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Society and the multiple communities of higher education

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Professional interests, affiliations, roles, and conditions of service that identify and separate groups have long been established within university traditions. As new social and institutional imperatives emerge, however, professional comfort zones are disturbed. Traditional communities of practice are gradually becoming more open and more participatory. This paper investigates the possibilities and complexities of community building from national and institutional perspectives. The communities created by means of curriculum design decisions, conversations between authors and readers of teaching and learning texts, and knowledge domains which are either legitimised or rejected will also be explored. The University of South Africa (UNISA) will be used as an example to illustrate some of the challenges presented by the changing conditions of institutions and society.

Die samelewing en meervoudige hoëronderwysgemeenskappe

Professionele belangstellings, persoonlike verbintenisse, rolle en diensvoorwaardes wat groepe identifiseer en afsonder, is lank reeds deel van universitêre tradisies. Professionele gemaksones word egter versteur namate nuwe sosiale en institusionele eise na vore tree. Tradisionele praktykgemeenskappe word toenemend oop en deelnemend. In hierdie artikel word die moontlikhede en probleme wat hierdie gemeenskappe in die gesig staar belig vanuit nasionale en institusionele hoeke. Ondersoek word ingestel na gemeenskappe wat op grond van kurrikulumontwerpbesluite die lig sien, gesprekke wat plaasvind tussen outeurs en lesers van studietekste, asook kennisdomeine waaraan legitimiteit verleen word of wat verwerp word. Daar word spesifiek na die Universiteit van Suid-Afrika (UNISA) verwys ter illustrasie van sommige van die uitdagings van veranderende omstandighede by onderriginstellings en die samelewing.

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All our life experiences, learning and work activities are situated in a specific context, which is composed of relationships with other people, ideas, objects, circumstances, events and various resources. This contextual setting and everything to which we attribute meaning forms our life-world. A significant aspect thereof is the interaction among members of community at any given time. Through association and engagement in joint activities, meaning is negotiated, forms of knowledge are constructed, and the norms and values that identify a community are communicated (cf Bruner 1996, Vygotsky 1978, Hall 1997, Leistyna 1999).

Formal education, particularly higher education, is one of the most powerful systems by means of which nations and communities establish, preserve, change and disseminate particular forms of knowledge and values. Throughout the world, universities are facing new social, political and economic challenges and pressures. The purposes of higher education have extended beyond the traditional core functions of teaching, research and community service. As King (2004: 47-60) explains, the university is required to be an innovator, a distributor of world-class good practice to a wider and more international audience, and a competitive contributor in a global knowledge-based economy. Such innovation and knowledge production is usually pursued by self-contained disciplinary and professional communities. If such communities are an integral part of the university, how do their identities and practices shape the higher education life-world? By extension, how does higher education as a sub-system of society at large impact on the lives of individuals and on society?

This study will commence with an overview of the "drivers" for community building in South Africa and of the transformative interventions being introduced in higher education. The second part will focus on the communities within institutions of higher education — how they stand in relation to one another and how they influence teaching and learning. In this regard, a distinction will be drawn between professions, disciplines, academic groupings and non-academic ones. Lastly, the organisational and pedagogical rationale for creating stronger networks across communities and practices will be considered. In conclusion, certain implications of serving multiple social interests will be highlighted.

1. Community building in the South African context

Like many other African societies and their institutions, South Africa has to deal with challenges associated with many decades of unfavourable governance systems. South African universities were designed and funded to serve the political interests of a government which perpetuated social imbalances. English universities were dedicated to the intellectual pursuit of truth, justice, academic freedom and autonomy, while Afrikaans universities were required to promote social order and to facilitate the advancement of Afrikaans speakers and the Afrikaans community. Institutions serving black students were established mainly to promote the self-development of populations in "states" divided by ethnic and regional classifications (Koen 2003: 298). To a significant extent, the curricula, institutional cultures, language policies, styles of management, student participation, success rates and staff profiles still reflect the academic traditions and institutional patterns of the past (Makgoba 2004).

One of the important contributions to the repair of the social degeneration caused by apartheid was the Nation Building initiative launched by Aggrey Klaaste when he took over the leadership of the *Sowetan*, a local daily newspaper, in 1988:

> The overall aim of Klaaste's Nation Building programme was to start repairing the damage apartheid had wrought on structures within black communities across the country. [...] This was done by means of identifying people who, despite severe hardships imposed by the government's wantonly discriminatory policies, had risen above their circumstances and set a remarkable example by their actions. These achievements were to be recognised by giving awards (Davie 2003).

Even before the dawn of the democratic era in the country, the Nation Building initiative laid the foundation for a more just society and inspired people to work towards a better future. The theme of nation building was naturally integrated into the new government's policies and national agendas for social transformation. This sort of transformation is characterised and driven by the following factors:

- Economics: the formation of human capital;
- Policy: the creation and sustaining of state and civil institutions;
- Social structures: the basis of social stratification and mechanisms of mobility for various groups, and

- Culture: the production and dissemination of ideas, which exert an influence upon and critique all the above (Brennan *et al* 2004: 26).

Today, the university is obliged to reposition itself to support efforts to meet essential human needs, build a post-colonial and post-apartheid society, and engender a vibrant intellectual culture (Sawyerr 2004: 15, Bawa 2004). Higgs (2002: 16-7) is, nevertheless, critical of the transformation discourses that define the social role of a university primarily in terms of national needs:

> These calls for the transformation of higher education in the name of national development, however, also represent statements of political intent whose utilitarian notions of a university's function have given rise to the movement away from elitist to mass and universal higher education. Such utilitarian perceptions of a university's role in society need, however, to be treated with some reservation because there is an explicit narrowness in these goals which ignores the inherent value of democracy in education.

While this caution is important, the community service function of higher education does not have to be understood in purely utilitarian terms. Community service should be concerned with more than just empowerment and community development projects. These, although important in their own right, may be confined within a generally repressive political system. From a transformation perspective, community building involves processes of change and social reconstruction. In this regard, the social role of higher education acquires a mixed and complex form — sometimes supportive, sometimes critical. In South Africa, universities both sustained the apartheid regime and contributed to its overthrow (Brennan *et al* 2004: 15, 34).

2.   Surveying the higher education territory

Before exploring the role of the university in society, it would be useful to consider in more detail the communities and practices within higher education institutions.

The identities, affiliations, roles and conditions of service of separate groups have long been established within the university tradition. One might speak of the teaching, legal or engineering professions, yet each of these has disciplines and narrower fields of specialisation. For example, UNISA has fully-fledged departments offering courses for professional

specialisation in early childhood education, company law and environmental engineering. Furthermore, the university draws a broad distinction between academic and non-academic staff, with the latter category being further subdivided into professional and administrative staff.

2.1 Communities and discourses

The community building function of higher education may be seen as going against the grain of academic autonomy, the pursuit of excellence, and individual achievement. Sawyerr (2004: 44) aptly observes:

> Higher education [...] is an inherently privileging experience, and the situation is compounded by the very nature of university work, which tends to encourage 'meritocratic individualism' by encouraging and rewarding individual success and achievement. Thus, even though its broader social purposes include the equalisation of life chances, higher education tends to pull in the direction of individual competitiveness and the reproduction of privilege.

From the Vygotskian perspective, however, learning is a social process in which people learn from one another through participation in the construction of knowledge. Lave & Wenger (1991: 103) encourage us to talk within our practice, which is a process of exchanging information, engaging, focusing and shifting perspective, bringing about co-ordination and community-building. Thus, our identities and our understanding of the world are formed from the roles we fulfil within our communities and the shared constructs that we develop.

A community of practice consists of a set of interactions and specialised activities performed by a group of people who share a common sense of identity, purpose and roles. Individuals belong to more than one community of practice, and perform multiple roles that are guided by the norms and discourse of each community. The community-maintaining function of discourse is intertwined with meaning-making, identity, and control over ways of interacting with people and objects. Discourse signifies the social practices that members of a community account meaningful, worthy and acceptable. Therefore, acquiring a discourse means developing the ability to represent knowledge appropriately in a specific domain and at a particular historical moment (Bruce 1994: 291-3, Hall 1997: 44). Within and across such communities of practice there are many other cliques, specialisation areas, points of convergence and tensions.

2.2 Academic tribes

Institutions, disciplines, and the people who make them are eager to preserve their distinct cultures and identities. Becher (1989: 20) describes communities of relationships and practice in higher education as academic tribes — each with recognisable identities, territories, traditions, knowledge domains, artefacts and attributes. The attitudes, activities and cognitive styles of groups of academics representing a particular discipline seem to be closely bound up with the characteristics and structures of the knowledge domains within which such groups are professionally situated. Thus, even within a single College of Human Sciences at UNISA, the posters and collections displayed along the corridors of the Departments of Classics and Modern European Languages, History, and Communication Science exude distinctly different auras, each associated with the activities of that particular tribe and territory.

Academic tribes are further composed of people who make representations of others to themselves, their colleagues, the public and students. Certain representations have been historicised and institutionalised as the canon or cultural capital (McLaren & Da Silva 1993: 62). The traditional institutional sites for the production and circulation of academic knowledge are laboratories, libraries, studies, lectures, seminars and consultations, journals, books, conferences and theses (Jarvis 2000: 348, Muller 2000: 14). Authors work within disciplinary and professional frameworks of knowledge production. Knowledge that resides outside the canon — border knowledge, as Rhoads & Valadez (1996: 7, 25) call it — is suppressed or ignored. Tacit theories, vocabularies, concepts and narratives that form part of the everyday knowledge base of individuals and communities have not generally been recognised as legitimate within academic discourses and curricula. This closed view of knowledge and of the curriculum is based on a form of academic autonomy which promotes exclusivity and hierarchy.

Members of a particular academic tribe also use a specialist jargon to communicate the aspects they value most in any contribution to the discipline. Becher (1989: 23-4) notes, for example, that historians will commend a piece of work as "masterly", and will be ready to single out the quality of "good craftsmanship". Scientists place significance on "elegant", "economical", "productive", "powerful", "accurate" and "rigorous" solutions to mathematical and physical problems. In sociology, "persuasive", "thought-provoking" and "stimulating" are common evaluative descriptors.

With regard to the admission of members to the tribes of academe, Kaufer & Carley (1993:341) state:

> Individuals within a discipline belong not only to a profession propagating knowledge, but to a more abstract intellectual community under whose auspices they author — not just propagate — knowledge for the discipline's use, formulating new ideas and, through those ideas, seeking authority to change, in small ways and large, the discipline's landscape. Disciplines not only encourage this discovery authorship and the generation of new ideas, but make it a requirement for membership. They impose a regimen, teaching aspiring members how to (a) generate and present new knowledge, (b) expand the common culture, and (c) cultivate and protect an authorial signature and handle.

Scholars gain recognition and authority when their names become associated with their particular ideas. They also have to make their texts appear as a continuation of ideas that are already central to the community of experts in the subject discipline. Furthermore, in order to become respectable contributors and effective agents of change, it is not sufficient for them simply to put out new ideas. They must also forge a "handle" that becomes associated with those ideas — a phrase or name that, simply by being mentioned, evokes a wealth of ideas known by many (Kaufer & Carley 1993: 348, 377).

It follows, therefore, that knowledge production tends to be rigorously controlled by core groups of influencers and gatekeepers. The core group, or "inner circle" (Mouton 2003), comprises people who are considered the genuine proprietors of a specific discipline, profession or institution. Depending on where it stands, a core group defines "the way things are done around here" (Kleiner 2003: 670-71). For example, it may be a highly cited network of international scholars, influential members of a university tuition committee, or any group whose competence and opinion is critical to the work. The recognition and power that a core group enjoys enable it to determine what may or may not be disseminated in academic journals, what content, issues and resources are available for use in curricula, and so forth.

2.3 Professional and administrative staff

As Tait (2004: 214) revealed, there is a strong perception in many institutions that academic staff members are central and enjoy high status, while non-academic staff members peripheral. Non-academic staff

members often have low status and less power, despite the critical roles they play as teaching advisors, academic developers, counsellors, information communication technology specialists and project managers.

At UNISA, members of staff not employed as lecturers at one of the five colleges, as well as those situated at colleges but serving as secretaries or technical assistants, are generally classified as administrative staff. For example, vacancies are posted in one of two categories — teaching and research, or administrative. Under administration, a further distinction is made between professional and administrative departments in terms of their purpose and main function.

Departments such as Production and Dispatch would be seen as purely administrative, while autonomous units engaged in research and/or staff development services are regarded as professional. In some cases, even professional staff members for whom research is a key performance area are not regarded as research staff. As a result, there is dissatisfaction about inflexible work hours, being expected to research and publish without the benefit of research and development leave, being classified as professional and administrative, and the limitations of a career path in which one cannot become a professor (Daweti 2003).

2.4 Overlapping interests

Despite the apparent distinctions among professional groups, and between their publicly stated missions, goals and achievements, there are shared interests. Outside disciplinary specialisations, professional communities tend to be brought together through affiliation to unions and staff associations. During times of major change and restructuring, in particular, issues of concern tend to centre on salary negotiations and reviews of conditions of service (Koen 2003: 306). Most project teams working on course development, quality assurance, and research are necessarily composed of people from more than one disciplinary domain or professional group. Nevertheless, those collaborative initiatives that impact on teaching and learning still form an exception rather than being standard practice. Disciplinary communities that share similar values and philosophical backgrounds — such as psychology, sociology and anthropology in the social sciences or mathematics and statistics in the mathematical sciences — are likely to share intellectual territories and to offer curricula with overlapping modules and prerequisites. In contrast,

> [W]hen the patriotic feelings within a discipline run high, deviations from the common cultural norms will be penalized and attempts to modify them from the outside will be rejected (Becher 1989: 37).

3. New organisational and pedagogical frameworks

Carr & Kermis (1983: 82-96) describe three paradigms that determine organisational and pedagogical practices in institutions of learning (cf Marsick 1988: 190-1). The dominant paradigm is the technical, which focuses on the acquisition, transmission and control of an objective body of knowledge. The interpretive paradigm emphasises interaction which is aimed at a better understanding of events, situations and experiences. The strategic paradigm involves critical examination of the norms, values and assumptions that govern the teaching and learning activities undertaken by individuals and groups. From this perspective, getting our higher education house in order is an ongoing, reflexive and community-based project. As Rhoads & Valadez (1996: 9) put it, it is not merely concerned with repairing cracks and leaks within clearly defined parameters; rather it has to do with critically opening up and reshaping organisational and pedagogical frameworks.

3.1 Opening up learning environments

Staff at institutions of higher education strive to serve the community by meeting the educational needs of individuals who would otherwise be excluded from formal education. One of the ways in which this is achieved is by providing flexible learning environments by means of open and distance learning approaches. During the mid-1990s, residential universities in South Africa started offering some of their programmes by distance education. These new dual-mode institutions attracted more students, particularly school teachers who needed to upgrade their qualifications to improve their promotion prospects. However, it is not sufficient to widen student access to "closed" curricula and learning programmes that do not engage with and interrogate what is passed on as knowledge. The curriculum has to be opened up in a manner that takes into account the experiences and realities of individuals.

Not all students admitted to the university are able to benefit optimally from learning opportunities. For instance, the statistical profile of 2004 reflects that 59% of the 746 114 students enrolled at higher

education institutions across the country are black (Ntshwanti-Khumalo *et al* 2004: 20). Most of them use English as an additional language. They attended secondary schools generally characterised by inadequate resources for teaching and learning, restricted curriculum choices, and limited career paths. Many of them have little practice in reading for comprehension, critical reflection, and writing. They initially find it difficult to use new academic literacies and the knowledge represented by these. Added to these academic pressures are personal circumstances that include demands of work, limited financial means in the family, illness of the student or a family member, and death of a loved one (Bertram 2002). One of the evident effects of a combination of these factors is that the graduation rate is generally far lower than the participation rate (Pienaar *et al* 2001, SAQA 2002).

Intervention in this regard requires us to make the learner the focus of our academic and administrative activities. Learner support — including the cognitive, affective and systemic functions (Tait 2000: 289) — should be integral to all teaching, learning and assessment.

3.2 Texts and curricula

The traditional curriculum consists of discrete blocks of specialised knowledge, tightly organised into pre-defined categories. It is reduced to a package consisting of a study programme, a list of prescribed books and study guides, passed down to students and tutors. The task of sorting out any overlaps and terminological mismatches among courses is left to the students. In this sense, the curriculum is a macro-text of what is considered worthy of being taught and learnt:

> The books we ask students to read, the issues we pose for discussion, and the patterns of independence and authority that we establish [...] reflect particular traditions of knowing and doing that are valorized by our choices, just as the less obvious decisions about books we exclude and issues we do not discuss marginalize or devalue other traditions (Applebee 1996: 121).

The social constructivist perspective has opened up and legitimated socially rich accounts of multiple contributors and realistically situated the teacher-student roles and interactions in a complex and ever changing social system (Kaufer & Carley 1993: 56). There is a growing awareness of the interconnectedness between author and reader, and between text and context. Just as knowledge is understood as socially constructed

within a particular world-view, authors and their texts are no longer seen as dicored from the social, cultural, political, and historical contexts of their time. A dialogical relationship with students ensures that they are involved as joint participants in the learning process rather than left to remain passive observers and recipients. Moreover, the quality of curricula and of the representations made in texts is now under more public scrutiny than ever before. We realise that

> the knowledge and understanding that students are prevented from bringing to their experiences is as important as the knowledge and understanding which students are permitted to narrate with respect to their lived experiences (McLaren & Da Silva 1993: 61).

As educational systems open up, there is greater scope for introducing new issues into the curriculum, using alternative texts, involving students more actively in our design decisions, and utilising different ways of constructing knowledge to enrich our perspectives. For Applebee (1996: 122-6), the benefits of widening the range and type of texts include the following:

- We gain breadth of vision and sensitivity to alternative systems of knowledge construction, which extend our range of understanding and ability to live in the world in which we find ourselves.
- Literature provides a mechanism for sharing alternative world-views — making the inexplicable explicable, the uncommon common.
- Literature offers both contact zones and safe houses. When we read within familiar traditions, we experience the comfort of the predictable. When we read in alternative traditions, we are asked to step into another perspective, to view the world from an unfamiliar tradition of knowing and doing.
- We come to understand that multiple voices in creative dialogue with one another are more typical than any single point of view.
- It is through gradual immersion in new conversations, rather than by standing alongside and being told about them, that we gain knowledge-in-action in any sphere.

An important consideration to bear in mind about the written texts we use for teaching and learning is that we live in a global context where texts and images not only proliferate but do so beyond the confines of the locality of their production. Hence the caution: "[W]e can no longer distance ourselves from responsibility for our texts" (James *et al* 1997: 12).

UNISA has introduced an Excellence in Tuition Award, based on the notion of the scholarship of teaching. The entire learning package and a portfolio of evidence — which includes reflections on the design process, the teaching and learning practice, the assessment and learner support strategies, and the impact of a specific module or programme — are submitted for consideration. By means of this system, individuals and teams that advance high-quality learning and teaching are given official recognition every year (Unisa Tuition Committee 2005).

3.3 Workplace interactions

Institutions and organisations are more than just the sum of the people in them. There are social elements that shape individuals' interactions at work and their perceptions of self in relation to the job and the organisation. Since many people spend most of their lifetime in the workplace, it is clear that they need to participate in the creation of the discourses which regulate and represent their selfhood. Marsick (1988: 191-4) and Walker (1994: 212) contend that people learn best when their identity and growth are recognised as integral to the learning. It is also generally accepted that any learning undertaken by staff will benefit the organisation in some way (Tait 2004: 210). Thus, learning for organisational productivity cannot be separated from learning for personal development.

Current efforts to promote the diversification of university staff are seen as a response to the social, political, economic and cultural needs and demographics of our country. By and large, black, female and disabled persons continue to be the targets of employment equity policies. However, once appointed, the recruits are expected to adapt automatically to existing cultures and structures. Once-off orientation sessions and cultural awareness courses are expected to produce cohesion and collegiality.

Creating the circumstances for broader cultural awareness and greater professional satisfaction is important, but more is needed. Rather than seek to empower people by "giving" them power or "allowing" them the freedom to act within clearly defined parameters, those parameters or traditions must be opened up and shaped anew. The challenge is

> to transform educational institutions from monolithic centres of power to democratic constellations in which organizational structures reflect diverse cultures and perspectives (Rhoads & Valadez 1996: 9).

This means more than simply offering courses and educational experiences that expose students and staff to a wide range of cultures. It goes beyond merely encouraging individuals to be proud of their identity, their history or their unique experiences. The university system has to be reconstructed so as to manifest its many identities by means of the people comprising it, who collaborate to create meaningful learning opportunities for students. Institutions must situate this diversity within the organisational canon so that crossing, overlapping, and influencing of identities, people, and cultures can take place (Van Niekerk 2004: 194).

3.4 Research and knowledge production

As has been stated, each professional community advances specific forms of knowledge. Knowledge production, dissemination, and management are intricately connected with research. In the context of the transformation of higher education, research activities are considered worthwhile when they

- contribute to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship;
- enable the attainment of national and global challenges;
- solve immediate applied and social problems;
- uphold rigorous standards of academic quality, and
- develop skills and competence (Mouton 2003, Dept of Education 1997).

Regarding the last point in particular, Lave & Wenger (1991: 98) consider participation in the cultural practice within which any knowledge exists as a key principle of learning. Sawyerr (2004: 32), too, states:

> [T]he development of research skills takes place principally 'on the job', in the course of conducting research, whether as an individual or as part of a team. It is in this process that the skills and insights acquired as part of formal training are sharpened and extended. Moreover, on-going research, particularly when it is collective or networked, provides an irreplaceable opportunity for the experienced members of a team or network to complement and help the capacity of others.

According to Mouton (2003), in general

> [T]he original good (transformative) intentions have not been realized and we currently are in a state of transformative 'inertia' which requires innovative and unequivocal interventions.

For instance, wide disparities persist in the age, gender and race profiles of researchers, as well as the graduation and output levels of institutions (Pienaar *et al* 2001, Koen 2003, Mouton 2003). Professors are on average older, white, and male, as well as having the highest qualifications. In 2005, only 20% of rated researchers were women and just over 9% were black. In the same year UNISA boasted 75 rated researchers, which is only 5% of the total number of teaching and research staff in the institution, and less than half of the average number of rated researchers at the top five universities (NRF 2006).

This condition need not be permanent, however. While it is arguable whether all universities should be defined as research institutions, there is, as Sawyerr (2004: 35) says,

> … no disputing the idea that universities, like all social institutions, should contribute to social development […] Over and above the calibre of its graduates, a university's contribution to development turns on the quality of the knowledge it generates and disseminates.

4. Learning university, learning society

Just as we recognise the multiple roles performed and interests pursued by different professional communities within an individual institution, we have to acknowledge that the university plays multiple roles in society and that it serves both local communities and global interests. In some cases, the national and international roles co-exist in a single region, but are performed by different institutions. In multi-ethnic societies and in countries where long periods of strife have destroyed the social infrastructure, the role of the university in nation-building is probably inescapable (Brennan *et al* 2004: 17, 34, Duke 2001: 520). As one of the oldest universities in South Africa and the largest distance education institution on the continent, UNISA has made it possible for thousands of people to further their education despite difficult circumstances. For example, during times of political hostility and exclusion, many of those who were in exile or serving long prison sentences depended on the University's distance mode and accessibility. Alumni of UNISA include well-known individuals who are regarded as community builders, such as Dr Nelson Mandela (former President and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993) and Archbishop Desmond Tutu (recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984). The institution enables

thousands of working adults, as well as younger students coming directly from high school, to pursue their education and professional development by means of open and distance learning.

Generally, university systems are less concerned with acting as direct causes of social change and more influenced by what is happening in society and in the world at large. Furthermore, the freedom to determine what is taught, to express views, and to operate without external state interference is not absolute and remains contentious (Koen 2003: 318). This, however, does not mean that higher education is merely a reaction to the dictates of economic and political forces. It is necessary to understand society in multivalent terms, not as limited to national boundaries and interests. The society whose interests are to be served consists of constituencies with different, sometimes conflicting, interests on any number of issues. The hopes and aspirations of politicians and policy strategies cannot always be assumed to be achievable realities (Brennan *et al* 2004: 16, 19, Higgs 2002: 13, Sawyerr 2004: 43).

As connected systems, institutions of higher education and other institutions in society have the capacity to learn from experience and reflection, and to undergo change as a result. The increasing rate of knowledge flow and diffusion has made it both necessary and possible for learning to take place in settings other than those of formal education. In addition to offering appropriate learning opportunities to people in every stage of life, the learning society is one that has

> succeeded in transforming its values in such a way that learning, fulfilment, becoming human, [have] become its aims and all its institutions [are] directed to this end (Jarvis 2000: 346).

Nonetheless, universities remain important avenues through which professional and national values can be rebuilt and reinforced. The way in which the systems and cultures of higher education are set up can have far-reaching implications:

> Tertiary education […] provides not only the high-level skills necessary for every labor market but also the training essential for teachers, doctors, nurses, civil servants, engineers, humanists, entrepreneurs, scientists, social scientists, and myriad personnel. It is these trained individuals who develop the capacity and analytical skills that drive local economies, support civil society, teach children, lead effective governments, and make important decisions which affect entire societies (World Bank 2002: ix).

5. Conclusion

Institutions of higher education and their professional communities espouse particular sets of values and interests. New social and institutional realities are bringing these communities into closer contact with one another and simultaneously challenging the monopoly of the university and its disciplinary domains over knowledge production and learning provision. In particular, the university's service to society is being scrutinised and repositioned in terms of social transformation and reconstruction.

While responsive to economic, technological and political imperatives, the essence of higher education is not yet about to change. The university plays a crucial role in providing a "protected space" — set apart from the interests, orthodoxies and pressures of the day — that allows people, individually and collectively, to reflect, re-assess, and act freely as critics and agents of social renewal and reconstruction (Duke 2001: 18). Nonetheless, continuous critical review of the relationships among higher education communities on the one hand, and between university and society on the other, is desirable, even inevitable. As part of an open society, universities and their communities are able to engage with agencies in other social sectors and fields of practice. Such interaction should ultimately influence institutional capacity-building frameworks, disciplinary world-views, and pedagogic discourses.

The key questions thus run along the following lines:

- Will institutions of higher education rigorously explore the possibilities of new forms of collaboration and networking in this age of risk and uncertainty?
- Will they pioneer openness and reflexivity within and across professional boundaries and missions?

Their success depends in large measure on the answers.

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