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

The Renaissance of the
University of the Western Cape

2001 – 2014

Editors

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Introduction

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Purpose of the book

The remarkable revitalisation of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) at the turn of the century was an unprecedented achievement in the history of higher education in South Africa. This book is an effort to record, document and present an account of a recrafting of an institution as it sought to move away from the inherited scripts of apartheid. The oppressive and discriminatory practices of the apartheid era created distinct categories of universities in South Africa that have to this day largely retained the racial markers imposed upon them by apartheid as the country grapples with the transformation and redress challenges. The Extension of University Education Act No. 45 of 1959 laid the foundation for a racialised and ethnically-based university system with hugely disparate funding formulae and mandates for the then existing White and newly established Black (African, Coloured and Indian) universities. The latter grouping is referred to as the historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) within the current democratic dispensation. UWC is one such HDI, established for “Coloured” South Africans.

Apart from receiving limited funding from the state, the HDIs were not designed to offer postgraduate education and engage in research and innovation, but to produce first degree Black graduates to occupy the lower rungs of the labour market. Moreover, since the HDIs drew

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their students from the disenfranchised, marginalised and poor sectors of South African society, a significant increase in student fees to grow income was not an option. Consequently, as a result of a low resource base, maintaining financial stability without compromising the academic project was always a challenge.

Despite the many challenges, under the leadership of Rector and Vice-Chancellor Prof Jakes Gerwel, UWC established a legacy for its role in forging a vision of a future post-apartheid society in the midst of a courageous struggle against apartheid waged by students and staff of the University. In his address at his Installation as the Rector and Vice-Chancellor of UWC in June 1987, Prof Gerwel declared UWC as the Intellectual Home for the Left. In 1989 he defied government policy and officially opened UWC's doors of learning to students of all races, the first South African university to take this bold step.

The period 1994-2000 was extremely difficult for the University. Because of its alignment with the struggle for liberation, it lost large numbers of its intellectual core to political and public leadership positions in the new democracy. Perhaps not surprisingly, a number of members of the first democratic cabinet were recruited from UWC, including Prof Jakes Gerwel himself, who was appointed as Director-General in President Nelson Mandela's office. Proffs Kader Asmal and Dullah Omar were appointed as ministers. The country's gain was UWC's severe loss, as a strong cohort of good academics is essential to engage in high-end research and scholarly teaching and learning, as well as to attract external funding. The loss particularly affected UWC's capacity to maintain a growing postgraduate education and research programme. The new era also brought a mounting financial crisis. Although UWC's tuition fees were among the lowest in the country, it naively heeded the Minister of Education's political call to suspend fee increases and allow indigent students to enrol without paying. This resulted in rising student debt with no relief from the state.

Manipulation of the higher education market also played a role in destabilising HDIs. To take advantage of a new higher education funding system, and to demonstrate their rapid transformation, several historically white Afrikaans universities used their substantial resources, as well as entered into partnerships with private higher education providers, to lure away significant numbers of the best students from UWC and other historically disadvantaged universities. This was intended to redeem their political reputations and to enable them to exploit the democratic

government's university subsidy system. Between 1994 and 2000 student enrolments at UWC declined by approximately one third to just under 10 000. The University faced the future with a sense of trepidation. With declining student numbers, staff retrenchments and imminent bankruptcy, the University was left in a perilous state, unable to live out the dream it had helped to create under the oppressive conditions of apartheid. At this time, the term in office of Rector and Vice-Chancellor Prof Cecil Abrahams came to an end.

In November 2001 Prof Brain O'Connell was appointed Rector and Vice-Chancellor of an institution that was in a dire condition. Confronted with a crippling financial crisis, disillusioned and mistrustful staff, and a plethora of academic and other challenges, O'Connell entered an institution with an uncertain future. With a unique sense of care and compassion, self-belief and unflinching hope for the future, he presented a bold but carefully constructed Vision for UWC and highlighted the importance of its role in South Africa's reconstruction and development. Such was the Vision and his humble yet strong leadership style that he was able to galvanise all UWC stakeholders into believing that a better future was possible through a collective effort. With the support of his executive and middle managers as well as the students and staff across the Institution, O'Connell initiated an open and transparent process of strategically rebuilding UWC.

Soon after Prof O'Connell took office, a national working group, established by the Minister of Education to advise on the restructuring of higher education in South Africa as part of the necessary rationalisation within a democratic state, recommended that UWC be merged with Peninsula Technikon. Prof O'Connell responded by presenting his Vision for UWC to state officials accompanied by a strong argument for why it was necessary for UWC to remain as a stand-alone institution for the country's transformation and redress programme as well as for its socioeconomic development agenda. The government was persuaded and UWC did not merge with Peninsula Technikon. The focus now was on realising the Vision of transforming UWC into a financially viable academic institution underpinned by excellence and impact in teaching and learning, research and innovation, and community engagement, that would revitalise the University's promise to work towards a post-apartheid future.

When Prof O'Connell retired at the end of 2014, UWC had exceeded expectations. An expansive scholarly project placed it at the cutting edge of debates about social transformation. Its financial wellbeing was

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restored and the rewards of years of committed attention to the task of reorienting the University towards the task of consolidating post-apartheid freedom helped to rebuild the teaching and research capacity of the University. Within a relatively short period it was recognised as one of the leading research-led universities in South Africa and the continent. This was confirmed by the 2015 *Times Higher Education* ranking of African universities that placed UWC 5th in South Africa and 7th in Africa. The academic landscape of UWC had dramatically transformed with an expanding set of scholarly undergraduate and postgraduate programmes which served a student population that increased from under 10 000 in 2001 to 22 000 in 2014.

UWC was described as a “shining star” by representatives of the state and members of public institutions when reflecting on what is possible with visionary leadership. This book emerges from an insistence on the need to document the amazing resurgence of UWC not only to inspire and motivate other HDIs and the new universities in South Africa, but also to serve as a learning resource for external institutions elsewhere, including the African continent. The contributions in this book from the present Rector and Vice-Chancellor, Prof Tyrone Pretorius, the then members of Prof O’Connell’s Executive Management team and selected directors and senior scholars from the University’s schools, departments, institutes, centres and units are more than a tribute to the outstanding leadership of Prof Brian O’Connell. These contributions also document for posterity how the presence of an inspiring, visionary and self-believing leader, whose approach was underpinned by the premise “from hope to action through knowledge” and a set of carefully crafted strategies and processes that were in synergy with his Vision, can lead to remarkable achievements. Such was the Vision that it was embraced by government departments, national science councils and other national and international funding agencies and partners, which as a collective provided invaluable support to the turnaround programmes and initiatives that were implemented.

Scope of contents

The book begins with a Foreword by Minister Naledi Pandor, who while holding the portfolios of Minister of Higher Education and Training, and Science and Technology had first-hand knowledge of the re-emergence of UWC. During the period 2005-2015 Dr Pandor officiated at several events at the University, including officially opening the new life sciences building

and launching the first DST/NRF Centre of Excellence at a historically disadvantaged university. Section A focuses on transforming the institutional executive management and culture. It begins in Chapter 1 with the vision of Prof Brian O'Connell, which served as the cornerstone for the strategic rebuilding of UWC and its turnaround, and will be referred to in the book as "the Vision". Chapters 2-6 share how the different members of Prof O'Connell's Executive Management Team responded in reconfiguring their particular portfolios towards the realisation of the Vision; the team was made up of the Head of Institutional Strategic Planning, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Student Development and Support, the Executive Director Finance and the Executive Director Human Resources. The comprehensiveness of the revitalisation strategy towards a holistic institutional recovery is brought out in Section B, which deals with the realignment of the different components of the academic project. A fresh look at the Institution's Strategic Plan for Teaching and Learning; its Research and Innovation Agenda, the mainstreaming of Community Engagement within the University's academic project and the necessary strengthening of e-Learning through the embedding of emerging technologies in support of the academic enterprise, are presented in Chapters 7-10.

The foundation for UWC's advancement into a research-led university, in response to the O'Connell Vision, was built on the success of its identified emerging and established niche areas. As part of the colonial mindset of the architects of apartheid, HDIs were not established to offer postgraduate education and engage in research, especially in the sciences, but O'Connell firmly believed Africa had what it takes to produce not only Nobel laureates in Literature and Peace, but also in the Sciences. He continuously urged his academic staff: "We must show that we can do good research, good science". It is not possible within the scope of this book to capture the range of individual achievements across the institution. Consequently, Section C has been reserved for niche areas in the different faculties. In the Chapters 11-25 a selection of the University's leading directors and senior scholars, representing the critical mass of scholars around whom UWC's scholarly advancement was conceptualised, share how their respective niche areas blossomed to become centres, institutes and units that received national and international acclaim for the quality of their research and thought leadership.

Reflections on the journey of UWC from 2001 to 2014 are presented in Section D. Chapter 26 is reserved for the views of UWC's current Rector

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and Vice-Chancellor, Prof Tyrone Pretorius. He started his academic career at the University, eventually rising to Dean of the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences, and then to Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic from 2001 to 2005. At the end of his term in office he left UWC to head the South African campus of Monash University of Australia as President and Pro-Vice-Chancellor and later in 2013 he took up the position of Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning at the University of Pretoria. In January 2015 Prof Pretorius returned to UWC when he was appointed as Rector and Vice-Chancellor to succeed Prof O'Connell. In this chapter, entitled *Phoenix: The UWC I left and the University I Returned to*, he reflects on his experience. The concluding Chapter 27 is an appreciation of visionary leadership.

Conclusion

Far from being a conventional volume of academic writing bound by a commonly adopted theoretical framework and disciplinary method, this is a book that offers a perspective on the emergence of a post-apartheid university, one that refused to be beholden to, or impeded by, the inheritance of an apartheid past. While the focus of the volume may be institutionally specific, it nevertheless sets out some of the critical lessons facing higher education transformation as it seeks new paradigms for linking teaching and learning with research and innovation. Effectively, this is a book that combines scholarly and administrative reflections on the making of a post-apartheid university and highlights the importance of leadership in higher education to lend institutional weight to building a future non-racial society. Given the wide array of essays by educators, administrators and researchers collected here, the volume serves as a Festschrift for a gifted academic and educational leader whose inclusive vision marks a milestone in the transformation of higher education in South Africa. The essays collected in the present volume testify to the importance of drawing on the experience of the historically disadvantaged institutions of South African higher education as a whole is to meet the challenges of deracialising the sector beyond the University of the Western Cape. The essays provide insight and new knowledge in deepening our understanding of translations of strategic plans, academic excellence, student development and support, and financial and human resource management at a South African institution of higher education. Anchored in specific experiences of institutional niche areas nurtured during the tenure of Prof Brian O'Connell, the volume will serve as a

major contribution to the history of the re-emergence and revitalisation of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa. The volume serves not only to document and celebrate the accomplishments of exemplary educational leadership, but it also provides a perspective on the new-found lustre in higher education in South Africa.