Towards Curriculum Relevance: The Reform Experience Of The National University Of Lesotho

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BACKGROUND

The National University of Lesotho (NUL) was founded in 1945 as the Pius X11 College. In 1964 it was taken over by the Governments of Basutoland, Bechuanaland Protectorate and Swaziland. At the independence of the first two countries in 1966 its status as a co-owned university of the three countries was maintained but its name changed to the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (UBLS) in accordance with the names assumed by these countries as they shed off their colonial names. This status remained until 1975 when the Roma campus of the university was proclaimed the National University of Lesotho by an Act of the Parliament of Lesotho.

Since 1975 the NUL has achieved modest levels of growth in its faculty, support and student demographic profiles. Programmes have diversified, campuses have multiplied and extension activities increased. But the overall verdict of its achievements is not rosy on a comparative scale with other similar institutions. In particular it has remained stunted in students enrolments, research output and has been limited in modernizing its course offerings and responsiveness given the very high demand for higher education in the country and region.

Several studies intended to unlock this relative stagnation have been conducted in the past twenty years. Among the more significant are the Cost Effectiveness of Education in the Kingdom of Lesotho by the World Bank (better known as the World Bank Report) in 1984, the Report of a Review Commission for the National University of Lesotho in 1989 (better known as the Sims Report) and the Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service study of 1995 (known by its acronym as the CHEMS Report). In spite of all these invaluable studies limited progress was made over the time.

Constraining factors have, among others, been the institution’s overly dependence on Government subvention as the principal source of its recurrent and capital budgets, limited infrastructural developments thus constricting its absorptive capacity, inefficient utilization of fiscal, human and spatial resources, out-moded and cumbersome administrative and managerial systems, low business and entrepreneurial acumen and orientation, etc. Subjective factors have also had direct bearing on the institution’s ability to rise to the challenges of the time. Successive management regimes spent far too much time, in a manner of speaking, “killing the messenger who brings the bad news” by looking for weaknesses in the various studies and bashing them. If not this, they implemented the recommendations selectively, half-heartedly and in a lopsided manner inadvertently generating more problems for the system in the future.

These and other systemic and structural issues have foreshadowed a growing crisis for NUL. It took yet another commission by Ernst and Young, a firm of auditors, to reach the verdict that the institution had lost a sense of direction and vision in the report on the National University of Lesotho Management Audit, 2000. The study challenged the university to make a decisive choice between far-reaching and deep-seated change of direction or face terminal marginalisation. Shocked by the revelations, the Council was jolted into action and at a special meeting in August 2000 appointed a Convenor to spearhead the university’s transformation efforts. The appointment of a new management team the following year gave
impetus to this process and an all-inclusive Task Team to thrash-out and develop a strategic plan was put together. Unprecedented consultations with all stakeholders including students, faculty and support staff followed. Externally, government ministries, the two Houses of Parliament, the private sector, educationists, NGOs, parastatals and a host of others were consulted to hear views about their assessment of the performance of the NUL, its weaknesses and strengths. Out of this came the Strategic Plan 2002/07 approved by Senate and Council respectively in August and September, 2002. Another related document also approved was the Management Plan detailing a new governance system for the faculties and institutes.

PUSH FACTORS FOR COMPREHENSIVE INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

The Strategic Plan is a serious paradigm shift intended to reposition the NUL in relation to numerous challenges. The threat of diminishing resources, a vigorously competitive market and the ever-growing and increasingly louder cry for access to higher education in Lesotho society constitute the motif forces pushing the change agenda. These imperatives are the same defining the context of challenges facing higher education globally as summarised in the following sections.

Firstly, the changes in the global economy in the last twenty-five years have prefigured the resources available for education in general and for higher education in particular. This economy has either not been growing fast enough to cope with the demands or has been growing in a lope-sided manner. In this context the state is unable to meet satisfactorily the myriad of competing demands on the limited resources available to it. Not only has higher education been knocked off the pedestal of favoured projects in the allocation of resources, but it has to endure the humiliation of vying for mere recognition in what states consider their priorities.

Thus institutions providing higher education face a real test of survival. To survive they need to adapt. They must learn to carry their business in an environment of scarce resources. This has a direct bearing on curriculum, structures and systems. The challenge in this regard is how to manage the obvious tension between the pressure to provide good quality education on the one hand and the increasingly scarcer resources available to support education.

For the NUL this reality is thrown into sharp relief by the fact that its main source of revenue, Government subvention, has reached a plateau because large increases cannot any longer be expected, since Government has prioritised the allocation of resources to the fight against poverty (Majoro and Hoohlo, 2002: 69). If there were any doubts of the implications, these were dispelled by the Government recently. In a policy statement and partly in response to the university’s intimation that it is considering a modest raise in fees, the Minister of Finance has made it clear that “Government is no longer in a position to offer more subventions than is currently providing. However, institutions are free to engage in any expansion or adjustment in fees they consider appropriate, provided they can pay for them” (Thahane, 2003).

Secondly, globalisation has engendered conditions for fierce competition no less in the education industry as in other walks of life. Information technology has made the delivery of education easier and cheaper. In these circumstances territoriality can no longer protect national institutions from competition in their own traditional markets. Virtual universities and long-distance modes of learning, for example, prove increasingly attractive and accessible to growing numbers beyond national boundaries. Besides the monopoly of universities as exclusive providers of higher education is being challenged, among others, by industry and a multiplicity of private agencies making a living through packaged training in a manner perceived to be more appropriate to the world of work than universities have conventionally done.
The challenge for universities in this regard has to do with the relevance of curriculum to the world of work. This challenge is at the heart of how far the conventional distinction between university curriculum and technikon curriculum remains valid. In this situation universities can only survive provided they can straddle this divide. In so far as the NUL is concerned the World Bank was instructive in this regard. It argued that “NUL graduates will be most effective from society’s point of view if they know how to combine foreign expertise and capital with low cost labour, water and power in such a way as to take advantage of free or relatively free entry to the major markets. This can be only be done if they have entrepreneurial and organisational ability, as well as technical skills…” (World Bank Report: 17).

Thirdly, ours is an epoch of knowledge-based economy and society. Knowledge is not only a driver of national development, but also the decisive determinant of citizens’ access to world economic and cultural resources. More importantly, there is a clear correlation between the ability of individuals to survive in a highly competitive economy and society and the imperative for such individuals to constantly skill and re-skill themselves. In this context learning institutions are challenged to reposition themselves to respond to the demands of a different type of learner-cadre. Such a cadre wants to be multi-skilled as well as be constantly re-skilled through life-long learning in order to keep chase with the talisman of a perpetually changing work environment.

Thus, appropriation of knowledge is at the very heart of the quest for a better citizenship. It is now generally recognized that the road to development, to a successful fight against poverty, passes through good quality education. “Any serious understanding of the educational experience we offer students”, Barnett argues, “has to be placed in the context of a wider sense of the changing relationships between knowledge, higher education and society” (Coffield and Williamson, 1997: 28). Regrettably for the NUL, this is a reality that still has to dawn on the Lesotho Government. In the last few years Government has been unequivocal in articulating the view that higher education is not among its priority concerns. The policy measures announced by the Minister of Finance referred to above are some of the many intended to give practical effect to this perspective. Sadly the policy contradicts the Government sponsored Vision 2020 that envisages integrated human development centred on education (Vision 2020, 2001).

These factors form the background against which curriculum reform forms part and parcel of the broad spectrum of institutional transformation at the NUL. They inform the objectives targeted by that reform.

**CURRICULUM REFORM AND THE CHALLENGES OF STANDARDS**

Curriculum reform is one of the creative means by which learning institutions attempt to operationalize their responses to the challenges they face. It seeks to address concerns about the quality of the products and the relevance of their skills and competences to the various stakeholders in the economy. And yet as Mok and Lee argue “no consensus has been reached defining the term “quality”, although it appears to be a fashion for universities throughout the world. How “quality” should be assessed is still an unresolved riddle within academic circles” (Mok and Lee, 2000 : 367) Middlehurst arrives more or less to the same conclusion:

> At one end of the spectrum, there is a sense in which quality can mean whatever individuals or groups take it to mean according to their own tastes and needs… At the other end of the spectrum, quality can be interpreted as attainment of a level of excellence that is defined, tacitly or explicitly, by those who are expected to understand and recognize such excellence, the ‘connoisseurs’ (Middlehurst, 1997: 45-46).
In an attempt to give contextual meaning to quality and standards as applicable to NUL CHEMS submitted thus:

Two interlocking concepts are used: ‘standards’ by which is meant the results that students achieve and the way their qualification is regarded by the outside world, and ‘quality’ which we use (in the current international idiom) to mean the internal judgements, systems and processes that NUL uses in order to ensure that suitable standards are achieved. In this context quality cannot be assumed, and sensitive management systems may be needed in order to provide the opportunity for standards to be raised (CHEMS: 68).

In the following sections we deal with some of the reformatory systems and measures NUL is, or has undertaken to ensure a framework for curriculum development that provides for both quality and standards as it also responds to socio-economic and political needs of the country.

**Setting a Framework for a New Curriculum**

The NUL Management Plan contends that the rationale for the transformation of NUL is driven by the need to align the university with national development objectives and in particular draws inspiration from Lesotho’s Vision 2020 and the Draft Higher Education Bill (Management Plan: 9). High on the agenda of the transformation is the wholesale review and modernisation of programmes. The objectives of the review are stated in the Strategic Plan to include, inter alia, the introduction of relevant and marketable programmes and the consolidation of existing ones; diversification and modularisation of programmes; promotion of theory and practice and the adoption of best practices in teaching (Strategic Plan: 22).

Recognising the importance of speedy implementation of these policy-thrusts, a Management Forum session (a monthly caucus chaired by the Vice Chancellor and including all senior academic and administrative leaders to review progress in the transformation process) held in the town of Mohaleshoek in November 2002 set out clear timetables and mechanisms for their realisation. From November, 2002 Interim Executive Deans were appointed to co-ordinate faculty mergers and the configuration of schools. The mergers were expected to have been completed at the end of June 2003 and indeed they were. Substantive Executive Deans would ad interim have been appointed to assume duty in July 2003 along with the appointment of Interim Heads of the newly reconfigured schools. Heads of schools jointly with Programmes Chairs are charged with the mandate to facilitate, co-ordinate and lead the review of programmes within their domains. They are expected to have accomplished this task by the end of November, 2003 in time for the approval of the new programmes by Senate with the view to have them in place in 2004/2005 Academic Year. These processes are currently underway.

Concurrent with programmes review, the necessary infrastructure is being put in place to support the improvement of the quality of teaching and the empowerment of lecturers with innovative teaching methods. It has been recognised that lack of staff development to support curriculum change can be the Achilles heel dogging the materialisation of the contemplated outcomes (CHEMS: 57). This is of more significance because of two postulated developments: The contemplated modularisation of programmes will be a new mode of tuition-offering at NUL. All stakeholders need to fully understand how the shift shall be institutionalised. This is all the more important if the institution has to avoid a repeat of the mistake that happened when it made a paradigm shift from the unit to the subject system in the early 1990s. Secondly, new instructional and delivery techniques made necessary by increasingly bigger class sizes, a multi-campus university and the growing strategic premium the NUL currently attaches to distance mode access require co-ordinated and comprehensive staff capacity-building.

Towards these ends the Academic Development Officer (ADO) (a post that was unfilled for a long time) has been re-activated. Apart from the traditional duties performed by this officer in most universities, at
NUL he doubles also in handling the in-service training and development of the academic staff. The ADO superintends the Academic Development Centre (ADC), a unit responsible for the mentoring and equipping of staff with a range of skills and competences relevant to their work. For a long time the centre could not optimise its role partly for lack of a more focused leadership, a clearly defined role and the appreciation of its function by the staff. As part of his terms the ADO has to re-organise the ADC, develop its capacity and crystallize its mandate and modus vivendi to face up to its new challenge.

Also acknowledging the mutually re-enforcing synergies between the development of research and teaching activities, the university has established the post of Dean of Research and an incumbent has just been appointed. Her role will re-enforce that performed through the ADC in the area of guiding, mentoring and building the capacities of especially younger academics in the field of research. As overall co-ordinator of the university’s research work, this officer is enjoined to ensure that research activity is more focussed to issues of relevance to the political economy of Lesotho and the region and that research output filters through to inform instructional material.

NUL is not immune to the challenge mentioned earlier of managing the tension arising from the huge increase in student enrolment dictated by the growing clamour for higher education and envisaged by the Strategic Plan on the one hand and the need to ensure that this development does not lead to decline in quality and standards on the other. The Strategic Plan envisages a student population of 10000 at the end of the Plan Period (2002-2007) from about 3500 the year before the Plan Period. This is an increase of just under 300% and it may put a strain on the resources and thus impact adversely on standards if not properly managed. Already there was suspicion that the modest increases of the early 1990s may have been implemented at the expense of standards (CHEMS: 67).

But then some degree of massification is no longer a choice but an imperative of survival for universities. The need to reduce the unit cost of training makes increases in enrolment in a competitive world a necessity of economies of scale. With the current full-time enrolment, NUL does not compare favourably with many institutions in the region, including the universities of Botswana, Namibia and Swaziland - all of which were established more recently. Such a comparison is warranted by the fact that the individual national populations of these countries are lower than that of Lesotho (Majoro and Hoohlo: 67). Besides, the NUL is always called upon by Government to do something to stem the drainage of financial resources out of the country resulting from the thousands of learners who have to seek training in South African universities every year.

In an attempt to address those problems that might directly affect the quality of education a number of initiatives are underway. Firstly, in the area of the carrying capacity of resources the following approaches have been adopted: At one level it has been assessed that all along workloads were uneven across departments including within departments. A more determined effort is being made to ensure that official workload policy, based on the Full Time Equivalent (FTE) mode, is rigorously enforced. As a long term strategy a need to review this policy with the view to benchmark it with other universities with similar resources constraints has been identified. In so far as facilities are concerned a class room facility capable of accommodating very large classes will be complete in August, 2003 almost in time for the commencement of the new Academic Year. While resources could not be found to enlarge library facilities to cope with the intake, a massive programme to capacitate this unit with computers in order to enable students and staff access to resources on-line is underway.

The measures mentioned above would fall short of efficacy unless reforms in other sectors are also carried out. One of the legacies of managerial neglect over the years is the discernible decline in the work ethics of staff especially with regard to conscientiousness to duty, research output, being available for consultations with students, proper preparations for lessons, etc. In this regard the managerial system discussed latter in this paper is part of an effort to reverse this unhealthy development and to restore
sound work ethics. Along with this, peer and student assessment of lecturers are being introduced. A Code of Ethics has also been approved by Council and begins enforcement in 2003/2004 Academic Year.

**Strengthening the Foundation Programme**

School leaving qualification in Lesotho is the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate Ordinary level (COSC O level). It is a qualification generally regarded to be lower than that required for normal entry into degree studies. Over the years NUL has navigated itself around this problem by offering a one-year preparatory stage called the Common First Year (CFY). The CFY is a pre-degree remedial stage integrated into a four-year degree study for all students intending to take non-science programmes. While free to choose from a package of courses, however, students in the CFY have to take Communication and Study Skills, Mathematics and Numeracy, Statistics and African Studies as compulsory courses. A separate preparatory curriculum is designed for science students. From time to time it becomes important to review the content and thrust of the CFY with the view to address the apparent weaknesses in the pre-university training of the entrants as well as the changing demands of the various programmes they are being prepared for.

A radical introduction of the transformation process in this regard is in two directions: In view of the growing importance of information technology in our age, a course in Computer Literacy is now compulsory for all NUL students regardless of their disciplines of choice. Another universally compulsory course will be Life Skills which shall include aspects of Human Rights and Democracy, Gender Issues, HIV/AIDS, etc. The need for a Life Skills course is self-evident and as it is contended in the Strategic Plan it is intended to introduce students to essential concepts "which are an integral part of their education towards becoming responsible members of the community and professionals" (Strategic Plan: 62). General Studies and Introduction to Logic have also been added as compulsory courses for those in the CFY programme to address observed weakness in the school-leaving curriculum.

**Institutionalising Remedial Courses to Improve Access**

The transformation process has also had to confront the challenge posed by the feeder-system’s incapacity to provide sufficient numbers to meet the enrolment targets prescribed by the Strategic Plan. A higher than normal wastage at this level rooted in the COSC assessment mode is recognised as the major problem. For example the 2002 COSC results show that of the 7,178 candidates who sat the examination approximately 6000 constituted wastage. And yet even of 1,346 passing in either a First or Second Class over 600 failed to obtain a credit in English (NUL Academic Office Memorandum: 2003). This problem strikes at the very heart of the university’s student recruitment drive. According to the university’s admission criteria a credit pass in English for all applicants to the Arts programmes and in Mathematics and at least an ordinary pass in English for applicants entering the Sciences is a condition precedent for admission. High school preparation in English and science subjects has been for some time a major source of concern at the NUL (CHEMS: 67). The statistics quoted above amply illustrates this point.

A remedial course inappropriately named a Bridging Programme has been institutionalised in response to this deficit in the supply of candidates by the lower level of the school system. Designed mainly for candidates who otherwise meet the admission requirements, but fail to obtain a credit in English or Mathematics or both (where credit is a requirement in Arts programme such as Economics), the Bridging Course is run for approximately two months under the auspices of the Communication Skills Unit in conjunction with the Mathematics Department. Respectively in 2002 and 2003 the English component of the Bridging Course attracted 400 and 800 candidates.
At the end of the highly intensive instruction students sit an examination that determines their admissibility to NUL. The results so far have been encouraging as the failure rate in 2002 was less 0.5% and about 1% in 2003. A real litmus test for this course, however, is in how its beneficiaries perform in their degree courses. In this regard a preliminary study commissioned to assess how Bridging Course students perform in their degree programmes has revealed positive results. It found that as a group those who entered their degree programmes after the remedial English course performed generally better than their direct entry counterparts (Sebatane, 2003: 13). Unfortunately the same is not evident of those who remedied Mathematics suggesting, therefore, that more work needs to be done in this area.

Thus the Bridging Programme serves a useful purpose of ensuring that the university has adequate supply of candidates in the short term. A national effort to reform high school curriculum away from the COSC O level format along with the university’s revision of its admission requirements, both underway, are seen as providing a long term solution to the problem. These measures are critical if the university’s enrolment targets have to be realised.

**Rationalising to Release Resources**

Rationalisation of curriculum is also focused on two interrelated aspects: (a) the removal of course duplication in order to release the human resources and reduce overhead costs to support more viable programmes and (b) the consolidation of faculties and departments in order to achieve economies of scale while fostering collaboration among cognate disciplines.

(a) Rationalising course offerings

In the early 1990s NUL decided to abandon the unit system in favour of the subject system. The switch was motivated by the need to control both the number of courses on offer as well as to put an end to duplication of course offerings across faculties and departments (CHEMS: 60). This opportunity was however lost on both counts as courses continued to multiply without restraint as department went on a spree to justify their existence and perhaps also to create employment opportunities. In the same vein course duplications increased rather than disappear. A good example of a phenomenon that was allowed to develop its own internal dynamic, possibly for both reasons cited above, is the Department of Development Studies. In the 1970s it was a single foundation course offered as part of the Common First Year (CFY). Later it not only became a programme in its own right, but also established a full-fledged department. It continued to grow in size and overheads costs despite the recommendation way back in 1984 that it should be merged into its constituent disciplines (World Bank: v).

Part of the explanation was the fact that no organ of the University seemed vested with explicit oversight authority over the enforcement and implementation of policy. In practice the Academic Planning Committee (APC) chaired by the Pro Vice Chancellor is responsible for scrutinising the technical soundness of courses and making recommendations for the approval of the Senate. It has been noted however that the APC pays little systematic attention to the rationalisation of programmes across faculties and considers its job to be restricted to course approval rather than with planning (CHEMS: 60). As a way of addressing this deficit within the context of the transformation process elaborate procedures and organs for the enforcement of rationalisation have been created. Specifically Interim Executive Deans (transitional administrative structures institutionalised to preside over the merger of faculties) were assigned the task to audit all course offerings within units in their jurisdictions, identify and recommend the elimination of course duplications.

In case some course duplications survived at this level, in all probability they would not escape the attention of the Academic Transformation Committee (ATC). Chaired by the Pro Vice Chancellor, the
ATC has Executive Deans and the Director of Transformation as members (in practice the ADO also sits-in). Its task is to receive and further rationalise restructuring proposals from the emergent faculties and recommend to the Senate. As the ATC report shows for schools being proposed by the faculties to be approved they had to show the capacity to develop “relevant and cost effective academic programs by eliminating small programs and avoiding the duplications in order to release teaching capacity and resources” (ATC Report, 2003: ). The fact that the ATC, unlike the faculties, has within its purview, the larger picture of all course offerings in the whole university system, places it in a better position to spot and eliminate duplications. Many course duplications have been eradicated by consolidating courses through these processes.

(b) Strengthening Curriculum through Consolidation of Units

NUL experience also unequivocally illustrates the fact that curriculum reform cannot be effectively implemented without supportive systems. CHEMS report highlighted at least one key explanation why the 1989 Sims recommendations had not been implemented. It said this was due to the lack of a clear implementation strategy to support curriculum change (CHEMS: 57). In response to this criticism the Strategic Plan envisaged a direct relationship between the streamlining of managerial authority, devolution of administrative powers and financial resources to the academic units and the complete overhaul and re-organisation of faculties. In the first place it was not going to make good economic rationale to devolve powers and resources to minute academic units. Economies of scale had to be enforced if efficient management of resources and good value returns were to be realised.

Over the years the University had established eight teaching faculties, one teaching institute and three research institutes. There were scores of departments under these units. For a small institution operating on a shoe-string budget, this proliferation made devolution of resources a nightmare. The option was always to control the budget centrally so that resources can be shifted from time to time to those areas of dire need as and when exigencies dictated. In the same way movement of staff to areas of need became impossible as staff vacancies had to be filled within the same department even if the resources could be more effectively used elsewhere in the faculty (CHEMS: 35). And by creating too many small cost centres, control of overhead costs became extremely difficult to achieve.

That this proliferation was a managerial absurdity was apparent in the variations in size between one faculty or institute or department and another. For example while in 2001/2 the biggest faculty registered around 1000 students, the smallest registered 17 (Vice Chancellor’s Report, 2002: 42). Thus the small units were heavily subsidized by those with higher students enrolment to the detriment of the latter’s own staff and workloads (CHEMS: 35). In other words the proliferation of academic units impacted both directly and adversely on productivity and academic efficiency.

A radical break with this tradition has since been realised through the consolidation of the former eight relatively small faculties into three mega units. The former Faculty of Agriculture, Faculty of Health Sciences and Faculty of Science and Technology have been consolidated into a single Faculty of Sciences, Applied Sciences and Engineering. The Faculty of Law merged with the Faculty of Social Sciences to form the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences. Humanities and Education have also merged to form the Faculty of Humanities and Education (ATC Report). The former Institute of Extra-Mural Studies (renamed the Institute of Distance and Continuing Studies) has been re-organised and given a larger mandate to replicate programmes offered by faculties but on part-time and distance modes while continuing with and enhancing its extension profile. Of the three research institutes, two have been de-established and their staff moved to beef-up the staffing needs of the faculties while one has been restructured to co-ordinate all research activity within the university. The restructuring has also resulted in fewer but large schools and centres being established within the new faculties and the teaching institute.
Consolidation of faculties and the de-establishment of some of the institutes was probably the most hard-fought contest in the whole transformation process. Divergent arguments were advanced by various units in opposition to mergers. The incompatibility of the disciplines proposed for merger, spatial distance between faculties in the case of the proposed Faculty of Sciences where one unit was forty five kilometres away, poor consultative processes, etc, were some of the principal arguments. Underlying all these were genuine concerns that the rationalisation would result in job loses. In some cases people in positions of dean or head worried of losing status of influence. Some disciplines also feared that their professional identities would be swamped by what they considered non-professional ones. The attendant shift to managerialism embodied in the proposed executive deanship worried many who saw it as neo-authoritarianism creeping into academia.

As indicated earlier, the process was always designed to be transparent and inclusive to the extent practicable. But to overcome some of the concerns it became imperative for central management to constantly review the appropriate role players at every strategic stage with the view to mainstream their ownership of the process. With regard to the mergers, three key initiatives were put in place. At one level monthly Management Forums incorporating deans of the traditional faculties were instituted with the specific aim of involving leadership at this level into driving the process. To avoid possible grounding of the transformation process by vested interests, Interim Executive Deans were appointed to preside over the merging faculties parallel to the traditional deans with the former’s remit limited to transformational issues only. At another level space was created for the active participation by faculty staff in all matters pertaining to configurations of new schools, governance issues at faculty/institute level and programme design. These measures ensured that a critical mass of stakeholders with a buy-in in the process existed and drove it.

It is primarily at the school level that it is assumed the impact of the re-organisation shall be felt. The Strategic Plan highlights the following as the benefits and out-comes expected to flow from the creation of bigger teaching units:

- better manageability
- a greater sense of responsibility
- accountability and responsiveness
- greater interdisciplinary cooperation and cross fertilization of programmes
- improvement in quality, focus and depth of subject matter.
- programme based planning will determine the resource needs with priority given to academic functions
- curricula will be more flexible in order to respond to staff availability and students needs
- optimisation of the deployment of existing staff expertise through teaching across areas that are currently pigeon-holed in separate Faculties
- faster and more efficient decision-making processes because decisions will be taken at the level at which they will be implemented and accounted for
- removal of barriers between cognate or near-cognate disciplines
- justification of extensive devolution of financial and other academic responsibilities to these levels
- promotion of academic niches where NUL has comparative advantage
- optimisation of staff student ratios within faculties (Strategic Plan: 52-53).

The immediate benefit of the consolidation is in two significant directions: Firstly, in one fell swoop it has eradicated the artificial dichotomy between research and teaching. This has always been a pernicious issue in terms of the optimal utilization of resources causing what Sims report labelled “a dichotomy of research privilege between Institute and departmental staff” (Sims Report: 26). In consequence of this dichotomy cross-enrichment between research and teaching could not take place. Secondly, as a result of
the consolidation research staff has been redeployed to the faculties to teach. This has brought great relief to beneficiary faculties now able to tap into a wealth of experienced and well-qualified staff for years marooned in the research institutes.

**Institutionalising Line Management to Sustain Change**

What governance system is appropriate for institutions of higher learning is always a highly debatable issue. Two contention perspectives centre on the collegial and the line management models. The former is associated with the British tradition while the latter draws heavily on North American system and is influenced by corporate governance culture. Both these models have their merits and demerits. It is important to note, however, that one or another can be appropriate in given situation depending on the challenges the organisation is responding to (Bosch and Teelken: 2000: 388-390).

In the case of the NUL the Management Audit report concluded that the inability of the institution to deliver on its vision and mission is rooted in the absence of a clear managerial hierarchy, devolved, responsible and accountable authority and the manner of appointment of key positions such as those of Deans and Heads. The report criticized the fact that appointment to these positions continues in the old tradition of collegial election rather than follow selective procedures. It argued that such a procedure did not form a sound basis for the appointment of people with appropriate managerial and academic skills (Ernst and Young, 2000: 44-47).

Taking a broader view of things the Strategic Plan had this to say about the need for institutional reform at NUL:

> It has been clear from these reports and the current strategic planning process that new domestic and global circumstances impose new demands and pressures on institutions of higher education to develop the ability to read the signs of the times and to adjust their academic and management structures accordingly with significant decentralization and scaling down of the centrally-located services. There is a broad consensus that existing academic, administrative and management systems at the NUL create bottlenecks, delay decision-making and implementation, and involve a high degree of duplication at the faculty and central levels (Strategic Plan: 28).

This is the context within which NUL opted to institutionalise line management especially in the academic arena as part of streamlining systems to encourage evolution of responsible and accountable leadership able to co-ordinate and lead, among others, curriculum reform. Thus the restructured faculties and institutes are managed by Executive Deans appointed through selection processes and accountable to the Vice Chancellor through the Pro Vice Chancellor. The schools and centres are also managed by Heads ultimately accountable for their domains to the Vice Chancellor but through a clearly defined hierarchical structure. It devolves on the line management so instituted to ensure that all strategic objectives of the university are implemented at the faculty and school levels. This development hopefully resolves what seems to be “a lack of clarity about who is responsible for what action” (Sims Report: 4).

However, for an institution steeped in the collegial tradition as NUL was, the transition particularly to executive deanship was not entirely without its detractors. Key among the concerns was the costs of maintaining the new system. It was argued, not without justification, that the critical objective of the transformation was cost-containment which the emergent structure seemed to undermine. Subsequent experience has proved that this charge was well-founded. It seems, however, that stakeholders have decided to give the system a chance in the hope that value returns will prove the costs worthwhile.
Designating niches

In the age of high competition universities can no longer afford to spread themselves too thinly by seeking to offer every thing. This makes for inefficiency as well as lack of depth in curriculum. They may however enhance their relevance around niche areas where they stand better chance to consolidate their competitive advantage. A critical contribution of the Management Audit report is in helping NUL to reawaken to this challenge (Ernst and Young : 36). In selecting its niches NUL sought to exploit its position as the sole institution of higher learning in the country. It has thus decided to unleash its teaching and research resources to explore new opportunities emerging in the national economy and exploit these to its advantage. This it has to do because knowledge and research have, more than ever before, become “tradable commodities” (Mok and Lee: 370).

For NUL three broad areas designated as niches are (1) Water and Environmental Management; (2) Tourism and Cultural Studies and (3) International Relations and Conflict Management (Strategic Plan: 27). All these were carefully selected after an analysis of public opinion derived from a range of players when the Strategic Plan Task Team conducted the environmental scan and because of their self-evident strategic relevance to Lesotho’s economy. Given the importance being placed on these niches the co-ordination of both research and teaching in these fields will be removed from the domain of the faculties. Three centres respectively housing these niches are in the process of being established within the Research Institute. Underlying reasons for their removal from the domain of the faculties are (1) to encourage multi disciplinary research, teaching and packaging; (2) to encourage collaboration with other stakeholders outside the academia in the development of curriculum and policy application and (3) to raise the profiles of these niches under the aegis of autonomous centres with the objective of attracting funding.

CONCLUSION

Curriculum reform has to proceed from the following questions: What are the political, social and economic issues crying out for educational institutions to adapt the content, orientation, techniques of delivery and quality of their courses? How will these activities and goals be achieved? How do we measure the success or otherwise of the achievements?

At the NUL curriculum reform has been an on-going exercise initiated in the 1990s to respond mainly to the needs of cost-containment. However, these initiatives bore limited fruit because of the prevailing environment militating against comprehensive change. The structural and systemic factors also bore on the limited successes gained. While currently curriculum reform is at the initial stages, it seems to hold immense potential for success because this process is linked with the overall introspection of the university as articulated by the Strategic Plan and the institution’s future and fate may very well depend on how far it drives the reform.

Important lessons to be drawn from the NUL experience are as follows: Firstly, there is an interlocking relationship between capacity of an institution to carry-out comprehensive curriculum reform and the creation of appropriate institutional framework and system tuned to the realisation of that objective. In this regard the question of a leadership that is consciously aware of the prevailing social, political and economic circumstances impressing on the need to be responsive to them is critical. It is also important to ensure that the systems are also changed because where the culture is hostile to reform much cannot be achieved. The other lesson not adequately articulated in this paper is that the current and future success of the reform agenda has depended largely on the massive ownership of all stakeholders to the process. The external situational analysis exerted sufficient pressure to faculty at NUL to realise that curriculum reform has to be carried out. In this way a conducive environment was created for all to freely inform the process.
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