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

The Renaissance of the
University of the Western Cape

2001 – 2014

Editors

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The Turnaround Vision of Brian O'Connell

From interviews with Dr Vanessa Brown (2006) and Prof Ramesh Bharuthram (2019)

Career prior to joining UWC as Rector and Vice-Chancellor

Brian O'Connell started his career in 1970 as a teacher at Florida Secondary School, Ravensmead in the Cape Flats, ten years later rising to the position of Principal of Kleinvlei Secondary School. With a deep-seated interest in tertiary education, he moved to the University of the Western Cape as Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education, where he served from July 1985 to March 1988, then moving to the position of Rector of Athlone College of Education. In April 1991 he joined Peninsula Technikon as the Director of the School of Education.

In October 1995 Brian O'Connell was appointed head of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) as Superintendent General of Education in the Province. His primary goal was to elevate the provincial education system to fully serve the people of the Western Cape, especially those who had been severely disadvantaged and impoverished during the apartheid years. In carrying out his mandate, he had to face many challenges. None was as large as the task of communicating to the educators in the schools the possibility of job losses. The rationalisation into a unitary education system within democratic South Africa's transformation and redress agenda indicated there would be job losses for some teachers. Since the Western Cape was better resourced than most of the other provinces in

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the country, the impact was expected to be more severe there than in the others. How does one communicate such distressing news to the teachers and the wider community?

Brian O'Connell was a strong proponent of inclusivity and engagement. He held 24 meetings across the province with teachers, school governing bodies (SGBs) and the wider community. He wanted to engage with them to unpack the reality of the situation, despite its harshness, motivated by the need for sense-making and understanding. Not unexpectedly, the atmosphere at the meetings was hostile and he was verbally attacked in his capacity as the messenger bringing unpleasant news. But the truth of what was to soon happen had to be shared with the community – his conscience would not allow him to do otherwise. Through these meetings he was able to get the communities to understand the actions that were to follow and the reasons for them.

In his capacity as Superintendent General of Education his strategy was to empower the educators within the province. He focused on developing the leadership skills of school principals and their management teams, as well as the SGBs so that they would take ownership of their schools and lead them on successful growth paths. He introduced a shift from centralised responsibility to shared responsibility within a devolved management model. This approach, while welcomed by the school principals and SGBs, unfortunately led to a fierce conflict with the MEC for Education in the Western Cape. Not prepared to compromise his stand on inclusivity and community development, Brian O'Connell decided to give up his post, explore other opportunities or go into retirement.

The return to UWC

While working for the provincial government in not the best of situations for him to achieve his goals, he met a staff member of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) who informed him of the vacant post of Rector and Vice-Chancellor (VC) of UWC which had been advertised and suggested he consider applying. He did so, was interviewed and offered the post. Brian O'Connell joined UWC as Rector and Vice-Chancellor in November 2001. He walked into a hostile environment and found the staff to be hugely dispirited.

The Turnaround Vision of Brian O'Connell

Following the departure in 1994 of Rector and Vice-Chancellor Professor Jakes Gerwel and several senior academics to serve in South Africa's first democratic government, UWC went through a difficult period highlighted by poor management and uncertainty, a significant drop in student numbers and consequent financial instability. As the institution headed into bankruptcy, some staff members were retrenched. According to the staff, the way in which the retrenchment process was implemented by the previous Executive Management was non-consultative and deceitful, resulting in a mistrustful and negative attitude towards the University Executive Management. In the prevailing circumstances the staff union NEHAWU had assumed a very strong role as the voice of the workers. Staff morale was very low. When Brian O'Connell arrived in 2001 the University was in a grave financial situation facing imminent bankruptcy, while its student population had declined to below 10 000. The viability of UWC as a university for the future was seriously in doubt.

On his second day in office Rector O'Connell met the leadership of NEHAWU and was presented with a list of 39 demands. A second meeting was set for a week later at which Executive Management's response was to be presented. A day before the second meeting Professor O'Connell was informed that the union was arranging a staff march to the administration building on the next morning. He immediately called in two members of the NEHAWU leadership and informed them that if a march did take place, he would do what he considered necessary to preserve the integrity of the University as an asset of the citizens of South Africa. He reminded the NEHAWU representatives that under apartheid the country had traversed a journey that had been dehumanising and painful for most of its (oppressed) citizens. The many lives that had been sacrificed in attaining the country's democratic freedom could not be forgotten, but needed to be respected. Therefore, it was incumbent upon all South Africans to respect and to operate within the confines of the country's Constitution. Consequently, he informed the NEHAWU representatives that any illegal action by staff would be severely dealt with, including immediate suspension of the perpetrators, followed by disciplinary processes and possible dismissal. The planned march did not take place. The rules for engagement between staff and the Executive Management had been set down by Rector Brian O'Connell. The subsequent scheduled meeting with the Union was very constructive and served to set the foundation for ongoing positive relations and engagements with staff.

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After that, Professor O'Connell could focus on revitalising the academic project, in particular to share his vision with the University stakeholders. His approach was one in which the first step was to recognise UWC was financially poor and struggling. As he recalled:

However, we could not throw in the towel. We must have hope! But hope alone was not enough. We needed to act to realise the desires of the hope. The actions we take have to be appropriate. To achieve this, we have to acquire and be informed by the relevant knowledge.

Consequently, Professor O'Connell created the motto '**From Hope to Action through Knowledge**' as the driver for taking UWC forward, which extended the original UWC motto from '*A Place of Quality, A Place to Grow*' to '*A Place of Quality, A Place to Grow, from Hope to Action through Knowledge*'.

The set of events that followed strengthened Professor Brian O'Connell's credentials as a leader to be respected and consolidated the belief that it was possible to turn UWC around. In 2001 the then Minister of Education Professor Kader Asmal, established a National Working Group (NWG) to advise on the restructuring of higher education in democratic South Africa as part of a process of rationalisation within a unitary education system, so as to dismantle the differentiated higher education systems established on the basis of race and ethnicity during apartheid (Extension of University Education Act, 1959). In its recommendations the NWG proposed that UWC and the adjacent Peninsula Technikon should be merged into a single comprehensive university offering both traditional university and technikon programmes. The reaction of staff on the UWC campus was, not unexpectedly, one of extreme anger, with a call for protest action. Instead, Brian O'Connell adopted a different stance: "We needed to contest with the State on intellectual and aspirational terms. Not on UWC's instinctive 'let's go to the barricade' terms."

UWC's response had to be level-headed and carefully thought out. In engaging with his staff, he emphasised the need for a cogent argument not only for why UWC's legacy as a champion at the forefront in the fight against apartheid could not be destroyed, but also to articulate in a definitive way that UWC had a relevant and important role to play as a stand-alone institution in the transformation of higher education in South Africa. Accordingly, Professor O'Connell presented a position paper to the highest levels in government on why UWC could not be merged and

presented his vision on what the institution had to offer to the nation. In doing so he informed his staff that he would resign if his appeal is unsuccessful and UWC is merged with the technikon.

Government listened. In response, the Minister of Education did not accept the recommendation of the NWG. The University of the Western Cape was to remain as a stand-alone institution (Department of Education, 2002). The vision presented by Brian O'Connell in mapping the way forward for UWC was accepted. It was now time for UWC to deliver on the promises under the leadership of Brian O'Connell.

Soon thereafter, Professor O'Connell was alerted to an opportunity for a grant funded by the Flemish funding agency VLIR-UOS in Belgium. Motivated by his vision that UWC must have a presence in the global space and his recognition that significant external funding was required to transform the academic project at UWC, he decided on a project on human and social development called The Dynamics of Building a Better Society (DBBS). This decision was taken against institutional expectations, since the level of scholarship in the natural sciences at UWC was at that point much higher than in the other faculties. Professor O'Connell's defence of the proposal in the presence of an international review panel during a site visit was underpinned by the legacy of UWC and the O'Connell Vision to take the institution to greater heights through a focus on excellence in scholarship and meaningful societal impact. The defence was not easy. The UWC proposal was an unusual one for the VLIR review panel members to assess. They had not encountered a similar proposal in their 18 other partnerships across the world in the previous 10 years, as these had all been in the natural sciences. Professor O'Connell recalled:

I argued strongly that it's got to be a Social Sciences-Humanities relationship. And I argued also that an important element of the intellectual programme must be the transformation of the University itself, because while it is seeking to transform itself with respect to its academic abilities, it must also be inside itself as a microcosm of society, because we are of the culture, it is us.

He argued further:

There was a need for a sense of co-responsibility amongst all humans in addressing the challenges to our physical and social environment. Our future as a species depends on the success of our collaborative relationships with humans globally.

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The panel was impressed, the 10-year DBBS grant of R49 million was made to UWC in July 2003. The transformation of UWC under the leadership of Brian O'Connell had started to crystallise.

Simultaneously, Professor O'Connell realised that in the first steps towards strengthening UWC's presence in the global space, the University had to exploit the high-end research, marked by rigour and excellence, already taking place in the Faculty of Natural Sciences, led by a cohort of scholars with established international profiles.

His next task was to focus on the fellow members of his Executive Management Team, some of whom were already in office, and related supporting units. Crucial to the realisation of his vision for UWC was the need for a strong Institutional Planning Division. It was necessary to have a strategic planning team that understood the South African higher education system and the science and innovation landscape. With a commitment to enhancing student life experience on campus, he needed as Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Student Development and Support a person who fully understood the backgrounds of 'our' students, their life experiences and the challenges they encountered – somebody who was able to identify the emotional and cultural needs of 'our' students that had to be addressed in helping them to settle into a university environment which, apart from being foreign, is for many located far from home. At the same time the person must have a strong position on the discipline and commitment required of our students to succeed as future leaders.

As regards UWC's financial challenges, Professor O'Connell realised he had to lead from the front. For almost his entire term in office he remained one of the lowest paid Vice-Chancellors in the country without complaining or requesting a higher salary. This stance won him many friends. Adopting a transparent approach, he found NEHAWU 'splendid' in their engagement with Executive Management during the financially difficult years. Open discussions were held on the financial challenges facing the University and there was a realisation that all stakeholders needed to work together to take UWC forward. Such was the commitment that salary increases smaller than those at other universities were accepted by UWC staff, with Professor O'Connell at the forefront declining his personal salary increase during the difficult times. Therefore, he needed as his Executive Director Finance somebody who was not overwhelmed by the financial challenges, but was positive about the future in accordance with the O'Connell Vision and would provide the necessary prudent leadership in developing and

implementing a financial turnaround strategy for the University. Similarly, UWC needed an Executive Director for Human Resources who fully understood the institution's past difficult periods and appreciated how the staff were working with the Rector in revitalising the University and its academic project. He wanted somebody who, despite the challenges, would work with him in improving staff working conditions and benefits as UWC's revival hinged critically on a committed and respected staff complement. As a leader of the institution's academic project, Professor O'Connell required as Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic a person of high scholarly standing, somebody with an international presence who commanded national respect and would be able to connect UWC to national and international knowledge spaces and opportunities. Such a person had to be supported by an Academic Registrar with experience as an academic and who fully understood the different organs of the South African higher education system and their *modus operandi*.

In parallel to establishing an appropriate Executive Management Team for the realisation of his vision, Professor O'Connell concentrated on motivating all other staff members. He continued to enunciate his strong belief that UWC was uniquely positioned for great achievements, despite the institution's limited resources: "We are special because of our past; therefore, we must believe in ourselves."

Professor O'Connell used the way in which UWC engaged with the Department of Education in overturning the proposed merger of the university with Peninsula Technikon as an example of what is possible, as long as we do so with thoughtful leadership, integrity and honesty.

So what were the underpinnings of the Brian O'Connell Vision that were responsible for the remarkable transformation of the University of the Western Cape?

In his Foreword to the book celebrating the success of the DBBS project, Rector Brian O'Connell wrote (DBBS, 2014):

The modern world is an environment of rapid change. Per Dalin points out that we are experiencing an unprecedented ten revolutions occurring simultaneously. There are revolutions prompted by globalisation and the population explosion, revolutions in knowledge and information, in the economy, technology, ecology, culture, politics, aesthetics, and values. Dealing with change on this scale requires a paradigm shift of the kind last experienced when science began to deepen its challenge to other forms of knowing in the 17th-century. We have to learn to know and see differently. That is not easy. With this in mind, the philosopher

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Manuel Castells points us to a combination of global knowledge, networks and communication as our fundamental means of dealing with the challenges of the 21st-century. We need to work in partnerships. There can be no going it alone.

Learning to see and understand differently is still the primary challenge in South Africa's ongoing transition to democracy. 20 years ago, emerging from the apartheid past with a mission to engage with apartheid's terrible ongoing legacy, UWC knew that it needed partners to face Dalin's ten revolutions in their local incarnations. Transformation of the kind that enables people to move beyond apartheid's authoritarian certainties requires a profound paradigm shift from both oppressor and oppressed. This shift is inseparable from a global challenge. New perspectives and new knowledge are required to respond to the non-linear, persistent and ubiquitous changes, both social and natural, that are now beginning to impact on humans across the world. It is in partnerships across cultures and nationalities that we are most likely to gain these perspectives and find this knowledge. And it is in partnerships that we find the assurance and the social conviction necessary to make the new knowledge and perspectives available and ultimately unavoidable.

Professor O'Connell had a deep understanding of the daunting challenges facing South Africa's fledgling democracy and the importance of the role of universities as the originators of new knowledge and thought processes. He constantly articulated the need to make sense of the situation as depicted in the picture below, which he used consistently to remind the UWC family of the institution's greater purpose.

Figure 1.1 The O'Connell Sense-Making Scenario: The divide between the advantaged (15%) and the disadvantaged (85%).

The challenge was to find the middle road that addresses the dire needs of the 85% of our country's population who were previously severely disadvantaged, at the same time not putting fear into the 15% who were advantaged during apartheid

He states:

We began early on to make sense of our historically black status and to say we can't hold on to that. It offers us nothing into the future. We must celebrate it consistently to remind us about how brave we were, how daring we were and how successful we were given a particular set of challenges. So it's within us to rise to challenge. That's why we remind ourselves.

The second reason we must hold onto it is to keep reminding ourselves that the majority of people in this country were on the wrong side of the largesse, the welfare of this enterprise. So the majority of the people shared our historical blackness. So in everything we do we must be in discourse with them, because we are saying in a sense we are you, but because of our particular mandate we've got to think about what we might be. And so we want you to look at us and as we go into discourse with you, see how it's possible for us to begin to move this entire enterprise into a more advantageous position with respect to securing a better future.

So we can't let go of our historical blackness, but we can't hold onto it as our defining characteristic. Our defining characteristic is that we were that, but now we are in a new situation. We carry all the hurts of that, but we are now striving to see how we challenge our reality, and we challenge it on both sides. It's to dare that way and it's to dare this way, because it's a fork.

That's why I say by definition people at universities find themselves in an invidious position because in a sense they are almost like TS Eliot's Magi. They are leaving the one and they're making contact with the other, but they are still part of the one that they are leaving. How do they hold on to their linkage to the one while moving into the demands of the other? In a sense they are moving into a new space. And so you are by definition in a position of contestation with your culture. That's what and where you are.

So how do we make sense of this now? We make sense of this by saying as an historically black institution we must debunk the notion that certain kinds of knowledge are the preserve of a certain group of people. That modern science is a Western thing. We must debunk that and we debunk that by showing we can do it too, and if we must link anywhere, we must link with Timbuktu, and we must link with some of the early African universities, and the Persian universities of that time, to show that this is not the right of a privileged few. This is all part of our human possibility.

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Our history has denied us the freedom to engage with the world and to dare it. We now have that chance. This University is you and this is you doing this. Look at what you can do so that you lose your inhibition and you lose your sense of self-consciousness – and your self-esteem will grow as you start to play at ever higher levels, more complex levels or more necessary levels of sophistication, of quality, in order to confront what the challenges are and deliver on your aspirations of being competent in meeting your challenges.

So it's not an aspiration in the sense of being fanciful. It's an aspiration to ask what must we know if we are to survive and grow, and if we don't know it now, can we at this University – given the fact that it (UWC) is embedded within all the challenges and difficulties of this (disadvantaged) sector – identify and acquire the necessary knowledge? Can we actually dare to walk that ambitious journey and, if we walk it successfully, what does it say to our culture and our society, because it's not someone else – we and you are doing it from within. We are not leaving our community, we are not going and becoming something else. We remain a part of you, your own people and (because of our success) look at what we are capable of doing.

And that's how I feel about UWC particularly and that's how I make sense of it.

He states further:

In South Africa I think the fundamental challenge is, probably, through the quality of what we do and the impact that makes, to convince our culture that knowledge matters deeply, and that in South Africa we have an incredible resource, probably the most powerful in Africa, that we should utilize and harness in order to shift our entire nation's and sub-continent's consciousness about why knowledge matters and what knowledge is necessary in this modern era for a country to survive.

So that's what I now see as the function of our universities, but UWC in particular because of its past, because of its integrity, its reputation. There is a possibility that the culture will listen to UWC in ways that it won't listen to other universities, which it considers to be foreign or alien voices. UWC has a legacy in the struggle against apartheid as representing the voice of the people – the downtrodden, the oppressed. So if this University was to really, really shine academically within our democracy and start producing large numbers of students from our communities of great ability underpinned by excellence in scholarship, while not losing our societal impact, then we shall give our culture great hope for the future. Such achievement will improve our chances of having a successful discourse with our culture. There's trust in this organisation because of its past, as there will be trust in some of the others, for example, the University of Fort Hare.

He also forcefully articulates his conviction:

I tell this story in the way that I do with absolute conviction because it's true. It's not a made-up thing, not a mock-up thing. I tell it like it is about this University and the role it must play in this country. It must shine. It must contest with those historically white institutions on their own terms, not, 'Well, we are a poor historically black university'. We must say it is because of our passion, energy and self-belief, just because of who we are: 'We'll go and we'll play the game with you and beyond, whatever it takes'.

As his Vision started to take roots into reality, Prof O'Connell recognised that UWC was already doing well in the humanities and social sciences. The need was to elevate the existing scholarship to levels of excellence. At the same time, there was a need to focus on the natural sciences, because it was the one aspect of the past that was not appropriately funded at the historically Black universities. It was the biggest leap that had to be made, and it was important for the University to believe "We can do this". This served as the catalyst for one of the first priorities of his vision, namely a landmark new Life Sciences Building.

In closing, in his address at his inauguration as the Rector and Vice Chancellor of the University of the Western Cape on 23 March 2002, in the presence of the Chancellor of the University, the Honourable Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a host of dignitaries, UWC stakeholders including students and staff, Brian O'Connell concluded with the following (O'Connell, 2002):

Chancellor, we are a real university with genuine expertise, and professors and teachers of the highest order. We are developing sound relationships with organised labour and we have an SRC of outstanding quality and commitment. Many of our administrative staff have spent all their working lives here, committed to service and in anticipation of the major challenges that await us they are participating eagerly in restructuring and development programmes.

Our relatively new and fairly young management committee is beginning to knit together as a team and our Council has confirmed their faith in us by asking the national government to allow us the space to continue on our developmental path, unencumbered with the burden of managing a merger. Arriving at this point has been a huge struggle. You know this well, Chancellor, as you have seen parts of the best and the worst of UWC in the last 40 years. But we are now a university of merit, no longer needing to qualify our existence, and the reward for all of this commitment must be the chance to enhance the growing international reputation and range of collaboration with over 20 institutions from all over the world with whom we have formal agreements and active collaboration, and to enhance our ability to innovate and teach.

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We ask only to be given the opportunity not to be distracted from our march to excellence and to be allowed to become a symbol of hope for our country as an institution that refused to be beaten, and has fought its way to the fulfilment of its hopes.

Chancellor, earlier I gave a list of some of the most important challenges facing our country. In doing so I took the risk that my address might be construed as negative, painting a bleak picture about South Africa. I also took the risk that our newspapers may focus on what is wrong and present my address as focusing on the pathology of my country, forgetting the themes of my address: hope, knowledge and agency. Lest that happen, let me state unambiguously that we are a great nation and deserve to be held up to the world for our courage, our wisdom and our generosity. We have done far, far better in transcending the evil of apartheid than we had any right to expect. As a nation we have given the world the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, one of the most remarkable gestures of human generosity this world has ever experienced, which provided us with a space to heal and to restore the dignity of all our people.

What I am speaking about tonight is the road ahead, the realisation of our full potential, the thoughts and the deeds that will help us to sustain a life of truth, respect, responsibility and justice. What I am speaking about is the role that our higher education institutions in general and UWC in particular must play, and can play because of its past, but also because of the talents and the commitments of its present staff and students. And I make these claims not on the basis of our intentions, but on the solid foundation of our present and growing capacity.

At our graduation on 14 March, Professor Tyrone Pretorius, our Vice-Rector: Academic, in his address introduced me to the psychological concept of fortitude, the manner in which the collective energy and wisdom of a people are harnessed on the basis of what they do or can do that is right. It is a powerful concept that resonates so strongly with me and with my thesis about the family, with which I started my address.

UWC is a family of a special kind and it has much fortitude. It does so much that is right and will use its combined wisdom and its considerable intellectual power to understand itself even better and maintain and enhance its ability to bring knowledge and understanding to our people. But it must do more than this. Based on the notion of fortitude it must mount a sustained multidisciplinary response to poverty as its special contribution to the life and welfare of our people. It is ready for the task, Chancellor, and as Rector I commit this institution to a life of fortitude in the knowledge that UWC may not fail itself, for to do so is to fail this nation. If this nation does indeed fail, then history's judgement of UWC as well as its sister institutions will be harsh indeed and will decisively obliterate the significance of UWC's success in struggle.

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We owe it to that special past, to our alumni and all those who have worked here to write the next chapter of UWC in glory, with their continued help. To the extent that it depends on my leadership and my energy to ensure this, I make that pledge to you, my families, the UWC family and the nation tonight.

Conclusion

The chapters that follow provide evidence of the way that Brian O'Connell fulfilled the pledge made on 23 March 2002 through his passionate, caring and inspirational leadership that galvanised the UWC family into self-belief.

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