

# *Internationalising a Rural, Historically Black South African University*

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*A strong international dimension has always been and is increasingly becoming an essential ingredient of the university. This article investigates the state of and prospects for internationalisation of an extremely peripheral and historically marginalised South African university. Questionnaires and semistructured interviews with academic and administrative staff were employed. Although the level of internationalisation of the university appears higher than what the university's geographical location and history might suggest, it has a long way to go. Although there is unanimity as to the importance and need for more internationalisation, there appears to be widespread uncertainty amongst academicians and administrators regarding what internationalisation means in their immediate work and what should be done to advance internationalisation. The article concludes with the recommendation that an institutional policy and plan for internationalisation should be set in place, and that comparative educational research should play a key role in informing such a policy and plan.*

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**Keywords:** *internationalising universities; South Africa; university; University of Zululand; importance of international dimension at universities*

## **STATEMENT OF PROBLEM**

### **A Strong International Dimension: Historically, an Essential Ingredient of the University**

At least three features of the mediaeval university—historically the bedrock of the modern university—are evidence of a strong international dimension at those institutions. The first was the *jus ubique docedi*, granted by Pope Gregory

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IX to the masters at the University of Paris (the prototype of the modern university) in 1231. This granted the right to Paris graduates to teach anywhere in the Christian world in return for their pledge of obedience (Welch, 1997, p. 325). Secondly, the intermittent, and often regional, turmoil of the 13th and 14th centuries (such as the Papal schism) and the migratory response that this engendered were an important spur to the development of new universities (de Ryder-Symonds, 1992, p. 289). Rashdall (1936) has argued that “half of the universities in Europe originated in migrations of this kind from older universities” (p. 570). Thirdly, one of the defining characteristics of the mediaeval university (as opposed to other educational institutions of the time, such as cathedral or monastic schools) was that it attracted students from all over Europe, rather than just from the immediate hinterland (Boyd & King, 1975, p. 138; Duggan, 1916, p. 100).

### **The Contemporary, Ever-Increasing Imperative for the University to Develop a Strong International Orientation**

The early 21st century, which is commonly described as the era of globalisation, calls for more and more universities to internationalise, especially in terms of programmes, faculty, and students (the last two via staff and student exchange schemes and the establishment of a significant expatriate component in the student and staff bodies). For the purposes of this article, Knight’s definition of *internationalisation of higher education* will be used: “Internationalisation is a process of integrating an international, intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution” (as quoted by Welch, 2002, p. 434). Knight’s (1996) taxonomy includes political, economic, academic, and cultural rationales for the internationalisation of higher education. In earlier research, Knight (1995) found that “the preparation of scholars and graduates who are internationally knowledgeable and competent” (p. 105) was by far the most commonly cited rationale by the Canadian professoriate followed by the need to “address the interdependent nature of the world (environmentally, culturally, economically, socially) through scholarship” (p. 105). Also mentioned was the need to maintain scientific and technological competitiveness. The internationalisation of academia can contribute towards the enhanced understanding of the trade and economic contexts of trading partners as well as to a more sophisticated appreciation of associated political, religious, and social traditions. To Knight’s rationales could be added intellectual and scientific considerations: Internationalisation also brings necessary academic cross-fertilisation. In the absence of international interaction, epistemological, peda-

gological, and other assumptions are unlikely to be continually and rigorously reexamined. Finally, internationalisation could also be linked to the more altruistic motives of the credo of the field of international education: “common sense notions of international community, international cooperation, international community of interests, and international dimensions of the common good,” sometimes associated with ideals of supranational entities such as the United Nations and its charter (Jones, 1999, p. 147). Thus, internationalisation of higher education is instrumental in the creation of an internationalist value system, achieving the goal of an international moral and political order predicated on respect for difference, social justice, and mutual respect within and between nations as a key element, as is the rejection by the weak of domination by the powerful (e.g., of politically and economically strong nations over those less economically developed, or of the majority of a nation’s populace by powerful politico-economic elites, or of a single ethnic or religious power block) (Welch, 2002, p. 434).

### **Counterforces and Barriers to the Internationalisation of Higher Education**

The movement towards the internationalisation of higher education runs against a number of constraints of a financial, political, legal, and ideological nature at personal, institutional, and national levels. Transnational relocation and even short visits are very costly exercises for academicians. During the past three decades, universities worldwide have found themselves in restrictive budgetary climates. In an era of increasing financial strictures in higher education, the temptation for institutional managers is to withdraw from international activities and simply concentrate on core teaching and learning activities (Welch, 1997, p. 339). Visa requirements, as well as the remaining ideological barriers in world politics, are also inhibiting factors.

### **Internationalisation on the Higher Education Studies Research Agenda**

Given the imperative to develop internationalisation in higher education institutions on one hand and on the other hand, the many obstacles in the way thereto, it is not surprising that internationalisation has risen to prominence on the higher education studies research agenda (see Welch & Young, 2001, p. 2). This literature, however, focuses principally on the experiences of wealthy, developed, Western countries, especially those of the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Welch & Young, 2001). Although significant

attention has been paid to European initiatives (de Wit, 1995), rather less attention is given to the Asian region (Knight & de Wit, 1997). Latin America and Africa rarely appear on the horizon at all. South Africa is no exception to this (see Wolhuter, 1997).

In the context of, on one hand, the peripheral location and continual marginalisation of Africa and fears that globalisation will by-pass Africa and thus aggravate the marginalisation (economically, intellectually, and otherwise) and on the other hand, initiatives such as the internationally sanctioned New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), research underpinning the internationalisation of universities in Africa is timeous. This is even more urgent in the case of South Africa, which is still reeling from the effects of an international academic boycott waged against the country for approximately three decades from 1960 to 1990 (see Harricombe & Lancaster, 1995).

### **Aim of Research**

The aim of this research is to assess the present state of and outlook for the internationalisation of an extremely peripheral South African university, the University of Zululand, as perceived by staff, as the basis for further research on the internationalisation of universities in Africa.

The article commences with an outline of the historically evolved context of universities in South Africa and of the University of Zululand in particular. This is followed by a discussion of the research methodology. Subsequently, the results of the research will be depicted before concluding with a discussion of the prospects for internationalisation as appearing from this research.

## **CONTEXT: HISTORY AND PRESENT SITUATION OF UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA AND OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ZULULAND IN PARTICULAR**

### **Historical Development of South African Universities**

The first university in South Africa was the University of Good Hope, founded in 1873 under the auspices of the then British colonial administration. This university did no teaching but instead, laid down syllabi, conducted examinations, and awarded degrees for teaching done at colleges such as the South African College (Cape Town) and the Victoria College (Stellenbosch). The University Act No. 12 of 1916 made provision for the establishment of a federal examining university to be called the University of South Africa, located in Pre-

toria. This university would incorporate the University of the Cape of Good Hope. In time its constituent colleges became autonomous universities. Stellenbosch University (Victoria College in 1916), University of Cape Town (South African College in 1916), Witwatersrand University in 1922, University of Pretoria in 1930, University of Natal in 1949, University of the Orange Free State in 1950, Rhodes University in 1951, and Potchefstroom University, 1951. Once its constituent colleges became independent universities, the University of South Africa became a correspondence (distance teaching) university in 1951. All these institutions were meant to cater to the White population.

Tertiary education for Black South Africans commenced in 1916 when the South African Native College was established at Fort Hare. This institution became putatively autonomous in 1949 under the name of the University of Fort Hare.

A key date in the history of South Africa is 1948. In that year the National Party came to power. It implemented a programme of rigorous *de jure* and *de facto* racial segregation policies (apartheid)—a typical colonial setup, *de facto* racial segregation had always been a characteristic of South African society. The advocates of apartheid believed that the separation of the races (and of the various ethnic groupings within the Black race) would enable each grouping to develop to prosperity upon the basis and along the lines of its own culture. For this purpose, 10 putative autonomous states (so-called homelands) were created within the borders of South Africa for the various ethnic groupings. Each was to have its own government, school system, universities, and so forth. Consequently, such universities were created, each exclusively for students of a particular ethnic group.

The idea of separate, segregated education systems and universities was widely condemned among Black South Africans as inferior education meant to perpetuate inequality and White domination (see Christie, 1991, pp. 229-265; Karis & Gerhart, 1977; Nkomo, 1990).

The South African government did not succeed in selling its policies to the international community either. Especially after 1961 (when the country ceded from the Commonwealth and became an independent republic), South Africa was subjected to a barrage of international sanctions and isolation measures across a wide field of trade, economic, political, diplomatic, educational, cultural, sports, and other matters. In the field of universities, the international academic boycott took effect. Harricombe and Lancaster (1995) identified the following tactics of the boycott:

- refusal by international scholars to travel to South Africa or to invite South Africans abroad;
- refusal to publish South African manuscripts internationally;

- refusal of international scholars to collaborate with South African scholars;
  - refusal by some publishers to provide access to information (e.g., books, computer software);
  - denial of South African participation at international conferences;
  - denial of access to South African academics by certain institutions abroad;
  - refusal to recognise South African degrees; and
  - refusal to act as external examiners for theses presented at South African universities.
- (p. 30)<sup>1</sup>

In 1994, a new constitution and a new political dispensation commenced. The African National Congress took over the role of the ruling party from the National Party. The African National Congress spelled out a new education policy based upon the following principles: equalisation of opportunity, desegregation, multiculturalism, and democratisation (see Wolhuter, 1999, p. 366).

### **The University of Zululand**

*History.* The University of Zululand was established in 1960 as one of the universities intended for the exclusive study by one of the Black ethnic groupings, namely the Zulu. It was thus severely discredited in the eyes of Black South Africans as well as those of the international academic community. In his seminal comparative study of British, Indian, and African universities, Ashby (1966) discussed the University of Zululand as an example of the “Bantustan” universities, even going so far as to state that these institutions are “unworthy to be included in the community of universities” (p. 35). It should further be mentioned that the University of Zululand, like all historically Black South African universities, has not been as well endowed (financially, also regarding libraries, laboratories, etc.) as the historically White universities.

*Location.* The University of Zululand is situated in a deep rural setting, some 200 kilometres (125 miles) north of the closest city, Durban.

*Institutional structure.* The first universities in South Africa, conceived at a time when the country was part of the British Empire in the 19th century, were modelled on the Scottish universities. Later universities, such as the University of Zululand, followed this model. Academe is thus divided into faculties and faculties in turn into departments. The University of Zululand is divided into the following six faculties: arts, commerce and administration, education, science and agriculture, theology and religion studies, and law. The Faculty of Science and Agriculture, for example, consists of the following departments: agriculture, biochemistry and microbiology, bot-

any, chemistry, computer science, engineering, geography, consumer sciences, human movement science, hydrology, mathematical sciences, physics, and zoology.

*Faculty.* Ever since their inception, faculty posts at the Black South African universities were open to anyone (i.e., not racially segregated). As suitably qualified Black academic staff were, during the 1960s, numerically very few (and many of these few preferred to accept appointments at universities abroad rather than associate themselves with the idea of segregated universities), the idea was to fill posts where suitable Black candidates were not available with Whites. First-grade White academicians were not available in large numbers either—Whites from liberal White universities (who were opposed to the government's segregation policies) shunned contact with the Black universities, which they perceived to be a product of apartheid (see Behr, 1988, pp. 193-194). In any case, White academicians generally preferred appointments at the better endowed, metropolitan-located White universities.

One conventionally employed indicator of internationalisation of faculty at an institution is the percentage of faculty who earned their "highest degrees in another country" (see Altbach, 1996, p. 6 et seq.), although this index is not unproblematic (see Welch, 1997, p. 328). Of the 272 strong faculty of the University of Zululand, a mere 40 (or 14%) obtained their highest degrees outside South Africa (calculated from information in the University of Zululand's 2001 calendar). This could be contrasted with corresponding figures of countries such as Australia with 20% (Sheehan & Welch, 1996, p. 86) or South Korea with 39% (Lee, 1996, p. 103).

*Students.* At the inception of the university, admission was reserved for students from the Zulu ethnic group. Such students rejected the idea of racially segregated universities and attended the University of Zululand for the sole reason that it was the only university they were, by law, allowed to attend. The gradual desegregation of universities since the mid-1980s saw a flow of the most able and more affluent Black students to the better endowed, more expensive, and more elite historically White universities. Desegregation at university level in South Africa is still almost exclusively a one-way flow: from the historically Black to the historically White universities. Consequently, still more than 90% of the approximately 4,000 students enrolled at the University of Zululand are Black. Students from outside South Africa total approximately 120, with about 100 from Swaziland, 3 from Lesotho, 3 from Namibia, 3 from Mozambique, and 6 from Italy (S. C. Mzimela, assistant registrar, Student Affairs, University of Zululand, personal communication, August 2001).

All of the above adds up to an institution quadruply marginalised. In the first place, the University of Zululand is, like any other university in Africa, geographically far from the North American–Western European nerve centre of the

international academic network (see Altbach, 1982; Arnove, 1982). Secondly, the University of Zululand had been, as had all South African universities, subjected to the international academic boycott. In the third instance, within the hierarchy of South Africa universities, it has, as an historically Black university, been marginalised by the elite of South African academia. Finally, its rural setting, far from the cities and centres of the South African space-economy, has rendered it very peripheral.

## **METHOD**

A research instrument with a proven track record was chosen: questionnaires and semistructured interviews used by Welch and Young (2001) to research the internationalisation of a Chinese university. These questionnaires, probing academic and administrative staff's figuring on the international dimension, as well as their views on the state and prospects of internationalising the university, were adapted to South African conditions. A sample of 48 academicians and 27 administrative staff were selected for the questionnaires, and 5 academics and 3 administrators for the interview. (In the Welch and Young study, 70 academicians and 30 administrators were selected for the questionnaires, and 5 administrators and 8 academics for the interviews.) The selection was done to maximise representation regarding the academic departments/administrative section, the academic/administrative rank, gender, race, and age. The response rate for the questionnaires was 50% and 85%, respectively, for academic and administrative staff.

## **RESULTS**

### **Views on the Importance of Research on the Internationalisation of the University of Zululand**

Although the questionnaires and interviews contained no specific question as to the respondents' views on the value of this research, the final item of the questionnaire for academicians was an open question in which respondents were free to express themselves on any aspect of the research project and on the topic of the internationalisation of the university. In responding to this question, 7 academicians expressed appreciation for the research. The following two examples of responses are illustrative: "Research of this kind is long overdue," and "The research project is timely. Having been at universities in the UK, the USA, and other parts of Africa, I feel this university needs to change."

### **Concrete Measures of the Level of Internationalisation of the University of Zululand**

The following indicators of the level of internationalisation of the university were measured by the questionnaires.

*Teaching.* Upon the question as to whether they have organised a class of students from a foreign country, 27% of the academic staff answered in the affirmative, whereas 73% replied no. Only 1 academician replied yes to the question as to whether his or her department has academic programmes abroad; this particular respondent reported that these were ad hoc programmes only, and the students thereof constituted less than 5% of all students of that department. The question as to whether any of their students are involved in international research elicited a yes response from 28% of academicians. Only 4 reported that international field trips or research are required as part of course work or dissertation. Respondents were asked how international or comparative topics figure in their courses and to place their answers on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *none* to 5 = *most*. The average was 3.0.

*Research.* Of academics, 35% indicated that they have international research contracts or projects. International partners involved in research initiatives were reported by 61% of academics. Of these, 8 indicated that they have partners in Europe, 3 in Africa, 3 in North America, 2 in Australia, and 1 in Latin America, whereas 1 reported being involved in a research project global in scope with partners worldwide. Of academic staff, 58% answered that they have published in scientific journals outside South Africa, whereas only 26% have served on the editorial board of or have reviewed articles for a foreign journal. Membership in international scientific organisations was reported by 57%, and 17% have examined a master's or doctoral thesis from abroad.

*International communication by academic staff.* Of the academicians, 57% reported that they often go abroad on academic purposes. The most common reason cited by those who do not often go overseas is financial. Communication with colleagues in other countries was reported by 78% of the academicians; they keep in touch with such colleagues by means of correspondence (including e-mail), journals, meetings, cooperations, and conferences. Of those in communication with colleagues abroad, the bulk interact with colleagues in North America and Europe. Only 3 are in communication with colleagues elsewhere in Africa, 2 with colleagues in Asia, 3 with colleagues in Australia, and 1 with colleagues in Latin America. All but 3 academicians use the Internet.

*Internationalisation of administration.* Overseas living/working experience was reported by 50% of the administrative staff. However, only 3 have overseas experience in university administration. The majority of those with overseas living/working experience went overseas on academic (study) purposes. All but 4 of the administrators surveyed use the Internet.

*Institutional policy and support for internationalisation.* Of the academicians surveyed, 75% reported that they could obtain no institutional assistance in the organising of workshops to internationalise curriculum, 50% answered that their teaching/research evaluation programmes do not include foreign experts, and 86% indicated that they do not get any reward from the institution for involvement in international affairs. Of the administrators surveyed, 75% reported that an international dimension is not acknowledged in their mission statement, and 71% indicated that they do not receive advice on international administration from abroad.

### **Respondents' Assessments of the Level of Internationalisation of the University of Zululand**

In their responses to the open question referred to above, 8 academicians expressed a desire for the university to internationalise more. In all the interviews with administrators and with all but 2 of the academicians, an unqualified overt wish transpired for the increased internationalisation of the university. Although the 2 exceptions supported the principle of internationalisation, they cautioned that it should not be done in a way that drowns the university in an international tidal wave to the extent that the university loses its present identity and character, that it cannot serve the local and national community any longer, and that in an age of affirmative action, all career opportunities for Black South Africans are confiscated by foreigners.

The questionnaire for academic staff asked respondents to estimate the internationalisation of their specialty at the University of Zululand and to place their responses on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *weak* to 5 = *strong*. The average score was 2.7. Academicians were likewise asked to express judgement on the stock of foreign books/journals in the university's library on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*far from enough*) to 5 (*very rich*). The average rating was 3.0.

### **Why Respondents Want Internationalisation**

The following motivations as to why respondents desire increased internationalisation transpired from the interviews and the questionnaires:

- It would enhance the quality of teaching and research at the University of Zululand;
- Academicians feel it would enrich their work and encourage them to do more;
- It would improve the image of the university;
- Research done at the University of Zululand would be brought under the attention of the worldwide scientific community;
- It would be in step with the current trend of globalisation;
- Interaction with universities abroad would enable the university to find solutions to problems by benefiting from the experience of overseas universities, thus making it unnecessary for the University of Zululand to reinvent the wheel; and
- It would help the university to serve the needs of its students and community.

### **Respondents' Understanding of Internationalisation**

The questionnaires for both academic and administrative staff asked respondents to describe their understanding of internationalisation, as it relates to their own work, in three lines. From these responses, as well as from the interviews, the following meanings attached to internationalisation could be distilled. The most common meaning of internationalisation relates to the uplifting of the standard of learning (i.e., teaching and research, including research output) to that of any well-known, respectable university in the world. Internationalisation further signifies (a) appointing faculty with foreign experience, (b) attendance of international conferences by faculty, (c) the offering of joint degree programmes with universities abroad, (d) the offering of globally compatible degree programmes that will be accredited worldwide, (e) collaborative research with faculty at overseas universities, (f) international student exchange, and (g) the appointment of overseas external examiners. It should also be mentioned that this question drew no response from 12 respondents, whereas 1 respondent wrote “no idea.”

### **Respondents' Views on What Should Be Done Concerning Internationalisation**

Both academics and administrators were asked in the questionnaires about what should be done in advancing internationalisation and were given three lines in which to respond. From these answers, and from the interviews, the following transpired:

- Staff should be afforded the opportunity to attend more international scientific conferences. Technology should also be harnessed to make the attendance of such conferences by means of television possible;
- A deliberate attempt should be made to recruit more foreign students;

- More staff-exchange programmes should be set in place;
- There should be collaboration between the university's financial and human resource management section and those of foreign institutions to make use of the expertise of foreign institutions and create a more efficient system of financial and human resource management at the university;
- The university's management structures should formulate a deliberate policy of internationalisation and set a plan for internationalisation in motion;
- The view that an attempt should be made to eradicate xenophobic staff or make them aware of the value of foreign expertise was expressed by 2 respondents; and
- The teaching of French and Portuguese as foreign languages should be advanced, according to 1 respondent, to facilitate interaction with francophone and lusophone Africa.

The questions in the questionnaires referred to above drew blank responses from 6 academicians and 6 administrators.

## CONCLUSION

Although the level of internationalisation of the University of Zululand is not as low as could be suggested by its geographical location and history of marginalisation, it still has a long way to go. Amongst its academicians and administrators, there is unanimous agreement as to the importance of internationalisation and desire for more internationalisation. At the same time, there appears to be widespread uncertainty amongst staff as to what internationalisation exactly means, especially within their immediate working environment, and what should be done to advance internationalisation.

The major lacuna appears to be the lack of an institutional policy and plan for internationalisation. It is recommended that such a policy and plan is drafted. Such a plan and policy should include briefing staff as to the exact and full meaning of internationalisation, especially in their immediate working places. The plan and policy should be drafted in collaboration with staff. Such a plan and policy should be informed by comparative education research. The research reported in this article is merely incipient research on a lacuna in the education research agenda, namely the internationalisation of higher education in Africa. Only one institution was subjected to the research, and the research was limited to staff's figuring on the international dimension and their views of internationalisation. Follow-up research along the following lines would be a valuable supplement to this study:

- views of students on internationalisation;
- assessment of the level of internationalisation as it relates not only to curricula and institutional policy but also to aspects such as library stock and student and staff exchange

programmes. Such assessment should use as yardsticks the political, cultural, economic, academic, and internationalist value system ideals of internationalisation;

- extending this research to other higher education institutions of South Africa and the other countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and Africa north of the SADC countries;
- research should also be conducted on the state, possibilities, and desirability of mutual interaction between African universities, especially between the universities of the SADC countries. Concentration on such links would be cheaper than building an international dimension on interactions with northern hemispheric universities. On the other hand, the fact that the nerve centre of the international research activity is at present located in North America and Western Europe mitigates against too little value being placed on links with the northern hemisphere versus links within Africa. Research on this issue should also include a discourse on cultural diversity/solidarity within SADC as well as an investigation into the role inter-SADC links can play in human resource development in the region; and
- comparative research on institutions that have progressed down the road of internationalisation.

Research on the above could pave the way for the most efficient internationalisation of the higher institutions of Africa for the benefit of these institutions as well as for Africa.

#### NOTE

1. For an empirical study on the full extent and intensity of this boycott, the interested reader is referred to the work of Harricombe and Lancaster (1995).

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