections of the building also conveyed Unisa's affiliations. The J. L. van Schaik Room, the exhibition venue for the valuable Africana collection, provided archival depth to its holdings. The Alma Mater Reading Room commemorated the collective memory of the university, and the Sanlam Atrium reflected the long and expansive financial relationship between Unisa and the wealthy Afrikaner company (Suttie, 2005:110–1, 114).

Befitting the status of the new Unisa Library, the Unisa Information System (UNIS) computer system was introduced to access its considerable resources. It was devised by the university's own Computer Services division to improve the library's overall efficiency. Alas, it proved extremely troublesome; problems with the network or computer hardware led to large-scale frustration. Tailor-made computerisation turned out to be expensive and sometimes ineffective, often leading to strained relations between library and computer staff. Moreover, it was estimated in 1988 that computerising the

card catalogue would take about 20 years if the staff was not dramatically increased. The Retrocat Project was therefore approved which envisaged the employment of 20 additional staff with the necessary technical competence (Unisa Archives 1988). The aim was to unlock Unisa's vast resources for a much wider community in line with growing public demand for sharing information across the education sector. The changing political climate in South Africa and the spotlight on unequal educational opportunities for black and white added weight to such demands. Unisa's new library had to adopt a policy of commitment to community service and open its doors to a wider audience of students and researchers. Moreover, it had to devise a credible programme of academic development for library users from disadvantaged educational backgrounds (Suttie 1990:103–105; Williams 1989).

Computerisation presented enormous problems, but so did user education. It was rudimentary and perfunctory at first. A slide show was developed for use by students who attended discussion classes on the main campus and at the regional centres, but it soon became clear that an intensive campaign was needed. The Study Collection of recommended books for Unisa courses also experienced various setbacks which meant that students were unable to obtain important reading materials. The Economic and Management Sciences were alarmed to discover that many of their recommended articles for specialised courses were still not available because Unisa Library did not subscribe to the relevant journals (Unisa Archives 1988).

By 1988, the library employed 204 members of staff. Turnover was very high because salaries were not competitive and senior staff left for stipends of up to R12 000 per annum more. The public sector was clearly able to attract librarians from universities despite Unisa's announcement that salaries would be increased. During the year, 64 appointments were made, but 13 posts remained vacant. Financial disincentives notwithstanding, eleven staff improved their qualifications and two obtained master's degrees, others presented papers at international conferences, the library organised a symposium on subject referencing and a workshop on archiving, and fifteen academic articles were published (Unisa Archives 1988).

The new building unleashed a host of new policies. 1989 saw the compilation of mission statements, the entrenchment of performance measurements and the implementation of new procedures. The managerial model of administration was extended (Unisa Archives 1989). It reflected the theoretical trends in Information Science at this time which were mainly concerned with 'objective' and 'scientific' calibrations of library service (Dalton 1992; Shillinglaw 1988; Willemsse 1991).

The library's annual report began to include graphs measuring productivity as well as copious statistical data. Articulation with academic departments,

which had not been effective enough, was also a major feature of the model, and the library strove to provide superior study and research support to undergraduate and postgraduate students respectively. To this end, brochures were compiled, policies devised and questionnaires distributed. The Study Collection was scrutinised to improve its 81 per cent performance in 1988 and ways of providing the 13 589 publications not readily available in the Unisa Library were expedited. The Subject Reference Division, by contrast, received a 98,7 per cent satisfaction rate for its bibliographical service (Unisa Archives 1988).

The new library also brought a constituency of students and other users to the campus each day, putting pressure on the physical environment (De Jager and Malan 1989). The library management therefore introduced new rules of admission to control the increased traffic and regulate noise. Unisa's management consistently denied the existence of the mushrooming on-campus student population, claiming that the university was entirely a distance-education institution and therefore was not obliged to provide seating to students who allegedly were not using the library's books or journals. Furthermore, many of these students were unfamiliar with a large academic library which presented a range of problems to staff whose main function was to service students at a distance. Increasingly, they had to deal with clients in the library, often in search of a place to study, but also unable to navigate the rich information resources located on each of the eight floors of the building. Orientation programmes, more signage, training in the use of the UNIS computer catalogue, a user information system and other strategies were devised (Unisa Archives 1989).

In 1990, the Unisa Library concentrated on fine-tuning its systems and policies. It focussed on reducing waiting lists for books and the delivery time of information to students. The university experienced a decline in registrations (Boonzaaier and Rautenbach 1990:3), which resulted in fewer requests for literature and allowed a period of consolidation. Book orders increased to their highest level in seven years which restored the sense of importance Unisa placed on its library (Unisa Archives 1990). Inflation was, however, taking its toll as the Rand lost value yet again and international publishers increased their prices, especially of academic journals and monographs. South Africa's political woes in the late 1980s weighed heavily on the economy and negatively affected educational budgets; universities were hard hit and even Unisa's privileged position could not cushion the blow. The events of February 1990, which signalled the end of apartheid and F. W. de Klerk's negotiated settlement with the liberation movements, brought some relief, but the next few years of uncertainty made planning difficult because economic predictions were tentative.

The ebbing state subsidy to universities from the Department of Education and Culture compounded problems and forced libraries to work more closely to provide for the information needs of the country. The Unisa Library naturally played a central role in such collaboration which simultaneously increased pressure on its resources and broadened its access to other holdings. The extent of this ebb and flow is reflected in the statistics that Unisa received 37 311 requests for its publications, while it ordered only 14 295 from other libraries. Interlibrary loans were free among universities, but because of the disproportionate administrative cost to Unisa, its library management considered introducing charges similar to those levied by the State Library (Unisa Archives 1990).

The computerisation of Unisa's holdings was progressing very slowly. The Retrocat Project had not achieved its aim, so it was decided to contract an international company with the necessary expertise to complete the data transfer by the end of 1991, once funding had been approved. The user information function on UNIS was being upgraded and 39 academic departments were linked to the cataloguing system. Bibliographical searches for research students and staff were enhanced by DIALOG software which connected the Unisa Library to a suite of international databases. To improve user access to information sources a work book for first-year students was compiled for distribution in 1991 as part of the study package (Unisa Archives 1990).

If F. W. de Klerk had set a new political trajectory in 1990, the Unisa Library marked the end of an earlier political tradition in its acquisition of the Sir De Villiers Graaff papers. As leader of the opposition between 1956 and 1977, his collection was a handsome addition to the United Party Archive housed at Unisa. The Law Library was moved from the Samuel Pauw Building in Skinner Street to the new library on the main campus. This led to huge disruptions in the service to law students. The consolidation of Unisa's information resources in one central library did, however, complete the long process of creating a new Unisa Library on the Muckleneuk campus which dated back to the early 1980s during the principalship of Theo van Wijk (Unisa Archives 1990; *Unisa Bibliovaria* 1990:2–3).

Library history in 1990 cannot, however, be confined to buildings and policies. Most academic librarians were members of SAILIS, which was the presiding professional organisation. It was challenged during the 1980s by the much smaller ALASA, which represented black librarians. SAILIS followed the political reforms of the apartheid government, opening its membership to Africans and renouncing apartheid. Its journal remained firmly in the hands of white editors and its production consisted mainly of articles on technology and management, eliding pressing political concerns. Christopher Merrett, a

critic of SAILIS, condemned its 'mistaken belief that professional respect can be derived from structures, titles and qualifications, plans and codes' which inclined 'towards corporate identity rather than individual initiative and insight' (Merrett, 1988:2).

The extent of Unisa librarians' involvement in SAILIS and their extensive publication in its official organ, the *South African Journal of Library and Information Science*, indicates the political climate. In fact, John Willemse had always had a close relationship with the professional society from the days when he served as president of the South African Library Association (SALA) between 1976 to 1978. He had been active for a long time as a council member as well. Antipathy by senior Unisa librarians who served on SAILIS committees towards the Library and Information Workers' Organisation (LIWO), a product of the education crisis precipitated by the states of emergency and founded in 1990, also shows the growing polarisation between social activists and bureaucrats in the profession (Cuthbertson, 1992:39; Merrett 2001:31; Lor 1996:253). Willemse was particularly defensive about SAILIS and wrote a passionate reply to John Pateman's promotion of LIWO in the pages of the *New Library World*. He claimed that SAILIS 'always has been a non-political body', but admitted that its membership 'was probably sympathetic towards Government policies' (Willemse 1993a:26). Despite Willemse's defence, SAILIS and its African counterpart, ALASA, remained separate organisations, based on the long history of segregation in the library profession, a state of affairs which persisted into the democratic era in South Africa.

5. CONCLUSION

Ambivalence, ambiguity and contradictoriness, as much as a stalwart of nationalist higher education, characterise the Unisa Library between the 1970s and 1990. The university's very nature as a distance-education institution meant that it served diverse elements of South African society, from prisoners on Robben Island and in Pretoria Central Prison, to cabinet ministers in the apartheid government, and from COSATU trade unionists to corporate moguls, across race, class and gender. Its peculiar place in higher education allowed it a measure of freedom which resulted in unusual relationships, sometimes subversive, but more often conformist in nature. Individual librarians oiled the wheels of compliance to apartheid laws, sometimes consciously, but most of the time by simply conducting their professional duty as information vendors and following their library training (Merrett 1994:212), which had the effect of spreading knowledge to a wide community of scholars, some intent on disrupting apartheid power.

Merrett (1988:2) has shown persuasively that in most instances the emphasis was placed on ‘political circumspection and the search for professional stature’, which led to a ‘transfer of management technique and computer technology from the business sector to librarianship’. Notions of education and civil rights were therefore erased as libraries such as Unisa chose – in his words – ‘gleaming hardware’ above human engagement. He makes a strong case against the Unisa Library’s embrace of the racial and nationalist paradigm, and its failure to grasp the extent of alienation among its black student constituency.

There is, however, another way of looking at the Unisa Library’s political complacency, one which gives its students more agency in confronting the inequities of South African society. By dispensing knowledge, it also brokered new ideas about how South African society could be governed. Its sources far exceeded the scope of narrow curricula and thus opened a world of information to students whose scepticism of Unisa courses led to unsupervised reconnaissance of non-prescribed literatures, redolent of intellectual dissent in oppressed societies worldwide, which in turn inspired pockets of protest against apartheid hegemony. A world-class academic library could therefore subvert the censorious education of a parochial nationalism. On the other hand, it has to be admitted that the library management failed to support staff who openly challenged the government. It chose, instead, to endorse the excesses of the states of emergency, unable to appreciate the symbolism of Van Gylswyk’s deportation.

The Unisa Library’s political prevarication ironically led to some more constructive and less expected consequences. Its more cosmopolitan, multiracial nature than the University of Pretoria resulted in the appointment of African librarians during the 1980s, which changed the composition of its staff. This mirrored the shifting demographics of the student population and ultimately made the library more amenable to academic support for black students whose experience of Bantu Education had left them under-prepared for higher education. African librarians were recruited in a range of departments which signalled a more open employment policy than in Unisa’s academic ranks.

In sum, Unisa Library was extremely complex in the period 1976 to 1990, torn between its dependence on government and an increasingly critical, and sometimes hostile, student audience. It was indubitably an Afrikaner nationalist institution, run by a cautious and conservative management, but its library harboured elements which would ultimately uncouple it from such moorings, precisely because it had pretensions of being a global player in information and saw itself as ‘leader of the pack’ among South African libraries. This allowed its managers pragmatically to align themselves to both

nationalist interests internally and international agencies externally. Will-emse's own extensive links with IFLA blurred his close alignment with Afrikaner nationalist networks, such as the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap and Kuns and the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings (FAK) in South Africa. Unisa often sought absolution in its apparently non-racial make-up and used its student composition to rise above the unequal nature of apartheid higher education which had elicited worldwide condemnation.

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