

The Vrije Universiteit And South Africa ~ Can 'New' Meet 'Old'? VU-South Africa, 1976-Present: Development Cooperation In Southern Africa



Introduction

In his paper, Brinkman provides an overview of the roots of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam's (VU) development cooperation activities in southern Africa in the second half of the 1970s. Upon cancelling the cooperation agreement with Potchefstroom University in 1976, the VU decided to develop links with other universities in the Southern African region. The idea was to aim at universities that were playing a clear role in the development of black leadership for the future of the sub-continent. As 'black' universities inside South Africa were also heavily influenced by 'apartheid' policies, the choice was made to look towards universities in surrounding countries. The first cooperation links were established with the universities in Botswana, Swaziland and Lesotho. As Brinkman also indicates, these new links fitted well into the new Dutch national policies for development cooperation, as they emerged during Jan Pronk's first period as Minister for Development Cooperation in the 1970s. Pronk established a new funding channel for cooperation links between Dutch universities and universities in developing countries.

Brinkman identifies some themes in the history of the relationship between the VU and South Africa:

- * The flourishing of development cooperation activities at the VU, particularly, but not exclusively, in southern Africa;
- * The emergence of particular focal areas for development cooperation at the VU based on the needs of partner institutions;
- * The return of the VU to South Africa after the Wende in the early 1990s;
- * 'New' meeting 'old' in South Africa (and vice versa), in terms both of themes

and of partner institutions;

* The challenges posed to universities because of the emergence of the 'knowledge society' and the consequences this may have for a traditional academic organisation.

The purpose of this paper is twofold:

1. To illustrate Brinkman's themes in one particular focal area of development cooperation at the VU, namely basic science education;
2. To raise some fundamental issues regarding development cooperation in Dutch universities, the position of such cooperation at the VU, and its role in South Africa.

In the Netherlands, both the position of universities and the development cooperation policies have undergone fundamental changes over the decades since the 1970s, and particularly in the 1990s. The question raised here is whether 'new' can really still meet 'old', and what would be needed for that to happen.

Basic science education is only one of the focal areas in development cooperation at the VU. Other prominent fields of cooperation are in natural resource management (soil and water conservation, land reform, community based natural resource management, water harvesting, and land husbandry), in university management development, and in the use of ICT in higher education institutions.

In natural resource management, strong links also exist in South Africa, particularly with the Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) at the University of the Western Cape. In university management development, there are cooperation links in South Africa with the University of the North and with North West University, and with the University of Pretoria (1999-2001). Some work in this field has also been done at the University of the Free State.

The choice of this paper for basic science education is explained by the fact that it has been the largest individual area of work over the decades, and that it most clearly demonstrates a few of the fundamental tensions regarding the relationship between universities and development cooperation.

The problem of basic science education for developing universities

The output of developing universities is often skewed towards the humanities and social sciences, whilst the need for manpower and knowledge products in natural sciences, engineering, medicine, etc. is often much more acute. Apart from the expense and expertise required to develop these exact fields, an underlying

reason for this phenomenon is often also the lack of qualified candidates to take up a study in these fields. As Brinkman indicates in his paper, there is often a 'vicious cycle' in educational systems of underperformance in the exact subjects: not enough students enter higher education institutions due to poor education in schools; this causes particularly that not enough well-qualified secondary school teachers are produced in higher education, which leads to further poor education in schools. Basic science education interventions stem from this problem. Although universities are not directly responsible for secondary education, and the original project plans were also critically received for funding under the university cooperation umbrella, it is clear that universities have a direct interest here, both in the number and in the quality of incoming students, as well as in the number and quality of teachers produced.

Different types of programmes addressing this 'vicious cycle' problem in various ways have been developed over the years in different countries and institutional contexts. The choice of programme has always been dependent on the particular circumstances, wishes and possibilities of partner institutions or governments. The following main types can be distinguished:

- * Foundation programmes for students entering higher education institutions to remedy their knowledge and skill deficiencies and to give them a solid preparation for their further studies in the exact fields;
- * Reform of pre-service teacher qualification programmes, including the development of special programmes for already serving teachers who lack appropriate background and qualifications;
- * In-service support programmes for teachers in schools to assist them in improving their teaching.

In the following paragraph a brief overview of examples of different programmes in the southern African region will be provided.

Some basic science education projects in the southern African region

Programs and countries where the VU has rendered support to the design and implementation of basic science schemes are:

- * Foundation programmes for students entering higher education: Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Swaziland, and Zambia;
- * Reform of pre-service teacher qualification programmes: Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zimbabwe;
- * In-service support programmes for teachers: Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi,

Namibia, Swaziland.

Within the framework of this brief paper we cannot discuss all these interventions in detail.

VU basic science education activities in South Africa since the early 1990s

Following the request from the European Union in 1990 to develop a basic science education programme in newly independent Namibia, a similar request was received for South Africa in 1992. This took the specific form of developing a foundation programme at a traditionally disadvantaged university, the University of the North, aimed at improving its intake in science programmes. The problem of the lack of properly qualified candidates from disadvantaged communities, particularly in the exact sciences, was and is widespread in South Africa as the quality of secondary education leaves much to be desired in a large majority of schools. The Foundation programme at the University of the North (UNIFY: University of the North Foundation Year) was meant to address this problem in this particular institution, but at the same time to form an exemplary programme that other institutions in South Africa might follow. In his paper, Brinkman describes the success of this programme, in which five VU staff members were involved for a number of years and which has now been fully institutionalised in the University of the North.

Direct replication of the UNIFY programme was not easy to realise. Many South African institutions started to address the problem in their own ways during the 1990s. Also, the continuous uncertainties surrounding the higher education landscape in South Africa and the position of historically different types of institutions made a concerted national approach impossible.

In 2000, the University of Pretoria (UP) approached the VU for assistance in setting up a UNIFY-type programme, now called the UPFY programme (University of Pretoria Foundation Year). Although not a historically disadvantaged institution, the University of Pretoria decided to transform its student intake and admit a much larger percentage of students from disadvantaged communities, and also saw the need to address the specific problems in the sciences through a foundation programme. UP had its own financial resources and contracted the VU directly without an external funding agency being involved.

In 2004, a new national funding channel for foundation-type programmes was opened by the National Department of Education in South Africa, following the

new funding arrangements for universities, which are outcome- and formula-based. In this new formula-based funding framework little room exists for extra activities to address historical inequalities; hence the need for separate subsidies. Universities can submit proposals for a maximum of two programmes per institution for special subsidy. North West University (the recent merger between Potchefstroom University and University of the North West in Mafikeng) submitted proposals and received funding for its Foundation Programme at the Mafikeng campus (both sciences and commerce). Presently [October 2004] discussions are ongoing about establishing a cooperative link with VU (see also below) for the development of this programme.

In science teacher education and in-service support to teachers the volume of VU activities in South Africa has been less pronounced, largely because of difficulties to attract external funding. The reasons for this can be found in the peculiarities of both the South African context and the funding channels, particularly the Dutch ones. The latter are more fully addressed in the next paragraph. With regard to the former, the following parameters are important to note:

- * Until recently, teacher education in South Africa was largely the responsibility of special teacher education colleges, directly administered by the Provinces, and offering Certificate and Diploma level programmes. Although universities also produced some degree-level teachers for the upper end of secondary schools, their contribution was relatively small, particularly in the sciences.

- * The Teacher College sector was of generally poor quality and produced far too many teachers in the 1990s. This sparked the decision taken by the end of 1990s to close all Colleges and/or merge them with the University sector. However, the responsibility for schools and teachers rests with the Provincial Departments of Education, whilst the universities are relatively autonomous and directly governed through the National Department of Education. This created coordination problems between teacher education and the school system.

Even at present, few new teachers are absorbed in the schools, although it can be predicted on the basis of demographic projections that a large shortage of teachers will quickly emerge in the coming years. The situation is particularly serious in the sciences and mathematics field, with many teachers lacking an appropriate background. Labour regulations and cost containment, however, prevent large-scale hiring of new teachers. There is an urgent need for large-scale upgrading of teachers in the system, but an appropriate policy framework is still

under development at national level. Universities do mount programmes for teacher upgrading, but coordination and funding mechanisms with the employer (that is, the Provincial Departments) are not properly developed as of yet.

Some VU cooperation activities in science teacher education in South Africa did take place after 1995, following a large international conference in Windhoek, Namibia in December of that year. That conference brought together for the first time science educators from southern and eastern Africa (all SADC countries) with those from South Africa, to discuss the problems of improving science education in secondary schools. Following the conference, the University of the North asked the VU for support in developing the domain of science teacher education in its Faculties of Science and Education, also on the basis of the good experiences with the UNIFY programme. This gave rise to the UNITE programme (University of the North Initiative in Teacher Education) that is still active with support of the VU Association (the owner and governing body of the university that provides support to some development cooperation activities in South Africa). However, external support to this initiative could not be acquired because funding channels either concentrated on working through government departments and not universities, prioritised primary education above secondary education, or worked with selected institutions only.

One project in science education that was initiated in 2002 is important to note here. It concerns assistance to the Department of Education in North West Province in order to develop an organisational unit and a strategy to strengthen mathematics, science and technology education in the Province. Links with North West University are also being established within this project. The project will be more fully described below when examining the case of North West Province, but before doing so, the changing Dutch policy and funding frameworks for development cooperation will be discussed, particularly where they affect cooperation in South Africa.

Changing policy frameworks for education development cooperation

* Bilateral cooperation through the Dutch Embassy. No structural involvement of Dutch expertise, but particularly funding with contracted South African expertise. Emphasis is laid on basic education.

* Joint Financing Programme for Cooperation in Higher Education (MHO). Succeeded earlier institutional cooperation programmes in 1993. Only one

institution per country was selected to benefit from the programme. In South Africa this was the Technikon Northern Gauteng (on the border of North West Province, mostly drawing students from this province). Mainly supported by Dutch universities for professional education, which offer technikon-type programmes in the Netherlands.

* The Programme for Cooperation between Dutch Universities of Professional Education and Educational Institutions in Developing Countries for the benefit of Primary Education (HOB). Since the mid-1990s; aimed at support from higher education to teacher education for basic education. Emphasis also on primary education; only Dutch universities for professional education are allowed to participate. In South Africa, cooperation in the COMETDS

* (Cooperative Model for Educator Training Development and Support) programme in North West Province. The VU involvement in these programmes in South Africa has been minimal, but the VU's merger partner, Windesheim polytechnic, is participating in both. The Technikon Northern Gauteng project and the COMETDS programme have both been externally evaluated by a VU/CIS staff member.

* CENESA programme for Cooperation in Education between the Netherlands and South Africa. Funding comes from two Dutch ministries: Education and Development Cooperation. CENESA was originally meant to be a more or less symmetrical exchange programme for educational expertise between the two countries (system-to-system exchange, no particular role for universities). However, after initiation at the national level failed to produce results (national level: largely policy-making, provincial level: responsible for implementation), the programme shifted its focus to three provinces with large capacity problems, namely Limpopo, North West and Kwazulu Natal, thereby partly defeating the idea of more symmetrical exchange. The VU project in North West Province is part of this programme, but also other projects in the development of Curriculum 2005 and vocational education have been active in this province. As the CENESA framework is intended as a system-to-system exchange, VU/CIS is implementing this project together with a few Dutch partners that are active in education development both in the Netherlands and internationally, notably the Education Faculty at the University of Twente and the National Centre for School Improvement in Utrecht (APS).

The overall picture shows different channels and different projects without proper coherence and without cooperation between them. At present, all above funding

frameworks are in the process of disappearing, except for the bilateral one.

The new NPT programme for support to post-secondary education and training that started operating early 2003, succeeds and merges the former separate programmes and has a wider sector focus. In South Africa this programme will also become active, although its focus is still unknown. In the Netherlands Programme for Institutional Strengthening of Post-secondary Education and Training Capacity (NPT), the Dutch universities can still be strongly involved, although largely in a consultancy-type role. Some new characteristics of the programme as compared to its predecessor are:

- * The NPT is not exclusively aimed at higher education in the strict sense, but at any type of post-secondary education.
- * The programme does not concentrate on a limited number of institutes in the South but projects are spread out over many institutes.
- * Any Dutch institute, organisation or firm that can offer the required knowledge may participate in projects.
- * Projects are awarded to Dutch participants by way of public tendering.

These new characteristics imply that in fact the idea of cooperative links between institutions has disappeared; tender procedures have replaced earlier modalities of joint project development. The type of projects that are currently being formulated in the new NPT framework usually require the formation of alliances with different partners on the Dutch side in order to mobilise the diversity of expertise that is requested for individual projects.

This trend raises a number of critical questions for the future of development cooperation in higher education and the involvement of Dutch universities:

- * Can the link between development cooperation and academic cooperation be maintained?
- * Will the opportunities for southern universities to get connected to the worldwide academia be reduced?
- * Who 'owns' the project on the Dutch side, if multiple parties are involved?
- * Why would a Dutch university invest time and money to develop and maintain projects and cooperative links in a framework that stimulates rather loose consultancy arrangements and temporary consortia of partners?
- * Why would a Dutch university invest time and money in the expertise development that is required to work effectively in challenging development contexts?

In the 'knowledge society' it is said that working across traditional boundaries of disciplines and types of organisations is the norm. Innovation stems increasingly from problem-oriented research and development in the real world and applied contexts, rather than traditional discipline-oriented modes. Development problems in the developing world, such as problems of educational development in school systems, can be considered as such real world problem contexts, fit for research and development activities across traditional boundaries between disciplines and organisations. This requires, however, that funding for research and development work becomes part and parcel of development cooperation activities. In international circles, such as in the World Bank, this is being realised more and more. VU/CIS, for example, has been involved in recent years in major study assignments on problems and promising practices in Secondary Education in Africa, commissioned by the World Bank. In Dutch education development cooperation programmes, however, this is not yet visible. Rather, demand-driven consultancy in a competitive environment is the norm at this moment.

If the 'new' of problem-oriented development cooperation is to meet the 'old' of academic work and expertise development, new arrangements are necessary, not only at the institutional and inter-institutional level, but also at the national policy level.

The case of North West Province

In more than one way, North West Province in South Africa can be considered as a microcosm of 'new' meeting 'old', particularly for the VU:

* Dutch bilateral development cooperation has selected North West Province to get special attention and, as explained above, different projects through different funding channels are operating in this province. VU/CIS is directly involved in one of them, namely in mathematics and science education with the provincial Department of Education.

* The former University of Potchefstroom is located in this new province. As described by Brinkman, the VU re-established contacts with Potchefstroom after 1992.

* Initial contacts with the University of the North West in Mmabatho (the former University of Bophutatswana, UNIWEST) have also been established in recent years, both with university management and in basic science education. The university initiated a Foundation Programme in 2000 and expressed interest in the VU's experience in this area.

* From 1 January 2004, the University of Potchefstroom and UNIWES have merged to become the new multi-campus North West University (NWU). This merger is part of the national restructuring of the entire higher education sector. The VU, in the person of Brinkman, has been supporting the preparation of the merger. In 2004 the VU has started to support NWU in matters of organisational and management development with financial support by the VU Association.

* Activities in the field of science education are being initiated at present, for the foundation programme as well as for science teacher education.

The situation with regard to basic science education in Potchefstroom and Mafikeng is quite different and provides a telling picture on 'new' and 'old' in the South African context.

* The Foundation Programme in Mafikeng is large in student numbers, but poorly resourced with regard to staff, equipment and facilities. It is not well embedded in the institution and lacks a clear direction and institutional contacts with the main faculties and departments, which it should feed with incoming students. After completing the foundation programme many students leave the institution for other higher education institutions.

* The Potchefstroom campus does not have very many formerly disadvantaged students as of yet. Most of its programmes are still taught in Afrikaans, which means that it is not very attractive for a large majority of students from North West Province who are Tswana-speaking with English as a second language. Students from the Mafikeng foundation programme could study science-based programmes in Potchefstroom, but language forms the main barrier.

* In Potchefstroom a strong group of science educators exists in the Faculty of Science who have offered in-service teacher upgrading programmes over the last ten years, mainly for teachers from North West Province. These programmes are part-time and are offered in English.

* In Mafikeng, the Faculty of Education also offers teacher-upgrading programmes in the sciences and is even involved in an ambitious special project for the delivery of such programmes at a distance, with assistance of ICT-technology. However, in Mafikeng only one science and mathematics educator is present in the Faculty of Education, who is hardly involved in the upgrading programmes and has only some temporary part-time staff to complement his own work.

The case of North West Province and North West University provides a picture of

'new' meeting 'old' in the new South Africa. It is clear that the transformation of systems and institutions is not an overnight affair. The implementation of 'rational' decisions like merging the two universities in the province requires a lengthy process of development before a viable institution emerges for the long term.

The question may be raised which role a foreign partner, in this case the VU, could play in such a process, particularly in terms of development cooperation. Development cooperation is dealing with external assistance in capacity building, in terms of both expertise and funding. However, neither finance nor expertise are particularly lacking in South Africa. And in terms of the criteria for official development assistance (ODA), South Africa does not qualify for development cooperation. In this context, development cooperation with South Africa is to a large degree a political choice, justified by South Africa's position in the sub-region and the continent and by the need for transition to a new social and economic situation in the country. And in the Dutch case, also propelled by the idea of traditional ties between the two countries.

The need for transformation and transition is still all too apparent in South Africa, but the nature of the problems is quickly changing. The historical divisions along racial lines are changing towards deep divisions between a small, middle-class, well-off, and employed minority and a large under-employed and poor majority. Lack of educational opportunities definitely plays a crucial part in the development problems of South Africa, but this does not refer that much to problems in higher education. The participation rate in higher education in South Africa is relatively high (around 20 per cent of age groups) for its development level. Non-absorption of graduates in labour markets is already occurring or will occur soon, even in sciences and engineering. South Africa faces difficult choices in its development strategy, for example between stimulating labour-intensive low-technology markets versus service-oriented high-technology markets. These choices, however, are largely political and it is questionable whether development cooperation has a role to play in them, in other words whether in development cooperation 'old' can still meet 'new'.

By way of conclusion

At this point in time no definitive answer can be given to the question raised here. We have pointed at a number of developments that are ongoing:

* The role of universities within South African development is changing. The

higher education system as a whole is now being geared much more towards the needs of the entire student population, black and white, and also more to the development needs of the large poor sections of the society.

* The role of Dutch development cooperation, and more specifically cooperation in higher education, is changing in South Africa. This is due to the fact that the country does not meet the formal criteria for development assistance and the fact that human and financial resources for the further development of higher education are not really lacking in the country itself.

* The new Dutch NPT programme, the main funding source for Dutch universities active in development cooperation in higher education, is changing the role of the Dutch institutes in that kind of cooperation.

* As a consequence of this last point, the character of the relation between VU/CIS and its partners in South Africa is also changing.

Each one of these developments shows intrinsic tensions. (For instance, two years after the start of its implementation, objections against the set-up of the NPT programme are growing in number, and the need for new adjustments is becoming clearer.) These tensions make the outcome of the developments unpredictable at this moment. One conclusion, however, seems to be obvious: the 'new' Dutch university development cooperation, set in a problem-oriented framework aimed primarily at local capacity building, does not seem to have much of a real reason for being in South Africa. Although barely starting at this moment in time, it may not last very long as the conditions in the country do no longer clearly justify externally financed development support to the higher education sector. (The same in fact holds true for official development aid at large.) And as explained above, this new type of development cooperation in higher education does, unfortunately, not offer clear possibilities for the 'old' twinning of academic with development cooperation. At the same time academic cooperation between staff from different VU faculties and their colleagues from a range of South African universities is flourishing more than even before. It seems rather obvious that this is where the future for the VU cooperation with South Africa lies in the longer term.