FROM **HOPE** TO **ACTION** THROUGH **KNOWLEDGE**

The Renaissance of the
University of the Western Cape

2001 – 2014

Editors

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Foreword

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This book serves as a welcome and unique addition to the increasing stock of knowledge on the transformation of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa. While the book provides an extensive account of a university succeeding despite its apartheid legacy, it also provides evidence of the impact of the apartheid legacy on universities in South Africa.

University leaders and all institutional stakeholders entered the period of change in democratic South Africa filled with hope and optimism. For many, the advent of democracy signalled a firm break with the past. Those who had courageously survived the worst intentions of apartheid higher education hoped for dedicated policy and resource support from the new democratic government that came into office following the elections of 1994.

The University of the Western Cape, a university created to execute the apartheid 'grand plan' of racial separation and academic inequality, eagerly prepared for a different era of higher education in South Africa. A period in which transformation and redress of past discrimination as critical imperatives beckoned. The University had played a significant role in the struggle for freedom. It openly associated with those fighting for freedom and was bold in actively supporting this cause. Former Rector and Vice-Chancellor Prof Jakes Gerwel earned national and global acclaim for his leadership in resisting apartheid, while also ensuring

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the academic project of the University was honoured and acted upon. Needless to say, for this bold stand the University was duly penalised by the apartheid state.

The departure of Prof Gerwel from the University in 1994 to join the country's first democratic government was followed by periods in which there appeared to be loss of vision and strategy at the institution.

The appointment of Prof Brian O'Connell as Rector and Vice-Chancellor in 2001 resulted in a historic revival of mission and purpose as detailed in this well-crafted account of his two terms as Rector and the immense changes he wrought at UWC.

As this accurate account indicates, once UWC appointed a leader steeped in education policy and practice, determined in the belief that historically disadvantaged institutions can and should pursue and achieve excellence, and able to build a team that would persuade an entire university community to share the ideal of fundamental change, nothing would stop the University. The book details all the different aspects of the change process Prof O'Connell began on assuming office.

I will never forget my excitement when he came to present his plans for achieving science excellence at UWC. He clearly knew that the legacy of apartheid and the lack of intellectual ambition it imposed on majority black institutions had to be confronted. Furthermore, he was determined to work with immense energy against the prevailing notion that historically black institutions had been centres of constant conflict and protest, institutions with a poor research record and poorly managed financial assets. He addressed all these imprints of apartheid and did so successfully. The book confirms this. On my first visit to UWC in 2005, I could feel the commitment to the emerging vision and saw the new visible results of success. Students stopped the Rector as we walked across campus and he had real conversations with them. The rapport with academics, international partners and other stakeholders was also visible.

Now to the book, it is rare to have such a diverse and detailed account of change within a university. The book is of relevance to the entire system as it focuses on so many policy goals of the government and the sector. It can be used as a practical guide on how to create quality and success in higher education. It is a must read for change-oriented leaders as it is a rare account of how to transform an institution. The editors who ensured that this book was compiled must be commended for this excellent contribution to the development of higher education.