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# A social realist account of the way academic managers exercise agency in monitoring students' academic success in South African higher education

Full thesis in fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

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# Acknowledgements and dedication

This piece of work I dedicate to my late father, uMzawufunwa Luvava Wilson Dwayi, unyana kaMagejane kaDwayi kaDingi noQhoshani, uMamfekethweni kaMathwasa. To my sibling dear sisters, Nonzameko and Nontembeko, who have since passed on. May your legacies live on, booValela, oSango, oGubhela, oNtambozencaluka!

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***"Finally, my brethren, be Strong in the Lord and in the Power of His Might"***

***(Ephesians, 6: 10)***

# Abstract

The roots of this thesis lie in discourses which promote the use of academic monitoring strategies for student success in South African higher education. Although access to higher education widened for black South Africans following the first democratic election, this 'formal' access (Morrow, 1993) has not been matched by success with annual cohort studies showing that, regardless of the university at which they are registered, the subjects they are studying and the qualifications they hope to attain, black South Africans fare less well than their white peers. Monitoring performance and referring students on to academic support and development structures thus became a strategy identified as having the potential to address patterns in performance data.

The study reports on an attempt to introduce a strategy for Academic Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development at a historically black university in South Africa's Eastern Cape province. It draws on a metatheoretical framework developed from Bhaskar's (1978, 1998) critical realism and Archer's (1995, 1996) social realism to do this. More specifically, it focuses on the way managers at the institution exercised their agency in relation to the strategy and identifies the way social and structural conditions, developed from the time colonial settlers first arrived on the continent, worked to constrain the exercise of this agency.

Although the focus of the study was on agency, the study revealed a system of necessary contradictions (Archer, 1995, 1996), a system of conflicting beliefs exacerbated by a lack of resources, that led to the implementation of the strategy not being as successful as intended.

The study not only illuminates the conditions at one South African university but also adds to the body of work on management in higher education and to critiques of 'managerialism'.



Key words: Social realism, critical realism, New Public Management, academic monitoring, Integrated Academic Development

# Amagqabantshintshi

Eyona ngxam yale thisisi kukuphendla iindlela zokukhuthaza ukusetyenziswa kwamaqhinga ezemfundo okuqwalasela impumelelo yabafundi kumaziko emfundo ephakamileyo aseMzantsi Afrika. Nangona emva konyulo lokuqala lwedemokhrasi abemi abantsundu baseMzantsi Afrika bethe bavuleleka ukuba bafikelele kwimfundo ephakamileyo, olu fikelelo 'lusesikweni' (Morrow, 1993) khange luhambelane nempumelelo yaba bafundi, nanjengoko uphando olujolise kwimpumelelo yabafundi ngonyaka ngamnye lubonisa ukuba aba bafundi bathi nokuba bafunda kweyiphi iyunivesithi, befunda ziphi iikhosi bekwafundela waphi amakhono, abafundi abantsundu basoloko berhuqeka emva xa bethelekiswa nabo bamhlophe. Ukuqwalaselwa kwenkqubela nokudluliselwa kwabafundi kumacandelo enkxaso nophuhliso kwimiba yemfundo kube liqhinga elithe lachongwa njengelunokukwazi ukujongana neepateni zendlela abaqhuba ngayo abafundi.

Olu phando lunika ingxelo malunga nenzame yokuza neqhinga lokuQwalaselwa kwemiba yeMfundo ukwenzela uPhuhliso kwiyunivesithi eyayisakuba yeyabantsundu kwiphondo leMpuma Koloni laseMzantsi Afrika. Luqamele ngesakhelo semethathiyori esakhelwe kwi-critical realism kaBhaskar (1978, 1979) kunye ne-social realism kaArcher (1995, 1996). Eyona nto lugxile kuyo yindlela abalawuli neenkokeli zeli zikomfundo eziwasebenzisa ngayo amagunya azo ngokunxulumene neli qhinga, lukwachonga indlela iimeko zentlalo nezeziko, ezamana ziphuhliswa ukususela oko kwathi kwafika abarhwaphilizi kweli lizwekazi, ezasebenza ngayo ekunqandeni ukusetyenziswa kwala magunya.

Nangona ugxiliso lolu phando belusemagunyeni, luthe lwaveza uluhlu lwemiba echaseneyo eyimfuneko (Archer, 1995, 1996), uluhlu lweenkolelo ezingqubanayo ezihlutshezwa kukushokoxeka kwezixhobo, nolukhokelele ekubeni ukufezekiswa kweli qhinga kungabiyiyo le mpumelelo ibilindelekile.

Olu phando aluphelelanga nje ekugqamiseni iimeko zale yunivesithi yaseMzantsi Afrika, koko lukongeza kumsebenzi osele wenziwe kwimfundo ephakamileyo lukwaphendla ‘ezolawulo’.

Amagama angundoqo: I-social realism, i-critical realism, uLawulo oLutsha lukaRhulumente, uqwalaselo lwemiba yemfundo, uphuhliso lwemiba yemfundo.

# Table of Contents

## List of Tables



# List of Figures

# Chapter One: Introducing the study

## 1.1 Some reflections

I begin this thesis by referring to two events that occurred at the beginning of my doctoral journey. The first event relates to an article written by a student (Mthethwa, 2013) in the *Mail & Guardian*, a South African weekly newspaper, entitled 'How could I have failed varsity?' In the article, the student, Nomusa Mthethwa, expresses her bewilderment at having failed most of the courses in her first-year industrial engineering course at a university generally regarded to be one of the best in South Africa in spite of having had an excellent private education. The article gave rise to a great deal of discussion not least because a dominant assumption across the country is that it is the poor quality of the schooling system that results in students doing poorly in higher education (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). In the light of Mthethwa's status as a recipient of a good education, her failure to pass her first year courses contradicted popular discourse.

At the time the article was published I was still thinking about what I might focus on for a doctoral study and having conversations about the being and 'becoming' of learning, teaching and assessment systems in higher education and the role the field of Academic Development was able to play in this (Volbrecht & Boughey, 2005). Some of these discussions drew on claims that the majority of students entering universities were 'underprepared' for the learning that lay ahead of them. This led me to think about claims made as far back as the mid 1980s (see, for example, Vilakazi & Tema, 1985) that it is not 'underprepared' students who are the 'problem' in South African universities, but rather the under-preparedness of the institutions themselves to cope with the changed student body that resulted once South Africa moved to a democratic dispensation and access to higher education was more freely available to the black working classes to whom it had long been denied.

Since the early 1990s and the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, the demographics of the student body in South African universities have indeed changed. Although many black students have gained access to higher education, they have not necessarily been successful when studying. The poor drop-out and throughput rates of students, and particularly of black students (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007; CHE, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017,

2018, 2019) has been identified as a persistent pattern that remains in spite of numerous attempts to address it.

The second event relates to the university at which I am employed, Walter Sisulu University (WSU), where the 2013 Annual Report (WSU, 2013) identified the student success rate as standing at 81.1%, against the target set by institutional strategic planners of 80%, and the graduation rate as 21% against the target of 20%. However, a deeper analysis showed that of the 4 615 students admitted to four engineering programmes in 2012, 328 (or 7%) had not accumulated sufficient credits to write the mid-year examinations. A further 826 students (19%) were then excluded after these examinations. This meant that 1 154, or 25%, of the students admitted at the start of 2012 had been lost by mid-year. Further scrutiny of the students excluded case by case revealed a low take up of academic development initiatives intended to provide support and a lack of evidence of the way their progress had been monitored throughout the semester. This was in spite of the fact that the requirements for programme accreditation set by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), the statutory body responsible for quality assurance in South Africa, make reference to academic development for student success, and student retention and throughput rates (CHE, 2004a) and the fact that the Report on the Institutional Audit conducted by the CHE in 2011 as part of its first cycle of quality assurance work (CHE, 2011:10) had recommended that WSU should

> *. . . strengthen its reporting and monitoring mechanisms in all areas with special focus on student success, throughput, and graduation rates and staff qualifications, and ensure that the appropriate divisions take responsibility for the implementation of policies and plans.*

The Annual Report of 2013 (WSU, 2013a) led me to question the potential of the introduction of reporting and monitoring to enhance teaching and learning at WSU (a strategy recommended by the CHE as a result of the audit) given the apparent disjuncture between reporting that success and graduation rates had actually exceeded targets set in one document and observations about the number of students excluded in the 2012 academic year in another.

Monitoring student performance and reporting on this monitoring is a common strategy identified by managers as a means of assuring and enhancing quality provided interventions are developed to address the problems identified as they occur. My reflections led me to question the potential to address poor student performance using management tools given what I had observed at my own institution in relation to the use of reporting and monitoring.

In short, the experiences described above contributed to the study on which this thesis is based. However, there is more to the background of the study than this.

## 1.2 Background

As I have indicated above, the study on which this thesis is based focuses on one institution, Walter Sisulu University (WSU), located in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. As I will explain in more detail in Chapter Three, the history of higher education in South Africa shaped WSU in very specific ways both before and after the first democratic election of 1994. As a category of institutions established for black social groups, the historically black institutions were conditioned to fulfil a particular role in the socio-political economy of South Africa. The legacy of this conditioning lives on to this day and has resulted in WSU being the only option for the majority of young, black, working class people hoping to pursue a higher education in the eastern parts of the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The shaping of the institution over decades has arguably led to WSU not being able to fulfil its mandate to provide a quality higher education in spite of numerous interventions, including being placed under administration by the Minister of Higher Education, and in spite of attempts to introduce effective and efficient governance and management structures.

The study is located within the broad field of South African 'academic development', also known in other countries as 'educational development'. As Boughey, 2007, notes, the field has its roots in attempts to provide greater chances of academic success for the small number of black students entering historically white universities. In these early days, 'success' was intended to indicate the ability of students to gain a qualification. By the mid 1990s, the field was shifting to play a role in institutional development thanks to policy developments following the shift to democracy. These shifts have been conceptualised as involving a move from a focus on equity to efficiency (Boughey, 2007). This, along with the introduction of the

incentivised funding formula (DoHET, 2004) and other developments such as three year rolling enrolment plans involving reporting against targets, meant that the meaning of 'success' changed to one which now encompasses institutional performance measured by 'success rates', 'throughput rates' and 'attrition rates'. More recently, following the student protests of 2015 and 2016, the term 'success' as used in the field of academic development has shifted once again to encompass the notion of students' 'thriving' or 'flourishing' especially in the context of calls for decolonisation of the curriculum. The use of terms such as 'success' needs to be understood within this broad context.

As the field of academic development has shifted to a focus on institutional, and not only student, support (Boughey, 2007) practitioners are often involved in developing strategies intended to enhance institutional efficiency. As indicated, this study focuses on one very specific strategy in the management of teaching and learning, that of monitoring and reporting in the form of the WSU Strategy on Academic Monitoring for Academic Development. Discourses privileging the idea that teaching and learning needs to be 'managed' in much the same way as other areas of academic life have developed alongside the introduction of what is termed 'New Public Management' (NPM) to higher education.

NPM developed in the latter half of the last century partly in response to the need to make state funding stretch further. From the end of World War II onwards, countries in the Global North moved towards enhancing and expanding the social services offered to citizens. Some of the increases in the provision of social services were due to discourses calling for greater parity in society and, in particular, for the distinctions which had long fractured society to be eroded. Education, and higher education in particular, changed because of these calls most specifically in terms of the widening of access. As state provision increased so did the demands this made on the public purse with the result that national governments became more and more aware of the need to make what funding was available go further and be used accountably (Tolofari, 2005). The set of practices broadly termed 'NPM' emerged from this point on and focus on enhanced accountability in the use of public funding. The attainment of accountability is dependent on reporting and monitoring and, also, on ensuring that funds are spent as effectively as possible. The need to use funding effectively leads to the development of goals and the strategies intended to achieve those goals, to the identification

of indicators that will allow achievement against those goals to be measured and so on (see, for example, Hood, 1991).

The need to ensure that public funding was spent as efficiently as possible is particularly pertinent to higher education. The so called 'massification' of higher education has been apparent in the Global North for more than half a century and has had an impact on the forms universities take and how they are managed (Trow, 1973). In South Africa, massification has occurred much later, and at a slower pace, than in the developed world as it is only in the last few years that participation in higher education has reached the 20% which, according to Trow, marks the shift from an 'elite' to a 'mass' system. In South Africa, student numbers are slightly more than double to what they were in the early 1990s. Nonetheless, this increase in numbers has not been unproblematic.

The analysis of student performance data in the form of the CHE's annual *VitalStats* series based on information retrieved from the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DoHET's) Higher Education Management and Information System (HEMIS) (see, for example, CHE, 2020) is relatively recent. What all these analyses show, however, is a persistent pattern: regardless of the institution at which they are registered, the subjects they are studying or the qualifications for which they are enrolled, black South African students do not do as well as their white peers. This observation has led to calls for a focus on teaching and learning and arguments that equality of access will not be achieved unless equality of outcomes is also achieved (see, for example, Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007).

A number of state funded initiatives have been put in place to address teaching and learning in order to contribute to equality in educational outcomes for all students including the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP) introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education and Training (MoHET) in 2017. Monitoring and evaluation is central to the UCDP as the following diagram shows:

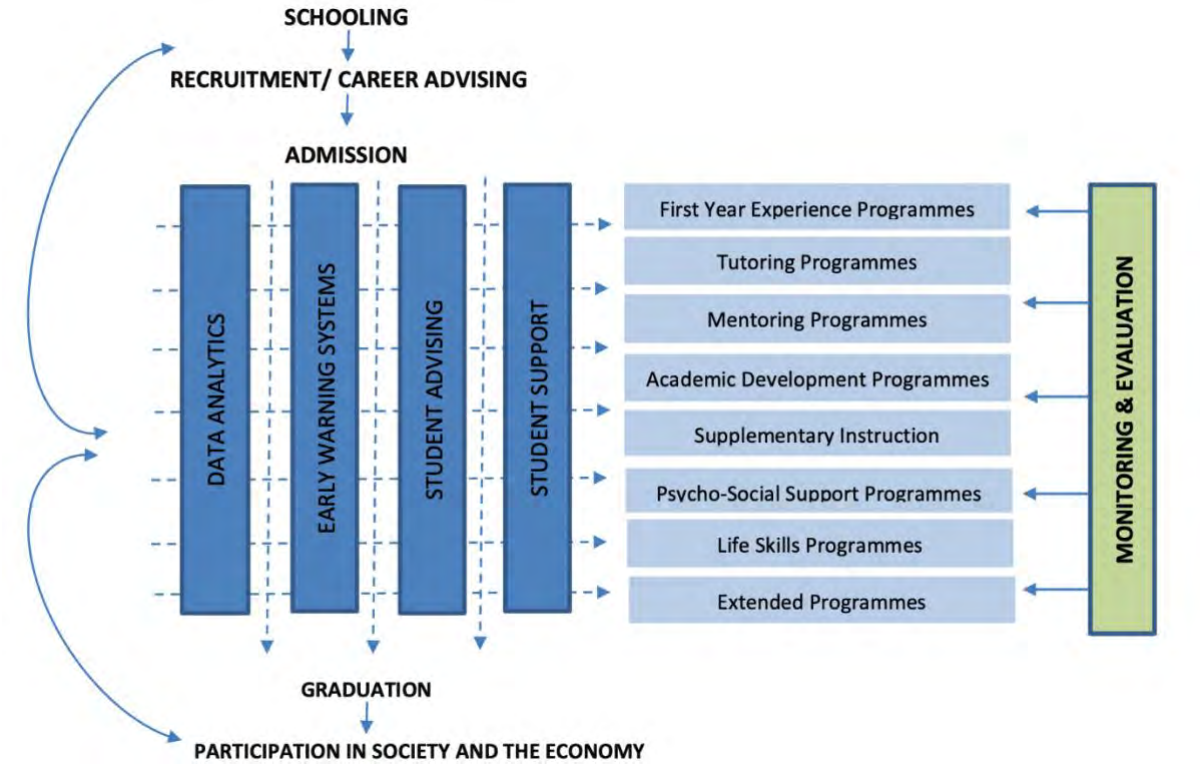


*Figure 1: The University Capacity Development Programme (MoHET, 2017:10)*

Other initiatives, including the Siyaphumelela Project funded by the Kresge Foundation (https://siyaphumelela.org.za), seek to support universities to use 'big data' to improve student success. At WSU, these ideas and calls for the use of monitoring and evaluation resulted in the development of a the Academic Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development Strategy (WSU, 2016) which will be described in more detail later in this thesis.

The term 'academic monitoring for academic development' used in the WSU strategy document refers to the ideas noted above that student performance can be monitored and that this monitoring can be used to identify students who are at risk of failure and who thus need to be referred to/subjected? to an initiative (a strategy) which will reduce that risk.

## 1.3 Problem statement

Since the early 1990s, the demographics of the South African higher education system have changed enormously. Not only has the system almost doubled in size since the early 1990s, it has also shifted to reflect the overall demographics of the population overall to the extent that almost 88% of the 1 071 192 students in the public higher education system in the 2019

academic year were black[1] (CHE, 2021). Achievements in respect of widening access for black South Africans have not been matched by achievements in success, however, an observation which has resulted in the introduction of strategies such as the UCDP described above. At the same time as this has happened, South Africa has followed other countries in introducing strategies associated with NPM including monitoring and reporting on student progress and performance in an attempt to make the system more efficient and effective. However, the existence of a monitoring and reporting system in itself does not mean it will be implemented meaningfully, as I have tried to indicate by identifying disjunctures in the 2013 WSU Annual Report noted above. A problem could therefore exist in the implementation of the monitoring and reporting strategy at a university such as WSU. The study underpinning this thesis sets out to explore this possible problem.

As the study drew on a single case study involving a historically black South African university, it is not possible to make generalisations on the basis of the study and, therefore, make claims about the magnitude of the problem itself. Rather in drawing on a strong theoretical framework in line with Bernstein's (2000) account of a horizontal knowledge structure, typical of the social sciences, the aim is to illuminate the problem using a theoretical lens.

## 1.4 The theoretical framework

Bitzer & Wilkinson (2009) lament the fact that higher education studies in South Africa needs to move beyond its preoccupation with what works and what does not work as practice, a point echoed by Shay (2012) who calls for theorised accounts of practice in order to 'reconceptualise' problems in teaching and learning. At doctoral level, the use of theory is imperative. For me, the question was which theory would best illuminate the complexity of the context of the university at which I worked and account for what I saw as a failure to implement as intended the strategy I was interested in exploring.

[1] The term 'black' here is used to encompass what the CHE (2021) terms African, Coloured and Indian students.

I began this introductory chapter by describing events that impacted on my thinking as I was beginning the journey that has resulted in this thesis. The theories with which I was familiar did not appear to have the power to explain the events narrated above, not least because they were not able to explain the fact that long established practices continued to dominate because of the way they were supported by institutional culture. Institutional culture was, of course, implicated in what I perceived to be the problems inherent to the implementation of the Academic Monitoring and Support Strategy.

Clegg (2009) identifies the potential of Bhaskar's (1978, 1989) critical realism to solve what she terms the 'paradigm wars' within the field of Higher Education Studies in addressing what she terms its 'axiological charge', or its duty to provide credible explanations of challenges to social justice. As a practitioner in the field of Academic Development, a field long devoted to enhancing the chances of success available to poor, black, working-class students in South African higher education, social justice was enormously important to me. The idea of a theory with the potential to explain challenges to the achievement of social justice was immediately attractive. I explore Bhaskar's critical realist philosophy in detail in Chapter Two of this thesis.

However, I judged Bhaskar's work alone to be insufficient in explaining complex social phenomena. Bhaskar offers a philosophy of knowledge and knowing. What was needed in addition to this work was a theory of society and, more specifically, of social change. I found this in the work of sociologist Margaret Archer (1995, 1996) and her 'morphogenetic framework' in particular. Archer sees change (or non-change) as occurring in endless cycles. Her morphogenetic framework offered the potential to allow me to explore the implementation of the WSU Strategy on Academic Monitoring and Success and to begin to see whether or not it could make a difference to change in the form of improved student success. Archer's social realism is also explored in more detail in Chapter Two of this thesis.

For Archer (1995, 1996), a key question in social life relates to the extent to which agents are able to contribute to change. This question has challenged social theorists for centuries. Archer's response to disputes about whether or not human beings produce society or whether they themselves are its products is to attribute to all humans the powers and properties which will allow them to act in response to what they find around them. However, they are conditioned in the exercise of these powers socially and culturally. The use of

Archer's morphogenetic framework therefore requires an exploration of the social and cultural conditioning in place for each 'cycle' of change or non-change. For the purposes of my study, I needed to focus on the implementation of the Strategy on Academic Monitoring for Academic Development. However, Archer's insistence that agents are conditioned to act in particular ways meant that my study needed to go back in time to before the idea of a monitoring initiative was ever mooted at WSU. Initially, I had no idea how long I would need to go back in time to explore this conditioning (and thus date the beginning of the morphogenetic cycle I was studying) but, eventually, my extensive engagement with the literature led me back to the arrival of colonialists on African soil. The thinking behind this dating of the morphogenetic cycle in this way will become apparent in Chapters Three and Four.

## 1.5 Research objectives

The study on which this thesis reports therefore aims to:

- Examine the implementation of a strategy involving monitoring for academic success at a historically black South African university;
- Explore the way institutional managers exercised their agency to implement the strategy;

The study draws on Bhaskar's (1978, 1989) critical realism and Archer's (1995, 1996) as a 'metatheoretical' framework in addressing these objectives.

At this point, the term 'institutional managers' requires some explanation. Every university is organised differently. In South Africa, the mergers and incorporations that resulted from the National Plan for Higher Education (MoE, 2001) resulted in the formation of some very complex institutions and WSU is one of these. I will discuss the history of WSU in more detail in Chapter Four of this thesis but at this point will note that the university comprises eleven faculties spread over four campuses. Each faculty is headed by a Dean who, amongst other things, carries responsibility for teaching and learning. Some of this responsibility is devolved to deputies. Each faculty comprises a number of departments, each of which has a Head of Department. Each campus has a Head. In addition, the university has appointed a number of

senior directors with specific areas of responsibility, some of which relate to teaching and learning. In common with other institutions, WSU also has a Vice Chancellor and two Deputy Vice Chancellors, one of whom is responsible for academic affairs and research. The 'managers' in this study are thus, deans, deputy deans, heads of departments and senior directors who carry specific responsibilities for teaching and learning and, in particular, for monitoring. Given the focus on monitoring in my study, I also include the Deputy Vice Chancellor, Academic Affairs and Research, in my definition as this post holds ultimate responsibility for reporting against goals and targets set out in institutional level strategic plans.

## 1.6 Research questions

The main research question posed for the study was:

> How do academic managers exercise their agency to monitor and promote student academic success in the context of implementing an institutional strategy on monitoring and support.

The use of Bhaskar's critical realism and Archer's social realism then led to the development of the following sub-questions:

- How do structural and cultural conditions and mechanisms enable or constrain agency in pursuit of student academic success?
- What sort of practices and processes emerge from the exercise of agency?
- Which structures and mechanisms contribute to the sustainability of these practices?

Reference to these questions will be made throughout the thesis. The significance of the sub-questions will become more apparent to readers who may not be familiar with critical and social realism in Chapter Two.

## 1.7 Structure of the thesis

Reference has already been made to the structure of the thesis in Section 1.4 above. However, more detail is provided below. Before proceeding to the detail, however, it is necessary to say a word about the way theses drawing on critical and social realism tend to be structured. Conventionally, a doctoral thesis in the social sciences provides a literature review early in its

structure. The theoretical lens used for the study may be delineated in another chapter as, typically, such theses draw on Bernstein's (2000) notion of a 'horizontal knowledge structure wherein a particular theory is used to illuminate an object of study. Studies drawing on critical and social realism often foreground the theory so that it appears very early in the thesis (usually in the form of the second chapter as in the case of this thesis). This is because the 'metatheory' is integral to the entire study in that it provides an account of ontological and epistemological assumptions as well as of social change. When a study draws on Archer's (1995, 1996) 'morphogenetic framework', the thesis moves swiftly to an exploration of the first stage of that framework to identify the social and cultural conditioning in place at a particular place in time. The 'literature' (which is typically presented as a separate chapter in conventional theses) is embedded in this exploration. More literature is then embedded in the analysis chapters reporting on the second stage of the cycle to allow for the use of its explanatory power. This thesis therefore does not contain a conventional 'literature review' chapter and I hope that the explanation of my reasoning in structuring the thesis in this way will avoid what might otherwise be experienced as a gap. So,

- Chapter One introduces the study and the background thinking that led to its conceptualization. More exploration of the background and, more specifically, the higher education context, is provided in Chapters Three and Four.
- Chapter Two outlines the metatheoretical framework for the study by drawing on Bhaskar's (1978, 1998) critical realism and Archer's (1995, 1996) social realism. The work of both theorists addresses ontology, or a theory of reality, and epistemology, or how reality can be known. Bhaskar does this by positing a layered ontology upon which Archer also draws and which she elaborates to allow for more in-depth explanation of the social world.
- Chapter Three looks at the macro context in which higher education institutions are located in order to explore the way agents are socially and culturally conditioned. To do this, it analyses discourses, conceptualized as sets of ideas that can enable and constrain action (Kress, 1989; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999), as well as structures defined, for the purposes of this study, as devices that regulate access to the 'goods' of the world. In the case of this study, one 'good' is a qualification which would allow poor black students to enhance their life chances.

- Chapter Four looks more deeply at the history and shaping of WSU itself to argue that, despite the shift to democracy, it is still largely the institution to which the majority of the poor black working students located in the more remote parts of the Eastern Cape known as the 'former Transkei' can aspire to attend. This has implications for the way it can function as it moves forward.
- Chapter Five explains the design of my study and justifies the decisions I made in relation to that design drawing on critical realism.
- Chapter Six explores the way Deans and HoDs implemented the Strategy on Academic Monitoring and Success and, more specifically the way they were enabled or constrained in the exercise of their agency by institutional (and broader) conditions. To do this, and following the metatheoretical framework, the Chapter identifies structures and mechanisms (in the form of discourses) in operation at WSU.
- Chapter Seven concludes the thesis. This chapter attempts to evaluate the extent to which change has or has not taken place and attempts to identify what might be done to allow for change in the future.

## 1.8 Significance of the thesis

The thesis aims to contribute to a body of work on South African higher education. As Boughey (2022) points out, work that draws on theory to reconceptualize problems in South African work on teaching and learning has largely been produced by groups of researchers working at well-resourced, historically-white universities. With some notable exceptions, this work also tends to draw on studies conducted at the same institutions. As a result, there is a paucity of work that reports on institutions whose histories have been shaped by poor resourcing and the political economy of apartheid.

Popular discourse often constructs historically black universities as problematic institutions as they are placed under administration because of failures and problems in governance and management (see, for example, *Mail & Guardian*, 2 Nov, 2011). The study underpinning this thesis aimed to 'talk back' to these constructions showing how these institutions continue to be shaped by the forces of the past and that even the most earnest attempts to introduce

management strategies intended to address problems will also be subject to historical constraints. In spite of this, the study aimed to identify what could be done to managers to better do what they need to do to ensure that these institutions serve the communities in which they are located and from which they continue to draw students. In this respect, the study drew on what Clegg (2009) identifies as the 'axiological charge' of critical realism to contribute to social justice.

## 1.9 Conclusion

This introductory chapter has provided a rationale for the study on which this thesis reports, a brief overview of the theoretical framework used for it and outlines the research questions. In Chapter Two, I will move to explain the theoretical framework in more detail.

# 2 Chapter Two: The metatheoretical framework

> *…metatheory is indispensable to social inquiry and … there are advantages to be gained from an epistemology which specifies that metatheory, substantive theory, methodology and empirical data should be consistent with each other and should regulate each other* (Sibeon, 2004:8).

## 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the use of Bhaskar's (1979, 1998) critical realism and Archer's (1995, 1996) social realism as a metatheoretical framework for this thesis. My argument focuses on the potential for a combination of these theories to be used to explore situations in higher education that are characterised by strong evidence of disadvantage, exclusion and marginalisation. My use of the term 'metatheoretical' is intended to refer to the ability of the framework to encompass ontology and epistemology as well as to provide an account of social change.

## 2.2 Why critical realism?

One of the main strengths of Bhaskar's critical realism is its ability to address what Guba and Lincoln (1994) term 'paradigm commensurability' and, particularly, the 'dichotomous character of number crunching/empirical and the hermeneutics thereof' of philosophies that rely on empiricism alone (Bhaskar, 2008: 370). Patomäki and Wight (2002:213) note that:

> *. . . positivist orthodoxy has been under a sustained challenge from what are variously labelled reflectivist or postpositivist theories. For many post-positivists, positivism is not only epistemologically and ontologically flawed; it is also co-responsible for many of the social ills and political catastrophes of the modern world. Yet, for many positivists the postpositivist assault amounts to advocating subjectivism, irresponsible relativism and lack of standards, which work against conducting proper research and the effort to make the human condition better.*

As I will argue later in this chapter, critical realism has a particular concern for social justice and thus has the potential to address Patomäki and Wight's (2002) critique of positivism without relying on subjectivism and 'irresponsible relativism'.

For Harvey (2002:163), critical realism adopts an 'ameliorative 'third path'' between the relativism of much work in the social sciences and the realism of the natural sciences. It does this by seeing reality as:

- Stratified (in the sense that it can be understood and explained at different levels) and as emergent (in that it comprises component parts of a deeper layer of reality but, at the same time, is irreducible to those parts)
- Contingent and transcendental in that it argues that the nature of objects allows us to know something about them. Intransitive objects are real and infallible and are not available to our consciousness. We are able to have knowledge of transitive objects, however, as we can experience them empirically. Nonetheless, this empirical knowing is fallible (Bhaskar, 1978, 1998).

Bhaskar's ontological stance derives from the question of what reality must be like for a phenomenon to occur at all. For Bhaskar, the deepest level of reality, known as the 'Real' consists of mechanisms that possess properties and powers which may not always be exercised or, if exercised, may not be actualized and, if actualized, are not necessarily always perceived. These mechanisms are actuated as events and processes at the level of the Actual, the second strata in Bhaskar's ontology. At the final level, the Empirical, we realise their powers and properties as experiences and observations. A higher level or stratum is rooted in, or emergent, from the level(s) below without being reduced to them. Elder-Vass (2007, 16) identifies the 'downwardly inclusive view' of the entity-types and causal mechanisms of the domain of the Real. A 'downwardly inclusive view' considers the existence and the effects of the parts of the whole i.e. the 'whole' refers on all three domains of Real, Actual and Empirical.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mechanisms | √ | | |
| Events | √ | √ | |
| Experiences | √ | √ | √ |

*Figure 2: A layered reality (Bhaskar, 1978:13)*

As indicated above, critical realists make a distinction between a reality which is observed and one which cannot be observed by asking questions such as 'If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears the sound, does this mean the tree did not fall?' The falling of a tree is not nullified because we do not experience its fall. The level of the Real is beyond our observation and experiences and our direct understanding of it. It is the domain of intransitive objects. Events and experiences emerging from this lowest level of reality are not the same as the intransitive objects that comprise it but rather our construction of what emerges from the interplay between them. Critical realism thus encompasses the relativity of the myriad ways of knowing at the levels of the Actual and the Empirical and the realism of the world of intransitive objects at the level of the Real. For Bhaskar, our claims to understand reality (for example in positivist research) reduce and simplify the generative and emergent mechanisms at lower levels of reality to those that can be known. He therefore argues that a stratified ontology and the notion of emergence are necessary if the two extremes of reductionism, the materialist-physicalist reductionism of positivism and the idealist-mentalist reductionism of constructivism, are to be avoided.

Importantly, a lower level explains only the constitution of the mechanisms that lead to emergence at a higher level. It does not explain how or whether these mechanisms will be exercised. As a result, mechanisms are seen to be exercised in myriad ways with the result that emergence cannot be predicted. Danermark, Ekstrom, Jacobson & Karlsson (2002: 66) distinguish between the understandings of systems as ‘closed’ or ‘open’. In a closed system,

causes are seen as single mechanisms leading to results. In an open system, the mechanisms leading to events and processes are multiple and complex and changing in the way they interact together. The dominant so-called 'scientific method' rooted in positivism and reliant on empirical data is seen as closed in that scientists seek to identify cause and effect relationships and, where these are negative, manipulate them to achieve more favourable results. In an open system, such as the stratified ontology posited by Bhaskar (1978, 1998), the mechanisms leading to events and processes are multiple and complex and ever-changing in the way they interact together. Because of this, causality can only ever be tendential and not determinant.

For critical realists (Bhaskar, 1979, 1998; Sayer, 1999 & Benton and Craib, 2001), a depth ontology, in comparison to a 'flat' ontology, entails an account of 'absence' (that is, which mechanisms are not working) and is an ontological framing that helps one to delve deeper, beyond the surface and the empirical, to the historical and the underlying powers that generate events and the experiences associated with them. As my analysis in Chapters Three and Four will show, the idea that critical realism could allow me to identify the 'historical' powers that generate events and experiences was very important given the location of my study at a historically black South African university.

Realist ontology allows for the use of immanent critique. Immanent critique notes inconsistencies between theory and practice and inconsistencies within theory. Both of these are important to Bhaskar although inconsistencies between theory and practice tend to be noted more often because of critical realism's insistence on an open system. For example, immanent critique would entail debunking the idea inherent to the story cited in Chapter One of the student educated at a private school failing at university that it is schooling that prepares students for higher education. An understanding of good quality schooling as a precursor to success in higher education would constitute a cause/effect relationship typical of positivism based on 'common-sense' theories that can be debunked using other theory and research. Critical realists, understand university spaces as a social world, as open systems where success is the result of the interplay of a myriad generative mechanisms. Chapter One also referred to a debate about language and the idea that academic language is no one's mother tongue. From a critical realist perspective, experiences of and observations about language use (for example, the observation that students 'can't read or write') would need

to be understood in terms of class, power and privilege, and how such aspects are shaped into particular behaviours rather than in terms of what Christie (1985) terms a 'model of language as an instrument of communication' where language is understood as a vehicle to transmit meanings. Al-Amoudi and Willmott (2001: 461) argue that 'for anyone committed to critique, the challenge is to question and subvert forms of knowledge that aspire, or claim, to place closure on our accounts with, and of, reality.' In this way, immanent critique allows us to identify how the higher education system, with its transfactual powers and properties at the level of the real, might be disadvantaging, marginalising and excluding and therefore how it reproduces itself and, also, how it might be transformed.

In this way, realist ontology allows a researcher to challenge the normative and descriptive constructions about learning, teaching and assessment systems in higher education that might not adequately constitute socially just practice. Realist ontology allows for the identification of structures and generative mechanisms and properties at the level of the Real and the interplay between them. The two stories with which this thesis began reflect a contrast between so called 'facts' taken as obvious and the contradictions, tensions, inconsistencies that allow for other ways of understanding the experiences reported in the newspaper articles.

## 2.3 The principles of critical realism

### 2.3.1 Epistemic relativism and the epistemic fallacy

The fact that critical realism represents a 'third path' (Harvey, 2002) between relativism and realism has already been noted. The epistemological relativism acknowledged by Bhaskar means that our constructions of the social world are historically and socially situated and, as such, that our understanding of social reality cannot be reduced to our experiences of it. The potential falsity of our constructions is known as the 'epistemic fallacy', or a conflation between what is and what can be known. Guba and Lincoln (1989: 108) identify what they describe as 'metaphysical questions' which concern themselves with the nature and form of the reality that can be known. 'Epistemological questions', on the other hand, relate to questions about the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known. Our knowledge about reality is conceptually mediated and, thus, fallible. Epistemic relativism is about the relativity of knowledge and an acceptance that our knowledge of the

world (epistemology) is not identical to the world itself (ontology). For critical realists, it is the properties of an object that make it amenable to our understanding, and even then, such an understanding remains fallible because it cannot be a true representation of reality (and which accounts for absence, and change). Our historical and social understanding of a phenomenon limits our understanding of its true nature. Critical realism provides the conceptual tools to deal with the complex nature of reality in the form of causation, stratification, emergence and contingency. Sayer (1999:02), in arguing against infallibility, observes that:

> *if ….the world itself was a product or construction of our knowledge, then our knowledge would surely be infallible, for how would we ever be mistaken about anything? How could it be said that things were not as we supposed?*

Epistemic relativism claims no objective truth, but competing ways of looking at things, that is rationality in terms of judgement, based on a diversity of views. Problems ensue, from the critical realist stance, when our social constructs include the reduction of reality to our experience of it.

Key social scientists and philosophers (Delanty, 1997; Bhaskar, 2008; Benton & Craib, 2001; Fenwick, Edwards and Sawchuck, 2011) acknowledge the value of dealing with 'beyond-ness' in the social world. In this sense, their thinking entails disrupting and reimagining many dominant understandings and entails a shift from thinking about questions such as 'What is?' and 'How does? to 'How should? and 'What ought to be?' This means working against dominant grand narratives that privilege power. In the case of the events narrated in Chapter One, this would involve looking for absences in, and alternatives to, dominant understandings in pursuit of social justice as indicated by the potential for success enjoyed by all students in higher education.

Bhaskar's (2008) critical realist position on dualisms and westernisation provides a potential resolution to what can be identified as the default consciousness of westernisation, as an imposed simplified sense of order (Cattell, 2012). For Bhaskar (2008:345),

> *. . . issues which should have been long settled still split human, and to, to an extent, the natural, sciences: between realism and irrealism, positivism and*

*hermeutics, individualism and collectivism, between qualitative and quantitative and large-scale and micro research, and fact/value and theory/practice.*

The previous section alluded to the way in which critical realism resolves paradigm incommensurability. As a form of epistemic relativism, critical realism problematises interpretive/constructivist/discourse theories by arguing for consideration of conditions at a level beyond what we can know empirically. In relation to the two stories that appear in Chapter One, critical realism questions common sense understandings of the role of language and schooling in success in higher education in spite of the fact that strongly theorised alternative accounts (alluded to in the reference to Bourdieu and Passeron (1997), for example) are available. Critical realism calls for an analysis of the experiences and events narrated in the two stories as problems vexing higher education.

The power of explanatory critiques based in epistemic relativism is in challenging the tendency to make claims based on normative and descriptive values about reality. For critical realists, reality will always be a subject of our interpretation and cannot be reduced to our observation and experience of it. Explanatory critique therefore entails de-constructing and reconstructing by means of a realist orientation. In relation to the first story of the student who failed in spite of the quality of her schooling, for example, this would involve challenging reductionist and technical understandings and acknowledging the mechanisms at play in universities that make them different to schools.

According to Bhaskar & Hartwig (2016), the act of deconstructing demands criticism and critique. In relation to the stories, this would require understanding constructs such as 'success' and 'quality' as emerging from the interplay of mechanisms at the level of the Real and, at the same time, questioning the ideology inherent in practices which emerge as events at the level of the Actual. Arguments would have to encompass values and ideologies and not only rely on the empiricism of number crunching. Gough & Price (2004) argue that deconstruction invites us to be suspicious of stipulative definitions and of attempts to claim that worlds and concepts have essential meanings. Critical realist theorising both of the field of Academic Development (for example, Clegg, 2005; Wheelahan, 2010; Kahn et al, 2012; Boughey, 2012; Boughey & McKenna, 2015; Behari-Leak, 2017; Case et al, 2018) and of management in higher education (for example, Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Tsang & Kwan, 1999;

Mingers, 2000; Al-Amoudi & Willmott, 2011; Dwayi, 2017) would help to surface the inadequacy of current understandings, the orthodoxy of learning, teaching and assessment systems and the complicity of many academic teachers in exclusion as well as the inadequacy of management theories.

### 2.3.2 Judgemental rationality

Judgemental rationality, another key critical realist concept, concerns itself with which theory/explanation might best fit the evidence. Judgemental rationality can be described as a form of thinking in which, of many possible explanations or accounts of reality, we choose the most probable without ruling out other possibilities. It refers to the unequal fallibility of theories, especially as theories, in general, are socially constructed and value-laden.

Making judgements on the basis of the realist orientation requires us to foreground values-based judgements rather than what might appear as factual. This entails distinguishing between being, and the knowledge of being, and acknowledging that not all representations of the world can be taken to be equally good (see, Fairclough 2005). Judgemental rationality involves recognising representations of the world as embedded within power/knowledge relations, hence Clegg's (2005) notion of trying to understand the knowledge wars in dealing with paradigm in/commensurability.

Al-Amoudi & Willmott (2011) argue that one of the qualities of being a critical realist is to take a sceptical standpoint because transitive 'claims about the intransitive are necessarily constrained as well as enabled by established, hegemonic conceptions of their status and relationship'. On the basis of judgemental rationality, claims about what could, for example, constitute quality in learning and teaching would have to be balanced against others related to equity, as a necessary contradiction and as 'empirically grounded depth-explanations instead of the superficial constant measurements extrapolated over whole populations' (Price, 2014: 58). The focus then shifts to finding the most credible explanation in specific circumstances through a process of critique. Much of the power of judgemental rationality comes from its links to the emancipatory cause because of the way it can surface the power of arguments irrespective of disciplinary positions and can make arguments for the sake of emancipation and human flourishing.

### 2.3.3 Retroductive reasoning, transfactuality, transcendental argument and realism

Central to the power of critical realism and judgemental rationality are a number of other interlinked concepts: retroduction; abduction, transfactuality and transcendental realism.

- Retroductive reasoning (Price, 2014; Clegg, 2005) entails the pursuit of the structural and generative mechanisms, powers and tendencies at the level of the Real, which produce or do not produce observable and experienced outcomes. This is more of a thinking process whereby a person starts at the level of the Empirical (sense and experience) and engages with both the Empirical and the Actual levels to work back to the level of the Real in order to explore the generative mechanisms at work. The realist position is that our claims and methods of study must be adapted to the nature of the object as stratified and with emergent powers if such knowledge is to have practical relevance (Price, 2014). Bhaskar (2002) describes retroductive thinking as analogical and metaphoric because it requires one to use one's imagination and visualisation to creatively imagine an analogy, metaphor or model that can be used to explore mechanisms at work in the domain of the Real. Using retroductive reasoning, the researcher infers which mechanisms could be at play at the level of the Real in order to generate what is expressed as events and processes at the level of the Actual and as experiences and observations at the level of the Empirical. Danermark et al., 2002 outline a model of retroductive reasoning by providing the four steps of i) retroduction, ii) elimination; iii) identification and iv) correction.
- Abduction involves using theory to move from empirical data to the level of the Real. It is therefore linked to retroduction in the sense that it involves moving from what can be experienced and observed to what cannot but theory is used to open up the potential of identifying mechanisms at the level of the Real. Boughey & McKenna (2017, 2021) posit a continuum of theoretical positions used to account for success in higher education. At one end of the continuum is what is termed the 'model of the student as a decontextualised learner'. This locates the ability to succeed in higher education in factors inherent to the individual such as intelligence and aptitude and, in doing so, resolves institutions of responsibility for failure. At the other end of the continuum is the 'model of the student as a social being' which acknowledges the

multiplicity of forms of knowledge and ways of knowing and sees some forms as privileged over others. Using theories located towards the 'model of the student as a social being' end of the continuum opens up the way to account for South African student performance data by understanding universities as alien spaces for black working class students. Such theories could be used to abduct within a critical realist ontology to arrive at alternative understandings of what is experienced in pursuit of social justice.

- Transfactuality involves surmising the real from empirical evidence. In considering empirical evidence it is always necessary to consider all possibilities in order to avoid reductionism. Price (2014: 61) notes that, for critical realists, 'factual information is only the empirical starting point of science and is meaningless unless placed within the transfactual theoretical context which explains it'. Properties and powers at the domain of the Real are working independently of the factual outcome and are separated from the factual events. Transfactuality entails the acknowledgement of the structures and generative mechanisms and how these, as intransitive objects, might be accounting for what is not immediately available to our cognition as factual. The key is to avoid oscillating between determinism, which would be ontological monovalence, and volunteerism, which would be epistemic fallacy, is to question how the material conceptually fits into our theorising as judgemental rationalism. As a process of inference, it involves surmising the real from the empirical evidence and thus arriving at a transfactual explanation by retroductive reasoning. The story of the young woman who had failed first year courses at university in spite of her high quality schooling provides an example of transfactual reasoning not only because it contradicts assumptions about the link between the quality of schooling and success but also because Mthethwa, the young woman, was very proficient in English, the language of teaching and learning at the university she attended and, therefore, did not suffer from the 'language problems' commonly alleged to contribute to failure in South Africa (Boughey, 2002). Transfactuality allows for something else to account for such empirical evidence, and not the immediately observable or eventful. The literature on teaching and learning questions common sense assumptions about success (see, for example, Boughey & McKenna, 2017) and provides other reasons for the experiences reported by Mthethwa (2013). Price (2014:61) argues that, for critical

realists, 'factual information is only the empirical starting point of a science and is meaningless unless placed within the transfactual theoretical context which explains it'. In this way, transfactuality becomes the third realist tool used to avoid actualism/actualist collapse of the natural necessity.

- A transcendental argument is anchored on understandings of what reality must be like for the observed and the experienced to be possible. Importantly, the answer to the question 'What it is' cannot be inferred as 'What it ought to be'. In relation to the Mthethwa case, the assumption is that high quality schooling ought to prepare learners for higher education. Other evidence (see, for example, Geisler, 1994) is available to show that this is not necessarily the case.

Critical naturalism is a precursor of critical realism in the sense that, originally, Bhaskar (1979) identified critical naturalism as a philosophy of the human sciences. For Corson (1991: 231), critical naturalism:

> *... asks us to drop our preoccupation with the 'grounds for knowledge'; incorporates the social world as an intrinsic part of the scientific world; . . . allows for the existence of knowable structures that are at work in the human domain which are partly analogous but irreducible to (although dependent upon) those discovered in nature; and it urges that we study the two worlds in parallel.*

Benton & Craib (2001) discuss the binary opposition of empiricism/natural science and post structuralism, and argue for the value of natural sciences and their implications for social sciences. They explain (2001:13) that 'it possible to have a science of society in the same sense as the science of nature, but not necessarily of the same form as [the natural sciences] and not employing the same methods'. Critical naturalism provides a solution to the structure-agency problem by means of a commitment to the reality of social structures, conceived as relations between social agents in virtue of their occupancy of social positions. Understandings of structures and agents in the social world should entail the realist ways of understanding and explaining society (along natural terms). The need for a science of society leads me to the work of sociologist Margaret Archer (1995, 1996) whose social realism makes up the second part of the theoretical framework used for the study on which this thesis reports.

### 2.3.4 The explanatory power of social realism

The previous section on Bhaskar's critical realism attempted to explain how critical realism allows for the understanding of social phenomena. Archer (2007:12) advances arguments that critical realism is just a meta-theory noting its lack of 'robust and relational theory of social integration' (Archer, 2010: 273). In her argument (Archer, 2010: 276), posits that, while Bhaskar acknowledges society/structure and person/agency relations, there is no adequate explanation about how such a relationship takes place rendering it a 'non-reflexive socialisation' versus what she recommends as 'reflexive deliberation'. Danermark et al. (2002) also explain why critical realism is not explanatory and why it cannot be regarded as an empirical project. While cognitive tools such as abduction and reproduction allow the researcher to conceptualise the interplay of mechanisms at the level of the Real, such efforts do not constitute an explanatory account in social science. Our inferences about the workings of emergence is just ontological, it cannot explain how social change takes place.

This chapter therefore draws on Archer's (1995, 1996) work, known as 'social realism' to argue that it is only when we understand the interplay of structural, agentic and cultural systems at the level of the Real that we might be able to account for events that emerge at the level of the Actual and experiences and observations that emerge at the level of the Empirical. Archer is a critical realist in that her theory acknowledges Bhaskar's ideas about a stratified ontology and emergence. However, her work has the potential to allow us to explicate the workings of the Real in more depth.

## 2.4 A realist social theory

Archer's Social realism provides us with a toolkit (Archer, 2010: 276) in that it makes available the concepts to be used to understand a social phenomenon as 'social formations, institutional structures, and organisational forms'.

Carter and New (2004:1) argue that researchers need social realism because:

> *Of all the philosophies of social science, social realism is probably the most optimistic about the possibility – and the necessity – of reaching significant knowledge of the social world as a result of systematic, principled investigation. Social realism holds the view that the project of empirical research in the social*

*sciences is to investigate social phenomena in order to discover underlying causal mechanisms. Good explanations are, therefore, those which account for patterns of phenomena by showing that causal processes are operating at various levels of the social world* .

In order to discuss social realism, I address Archer's work on:

- Structure, agency and culture in order to approach these three elements in ways that indicate their significance in non-conflationary ways. Of particular significance is the role of a cultural system, which tends to be overlooked due to our pre-occupation with the workings of a structural system (Williams, 2012). South African work (Quinn & Boughey, 2009; Boughey & McKenna, 2017) shows that the cultural domain in higher education has been hard to shift in spite of the fact that a great deal of structural elaboration has taken place.
- The morphogenetic framework (morphogenesis/morphostasis) in order to show shifts need to be observed over time and especially so that the exercise of agency might be explained as transformative or reproductive.
- The internal conversation in order to highlight the primacy of agency through the 'reflexive imperative.

## 2.5 Structure, culture, and agency

The sociological challenge of treating the concepts of culture and structure in unequal terms is documented in recent realist-based literature (for example, Williams, 2012; Case, Hilton, Kotta, Marshall, McKenna & Williams, 2012). Williams (2012) , in particular, goes into length in critiquing the works of such established sociologists as Bourdieu (1977) and Bernstein (2000) who, according to Williams, tend to assume culture by being pre-occupied with structure. By taking the Archerian position, Williams argues for treating culture as equal to structure instead of relegating it to an afterthought.

Structure refers to the materialist world, the world of role and responsibilities, policies and strategies. For the higher education environment, structures would constitute such social systems as learning, teaching and assessment (LTA) and quality management including

related admission and progression rules; the institutional, and organisational structures such as committees, units, departments, faculties, etc. and the academic hierarchy.

Culture refers to the world of ideas; how we think about things and about the world. In higher education, culture involves ideas, where contestations occur around ideologies, theories, beliefs and values as evidenced in discourses. In an ideal situation, and following the objectives of an emancipatory project, culture can be understood as integral to growth and development in the social world.

Agency refers to people and their ability to act within and upon their own world in terms of their social roles and positions. For Archer (2000:261), the term 'agency' is ‘always and only employed in plural even though its usage in the singular can be taken to indicate a reference to a single agent. For Archer, the term ‘agency’ relates to individuals as well as to collectivities or groups.

Culture and structure constitute what Archer terms 'the parts' and agency 'the people'. Culture and structure condition, but do not determine agency. Structure and culture, on their own, cannot cause people to do things; their causal effects are always mediated by human agency (see, for example, Case, 2013). According to Archer (1995, 1996), structural or cultural mechanisms have causal powers in that they possess the potential to constrain or enable change, depending on how individuals respond to them (Elder-Vass, 2010). Important in Archer's work ‘is the recognition of the possibility that powers may exist unexercised, and hence that what has happened or been known to have happened does not exhaust what could happen or have happened’ (Sayer, 1999: 12). It is only through agency that the powers accorded to mechanisms in the domains of culture and structure are activated.

## 2.6 Analytical dualism

Central to Archer's work (2007:7) is the need to avoid what she calls the 'fallacy of conflation’ of culture and agency and structure and agency. Archer (1995) explains structure, culture and agency as constituting different levels of a stratified social reality, each possessing distinctive emergent properties which are real and causally efficacious but irreducible to one another. According to Archer (1995), non-conflation means that each element must always be understood in terms of its distinctive powers and properties although they will always be relational to agency, that is, as structure and agency, and as culture and agency. To Archer

(1995), the problem for social science is how to link the two rather than conflate them. She identifies the following types of conflation and explains why they need to be avoided in our explanation of a social practice:

- Downwards conflation involves the idea that individuals are moulded by society. This has to be avoided on the basis of determinism.
- Upwards conflation refers to the claim that social reality is nothing but individuals and their activities. Upwards conflation involves aggregating individual acts and has to be avoided on the basis of voluntarism.
- Central conflation is the claim that structure and agency are mutually constitutive. Central conflation precludes any examination of their interplay by eliding them.

The implications of this work on conflation for researchers is that structure, culture and agency always need to be treated as analytically distinct within an overall understanding of agency acting on structure and/or culture.

For Archer (2003), researchers need to pay careful attention to the way objective features of society influence human agents. We need to address this without a preoccupation with determinism which, to her and all other realists, is not the answer. According to Archer (2003), we need to accentuate the way structure and culture shape the social context in which we as individuals operate, but without neglecting our personal capacity to define what we care about most and to establish a modus vivendi expressive of our concerns. Treating each element as analytically distinct is seen as the way to deal with this complexity. Analytical dualism, together with the morphogenetic framework (see below) constitute the methodological approach for a social realist account.

For Archer (2006), the problem in exploring the relationship between structure and agency relates to the way conceptualisation of this relationship is able capture the notion of a human being who is partly formed by their sociality but also has the capacity to transform society in some part. Social theorising has oscillated between two extremes. On the one hand, Enlightenment thought promoted an 'under-socialised' view of a person whose human constitution owed nothing to society and was thus a self-sufficient 'outsider' who simply operated in a social environment. This is contrasted with a later, but pervasive, 'over-

socialised' view of a person, whose every feature, beyond biology, is shaped and moulded by social context. A person thus becomes a dependent 'insider' with no capacity to transform a social environment. Social realism argues that both under-socialised and over-socialised models are inadequate since they would present a problem of conflation. To resolve this problem, the notion of structure as a system is proposed whereby agency is able to act on its micro elements while macro elements remain as conditioning. This then means a structure cannot be recreated but transformed or reproduced. As already indicated, Archer also criticises Giddens' (1984) structuration theory which sees structure and agency as mutually constitutive. For Archer (1996:87), this results in structure and agency being locked in a 'conceptual vice'.

Archer (1996) makes a similar argument in relation to culture and agency. She explains that human beings in their daily lives feel a genuine freedom of thought and belief, yet this is unavoidably constrained by cultural limitations, such as those related to the language spoken, the knowledge developed and the information available at any time. However, human beings also have the ability to transform or reproduce culture by acting on its micro elements, while macro elements remain as conditioning.

Analytical dualism therefore entails clearly explicating these dual relations of structure and agency, and further of culture and agency, in ways that make their relations distinct from one another. Archer (1996: 143) describes analytical dualism as 'an artifice of convenience' which enables researchers to determine 'whose conceptual shifts are responsible for which structural changes, when, where and under what conditions'.

A critical realist ontology identifies stratification as a means of dealing with causation in a non-reductive form. By means of a depth ontology, researchers are able to claim that there is more to causation than necessary connections and to constant conjunctions (Humean logic). Through abduction and retroductive reasoning, researchers are able to be creative about what appears as observed and experienced so that we might have imaginative abstractions about the workings of causal mechanisms as emergent powers and properties of social phenomena.

By means of a deep and stratified ontology (Bhaskar, 1979, 2010; Archer 2000; 2003), causation is viewed from a realist stance as contingent and tendential. Stratification means

that our understanding and explanation of the social world entails using transcendental reasoning to identify and explore the interplay of structures and the mechanisms at the level of the Real in order to make statements about the way they lead to the emergence of events and processes at the level of the Actual and experiences and observations at the level of the Empirical.

The use of social realism to explore the question guiding this thesis 'How do academic managers exercise their agency to promote and monitor student academic success in the context of implementing an institutional throughput management strategy in higher education?' entails an examination of the way managers exercise their personal emergent powers and properties (PEPs) in relation to the value and belief systems about teaching and learning which, following Archer, would be conceptualised as possessing their own cultural emergent powers and properties (CEPs) and also in relation to activating elements of the University's plans and strategies, as elements of a structural system. These would also be assumed to possess their own structural emergent powers and properties (SEPs). This understanding is captured in the first sub-question guiding the thesis 'How do structural and cultural conditions and mechanisms enable or constrain agency in pursuit of student academic success?' The terms 'structural and cultural conditions' capture the understanding that agents confront SEPs and CEPs as they exercise their own PEPs. 'Structural conditions' refer to those structures exerting SEPs in the context in which the agent operates. 'Cultural conditions' refers to mechanisms exerting CEPs in the context in which the agent operates.

Causation in social realism is explained in terms of the mechanisms confronting agents either as constraints or as enablements. As I have indicated, structure and culture pre-date agency, which therefore indicates a causal relationship. Archer (1995: 167) explains that agency does not create the structure nor the culture, but reproduces or transforms them in any 'generation'. The systemic nature of the structure and culture determine the kind of response that agency can have. Change or non-change emerges from the interplay of PEPs, CEPs and SEPs and is visible at the level of events and experiences which means it can be identified, monitored and evaluated. Emphasising the importance of emergence and the relational philosophy of critical realism , Sayer (1999: 12) notes,

> *[t]hat the world is characterised by emergence, that is situations in which the conjunction of two or more features or aspects gives rise to new phenomena, which have properties which are irreducible to those of their constituents, even though the latter are necessary for their existence*.

Sayer (1992), and also Wheelahan (2007), explain that the social world is, in part, constituted through the meanings agents make of their activity, which then foregrounds the importance of interpretation in social research. Research drawing on critical and social realism has to use interpretive understanding as part of any explanation. Sayer (1999: 17) explains this point thus: '[m]eaning has to be understood, it cannot be measured or counted, and hence there is always an interpretive or hermeneutic element in social science'. This means that social realist research is amenable to qualitative research methods such as interviews.

## 2.7 The morphogenetic framework

For Archer (2010: 274), citing Buckley (1967: 58), morphogenesis refers to 'those processes, which tend to elaborate or change system's given form, structure or state'. Morphostasis, on the other hand, refers to 'processes in a complex system that tend to preserve such forms, structure of state unchanged'. Archer's morphogenetic framework explains how emergence occurs in ways that allow for an examination of the interplay between structure/culture and agency over time. The morphogenetic framework therefore serves as a theory of change. Archer (1995) developed the theory because she recognized that social systems are able to restructure themselves, often radically, over time.

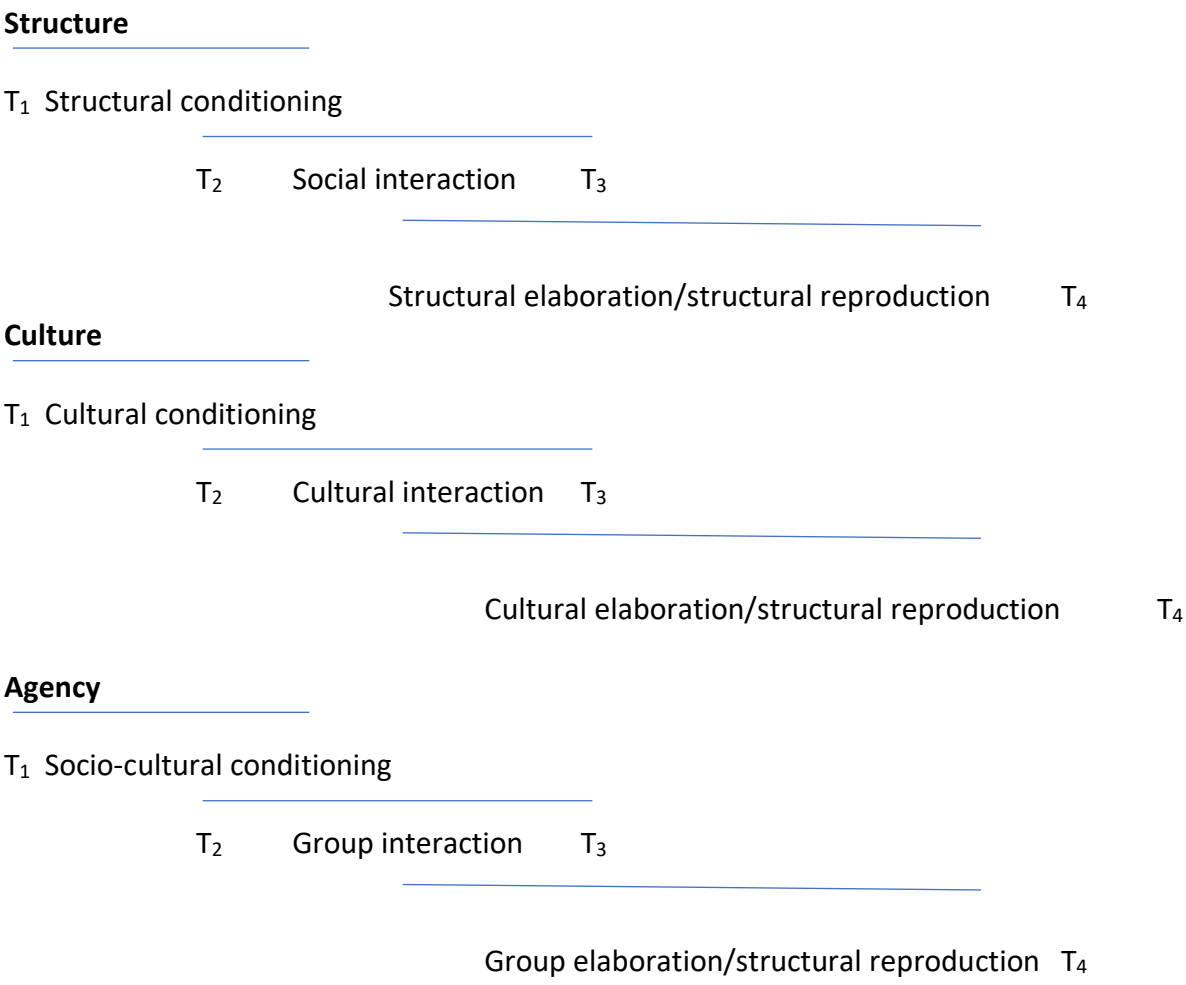


*Figure 3: Archer's morphogenetic framework (Archer, 1995 :193ff)*

Time is important in the morphogenetic framework. For Archer, change or non-change occurs in an unending series of cycles. In a cycle, $T_1$ denotes the pre-existing conditions in place as it begins. In the case of agency, $T_1$ is understood as the period of social and cultural conditioning in place as agents begin to act on a particular project to address a concern. In relation to the domain of culture, $T_1$ indicates dominant cultural conditions which are understood to be discursively constituted. For structure, $T_1$ refers to the social structures in place as a cycle begins. $T_2$ to $T_3$ is then seen as the period of interaction between structure, culture and agency. At $T_4$ it is possible to discern whether change (morphogenesis or elaboration) has taken place or whether a system has reproduced itself (morphostasis).

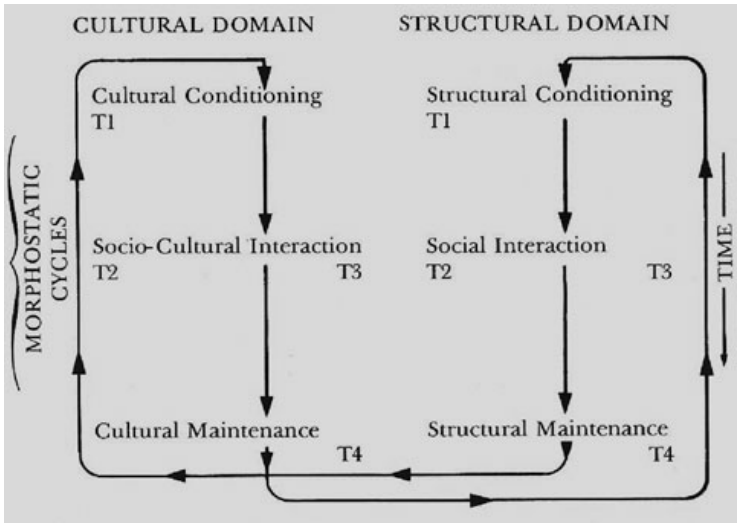


*Figure 4: Morphostasis: Predominant habitual action and low reflexivity (Archer, 2010:281)*

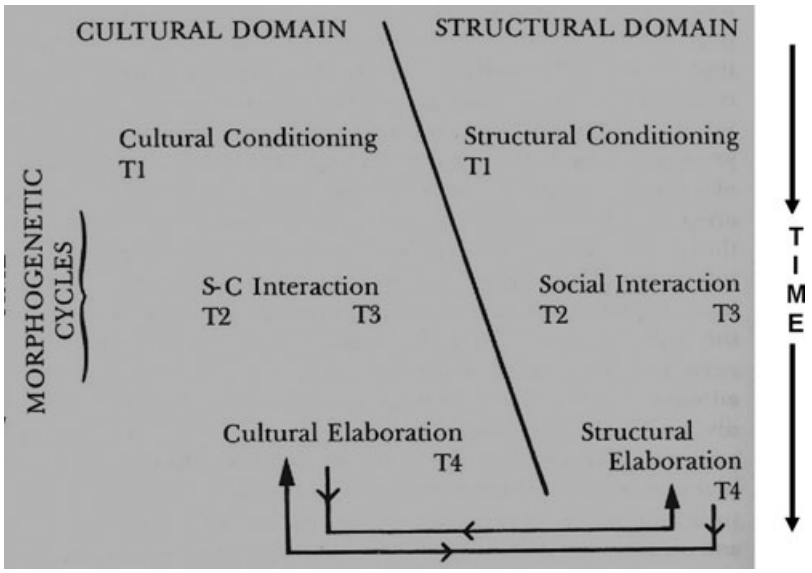


*Figure 5: Morphogenesis and reflexivity, Archer (2010:284)*

### 2.7.1 Situational logics

The logics of a particular situation will predispose actors towards exercising their agency in particular ways. These situational logics impact on power relations and what is possible and not possible. Some situations demonstrate high levels of complementarity where SEPs and CEPs are compatible and thus create conditions likely to lead to reproduction. In others, SEPs and CEPs are mostly incompatible with the result that tension results and opportunities for change occur. Archer also makes a distinction between 'necessary' and 'contingent'

conditions. Necessary conditions are internally related in that they depend on each other. Contingent conditions are externally related and contextual.

Archer (1995: 218) makes four propositions in this regard:

- Necessary complementarities occur in a situation where there are compatibilities between CEPs and SEPs leading to an environment of mutual support. This makes change less likely.
- Necessary incompatibilities represent the opposite of necessary complementarities and occur when elements of the system are incompatible and thus constrain possible change; When ideas or beliefs contradict each other, accommodation is sought because the ideas are related to each other in some way.
- Contingent incompatibilities occur when there is a 'battleground of ideas' where agents have nothing to gain from compromise and everything to gain from inflicting damage on the ideas and beliefs held by opponents. As a result, elimination occurs.
- Contingent complementarities occur when there are material opportunities that concur with dominant ideas with the result that opportunism becomes possible.

### 2.7.2 Archer on agency

Archer distinguishes between two different groups of agents: primary agents and corporate agents. Primary agents have very little power and are described by Archer (2000:263) as 'collectivities sharing the same life chances'. A group of black working class students entering a university to begin a programme of study could thus be considered as primary agents. Primary agents can transform themselves into corporate agents by using their reflexivity to pursue a project. So, for example, in 2015 and 2016, groups of primary agents came together in South African universities to protest against the rising cost of tuition fees. As a result of these protests in 2015, a 0% increase was imposed by the State President for 2016 and, towards the end of 2016, a new system for funding poor black students was introduced. This is thus an example of primary agents transforming themselves into corporate agents and bringing about both structural and cultural change in the system. For Archer (1995: 258) corporate agents are groups:

> *... who are aware of what they want, can articulate it to themselves and others, and have organized to get it, can engage in concerted action to re-shape or retain the structural or cultural feature in question.*

Archer also identifies social actors as individuals who occupy roles that themselves have powers and properties. The role of professor, for example, accords an individual occupying it more power than another individual occupying the role of junior lecturer. The powers of social actors are thus not reducible to the PEPs of the individuals occupying them. Different individuals will bring different PEPs to the role of professor which then accords them powers related to the role itself.

### 2.7.3 The internal conversation

As noted earlier in this chapter, Archer (2006:261) argues that both the 'under-socialised' and 'over-socialised' models of humankind are inadequate foundations for social theory because they present us with either 'a self-sufficient maker of society, or a supine social product who is made'. Instead, if we are to understand and model the human being as both 'child' and 'parent' of society there are two requirements. The first is that social theory requires a concept of the individual as a person whose sociality make a vital contribution to the realisation of his potential as a human being. The second is that it requires a concept of an individual who is autonomous enough to reflect and act upon the context in which s/he finds herself in order to transform it. Key to Archer's work is the idea that structure and culture shape the contexts in which individuals and groups of individuals operate. Structure and culture are not deterministic, however, as human beings are able to exercise their own personal powers and properties (PEPs) in relation to them. The question then becomes how these PEPs are exercised. Archer's response to this question lies in her concept of the inner dialogue or 'internal conversation'.

According to Archer (see, for example, 2010:10 ):

> *... reflexivity mediates between the objective structural and cultural contexts confronting agents, who activate their properties as constraints and enablements as they pursue reflexively defined 'projects' based on their concerns.*

All individuals, according to Archer (2010), have personal concerns, defined as things they care about, and pursue those concerns by identifying projects. Reflexivity, or the 'internal conversation' then mediates between the concern and the project and constraints and enablements in the form of SEPs and CEPs in the contexts in which they find themselves. Reflexivity thus governs agents' responses to social conditioning, their individual patterns of social mobility and whether or not they contribute to social reproduction or transformation. The internal conversation is thus the link between the individual and society.

Archer (2000:20) identifies the 'DDD scheme' (shown below) as an internal process of pursuing concerns through reflexivity. The scheme consists of three stages:

- Discernment is fundamentally about the subject putting together reflective, retrospective and prospective considerations about the desire to which he is drawn through an inner dialogue that compares and contrasts them.
- Deliberation is concerned with exploring the implications of endorsing a particular cluster of concerns from those pre-selected as desirable to the subject during the first moment.
- Dedication represents the culminating moment of experimentation between thought and feeling that has occupied the preceding phases.

In this way, agency is emergent. Agents act on the causal mechanisms of structure and culture, affording them the opportunity for their PEPs and thus allowing for the emergence of events and experiences.

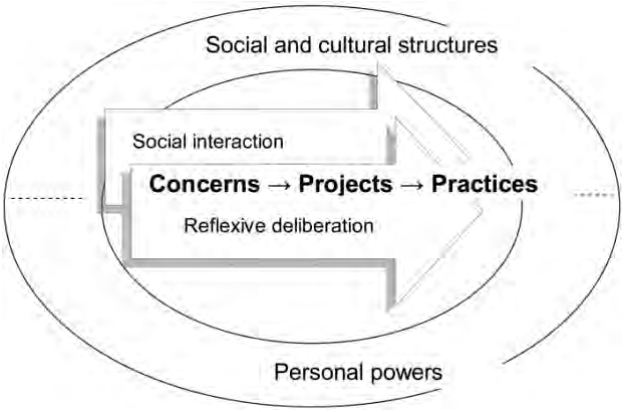


*Figure 6: The role of reflexive deliberation (Kahn, Qualter & Young, 2012:863)*

Archer's own research (2007) allowed her to identify four ideal modes of reflexivity:

- Meta reflexivity occurs when the inner conversation is subjected to self-critique in order to identify whether or not it is possible to take effective action. Meta-reflexivity, then, is about self-monitoring, self-examination, self-knowledge, self-criticism and self-improvement. Meta-reflexives are mainly idealistic and tend to experience a constant tension between constraints and enablements. Uncertainty can be a major problem as an individual pursues projects identified on the basis of concerns. As a result, meta-reflexives can feel a need to improve their learning on an ongoing basis. They maintain a subversive stance towards constraints and enablements.
- Autonomous reflexivity allows individuals to engage in action on the basis of a solitary internal conversation. Individuals practising autonomous reflexivity are self-sustained, able to identify actions independently and tend to prioritise performativity. Autonomous reflexives tend to deal with constraints from the perspective of their potential to become enablements and can therefore contribute to morphogenesis because of the way they are able to challenge SEPs and CEPs.
- Communicative reflexivity requires communication with others before action is taken. Individuals practising communicative reflexivity will want to act in a way which 'fits' with what others are doing. As such this mode of reflection is characterised by assimilation, or constrained ability. Communicative reflexives are more likely to thrive in stable conditions and may remain in the same locality on a long term-basis so that relationships can be maintained. Communicative reflexives are more likely to maintain prior conditioning rather than challenge it.
- Fractured reflexivity is characterised by internal conversations that contribute to the disorientation and distress that an individual is already experiencing. As a result, it can lead to inaction. Individuals tend to have no confidence in themselves and the demands they place on their ability to reflect can cause anxiety and distress. Constraints can lead to self-pity. Fractured reflexivity is therefore highly likely to lead to morphostasis.

Archer (2007) stresses that these types of reflexivity are 'ideal' and, in addition, the research on which they are based was conducted in the United Kingdom, a very different context to South Africa. It is, however, worth noting that Archer argues that both communicative reflexives and fractured reflexives are more common in environments where authoritarian structures predominate. Given South Africa's history in apartheid and, as Bunting (2002b) notes, the historically black and Afrikaans speaking universities were characterised by authoritarianism during apartheid, it is possible to see how the potential for change might be constrained post democracy.

The stories introduced in Chapter One can be of assistance in explaining this point. As already noted, discourses constructing students' problematic learning experiences as due to their inadequate mastery of the English language have long predominated in South African higher education (Boughey, 2002). These constructions of students' language related needs are so long standing and so dominant that, in spite of the work of critical researchers (Boughey, 2002, 2005, 2013; Jacobs, 2007, 2009; McKenna, 2004a,b) they continue to influence practice at most universities as well as the beliefs of academics, as in the Vale case cited in Chapter One. It is not only dominant discourses that need to be challenged, however, but structures which support the 'convenience' and economy of stand-alone courses taught by so-called 'language specialists' even though 'across the curriculum' approaches which see academics taking responsibility for their students' disciplinary language needs (Jacobs, 2007, 2009) are more likely to be effective. Beliefs about the relationship of the quality of schooling to success in higher education are similarly dominant even though there is a wealth of research which shows that the teaching and learning practices of school are very different to those of universities (see, for example, Geisler, 1994). Although there is no doubt that the poor quality of the majority of schools in South Africa means that students arrive at universities underprepared for the learning demands they will face, the experiences of Mthethwa show that more is needed than a good education. Rather, what is required is for academics to make overt the 'rules and conventions' (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988) of academic learning. Over time, ideas about language, the role of academics in developing language proficiency and so on have become so dominant in South Africa that they have come to represent a form of 'authority'. It can thus be very difficult for individuals who have long been constrained in the exercise of agency thanks to the authoritarian environments in which they have found

themselves to counter ‘established doctrine’. It is not my intention in this thesis to pursue Archer’s ideas about reflexivity in any detail but they are noted here as I will be drawing on the concept of the ‘internal conversation’.

## 2.8 Using critical and social realism in the study

Critical realism provides an underlabouring philosophy for my study in that it allows me to explore events and experiences such as those reported in Chapter One from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders and to use these perspectives to arrive at an understanding of a deeper layer of reality. This will allow me to address my research question 'How do academic managers exercise their agency to promote and monitor student academic success in the context of implementing an institutional throughput management strategy in higher education?' in a way which addresses the multiplicity of human experience and observation while, at the same time, acknowledging the enduring nature of the structures and mechanisms from which it emerges.

As indicated in Chapter One, my interest in completing this study was, ultimately, to contribute to social justice in the form of enhanced chances of success for the black working-class students who take up most enrolments at my university, a historically marginalised and under resourced institution because of apartheid. The possibility of identifying enduring structures and mechanisms allows me the possibility of seeing which could be addressed through the development of management practice.

Given that my aim was to explore the workings at the level of the Real, the use of Archer's social realism offers a potentially better explanation of the way managers exercise their agency. Even more importantly, the morphogenetic framework allowed me to consider the exercise of agency over time. This is important given the enormous changes that have taken place in the South African higher education system following the shift to democracy and the way social and cultural conditions have conditioned agency.

## 2.9 Conclusion

In this chapter I outlined the two theories I integrated into a theoretical framework which functioned as a lens which allowed me to explore the object of my study, the implementation

and monitoring of the WSU Strategy on Academic Monitoring for Academic Development. The two theories are Bhaskar's (1989) critical realism and Archer's (1995, 1996) social realism.

My theoretical framework required me to structure my study using Archer's (1995, 1996) three-phase morphogenetic framework. In the next chapter, Chapter Three, I move on to explore the first phase of the framework by looking at the social and cultural conditioning at place at a macro level.

# 3 Chapter 3: Social and cultural conditioning at $T_1$

> *The basic confrontation, which seemed to be colonialism versus anti-colonialism, indeed capitalism versus socialism, is already losing its importance. What matters today, the issue which blocks the horizon, is the need for a redistribution of wealth. Humanity will have to address this question, no matter how devastating the consequences may be* (Fanon, 2017:xvii).

## 3.1 Introduction

Following the metatheoretical framework outlined in Chapter Two of this thesis, this chapter aims to describe the social and cultural conditions in place as the WSU Strategy on Academic Monitoring for Academic Development, the focus of the study, was developed and introduced. This is necessary if the social and cultural conditioning of the agents who are the focus of this study, the managers at a historically black South African university situated in what was a former 'Bantustan' and what is now one of the poorest provinces of the country, is to be understood. Following the metatheoretical framework, this chapter needs to be understood as $T_1$ in Archer's morphogenetic framework.

## 3.2 The past and the present

The Marikana Massacre of 2012 (ISS, 2018) and the Fallist Movement of 2015-2016 (Pennington, Makose, Smith & Kawanu, 2017) arguably constitute two major events in the history of South Africa that reveal the complexity of her new found constitutional democracy. Such events are likely to go down in history as illustrations of the way an emerging economy can be both fractured and united. In one case involving power and social class, the Marikana Massacre, thirty four lives were lost as the result of what can be described as the naked face of capitalism in a country which continues to rely heavily on a migrant labour system that provides work in a context of high levels of unemployment. The Fallist Movement, from which the student protests at universities across the country emerged in 2015 and 2016, resulted in changes to the funding provided to poor black students and renewed attention being paid to arguments to decolonise South Africa's universities. These increases in student funding were, however, accompanied by a 1% rise in Value Added Tax (VAT) which meant that the burden

of carrying the increases ultimately affected the families of the very students the funding aimed to assist. Such is the complexity of the South African system.

These events reflect how, in South Africa, capitalism continues to reproduce the old regimes of power and inequality despite the context of a new found democracy. The Marikana Massacre saw poor black workers striking for their rights gunned down by the police force commanded by the new democratic government and the dispute about fees (which later came to include calls for the universities to be 'decolonised') provided insights into the complicity of the higher education system in maintaining power and privilege.

From a realist point of view, it is possible to see how the Fallist movement and the Marikana Massacre emerged from a context in which global forces conditioned action and both events provide evidence of the way social systems can reproduce themselves. In the case of Marikana, it is possible to see how multi-national companies can exert influence at a local level to maintain their economic position regardless of the political dispensation. The Fallist Movement had its origins in the actions of students at the University of Cape Town who called for the removal of a statue of Cecil John Rhodes with the hashtag #RhodesMustFall. The movement played out in South Africa predominantly in the historically white, liberal universities such as the University of Cape Town, Rhodes University and the University of the Witwatersrand. The original #RhodesMustFall movement grew to encompass #FeesMustFall protests, attempts to challenge the neo-liberalism informing higher education thinking in the country and, also, the commodification of higher education, developments which all followed global trends. All these protests indicate, albeit at surface level, how the subaltern (Gramsci, 2011) can rise against the status quo, and also how the powerful can continue to exercise control of the marginalised.

In this chapter, I argue that the social and cultural conditioning in place as the shift to democracy took place led to the emergence of events, in the form of policy development, and experiences which are not in keeping with the ideals of transformation that informed the spirit of the new democratic order. My argument is that, try as it might, it was extremely difficult for South Africa to escape the shackles of the past and that these continue to constrain the higher education system, and institutions in it such as WSU, to transform.

## 3.3 The social and cultural conditioning of South Africa

In order to explore the social and cultural conditioning at a historically black university, it is necessary to begin with the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) project which has long dominated political thinking in South Africa. The origins of the NDR lie in Lenin's (1920) *Draft Thesis on the National and Colonial Questions for the Second Congress of the Comintern.* Central to Lenin's thinking was the idea that the world consists of a majority of oppressing, colonial nations and a minority of oppressed, colonised nations. The NDR, as a strategy, draws on the idea that revolution, or change, first requires emancipation from colonial rule. Once this has been achieved, the newly independent country needs to move from a capitalist system inherited from the colonialists to a socialist system.

In South Africa, freedom from colonialism was achieved when the 1994 democratic election ended white rule. The period of white rule from the time the Republic of South Africa gained its independence, a process which began in 1910 with the formation of the Union of South Africa, has been termed 'colonialism of a special type' because the country was ruled by a white minority. The move to full independence was therefore only achieved in 1994 with the first democratic election that brought the African National Congress (ANC) to power.

As the ANC came to power, the new government had to develop policy in a context which included the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the growing power of international organisations such as the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Although early policy in the form of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) drew on socialist principles, by the mid 1990s, pressure from the wider world resulted in a shift to the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy with a focus on the 'trickling down' of wealth through capitalist expansion. The context in which the new democracy sought to establish itself was therefore dominated by a globalised capitalist system with its influence clearly evident in the shift from the RDP to GEAR.

The NDR was premised on the main objective of a unitary and democratic South Africa, drawing on the communitarian African philosophy of ubuntu (Barolsky, 2016), and thus referred to the notion of a caring society as a central feature. In many respects, the Fallist protests and the Marikana Massacre illustrate the tension between the cultural system,

expressed in the values of solidarity and caring, and the assertive individualism associated with personal freedoms and neoliberalism associated with the hyper-capitalism privileged at a global level, an issue which I now explore in relation to higher education.

### 3.3.1 Globalisation, neoliberalism and higher education

The impact of the development of a globalised economy dominated by multinational companies has been felt in higher education systems across the world. In its simplest terms, globalisation is characterised by the breaking down of national boundaries as goods are produced and sold across the world, a process that has been fuelled by the development of information and communication technologies and improved transportation links (Garrett, 2000; Deese, 2017). The global economy is also widely cited as a 'knowledge economy' (see, for example, Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2008) not only because of its reliance on the 'reinvention' of existing goods, a process widely regarded as requiring high skills at the design phase, but also because advanced knowledge is needed, *inter alia*, to reconfigure supply chains and distribution chains and to market goods across the globe. The concept of a knowledge economy has then led to the identification of universities as sites for the production of the 'knowledge workers' necessary for it to function.

In South Africa, Education White Paper 3 (MoE, 1997: para.1.3) identifies the four purposes for higher education as:

- Meeting the learning aspirations of individuals;
- Contributing to the creation of a critical citizenry;
- Developing new knowledge; and
- Contributing to the development of a skilled workforce.

Since the time the White Paper was published, arguably the final purpose of contributing to the development of a skilled workforce has come to dominate (Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

In many respects, the privileging of the role of higher education as contributing to the development of a skilled workforce is understandable. South Africa had experienced economic boycotts during apartheid with the result that it faced an urgent need to confront developments that had taken place in its absence as it emerged into democracy. Badat, (2015:79) refers to this period just after the democratic election as the 'epoch of globalisation

and the influence of neoliberalism'. Habib and Padayachee (2000), explain that, by the time the ANC came to power in the 1990s, the party faced an international consensus on neoliberalism which had been spread across the world through international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In relation to higher education, Robertson (2010) identities the early 1990s as a time shaped by the logics of corporatisation, competitiveness and commercialisation which were mobilised to rework the basis of capital accumulation. A central outcome of these global forces was the positioning of higher education across the world as a producer of 'knowledge workers for the 'new' economy so, in this respect, and in spite of the purposes identified in the White Paper (MoE, 1997), in moving to privilege the role of the system in economic development, South Africa was no different from other countries.

The construction of universities as sites for the development of knowledge workers has resulted in a number of other changes. One of the most evident effects is in the expansion of higher education systems with all countries now aiming to offer higher education opportunities to greater proportions of young people. In 1999, then British Prime Minister Tony Blair pledged a participation rate of 50% (Weale, 2022). Calls for this figure to be increased to 60% by 2030 and 70% by 2040 have now been made (Weale, 2022). In South Africa, the proportion of young people in the 18-24 year old cohort studying in universities has just reached 20% although this figure continues to be skewed in favour of the white population group (CHE, 2021).

As South Africa emerged from years of isolation in the early 1990s, fewer than half a million young people were in higher education. Early policy documents such as the Report of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE, 1996) and the 1997 White Paper (MoE, 1997) identified massification as a strategy that would contribute to the achievement of greater equity in the South African system. However, given the participation rates noted above and the fact that black students bear the brunt of poor performance in the system (CHE, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021) questions have to be asked about the success of this strategy.

As higher education has become associated with employment in the global economy, migration across national borders in order to access universities has become more common. In Australia, the recruitment of international students became a strategy across the system

and by 2019, revenue received from the payment of fees by students who had travelled to study in the country reached A$10 billion (Hurley, Hoang & Hildebrandt, 2021). Although South Africa is not a destination of choice for students from the Global North, students from the rest of the continent do choose to enrol at South African universities particularly at postgraduate level. The enrolment of international students in South African universities peaked at 7.4% of total enrolments in 2015 since which time it has declined (CHE, 2021).

This migration of students to pursue opportunities to study in other countries has contributed to the concept of a 'globalised' higher education system. This has then had knock on effects one of which has involved the development of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) that use tools such as learning credits and levels of learning to facilitate the process of transferring learning acquired in one context to another. South Africa was one of the frontrunners in the movement to develop qualifications frameworks (Tuck, 2007; Allais, 2010) although the motivation for the development of the South African framework lay more in the need for redress following the denial of quality education to the majority of the population during apartheid.

Bundy (1979) sees the denial of education and skills development as intertwined with colonialisation and dispossession. Wolpe (2012) defines apartheid as an attempt to protect white workers and, at the same time, provide cheap labour as South Africa moved towards industrialization, a goal that was partly achieved by the denial of quality education to the black masses. The opening up of educational opportunities and the recognition of learning acquired outside formal contexts was thus key to addressing the wrongs of the past and was a prime motivator behind the development of the South African NQF. This example of the NQF makes it possible to see how developments related to globalization paralleled the need for redress as apartheid ended and resulted in changes to the higher education system that matched those occurring at a global level. South Africa needed to engage with a globalized economy for the sake of the economic prosperity of its citizens but, at the same time, it could not ignore the injustices of the past. When these came together in the form of initiatives such as the NQF it is possible to see how the higher education system followed global norms albeit for expanded reasons.

The introduction of the NQF and associated tools of learning outcomes, credit values and framework levels were not the only changes to the system. At a global level, increased participation and the diversity associated with it (Trow, 1973) resulted in concerns for quality (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Movement across national boundaries to pursue opportunities at universities in other countries and migration for economic reasons also led to the introduction of quality assurance to higher education systems globally. If students were to be able to use qualifications earned in one country as a basis for study in another, then universities in the host country needed to be assured of the quality of the original qualification. In a similar vein, employers needed to be assured that qualifications held by migrant workers were 'of quality'. However, as with the development of the South African NQF, the introduction of quality assurance to the national higher education system was not solely due to developments at a global level.

During apartheid, black citizens had been denied access to quality higher education as enrolments were largely restricted to a group of poorly resourced higher education institutions established solely for them. As Bunting (2002b) points out, the historically black universities were never intended to produce an intellectual or professional elite (although many did so in spite of a host of obstacles) but rather to train teachers and other functionaries for the apartheid state (see, also, Jansen, 2021 on this point). In the South African context, therefore, the introduction of quality assurance, like the introduction of the NQF, can be seen to relate to the need to redress the wrongs of the past. The 1997 White Paper (MoE, 1997: para. 2.21) for example, constructs quality assurance as a means of eroding distinctions between historically black and historically white institutions. For this reason, the same White Paper (para.2.71) notes the need for a 'formative' quality assurance system 'focused on improvement and development rather than punitive sanction'. Once again, South Africa can be seen to be following global developments in higher education but for reasons that relate to its own troubled past and not solely to discourses privileging the breaking down of national boundaries.

The introduction of New Public Management (NPM) to higher education has already been noted in Chapter One of this thesis. From the late 1970s onwards, adherence to the notions of deregulation and the free market system propagated by Marty Friedman, economic advisor to President Ronald Reagan and, to some extent, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher,

resulted in understandings that public services could, and should, be managed like businesses. The need for public services to be offered as cost effectively and efficiently as possible was paramount in a context where demand for those services was rising. In the United Kingdom, participation in higher education increased from 3.4% of the 18-24 year old cohort in 1950 to 8.4% in 1970, 19.3% in 1990 and 33% in 2000 (Bolton, 2012). Similar patterns could be seen in the United States from the end of World War II onwards. In many respects, the widening of access in these contexts can be linked to a general shift towards the political left and the emergence of human rights discourses across the world (Mettler, 2005). The concern of policy makers, however, was that the cost of this widened access to public services should be limited.

The introduction of NPM to universities ultimately led to the development of strategies such as the Strategy for Academic Monitoring for Academic Development at WSU noted earlier in this thesis. At a wider level, it also led to the privileging of efficiency and effectiveness discourses which, as I will argue in Chapter Six, can be problematic. As Boughey (2007) points out, the pursuit of efficiency and effectiveness in teaching and learning led to the reconstruction of the field of Academic Development, which had long been driven by a concern for social justice, as a means of driving improvements in student performance. Boughey's analysis shows how a group of practitioners who had long served the interests of black working class students came to serve those of institutional efficiency and effectiveness. In order to elaborate on this point, however, it is necessary to turn to another concept associated with globalisation, that of neo-liberalism.

Neo-liberalism is closely related to globalisation in the sense that the term is used to refer to market reform including the elimination of trade barriers. However, neo-liberalism also stresses the free market and the elimination of price controls. It is also related to the reduction of state influence in the economy through privatisation and austerity. However, neo-liberalism also holds that free-market principles should be supplemented by constitutional democracy and a restrained welfare state. This idea is captured by Whyte (2019:8) who argues that a fundamental tenet of neo liberalism is that the competitive market should be based on an 'adequate moral and legal foundation' and would thus include an element of social welfare.

In higher education, neo-liberalism is closely related to the idea that universities should be competitive and business-like. The concept of the 'knowledge economy', or the idea that economic prosperity is based on the production, possession and use of knowledge has already been noted. The idea that knowledge can be of economic value is important since it allows it to be constructed as an entity to be traded. A graduate can 'trade' their knowledge for a higher salary. Universities can 'trade' the knowledge they produce on the open market and receive monetary payments in return. Once knowledge becomes commoditised in this way, it becomes possible to argue for a reduction in the responsibility of the state to support the production of knowledge (in the form of the research function in universities) and its dissemination in the form of education. Knowledge ceases to be constructed largely as a 'public good' to be used in the service of humankind but, rather, as a 'private good' benefitting individuals and individual institutions.

At a global level, this thinking has led to state subsidies for higher education falling steadily and a concomitant increase in the tuition fees paid by students. South Africa is no different in this regard with per capita funding for higher education steadily being reduced at the same time as the system itself has grown. Wangenge Ouma (2010), for example, calculates that state funding for higher education fell from 0.72% as a proportion of GDP to 0.67% between 1995 and 2007, a time when arguably it should have been rising as the system increased in size. In this context questions can be asked about whether the neoliberal tenet that the competitive market should be based on 'an adequate moral and legal foundation' was upheld in South Africa.

This is especially the case in the face of the lack of access to student loans in South Africa. As the protests of 2015 and 2016 showed, black working-class students simply could not afford the tuition fees that resulted from falling state subsidies and there was no safety net in the form of a comprehensive, state funded student loan system to support them. Thanks to apartheid, the families of black students generally had no collateral to secure a loan from a commercial banking institution (see, for example, Mashigo, 2015). As a result, they were denied access to means of participating in an economy based on knowledge. Even when students were able to access state funding, the amounts made available to them by National Student Financial Aid Fund in no way met the needs to pay

tuition fees and finance accommodation and food while studying. The result was that students were unable to access higher education and, even when access was possible, exclusion on financial grounds often followed because of unpaid tuition fees. At a broader level, this meant that black South African students were denied access to the means of participating in an economy based on knowledge.

From the beginning of this thesis, I have referred repeatedly to the Marikana Massacre and the #FeesMustFall movement. On the basis of what I have explained above, both the massacre and the student protests of 2015 and 2016 can be seen to have emerged from the social and cultural conditioning of the country that stretches back to the colonial era, and which saw black citizens denied access to basic rights including education. South Africa entered the new democratic era with an enormous backlog of needs to redress. However, in many respects, the need to engage with globalisation and modes of thinking such as neo-liberalism resulted in the tempering of approaches that could have been taken to arrive at a more equitable dispensation. From the mid 1990s onwards, the RDP was replaced by GEAR taking the wind out of the sails of the second phase of the NDR project. Although policy documents such as the 1997 White Paper (MoE, 1997) tried to balance the need for social reproduction with capitalist accumulation and expansion (Dale, 1989), arguably the scales tipped in favour of the latter.

As I will attempt to show in the latter half of this chapter, the impact on the historically black institutions such as WSU has been particularly harsh in spite of the many well-intentioned reforms introduced to the system including the series of mergers and incorporations that followed the publication of the National Plan for Higher Education (MoE, 2002) from 2003 onwards.

### 3.3.2 Higher education in South Africa post democracy

Writers such as Kraak (2001), Fataar (2003), Jansen & Taylor (2003), and Badat (2016) attribute the failure to effect transformation in higher education to some enduring issues that were never finally resolved as democracy arrived. Kraak (2001, 86) identifies 1999 to 2000, in particular, as the high point of 'the discursive tensions and political difficulties, resulting in significant policy doubt, retraction and reversal' that characterised the period following the

first democratic election. In trying to effect transformation, the new government was constantly faced with the need to balance redress with development in a process that became increasingly complex the more reforms were introduced.

Policy intended to lead to transformation includes the Report of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) (DoE, 1996) and White Paper 3 on the Transformation of Higher Education System (MoE, 1997) both of which would attempt to establish firm foundations for what would turn out to be the Higher Education and Training Act (Act No. 101 of 1997, as amended, sections 27, 28, 29, 31 and 35). Amongst other things, the Higher Education Act addressed the governance systems of universities, namely the Councils, Senates, Institutional Forums and Student Representative Councils (RSA, 1997).

Based on these policies several structural changes were introduced including:

- The establishment of the Council on Higher Education (CHE);
- The restructuring of the entire higher education system as a result of the National Plan for Higher Education (MoE, 2001) processes;
- The introduction of a new funding formula for higher education (DoHET 2004).

From the very first signs that democracy might become a reality, the need to restructure the higher education system was high on the agenda of those working for transformation. Under apartheid, the higher education system was fractured along numerous lines (Bunting, 2002b). The first, and most obvious, split was between institutions intended for different social groups with those established for black South Africans being consciously disadvantaged in relation to those created for whites. A second split was that between traditional universities and 'technikons', vocationally focused institutions offering mainly diploma level qualifications and doing very little research. The institutions comprising the system were also split along the lines of language, with some institutions using English as a language of teaching and learning and others Afrikaans. The location of an institution in an urban or rural area constituted one more fracture in the system. Typically, the historically advantaged universities were in urban areas and those established for black social groups in rural ‘homelands’ or in ‘townships’ on the outskirts of cities. As South Africa under apartheid drew on a system of different government departments for different social groups and as several so called 'independent homelands' or 'Bantustans' had also been established within its borders, institutions received

funding from different places. Bunting (2002b) provides a detailed account of the way these structural differences impacted on different groups of institutions. As an institution in the former 'homeland' of the Transkei, WSU was thus subject to a particular set of governance and management arrangements.

The restructuring of the system was a lengthy process which eventually resulted in a report of a working group (MoE, 2002) appointed to advise the Minister on the way forward following the publication of the National Plan for Higher Education in 2001 (MoE, 2001). Initially, a recommendation was made that the old University of Transkei (UNITRA) should be closed completely but fierce opposition led to this being abandoned. The report of the working group (MoE, 2002) led to the emergence of three institutional types, the traditional university, the comprehensive university, and the university of technology with the old UNITRA, Border Technikon and Eastern Cape Technikon being merged to form a new 'comprehensive' university.

Arguably, the NPHE saw the HDIs bearing the greater part of the burden of change. Institutions such as the University of Zululand and Walter Sisulu University were required to transform themselves into comprehensive universities when their previous histories meant that they had very little capacity to deal with vocational education. Although in the case of WSU, two former technikons were incorporated into the newly merged institution, staff employed in these partnering institutions were largely drawn from business and industry and had very little capacity for research. In addition, the new WSU needed to work across multiple campuses located at considerable distance from each other. In contrast, powerful historically white institutions such as the University of Cape Town and the University of Stellenbosch were left as traditional universities operating in urban areas and, where distance between campuses did exist, this was not a major problem. From 2002 onwards, it is therefore possible to see that WSU faced multiple challenges occasioned by its structural and cultural conditioning under apartheid.

A new funding formula, introduced in 2004, followed on the heels of the restructuring process and used the concept of 'incentive-based funding' as a lever to transform the system. As Bunting (2002a) points out, under apartheid, conditions in historically black institutions were not enabling of a shift to the independence they achieved post democracy. Historically black institutions, had always been funded like government departments or 'homeland

governments' and had never been allowed to build up reserves like their historically white counterparts. Any monies remaining unspent at the end of a financial year were required to be returned to the funding entity ('homeland' governments or the relevant department within the borders of the Republic). This lead to 'fiscal dumping' at the end of each year where unused funding was spent simply to avoid returning it. As a result, the institutions did not build the financial expertise that would allow them to manage the funding that came with greater freedom post-apartheid. In a similar manner, the tight authoritarian control exercised by the entities in charge of the historically black institutions were not conducive to the development of governance and management structures that could cope with more freedom and the need for strategic decision making (Bunting, 2002a), particularly that related to finances.

The new Funding Formula (DoHET, 2004) was output-based for both research and teaching. It is important to note the introduction of the formula meant that HDIs had to compete for funding with their historically advantaged sister institutions which had greater capacity for research, and which were able to attract stronger students based on their reputations and better facilities. The lucrative nature of research subsidy has also meant that, at many institutions, academics have been pressured into producing research which has impacted on their availability to enhance their teaching. In this respect we can see what Archer would identify as necessary contradictory conditions. In an academic environment teaching and research can be seen to be necessary in the sense that they depend on each other. Academic teachers depend on their research to keep up with advances in their disciplines and on teaching to produce the next generation of researchers. Recently a great deal of attention has been paid to the need to enhance teaching given the poor student performance data noted throughout this chapter and funding for this has been introduced via a University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG). However, arguably the structure of the grant and discourses promoting the enhancing of teaching are countered by the structure of the funding formula and other discourses promoting research for the value it can contribute to university finances.

Another major development was Section 38 of the Higher Education and Training Laws Amendment Act (Act 23 of 2012) (RSA 2012:8) which gives the Minister of Higher Education and Training the 'power to intervene and to issue directives on a range of matters and the

power to appoint an administrator if an institution does not comply'. Administrators have been appointed at a number of institutions over time including at Walter Sisulu University, the location of the study on which this thesis is based. An emerging body of literature focusses on governance crises that have affected historically black institutions since the shift to democracy (Dumay et al., 2017; Crous, 2017; Tondi, 2019). However, much of this work continues to draw on normative explanations of failure in that it falls short of explicating the underlying conditions that allow for failure and the practical alternatives that might be possible.

As Jansen (2022) points out, a 'lack of capacity' is often cited as a reason for failures in governance and management at some universities that repeatedly find themselves under administration. This discourse has resulted in programmes such as the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) initiative offered by Universities South Africa (USAF) and which offers a range of development opportunities to managers at all levels. Jansen's analysis of the reasons for some universities repeatedly falling into administration is very different however. As already noted, he argues that it was never the intention of the apartheid state for the historically black institutions to develop academic projects. Rather their role was to function as institutions training functionaries for the apartheid state. For Jansen, an academic project is key to the functioning of an academic institution. In an institution held together by a strong academic project, all agents within the institution understand that the purpose of resources is to sustain it. As a result, the chances of resources being diverted to other ends are fewer. A strong academic project has other benefits. Jansen cites the fact that even when experiencing crises some universities are better able to maintain or return to teaching and learning and research than others. His point is that the understanding that the academic project is paramount facilitates this.

For an historically black university in a remote area of the country potentially isolated from a lot of interaction with other academics, it is not difficult to see how understandings of the academic project at WSU were not nurtured and sustained. Arguably this would have the potential to impact on the way agents responsible for the WSU Strategy for Academic Monitoring for Academic Development, that is the focus of the study underpinning this thesis, understood their roles.

There is no doubt that a higher education has the potential to lead to a better quality of life, although 'quality' in this context can be defined in many ways. In South Africa, for example, a higher education has the potential to lead to better chances and better paid employment. 2020 data (SAGEA, 2020) shows that the median starting salary for graduates was R220 000. Workers qualified at certificate or diploma level can expect to earn an average of 17% more than peers with only a school leaving certificate and those with a bachelor's degree 24% more (salaryexplorer.com). However, a higher education also has the potential to contribute to the quality of life in other ways related to the public good which will then enhance quality overall. Nonetheless, research suggests that not all graduates are 'equal' in the sense that those with qualifications from historically disadvantaged universities are more likely to be unemployed than ~~those from~~ those that were historically advantaged (Moleke, 2009; Mncayi & Dunga, 2016). The area of study also impacts on employment of graduates from some areas (typically in the humanities and social sciences) encountering fewer opportunities than those from science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines (Moleke, 2009, Mncayi & Dunga, 2016). University and field of study then intersect as many of the historically black graduates do not qualify for STEM programmes and are more likely to study in the arts and social sciences (CHE, 2019) arguably because they do not meet entrance requirements for the STEM subject area.

As a university catering for black working class students in one of the most remote parts of the country, the ability of WSU to contribute to a better quality of life for its students is impacted by many of the observations made in the paragraph above. As already indicated, many students enrolling at the university come from remote rural areas and have studied in schools with minimal facilities and poorly qualified teachers. As a result, their performance in areas that will allow them to enrol in programmes focused on science, technology, engineering and maths (the so called 'STEM') in the school leaving examinations is generally poor. As a 'comprehensive' university, expansion at WSU was directed towards vocationally oriented diploma programmes, again not areas with the highest earning potential especially if they are located in Commerce and the Social Sciences. For many students, moreover, the lack of counselling at school means that applications to study are often a matter of 'pot luck' with some not even understanding what they will be studying in any meaningful way as they enrol in a programme.

Although WSU was the only option for black students in the former Transkei, this is no longer the case and the more able (in terms of being better qualified at school leaving level) tend to exercise their agency to enrol at other institutions. Cooper (2015) identifies prestigious, traditional universities such as the University of Cape Town as institutions of choice for the middle classes. This finding follows international trends with Marginson (2016) pointing out that although the expansion of a higher education system may be guided by state policy it is primarily powered by the ambitions of families to advance or maintain their social positions with the middle classes generally gaining most access to the most prestigious institutions.

In the South African context, this leaves universities such as WSU as places of learning for the black working classes with the result that student bodies tend not to benefit from the diversity experienced on other campuses. Even universities focused on the provision of undergraduate programmes benefit from the services of postgraduate students as tutors and role models. When successful students at undergraduate level choose to pursue postgraduate opportunities elsewhere, this leaves WSU without the capacity to enrich the learning experiences of its undergraduates in the same way as those available to young people at other institutions.

Although the Department of Higher Education and Training (DoHET) has adopted the White Paper for Post-Secondary Education and Training (DoHET, 2013) as a means of stemming the tide of students who regard university education as the only means to a meaningful and skilled adult life, the number of applications that continue to be made to universities each year suggests that strategies identified in the White Paper are facing constraints and the HDIs, particularly those in rural areas, continue to face a flood of applications from students who have not been best prepared for higher education. For the vast majority of students in areas such as the rural Eastern Cape, the historically disadvantaged rural universities of Fort Hare and Walter Sisulu are the only option if they want a route out of poverty.

Cooper's (2015) analysis of what he termed the 'stalled revolution' identifies three bands of institutions:

- A top band of five universities, namely UCT, Stellenbosch University, Pretoria University, University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Kwazulu-Natal.

- A middle band of seven universities have a strong element of urban based universities, namely North West; Johannesburg; University of South Africa; Free State; Nelson Mandela; Western Cape and Rhodes University.
- A bottom band consisting of rurally based universities or institutions developed from a former Technikon which did not have extensive research capacity.

Notable in this analysis is the absence of the historically black rural universities in the top two bands. More than twenty years after the first democratic election (since Cooper's research was conducted in 2015), it would appear that, in spite of all the policy work and structural change the structural and cultural conditioning of the historically black universities had impacted on their ability to improve their status in the higher education system overall. As Jansen (2022:56) points out:

> Universities did not start as blank slates in the transition of the 1990s but as compromised institutions that, on the one hand, carried the ideological baggage of a colonial and apartheid past and, on the other, were already deeply contested social institutions unlikely to be whipped into democratic shape by a straightforward calculation that more resources equals smarter policies, equals better outcomes.

In many respects, Jansen's observation quoted above speaks to Archer's morphogenetic framework with its insistence on the importance of structural and cultural conditioning as well as the understandings of higher education as an open system where the emergence of events and experiences cannot be attributed in a strict cause/effect relationship to inputs.

## 3.4 Quality assurance as a lever for transformation

As already noted, the introduction of quality assurance to South African higher education was identified in key policy documents of the 1990s such as the White Paper (DoE, 1997) as key to the transformation of the higher education system overall. The 1997 White Paper identified quality assurance as a responsibility of the Council on Higher Education, a body established to advise the Minister. The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) was then established as a standing committee of the CHE in 2001 (CHE, 2004).

The Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) (CHE, 2004, p.13) conceptualised quality according to four principles of:

- fitness of purpose;
- fitness for purpose;
- value for money, and;
- transformation.

The purpose of an institution was to be captured in its mission and vision statements and the expectation was that these would be crafted to provide a unique niche for the institution in the system. The notion of fitness of purpose was then intended to evaluate the niche that had been identified. Frameworks for institutional audits and programme accreditation then attempted to measure the extent to which an institution was 'fit for purpose' along with the other elements of quality identified by the HEQC. Value for money was an important element of the definition of quality since universities charged very different levels of fees to students and were resourced unequally.

Clearly, given the disparities of the past and the need to provide access and success to quality higher education to the black South African students who had been denied it under apartheid was paramount in efforts to assure quality particularly in teaching and learning.

Over time, a number of initiatives have been developed with the goal of enhancing and assuring quality. The first cohort study of students entering higher education in 2000 was published in 2007 (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). This study, which was the first to show black students' poor performance in higher education in comparison with their white peers led to an argument for an overall improvement in teaching and learning through widescale curriculum reform. This resulted in a proposal (CHE, 2013) for the introduction of a flexible curriculum in which all programmes would be extended by an additional year in order to offer tuition intended to address students' development needs. The proposal was not accepted by the Minister although it was also opposed by other constituencies as an imposition on black students in particular. Dominant thinking was that the quality of schooling would make it more likely that this group would need an additional year of tuition. This sort of thinking countered arguments made by more critical scholars (see, for example, Vilakazi and Tema,

1985 and Boughey and McKenna, 2021) who identify the way institutions of higher education themselves work to privilege some social groups over others.

At national level, these developments were supported by the professional association for those interested in teaching and learning, the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) and a number of related special projects such as the Teaching Advancement at Universities (TAU) Fellowship Programme. The new funding formula introduced in 2004 included ear marked grants intended to develop teaching and learning known as 'Teaching Development Grants' (TDGs). These grants were funded by top-slicing 20% of the output subsidy available to the sector. The calculation of the amount available to an institution as a TDG was on the basis of student performance data which meant that universities with poor graduation rates received more in the form of a grant than those with better rates. As this funding was ear-marked and project based, institutions needed to apply for the grants.

Moyo & McKenna (2020:2), in a piece of research on the use of TDGs, note that:

> *HDIs in particular struggle with shortages in areas such as basic operational funds, library resources, computer systems, accommodation for students, lecture venues and laboratories.*

As a result, in the early years of grant implementation:

> *The data shows that this context significantly impacted on TDG implementation, with funds often being spent on infrastructure instead of on teaching development initiatives.*

Before the administration of the grants was changed, the lack of resources at HDIs meant that initiatives were often delayed until the DoHET had actually transferred money into institutional bank accounts. Moyo & McKenna (2020) also note that the uneven availability of expertise across the system meant that many HDIs were unable to use their allocations of funding in the time frames set by the DoHET. As a result, they were forced to return unspent monies. One other problem was that, within institutions, funding was often allocated to faculties to use. If strong guidance was not available on the design of projects for which it could be used from a teaching and learning centre, then projects were not necessarily well

designed or planned. The overall shortage of expertise to manage and lead teaching and learning has long been noted (Boughey, 2007, 2012; Moyo & McKenna, 2020). This is particularly apparent in universities located outside major urban areas. The HDIs, then, in spite of the availability of funding to enhance teaching and learning, were not always able to benefit from the initiative as much as their better resourced peers. This leads Moyo and McKenna (2020:4) to note that 'money alone is not sufficient to bring about teaching development'. This observation attests to the way the structural and cultural conditioning of the past continues to impact on institutions rendering less effective the measures intended to effect redress. More recently, earmarked funding for development purposes has been re-conceptualised as the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP) (DoHET, 2017). Regardless of this reconceptualisation, the comments noted above are still applicable.

Other ear-marked funding intended to enhance student performance was awarded in the form of Foundation Programme Grants. These grants allowed institutions to insert an additional year of tuition into accredited programmes with the result that the programme itself was extended by one year. Once again, however, a lack of capacity in the system has meant that the grants have not always been used optimally particularly in relation to the design of what are termed 'Extended Programmes with an Integrated Foundation Phase' (CHE, 2021).

As part of its framework for programme accreditation, the HEQC (CHE, 2004, 7)) identifies the need for an institutional teaching and learning strategy which:

> *… should give recognition to the importance of promoting student learning … is appropriate for the institutional type (as reflected in its mission), mode(s) of delivery and student composition, contains mechanisms to ensure the appropriateness of teaching and learning methods, and makes provision for staff to upgrade their teaching methods. ...sets targets, plans for implementation, and mechanisms to monitor (student) progress, evaluate impact and effect improvement*.

The extent to which institutions have the ability and expertise to develop teaching and learning strategies which are fit for purpose in the sense of serving the mission and vision as well as the study body is, however, open to question (Boughey, 2011).

## 3.5 Integrated Academic Development as a transformative mechanism

As commentators have pointed out (Volbrecht & Boughey, 2005; Boughey, 2007, 2012) over the thirty or more years of its existence in South African higher education the field of Academic Development has passed through a number of overlapping phases the most recent of which is identified as involving a shift from the focus on equity evident from the late 1980s onwards to one on efficiency as institutions tried to keep pace with requirements to, for example, register qualifications on the National Qualifications Framework and make the most of the incentive based funding formula (DoHET, 2004).

Practices now labelled 'Academic Development' had emerged long before the advent of democracy in the form of a range of academic support programs and services focused on remediating gaps in student learning and have developed to what is currently understood as *integrated academic development* involving a whole institutional approach. At an international level, ever changing understandings of academic development have also been a familiar phenomenon in terms of context and time. Leibowitz (2014:5) captures the fluid nature of academic development as practice and research as follows,

> *The advantage of academic development remaining open, elastic, and flexible is that it provides space for a broad church of researchers and writers, using a variety of methods for analysis or intervention strategies, who can respond critically, creatively, sensitively, and instinctively – but in a scholarly manner – to the challenges that are posed by varied higher education contexts*.

Some of the practices associated with this integrated form or Academic Development are shown in the table below:

| Integrated Academic Development Programs and Services | | |
|---|---|---|
| Curriculum Development and Transformation | Professional Staff Development | Student Academic Development |
| Program Design & Development (HEQSF) | Staff Appointments and Promotions | Student Profiling, Access and Placement Testing |
| Curriculum/Program Development and Review (Learner-centeredness) | Evaluation of Teaching/Courses | Gateway courses; Developmental Modules; Reading and Writing Centres, Information & Academic Literacies |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Foundational Provisioning; Work Integrated Learning;<br>Short Learning Programs; Service Learning | Professional Academic Development (seminars; workshops; colloquia; conferences; etc) | Supplemental Instruction; Peer Assisted Learning; Student Academic Advising; Tutorials; Mentorship; |
| Problem/Project Based Learning;<br>Teaching and Learning with Technologies | High Level academic staff development (PGDHET; Masters and Doctorates in HES) | Student Tracking & Monitoring |
| Programme Accreditation | Teaching Portfolios; VC's Teaching Excellence Awards | Student Excellence Awards |
| A range of community engagement programs and services | Staff retention strategies | Student Tracer Studies and Employer Surveys. |
| Institutional Audits (2005-2011) and the Recommendations | | |
| Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Redistribution | | |

*Table 1: Integrated academic development areas reflecting the comprehensive nature of mediating the academic project as quality enhancement (adapted from Dwayi, 2016)*

The table is organised in terms of columns that represent the major areas of activity. Although the integrated nature of Academic Development is well understood by most working in the field, this is not necessarily the case for mainstream academics and deans who often have control of the funding for development activities. This problem emerges in the cultural system of an institution in discourses constructing students, their learning and learning needs, the role of academic staff, the nature of the curriculum and so on (see Boughey & McKenna, 2021, for an explanation of these discourses). The availability of funding as a structure does not mean that improvement will result as agents will draw on mechanisms in the domains of structure and culture to identify projects they want to pursue.

## 3.6 Institutional audits and programme accreditation as the quality measure

At international level, systemic reviews have been a feature of university education for some years now (Clegg, 2005). The first cycle of institutional audits in South Africa commenced in 2005 and was completed in about 2012. Research on the impact of the cycle on teaching and learning (Boughey & McKenna, 2017) shows that, although the introduction of quality assurance to the South African system resulted in 'structural elaboration' (Archer, 1995, 1996) in that all institutions developed structures intended to manage and enhance teaching and learning, the cultural system was reproduced with the result that the ideas used to explain student performance could not account for the fact that black South Africans consistently fared less well in universities than their white peers without attributing deficiencies to this social group itself.

Critiques of the frameworks developed by the HEQC have included that of Leibowitz & Adendorff, (2007) who criticised the use of teaching and learning strategies as instruments to evaluate quality by arguing that any possible measure of quality needed to be closer to the chalkface. Such critiques had already been part of debates in the Global North (see, for example, D'Andrea, Gosling & Scott, 2002). Bozalek & Dison (2013) argue that contexts count as institutions respond to attempts to manage quality by using, for example, a teaching and learning strategy.

A number of critiques using critical realism have emerged since the introduction of quality assurance in South Africa (Luckett, 2006; 2007; 2012; McKenna & Quinn, 2012; Boughey & McKenna, 2017). In many respects, this thesis aims to add to this body of knowledge.

The institutional audits which ran from 2005 to 2012 constituted the first phase of quality assurance work in South Africa. They were followed by the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP) introduced in 2014. The focus of the QEP was:

> *Enhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable* (CHE, 2014, 48).

While this commitment was significant given how progressive it sounded in its focus on student success and graduate attributes, the events and processes that came to comprise it

eventually showed how contested the notion of quality was in a system as diverse as South Africa's.

The first phase of the QEP focused on three main areas: curriculum development, staff development and student learning. However, the student protests of 2015 and 2016 brought new challenges to the way each of these areas was conceptualised given calls for the decolonisation of the curriculum under the hashtag #Rhodesmustfall. In addition, the very different institutional contexts made the sharing of 'good' practice, one of the features of the project difficult. Sayer's (1999:20) words illuminate the way intentions of project designers can be thwarted when a realist ontology is drawn upon to provide an account of what happened:

> *Much of what happens does not depend on or correspond to actors' understandings; there are unintended consequences and unacknowledged conditions, and things can happen to people regardless of their understandings.*

As Boughey & McKenna (2017, 2021) note, dominant discourses construct students' negative learning experiences as the result of deficiencies on their part. This approach invites critique not least because of the way it assumes, for example, that those who are not doing well lack motivation without any consideration of the way power relations and poor learning conditions impact on their capacity for learning. When it comes to the development of staff as academic teachers, it is assumed that professional development initiatives are sufficient to lead to improvement regardless of the work of those such as Behari-Leak (2017) who show that individuals are often constrained in their attempts to initiate better teaching practices by conditions at departmental and institutional levels. The body of knowledge that has sought to problematise the notions of student disadvantage and of academic learning has implications not only for the roles of academic staff members but also for those played by those in management positions. In many respects, the availability of critiques of dominant positions and their failure to be acknowledged 'decentres the regulative function of analytical reason and scientific knowledge' (Creaven, 2013:88). Re-centering would require deconstruction of dominant positions and the reconstruction of alternatives.

The 'scholarship of teaching and learning' (SoTL) refers to the practice of drawing on research to inform practice and vice versa. The foundations of SoTL have been researched by the likes

of Leatherman (1990), Milem, Berger, & Dey (2000), Rice (2005), and Henderson (2009) Crow but its roots can be traced to the work of Boyer (1990). In South Africa, the concept of SoTL has been taken up by those working in the field of Academic Development (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2019; Vithal, 2017). As already noted, the student protests of 2015 and 2016 focused on the need to decolonise the curriculum. Protestors and academics supporting them drew on the work of the likes of de Sousa Santos (2014), Maldonado Torres (2016) and others.

The extent to which decolonial thought has been taken up by those involved in SoTL in South Africa is open to question. What is obvious is that black students have been subjected to what writers such as de Sousa Santos (2014:92) term 'epistemicide'. Unequal exchanges among cultures have always implied the death of knowledge of the subordinated culture, hence the death of the social groups that possessed it. In most extreme cases, such as that of European expansion, epistemicide was one of the conditions of genocide. The loss of epistemological confidence that currently afflicts modern science has facilitated the identification of the scope and gravity of the epistemicides perpetrated by hegemonic Eurocentric modernity. Maldonado Torres (2016:10) identifies the power of decolonial thought to open up the possibilities of other ways of being to black subjects:

> *If coloniality refers to a logic, metaphysics, ontology, and a matrix of power that can continue existing after formal independence and desegregation, decoloniality refers to efforts at rehumanizing the world, to breaking hierarchies of difference that dehumanize subjects and communities and that destroy nature, and to the production of counter-discourses, counter-knowledges, counter-creative acts, and counter-practices that seek to dismantle coloniality and to open up multiple other forms of being in the world*.

However, the potential for dominant conceptions of students, their learning experiences, academic teaching, the curriculum, and so on, to be decentred seems distant especially in what Cooper (2015) identified as the 'third band' of institutions in South Africa. As Archer points out, change in the cultural system, or system of ideas, is harder to achieve than change in the cultural domain. This point is stressed by the evidence of the impact of the first cycle of institutional audits noted earlier (Boughey & McKenna, 2017).

## 3.7 Management and transformative agency

In many respects, it is arguable that much of the work intended to bring about transformation in higher education in South Africa has been treated as proxies for the actual change needed. Individuals have engaged with, for example, procedures and assurance but this work has often been treated as an end unto itself instead of the means thereof. In this final section of this chapter, my focus turns to the role of agency in higher education.

Organisational management literature (for example, Davis & Thompson, 2016) tends to agree that what are termed 'top down' approaches to management are undesirable. In universities, management has traditionally been the province of the professoriate and governance and management has been exercised through bodies such as faculty boards, senate, council and the committees that support these entities. The problem with this approach to management is that it tends to limit access to decision making as, historically, these structures have been dominated by those who held power at the top of the academic hierarchy as professors so that more junior staff and students could not participate on equal terms.

More recently, New Public Management (NPM) approaches have been introduced to higher education sectors across the world. As indicated in Chapter One, NPM is a mixture of neo-liberal economic principles related to public choice and the need for accountability for the spending of public money and reforms based on ideas of what constitutes 'professional management' (Hood, 1991; Olssen & Peter, 2005). Ideas related to NPM can also be seen to have informed the introduction of enhanced accountability and monitoring systems to the DoHET.

In considering management at HBUs, however, it is important to be mindful of their history in apartheid. As Bunting (2002b) points out, under apartheid, HBUs located within the borders of the Republic of South Africa were largely staffed by Afrikaans speaking academics who were supportive of the regime. As a result, the management systems tended to be very authoritarian. Although black vice-chancellors were eventually appointed, the senates they chaired tended to be dominated by the same group with the result that authoritarianism continued. HBUs located in the Bantustans were treated as just one more government department and were administered and led as such.

Over time, and following Archer (1995, 1996), the cultural and structural systems of the HBUs were conditioned by this authoritarianism with the result that staff were more likely to be willing to adopt the managerialist approaches. Although NPM has been resisted in the discourse of the historically white English speaking institutions (McKenna & Boughey, 2014), this was not the case for the HBUs because of this historical conditioning.

Moore and Lewis (2005:9) call for a type of university management that is 'theoretically informed, practically experienced and motivationally inclined, and who have the credibility and authority to take their colleagues along with them in the responsiveness project'. At the same time, the challenges of management in a context requiring transformation, and with reduced funding, have grown, as reports by the DoHET to the Portfolio Committee on Higher Education have noted (DoHET, 2015; DoHET, 2019). A 2016 study of higher education twenty years into democracy also identified the challenges facing vice chancellors (CHE, 2016b). Various efforts have been made by the association of vice chancellors, now named Universities South Africa (USAf) and the DoHET is currently funding management development as part of its University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP).

Although studies of higher education management exist, they tend to be located in a positivist orientation (Smith, 2006; Kempster & Parry, 2011; Thorpe, 2019). Work challenging the objective framing of management tend to be rooted in social constructionism, (see, for example, Carrol & Levy, 2010) in seeing the development of management capacity as a form of identity construction and, as such, as related to the exercise of agency. Work based on critical realism includes that of Vorster & Quinn (2012), Patomaki (2003), and Jones (2004). Critical realist oriented research includes attempts to strengthen researchers' confidence to place emphasis on an understanding and explanation of contextualised management as a scientific goal, rather than generalization through empirical replication (see, for example, Kempster & Parry, 2011). By drawing on a critical realist stance, the field of management has developed particularly for those who realize the overwhelming challenges of sustainability, and corporate social responsibility which the world now faces (Kempster & Carroll, 2016). In recent times, the likes of Thorpe (2019; 2020), in particular, identify critical realism as useful for addressing the fundamentals of management in general and also what is claimed to be a turn towards the empowerment of women.

A critical realist stance requires the exercise of agency to be conditioned and contextualised in terms of macro and micro politics and localised resources. It also requires managers to take a wide view of a context as in calls made by, for example, Tinto (2012) who argues that a whole institution, strategised approach needs to be taken to student development and support. In the context of the study that underpins this thesis, the challenge for managers is to draw on ideas and theories that will support the attainment of social justice given the inequalities that continue to plague the system. This, in turn, requires challenging the ways in which race, social class, power and privilege play out in ways to reproduce the status quo. The extent to which this has occurred will be explored in the chapters that follow.

## 3.8 Conclusion

The brief analysis of the higher education landscape post-apartheid sketched above has implications for understanding the dynamics of the NDR discussed at its outset. Observations pertaining to class, race, power and privilege are necessary in understanding how socio-economic changes shape conditions for previously disadvantaged communities. Particularly pertinent is the observation that it is the lowest band of institutions identified above that operate in areas serving the working classes. Questions about the quality of the learning experiences available to students in these institutions are therefore important.

White Paper 3 on the Transformation of Higher Education (MoE, 1997:1) outlines a number of principles for a transformed system including the idea that it should:

> *Promote equity of access and fair chances of success to all who are seeking to realize their potential through Higher Education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities.*

To realise this principle, the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) (MoE, 2001) was explicit about the need to produce the graduates needed for social and economic development in South Africa.

Any evaluation of change post-apartheid has to take into account the principles embodied in the 1997 White Paper and the dynamics involved in developing and implementing policy. That student participation and success rates, academic staff profiles and the emergence of institutional types noted above show that the majority group of the South African population

is not as well represented or served as other social groups suggests that the higher education system is suffering from a crisis of legitimacy given the goals of the transformation project.

Drawing on Sayer (1999), the interplay of macro and micro politics in the social world can be seen to contribute to what I regard to be an incoherence in the higher education project at two levels. My argument in this chapter has been intended to point to some of the ways in which macro politics in the broader social world in South Africa and globally have played out in relation to the historically black universities with the result that questions about the extent to which institutions such as WSU have been well served by policy changes post-apartheid have to be asked. Of particular interest in this thesis is the way dominant explanations of 'transformation' in higher education since 1994 have focused on the provision of quality education for all but the practices related to quality at institutional levels fail to live up to the promises made at a macro level.

That the advent of constitutional democracy in RSA was significant is beyond debate. The observations made above regarding student enrolments, the composition of the staff complement and the emergence of institutional types since the shift to democracy question the extent to which meaningful transformation, as envisaged in policy documents of the 1990s has been achieved.

In the next chapter, I move to looking at the way WSU was conditioned socially and culturally in the first phase of the morphogenetic framework. I thus move from a macro level perspective to a more micro perspective by moving to an institutional level.

# 4 Chapter Four: Walter Sisulu University

> *It is crucial that the true role of universities is understood before mechanisms to promote change are put in place* (Lucas & Boulton, 2008:6).

## 4.1 Introduction

I now move deeper into my analysis of the social and cultural conditions at $T_1$ by looking at the historically black university at which the study underpinning this thesis was undertaken, Walter Sisulu University (WSU) in the Eastern Cape. This university is steeped in its socio-political history which manifests in an enduring dysfunctional culture of governance in general and the crisis mode around its academic project in particular. Such a case therefore feeds into what can be argued as what remains 'ordinary' about South Africa (Kraak, 2001; Sheehan, 2009) almost three decades into her constitutional democracy.

The idea that South African society is still structured along the lines of race and social class has been noted repeatedly in the previous chapter. This is particularly the case for higher education (Cooper, 2015) with middle class black students eschewing the historically black institutions in favour of those they perceive to be better resourced and more prestigious. As already noted, WSU is the result of the merger of three different institutions, Border Technikon, Eastern Cape Technikon and the University of Transkei (UNITRA). Following the merger, two events, both occurring in 2011 and both pertinent to the study underpinning this thesis, took place. The first was the placing of WSU under administration by the Minister of Education and the second was the visit of a Panel appointed by the HEQC to audit WSU as part of the first cycle of institutional audits.

Placing a university 'under administration' is a process identified in the Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1999) that results in an individual external to the institution being appointed to take over the day-to-day management and for the Council, the body responsible for the overall governance of an institution, to be suspended or replaced. More generally, a discourse constructing universities being placed under administration as in need of 'intensive care' has emerged (see, for example, NCOP, 2014).

In late 2011, WSU was placed under administration for two years thanks to a series of events which had included the inability to pay staff salaries by June of the same year. The Report of an Assessor appointed by the Ministry of Higher Education and Training in July 2011 notes that:

> *Walter Sisulu University (WSU) is an institution in crisis, riddled with conflict, mistrust and disaffection among its stakeholders. There is complete loss of confidence in university leadership. Virtually all WSU constituencies are calling for Council to be dissolved and senior management to be dismissed, and for the Minister of Higher Education and Training to intervene by appointing an Administrator to take over management of the institution. There are constant conflicts and battles between employees and management, as well as between students and management, incurring frequent strikes by workers and class boycotts by students* (MoHET, 2011: 3)

WSU was by no means the first HBU to be placed under administration with commentators such as Mouton, Louw and Strydom (2013), Dumay, Bernardi, Guthrie and La Torre (2017), Crous (2017 and Tondi (2019) noting that being placed under administration has become one of the main features of HBUs post democracy. When the period of administration ended in 2013, the medicalised discourse at WSU was of the institution continuing to be in need of 'high care'.

The second event involved the audit of WSU by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) as part of its first round of institutional audits. The Audit Report noted thirty 'Recommendations'. Although interventions intended to enhance teaching and learning, many discursively constructed under the name of 'institutional planning', were identified, history shows that, overall, they were never implemented. The reasons for this failure to implement policies and associated procedures and strategies developed as part of planning processes can be traced to the conditions in place in the three institutions that came together in the merger process to form the new Walter Sisulu University.

The following sections of this Chapter identify the structural and cultural conditions that led to the emergence of these events.

## 4.2 History and geographical location

As already indicated, WSU results from a merger of three former institutions: the University of Transkei (UNITRA), Border Technikon and Eastern Cape Technikon. All of these institutions were intended for black social groups. UNITRA was located in uMthatha, the heart of the 'homeland' or 'Bantustan' of the Transkei. Eastern Cape Technikon was established under the Transkei government and Border Technikon under that of the Ciskei, another 'homeland' located in what is now the Eastern Cape province. As Bunting (2002b) points out, technikons and the historically black universities were set up with strong administrative and management controls in place and were never intended to be able to produce large amounts of research. All offered programmes that, under apartheid, would lead to employment considered 'appropriate' for black social groups. As historically black institutions, all were under-resourced and thus were established with limited facilities, library resources and so on.

The Eastern Cape province, in which WSU is located, is one of the most rural and poorest regions in the country largely because it comprises two former 'homelands', the Transkei and the Ciskei. Under apartheid, some areas of what now constitute the Eastern Cape were part of the Republic of South Africa. One such area buffered the homelands of the Transkei and the Ciskei in that it ran along the Kei River from the coastal city of East London to Queenstown. The division of the amaXhosa nation into two parts (or 'homelands') was a strategy on the part of the apartheid state intended to allow for the maintenance of its policies of division.

UNITRA was originally established as a branch of the University of Fort Hare, which was located in what became the Ciskei. UNITRA was funded by the homeland administration and served to sustain the economy of uMthatha, the 'capital' of Transkei, where it was based (Nkanyuza, 2015). The establishment of the university can thus be seen to be have strengthened the 'political independence' of the Transkei and, thus, to have contributed to the maintenance of the divisions created by the apartheid state. At the same time, the establishment of a university in a 'homeland', albeit an institution that was poorly resourced and never intended to be able to foster the freedom of thought that has characterised universities over the centuries, constituted an attempt to give the would-be 'state' of the Transkei some credibility.

Post-apartheid, development in the Eastern Cape has largely taken place around two industrial development zones, one located around the major city of Gqeberha (the old Port Elizabeth) and the other around East London. uMthatha, the location of the main WSU campus is far removed from both hubs. The old Transkei region is characterised by a large number of 'quintile five' schools attended by learners from some of the poorest socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, and in common with other areas in South Africa, opportunities to pursue a Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) are in short supply which means that WSU remains the main post-secondary educational opportunity in the region. The merger processes resulting from the recommendations of the NPHE (MoE, 2002) tended to be characterised by the bringing together of stronger and weaker institutions. However, the merger leading to the establishment of WSU was characterised in popular discourse as a 'marriage of the poor'.

The history of the areas in which the WSU campuses are located has implications for student enrolments. The majority of students come from poor socio-economic backgrounds, a point confirmed by Cooper (2015) who identifies enrolments at historically black institutions as being almost entirely black and working class. Interestingly, both the Report of the Assessor (MoE, 2011) and the Institutional Audit Report (CHE, 2011) identify class interests as being at the root of many of the disputes that have paralysed WSU. According to the Report of the Assessor, the affluent contributed to management and governance crises as they sought to maintain their own interests.

This brief overview makes it possible to see how some of the mechanisms identified in Chapter Three of this thesis, played out at one institution.

## 4.3 WSU Management and Governance

Management and governance at WSU can be seen to fall into two phases: i) the Pre-Merger & Merger Phase, characterised by the macro-micro politics of the merger and ii) the Post-Merger phase.

### 4.3.1 Pre-merger and merger

As already indicated, WSU was the result of the merger of three previous institutions recommended as a result of processes leading to the development of the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) (MoE, 2002). Initially, the NPHE processes had recommended that the old University of Transkei (UNITRA) should be closed down. Between 2000 and 2003, UNITRA was placed under administration three times, a fact that can be seen to have led to recommendations of closure. In 2001, the then administrator of UNITRA appealed to students, returning from the mid-year recess, to pay fees to halt the closure of the institution. According to the administrator, Professor Nicky Morgan, unpaid student fees, huge tax arrears and a bank overdraft meant that UNITRA would close within three months if more cash to fund its operations was not secured. The subsidy received from the government in April 2001 had lasted only two months before the university moved into the red once again (Macfarlane, 2001). The fact that the administrator was appealing to students, themselves amongst the poorest of the poor, to pay fees to save the university speaks to the enduring structural and cultural conditions post-apartheid that worked to maintain the status quo in the country discussed in the last chapter. A serious backlash from local communities as well as from the University itself resulted, with many noting the impact of such a closure on the economy of the area. In the event, UNITRA was not closed and WSU was established as a 'comprehensive university'.

In spite of the chronic lack of resourcing over the years, the fact that UNITRA was placed under administration three times between 2000 and 2003 is indicative of serious failings in governance and management at the institution. As already indicated in the last chapter, under apartheid, institutions in the former homelands were subject to high levels of control from the government controlling them. As a result, they never enjoyed the autonomy and freedom experienced by the historically white universities. This control was exercised very firmly in relation to funding (Bunting, 2002a). Tuition fees and all expenditure had to be approved by the government controlling the institution in an 'negotiated budget' and even new posts (both academic and administrative) had to be approved. Once a budget had been 'negotiated' the funding allocated to the institution had to be spent within the financial year in question. Any unspent funding was required to be returned to the relevant department at the end of the financial year. According to Bunting (2002a), the impact of this control was that the

historically black institutions never developed the capacity to manage their own affairs in the same way as their historically white counterparts. This was particularly the case in relation to funding where the requirement that any unspent funds should be returned led to a 'use it or lose it' approach at the end of the year. The requirement also meant that institutions were never allowed to 'save' and build up funding for leaner times. Pre-merger (and the assumption of university status for all institutions coming together to form the new WSU), capacity to manage had never been built up to the same extent as in other universities. Once again, therefore, it is possible to see how structural and cultural conditions worked historically to constrain the emergence of the governance and management systems that would serve UNITRA well once it was placed on the same footing as other universities in the South African system with regard to state funding.

In 1988, the negotiated budget system ended and all institutions were moved on to the standardised funding formula used previously only for the historically white institutions. The historically black universities were happy with this arrangement as the funding formula was applied 'per head' and they anticipated an increase in funding once apartheid came to an end and more students entered higher education (Bunting, 2002a). In the early 1990s, overall enrolments in higher education expanded enormously to the benefit of the historically black institutions. By the mid to late 1990s, this picture was changing as students exercised their preferences for the better resourced and more prestigious historically white universities (Cooper and Subotsky 2001). That had profound implications for the historically black universities as their funding, now 'per head' fell dramatically and they had no resources in the form of endowments or other savings on which they could fall. Financial crises were the order of the day across the historically black institutions. The fact that UNITRA was placed under administration three times between 2000 and 2003 needs to be understood against the backdrop sketched in the preceding paragraphs.

The history of WSU in the apartheid educational landscape allows for insights into the way governance and management was conditioned structurally.

### 4.3.2 Post-merger

The first Vice Chancellor of the new institution, Professor Marcus Balintulo, was installed in 2007. The Balintulo Vice Chancellorship focused on the need to engage with the status of WSU as a comprehensive university. The category of the comprehensive university emerged from the need to provide i) increased access particularly to career focused programmes, ii) improved articulation between career focused and academic programmes, iii) increased focus on applied research and iv) enhanced responsiveness to the socio-economic needs of communities (MoE, 2002). However, the Vice-Chancellorship ended abruptly in 2011 twelve months before the end of the agreed term of appointment.

Three strategic plans were developed under the leadership of Professor Balintulo:

- A Strategic Plan for the Campuses of the WSU for Science and Technology, 2007 – 2011 (WSU, 2006), also known as the 'Neil and Butcher Associates (NBA) Report'.;
- The WSU Strategic Plan 2008 – 2017 (WSU, 2008);
- The WSU Council Strategic Planning Indaba Report 2010 entitled *Five Years of Merger: Towards Vision 2020.*

The first of these plans, the NBA Report of 2006, identified the need for WSU to develop along scientific, responsive, innovative and technological dimensions and was insistent on the idea that community development should be central to the academic project. The question to be asked was whether the capacity to do this existed in the three institutions that had been brought together to form the new institution given their histories and the purposes they had served under the apartheid state, a point taken up in the NBA Report which identified the need for capacity development if WSU was to fulfil its mandate.

The WSU Council Indaba of 2010 attempted to build on the NBA Report of 2006. One of the questions the Indaba tried to address related to the costs of the merger estimated at R400m over three years when only R1.2m had been allocated.

One of the recommendations made as a result of the NPHE processes was that the new comprehensive university of WSU should embody a programme and qualification mix (PQM) consisting of at least 70% 'technikon type' programmes. The NPHE processes also recommended that no new programmes should be introduced and that no programmes

accredited to be offered on the site of one of the merging institutions should be offered on other sites post-merger. The implications of a PQM of 70% vocational programmes and 30% traditional academic programmes on the development of an academic project for WSU were quite profound, as I will try to explain later in this chapter.

## 4.4 The academic project

As Bunting (2002b) explains, differences between the technikons and the universities in the apartheid system were extensive and related to all aspects of institutional life. The technikons, for example, drew on the 'convenor system' for curriculum development. This involved an institution developing a curriculum for a particular programme which was then used by all other institutions offering the same programme. The technikons had also been subject to quality assurance under the auspices of the Certification Council for Technikon Education (SERTEC) as well as the requirements of professional bodies associated with the programmes they offered. Staff in the technikons brought into the merger that would result in the establishment of WSU tended to be less qualified and younger than those employed at the former UNITRA. Members of the academic staff at the former UNITRA were also more accustomed to the freedoms associated with curriculum development at a university even though they had always been subject to the constraints on freedom imposed by the apartheid state.

The idea that WSU should focus on the provision of technical and vocational education through the 70:30 PQM was not accepted without question. Nkondo (2010), for example, makes an argument for renegotiation of the mandate to include strengthening the presence of the humanities and social sciences in order to draw on the strengths of the former UNITRA. Drawing on the strengths of one institution in the merger process would, however, have weakened its development as a comprehensive university. However, the very status of WSU as a comprehensive university with a 70:30 ratio of vocational to traditional academic programmes also served to reproduce the inequalities of the past. As already noted, the historically black universities had never been intended to produce an intellectual elite. Rather, their purpose was the production of functionaries for the apartheid state. The designation of the only university in the former Transkei region as a 'comprehensive' institution and insisting on a 70:30 ratio of vocational to academic programmes once again arguably served to deny

poor black people access to intellectual inquiry of an abstract nature. While the 'comprehensive' designation could be seen to be pragmatic, it also served to reproduce the status quo.

Until 2014, the academic structure of the new WSU encompassed four faculties spanning i) health sciences; ii) science, engineering and technology; iii) business sciences, management and law and iv) education, each headed by an executive dean and deputy dean reporting to the Deputy Vice Chancellor, Academic Affairs and Research. The four faculties were represented across the eleven sites of delivery spread across the Eastern Cape province with the exception of health sciences which needed to provide access to academic hospitals and so were limited in respect to the locations on which programmes could be offered.

Debates about curriculum and programme design had long been central to the 'transformation' of higher education. The introduction of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in the mid 1990s as well as the identification of three institutional types in the NPHE (MoE, 2002) added to these debates. The original NQF consisted of three 'pathways' or 'tracks': a general academic track, a vocational track and an 'articulation' track which allowed learners to make links between traditional academic knowledge and the applied knowledge of vocational and professional education. One question for a new comprehensive such as WSU involved the extent to which it would be able to straddle both traditional academic knowledge and vocational and professional knowledge and how both knowledge types could sit comfortably in the institution overall. The 70:30 qualification mix required of the new comprehensive university was therefore potentially more disruptive to the tradition of general academic education that had dominated in the old UNITRA because of the unequal ratio.

At the time the concept of the comprehensive university was identified, little conceptual work had been done on knowledge even though Bernstein's (2000) seminal distinction between vertical and horizontal discourses and hierarchical and horizontal knowledge structures was available. Scholars in South Africa took up these ideas to explore curriculum differentiation, progression and articulation with Shay, Oosthuizen, Paxton and van der Merwe (2011) developing a conceptual framework to aid this task. Work in the area which has become known as the 'sociology of knowledge' is, however, very complex even for curriculum scholars and the extent to which specialists in the disciplines in the new institution could engage

meaningfully with it in order to effect the kinds of curriculum change needed was questionable. Muller (2009) offers a 'conceptual guide' to curriculum planning in the comprehensives and Shay et al. (2011) identify a number of curriculum types. The extent to which this work was taken up in the comprehensives is, however, questionable.

Other developments after 2002 have also arguably constrained meaningful curriculum development. From the mid 1990s onwards, universities were required to register all their qualifications on the newly established National Qualifications Authority (NQF). In common with other frameworks across the world, the South African NQF uses the principle of the learning outcome along with those of 'credit' and 'levels' and to allow for this registration. In 2014, the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) was finalised (CHE, 2014). Re-registration of all qualifications then became mandatory on the new framework. Lange (2017:33) points out that these developments at a national level have resulted in attention being paid to what she terms the 'exoskeleton' of the curriculum at the expense of more meaningful work related to the academic project.

Teaching is only part of the academic project, however. In respect of research, WSU was also conditioned by the past. As I have noted on several occasions, the historically black universities and the Technikons were never established as research focused institutions. Under apartheid, both kinds of institution were intended primarily as training establishments. There was thus no tradition of a 'research culture' at any of the institutions being merged to form the new WSU. Even more significantly was the fact that the requirement that the new comprehensive university should be vocationally focused with a 70:30 mix of vocational to academic programmes meant that its new organisation would not support traditional academic research. When the fact that staff at the two former Technikons were primarily practitioners employed on the basis of their experience in technical and vocational fields is considered, then it is easy to see that the new WSU was severely constrained in its capacity to produce research from its inception. As a university, it would, nonetheless, be expected to produce research. Research capacity building for the academic project was thus an enormous task.

## 4.5 The Centre for Learning and Teaching Development

One of main developments to result from the WSU merger was the establishment of the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development (CLTD[2]), a move which was commended by the CHE in its report on the institutional audit (CHE, 2011):

> *The HEQC commends Walter Sisulu University on the work done by the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development in supporting both staff and students; in improving student success; in helping staff improve their teaching, programme design and assessment skills; and providing resources to build institutional capacity to deliver on its mission.*

Given the challenges that faced WSU in developing as a comprehensive university, expertise in a teaching and learning centre was critical to programme planning and curriculum design.

Although the name of the CLTD now focuses on 'teaching and learning development' at one point the same entity would probably have been termed the 'Academic Development Centre'. Boughey (2007) provides an account of shifts in the field of South African academic development from the early 1980s onwards showing how activities originally focused on enhancing the chances of success for the small numbers of students admitted to historically white universities, and thus located within a general concern for equity, shifted to those which aimed to contribute to institutional efficiency as new polices and frameworks were introduced following the shift to democracy. In many respects, this shift resulted in conflicts for practitioners in the field although Quinn (2007) argues that the shift in focus from equity to efficiency in one historically white research intensive university allowed the centre housing academic development practitioners to accrue more status and, arguably, more power.

Over time, debates about the location of responsibility for academic development activities have emerged. In the 1980s, academic development was located in centres and units, usually located on the periphery of academic activities (Boughey, 2007). By the early 1990s, arguments were being made for the 'infusion model' (Walker and Badsha, 1993) involving the

[2] The original founding document and the Senate minute of September 2006, this Centre was conceptualized as the Centre for Learning and Teaching, with 'Development' added later as a form of making its function both explicitly distinct and philosophical.

relocation of practitioners into faculties and departments to work alongside academic staff. As Boughey (2007) points out, the field suffered from measures intended to affect financial efficiencies in the late 1990s onwards and academic development activities were shut down or reduced in size as a result. In the early 2000s, the field then re-established itself within an overall framing of institutional efficiency and effectiveness.

In a few universities, academic development practitioners enjoy academic status but this is far from the norm. In many they are appointed as 'professional' or 'support' staff. As Gosling's (2009) report on a survey of directors of academic development across the country notes, at the time the survey was conducted there was an overall lack of agreement about the role to be played by academic development practitioners in universities. Most centres or units were positioned to report to a deputy vice chancellor and to various senate committees but there was no consensus across the system as a whole. Although no research has been conducted on the form of academic development activities since Gosling's (2009) survey, his findings arguably stand to this day.

Following dominant discourses that constructed academic development as having the capacity to contribute to institutional efficiency and effectiveness, the focus of the CLTD in the new institution was on strategy and process monitoring, evaluation and reporting on integrated academic development programmes and services. The task confronting CLTD not only involved providing support to the new institution as it developed its academic project in order to comply with the 70:30 PQM mix but, also, that it needed to work with the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning overall. This meant that quality development related work needed to extend beyond the managerial and technicist approaches adopted at many other institutions in order to encompass strategies that reflected knowledge of and for transformation of the academic enterprise (Lange, 2017).

The Founding Document of the new CLTD (WSU, 2006a) identifies the mission of the Centre as follows:

> *The Mission of the Centre for Learning and Teaching for Walter Sisulu University for Science and Technology is to promote excellence in learning and teaching by providing integrated and specialised professional expertise and services for all faculties towards the improvement of the institutional learning and teaching culture.*

Although institutions brought together for the merger had provision for academic development, the founding of the new CLTD represented an attempt to produce a coherent structure based on theoretically driven understandings of teaching and learning and curriculum design that would address issues related to teaching and learning across the entire university. At the time of the merger, nine practitioners were working in academic development across all institutional sites. In 2014, when CLTD was at its peak functioning, this number had grown to fifty eight (58) although many staff members were employed on short term contracts facilitated by UCDG funding. Excluded from this number was quite a large number of staff whose main work was in what are known as Extended Programmes with an Integrated Foundation Phase.

The work of the CLTD at WSU mirrors that of similar centres in other universities in South Africa (Gosling, 2009) and internationally (Holt, Palmer, & Challish, 2011). The challenge of confronting discourses locating problems in students rather than in the nature of university education itself has already been noted. However, yet another challenge experienced by staff at CLTD related to tensions between understandings of Academic Development work as supporting economic development and the private good and a contrasting understanding which saw its main function as being that of promoting equity and social justice (see, also, Boughey, 2007). As Boughey (2007) points out, initial work in the field of Academic Development was located firmly in discourses that opposed the apartheid regime and which therefore privileged social justice. In the late 1990s, Academic Development had fallen into decline at many universities thanks to financial stringencies as the subsidy income per capita fell and, in some institutions, enrolments declined overall. As new policy initiatives related to the introduction of the National Qualifications Framework and quality assurance were implemented, universities needed assistance in meeting policy requirements related to teaching and learning. The field of Academic Development was then seen as holding the capacity to provide this assistance. Although the field was, in many respects, 'resurrected' in the early 2000s, thanks to the need for expertise in teaching and learning, it was reconstructed by 'efficiency' discourses. This left many practitioners with a dilemma. Strongly committed to the pursuit of social justice and a concern for poor black students, they felt conflicted when 'efficiency' demands impacted on the very people they had long seen as their priority.

In this context, the belief and value system sustaining the work of the CLTD emerged over time as a result of engaging with concerns about quality enhancement in a historically disadvantaged institution. The concept of student academic success was central to the belief system and the practices it led to. Practices drew on understandings of teaching and learning as profoundly social and cultural as opposed to those which saw Academic Development as involving the remediation of student deficits. Impactful and sustainable systems needed to be developed along with processes necessary to monitor and evaluate progress. Two major strategies emerged as a result of this realisation.

The first was to draw on ear-marked grants provided by the DoHET to enhance teaching and learning across the entire higher education system. A Teaching Development Grant was available as ear-marked funding from 2004 onwards along with a Foundation Programme Grant.

The second strategy was to draw on international funding in the form of the WSU NUFFIC[3] NPT[4] Project NPT/ZAF/237/267 (WSU, 2012), which would then lead to the subsequent NUFFIC NICHE[5] Project MOZ/13 in 2013-2016 (RUG, 2013). The WSU NUFFIC NPT Project ZAF/237/267 of 2008-2012, entitled, 'Strengthening the Centre for Learning and Teaching and the Science, Engineering and Technology Faculty of Walter Sisulu University'. At a practical level, the project centred on introducing, amongst other things, blended learning and the electronic resources needed to support it on all major WSU campuses, a staff development programme and on funding two master's and four doctoral bursaries as part of a staff development initiative.

## 4.6 Addressing poor performance

The development of the new university was shaped by persistent patterns of poor student performance. From a perspective in social realism, it is possible to identify some of the

[3] Netherlands Organisation of International Cooperation in Higher Education (NUFFIC)

[4] The Netherlands Programme for Institutional Strengthening of Post-Secondary Education and Training Capacity (NPT)

[5] Netherlands Initiative for Capacity Development in Higher Education (NICHE)

structural and cultural conditions that led to this. As already indicated, students enrolling at WSU tended to be black and working class with homes in some of the poorest areas of the country. Most had attended poorly resourced and badly functioning schools and were the first in the families to engage with higher education.

What is often neglected in explorations of the mechanisms leading to poor performance is the role of institutional managers, more specifically, the way they exercised their agency as social actors. A brief examination of institutional history reveals a disjuncture of espoused values and values in use on the part of managers. The example of the CLTD serves to illustrate this point. Although the CLTD was identified in institutional discourse as a major resource for the transformation required of the new WSU, it is apparent that institutional managers did not draw on this discourse to effect the appointments of the staff needed to resource it. Between 2004 and 2016, not a single staff member was appointed on a permanent basis to a position in the Centre. Appointments that were made were all on the basis of soft funding and were contract-based. Although this allowed the Centre to be staffed, it did not contribute towards capacity building and continuity since temporary appointments are often accompanied by high staff turnover. Rather, development work was dependent on grants and donors.

The literature (see, for example, Brew & Peseta, 2008) notes the way institutional structures such as academic development units can be sacrificed at the altar of political and economic concerns. An example of this phenomenon occurred in 2013 when an academic development practitioner on the Queenstown campus was informed by a dean that the CLTD had ceased to exist and that he should present evidence of his qualifications so that a teaching load could be allocated to him. It is not clear why the dean chose to make a claim that the CLTD had ceased to exist or why she chose to prey on Academic Development to meet her staffing needs rather than apply for additional staff through the appropriate channels. Whatever was the case, the dean was exercising her power as a social actor to achieve a more immediate need (ensuring that classes were taught) than to take a long term view about development.

The CLTD arguably had the potential to play a critical role in addressing the recommendations of the audit close-out report, to which this chapter will now turn.

## 4.7 The HEQC Audit Report

As already indicated, the Report on the first institutional audit of WSU conducted by the HEQC made thirty recommendations. In 2018, the HEQC wrote a 'close out' report on the audit noting the following:

> *The Institutional Audits Committee (of the HEQC) needed the institution (WSU) to prioritise areas that needed immediate attention and follow up on progress of the improvement plan. The IAC (through the Institutional Audits Directorate) would engage with the University to assist with this process.*
>
> *The University needed to provide a follow up report on its improvement plan, unpacking more issues, prioritising areas e.g. teaching and learning, and providing more context for implementation.*
>
> *The IAC required the institution to give priority to things that had an immediate impact on teaching and learning, and student experience.*

It is clear from these comments in the close out report that WSU had not dealt with the Report of the Audit Panel in the manner expected by the HEQC and, indeed, by 2018, ten of the thirty recommendations made in the Audit Report still had not even begun to be addressed. The existence of a Directorate for Quality Management was no guarantee that processes would be put in place to attend to the recommendations and effect improvements.

Although the recommendations of the audit report were not the subject of attention between 2011 and 2018, concerns about poor student performance continued to be raised. The Minutes of the Senate Meeting (WSU, 2013b) record the following discussion:

> *The reported poor performance by students in the examinations was viewed by Senate with serious concern and the faculties were advised to address this matter holistically and as early as possible with the assistance of the Quality Management Directorate and the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development.*

It is not possible to claim that the concern about poor performance noted in this minute related to the need for institutional managers to enhance institutional efficiency in any definitive way. However, the fact that state funding for public universities is incentive-based and the income that WSU would derive was dependent on maximising throughput and

graduation rates, suggests that 'efficiency discourses' were at least drawn upon by those in the debate. If this was the case, in social realist terms, it is possible to see these efficiency discourses contributing to the emergence of a call for the assistance of the CLTD, a confirmation of the points made earlier in this chapter.

In this discussion, the CLTD and the Directorate of Quality Management were clearly identified as structures that could enable poor performance to be addressed. At the same time, institutional managers were not ensuring that the audit was drawn upon as a mechanism to effect improvement and, as we have already seen, the CLTD itself was seen as a structure that could be drawn upon to serve other goals, such as the need to fill staffing gaps in mainstream teaching (see Section 4.6 above). In addition, and despite its identification of a structure to support the institutional goal of addressing poor performance, no institutional resources were drawn upon to allow it to function. Rather, it continued to have to rely on grant and donor funding.

From a perspective in social realism, what it is possible to see, therefore, are i) institutional managers identifying contradictory goals (address poor performance versus continuing to staff programmes that were, potentially, not optimally designed) and ii) the same managers drawing on 'clashing discourses' (the CLTD is an important resource in addressing poor performance, the CLTD can be dispensed with, and its staff deployed elsewhere). In effect, the 'centre' (in terms of the management structure) 'is not holding' as a group of corporate agents intent on a common goal and in pursuit of a common project to pursue that goal. Rather, individual social actors appear to be pursuing their own goals and projects at different times even though they may come together as a group of corporate agents in a Senate meeting to draw on discourses decrying poor performance and privileging the role of the CLTD in addressing it.

The importance of cascading institutional strategies down to the operational level of programmes and academic departments, instead of remaining the sole mandate of top management, is noted in the literature (Knight & Trowler, 2001; Leibowitz & Adendorff, 2007).

## 4.8 Addressing poor performance through strategy

Recommendation 19 of the HEQC Institutional Audit Report for WSU (HEQC, 2011) called for the development of

> *... an appropriate institution-wide strategy on teaching and learning, and assessment, to ensure the success of students, and which is consistent with the University's aspirations to be a developmental university that has specific teaching and learning goals, and which is linked to academic and pastoral support systems.*

The recommendation called for the development of a strategy aligned with other initiatives in the South African system. As already indicated, the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP) that constituted the second cycle of quality related work in South Africa drew extensively on the work of Vincent Tinto (see, for example, 2012) which argues for institution wide approaches to improving student performance. In addition, the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP) (MoHET, 2017) introduced to enhance the performance of the South African higher education system calls for strategy.

Strategic planning around teaching and learning at WSU has centered on the following points:

- The need to create access for success. This element on the strategy assumes that formal access to the university is not sufficient to ensure success. Rather, students will need to be provided with what Morrow (1993) terms 'epistemological access', or access to the forms of knowledge and ways of knowing that sustain the university as well as simple admission.
- An acknowledgement of the fact that WSU's student body will be drawn from lower socio-economic strata and will have attended poorly resourced schools that have not prepared them for higher education.
- The need for support systems that will maximise throughput and graduation rates.
- The need to provide an overall environment that will allow for the development necessary for students to graduate.
- The need for the professional development of staff in their capacity as educators.

As a result, strategies themselves have encompassed:

- Student tracking and monitoring.

- A range of integrated academic development programmes (i.e., programmes which integrate student development into mainstream teaching and learning).
- Enhancing the role of academic management, and
- The need to ensure that the academic project of the university is aligned with its mission and vision and, more specifically, with its aim to be 'socially embedded' in local communities.

At a more practical level, this has involved:

- The development of a WSU Strategy on Articulation Pathways with FET Colleges and DBE schools (WSU, 2006).
- Work with the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Technology to implement the WSU NUFFIC NPT Project (WSU, 2012), which amongst other activities developed tracer/employer studies of WSU graduates.
- A project tracking and monitoring student progress on several courses linked to an early warning system.

All these projects resulted in CLTD working closely with faculty management structures. All this work on the part of the CLTD on an integrated academic development strategy assumed that institutional managers would follow the procedures and apply the policies that supported it.

## 4.9 The monitoring of student success

The Walter Sisulu University Institutional Strategy for Academic Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development (Appendix I) was approved in 2016. The development of the strategy drew on various discourses identifying tracking and monitoring and the use of 'big data' to improve student performance in South African higher education. Evidence of these discourses in the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDG) was provided in Chapter One. However, the discourses were also strengthened by criteria developed by the CHE for use in the first cycle of institutional audits. Criterion 3 focuses on the 'arrangements for the quality assurance of, and support for, teaching and learning to enhance quality and allow for its continuous monitoring'. The Manual for the First Cycle of Institutional Audits (CHE, 2004) notes that the following would be expected as an indication that the 'arrangements' noted in the criterion had been met:

> *A system which stores and updates relevant information on students in order to inform policy, planning, implementation and review of teaching and learning* (CHE, 2004:14).

Criterion 7 (CHE, 2004:16) requires 'an effective programme management system [in which] responsibility and lines of accountability are clearly allocated. Management information systems are used to record and disseminate information about the programme, as well as to facilitate review and improvement'. The Manual then notes that audit panels would expect evidence of the

> *Capturing and continual updating of all necessary information about programmes, including their accreditation status, in the management information system; relevant aspects of this information are regularly available to staff and students in order to support improvement. At risk students can be identified and supported timeously* (CHE, 2004:17).

The development and use of tracking and monitoring systems were also promoted by funders such as the Kresge Foundation which had long supported a system in the United States called 'Achieving the Dream'[6] which used tracking and monitoring to try to establish 'what worked' to promote student success in community colleges. As also noted in Chapter One, the Foundation eventually funded a programme in South Africa called 'Siyaphumelela'[7] .

The development of a system to monitor student success at WSU was, however, more directly linked to Recommendation 4 in the CHE's audit report of the university (CHE, 2011:10) that:

> *Walter Sisulu University strengthens its reporting and monitoring mechanisms in all areas with special focus on student success, throughput, and graduation rates and staff qualifications, and ensure that the appropriate divisions take responsibility for the implementation of policies and plans.*

The development of the system in 2016 therefore came a full five years after the audit report had been received.

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[6] https://www.achievingthedream.org/org/940/the-kresge-foundation

[7] https://siyaphumelela.org.za

Using data to identify poor performance and develop mechanisms that will address it is dependent on the application of a series of theoretical lenses to that data. I have already indicated two major discursive positions in relation to the field of Academic Development in South Africa: a discourse constructing poor performance as due to students' 'problems' and another seeing it as emerging from the very cultural and structural systems of universities themselves. Theories about learning and teaching can be seen to draw on these discourses (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Depending on discourses informing the theory, initiatives intended to address areas of poor performance identified through the analysis of big data will differ in their approach. The use of data to track and monitor student performance does not, therefore, constitute an overall, nor a failsafe, approach to improving it given the contestations that are likely to occur in identifying the reasons for the poor performance identified. This is but one problem with the use of monitoring and tracking systems. Another, which is the focus of the study underpinning this thesis, relates to the implementation of the systems themselves. The two problems are not, of course, unrelated, as I will attempt to illustrate later in this thesis.

The Strategy identifies the following 'implementation approach' (WSU, 2016:2):

- *At institutional level the system must also address the issue of systems integration, including academic and other support services.*
- *The system must be implemented at faculty, departmental levels and programme levels and therefore be academically managed.*
- *The system must also build capacity within and across the universities (must also address establishing networks around improving practice, national and international).*

For the purpose of the study underpinning this thesis, the second bullet point above is particularly important.

The Strategy itself was piloted in the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Technology in 2014 and, at the time the document was approved had already begun to be implemented in the Faculty of Health Sciences. To implement the Strategy, faculties were required to

> *… set up teams on student data management per guidelines to be provided by the Learning and Teaching Development (LTD)* (WSU, 2016:4).

Extensive support was provided by CLTD for the implementation of the Strategy in the form of workshops and other activities. In principle, the approval of the Strategy by the Senate (and later Council) should have been sufficient to secure the support for its implementation from institutional managers. Activities conducted by CLTD to support its implementation served to raise awareness as well as develop capacity at lower levels of the institution.

## 4.10 Conclusion

As indicated in its introduction, this Chapter has sought to contribute to the analysis of the structural and cultural conditioning in place at $T_1$ by focusing on WSU as an institution. This chapter therefore provides an additional level of analysis of conditioning at T1 which looked at macro mechanisms. As I hope to have shown in this chapter, structural and cultural conditions 'inherited' as the new Walter Sisulu University emerged from the combination of three former historically disadvantaged institutions constrained its development from the very beginning. As I also hope I have shown, structural and cultural conditioning related to the field of Academic Development also resulted in incompatibility in the system. As I explained in Chapter Two, Archer (1995, 1996) identifies the following complementarities and incompatibilities in social systems:

- Necessary complementarities occur in a situation where there are compatibilities between CEPs and SEPs leading to an environment of mutual support. This makes change less likely.
- Necessary incompatibilities represent the opposite of necessary complementarities and occur when elements of the system are incompatible and thus constrain possible change; When ideas or beliefs contradict each other, accommodation is sought because the ideas are related to each other in some way.
- Contingent incompatibilities occur when there is a 'battleground of ideas' where agents have nothing to gain from compromise and everything to gain from inflicting damage on the ideas and beliefs held by opponents. As a result, elimination occurs.
- Contingent complementarities when there are material opportunities that concur with dominant ideas with the result that opportunism becomes possible.

As I hope to have shown in this Chapter, at WSU 'necessary incompatibilities' were evident in the form of conflicting ideas about the field of Academic Development. I have yet to show

how and whether these beliefs and ideas were accommodated in my analysis of social and cultural interaction from $T_2$ to $T_3$ in Archer's morphogenetic framework. Also to be explored is the extent to which 'contingent incompatibilities' were present in the social and cultural systems with agents, who have nothing to gain from compromise and everything to gain from inflicting damage on the ideas of others, engaged on a 'battleground of ideas'.

This chapter concludes my exploration of the social and cultural conditioning at $T_1$, the first phase of the morphogenetic cycle. In the next chapter, I will describe the design of my study.

# 5 Chapter Five: Research Design

> *Each time I have attempted to do theoretical/academic work it has been on the basis of elements of my experience, always in relation to processes that I saw taking place around* me (Foucault (1981), cited in Rajchman, 1985:36)

## 5.1 Introduction and background

In this chapter, I describe the design of the study that allowed me to answer the question I posed at the proposal stage:

> How do academic managers exercise their agency to monitor and promote student academic success in the context of implementing an institutional strategy on monitoring and support?

As I have argued in Chapter Two, I drew on Bhaskar's (1978, 1979) critical realism and Archer's (1995, 1996) social realism to develop a metatheoretical framework for the study. This framework allowed me to focus on the agency of academic managers and to understand why it took the forms it took. Although the study draws on qualitative and quantitative data, it is not 'mixed methods' which is informed by the philosophy of pragmatism.

Pragmatists believe that all human actions are the products of past experiences and the beliefs originating from them. In this way, pragmatists link human thought to action and hold that people take actions on the basis of the consequences they forsee for those actions. They then use the results of those actions to predict the consequences of future actions. This philosophy is very different to critical realism in which the study on which this thesis draws is based. I explore this point in more detail late in this chapter. Chapter Two explains critical realist philosophy in some depth.

My study took the form of a case study at one historically black South African university, described in detail in Chapter Four, and looked at the way managers worked to implement a Strategy for Academic Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development, also described in Chapter Four.

## 5.2 Case study

Bassey (1999:58) defines an educational case study as an empirical enquiry which is 'conducted within the localised boundary of time and space', pointing out that, as such, it is a 'singularity', an observation that obviously has implications for generalisation. He elaborates by noting that case studies focus on an 'interesting' aspect of an activity 'in its natural context'.

Many commentators (see, for example, Baskarada, 2014; Starman, 2013) point out that case study is particularly suited to qualitative research. In critical realist studies, however, the distinction between qualitative and quantitative approaches falls away (Boughey & McKenna, 2021) as researchers always begin by using data that is empirical in nature to move to the level of the Real, the deepest layer of reality at which the mechanisms they are interested in are located. Data can be qualitative in that it consists of a record of observations and experiences obtained through, for example, interviews or it can be quantitative in that, for example, it describes the frequency at which events occur. Historically, quantitative studies have attempted to prove the existence of an ultimate reality through inferential statistics with numerical data. Qualitative studies usually draw on relativism and thus acknowledge the existence of ultimate realities. Since Bhaskar's (1978, 1989) critical realism combines a relativist epistemology in the sense that it acknowledges we can all experience and observe the world in different ways with the existence of an absolute reality which can be reached using inference via empirical data. The empirical data used in a critical realist study can be qualitative or quantitative.

According to Yin (2003), case studies allow a researcher to develop an in-depth analysis of a social phenomenon which, in this case was the way managers exercised their agency in relation to the enhancement of teaching and learning. For Yin, case studies allow researchers to best answer 'how' or 'why' questions in real life contexts. The main research question in the study on which this thesis is based is a 'how' question in that it asks:

> How do academic managers exercise their agency to monitor and promote student academic success in the context of implementing an institutional strategy on monitoring and support.

This question is explored in relation to the 'real life' context of a historically black university in South Africa.

Stake (1995:1) argues case study researchers enter a particular context with 'a sincere interest in learning how they function in their ordinary pursuits and mileus with a willingness to put aside many presumptions as we learn'. When I began my study, I had many years of experience of working at Walter Sisulu University (WSU) as a manager in the field of academic development. I therefore embarked on the study with 'a sincere interest' in the way the monitoring and support system I had helped to implement worked. I did my best to 'bracket' my assumptions as I began the study and, as the research continued was challenged over and over again by insights that emerged. By the end of the study, my beliefs about academic monitoring and support had been challenged at a profound level as this thesis will show.

Easton (2010:118) sees critical realism as particularly suited to case study research since case studies often avoid a 'defence of their choice of method on formal epistemological grounds' not least because 'making truth claims based on such seemingly limited data is clearly a daunting prospect'. Critical realism, however, provides not only a basis for justification but also guidelines as to how case research might be done and how theory can be fashioned' (p. 128). Gerring (2007:45) argues that, if a case study is well done, it can identify the 'causal pathways at work in a causal relationship'. Critical realism is also interested in causal relationships though these are understood as 'tendencies'. The study on which this thesis was based aimed to identify causal relationships and relational events and thus drew on the potential of a case study to explore them in a specific context.

The selection of the case, WSU, was purposeful. Patton (2002) describes purposeful sampling as a non-random method of sampling involving the selection of information-rich cases for in-depth study. He goes on to note that the value of purposeful sampling is that any insights that may emerge will be of interest and value. In the case of the study underpinning this thesis, WSU was considered to be a valid object of study for a number of reasons. Most significant

of these was the fact that, in common with other universities in South Africa, it had adopted practices related to New Public Management in order to comply with requirements for funding from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and for quality assurance from the Council on Higher Education (CHE). However, as a historically black university located far from major metropolitan areas, WSU had always faced constraints with regard to staffing in both academic and administrative areas. The university was also troubled by other problems because it mainly attracted poor, working class, black students from rural areas unable to service tuition fees and living costs. As a result, it had never been able to derive maximum benefit from the state funding formula (DoE, 2004) which privileges throughput in what is termed 'minimum time'. This also meant that it students were in need of academic monitoring and support.

A more practical reason for the selection of WSU as a case was that it was the site of my own employment. Once ethical clearance had been obtained, I therefore had relatively easy access to documentation and interviewees. While the fact that I was employed at WSU facilitated access, it also had implications for my own positionality.

As I have already indicated, I am a mature black man from working class origins who, at the time of the study, held a senior position in Academic Development at the university. I have worked in the field of Academic Development for many years and am thus well versed in the ideas driving practice. I registered for doctoral study at Rhodes University and joined a Doctoral Programme in Higher Education Studies hosted by the Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning (CHERTL). The doctoral programme afforded me the opportunity to engage with other scholars at three 'Doc Weeks' per year, periods that offered intense workshopping, stimulating seminars and opportunities to engage with others. 'Doc Weeks' were then supported by an online platform which encouraged participants to post to forums and engage with each other online. Significantly, my participation in the doctoral programme exposed me to theory in the form of Bhaskar's (1978, 1989) critical realism and Archer's (1995, 1996, 2000) social realism and to looking at higher education with 'critical eyes'. This criticality required me to rethink many of the positions I had occupied over the years and question my own thinking. As I have indicated, I was involved in developing the architecture of many of the strategies used at WSU to monitor and support teaching and

learning. The criticality afforded to me by my students came to mean that I looked at those strategies differently. My engagement with other scholars on the doctoral programme meant that my thinking was probed and questioned by my peers and supervisors on a regular basis. In many respects, and as I hope this thesis shows, this eventually resulted in my adoption of a radically different position towards New Public Management in higher education than the one I had originally espoused. The doctoral journey was truly a learning journey in that it resulted in my identification of numerous problems related to practices I had espoused and advocated for many years.

## 5.3 The implications of using the morphogenetic framework

Chapter Two explored Archer's (1995, 1996) belief that social change (or non-change occurs in endless 'morphogenetic cycles'. Each cycle begins with a period (termed $T_1$) in which agency is conditioned by the structural and cultural conditions in play at the time. As Archer is a critical realist, these conditions are understood to consist of experiences of, and observations about, the social world (located at what critical realists term the 'level of the Empirical') that emerge from events (located at the level of the Actual) that, in turn, emerge from the interplay of mechanisms located at the deepest level of reality, the Real.

Any piece of research drawing on the morphogenetic framework therefore has to begin by excavating the interplay of mechanisms at the level of the Real at $T_1$. In order to do this, researchers must move from empirical data in the form of observations about, and experiences of, the period of time conceptualised as $T_1$ (captured in documents as well as in the literature or possibly generated using techniques such as using interviews and surveys) and using the inferential processes of abduction and retroduction (explicated in Chapter Two) to the level of the Real and, in doing so, identify the generative mechanisms at play in the period under study. Retroduction, as I have explained, involves asking the 'transcendental question' of what the world must really be like for something (an event at the level of the Actual or an experience or observation at the level of the Empirical) to have occurred. Abduction, on the other hand, involves using theory to see things differently.

The use of the morphogenetic framework then requires the researcher to explore the period when agents are understood to exercise their agency in order to pursue projects they have identified as addressing their ultimate concerns and confront the powers and properties of

structural and cultural mechanisms as they do so. This second phase of the morphogenetic cycle is termed $T_2$ to $T_3$. Analysis of this second phase involves drawing on the concept of 'analytical dualism' or the idea that 'the people' (agency) and 'the parts' (structure and culture) should be separated *for analytical purposes only*. The excavation of mechanisms therefore has to address the domains of structure and culture separately.

The final stage of the morphogenetic cycle, $T_4$, explores the extent to which change or non-change has resulted from the interplay of 'the people' and 'the parts' between $T_2$ and $T_3$. The analysis of $T_4$ therefore constitutes a form of evaluation and is reliant on the researcher trying to move from empirical evidence to the deepest layer of reality to make statements about what changes have occurred or have not occurred in the domains of structure and culture.

In a conventional doctoral thesis in the social sciences, it is customary for a chapter on research design to precede analytical chapters. In the case of this thesis, this chapter on research design follows two chapters already reporting on my research and therefore provides an explanation of the methods I used to pursue it 'in retrospect'. I have followed this unconventional route as I believed that I needed to provide more details about the study itself before explicating the design. These details needed to be provided in my exploration of the social and cultural conditioning in place at WSU, which led to the development and implementation of the Strategy on Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development on which the study focuses.

## 5.4 Exploring $T_1$

My exploration of the social and cultural conditioning at $T_1$, as I hope the Chapters Three and Four have demonstrated, involved extensive engagement with the literature in the fields of higher education studies, political and economic theory and history. After identifying concepts in the literature such as 'neo-liberalism', I was able to use inference to identify mechanisms at play at the level of the Real. I conceptualised terms such as 'neo-liberalism' as discourses defined by Kress (1989:7) as:

> *... systematically organised sets of statements . . . that . . . define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension – what it is possible to do or not to do) with respect to* [an] *area of concern, whether marginally or centrally.*

In critical realist research, discourses are understood to be mechanisms at the level of the Real (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999). My reading of the literature allowed me to identify dominant discourses conditioning the higher education system and WSU more specifically at global and national levels. As I have indicated these discourses are described in Chapters Three and Four of this thesis. In short, therefore, extensive reading of the literature and policy documents related to South African higher education and discussions with, amongst others, my supervisor, allowed me to identify sets of ideas circulating at global and national levels that conditioned, or shaped, policy makers and the system overall.

Researchers approach discourse analysis in different ways. Some (see for example, Kress & Hodge, 1979; Hodge & Kress, 1993; Fairclough, 1989; Johnstone, 2018) work at a micro level focusing on the syntax of the language itself. These approaches to discourse analysis draw on accounts of the nature of language itself and, particularly, Halliday's (1973, 1978) 'systemic functional linguistics'. Others, often working in the social sciences more broadly and not specifically in the discipline of linguistics, take a broader view involving i) the tentative identification of ideas that 'hang together' in order to construct something and enable and constrain action ii) the naming of this group of ideas as a discourse iii) exemplification of the discourse and iv) deconstruction. The ultimate aim of discourse analysis is to create awareness of discourses and their impact on the world so that individuals can choose whether or not to subscribe to them.

My engagement with, and analysis of, the literature drew on this broader approach to discourse analysis. Often other authors named discourses directly, including, for example, those relating to neo liberalism and globalisation (see, for example, Boughey & McKenna, 2021) and meritocracy (Sobukwa & McKenna, 2020). In such cases, I was following a well-established train of thought in identifying such discourses as conditioning the agents I sought to study as they went about implementing the monitoring and reporting strategy.

The same engagement of the literature allowed me to identify macro structures such as race and social class as working to distribute access to higher education and, thus, to the 'goods' of the world in the form of employment, salaries and so on. It also allowed me to identify lower level structures such as policies, frameworks, declarations and so on at national and institutional levels which also worked in the same way. Again, other writers on higher education (see, for example, Badat, 2009, 2012; Cooper & Subotsky, 2001; Cooper, 2015)

often noted the way structures such as race, apartheid and social class impacted on the higher education system and my identification of structure in my reading thus followed well-trodden paths of thinking.

The acknowledgement of research fallibility by critical realists is noted in Chapter Two. In order to manage my own fallibility in this stage of the research, I trusted in the depth of my engagement with the literature. As I read, I noted the different positions taken by authors of the texts I was reading as well as in policies and other documents and the disagreements between them. I acknowledged these as far as possible in my own text and used my judgemental rationality to decide amongst them and develop my own claims about the interplay of mechanisms at the level of the Real.

In doing this, I was able to produce an overview of the higher education system in South Africa (in Chapter Three) and a more in-depth view of the case that informs my study, WSU (in Chapter Four). I was also implementing the framework informing my study as both chapters explore the social and cultural conditioning in place at macro and micro levels at $T_1$.

## 5.5 Exploring interaction between $T_2$ and $T_3$

As I have indicated, my study focused on the way agents exercised their personal emergent powers and properties (PEPs) in relation to the mechanisms that confronted them as they sought to meet the requirements of the WSU Policy on Academic Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development. My understanding of this policy was that it was a structure in that it had potential to contribute to the distribution of access to knowledge and knowing. By monitoring the progress of all students and identifying patterns as a result of that monitoring, the intention was that social actors occupying positions at faculty and departmental levels would identify interventions that could address poor performance. The CLTD offered an array of interventions in the form of activities such as Supplemental Instruction, a Writing Centre and, also, support in curriculum development and design. If, for example, high failure rates were consistently identified in a course, it was possible to identify the need for a review of its curriculum in order to try to identify the reasons for students' lack of success. It was, of course, also possible for social actors to identify new interventions, to innovate by drawing on their own understandings of disciplinary areas although, in this case, they might also have to deal with constraints related to funding.

My exploration of $T_2$ to $T_3$ involved the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. Research in the social sciences often sets up an opposition between the use of these different data forms that draws on positions in relativism and realism, or interpretivism and positivism. Positivists argue for the existence of a reality that is independent of human thought and action and that needs to be 'revealed' by researchers acting as objectively as possible. The methods used to do this are empirical in nature and involve observation, measurement, experimentation and the use of inferential statistics. Interpretivists argue for the relativity of human thought and acknowledge multiple realities. Their research therefore focuses on exploring these multiple realities using qualitative data.

So called 'mixed methods' research, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, draws on pragmatism. Pragmatism is based on the idea that researchers should use the methodological approach that best suits the particular research problem being studied (see, for example, Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). The focus is thus on the potential value of a particular piece and on the questions being asked rather than on the methods or their philosophical underpinnings.

In research drawing on critical realism, the distinction between the use of qualitative and quantitative data derived from different ontological positions (i.e. realism or relativism), falls away. So too does the need to draw on pragmatism when quantitative and qualitative data are both used in a study. As explained in Chapter Two, any study based on critical realism has to begin with the level of the Empirical and explore the observations about and experiences of this level of reality. It is possible to use both quantitative and qualitative data to do this. Critical realist research often draws on engagements with research participants to elicit their observations about and experiences of the phenomenon being studied. These engagements may take the form of interviews, discussions and so on. Critical realist research exploring the level of the Empirical can also draw on written reports as these are understood to constitute observations and experiences. The data is thus qualitative. It is often possible to move easily from the level of the Empirical to the level of the Actual since accounts will often allow for events, understood to exist at the level of the Actual, to be identified.

*At the same time*, it is also possible to draw on quantitative data to *describe* the observations and experiences located at the level of the Empirical and events located at the level of the Actual. In order to identify events, some conceptual work is often necessary. Quantitative

data about the number of students excluded, for example, can be conceptualised as a series of events involving the application of, for example, a rule about academic exclusion: results being scrutinised, the rule being implemented by recording a decision on an electronic record, a notice being issued to students and so on. Student performance data can be conceptualised in a similar fashion: students complete assessment tasks, tasks are marked, results are recorded as passes or fails, students are notified (and so other actions are triggered). It is also possible to use patterns identified in quantitative data to begin to move from the level of the Actual to the level of the Real. For example, if black working class students (identified, possibly, by using their home address as a proxy) can be shown to cluster around the 50% mark for a particular assessment while students from other social groups generally perform more highly, it is possible to posit that social class is a structure at play at the level of the Real in the case of this particular assessment task.

The point about using both qualitative and quantitative data to describe experiences and observations at the level of the Empirical and events at the level of the Actual is that the descriptions allow us to move to the deepest layer of reality, the Real, using our inferential powers. It is not to allow us to make generalisations.

In order to describe the levels of the Empirical and the Actual, the following quantitative data was used:

- Student performance data aggregated at institutional level and obtained from the Directorate of Institutional Research at WSU;
- An analysis of performance data of forty individual courses again obtained from the Directorate of Institutional Research at WSU;
- Analysis of responses to a survey (Appendix I) administered to institutional managers;
- Analysis of qualitative data obtained from a number or sources.

The qualitative data used for the study included the reports submitted by deans and HoDs in order to meet the requirements of the WSU Academic Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development Policy and responses to a survey administered to academic managers. These reports and responses were conceptualised as accounts of experiences at the level of the Empirical and events at the level of the Actual. For example, reasons for poor performance stated in a report as '[p]roblems around the timetable' and '[p]oor class attendance by the

students' can be conceptualised as a series of events (or non-events) in that students did not attend classes and clashes where, perhaps, two classes are scheduled to use the same venue. The naming of attendance as 'poor' can then be conceptualised as an experience or observation on the part of the person submitting the report. In a similar vein, two classes being scheduled for the same venue can be conceptualised as an observation that the timetable was 'problematic'.

I also conducted telephonic interviews with deans and HoDs at WSU to explore my analysis of the reports they had submitted in relation to the WSU Academic Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development Policy. These interviews were conducted during the Covid 19 pandemic. It was not possible to conduct interviews using Zoom with key informants as many had returned home to rural areas and did not have reliable internet connections. I was therefore forced to rely on the use of a cell phone.

Notes were kept as the interviews were conducted and I relied on these notes to inform my analysis of the reports.

### 5.5.1 Abducting and retroducting to the level of the Real

In order to move from my analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data that allowed me to identify observations and experiences at the level of the Empirical and events at the level of the Actual to identify mechanisms at play at the level of the Real, I used the inferential processes of retroduction and abduction. In response to a statement in a report, for example, that, '[s]tudent attitude seems to be problematic in some cases', the use of retroduction involved asking the question 'What must the world be really like for this social actor to identify students' 'attitude' as problematic? In order to respond to this question, I needed to problematise the notion of 'attitude' as a social construct and acknowledge that 'attitudes' were expressed differently. The identification of attitude as 'problematic' could simply be one reading of a student's behaviour.

Abduction involved using theory, mostly from the field of teaching and learning in higher education to 'see' the statements in the reports differently and, thus, identify mechanisms that might not otherwise have been apparent. Comments about students' language proficiency, for example, allowed me to use theory on language and language learning to identify mechanisms that contributed to the emergence of the statements themselves.

In identifying mechanisms at the level of the Real, I was alert to the existence of structures (both macro and micro) and discourses. A statement such as: '[m]ost students do not have textbooks, they rely on hand-outs issued by lecturers' allowed me to identify finance (or access to money) as a structure constraining access to learning.

I have explained discourses as sets of ideas that hold together in language or other sign systems and which then serve to enable or constrain action, ways of thinking, ways of being and so on. I conducted a very broad discourse analysis which required me to:

- Read the text repeatedly in order to identify sets of ideas;
- Name those ideas as a discourse;
- Record examples of the discourse;
- Deconstruct the discourse by saying why it was problematic in terms of what it enabled or constrained;
- Identify an alternative way to construct the 'object' of the discourse.

This process was iterative in that it required me to read the data repeatedly. Having identified potential discourses, I sought to confirm or dismiss them as a result of repeated engagement with the data. In the process of doing this, I sometimes conflated two separate discourses into one or, alternatively, separated out what I had initially identified as a single discourse into two separate discourses.

I used discourse analysis to work with qualitative empirical data in responses to a survey (Appendix II). I purposively selected members of staff at WSU to respond to the survey on the basis of their roles and responsibilities and their familiarity with the work of the Academic Monitoring and Support Strategy. The survey was administered to the four rectors of WSU campuses in Mthatha, Butterworth, Buffalo City and Komani and to the deans of the 12 faculties that existed at that time. The survey was also administered to 8 Heads of Departments across the Butterworth and Buffalo City campuses.

I also used discourse analysis with the telephonic interviews I conducted with the Senior Director, Academic Planning & Research, the Acting Director of Quality and, later, the new Director of Quality at WSU. I was forced to conduct the interviews telephonically because of the Covid-19 pandemic which made face-to-face meetings impossible. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

## 5.6 Managing fallibility

As explained in Chapter Two, critical realists acknowledge their own fallibility as researchers and therefore draw on a range of techniques in order to manage the potential to make mistakes. In order to manage my fallibility:

- I drew on a range of data and data sources produced at different times;
- I checked one set of data against another;
- I opened up my analysis to others for validation.

In the time that I have been working on this thesis, I have presented at numerous conferences and have had innumerable conversations in various fora with colleagues well versed in teaching and learning in higher education. In presenting and engaging with colleagues I have opened up my work to the scrutiny of others and invited feedback. I viewed this as a means of ensuring the trustworthiness of my work.

As I have already indicated, I used telephonic interviews with deans and HoDs conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic to check my analysis of reports submitted as part of the monitoring of the WSU Academic Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development Policy with social actors who had submitted them. I viewed these interviews as a means of managing my own fallibility as I was referring my own interpretations back to others for checking.

## 5.7 Ethics

I obtained ethical approval to conduct my study from the Faculty of Education at Rhodes University. All participants in my study were asked to provide informed consent (see Appendix III).

Although I was aware of the names and positions of participants in the study, none are noted by name or exact position in the thesis.

All data was secured during the study in password protected files and will be maintained securely into the future.

I shared insights with participants as I developed them and invited comment as I did so. Participants were free to request that any information they provided was not used in the

study at any time. None chose to do this. All participants were also free to withdraw from the study at any point. None withdrew.

## 5.8 Positionality

For most of the time I was conducting the study on which this thesis is based, I was Director of the CLTD at WSU and thus held responsibility for contributing to the management and enhancement of teaching and learning. I led a large staff and held a senior position in the management structure at WSU. As Director of the CLTD, I was responsible for the development of the WSU Strategy on Academic Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development and, also, for the range of initiatives intended to support and enhance student learning that the Strategy was intended to draw upon. I therefore had a vested interest in seeing the Strategy work. I was also the possessor of what Williams (2009) terms 'guilty knowledge', or insider knowledge about the institution in which I worked and was often witness to the 'aporia', or contradictions and disjunctures in the way I tried to go about my study as ethically and rigorously as possible (Williams, 2009).

I am also a black man from a working class rural background, the first in my family to attend a university, a member of a church, a father, a husband, a neighbour and many other things. All these identities impact on the way I see the world. I therefore acknowledge the relativity of the way I see the world. Although I came to the study from the position as a manager of teaching and learning in a university I also brought multiple other identities to it. My position as a black man from a working class background, for example, opened the way for my concern with social justice and, ultimately, for a critical stance, on management practices.

Cousin (2010:1) identifies reflexivity as a means of acknowledging and addressing the bias that can result from positionality but also cautions against what she calls the 'positional piety' in which either moral authority is acclaimed through affinity with subjects … or through a confessional declaration of positional privilege'. Cousin's critique is essentially of 'standpoint theory' which roots power and knowledge in the personal knowledge and experience of individuals.

In order to conduct this study, I did engage in reflexivity. As I have noted, I am a black man from a working class background and therefore am open to claims of 'positional piety' in relation to the personal knowledge and experiences I brought to the study which aimed to

advance social justice. Throughout the study, I felt passionately about the experiences of students whose academic success was not assured and whose chances of gaining a qualification were diminished as a result. However, I was also a manager and drew on some of the practices associated with New Public Management (NPM) in my own work, the development of the WSU Strategy on Academic Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development being but one example of this. As my study proceeded, I saw myself as implicated in practices which were, at best, only paying lip service to social justice by enhancing student success. However, my engagement with the study allowed me to develop a critical stance towards those practices in general and in the way they were drawn upon at WSU in particular. This was difficult as the completion of my doctoral study has meant I have had to question much of what I espoused as a manager.

My understanding of research in the social sciences, and I count Higher Education Studies as falling within this area, is that it contributes towards the construction of a 'horizontal knowledge structure' (Bernstein, 2000). In a horizontal knowledge structure, researchers use a theory as a lens through which to view the world. As they use the theory, they see things they might not otherwise have seen or see things differently. Using a theory also impacts on positionality. My choice of critical and social realism, for example, which are both *critical* social theories in the sense that they are concerned with social justice impacted on the way I saw my data. Management of 'theoretical positionality' is achieved through an argument for a particular theory which I provide in Chapter Two of the thesis.

The idea that the pursuit of a doctoral qualification can result in profound changes at the level of identity is not new (see, for example, Saava & Nygaard, 2021). In my case, I can only attest to the changes that resulted to my view of myself as a manager in higher education and of managers in higher education more generally.

In the study, I managed my positionality through reflexivity. As a research method, reflexivity can often be viewed with suspicion and can run the risk of being named as 'naval gazing'. In stating that 'we can modify ourselves by reflecting upon what we most care about', Archer (2003:41) claims causal powers for reflexivity. Archer insists that reflexivity should not be confused with cognitive reflective practice. Archer's views on reflexivity position it as ontology and not as epistemology. My use of reflexivity in managing my positionality is thus consonant with my theoretical framework.

This process of reflexivity, which, following Archer, I am characterising as an inner conversation with myself, was facilitated by discussion with others and through my reading of the critical scholarly literature. In reading the literature I sought constantly not only to see texts that confirmed my existing views but those which contradicted them. As I did this, I sought to deal with those contradictions through reflexivity. I used the same approach in conversations with others in which I shared my initial insights from my study.

**Conclusion**

I have sought to enhance the trustworthiness of my research through some of the methods identified in Section 5.5 above. I leave it to my readers to decide how successful I have been in doing this.

# 6 Chapter Six: The Interplay of Structure, Culture and Agency

*Much of what happens does not depend on or correspond to actors' understandings; there are unintended consequences and unacknowledged conditions, and things can happen to people regardless of their understandings* (Sayer, 1999:20).

## 6.1 Introduction

As already noted, the main research question informing the study on which this thesis was based was:

> *How do academic managers exercise their agency to monitor and promote student academic success in the context of implementing an institutional strategy on monitoring and support.*

In order to answer this question, three sub-questions were posed:

- *How do structural and cultural conditions and mechanisms enable or constrain academic managers' agency in pursuit of student academic success?*
- *What sort of practices and processes emerge from the exercise of agency?*
- *Which structures and mechanisms contribute to the sustainability of these practices?*

This chapter is structured around my responses to the three sub-questions in order to arrive at a concluding section which addresses the main question.

## 6.2 Structural and cultural conditions enabling and constraining the exercise of academic managers' agency in pursuit of student academic success

Analysis of the survey administered to institutional managers (Appendix II) provides much of the basis for my response to this question. The survey was administered to a total of 35 individuals responsible for leading and managing teaching and learning at dean, director and HoD levels. A total of 24 responses were received to the 35 surveys administered representing a response rate of approximately 68.5%.

The survey inquired into the conditions enabling and constraining the implementation of five strategies identified in the WSU Academic Monitoring and Reporting Strategy: i) the Evaluation of Teaching and Courses, ii) the provision of Binding Study Advice, iii) Tracking and

Monitoring of Student Progress, iv) Assessment for Learning and v) Programme Reviews. My first pass through the data focused on identifying mechanisms enabling and constraining the implementation of each strategy. Reiterative reading of participants' responses then sought to refine this analysis in order to see how enablers and constraints worked in conjunction with each other (that is, in critical realist terms whether there was an interplay between mechanisms) and whether some constraints and enablements confronted some groups of respondents more than others. In reading the data initially, I was working at the levels of the Empirical and the Actual in that I was identifying events and observations and experiences at the level of the Empirical. Having done this, I was able to move to abstractions at the level of the Real to identify mechanisms in interplay with each other across the entire spectrum of interventions. I report on this level of analysis in Section 6.2.6 below.

### 6.2.1 Evaluation of teaching and courses (EoT/C)

At a departmental level, a major constraint on the evaluation of teaching and courses (EoT/C) was cited as time. For example,

> *Lack of time to do such a process* (ST01)
>
> *Insufficient time available for academic staff/units to do EoT/C* (FG21).

However, HoDs also identified the interplay of time with workload and other issues related to a lack of funding and a lack of a workload allocation policy:

> *Workload of lecturers* (MJ02)
>
> *Proper policy of workload for all levels of lecturing* (STJ09)
>
> *Currently capacity is a challenge* (BA04).

Workload and the lack of a workload policy also features strongly as a constraint in the implementation of other strategies and not only in the implementation of EoT/C.

The issue of time and workload does not only appear to apply to academic staff located in departments, however, since respondents note that the Quality Management Directorate (QMD) responsible for analysing surveys administered to students, and the Centre for Teaching and Learning Development (CLTD), responsible for supporting staff in identifying interventions to address problems, were often slow in returning results:

*There is a disjuncture from when the analysis is submitted by QMD to CLTD to when interventions are undertaken, at this point one hand does not know what the other is doing about the finding* (BA04).

*Only student evaluation has been done and there is no scheduled time, staff are told to give students forms for evaluation and collect them and hand them to HoD, to hand them to QA .There is no specific time of when to collect the forms while staff were told within the said time forms stays for weeks. The results from the analysis are received following year and are coming in bit and pieces* (STJ09).

*The issue of capacity at QMD is still a challenge in terms of resources and personnel i.e. If there could be a faster and efficient system to capture and analysis data it would be much easier to prepare reports on time and start again another cycle because they consume more time more especially if they are done manually even electronically you have to export the data etc. The issue of monitoring as to how the comments raised on the evaluation are corrected and implemented by academics somehow needs to be looked at, I think by both QMD and CLTD* (NM06).

*The issue of monitoring as to how the comments raised on the evaluation are corrected and implemented by academics somehow needs to be looked at, I think by both QMD and CLTD.*

*Most Lecturers often complain that they never receive the results of their evaluation and this is discouraging and when they do nothing is done by QMD in terms of advice where there are shortfalls* (VM17)[8]*.*

However, a bigger problem was identified in a lack of training in evaluation and in the subsequent lack of understanding on the part of academic staff and HoDs of its purpose:

… *insufficient knowledge of policies and procedure on EoT/C* (MJ02)

*Staff awareness of the practice and institutional policy* (EMK18)

[8] This respondent appears to locate all the responsibility for dealing with evaluations with QMD failing to understand the role of CLTD in supporting academics in interpreting the results and identifying ways problems could be addressed.

*HoDs and lecturers non awareness of its importance. Proper management of the process* (ZB03).

*Staff not aware of the evaluation of teaching policy and what is expected of them* (MP06).

*Lack of knowledge of the policy … and poor communication from the HODs as some of the HODS don't even know the policy* (ML12).

The failure to engage with staff about the purpose of evaluation was identified as problematic in other respects, however, with some HoDs citing 'fear' on the part of academics as a reason for not implementing the strategy:

*… fear of academics to be evaluated* (ML12)

*The understanding and interpretation of the whole concept of EoT, its purpose and benefits by academics becomes a challenge, because others tend to use it in order to achieve other objectives that are unrelated to the set goals* (N16).

*Concerns that staff will see the value of EoT/C and not view EoT/C in a negative manner that are deemed to reflect their "inability" to perform their work* (FG21).

The evaluation of teaching and courses has two purposes. In the first place it serves to assure quality in that perceptions of stakeholders are elicited to identify problems and address them. However, it also has a *developmental* purpose, closely related to the first, in that, in aiming to identify poor teaching and course design it also endeavours to provide ongoing support and development for academic teachers and course designers (Hounsell, 2002). Even when a course is evaluated positively, this can be seen as an opportunity for development as it allows the academic teacher or course designer to identify what works and what does not work in the context in which they are working. Comments cited above, appear to indicate that a lack of explanation of the purposes of evaluation has led to experiences and observations of it as primarily fulfilling a 'policing' function which results in experiences of fear on the part of teachers and course designers that they may be found deficient or wanting in some way. As a result, they are reluctant to implement the strategy.

The lack of understanding of evaluation also leads to observations and experiences related to the need for 'specialists' at departmental level to do evaluations:

*No specialists within departments to perform this duty* (LC15)

Ideally, evaluation is part of 'reflective' teaching practice with individual academics seeing the need to elicit perspectives on their work from a range of stakeholders and to triangulate these perspectives in order to arrive at insights about what worked, what did not work and what could be improved (see, for example, Hounsell, 2002). From this perspective, evaluation is not conducted by 'specialists' in departments but by academic teachers as part of their everyday practice.

HoDs also cited the failure on the part of 'management' to ensure that the policies are implemented:

*Proper management of the process* (ZB03)

*Academic leadership is not very firm in ensuring that indeed academic staff ensure that their student do take the evaluation* (BA04)

*Policies are not enforced or implemented* (NT08).

One HoD cited the failure of 'management' to ensure that policies were implemented as contributing to perceptions of 'failure' on the part of those who did practice EoTC :

*Equal management to all institutional Departments to prioritise Teaching and Learning not to set other department to failure* (STJ09)

HoDs are, of course, part of the management structure at WSU and seeing the need for others higher up in the management chain to ensure that policies are implemented is indicative of their failure to exercise their own agency as social actors. Social actors, as noted in Chapter Two, accrue powers from the positions they occupy as well as those they possess as individuals.

HoDs also identified problems with the overall infrastructure at WSU as contributing to the failure to implement the EoT/C strategy. The following comment illustrates this point succinctly:

*Department always feel what the use of evaluation is when there's no support of teaching and learning infrastructure and what to evaluate if there are no proper tools to conduct what was required. Our Department Teaching and Learning equipment or*

*infrastructure has malfunctioned in ages and many years the department asked for intervention, while other institution are changing in times and improved their technology* (STJ09)

In this comment, 'teaching and learning infrastructure' relates to, for example, the provision of audio visual equipment in teaching venues as well as more common problems related to the regular maintenance of buildings and features such as electrical reticulation systems. As a HBU, WSU was never intended to have top class infrastructure although efforts on the part of the DoHET to address disparities and backlogs through the provision of infrastructure funding have been in place for some years now. However, many HBUs have, in turn, lacked the capacity to use this funding with the result that funds have remained unspent or have been misappropriated for other uses. This problem has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic with the result that the DoHET is now 'clawing back' large amounts of unspent infrastructure funding before a new round of the same kind of funding is implemented (DoHET official, pers. comm 2023).

Although the condition of teaching and learning infrastructure is important, it is erroneous to believe that EoT/C has no value as it will not result in improved facilities. One way of understanding 'good' teaching is that it takes account of the context. If the context is research poor, good teaching can involve making the most of the facilities that are available even if they are limited to chalk and a blackboard. What appears to be the case here, therefore, is that general levels of dissatisfaction with conditions on WSU campuses impact on the willingness of staff to engage with EoT/C in an attempt to enhance their work as educators.

Finally, one HoD identified the multi-campus structure of WSU as problematic since some programmes are delivered at different sites:

*Multicampus university sharing programs* (TM14).

This is a structural constraint that arguably is 'built into' the institution as a result of the mergers and incorporations resulting from the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) (DoE, 2002).

### 6.2.2 Binding study advice

The identification of constraints to the implementation of the 'binding study advice' strategy can be categorised as relating to i) students themselves and ii) failures within the institution itself.

A major observation made of students relates to their unwillingness to engage with the concept of 'binding study advice' which would require them firstly to engage in an academic advising process and, secondly, to 'contract' to obtaining a number of credits in a particular year as a result of the advice provided:

> *Students do not want to be involved. They do not adhere to the call* (#001).
>
> *We normally identify the students at risk but most of the time they do not avail themselves for any advice* (ST01).
>
> *Those student who are missing the seminars without any written apology or Dr certificate, the Supervisor sends them an email of notice and request an appointment with the person and the HoD will be copied if the student did not horned that request the second letter as email to remind the student will be issued, if second time the said student again did not honoured HoD will be asked to write a letter to the student of notice and that letter will be sent to the students parent or guardian to intervene since the Department have no control on the student with life outside the campus* (ST09).
>
> *Students who do not perform well often do not collect their scripts and seldom visit the lecturers' offices until it's too late* (VM17).

These comments about students could point to a number of other issues the first of which is students' own understandings of what learning at a university involves. The final comment quoted above relates to what might appear to be a lack of understanding of what is needed to be an 'independent' learner, an individual who takes responsibility for their own learning. At school, learners are supervised more closely by teachers and this supervision is not provided once they enter a university as an adult. A second issue could relate to the generally poor student performance at WSU with many students taking longer than the 'regulation' time to complete a qualification and with failure of at least one course occurring as a norm rather than an exception. In this context, students might not perceive the need to engage in academic advising and contract themselves to a minimum performance in terms of passing courses as dominant discourses would construct failing as a 'norm'.

The following comment from one HoD identifying what would need to be done to ensure that the binding study advice strategy was implemented confirms the analysis I have offered above:

> *Facilitating a change in mind-set, through change-management that the setting of high pass rates should be the norm, and not the exception* (FG21).

One HoD, however, noted students' fragile personal circumstances as possibly contributing to their failure to take up the opportunities offered to them in the form of academic advising:

> *The constraints are study methods used and planning skills, disappointing study results and personal circumstances such as illness, handicap, learning disorders, pregnancy, exceptional family circumstances, or membership of student organisations* (MP19).

The comment above also refers to the role of student organisations and political action in mitigating against the take up of academic advising. This point was also identified by other respondents. For example, a director of a school noted

> *In our school we prepared the list and submitted to the relevant sections. I was informed, due to lose of time due to strike … the proper intervention could not be made on time* (#002).

An HoD also noted the role of student organisations as a constraint in implementing binding study advice:

> *Political interference from the side of student organisations and SRC* (BA04).

My analysis of the constraints and enablers to the implementation of the binding study advice strategy above has identified a dominant discourse constructing failure as a 'norm'. This point is taken up in other comments made another HoD who notes, as a constraint:

> *Having too many drop outs* (NT08)

In common with comments on the EoT/C strategy, respondents to the survey also identify a lack of awareness and concomitant 'buy in' constraining implementation of the strategy:

> *Lack of communication and consultation* (MJ02)

> *The foreseeable constraints would be starting the project without marketing it to all stakeholders (including the student body), as they might look at it as a trap* (NC05).

The failure to raise awareness of the strategy could also be related to the misunderstandings identified by the following respondent who identifies the association of the strategy with exclusions:

> *Departments do not compile promotion lists which they can use to identify student progress especially during the middle of the year as they associate exclusions with the end of the year* (VM17).

As with the EoT/C strategy, participants in the survey also identified structural constraints at institutional level as impeding implementation. In particular, these relate to the ability to capture, analyse and use data at institutional levels:

> *Incorrect HEMIS data especially on credits* (RE11)
>
> *Timeous data input and automated extraction so that results are available for decision-making in real time (FG21).*
>
> *Non-use of Tracking and monitoring* (ZB03)
>
> *Effective feedback from the ITS system where all marks are captured* (LC15).

The following constraint could refer to the lack of availability of relevant data but, also, to:

> *Staff ability to identify learners at risk* (EMK18).

However, the failure to monitor implementation on the part of managers located in more senior positions in the management chain is also identified as a constraint:

> *Institutional commitment on the BSA* (ZB03).

This comment is evidence of a wider discourse related to the need for institutional 'buy in' to all of the strategies related to academic monitoring and reporting.

> *High level management support and an interest to support the monitoring process to ensure the consistent implementation by all academic unit (depts.) and faculties* (FG21).

In common with the EoT/C strategy respondents also identified a lack of resources and capacity as a reason for not implementing the strategy

*Staffing and office space* (DV22)

*Provision of adequate resources* (PJ23)

One last comment in this section relates to the comment cited above that students might look on the binding study advice strategy 'as a trap'. This is indicative of a lack of trust on the part of students and, potentially, of a lack of a 'compact' between the university and its student body related to teaching and learning. It also brings to mind comments cited in Section 6.2.1 about some people within the institution using EoT/C 'to achieve other objectives that are unrelated to the set goals' (N16) and that EoT/C will be viewed 'in a negative manner that are deemed to reflect their "inability" to perform their work' (FG21). If these comments are taken into account, the possibility of a culture of distrust extending throughout the university becomes a possibility. If this is the case, then 'distrust' could become a constraint to the implementation of strategies intended to enhance teaching and learning more generally.

### 6.2.3 Tracking and monitoring

Closely related to the implementation of the 'binding study advice' strategy is the strategy on tracking and monitoring as the provision of advice is dependent on having data available to identify students 'at risk' and where performance needs to be improved.

A major constraint identified by respondents to the survey relates to the failure of academics to assess timeously, enter marks into relevant data bases and generally 'buy in' to the need to track and monitor performance:

*When lecturers do not monitor the progress of the students from the first assessment and do not do referrals where necessary* (RE11)

*Poor response of lectures to the cut-off dates and submission of marks* (NT08)

*Lack of student identification from Academics. Late assessments that will lead to non-identification and will lead to non-interventions. Also lack of TMS from academics and HODS* (ML12)

*Willingness of lecturers to provide such information on time* (PJ23)

*Lecturers must report high risk students to their HOD'S* (MP13)

*Lack of cooperation from the department* (MP19).

One respondent did, however, note the challenge of providing timeous feedback when classes are large:

> *Due to large classes, lecturers may not be able to provide prompt feedback to students* (VM17).

In addition to noting the need for academic teachers to assess and record marks promptly, one respondent identified the need for an automated system to analyse results 'in real time'

> *Timeous data input and automated extraction so that results are available for decision-making in real time* (FG21).

This observation can be seen to be confirmed by another that notes the need for

> *Effective feedback from ITS system where all marks are captured* (LC15).

As with other strategies, respondents also identified the need for monitoring and oversight on the part of managers higher up in the management chain:

> *WSU have great policies of monitoring and evaluation those policies needed to be enforced to all staff members* (ST09).

Respondents also noted the need for more awareness of the need for tracking and monitoring and for more training to be provided:

> *Lack of training for academic staff by the concerned department/centre* (MJ02)

> *Unawareness of TMS by academic staff* (MP19).

Interestingly, one respondent alluded to what might be termed a 'combative' culture within departments as impeding the implementation of the strategy and to students being aware of and taking advantage of the fact that staff members were not working harmoniously as a team:

> *If there's no Team work within staff members and always hostile to each other and student always take advantage in those quarrels* (ST09).

This comment is reminiscent of other comments relating to a lack of trust within the institution noted at the end of Section 6.2.3.

### 6.2.4 Assessment for student learning

What is termed 'assessment for student learning' is another tool identified in the WSU Academic Monitoring and Reporting Strategy. The term 'assessment for learning' can be understood as the need for assessment to be formative, as well as summative, in that it is used to provide feedback to students on their learning which can then be used to improve it.

Key to responses to questions about constraints on the implementation of this strategy were observations about the lack of awareness on the part of academic teachers of contemporary thinking on assessment. This lack of awareness was then attributed to a lack of training:

> *Lack of proper training for academic staff and lack of co-ordination of functions of exams, academic departments and CLTD* (MJ02)
>
> *Academics still thinking of assessment as summative only (ZB030)*
>
> *Lack of assessment and moderation skills among staff Availability of local moderators (MP06)*
>
> *Most academic staff members seem to believe that they know what assessment and moderation is all about yet they seem to lack basic assessment principles. Moderation is also associated with the final exam question papers not with continuous assessment tasks* (VM17)
>
> *No standard marking procedure ( Academic staff are not trained on standard marking practices) (MP19).*

Even though the WSU Academic Monitoring and Reporting Strategy does not mention moderation, large number of respondents associated the assessment for student learning strategy with moderation, identifying lack of understanding of moderation and the lack of availability of moderators as a result.

> *The task moderators delay sometimes most of scripts came late to exams* (NV07)
>
> *Moderation is done to comply not to give effective feedback (NT08)*
>
> *Staff do not understand the meaning of moderation. Staff compromise the purpose of moderation because of ignorance and lack of experience. Moderation is done to comply not to give effective feedback* (ST09).

*Make it mandatory for all DEPT to have Internal and External moderator* (MP13)

*Availability of suitably qualified external moderators*
*Unwillingness by suitably qualified academics to be external moderators because of the amount of work and too little compensation. (Currently all the scripts are send to external moderators and sometimes the numbers are too big and moderator end up moderating hundreds of scripts)*
*Some of the Internal moderators are not adequately trained to do moderation* (MP19).

One respondent noted the multi campus nature of WSU and the fact that programmes are offered on multiple sites as a constraint:

*Scattered sites resulting in delays in moderation*

*Transporting scripts to other sites* (TM14).

Moderation is related to validity and reliability in assessment and is thus important to quality. However, the failure of respondents to appreciate the notion of 'assessment for learning' in the sense of providing developmental feedback is a matter of concern and points to the lack of awareness of assessment principles identified by some respondents to the survey.

### 6.2.5 Programme review (PR)

In many respects, programme reviews reflect academic monitoring and reporting at a superordinate level. Programme reviews are often used as a means of ensuring and enhancing quality and are, of course, a form of monitoring and reporting.

In common with other strategies, respondents to the survey cite lack of awareness of the concept of the programme review and the processes associated with it.

One director points to a:

*Lack of knowledge and understanding of what needs to be done*

with the result that

*Staff members do not keep proper portfolios of evidence, that is, no proper filing of relevant documents (#001).*

In a similar vein, HoDs note a

*Lack of information on Programme Reviews i.e. how and when it should be done? What is the role of academic staff in it?* (MJ02)

and

*Departmental unawareness of the significance of the process* (ZB03).

HoDs identify other constraints on the implementation of programme reviews including the fact that

*Staff members do not take this process seriously* (MJ02)

and a

*Resistance to change*

which is accompanied by the

*Creation of comfort zone/environment (NT08).*

Yet another constraint is identified in the amount of support for programme review available from the QPD and the CLTD and other institutional units. One director noted the need for

*Faculty specific QA & L&T personnel appointed to work closely with programme managers, with this specific job function as KPA* (#002).

Others noted the need for

*Support and guidance from PR expert* (MP19)

*Well trained staff that understands the requirement of programme accreditation and conducting PR* (FG21)

and

*Appointments of staff to perform programme reviews* (MP06).

One respondent specifically noted the need for a management and information system that would allow for the provision of information on which to base programme reviews. This constraint affirmed calls for better institutional data to be made available for the implementation of other strategies:

*An efficient MIS to enable easy input and automated extraction of results necessary as part of the PR process* (FG21).

Respondents also identify constraints in the form of cost and a lack of time and capacity to conduct programme reviews:

*Running a review is also expensive and is very heavy on budget* (BA04)

*Budget becomes a challenge because QMD will prepare a budget at the end of each year but the approved one doesn't accommodate our planned schedule of reviews and we end up reviewing few programmes* (MN16)

*Capacity of the Faculties* (ZB03)

*Capacity to do that, not enough people/time to do it* (PJ23).

One final set of observations were indicative of the belief that programme reviews (and indeed audits) were for 'window dressing' purposes only in that they did not serve to address deep seated problems in the institution, particularly those related to the infrastructure and conditions in which staff were expected to work:

*Management need to take recommendations made very seriously so that departments will not perceive PR as a futile exercise and a waste of time* (BA04)

*When there was an institutional audit some part of the department building where hidden to the audits by members of the management who were accompanied them and that was wrong to us as staff. They painted a wrong image to the audits* (STJ09)

These comments point to observations identifying an apparent lack of will on the part of senior managers to implement recommendations emerging from programme reviews which arguably was also identifiable in responses to the implementation of other strategies discussed above.

### 6.2.6 Moving to the level of the Real

As I have already pointed out, the analysis presented thus far in this chapter draws on empirical data in the form of responses to a survey administered to deans, directors and HoDs. The survey captured their observations and experiences of constraints to the implementation of the WSU Academic Monitoring and Reporting Strategy (Appendix I) and

the analysis I have offered above is of these observations and experiences which, in critical realist terms, are located at the level of the Empirical. To some extent, my analysis has also identified some events, located at the level of the Actual. An example of an event is a respondent noting that, during the visit of an audit panel, members of the management team accompanying the panel prevented them from visiting some parts of the building. The noting of this event is understood to be relative. The individual accounting the event does so from their perspective.

My task now is to move from the relativity of observations and experiences located at the level of the Empirical and events at the level of the Actual to Bhaskar's deepest layer of reality, the Real. In order to do this, I need to identify mechanisms, and the interplay between them that led to the emergence of events at the level of the Actual and of experiences and observations at the level of the Real. In keeping with Archer's (1995, 1996) understanding of 'analytical dualism' which requires the artificial separation of culture structure and agency for analytical purposes only, I deal with mechanisms in each domain separately whilst acknowledging that they work together to lead to emergence at the levels of the Actual and the Empirical.

Until now, my analysis has drawn on responses to the survey administered to deans, directors and HoDs. My discussion below will also draw on other data I collected including reports to Senate on the implementation of the WSU Academic Monitoring and Reporting Strategy.

## 6.3 The domain of culture

As my understanding is that the domain of culture is constituted discursively, my analysis of this domain takes the form of a critical discourse analysis where I identify and deconstruct discourses in the data.

### 6.3.1 The discourse of the deficient student

Given observations of the dominance of this discourse elsewhere in the literature (see, for example, Boughey & McKenna, 2021) , it is not surprising that it is also drawn upon by deans, directors and HoDs in explaining constraints to the implementation of some of the strategies in the WSU Academic Monitoring and Reporting Strategy. Section 6.2.2 above provides some examples of this discourse in the survey data but will add more in my discussion in this section.

Some of the areas that have been most problematised in the literature are language, and more specifically, the use of English as the language of teaching and learning and reading and writing (see, for example Boughey, 2002, 2013; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Dominant understandings of language is that it functions as a vehicle for the communication of ideas that exist independently of it and which must be 'encoded' into language in order to be transmitted (Christie, 1985). The need to use English, an additional language for the majority, then has serious implications. The lack of command of its formal features such as grammar and spelling, means that the process of communication is not efficient. Christie (1985) posits an alternative understanding of language, however, in her argument that it functions as a resource to make meanings. The kinds of language a student has mastered, will therefore impact on the kinds of meanings that can be communicated. Most students master the use of language (either their home or an additional language) to communicate everyday, common sense understandings of the world around them, using what Bernstein (2000) refers to as 'horizontal discourse', but need to develop the language necessary to make the meanings associated with academic learning (Bernstein's vertical discourse) through engagement with that learning itself. All this supposes a role for specialists in the disciplines in the development of students' proficiency in academic language use as Jacobs (2007, 2009) points out (see, also, Boughey, 2013, Boughey & McKenna, 2021). The following observation made by a dean in a Dean'Report submitted as part of the Strategy on Academic Monitoring and Support processes is illustrative of this discourse in its attempt to account for poor student performance by citing students' lack of

> *[u]nderstanding of new technical terms used in the above mentioned subjects, basic understand of language of communication*

In a similar vein, a department accounts for poor performance in a course by noting that

> *The course is descriptive and requires a good command of the English language. Due to their schooling backgrounds some students have poor language skills.*

Related to the subject of language are reading and writing. Deans' Reports note students' 'lack of reading habit'. Theory in the form of Street's (1984) 'ideological model' of literacy sees literacy as a set of socially embedded practices developed as a result of immersion in different social contexts. The Dean's observation of students' 'lack of reading habit' does

make sense in the context of this theory. What it appears to assume, however, is that the development of a 'reading habit' is neutral and is not dependent on the contexts in which students were raised and are now immersed. Prinsloo & Breier (1996) explore reading practices in a range of communities in South Africa and show how a willingness to engage with printed texts is not common in the context of a preference for oral forms of engagement. For a dean who was brought up in a household where other members read and where books were available, the development of a 'reading habit' may seem natural. For students raised in impoverished households where oral communication predominated this is not necessarily the case.

What appears to be happening, therefore, in the 'deficient student' discourse is that learning is constructed as neutral and autonomous of context (see, also, Boughey & McKenna's (2021) 'model of the student as a decontextualised learner').

Yet another facet of the 'deficiency discourse' relates to the alleged failure of schools to prepare students for learning in higher education. While the dysfunction of many parts of the South African schooling system, and more specifically of state funded schools such as the lower quintile schools many of the students at WSU will have attended, cannot be denied, there is also an abundance of work which shows that learning at school is different to learning in higher education. Geisler (1994), for example, points to the way tasks required of learners in schools are qualitatively different to those in higher education in that they draw on understandings of knowledge as undisputed fact rather than as constantly evolving. The idea that schools afford learners the preparation necessary to succeed in higher education is also questioned by the observation that, drawing on global data, the single greatest indicator of a young person's ability to access and succeed in higher education is the nature of the home of origin with the children of middle class educated caregivers enjoying more access and success than any other group (see, for example, Bathmaker et al, 2016; Guinier, 2007; Mettler, 2005, 2014). Ethnographic research (see, for example, Heath, 1983; Armstrong, 2019) showing why this is the case as a result of identification of the way some caregivers not only prepare their children for learning in school but also extend that learning as they proceed in education. Nonetheless, the idea that schools can and should prepare learners for higher education was expressed in the reports examined. One dean cites '[l]ack of basic knowledge that is obtained at school together with incorrect conceptualisation' as a reason for poor performance and

another notes that '[t]here are students who are not properly educated'. The concept of 'under preparedness' is also noted:

> *Under preparedness of the learners coming from Grade 12 will always be a factor until the gap between the universities is addressed sufficiently.*

Another comment notes that students lack 'insight and logical thinking' although this is not directly attributed to schooling. It is worth noting here that what counts as 'insight' and 'logical thinking' in higher education is not a generic skill but is rather related to the understandings of the disciplines, the kind of knowledge they value and the means of producing it.

As Boughey (2007, 2012) points out, early academic development work focused on teaching generic 'academic skills' in stand-alone courses and classes. Over time, the very concept of these 'skills' came to be questioned as theorists came to understand that what students needed to develop were sets of practices related to knowledge making in the disciplines. Morrow's (1993) claim that students needed to be provided with 'epistemological access', or access to values about what could count as knowledge and how it can be known, in addition to formal access to courses and programmes if they were to be successful was then cited as the basis of a great deal of work which looked into the disciplines more carefully (see, for example, Reynolds, 2010). Decades later, this work now tends to draw on the work of Maton (2014) who provides a set of tools in the form of 'Legitimation Code Theory' that allows researchers to understand what is 'legitimated' in different knowledge areas and courses and, therefore, what students need to understand if they are to be successful (see, for example, Winberg, McKenna & Wilmot, 2021).

The realisation that what students needed was understandings of what can count as knowledge in different disciplinary areas and of what they needed to do to engage with it led to calls for academic development activities to be 'integrated' into mainstream teaching and learning and acknowledgement of the centrality of mainstream academic teachers to this process.

As already indicated in Chapter Four, WSU draws on an 'integrated' approach to academic development where student, staff and curriculum development are all integrated into a coherent whole. This means that students' needs have to be considered in relation to other

conditions at play in the institution and that the parts are all understood to contribute to the whole. At an organisational level, this approach requires strong collaboration between different units and entities responsible for academic success.

The dominance of the 'deficient student' discourse noted above illuminates i) an overall failure to appreciate the approach to academic development taken at institutional level and/or ii) a failure to engage with the underpinned ideas pertaining to the need to take a 'whole institution' approach to success. The failure to appreciate the approach to academic development taken at WSU, as well as the ideas underpinning it evident in the analysis above, is indicative of contradictions in the cultural system. Archer (1996:171) notes that such contradictions tend to create

> *[p]roblem ridden situations for actors which they must confront when they realise, or are made to acknowledge, that the proposition(s) they endorse are enmeshed in some inconsistency.*

The problem appears to be that the social actors involved in monitoring have not been made to confront the inconsistencies in the system.

### 6.3.2 The discourse of 'referring on'

As already indicated, the model of academic development and support at WSU is 'integrated' in that it sees entities and units, agents and groups of corporate agents, working together to promote student academic success. This requires all involved in the system to take responsibility and to exercise agency in order to promote success.

Apparent in the reporting against the WSU Monitoring Strategy is what I have termed for the purposes of my analysis a discourse of 'referring on'. The following comment in one of the reports is indicative of this discourse

> *Student Affairs also need to be requested to help with students who have been identified and having social problems.*

The following comment also draws on this discourse

*Lecturers have been requested to monitor the attendance of lectures and note any peculiar behaviour of students and refer to student affairs.*

As noted earlier in this thesis, the majority of students enrolled at WSU come from poor, working class backgrounds. Given the history of South Africa, the vast majority of these students could be understood as experiencing 'social problems' related to the effects of poverty and the impact of apartheid and other social structures on families and communities. An integrated approach to student success would involve acknowledging that the majority experienced 'social problems' and adapting teaching and curriculum design to accommodate those problems as far as possible. In the Reports, the dominant discourse appears to be that much of what emerges because of students' backgrounds can be 'referred on'.

Another Report identifies a strategy to be followed in order to enhance success as '[s]eek assistance with academic writing from the LTD writing Centre'. As already indicated in Section 6.6.1, contemporary literacy theory (Street, 1984) sees literacy as a set of socially embedded practices and not a set of neutral skills. The forms of academic writing are thus seen to emerge from values and attitudes towards what can count as knowledge and how it can be known in different knowledge areas and are not generic. Boughey & McKenna (2021) identify the use of the passive in 'scientific' writing as an example of this phenomenon. In Western science, knowledge is understood to exist independently of human thought and action and, thus, as needing to be discovered through objective study. A statement such as '5mls of the solution were titrated' describing an experiment hides human agency and, thus, the possibility of introducing human error or bias in discovering knowledge. In contrast, the statement 'I titrated 5mls of the solution' does exactly the opposite. Understandings of writing as sets of socially embedded practices have led to calls for writing development to be embedded in mainstream teaching and for academic teachers to be involved in supporting their students' writing development (Jacobs, 2007, 2009). While entities such as writing centres can play a role in writing development, their existence does not eradicate the need for academic teachers to consider the roles they could play. At the level of the curriculum, this might include considering the kinds and number of writing opportunities offered to students and the kind of feedback that it offered in relation to them. The discourse of 'referring on' arguably dismisses these kinds of suggestions. Rather, the solution to poor writing is seen to be the responsibility of an entity outside the faculty or department.

In spite of this, some comments in the reports were indicative of an understanding of the role mainstream departments and academic teachers could play. One strategy identified in order to promote success was the use of '[m]ore formative assessments to diagnose understanding of concepts of students' and another the fact that students would be given 'more research type questions to encourage use of textbooks and other reference material from the Resource Centre'. Without more in-depth research it is not possible to explain why some agents were able to identify pedagogical strategies that would involve doing things differently. It could be the case that those identifying such strategies had engaged with some form of staff development. Nonetheless, they were not common in the face of dominant 'referring on' approaches.

### 6.3.3 The adjunct academic support discourse

My discussion of the 'deficient student' discourse noted that early academic support initiatives focused on the provision of additional classes and tutorials that were 'adjunct' to the mainstream curriculum. As Boughey (2007, 2012) points out, these practices were challenged from the mid 1980s onwards by challenges arguing that, in the context of a new democratic order, the composition of the student body would be such that 'under preparedness' would be a majority, rather than a minority, phenomenon and that, as a result, widescale institutional change would be needed (Vilakazi & Tema, 1985; Mehl, 1988). The focus of academic development therefore shifted to encompass institutional development including staff and curriculum development.

Evident in the data is a strong discourse which still constructs student development and support as 'adjunct' to mainstream teaching and learning. Embedded in this discourse, is the idea that the teaching approaches and curriculum design in mainstream courses is unproblematic and that it is students who need to be 'developed'. The 'adjunct academic support' discourse is therefore in interplay with the 'deficient student' discourse identified above.

The 'adjunct academic support' discourse draws on initiatives such as Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) and tutorial systems as means of addressing problems identified as a result of academic monitoring. The following strategies are typical in the way they draw on the discourse:

*Continued use of PAL leaders or student tutors to divide students into smaller groups and give individual attention*

*Student tutors or PAL leaders will be used to explain these concepts to students.*
*The use of Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) and Tutoring <u>will be made compulsory</u> in all high failure subjects/learning areas.*

The discourse is also often drawn upon in references to the use of academic monitoring:

*If these students are identified early, they can be given extra work and questions to assist in understanding questions and answering techniques.*

As a result of this, and other discourses, and as will be pointed out repeatedly in this Chapter, there is no focus on the use of the monitoring strategy to identify problems that are 'bigger' than the student and which exist in the design of the curriculum and approaches to teaching.

### 6.3.4 The 'forcing attendance' discourse

Related to the discourse of the deficient student is another which I have termed the 'forcing attendance' discourse. The data analysed is replete with comments related to the fact that students frequently miss classes and fail to avail themselves of support and development opportunities in the form of, for example, academic advising . The reasons for this could well be related to structural conditions explored in Section 6.7.1 below. Students may live off campus and have difficulty in getting to class (possibly because they do not have taxi fare) or they may be doing some sort of work to earn the money that will allow them to study. Although (and as I will show below) there is acknowledgement of the structural conditions in which students live and study in the data, there is also evidence of a discourse constructing an appropriate approach to the problem of non-attendance. This discourse centres on the idea that attendance needs to be 'forced'. The following comment from a report providing a reason for poor attendance in 'normal' classes is indicative of a belief that students will attend classes in which tests or some other form of assessment is scheduled:

*... students tend to stay away from attending classes when there are tests in other subjects.*

The belief that students will attend classes in which assessment is scheduled then leads to strategies intended to enhance attendance such as the following:

*Assessment questions will be arranged during tutorial sections to increase attendance.*

The 'forcing attendance' discourse effectively elides the need to consider either the structural conditions which lead students to miss classes or the need to think about the way students' own perceptions of the value of the classes impacts on decisions to attend or not. If a class is simply presenting 'information' that can be obtained from other sources (in that, for example, it focuses on a PowerPoint presentation which is later made available to students) then doubts may arise about the value of attending in the context of other demands. The same would apply to a class where a lecturer relies heavily on handouts or a text book. If, on the other hand, classes were designed in order to engage students in some way and which were then perceived as adding value to learning, then attendance might improve without the need for any incentives other than the teaching approach.

The 'forcing attendance' discourse also negates the idea that teaching (as the 'how' of curriculum, see Section 6.7.2 below) could or should change and affirms the idea that the teaching and learning offered at WSU is not a problem, rather it is the students who are 'a problem'. The 'forcing attendance' discourse thus functions as a mechanism in interplay with the 'deficient student' discourse.

The discourses I have identified in Sections 6.3 all relate to students and the integrated approach to Academic Development adopted at WSU. The aim of the WSU Academic Monitoring and Reporting Strategy was to use monitoring and reporting as a lever to push the institution towards an integrated approach to Academic Development. Although agents comply with reporting their experiences and observations about what needs to be done these emerge from the interplay of problematic discourses with other mechanisms. In strict terms, the agents are implementing monitoring and reporting but not in the way intended in the Strategy.

The next sections of my analysis of the domain of culture look at a discourse which constructs the agency of deans, directors and HoDs and, thus, which constrain implementation of the strategy in some way.

### 6.3.5 I'm not 'management'

Evident in the data, and particularly in responses to the survey, is a discourse that privileges the role of more senior members of the management structure at WSU in 'making things happen'. Survey data as well as that contained in reports submitted to Senate refers frequently for the need for more senior members of the management chain to implement policy. The following comment made in response to the survey (already cited in Section 6.3.1 above) is indicative of this discourse:

> *Academic leadership is not very firm in ensuring that indeed academic staff ensure that their student do take the evaluation* (BA04).

Deans, directors and HoDs *are* academic managers. They are appointed to lead and manage faculties, centres and departments. They are distinct from those appointed to manage at institutional levels but they are, nonetheless, managers responsible for specific entities. What I have termed the 'I'm not a manager' discourse absolves those appointed at lower levels of the academic management hierarchy from exercising their agency to implement policies. Rather the tendency is to 'look upwards' for action.

This discourse is understandable in the context of the introduction of New Public Management (NPM) to higher education (Sections 3.3.1) which sees those with 'executive powers' appointed to positions historically held by academics. At WSU, where positions in the Vice Chancellorate and Deanery are all 'executive' positions in the sense that post holders were appointed on the basis of their ability to manage, the 'I'm not a manager' discourse is understandable at HoD level. Nonetheless, HoDs and directors are also appointed to manage and lead academic departments and schools. What appears to be the case, therefore, is that management structures and this discourse are working to constrain the exercise of agency on the part of those appointed at this level.

Although managers located lower down in the management chain tended to apportion responsibility for the implementation of the policy to those occupying positions higher up, it was, nonetheless, possible to designate responsibility in the opposite direction. The following comments from deans, for example, note the importance of HoDs and members of the academic staff:

*[T]he participation of the HoD is crucial*

*I requested the Heads of Departments and staff members to attend teaching and learning workshops to be aware of the latest developments in the academic world and study further.*

*Not much attention is given on ensuring that they have been affected. I believe that if faculties and departments could place more emphasis on tracking and monitoring students' performance, it would be easy to predict the results.*

*Lecturers are informed about the importance of tracking and monitoring.*

*Assessment results are not submitted on time to capture it on the system. Monthly reports indicate that the process of tracking and monitoring student progress is not done on a consistent basis.*

However, 'informing' or 'requesting' colleagues to do something in relation to the strategy is arguably not the same as ensuring that it is implemented. At all levels, dominant discourses appear to privilege the location of responsibility to exercise agency to implement the strategy elsewhere.

## 6.4 The domain of structure

For the purposes of this study, 'structures' are understood to distribute access to the 'goods' of the world whether material or ideational. It was possible to identify the role of structure in much of the data I analysed.

### 6.4.1 Funding

A structure firmly identifiable in the data is in the funding of higher education.

The socio-economic backgrounds of most students at WSU meant that the payment of fees is a perennial problem. Even though many students are supported by the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), funding is related to success. Students who do not complete a minimum number of credits each year can lose funding. In addition, funding is only available for the 'regulation time' of each programme '+1'. This means that, for a 360 credit qualification calculated to require three years of study, funding is available for a maximum of

four years (or, in technical terms, 'n+1' where 'n' refers to regulation time[9]. This means that any students needing to study beyond the maximum 'n+1' years is not funded by the scheme. Such students usually try to remain in the system and, in order to do so, will often participate in protests and strikes at the start of each academic year calling for registration and minimal initial tuition fee payments to be waived. Strikes and protests result in a loss of teaching time and, thus, pressure on the rest of the time available to complete the curriculum. Reports cited the impact of strikes and protests on teaching time as reasons for poor performance noting the '[t]ime loss due to strikes and the consequent pressure both on students and staff' and the fact that '[t]he strike on fees had a disruptive effect on the studies'.

What would appear to be the case, therefore, is that structural issues of a major scale are seen to impact on the ability to enhance success. While the issue of student funding cannot be ignored, it is also the case that, over time, something of a 'culture' of disruption has developed at the university. Expectations are that the beginning of each year will witness a strike or protest and student bodies such as the Student Representative Council or various political parties (in Archer's terms groups of corporate agents) are then able to draw on discourses related to students' poverty and the failure to address their inability to pay fees at institutional and national levels to cause protests and strikes. Mechanisms in both the structural and cultural systems thus work to impact on the time available for learning. If students themselves perceive the time available to learn as insufficient, a second round of protests and strikes can then result as the mid-year examinations approach further exacerbating the problems already experienced.

The following extracts from reports submitted to Senate to monitor and report performance identify protest action on the part of students as a reason for poor performance in courses:

> *The strike on fees had a disruptive effect on the studies.*
>
> *The 'Fees Must Fall' strike took students out of study mode for some time, and some students were not even sure the exams would be written this year.*

[9] NSFAS funding was once available for 'n+2' years. Changes as a result of the national protests about fees in 2015 and 2016 led to the scheme being expanded in order to fund more students but the maximum number of years eligible for funding was reduced.

In attempting to monitor academic success, detect problems and identify the strategies necessary to address them, social actors occupying dean and HoD positions at WSU identify these widespread structural level issues and cite them as reasons for poor performance. What is not evident in the reports is any reflection on the way the vicious cycles of poor performance due to structures such as funding could be addressed. Rather, agents appear to draw on a discourse of 'this is simply as it is' in their reporting.

The lack of funding for study can also be seen to underpin other reasons given for poor performance. For example, one report comments that

> *A lack of adequate accommodation facilities has also been noted as a cause of high numbers of exclusion*

Although WSU does have some residence accommodation available to students, poor management has resulted in it not being used as efficiently as it might. Students 'lingering' in the system (CHE, 2011:23) who have access to a residence room means that space is not available for incoming students. In addition, a failure to manage accommodation means that it is sometimes occupied by individuals who are not even studying at the university. In addition, the increase in student numbers overall has led to an insufficient number of residence spaces being available, a phenomenon that is not only apparent at WSU but at other universities in the South African system as well, and which has led to the provision of infrastructure funding for the building of residences being made available by the DoHET. If students are not able to access a residence room, then they are forced to seek accommodation off campus which is often of a very poor quality.

The lack of funding also underpins other problems identified by social actors such as an inability to purchase books with one comment noting '[m]ost students do not have textbooks, they rely on handouts issued by lecturers'. While access to books is a problem, this needs to be seen in relation to other pedagogical issues in the system. If literacy is understood as a set of socially embedded practices (Street, 1984) then it is likely that the practice of relying on handouts is indeed 'embedded' in the system and that, even if books were available, students would still prefer the condensed form of a handout as a 'source of information'. This points to an even bigger problem overall in the form of students' understandings of what it means to learn in higher education, understandings which often centre on rote learning and

repetition. If these are not challenged through pedagogy and assessment, then students will continue to prefer to engage with condensed texts that they can learn more easily than with texts in the form of books and journal articles which require them to engage with an array of ideas and take up a position in relation to them.

What appears to be the case, therefore, is that the complex cultural and structural system of WSU is reduced to the identification of a lack of money as a problem which leads to other problems which then impact on learning. Instead of trying to tease apart the structural and cultural system and analyse it in relation to the course and modules for which they are responsible to identify strategies that they could adopt, individuals writing the reports instead exercise their agency by citing a structure such as funding as a reason for the poor performance and, thus, their inability to act.

### 6.4.2 The multi campus nature of WSU

As already discussed earlier in this thesis, the institution of WSU was the result of the series of mergers and incorporations of the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) (DoE, 2002). The university is spread over four campuses located in Mthatha, Butterworth, East London and Komani. Mthatha, the location of the main campus, is approximately 225 kilometres away from East London and Butterworth is 120 kilometres from Mthatha which is just over 100 kilometres from East London located on the N2 highway which links the three locations. Komani (Queenstown) is about 225 kilometres northwest of Mthatha. As also noted, WSU was established as a comprehensive university offering a mix of vocational and academic programmes. Some programmes are delivered at more than one campus which means that staff teaching on them may be resident in different locations. The complexity of the institutional structure is identified as a constraint in implementing the WSU Academic and Monitoring Strategy with individuals noting, for example, that 'scattered' sites mean that examination scripts have to be transported over fairly large distances (TM14). The multicampus nature of the University would also be expected to compound difficulties in staff getting together to, for example, discuss assessment for student learning strategies or to discuss changes to course and programme design that consider conditions on different campuses. The provision of support by units such as the QPD and the CLTD is also complicated by the fact that these entities are not equally represented on all sites and specialists might have to travel to other locations to offer advice. This could account for some of the

observations related to the lack of training and support offered to academics in relation to the Monitoring and Reporting Strategy.

Tracking and monitoring needs to be an institutional wide strategy and clearly the multi-campus structure of WSU functions as a constraint in developing shared practices (understood as events at the level of the Actual) and shared experiences at the level of the Empirical.

### 6.4.3 Social group/class

As Cooper (2015) points out, social class has emerged as structure impacting on who enrols at which university with the historically black institutions remaining the main option for black working-class students, especially those from rural backgrounds. The merger of institutions that were brought together to form WSU in 2002, has already been described (Section 4.2) as a 'marriage of the poor' given that all constituent institutions were established for black South Africans. The role of social class in conditioning who is best able to access and succeed in higher education has been discussed in Section 6.3.1 and the role of the home of origin in preparing learners for school and extending their learning with in it (Heath, 1983; Armstrong, 2019) has been noted. As a result, it is possible to identify social class at a structure which, in interplay with other mechanisms at the level of the Real leads to some of the experiences and events identified as constraints in the sections above. Social class can also be seen to contribute to some of students' learning practices and experiences of learning as they have not been socialised into understanding learning at university in ways that would serve them well. Ills associated with poverty and the despair that comes with it can also be seen to contribute to student behaviour with one respondent to the survey noting that a major constraint to the implementation of the Academic Monitoring and Reporting Strategy which involves referring students to support and development initiatives is:

> *student lifestyle that is changing year by year, many students are exposed to alcohol and drugs, that alone is becoming a burden to the lecturer of student absenteeism and failure* (ST09).

### 6.4.4 The curriculum

The curriculum, broadly defined as the 'what', 'how', 'when' and 'who' of teaching in the sense that it not only addresses questions of what is taught but also how and when teaching takes place and who the teaching addresses, functions as a structure to distribute access to knowledge and knowing. While social actors at WSU might not have been able to exercise their agency to bring about changes to national funding, the curriculum is in their control. Bernstein's (2000) construct of the 'pedagogic device' explains how knowledge is converted into pedagogic communication through a series of rules. In order to do this, he identifies three hierarchically related fields, the field of production, the field of recontextualization and the field of reproduction, each of which is governed by its own set of rules. The field of production is where knowledge is produced. The field of recontextualization allows for the selection of knowledge to be taught. Typically the field of recontextualization comprises ministries and other bodies responsible for developing school curricula. In universities recontextualization takes place in departments (which identify knowledge to be included in curricula for which they are responsible) although it can also be the domain of individuals responsible for a particular course. The field of reproduction then refers to the process of converting knowledge selected for inclusion in a curriculum into pedagogic discourse and practice.

Social actors such as deans and HoDs are able to exercise their agency in at least two of these fields and, if they are active researchers, in all three. As active researchers they will contribute to the production of knowledge in the field of production. As institutional managers they are responsible for the selection of knowledge to be included in courses and modules and, more generally in programmes. This process involves looking at the boundaries between subjects and the sequencing and pacing of the presentation of knowledge. Even if HoDs and deans are not responsible for the actual processes of selection in terms of developing a curriculum outline, they are responsible for oversight of it and for ensuring that proposed programmes and courses are subject to the scrutiny of academic peers. HoDs also bear responsibility for pedagogical decisions, for the conversion of knowledge into pedagogic discourse and practice as a result of the need to oversee the quality of teaching and curriculum design using tools such as reviews and evaluations.

Although the curriculum is a structure over which institutional managers do have some control (in Archerian terms the powers and properties derived from the roles they occupy allow for this) the reports indicate that these powers are not exercised. This is in spite of the fact that the exercise of powers in relation to the curriculum would also allow for powers to be exercised in relation to other structural and cultural mechanisms.

A simple example will serve to illustrate this point. The identification of funding as a structure that impacts on student performance has already been noted. More specifically, the fact that funding issues frequently result in strikes and protests at the beginning of each academic year has been observed. If the start of teaching is delayed nearly every year, why is it not possible to make adjustments to the curriculum to accommodate this? The curriculum has been described as the 'what', 'how', 'when' and 'who' of teaching. If the number of weeks available for teaching is reduced just about every year, is it not possible to review curriculum content in order to identify what is essential and what is not? In a similar fashion, is it not possible to look at the 'how' and 'when' of teaching by, for example, developing learning materials (available either in hard copy or online) which explain content, theories, principles and so on in a scaffolded manner and for the contact teaching time that is available to be used for engagement around this content? Looking at the 'what', 'when' and 'how' of teaching would effectively address the 'who' since the curriculum would then be more responsive to poor working class students enrolled at an institution where strikes and protests were common.

Ironically, the Reports do identify elements of the curriculum as a problem. One report notes, for example, '[t]he volume of work of to be covered in some of the poorly performing subjects'. If managers can identify the amount of content as a potential problem in subjects where students do perform particularly poorly, why is ongoing curriculum review, initiated at department and faculty levels, not a strategy? Curriculum review does take place as a result of quality assurance procedures. It is not identified as a strategy by agents who are being asked to monitor academic success.

Another comment notes that

> *S3 Level subjects: Thermodynamics remains a challenging subject. The majority of the students were doing this course for the second time or more.*

If it is indeed the case that thermodynamics challenges most students, why has no research to investigate the reasons for this been instigated? Why has the structure of the course, the sequencing and pacing of knowledge and of the learning required, not been explored? One possibility would have been to identify Thermodynamics as either an 'extended course' (i.e. a course where the amount of time devoted to it is doubled) or as an 'augmented course' (i.e., a course where additional sessions are built into the course attendance which is a requirement) in terms of the Foundational Provisioning made available by the Department of Higher Education and Training (see CHE, 2021 for further explanation).

Instead of exercising agency to initiate such an exploration, social actors simply cite the 'challenging' nature of the subject. As they do this, they do, of course, construct themselves as subject to the control of disciplinary knowledge even though many would also agree with calls for curricula to be decolonised. Yet another comment notes of a particular course where

> *The pass rate is still not acceptable, the HOD and the staff will need to put their hands together to work out a lasting solution to this problem*

In this comment it is possible to see a reluctance on behalf of the Dean to take up the agency he can exercise by working with the HoD and staff to instigate a curriculum review.

What appears to be happening, therefore, is that managers comply with monitoring procedures in that they comply with their requirements but the compliance is not meaningful. Once again it is a case of a focus on the means (monitoring and reporting) rather than the ends (to effect improvement and enhance the chances of success of poor black working class students).

### 6.4.5 Teaching and learning infrastructure

Like other contemporary universities, WSU has developed an infrastructure intended to support teaching and learning. This infrastructure encompasses the use of information technology in the form of a learning management system (LMS) (WiSeUp) and associated platforms for the programme management. As already noted, Archer is insistent that mechanisms located at the level of the Real are inactive unless drawn upon by agents. The availability of an infrastructure to support teaching and learning therefore cannot contribute to the emergence of events (which, in the context of the academic monitoring system would

include more students passing courses and graduating) and experiences of those events unless agents are prepared to act.

The reports analysed for the purposes of this study indicate some frustration with the failure on the part of WSU staff to use the tools at their disposal to allow for the swift identification of students who are experiencing problems. Consider, for example, the following extract from a tracking and management report produced on the Butterworth Campus in March 2016 (WSU, 2016b).

> *ITS, HEDA and WiSeUp are the recognized WSU Management Information Systems which are to be fully integrated for the successful implementation of student tracking and monitoring. Since information regarding at risk students is normally received late from academic departments due to late or no captured marks on WiSeUp, the integration will fast track the TMS process as the marks are uploaded on ITS. Late submission of marks on WiSeUp posed a big threat to the early intervention* (WSU, 2016b).

The IT infrastructure relies on the exercise of corporate agency in the form of a number of entities in the university including the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS[10]) Department as well as academic departments and faculties. In relation to academic monitoring, it also relies on the agency of individuals such as lecturers (who need to mark tests and assignments timeously) and of secretaries who are responsible for loading marks onto the various systems. The data examined in order to conduct this study indicates a lack of co-ordination to the extent to which agents, both individual and corporate, work with the infrastructure itself. For example, the same report produced on the Butterworth campus in March 2016 notes:

> *Currently the TMS depends on the ITS system to extract data/marks which are captured by secretaries. They also capture them on WiSeUp as per the training. Two useful tools on WiSeUp such as Grade Centre and Retention Centre are assisting in getting such information and students have access to WiSeUp to view also their*

[10] HEMIS is the system used by the national Department of Higher Education Training to manage data from the higher education system.

> *performance. The AMP team has been trained on how to use HEDA to enhance TMS but still experiencing challenges on getting the correct data from HEMIS department, as we depend on them to extract the fields we require for TMS from their ITS people* (WSU, 2016b).

and

> *Accessibility of data from the faculties presented was still a challenge. Moreover test/task performance rates data obtained from HEDA or departmental secretaries does not reflect number of students enrolled, number wrote, number failed/ and number passed. This information is important to expose any trends in students' performance'* (WSU, 2016b)

The matter of the exercise of agency will be discussed further in the following section.

## 6.5 The exercise of agency

Until now, this chapter has focused on the structural and cultural mechanisms at the level of the Real on which social actors occupying positions as HoDs and deans at WSU draw as they comply with the need to engage with academic monitoring and reporting. In this section I move to look at the exercise of agency more closely.

The discourse of 'referring on' has already been noted earlier in this Chapter in relation to the cultural system and constructions of what it means to offer integrated academic development. In this section, some of the ideas in the discourse of 'referring on' are taken up again, this time in relation to the apparent reluctance of social actors to exercise their agency in relation to matters pertaining to teaching and learning.

The Improvement Plans submitted as part of the WSU Strategy for Academic Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development are particularly illuminating in this regard. Comments made in the Improvement Plan for one faculty on the Buffalo City Campus note that:

> *Faculty has discussed the low pass rate in the Faculty Board meeting and decided that all lecturers should plan strategies to improve the results irrespective of the results attained*

and that

> *… communication between the lecturer and the student is an important factor in the success of teaching and learning.*

Another report notes that:

> *The lecturers and students need to have a very good relationship and that should make both groups feel free with each other make follow ups and ensure that the strategies are implemented and they are functioning according to plan*

Faculty Improvement Plans are developed by deans, social actors who are able to wield considerable power because of the roles they occupy. One of the areas in which deans are expected to exercise these powers relates to strategizing and, indeed, job descriptions and key performance indicators identify the ability to strategise as key to holding the post. The comments cited above, however, are indicative of a reluctance to exercise those powers, to strategise on behalf of the faculty. Instead, it is left to individual lecturers to develop their own strategies and exercise their own agency in pursuing them.

The improvement plan for another faculty is different however in that it identifies actual strategies to be followed to enhance success in the form of:

> *Continued use of Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) leaders or student tutors to divide students into smaller groups and give individual attention*

and

> *More unannounced tests will be issued to ensure that students study all the time.*

Another faculty on the same campus offers a mixture of observations and strategies. For one course, the comment notes:

> *The students had PAL and the drop of 4% in pass rate need to be investigated. Students who are at risk will be monitored on weekly basis.*

The fact that a drop occurred in the pass rate of 4% in spite of the provision of Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) is noted but the comment is that this only 'needs to be investigated'. The comment then proceeds to note that '[s]tudents who are at risk will be monitored on a weekly basis'. There would appear to be little point of monitoring students on a weekly basis if this monitoring does not result in action to address poor performance.

The improvement plan for another course in the same faculty, is however, much more incisive in respect of the strategies identified:

- *Seek assistance with academic writing from the LTD writing Centre*
- *More formative assessments to diagnose understanding of concepts of students*
- *Student tutors or PAL leaders will be used to explain these concepts to students.*
- *Students will be given more research type questions to encourage use of textbooks and other reference material from the resource centre*
- *Computer rooms to have working computers at all times for students to write their reports.*

It is not only the case that strategies are identified however, but that there is coherence in the strategies. The use of formative assessment to diagnose conceptual misunderstandings is followed up by the use of tutors of PAL leaders to provide tuition to address the misunderstandings. The sort of understanding evidenced here is by no means widespread.

What appears to be the case, therefore, is that, overall, social actors appear to be exercising their agency in ways that are not conducive to the emergence of more positive events and experiences related to student academic success. This observation is corroborated by the following extract from a report written by the Management Team of the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development (CLTD)

> *The current HELM [higher education leadership and management] choices are not helpful to learning, teaching and assessment (LTA) systems. The Faculty Improvement Plans (FIP) are just written to comply to Institutional requirements e.g. HoDs do not bother to encourage their lecturers about the high risk course and the need for them to attend Professional Development Programs (PAD). The current practice is just compliance, no thorough engagement of LTA issues like FIP, programme structures, training nor EOT/C implementation worse impact. Currently, LTA items are put as last items in the faculty board agenda. Deans do not monitor committees nor guide on their KPAs. A lot of the challenges faced at this institution are structural and systemic in nature. These need to be dealt with by the Campus Rectors and the Vice Chancellors' Office.*

The extent to which structural and systemic challenges can be dealt with by the Campus Rectors and the Vice-Chancellor's Office is open to question. Some socio-economic challenges are simply beyond the scope of an institution. Changes in the domain of culture are also difficult to achieve since they require the insertion of alternative discourses, alternative ways of thinking about teaching and learning, the role of the curriculum and that of academic teachers which perhaps even the Vice Chancellor and Campus Rectors are not able to draw upon.

Another important constraint to the exercise of agency has been identified in the form of the 'I'm not a manager' discourse which locates the power to implement policies with individuals appointed higher up on the management chain with the result that those HoD positions in particular do understand that their roles as social actors also require them to implement policies and strategies.

It thus becomes possible to see that, even though many of those involved in implementing the Academic Monitoring and Reporting Strategy are social actors and, as such, can exercise their own personal emergent powers and properties (PEPs) as well as the structural emergent powers and properties (SEPs) inherent to the roles they occupy, discursive constraints on the exercise of agency along with other mechanisms identified in the sections above lead either to the Strategy not being implemented or it being implemented in ways intended by its architects.

## 6.6 Practices emerging from the exercise of agency

The second sub-question identified as guiding the study underpinning this thesis was

*What sort of practices and processes emerge from the exercise of agency?*

In order to answer this question, I will begin by looking at some of the quantitative data I analysed for the purposes of my research.

As part of monitoring and reporting practice, emphasis was placed on success rates. Table 2 below reflects the aggregated annual student performance rates of WSU undergraduate programmes from 2013/14 to 2018/19. As the table indicates, student success targets, understood as the ratio of FTE degree credits to FTE enrolments and established as a result of strategic planning processes, were exceeded during this period. For most years, the same

applied to graduation rates, understood as the ratio of headcount graduates to headcount enrolments.

| ***Performance Indicator*** | ***2014 (Baseline)*** | | ***2015*** | | ***2016*** | | ***2017*** | | ***2018*** | | ***2019*** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ***Target*** | ***Actual*** | ***Target*** | ***Actual*** | ***Target*** | ***Actual*** | ***Target*** | ***Actual*** | ***Target*** | ***Actual*** | ***Target*** | ***Actual*** |
| *Success Rate (Ratio of FTE degree credits to FTE enrolments)* | *74%;* | *80%* | *74%* | *80,5%* | *74%* | *80,35%* | *75%* | *79,1%* | *75%* | *79,0%* | *75%* | *79,1%* |
| *Graduation Rate (Ratio of headcount graduates to headcount enrolments)* | *18%;* | *19%* | *18%* | *19,3%* | *18%* | *20,1%* | *22%* | *19,6%* | *23%* | *22,2%* | *23%* | *20,9%* |

*Table 2: Student performance at institutional level 2014 to 2019 (source Directorate of Institutional Research, WSU)*

On the surface at least, it would appear that the institution was performing well in that targets were consistently exceeded. Digging beneath the surface reveals a somewhat different picture, however, as well as problems in reporting practices.

### 6.6.1 Academic exclusions

Analysis of cases of academic exclusion allows for the exploration of student performance in more detail. The 2011 Report on the Audit of WSU considered the issue of academic exclusions in some detail noting (CHE, 2011:23) that

> *Senior academics acknowledge that 'lingering' students or students who should be excluded dilute the university's teaching resources and are often part of that group which resists the university's academic ethos and project, and disrupts the teaching and learning activities.*

The term 'lingering' students in this extract from the Audit report relates to students who had spent more than the 'regulation time' on their qualifications. The reference to the 'dilution' of the university's resources then relates to the fact that institutions receive funding for this 'regulation time'. For example, the 'regulation time' for a qualification carrying 360 credits is three years (based on the assumption that 120 credits or 1200 hours of study per annum is a reasonable load). Institutions submit enrolment plans to the DHET on a three-year 'rolling'

basis and an agreed number of students are funded for each qualification on the basis of these plans. Maximum subsidy is received for students who complete a qualification in the 'regulation time'. At some universities, WSU included, it is not unusual to find students registered for a qualification with a regulation time of three years, for seven or even eight years. As a result, the maximum subsidy is not earned.

This concern with the use of scarce resources led to a recommendation in the report (Recommendation 20) that:

> *The HEQC recommends that Walter Sisulu University firmly implement its academic exclusions policy.*

The exclusions policy is effected by the application of General Rule (G)7 which allows for the exclusion of students who do not perform well as they

G7.1 – Lack credits to proceed to the next level

G1.2 – Fail the course/module twice

G7.3 – Exceed the expected duration of the programme.

Details of credits required to proceed to a successive level of study and the expected duration of programmes are provided in the WSU Prospectus published annually.

As a result of the CHE Audit, from 2011 onwards, discourses prioritising the need to apply the exclusions policy were dominant at WSU. Campus rectors were therefore required to detail exclusions in reports to the Senate and provide reasons for them.

Table 4 (below) provides details of the number of students originally excluded following the application of an institutional general rule (a 'G Rule') governing academic exclusions: the G7 Rule between 2015 and 2017. Table 4 shows the number of appeals, the number of successful appeals and, thus, the number of students eventually excluded. The data is extracted from faculty reports on examinations which were approved by the Senate and were not provided by the Directorate of Institutional Planning. This data therefore had to be aggregated as a result of the careful scrutiny of faculty reports for the purposes of this study and was not generated as part of normal institutional processes. A process to monitor exclusions longitudinally was therefore not in place.

| | Number of students affected by G7 exclusions | | Appealed | | Waived | | Number academically excluded | | Cumulative number of students finally excluded |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2015 | 2016 | 2015 | 2016 | 2015 | 2016 | 2015 | 2016 | March 2017 |
| Buffalo City Campus | 332 | 130/462 | 127 (38.2%) | 80 (61.5%) | 84 (25.3%) | 50 (38.4%) | 248 (74.6%) | 80 (61.5%) | 323 (69.9%) |
| Faculty of Science, Engineering and Technology | 138 | 64 | 64 | 34 | 50 | 30 | 88 | 34 | 122 |
| Faculty of Business Sciences | 194 | 66 | 63 | 46 | 34 | 20 | 160 | 46 | 206 |
| Butterworth Campus[11] | 231 | 281/512 | 128 (55.4%) | 00 | 136 (58.8%) | 281 (100%) | 95 (41.1%) | 00 | 218 (42.5%) |
| Faculty of Engineering and Technology | 12 | 236 | 83 | 00 | 83 | 236 | 71 | 00 | 71 |
| Faculty of Management Sciences | 77 | 45 | 45 | 00 | 53 | 45 | 24 | 00 | 24 |
| Walter Sisulu University | 2015 | 2016 | 2015 | 2016 | 2015 | 2016 | 2015 | 2016 | March 2017 |
| Students affected by the G 7 Rule/academic exclusions per annum) | 563 | 411/974 | 255 (45.2%) | 80/335 (19.4%) (34.3%) | 220 (39.0%) | 331/551 (80.5%) (56.5%) | 343 (60.9%) | 80/423 (19.4%) (43.4% | 541 (55.5%) |

*Table 3: Application of the G7 Rule in selected programmes by faculty and campus*

Table 4 shows, for example, that in 2015, 332 students on the Buffalo City Campus were affected by the G7 rule. Of these 332 students, 127 appealed their exclusion and 84 had their exclusions waived. This means that 248 students were eventually academically excluded. In 2016, 130 students on the same campus were excluded on the basis of Rule G7. Of these, 127 appealed and 50 were successful resulting in the exclusion of 80 students. Over 2015 and 2016, this means that the total number of students excluded was 323, or 69%, of those who had originally fallen foul of the G7 Rule.

For the institution as a whole, 974 students were excluded in 2015 and 2016. By March 2017, 433 students had appealed these exclusions successfully. This meant that nearly 45% of students originally identified for exclusion remained in the university.

Exclusions in 2015 and 2016 were not only on the basis of Rule G7. Some students may have dropped out of programmes for other reasons. For example, they may have been financially excluded on the basis that they did not have the money to cover living costs. Other students may not have met the 'due performance' requirements necessary to be admitted to

examinations. The number of students who therefore left programmes in 2015 and 2016 is likely to be much higher than those excluded on the basis of the G7 Rule further calling into question the value of success and graduation rates as an indicator of performance.

However, the fact that so many of those who were originally excluded on the basis of Rule G7 were successful in their appeals also calls into question i) the reasons for identifying these students as subject to Rule G7 in the first place and ii) the way in which the rule was understood while making decisions during the appeals process.

Table 3 indicates differences in the extent to which appeals against exclusion were successful in different programmes and on different campuses. In the Faculty of Science Engineering and Technology on the Buffalo City Campus, 63% of those originally identified as having fallen foul of the rules were excluded. In the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Technology on the Butterworth Campus, the percentage of students eventually excluded was 46%.

Further investigation reveals that although G7 is an *institutional* rule, it was applied differently on at least two campuses: Buffalo City Campus and Butterworth. On the Butterworth campus, additional rules appear to have been considered in identifying exclusions including Rule G3 (relating to a student exceeding the maximum time allowed for study) and G7.2 (which identifies students who fail a course twice as eligible for exclusion).

In social realist terms, what appears to be the case is that agents on the two campuses were drawing on different rules (where rules constitute structures distributing access to the 'goods' of the world) in order to allow for the emergence of an event (an exclusion).

Discrepancies in the application of the G7 and other rules within, and between, different faculties (which all report to the same campus rector) and between the two campuses give rise to questions about what is being evaluated when a student is excluded and, thus, to the way concepts such as 'academic success' are constituted discursively. Depending on the faculty and the campus, discourses constructing academic success appear to differ. Agents then draw on these discourses to make decisions about exclusions. What would therefore appear to be the case is that a single understanding of academic success does not drive decision making in relation to which students may continue with their studies and which must cease. In making this point, it is worth noting that although reports on the application of rules served before structures at campus and institutional levels, discrepancies in the way decisions

about exclusion were being made were not identified and there was thus no deliberation about potential unfairness or lack of rigour. This points to other ways in which social actors were exercising their personal powers and properties (PEPs).

The inconsistency in academic monitoring is illustrated by one case from the Butterworth campus in particular. In 2015, 354 students were affected by the G.7 Rule, 136 appealed against their exclusion and 218 were finally excluded. However, in 2016, all 236 students who were identified as subject to exclusion on the basis of Rule G7 in the Faculty of Engineering and Technology were 'readmitted with warning' while no cases subject to Rule G7 were identified in the Faculty of Management Sciences. The 2017 Campus Rector's Report on the 2016 cohort was not explicit about this sudden change in the way Rule G7 was applied and nor was this discrepancy identified either at campus or institutional Senate levels. What is arguably the case, however, is that a discourse favouring reporting per se (as an indication of effective management) was privileged over others privileging the need for accurate reporting and critical analysis of data in order to identify problems and means of addressing them through Academic Development. 'Instrumental rationality' (see, for example, Gibson, 1986) involves a focus on the use of reason to achieve a specific set of goals. The idea that 'means justify the ends' arises from this. In the case discussed above, what appears to be happening is that the discursively constituted focus is on the means rather than the ends. Monitoring and reporting is intended to be a means to the end of improving student success by allowing for the identification of academic development initiatives that can be drawn upon to support students who are performing badly. For monitoring and reporting to function as a means to this particular end, accuracy in monitoring and reporting is required. Once accuracy is neglected as the result of a failure to scrutinise data carefully, the ends are sacrificed. The focus is entirely on the means.

What appears to be happening, therefore, is that social actors are not drawing on their PEPs to exercise their reason to achieve an end. Rather, they exercise these PEPs in order to comply with reporting requirements. This is an important point in relation to the implementation of the Strategy for Academic Monitoring.

As I have indicated earlier in this thesis, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting are practices that emerge from discourses privileging efficiency and accountability and the idea that improvements can result from them is widely associated with New Public Management. As I

have also indicated, NPM was introduced to South African higher education. The DoHET, which is responsible for the allocation of state funding to public universities, requires monitoring and reporting on a regular basis and non-compliance results in delays in the payment of funding or, even, non-payment. As a result of the introduction of NPM, what would appear to be the case, therefore, is that discourses have developed in the cultural system of the higher education sector that identify the importance of reporting and monitoring. Managers in universities then see their roles as complying with reporting requirements.

In the case of the WSU Academic Monitoring Strategy for Integrated Academic Development, managers needed to draw on discourses requiring monitoring and reporting but, at the same time, also respond to others which construct these activities as a means of potentially enhancing student performance. A social realist analysis shows that the dominance of discourses privileging the need to monitor and report constrain social actors in engaging with other discourses about the use of these activities in teaching and learning.

In the examples provided above, both social actors (Deans and HoDs) as well as corporate agents in the form of faculty boards and Senate are all acting in the same way. Reporting moves from departmental level to that of the Senate. That individuals (social actors) and groups (corporate agents) all appear to act in the same way appears to be indicative of the strength of the 'reporting discourse' at the expense of others.

Secondly, what also appears to emerge from the analysis provided above relates to the way discourses espousing the value of education as a public good and the role of the university in pursuing that good (evident for example, in the 1997 White Paper on Higher Education) are not drawn upon. Rather, the role of the university is reduced to one of numbers and of meeting targets set by the Department of Higher Education and Training in the somewhat mistaken belief that meeting these targets is sufficient to ensure that the needs of the public good are met . The 541 (55.5% of the original 971) students identified as finally excluded in Table 5 are not just numbers but people. Given the WSU student profile, they represent a special category of people from the lowest rank of the social-economic strata. This then renders questionable the roles of managers at WSU as social actors with the power to contribute to the distribution of social justice to students who may have no choice but to register at this particular university.

### 6.6.2 Comparing apples with pears

Faculties at WSU are required to report termly to Senate using course data. My interest lay in the quality of the data in these reports, the way the data was understood by faculties and the reasons for heads and departments and deans failing to intervene when students were identified as performing badly.

The WSU Academic Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development Strategy (Appendix I), approved by the University Senate in 2015 defines a course with a 'low pass rate' as

> '. . . a subject in which both the total percentage of students passing the subject and the average final examination mark were below both the departmental and institutional averages.
>
> For example, the percentage of students who passed final exams over the whole institution in 2014 could be 80.0%, and the average final exam mark over the whole institution could be 52.14%. In one department, 37.36% of the students who had registered could have passed their final exam, and the average exam mark being 43.71%. Any subject in this department with a lower percentage pass and a lower average exam mark would be listed as a low-pass-rate subject for 2014 (WSU, 2015: para.3.1).'

Immediately it can be seen that the two indicators of performance are being used. At institutional level, the term 'success rate' following the CHE's definition is used. For reporting purposes at a lower level, another term, that of a course with a 'low pass rate' is used. The situation is then further complicated by the fact that reports submitted to Senate as per the requirements of the Academic Reporting and Monitoring Strategy shift to using the term 'high risk course' rather than that of 'course with a low pass rate' as detailed in the Strategy document. This move to the use of the term 'high risk course' that is arguably in line with national discourse where, for example, initiatives such as the Siyaphumelela project promoting the use of 'big data' to improve student success, also draw on the same term.

The March 2016 report submitted by the Faculty of Science Engineering and Technology on the Buffalo City campus (Appendix IV) identifies the following 'high risk' courses. Following

the definition of 'high risk' course offered above, the marks shown in the final column of the table indicate the average final mark in the examination.

Table 3 below shows details of some of the courses identified as 'high risk' delivered on WSU's Buffalo City Campus in a report submitted to meetings of the Senate in March 2016 .

| **Program** | **Course** | **HoD** | **Marks %** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Applied Sciences | Inorganic Chemistry 2 | | 44 |
| Applied Sciences | Organic Chemistry 2 | | 65 |
| Applied Sciences | Chemical Quality Assurance | | 69 |
| Applied Sciences | Analytical Chemistry 1 | | 60 |
| Applied Sciences | Organic Chemistry 2 | | 65 |
| Applied Sciences | Physical Chemistry 2 | | 75 |
| Applied Sciences | Food and Food Science | | 61 |

*Table 4: 'At risk' courses in the Faculty of Science Engineering and Technology, Buffalo City Campus, March 2016*

The final column in the table, entitled 'Marks %' details the average final mark for each course which are presumably lower than the institutional average for courses. A potential problem then arises in making sense of data at different levels because the terminology used at institutional level when data is presented using the CHE's term of the 'success rate' differs from practice at faculty and campus level when the WSU term of 'low pass rate course'/ high risk course' is used.

### 6.6.3 Omissions

Regardless of the terminology used, comparison of performance over a period of time is useful. Twice yearly reports submitted to the Senate detail performance only in the previous semester and do not compare overall trends or patterns. My own analysis of a randomly chosen seven courses offered in the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Technology on the Buffalo City Campus over two years (2015 and 2016) shows some relatively radical differences in performance in two courses (Inorganic Chemistry III and Physical Chemistry III) where the average mark dropped by 87% in Inorganic Chemistry III but increased by 22% in Physical Chemistry III. Differences in performance over the two years in the other five courses is not so marked.

| Subject | Average score (2016 exam) | Average score (2015 exam) | Variance[12] |
|---|---|---|---|
| Inorganic Chemistry III | 67% | 87% | -23% |
| Physical Chemistry III | 74% | 52% | +22% |
| Physics II | 74% | 78% | -5% |
| Chemistry I | 78% | 86% | -8% |
| Physics I | 75% | 82% | -7% |
| Behavioural studies | 74% | 78% | -5% |

*Table 5: Differences in performance in six courses over two years*

Analysis of performance over time allows for changes to be identified and for further investigations to be carried out. In the case of the Physical Chemistry III course in Table 5 above the 23% drop in performance between 2015 and 2016 should have resulted in scrutiny of the two assessments in each year to check validity and standards. However, if no longitudinal analysis is reported, this aspect of monitoring is missed.

A quotation popularly attributed to mathematician Karl Pearson notes that 'that which is measured improves' and 'that which is measured and reported improves more exponentially'. The quotation draws critically (and sarcastically) on the discourse noted in the previous section which privileges reporting as a means of enhancing higher education. As I have indicated in the previous section, measurement becomes problematic when the focus, inadvertently or unwittingly, falls on the measurement rather than on the goal for the measurement itself and when the methods used to measure are not interrogated rigorously. In Section 6.3 above, I argued firstly that the measurements identified in my data were often problematic and that the focus on measurement detracted from the value of that which was needed to be measured and analysed in order to contribute to social justice in the form of the well-being and success of poor black working class students registered at WSU.

[12] I have used the term 'variance' here to denote the difference between the average pass mark in each year.

### 6.6.4 Concluding thoughts on Sub-question 2

In this section I have addressed the second sub question informing my study: '*What sort of practices and processes emerge from the exercise of agency?*' The discussion above identifies managers drawing on national and institutional discourses privileging reporting to produce analyses which are submitted in the form of reports. As I have tried to show, however, these analyses do not go far enough in uncovering the underlying picture. More in depth and critical analysis would have allowed for questions to be asked about student performance and, potentially, to have allowed for targeted support and development initiatives to be launched. The lack of in-depth analysis is accompanied by an overwhelming reliance on what, in Section 6.3.1 above I have called the 'discourse of the deficient learner' which has been problematised in the field of Academic Development since the 1980s (see, for example, Vilakazi & Tema, 1985). This has led managers to 'refer' problems in student performance to entities other than those they are responsible for leading and to locate the 'problem' outside the structure they could influence, the curriculum.

My analysis in Section 6.3 also shows managers drawing on the WSU Policy on Academic Monitoring and Support as well as on discourses privileging the need for the policy to be implemented, initially stressed in the 2011 Report on the institutional audit conducted by the CHE, to exclude students. However, the interpretation and implementation of the policy is not even across all campuses and across the institution as a whole. As a result, the policy arguably has not been implemented fairly to the detriment of some and the advantage of others. Again, the lack of analysis and critical interrogation of actions can be seen to be problematic here with the result that compliance with dominant institutional discourses is prioritized above all else.

## 6.7 Structures and mechanisms contributing to the sustainability of problematic practice

The final sub-question informing my study was

*Which structures and mechanisms contribute to the sustainability of these practices?*

This final sub question arguably requires an analysis of T4 in Archer's morphogenetic cycle. I therefore leave my response to this question to the final chapter of this thesis

# 7 Chapter Seven: Conclusion

## 7.1 Introduction

The study on which this thesis is based was guided by the following research question:

> How do academic managers exercise their agency to monitor and promote student academic success in the context of implementing an institutional strategy on monitoring and support.

The following three sub-questions were then developed to ensure that the study drew on the metatheoretical framework outlined in Chapter Two:

- How do structural and cultural conditions and mechanisms enable or constrain agency in pursuit of student academic success?
- What sort of practices and processes emerge from the exercise of agency?
- Which structures and mechanisms contribute to the sustainability of these practices?

In this chapter, I focus on the third sub-question which, as I noted at the end of Chapter Six requires me to consider whether morphogenesis (change) or morphostasis (non-change) had occurred at stage $T_4$ of the morphogenetic cycle I examined.

## 7.2 Morphogenesis or morphostasis?

Boughey & McKenna (2017, 2021) follow Archer in noting that morphogenesis in the domain of structure is more easy to achieve than in the domain of culture. Boughey & McKenna's (2017) argument is based on their analysis of the impact of the first cycle of institutional audits on teaching and learning in South African universities. Their research showed that, although the audits had succeeded in prompting the emergence of structures in the form of policies and procedures and teaching and learning centres, dominant discourses constructing teaching and learning had not been challenged.

The introduction of the WSU Academic Monitoring and Reporting Strategy in 2015 was, in itself, a change in the domain of structure in that the policy functioned as a structure leading to the emergence of reporting practices. The policy alone did not lead to reporting, however,

since it is also possible to identify a discourse stressing monitoring and reporting as key to institutional functioning. Evident in this discourse is a set of ideas related to 'student success' as the following example drawn from responses to the survey administered to deans, directors and HoDs suggests:

> *Monitoring of student success is essential for the university - the success of the university depends on it.*

In turn, student success is seen to be key to university sustainability:

> *Student academic success as it is the key to the existence of the university.*

In this context, it is highly likely that, in making statements such as these, institutional managers are drawing on another 'economic efficiency' discourse related to the funding formula for higher education (MoE, 2004). As indicated in Chapter Three, the funding formula for higher education introduced in 2004 'incentivises' performance. In the core function of teaching and learning, this means that the subsidy earned by institutions is maximised when students i) complete their studies and ii) complete in 'regulation time'. Slow throughput and poor graduation rates therefore impact on the amount of subsidy a university will receive. There is very little evidence in the data generated by the survey of a concern for the way slow throughput and poor graduation rates will impact on students' lives, on their hopes and aspirations for the future and on the well-being of those who will rely on them as the 'first in the family' to attend a university. The link of the 'monitoring is key' discourse to others privileging economic efficiency is evidenced by the terminology used by respondents to the survey. For example:

> *Through this strategy poor learners are identified early and solutions found. This is one way of promoting the completion rate of the students and also improves student retention.*

The terms 'completion rate' and 'student retention' are used extensively in management discourse when the reference is made to incentivised funding.

Arguably what appears to be the case, therefore, is that there has been structural change in the introduction of the funding formula, management hierarchies to ensure that the university is managed more efficiently and, at a lower level, the introduction of the

Academic Monitoring and Reporting Strategy. At the same time, there has been cultural change in that discourses privileging the need for economic efficiency and for active management have become powerful.

What have not changed, however, are discourses constructing teaching, learning and students and initiatives deemed appropriate to address 'deficiencies'. The data I examined for the study is replete with the identification of problems as relating to students' own 'deficiencies' including their tendency to turn to protest action. The Academic Monitoring and Reporting Strategy, on the other hand, draws on an 'integrated' approach to student development and support that allocates responsibility to agents in faculties and departments to attend to matters such as pedagogy, curriculum structure and assessment. Rather than using in-depth analysis of student performance data to identify possible problems that could be addressed by curriculum review and reform, the tendency is to 'pass the problem back' to the students. In this respect, stasis in the cultural domain can be identified that works against change in that of the domain of structure.

Another area in which change has not occurred relates to WSU's status as a historically black institution starved of resources during apartheid and subject to bouts of dysfunction sufficiently serious to merit the appointment of administrators (see Section 4.3.1) even after it became a 'new' university as a result of the mergers of the NPHE (DoE, 2002). In many respects, the mergers and incorporations resulting from the NPHE, in the case of WSU at least, are indicative of a 'faulty compromise' resulting in an institution which was less coherent and focused than the one it sought to replace. This has then contributed to what would appear to be an ongoing sense that problems related to resourcing would never be solved and, also, to a sense of skepticism where both students and members of the academic staff do not trust 'management' to address institutional failures. In this kind of context, it could be argued that the odds were stacked against any initiative intended to bring about improvement and enhance performance. The structural conditions inherited from the apartheid era continue to plague the new university and, in many respects, have been made worse by its multi-campus organisation. In some ways, improved access for students to institutions across the entire South African system has also not served WSU well as Cooper's (2015) analysis of enrolments showed. Whereas the old University of Transkei

could once have attracted students who had performed well at school level, their ability to enrol at other universities post-democracy means that WSU now mainly enrols black working class students from rural areas who are not able to gain entrance to other institutions. Their lack of preparedness for tertiary level study then leads to a host of teaching and learning problems which the university has not managed to muster the resources to address. WSU's apartheid history therefore continues to impact on its ability to function to this day.

## 7.3 Where to now?

My journey to a doctoral degree has been a long one. As an experienced manager and practitioner in the field of Academic Development holding a position in one of the most poorly resourced universities in the country, I initially drew on ideas being promoted in national discourse such as academic monitoring for success very positively. I *believed* that monitoring could work, that student success could be enhanced, that a contribution to social justice could be achieved. I now understand that, of course, these beliefs were discursively constituted, that I was subscribing to dominant discourses about academic monitoring and the roles of managers within it. Drawing on these discourses allowed me to commit all my energy to the project reported in this thesis.

To say that my study has revealed the complexity of the situation is trite. Having engaged the conceptual tools provided by Bhaskar (1978, 1979) and Archer (1995, 1996), I can see that my initial beliefs did not sufficiently take account of the complexity of the social system in which academic monitoring was to be introduced. If I now return to Archer's situational logics discussed in Section 2.7.1 above, I can see that the system in which I tried to embed academic monitoring was characterised by what Archer terms 'necessary incompatibilities'

To recap, necessary incompatibilities occur when elements of the system are incompatible and thus constrain possible change. In a system of necessary incompatibilities, ideas and beliefs contradict each other. So, for example, social actors drew on positive beliefs about academic monitoring but, at the same time, also drew on discourses that were not necessarily conducive to its implementation. As a result of these contradicting ideas and beliefs, accommodation is sought because the ideas are related to each other in some way.

My analysis has begun to explore the nature of this accommodation. Academic monitoring is constructed positively but students are seen as deficient and in need of referral to support structures rather than being acknowledged by the teaching and learning system itself. The system works, support systems are available, so students are 'referred on' in spite of acknowledgements that the system itself should be 'student-centred'. Perhaps the most salient feature of this accommodation was identified in Chapter Six and involved the focus on the means rather than the ends of academic monitoring. Social actors submitted reports, perused reports in faculty boards and senate but did not apply their powers of scrutiny and analysis to them. The system was made to work in that reporting took place but it did not achieve its ends. And, of course, the losers in all of this were the students themselves.

I cannot even begin to suggest that this study provides any answers. All I can hope is that it prompts thought in those that read it and that, as a result, some new questioning, some new ideas will be inserted into the cultural register which will be more enabling of change.

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**INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGY: ACADEMIC MONITORING FOR INTEGRATED ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT**

## 1. Background Information

1.1. Based on the current systemic challenges about the planning and quality enhancement for improved student performance rates at Walter Sisulu University (WSU), the Directorate for Learning and Teaching Development has developed the second draft of the WSU Strategy for Academic Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development.

1.2. This draft is in response to the CHE Institutional Audit Recommendation 4 on student monitoring and tracking and articulates to the similar goals and objectives of the WSU Strategic Framework.

1.3. The strategy also compliments such efforts as WSU responsiveness to national imperatives, as in the current WSU Quality Enhancement Project and the management of the teaching development grant as funded by the Ministry of Higher Education and Training.

## 2. Goals and Objectives

2.1. The WSU system on Academic Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development will be developed as an important, scientifically justifiable mechanism to determine students' needs, to monitor their academic progress, and to identify high-risk students in good time to provide effective academic development.

2.2. The system will therefore address the following developmental Issues:

a) How can the monitoring of student learning be effectively linked to institutional strategies for improving teaching and learning?
b) What are the strengths and limitations of monitoring systems at WSU and in respect of various levels of institutional performance (course/module, program, department, faculty and institutional)?

2.3. The following activity areas will feature the system:

a. Monitoring students from entry to progression and program completion (by means of throughput/cohort analysis)for improved retention.
b. Monitoring undergraduate students for improving teaching and learning.
c. Monitoring post-graduate students for improving teaching and learning.
d. Tracking WSU graduates from program completion to employment by means of tracer/employer studies) improving teaching and learning.

2.3. The following will be the implementation approach:

a. At institutional level the system must also address the issue of systems integration, including academic and other support services.
b. The system must be implemented at faculty, departmental levels and programme levels and therefore be academically managed.
c. The system must also build capacity within and across the universities (must also address establishing networks around improving practice, national and international).

2.4. This system will therefore be designed along the following broad areas,

- Will be about developing a profile of the WSU learner, including addressing the preparation and connection phases of the institutional value chain[13].
- Will be a strategically important initiative, which is, inter alia, about keeping track of all students' progress at WSU, using the available data management tools and institutional research.
- One of its key performance areas will include liaising with all relevant entities and persons at the WSU in order to ensure that all important information is obtained.
- Will, thus, entail continuous involvement with the sources of data (registration and examinations, and academic planning) used to obtain meaningful information about students, as well as to process and interpret the data.
- Will be about developing questionnaires and other methods of data gathering in order to broaden the information basis, as well as to improve the reliability and validity of the information about student performance.
- Will involve purposeful expansion and improvement of the tracking system as a monitoring instrument, as well as a quality assurance and learning management instrument.
- Will be linked to both access and placement strategies of the institution, namely the National Benchmarking Tests, Extended/Foundation Programmes and other learning and teaching development programmes.

**3. Annual identification of low-pass-rate subjects**

3.1. The first step is to decide upon a definition of a low pass rate. The definition proposed for WSU: a subject in which both the total percentage of students passing the subject and the average final examination mark were below both the departmental and institutional averages.

[13] WSU institutional value chain entails six phases, the preparation of students by the WSU feeder schools; connection of such students with WSU academic programs; entry into WSU academic programs, progression; completion; and employment. Preparation and connection phases entail partnership programmes between WSU academic programs and the feeder schools.

For example, the percentage of students who passed final exams over the whole institution in 2014 could be 80.0%, and the average final exam mark over the whole institution could be 52.14%. In one department, 37.36% of the students who had registered could have passed their final exam, and the average exam mark being 43.71%. Any subject in this department with a lower percentage pass and a lower average exam mark would be listed as a low-pass-rate subject for 2014.

## 4. Maintaining a history

4.1. It is not sufficient to identify subjects that performed badly in one particular year. One needs to know whether this is a historically difficult subject to provide the correct intervention.

4.2. Therefore, the report for any given year should include results from the previous two years. A subject is included in the report if it has been classified as a low-pass-rate subject in any of the three years. This allows one to track improvement, decline and variable performance.

## 5. Faculty Teams on Academic Monitoring and Tracking

5.1. Faculties will set up teams on student data management per guidelines to be provided by the Learning and Teaching Development (LTD) (read Appendix A). This will become a full year programme which is also built on a three-month project to establish baseline information re student performance for each faculty (Appendix B).

5.2. Faculties will use data to set up student performance targets in line with the institutional performance targets as DoHET approved.

5.3. This project, which is already implemented in the Faculty of Health Sciences, was piloted at FSET in 2014, and (should have been) rolled out to all faculties in 2015.

5.4. More advanced structures and systems for monitoring and tracking student performance, namely Integrator III, LTD and WiSeUp were being established during the second part of 2014 towards mainstreaming and upscaling in 2015.

## 6. 360-degree Evaluation for Integrated Academic Development

6.1. To determine whether the appropriate academic intervention should be in terms of curriculum adjustment, changes in teaching strategy or materials, student support programmes such as tutorship and mentorship programs and different forms of academic advising, or any combinations of these, information other than exam results is needed.

6.2. The Evaluation of Teaching/Courses Policy and Procedures prescribe how data for academic development can be collected. One part of the procedures is the evaluation, which is performed electronically, by students of both the course and the instructor. The other is a form which is completed by lecturers themselves, by their immediate superiors and by their peers. When information from all four sources is combined with the pass rate report, it is possible for heads of departments, the teaching development specialist, and the lecturer together to make concrete plans for improvement which can be assessed at the end of each semester or year, depending on the nature of the subject.

6.3. While the responsibility for the gathering, collation and so forth of this data is the responsibility of the Quality Assurance Directorate, as per policy on Performance Evaluation

of Academic Staff, the Directorate shall collaborate with LTD specialists who will, in turn, use the information for the improvement of teaching and learning.

6.4. This data gathering mechanism also articulates with the draft policy on WSU Appointments and Promotions whereby the candidate would use the relevant information as part of a teaching portfolio.

6.5. This data gathering mechanism also articulates with the performance management systems, which is being development by the DVC division for 2015. According to this system, faculties will report on term basis on teaching and learning, while the LTD directorate will also report on academic and development per faculty and per campus.

6.6. The Appendix sections include more detailed information on the proposed WSU Strategy for Academic Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development and a Pilot Project to kick start this system as currently applied at the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Technology (FSET), BCC in 2014.

***Questions and comments:***

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## Procedure Guidelines for Student Performance Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development

### Preamble

These Procedure Guidelines should be read within the framework of the 2012 Walter Sisulu University (WSU) Turnaround Framework issue 1: PQM (point 2.5), the CHE Institutional Audit Recommendations 4, 19 and 15. In addition, the University General Rules, particularly the Faculty Exclusion rules and regulations which appear in the WSU Prospectus, should be noted as they provide important information on the G7 rule on student exclusion processes. Relevant stakeholders of this document are Deans of Faculties, Heads of Departments, Teaching Development Specialists, Academic Development Specialists, Directors and Managers of Student Administration and other Academic Support Managers.

### 1. Background Information on Academic Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development

1.1. The Centre for Learning and Teaching Development is committed to the first institutional goal, which is to promote excellence in under-and postgraduate studies.

1.2. This is set to be achieved through, firstly, producing graduates by means of learner centred programmes that are responsive to the developmental imperatives, and secondly, increasing student throughput and graduate rates at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

1.3. To fulfil these goals and objective, students that are registered at WSU have to be monitored on a regular basis. This will serve as an early warning system, and if students are not performing well in their class tests, or not attending classes regularly,

as well as other factors that may lead to them being at risk of academic failure, they will be continuously monitored and personal intervention provided.

## 2. Purpose/ objectives

This draft procedure manual addresses the conditions and processes proposed for adoption by WSU to ensure that:

2.1 Every student, regardless of enrolment or citizenship status, is entitled to monitoring of their academic progress and supportive intervention where the student is at risk of unsatisfactory progress.

2.2 The University identifies and supports students at risk early.

2.3 The university gives students identified as being “at risk” their best chance of academic success.

## 3. Scope/ Application

The application of this procedure manual applies to all:

3.1 WSU campuses

3.2 WSU students, inclusive of international students, registered for any course in any Faculty of the University.

3.3 WSU staff involved with academic progression processes. This refers to all academics and affected support departments such as the LTD, GAA, and CEI (Centre for Engagement and Internationalisation).

## 4. Guidelines For Implementation

### 4.1 General Procedures

4.1.1 Reviews of students’ academic performance must be conducted in a consistent manner that reflects fairness.

4.1.2 For the purpose of applying this procedure manual, progress in a course will be following each term assessment over each study period.

4.1.3 Following each assessment, each faculty will ensure that assessments are recorded so that they are accessible to the institutional tracking & monitoring team.

4.1.4 The intervention action will apply to each student whose performance is considered at risk or is deemed to be unsatisfactory.

4.1.5 The specific intervention for each student will take one of three forms, according to the seriousness of the student being at risk of not achieving satisfactory academic performance in future progression periods:

a) academic counselling letter/email/other communication to attend a meeting to discuss the students' performance

b) application of the actual intervention support system

d) application of the G7 rule

4.1.6 The timing of intervention events will be tied to individual faculties' progression processes in relation to that faculty's teaching periods (semester or year course).

4.2. **Institutional Mandate**

To provide procedures/guidelines for reviewing the quality of WSU service delivery to students for improved student performance (success and graduation) rates.

4.2.1. The responsibility for reporting on student performance rates of WSU students rests with the **Department of Management Information Services (MIS**) within the Institutional Research and Academic Planning (IRP). The MIS Department will assist with training and the interpretation of the data, as required.

4.2.2. Institutional norms and targets for student academic performance rates, per qualification type and Faculty, shall be set by the **Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic Affairs and Research** and reviewed annually in March as part of the institutional annual performance plan.

**4.2.3. Faculties and Departments** are required to access the student academic performance rates for their qualifications in **June each year**, looking at graduation in the minimum time.

(June is the earliest opportunity to review the data, as the May graduation data is required for the calculation of the throughput of the recent cohorts of students. The data will not yet have been audited for submission to DoHET; but waiting for audited figures will delay the review until July or August).

4.2.4. Each academic department will review the student academic performance rates for the qualifications it offers and **submit a report to the faculty by the end of June,** including an intervention strategy for those qualifications with performance rates that are declining or below the institutional norm for the qualification type.

4.2.5. Each faculty will produce a report based upon the Departmental reports, **by the end of July**. LTD will analyse the faculty reports and produce an annual review of throughputs **in September each year**. This report should be submitted to Senate for approval.

4.2.6. In setting their **academic goals** for the following year, each Department and Faculty should include its targets for the academic performance rates of its qualifications for the following year (considering that potential graduates for Diploma programmes will already have

been in the system for two years or more). These academic goals will also serve as basis for academic development programmes and services for each department, including justification for the use of the Teaching Development Grant.

4.2.7. A report on student academic performance rates will also form part of the program review process.

### 4.3. **Recording Student Academic performance**

4.3.1. The student's academic performance shall be recorded using the examination department's student mark-sheet. It is the responsibility of the Departments to ensure that the student mark-sheet is updated on time after each assessment is completed and recorded.

4.3.2. The assessment from the student mark-sheet will be entered into the ITS and will be migrated through the LTD system to WiSeUp for access by relevant stakeholders. University academics and administrators can access this information through the HEMIS system.

4.3.3. Through the LTD system's tracking function, all students shall be deemed either 'Competent (C)' or 'Not Yet Competent (NYC)' for each course within the qualification they are enrolled and complete.

4.3.4. This assessment will be conducted by the departments' beneficiary (ideally, the Academic Advisor), who will be trained by HEMIS officers to conduct these.

4.3.5. LTD will calculate the projected academic progress for the study period, based on the total number of courses that are required to be assessed and the outcome of these assessments. That is, if there were 6 courses in total assessed in a study period, and a student has been assessed as 'C' in 4 courses and 'NYC' in 2 courses for the study period, the student's academic progress would reflect that the student achieved 66.67%. This may be also done using the credit counting methods, depending on the Faculties.

4.3.6. These records are checked monthly by the Quality Assurance Officer (QAO) and Academic Advisor (AA) for currency and accuracy*.

### 4.4. Monitoring Student Academic Performance

4.4.1 The Academic Advisor (AA) will monitor student academic performance and academic issues via LTD and will be responsible for referrals for academic advising and any interventions required for improving performance*.

4.4.2. At least monthly, the AA and academic management will review the academic progress of all students and monitor the following points*:

4.4.3. When a student's academic progress falls below 50% for a completed single assessment (specifically the weighted ones), the AA shall send a '1st Warning Correspondence. This could take form of an email, red flag through WiSeUp, or sms. indicating the student has to contact a Career Advisor for an appointment to discuss his/her

poor academic progress and strategies to ensure staying above the 50% academic progress requirement for the following assessments or assessment period.

4.4.4. If the student does not respond within 7 days of the date of the correspondence, the AA will attempt to contact the student via telephone, noticeboard or through the department's lecturers. Should contact not be made and the student fails to attend the meeting at the beginning of the next study period, this will be recorded for reference purposes.

* *AA functions to still be concretized through the Teaching Quality Forum discussion and updated in this document. Their inclusion in this document should therefore be read and understood in this context.*

4.4.5. For the following assessment, if the same student once again falls below 50% in academic progress after falling below 50% in their previous study period, he/she shall be sent a '2nd Warning Communication' notifying them that they are at risk of failing the course and possibly, of exclusion. In cases where the students are international students on a performance agreement funding contract, they are informed that a 3rd non-performance (particularly in cases where they do not respond to the intervention meetings), they will be reported to CEI which reports to the relevant government agency.

**4.5. Reporting of unsatisfactory academic progress to stakeholders other than the student**

4.5.1 When an international student's projected academic progress falls below 50% for 3 consecutive study periods, the student shall be sent a 'Breach Recorded' correspondence copied to CEI indicating their unsatisfactory academic progress in their course of study. They are informed that this has occurred as they have failed to be deemed Competent in more than 50% for three consecutive assessments periods and have not followed through with the intervention put in place for them. For non-international students, the 3rd Warning Correspondence is copied to their guardians or parents and departments.

4.5.2. Students at this point are also informed of their right to access the appeals and complaints process and have 20 days to do so.

4.5.3 If the student does not go through any appeal or complaint process within 20 days, the report shall be submitted to the Faculties for reference in case the G7 rule has to be applied at a later stage to that student.

4.5.4. A copy of all letters, details of phone calls made, and any reports are to be kept in the student files by the AA.

4.5.5. A student who has gone through all the support but has still failed to comply will be excluded from the university.

4.5.6. It is the decision of the various Faculties to determine whether the student can be accepted after 1 or 2 years back to the university following exclusion.

4.5.6. ***Campus Academic Exclusion Appeals Committee (CAEACOM),*** to be established in addition to the Faculty Appeals Committee, per the following proposed Terms of Reference,

a. Campus Rector (Chair).
b. Executive Dean of Students or nominee.
c. Director, Centre for Learning and Teaching Development or nominee.
d. One senior member of the academic staff from each faculty nominated by the Dean concerned.
e. Two student representatives nominated by the SRC.
f. **In Attendance:** HoD/Manager, Learning and Teaching Development & HoD/Manager, Academic Services, per Campus.
**g.** To consider, amongst others, the evidence of utilising available academic development services, namely different forms of academic advising (Peer Assisted Learning/Tutorials/Mentoring, etc); Evaluation of Teaching/Courses and Quality of Assessment for student learning as part of managing student appeals.

## 5. DEFINITIONS

5.1 **Progression Period:** the period of study at the end of which a student's academic progress is formally assessed. There will be 4 Progression Periods within an academic year. Each will be three months in duration, the first running from 1 January to 30 March, the second from 1 April to 30 June, the second from 1 July to 30 September, the fourth from 01 October to 15 December.

5.2 **Teaching Period:** the period between the commencement and completion of teaching in a specific course.

**Appendix 1: Table outlining Activities on Student Academic Performance Monitoring for Integrated Academic Development**

| *ACTIVITY* | *STAFF RESPONSIBLE* | *PERIOD* | *MEASURES* |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Development of learning contracts, viz. learner guides*<br><br>*Communication on student performance monitoring for integrated academic development* | *Academic Advisor (AA); lecturers; Teaching Development Specialist*<br><br>*(HoD, for monitoring purposes)* | *Upon registration* | *Learning Contract/Learner Guide; Student academic advising sessions*[14] |

[14] Read a separate document on Procedure Manual for Academic Advising

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *At this point, it is very important that new students are oriented and inducted accordingly, including conducting various forms of student profiling* | | | |
| *Assessment 1 or more*[15] | *Lecturer* | *Term 1*[16] | *Scripts (or any other evidence of assessment)* |
| *Capturing of marks on ITS* | *Faculty Officer and/or Dept secretary* | *within 7 days of assessment* | *Marks appear on ITS* |
| *1 beneficiary trained by HEMIS officer to use HEDA system for department* | *HEMIS* | *Term 1* | *Dept. beneficiary to have password* |
| *Marks migrated to WiSeUp and HEDA* | *HESD and Beneficiary* | *Term 1* | *Students are able to access marks through WiSeUp, Academic are able to access marks through HEDA* |
| | | | |
| *"At risk" students are flagged (1st warning) and contacted* | *Tracking & Monitoring Specialist & AA* | *Beginning of term 2* | *Records of calls, any attempts of communication* |
| *Intervention meetings are set up with students* | *Academic Advisor* | *Beginning of term 2* | *Records of meeting procedures and advice/referrals given to individual students* |
| *Report of term 1 flagged students submitted to Faculties; Submission of Faculties intervention* | *Academic Advisor, HoDs* | *Term 2* | *Reports* |

[15] Read the revised policy on Assessment for Student Learning, with implication with on time administration of assessment and monitoring at academic management level

[16] These terms are read differently for semesterised courses

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *measures[17] as a response to the report* | | | |
| *Assessment 2 or more* | *Lecturer* | *Term 2* | *Scripts (or any other evidence of assessment)* |
| *"At risk" students are flagged (2nd warning) and contacted* | *Tracking & Monitoring Specialist/AA* | *Term 2* | *Records of calls, any attempts of communication* |
| *TERM 3* | | | |
| *Intervention meetings are set up with students* | *Academic Advisor* | *Beginning of term 3* | *Records of meeting procedures and advice/referrals given to individual students* |
| *Referrals of "at risk" students are contacted for follow up* | *Academic Advisor* | *Term 3* | *Contact records from referred support unit* |
| *Report of term 2 flagged students submitted to Faculties, Submission of Faculties intervention measures as a response to the report* | *Academic Advisor, HoDs* | *Term 3* | *Report* |
| *Assessment 3 or more* | *Lecturer* | *Term 3* | *Scripts (or any other evidence of assessment)* |
| *3rd warning correspondence to students with less than 50% in 3 consecutive assessments;*<br>*Copy sent to departments for all students, CCIP for International students and* | *Tracking & Monitoring Specialist and AA* | *Term 3* | *Copy of the Warning correspondence* |

[17] Faculty measures entail various forms of integrated academic development, namely, but not limited to, academic advising (tutorship and mentorship programmes); extended curriculum (reading and writing centres; information literacy; developmental courses in high impact modules); evaluation of teaching/courses; professional academic development; assessment of student learning; program reviews; development of the teaching and learning infrastructure, etc.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *parents for national students* | | | |
| *TERM 4* | | | |
| *Intervention meetings are set up with students* | *Academic Advisor* | *Beginning of term 4* | *Records of meeting procedures and advice/referrals given to individual students* |
| *Referrals of "at risk" students are contacted for follow up* | *Academic Advisor* | *Term 4* | *Contact records from referred support unit* |
| *Report of term 3 flagged students submitted to Faculties;*<br>*Submission of Faculties intervention measures as a response to the report* | *Academic Advisor; HoDs* | *Term 4* | *Report* |
| *Assessment 4 or more* | *Lecturer* | *Term 4* | *Scripts (or any other evidence of assessment)* |
| *Consolidated tracking and monitoring report submitted to Exclusion Committee*[18] | *Tracking & Monitoring Specialist; AA; HoD* | *Term 4* | *Report* |

*(Adapted from UKZN and NMMU models of student performance monitoring and academic development)*

[18] At this point, it is assumed that students-at risk have been identified on time and referred to academic development programmes and services. It is also assumed that course and staff development implications of student performance have been addressed, especially as a result of evaluation of teaching/courses.

**WSU mechanisms**
**for**
**Academic Monitoring and Support for Integrated Academic Development**

**A survey for Campus Rectors, Deans and Heads of Department**

## Introduction and background

Almost all key performance areas for Faculty Deans, Heads of Departments, Campus Rectors and the Office of Deputy Vice Chancellor have academic monitoring and support implicit in their formulation. This is because student academic success is an organising principle in all the key functions of a university, be it teaching and learning, research and community engagement. Through the development of critical thinking, the notion of university education as a public good seeks to promote knowledge production and application, with the current student body as future community leaders.

It is in this context that Academic Monitoring and Support (AMS) becomes the main element of quality enhancement within the university, from student entry, to student progression, completion and to work placement. The role of higher education leaders and managers is critical in AMS, where the focus is not only about setting the targets for student achievements, but also to be able to understand and explain what could be the inhibitors and/or enhancers of student learning, and how to eliminate or promote those as part of higher education management and leadership practices.

In recent years, WSU has experienced mixed improvements in student academic performance, from 80% to 81% in student success, and from 19% to 17% on graduation rates, with DHET targets for WSU at 74% and 18% respectively for 2014/15. However, these targets are for the institution and there is no clear evidence of the way academic leaders and managers employ AMS practices to promote student success as part of their key performance areas. This then poses a challenge in identifying efficient and appropriate practices for academic monitoring and support and evaluation of the way they impact on courses/modules, programmes, departments and the institution overall.

In order to explore the way AMS takes place at WSU, this survey uses a series of questions to explore the way leaders and managers implement monitoring and reporting strategies. The purpose of the survey is to better understand, explain and identify any gaps in the university teaching and learning support systems and processes and also to optimise performance against targets.

Please complete all the questions. Your responses are not anonymous as this study has identified your office, with endorsement from faculty management.

**SECTION A: WSU student academic performance targets for 2014 were 74% for student success rates and 18% for student graduation rates. The actual performance for WSU overall for 2013/14 was 81% and 17%, respectively. In the questions below, please indicate by placing X in the relevant box.**

1. Do you know what the average student success rates[19] were in your course/module, programme, department/faculties in November/December 2015/2016?

| | | x | Please provide % | | x |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Course/Module | Yes | | | No | |
| Extended Programme | Yes | | | No | |
| Mainstream Programme | Yes | | | No | |
| Department | Yes | | | No | |
| Faculty | Yes | | | No | |

2. Are these student success rates improving/stable/becoming worse? Please mark with X.

| Improving | Stable | Becoming worse |
|---|---|---|
| | | |

3. How do these success rates compare with the rest of the institution? Please

[19] Student success rates refer to the total number of courses passed by students in a given academic year relative to course enrolments, (CHE Vitalstats, 2011)

mark with X.

| Satisfactory | Average | Unsatisfactory |
|---|---|---|
| | | |

4. Please indicate the estimated percentage of excluded students in 2015/2016 in your course or module/programme/department/faculty.

| Course/module | Programme | Department | Faculty |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |

5. In your opinion, what are the constraints on improving students' performance?

6. In your opinion, what could be done to enhance student success?

7. Please indicate your satisfaction with the extent to which the student academic performance indicators (targets and actual numbers) are discussed at departmental /faculty/campus/senate levels.

| | Satisfactory | Unsatisfactory |
|---|---|---|
| Department | | |
| Faculty | | |
| Campus | | |
| Senate | | |

8. Are you aware of any discussions that have included plans to make improvements in the following areas? Please mark any area in which you are aware of discussion with X.

| **Problem area** | **Discussion?** | **Problem area** | **Discussion?** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Student performance | | Academic advising | |
| Curriculum design | | Curriculum programme review | |
| Curriculum delivery | | Teaching methodologies | |
| Programme management | | Assessment | |

**SECTION B:**

9. WSU has a Teaching and Learning Development Strategy which identifies activities to be used to provide support and development to students.

Please indicate (by marking with an X) whether you have been involved in any of the following activities intended to provide support and development to students over the last three years.

| **Activity** | **Involved?** | **Activity** | **Involved?** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Student Orientation/Induction | | Academic Advising | |
| Extended programmes | | Academic Development modules/courses | |
| Professional Excellence Programme/Workshops | | e-Learning training | |
| Evaluation of Teaching and lLearning | | Curriculum Development | |
| PAL/tutorials/mentors | | Registered in WiseUp | |
| Reading and Writing Centres | | Short Learning Programme | |
| Academic Programme Reviews | | Seminars | |
| National/International Conference | | | |

**SECTION C:**

In order to operationalize the institutional Teaching and Learning Development Strategy, CLTD developed Standard Operating Procedures (SoPs) to mitigate the impact of student exclusions at WSU. These SoPs served before the Senate Committee for Learning and Teaching Development for faculty input and were approved at the meeting of Senate held in August 2015. Please provide an answer to each of the questions about the SoPs.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. | *Binding study advice: Each WSU student to be contracted to accumulate a specified number of credits on the basis of which academic advice is provided for learners at risk* |
| | What constraints did you experience in providing binding study advice? |
| | What best enabled you to provide binding study advice? |
| 2. | *Tracking and Monitoring System: Each WSU student to be monitored and tracked for student academic performance per task completed and marked per semester/year to allow for referral of all at risk students to 'on time' academic development interventions.* |
| | What constraints did you experience in tracking and monitoring student performance? |

| | |
|---|---|
| | What best enabled you to track and monitor student performance? |
| 3. | *Assessment for Student Learning: All assessment tasks to be moderated to ensure the quality of assessment for student learning and to ensure that capacity building for academic staff takes place where standards are not met.* |
| | What constraints did you experience in moderating assessment tasks? |
| | What best enabled you to moderate assessment tasks? |
| 4. | *Evaluation of Teaching/Courses: Each course/module to be evaluated per institutional policy (i.e. within the semester for semester courses and within a year for year courses) and procedures for on time academic development interventions to be effectively implemented.* |
| | What constraints did you experience in evaluating teaching and courses? |
| | What best enabled you to evaluate your teaching and courses? |
| 5. | Programme Reviews: Each academic programme to be reviewed per institutional policy (that is within three years of programme offering) and procedures and corrective action plans to be implemented timeously. |
| | What constrained programme reviews in your experience? |
| | What best enabled the review of programmes? |

**SECTION D:**

An effective Tracking and Monitoring System, involving tracking and monitoring students' performance on assessment tasks, is argued to be essential to improvement. Please indicate your response depending on your role in the university. Please answer the questions below appropriate to your role in the University.

Please indicate you role in the University with an X.

| Head of Department | Faculty Dean | Campus Rector |
|---|---|---|
| | | |

1. What is done to track and monitor student performance in your department/faculty/on your campus at the moment?

2. What challenges have you experienced in tracking and monitoring performance in your department/faculty/on your campus?

3. Do you have any recommendations about the way tracking and monitoring could be made more effective?

**SECTION E:**

The WiseUp online Learning Management System offers a number of tools to support academic monitoring and support. For example, after each assessment task, a lecturer can:

a. Identify students at risk (in order to refer them to support activities)

b. Identify students who have achieved highly (and recommend them as Peer Assisted Learning Leaders/Tutors)
c. Monitor course activities (who does what, how many times)
d. Notify students at risk (by email/sms) and recommend they seek academic support/development.

Please indicate how these WiseUp tools can add value to the management of student exclusions at the level for which you carry responsibility as well as any recommendations you may have for improvement.

| |
|---|
| **Management of exclusions at campus level:**<br><br>Has WiseUp been used to manage exclusions at campus level? If so, how?<br><br>Do you have any recommendations about how WiseUp could be better used to manage exclusions at campus level? |
| **Management of exclusions at faculty level:**<br><br>Has WiseUp been used to manage exclusions at faculty level? If so, how?<br><br>Do you have any recommendations about how WiseUp could be better used to manage exclusions at faculty level? |
| **Management of exclusions at departmental level:**<br><br>Has WiseUp been used to manage exclusions at departmental level? If so, how?<br><br>Do you have any recommendations about how WiseUp could be better used to manage exclusions at departmental level? |

**SECTION F:**

At some universities, academic development and student registration units are represented at Faculty Appeals Committees. This is currently not the case at WSU. Please indicate by placing X in the boxes below whether you would support this practice at WSU.

1. Do you support the inclusion of HoDs Academic Development and HoD Academic Services/Administration **as participants** in Faculty Appeals

Committees? Please mark with an X.

| Yes | No |
|---|---|
| | |

Please provide a reason for your response/

2. Do you support the inclusion of HoDs Academic Development and HoD Academic Services/Administration **as observers** in Faculty Appeals Committees? Please mark with an X.

| Yes | No |
|---|---|
| | |

Please provide a reason for your response.

3. Do you support the use of student records and the relevant data on academic development in making decisions about academic exclusions.

| Yes | No |
|---|---|
| | |

Please provide a reason for your response.

4. Would you support the establishment of a Campus Academic Exclusion Appeal Committee in addition to the Faculty Appeals Committee with the following membership?

   a. Campus Rector (Chair)
   b. Executive Dean of Students or nominee
   c. Director, Learning and Teaching Development or nominee
   d. One senior member of the academic staff from each faculty nominated by the Dean concerned
   e. Two student representatives nominated by the Campus SRC
   f. In attendance: HoD, Academic Development & HoD, Academic Services, (depending on faculties and departments on each campus)

| Yes | No |
|---|---|
| | |

Please provide a reason for your response.

5. Would you support the use of evidence of a student's participation in Academic Advising Sessions, Peer Assisted Learning/Tutorials/Mentoring to make decisions about student appeals?

| Yes | No |
|---|---|
| | |

Please provide a reason for your response.

**SECTION G:**

Respondent's Biographical Details (NB: Template/Questionnaire is not anonymous):

Surname and Name/Initials:

Designation:

Department/Faculty:

# Appendix III

## Request for your participation in a research project

Dear

I am registered for doctoral study in the Faculty of Education at Rhodes University. I am writing to you to invite you to participate in my study as an informant and to request your informed consent to do so. I have identified you as a participant because of your role at Walter Sisulu University. In 2014, your department/faculty was involved in the pilot project on academic monitoring and support, which was approved by the Deans of Faculty and the Research Ethics Committee. My current study follows up on this pilot project.

In the context of the number of students who drop out of the system or are excluded in the course of their studies, the goal of my study is explore the constraints and enablements facing academic managers and leaders as they set about working with the WSU Strategy for Academic Monitoring and Reporting. The results will be used for research and publications purposes only and will be made available in the form of a thesis and any publications that emanate from it.

Although this communique identifies your name and that of your department and faculty, no individuals will be mentioned by name in the thesis and any publications that are related to it.

I will share my results with you as my study proceeds and you will be free to request that any references to information you provided are deleted. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Thank you for your kind assistance

In the event of any problems or queries, please contact me as follows:

*VM Dwayi, (083 390 2229) (Fax: 086 622 2161) (Extension: 043 709 4720)*

*Informed Consent*

I……. agree to participate in the study being conducted by Mr Valindawo Dwayi.

I understand that my identity will not be revealed in the study and that any information I provide will be treated in confidence.

I also reserve my right to withdraw from this research project should I choose to do so.

Name:…….

…….

*Signature*

……

*Date*