

Chapter 1: The transformation process at the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education¹ (1993 - 1999)

1.1 Introduction

The regime change in South Africa since 1994 also brought about fundamental changes to the system of higher education in this country. Not all the changes that were brought about since 1994 were political in nature, but the political changes brought enough urgency and necessity into the system of higher education to facilitate a process of transformation. This dissertation is about the context of transformation in higher education, but more specifically the transformation process at the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, a historically white university. This dissertation wants to follow the tracks of transformation (i.e. analysis of the process) at the PU for CHE since 1993 until the establishment of an Institutional Forum during 1999 at this institution and to make some conclusions about processes of change at institutions for higher education.

The entire South African education system is presently being re-examined and restructured at national and institutional levels - a process which is a logical sequel to the introduction of a new political dispensation and the transition from apartheid to democracy. Higher education, as an integral part of the larger

¹ Officially the name of the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (PU for CHE) has been registered in Afrikaans as the **Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoër Onderwys (PU vir CHO)**, but in this dissertation the English reference will be used, except for the bibliography, where the Afrikaans reference will be used for official documentation.

education system, set in this dynamic socio-economic milieu, is also under scrutiny. According to Fourie (1999:1) the universities of South Africa are the products of apartheid from every angle one wishes to understand or classify them.

Higher education institutions in South Africa have, for a considerable number of years, been the sites of struggle and conflict between various role-players: the 'liberal' White universities came into conflict with the apartheid government over admissions policies which precluded them from admitting Black, Coloured or Indian students. The historically Black universities struggled to shake off the stranglehold of government control and the stigma of being 'bush colleges', and all institutions suffered from the effects of the academic boycotts and isolation from the international academic community. In addition, student organisations and, to a lesser extent, staff associations, as well as many students and academics in their personal capacity were involved in the struggle which culminated in the advent of the 'new' South Africa on 27 April 1994.

The political struggle being over, many academics, administrators and students were looking forward to 'getting back to business' on campuses and lecture halls which would be peaceful and orderly. This however, was not to be. Over the past five years and until recently the incidents of student unrest and protest have diminished neither in number nor intensity and many higher education institutions have turned into battlegrounds. Very often the governance and/or management structures of institutions were the target of students' protest or had to bear the brunt of students' dissatisfaction with features of the system or the institution. A new struggle, the one for transforming the South African higher education, was evolving. The PU for CHE is not an exception in this case. Transformation at the PU for CHE started as early as 1992 (Venter, 1995:2) and had the benefit of a well structured process, but the process itself was under-performing.

Over a period of more than twenty years several investigations into South African higher education have taken place, all of which to a greater or lesser degree addressed transformation such as the Van Wyk De Vries Commission (1974) and the De Lange Commission (1981). More recently, however, the reports of two other significant investigations into the South African education system attracted widespread attention: the Education Renewal Strategy of the Department of National Education Policy Investigation which was undertaken under the auspices of the National Education Co-ordinating Committee. The Education Renewal Strategy constituted a land mark in South African education policy making by moving away from the organisation and provision of education along racial lines, and stating that: "Race should not feature in structuring the provision of education in a future education system for South Africa and justice in the provision of educational opportunities must be ensured" (Fourie, 1996:2).

The first official investigation into higher education in the new South Africa was that of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) which was established by the presidential proclamation on 3 February 1995. The broad aim of the Commission was to investigate all aspects of higher education and make appropriate policy recommendations.

Clearly the groundwork for the restructuring and transition of South African higher education has been taking place over a long period of time. At present, however, the entire higher education system and its constituent institutions are struggling with the effects of socio-political transition and the meaning and implications of transformation. It is equally clear that governance, particularly institutional governance, and the issues related to it, are crucial points in the higher education debate.

The transformation of higher education should not be seen as a one-dimensional political change. It must be seen as the university system's response to a changing world. It must also be seen as a process and not an event. Therefore, it should be made clear that there is no simple definition of the term

"transformation". It is suggested at the outset of this study that a much-improved level of understanding of this term should be encouraged, if the concepts and principles to which it relates are to be properly valued.

Communication uses words and metaphors, and the language for discussing transformation features many words whose meanings are problematic: among others, revitalisation, restructuring, reformation, consensus, change, bargaining, equity, efficiency etc. Each is an aggregation of diverse concepts and semantics associations embedded in some prior view of nature, culture and man.

Against this background several research questions could be posed:

- How does one define transformation, especially in the context of higher education?
- What is the context of transformation in higher education in general, but more specifically at the PU for CHE?
- What are the components of the transformation process at the PU for CHE?
- What are the characteristics of the transformation process at the PU for CHE?
- Are transformation processes at universities sustainable?

1.2 The aims of this study

The general aim of this study is to contribute to the expanding body of knowledge on transformation at institutions of higher learning. To enable this general aim, the following specific aims were formulated:

- To establish a working definition of transformation in higher education.
- To establish the context of transformation in higher education.

- To analyse the transformation process at the PU for CHE from 1993-1999.
- To determine what substantial impact the transformation process had on the institutional governance at PU for CHE.
- To establish what components ("stakeholders") of the transformation process were at the PU vir CHO.
- To determine the characteristics of the transformation process at the PU for CHE.
- To establish whether transformation process at the PU for CHE was sustainable.

1.3 Central theoretical statement

The transformation of higher education institutions (such as the PU for CHE), are generally regarded as political transformation processes, but if these processes are not "transformed" into much more than political change, it will not be sustainable, nor will it contribute to better, more efficient or effective institutions of higher education.

1.4 Method of investigation

Essentially this is an analytical and practical study of a phenomenon that is currently very relevant for higher education in South Africa. To fulfil the aims of

this study it was necessary to do a literature study that included articles on transformation, unpublished official minutes and reports; speeches, newspapers, government gazettes, legislation and the primary sources of transformation at the PU for CHE. The researcher has also secured free access to all the minutes and recorded data on the transformation process at both campuses of the PU for CHE. The minutes and the reports of the different transformation structures were used as primary research documentation and to ease the use of these minutes and reports, a separate heading was created in the bibliography to list all the available minutes and reports up to March 2000. It was fortunate that a very good documentation existed about the process, but the researcher found crucial pieces of evidence and nuances missing in the minutes and reports. Therefore, two in-depth interviews were conducted with the chairpersons of the Broad Transformation Forum at the Potchefstroom campus of the PU for CHE and the Watuni Transformation Committee at the Vaal Triangle Campus of the PU vir CHO. In this dissertation references will be made to these two interviews, of which the original transcripts are with the author.

The Nexus database indicated that there are no masters studies registered in this country dealing with the topic under investigation, but brought the doctoral study of Fourie (1996) under the researcher's attention as a very valuable source on transformation of higher education in general.