A process analysis of institutional transformation at the PU for CHE

(1993-1999)

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Abstract

This study is about the context of transformation at higher education institutions, but more specifically the transformation process at the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (PU for CHE), a historically white university. The tracks of transformation at the PU for CHE since 1993 until the establishment of the Institutional Forum during 1999 were followed and conclusions were made about processes of change at institutions of higher learning. The Higher Education Act of 1997 requires of every institution of higher education to have an Institutional Forum as an advisory body to the University Council.

This can be related to several problems that always accompany this process:

- Some people treated transformation as if it's an event and not a process.
- The composition (representation) of transformation structures is still questionable.
- The legitimacy of the process itself in most cases is still questioned.
- Lack of commitment and trust among some stakeholders i.e. there is always suspicion of hidden agenda.
- Protection of the status quo in most universities makes it difficult for transform these instituions.

However, it should be realised for whatever it is that, transformation entails a number of dimensions such as equity, governance, democracy, gender issues, student access and success, affirmative action, quality and development. Transformation is not only about political changes as some tend to define it. Transformation of higher education is generally regarded as a political transformation process, but if this process is not reformed into something more than political change, it will not be sustainable, nor will it contribute to better, more efficient or effective institutions of higher education.

Initially, transformation was understood rather narrowly in terms of institutional democratisation - consequently it became a frequent cause of confrontation between students demanding full participation in institutional governance and resistant institutional administrations seeking to protect their exclusive management turf.

At historically white universities black students saw transformation as a tool to overcome perceived racist arrogance. At black institutions students pushed for a say in setting fees and for an open-admissions policy irrespective of the ability to

pay, or in deed, of academic performance. And so, the word "transformation" elicited different expectations and tensions from different constituencies.

The transformation process also pointed to serious structural and process deficiencies at the PU for CHE from 1994 to 1999. These were:

- A lack of capacity, not only in the knowledge of constituents in the transformation process, especially dealing with substantial issues, but also in terms of time and resources. The pressures from management, usually in terms of time frames made quality feed-back and contributions difficult to attain.
- Participatory patterns were also not very satisfactory, especially from students, trade unions and external constituents. Long and extended meetings made BTF meetings unpopular opportunities and the very busy schedules of students and staff made it difficult for parties to attend all meetings. Trade unions used the BTF to leverage support and power to attain goals that had very little to do with institutional transformation.
- Transformation agendas were not all pointing in the same direction. This was especially clear from the difficulty the BTF had in developing inputs on the Green Paper, the Statute and the extension of the terms of office of the rector and vice-rector.
- The forums were poorly resourced.
- With the lack of capacity and the participatory patterns, the Broad Transformation Forum (BTF) and to a certain extend the Watuni Transformation Committee (WTC) experienced legitimacy problems in terms of the impact of their decisions as well as the status that the Forums had within the University.
- The legitimacy of the forums were also hampered by the lack of statutory definition of the forums, a situation that was partially resolved with the introduction of the Institutional Forum on 24 July 1999.

For knowledge to have an impact in the international system, it must be widely accepted by policy makers. New knowledge can provide the basis for evolutionary change, which usually involves altering rules and procedures within the context of a given set of principles and norms.
In contrast, revolutionary change, which generates new principles and norms, is associated with shifts in power.

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