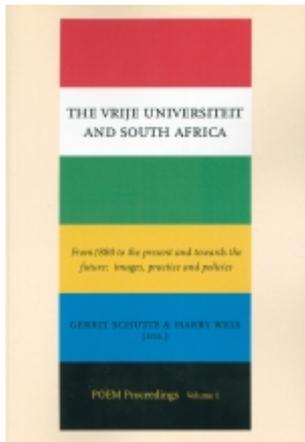


# The Vrije Universiteit And South Africa ~ Political And Organisational Developments



## *Introduction*

In the long history of VU relations with South Africa the year 1992 provided a landmark: the VU came back to South Africa, as a partner of the University of the North (UNIN) in a big pre-entry science project funded by the European Union. UNIN is a so-called historically black university, founded under apartheid policy. In 1992 five VU specialists started working at UNIN, continuing till the end of 1998. After 1992 the cooperation VU-UNIN was extended to other fields, and UNIN is still a main partner of the VU in South Africa.

1992 was two years after the *Wende* in South Africa, President de Klerk's transition speech in parliament and the release of his successor, Nelson Mandela, from prison. At last a new South Africa came in sight. The VU was the first Dutch university to re-enter South Africa.

Traditionally relations of the VU with South Africa were based on theology and philosophy. The VU that came back to South Africa in 1992, was a very different university, with strong expertise, many years of experience and a good reputation in development cooperation, mainly built up in countries in southern Africa outside South Africa since 1976.

That change in the VU interface with South Africa is the main theme of my presentation about the period 1972 till the present.

## *Point of departure in 1972*

At the beginning of 1972 the situation at the VU with regard to South Africa had nothing remarkable:

- \* Contacts were maintained mainly by theologians and philosophers.
- \* The exchange of professors with the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, agreed on in 1958, had come to a standstill at the end of the 1960s.
- \* A general, strong uneasiness about apartheid policy in South Africa prevailed.

VU theologian Professor J.H. Bavinck had been one of the first in the Netherlands (1953) to voice basic criticism. Traditional South African VU-partners in theology and philosophy had appeared to be pillars of apartheid ideology.

\* With regard to development cooperation frustration was prominent. In the years after the 1961 VU-Corps congress it had been decided that the VU in view of its identity as a Christian university in the modern world would go for development cooperation. Consequently since 1967 a big effort had been made to support the new Université Libre du Congo at Kisangani. This university however had been nationalized and the VU start in development cooperation had turned out to be a failure, though experience had been gained.

\* Apart from this, minds and time at the VU in the years before 1972 were fully taken up by tempestuous growth of the university, by building a big modern campus, by a new ecumenical codification of its identity as a Christian university, and by participation in the nationwide movement for democratisation of university governance.

### *Changes in 1972*

In retrospect however, two developments at the VU in the year 1972 were relevant for a change in its relation with South Africa.

1. The formal structure of the Dutch universities, being weakly organised professors' universities according to German tradition, collapsed under the pressure of mass higher education and termination of budget growth. A new governance structure was introduced by law, inspired by the Dutch legislation on municipal governance. A professional university management body was introduced, counterbalanced by a university council, elected by academic staff, non-academic staff and students. Without this professionalisation of university management and its corollary, the professionalisation of the university administration, VU development cooperation would never have succeeded. On the other hand, inventing the new governance wheel along political models generated considerable belief in policy making, a.o. with regard to international relations. It was not easy to handle inevitable casuistry in that setting (e.g. shall we cooperate with universities in a country like Indonesia, under the control of the Suharto regime?).

2. An honorary doctorate in theology was awarded to C.F. Beyers Naudé, former minister in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, who had publicly broken with the support for apartheid by his church and founded the Christian Institute

for Southern Africa. Professor Berkouwer, the grand old man of the VU Faculty of Theology, made it quite clear that the faculty stood with Beyers Naudé and no longer with the theological and ecclesiastical establishment of his church, with which VU theology had had a long standing relationship. The honorary doctorate was in fact a realignment of the South African VU-commitment, supporting Beyers Naudé in his opposition to apartheid.

It is important to keep in mind that part of the justification for the apartheid policy of the ruling South African National Party had been provided by Reformed theologians in South Africa (cf. Giliomee 2003: 462-3). Professor H.G. Stoker of Potchefstroom University, the most prominent Reformed philosopher in South Africa and well connected with the Reformed philosophers of the VU, also contributed to that justification (cf. *ibid.*: 416). The VU philosophers however, contrary to the VU theologians, kept quiet.

#### *A new start in development cooperation*

It was in 1975 that a new start was prepared concerning the VU commitment to development cooperation. The experience with the Université Libre du Congo had made clear that such commitment had to be practiced in cooperation with existing institutions, to support their development according to their priorities in the context of their countries, on the basis of expertise available at the VU. A serious effort required that VU staff would be made available to universities in developing countries, both by posting at the partner university and by short missions. A great boost was that the necessary funding could be found under the new Dutch government program for university development cooperation, which started in 1977. From the very beginning the VU was a big shareholder in this program, because it could provide a strong in-house infrastructure, adapting its own organisation and also using its own budget for development cooperation.

To implement development cooperation according to this concept choices had to be made as to where in the world the VU would go and offer its services. The answer was given referring to VU tradition: Indonesia, particularly Java, and southern Africa. Opting for one of the new apartheid-created black universities in South Africa was impossible. In 1976 a VU delegation visited the small universities of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, countries most close to South Africa. This was the beginning of a long and successful partnership with these universities, accepted under the Dutch government program and later extended to other countries in the region, outside South Africa. I refer to the presentation

by Kees van Dongen for further information on this subject.

### *Break with Potchefstroom*

By coincidence it was also in 1976 that an unsuccessful dialogue took place between the VU and the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (PU). The final break was inevitable and dramatic, but in practice of rather marginal importance. The agreement between the two universities to exchange professors, dating back to 1958, had not been implemented for already many years, and the relationship between the two institutions (sisters by tradition) was very weak, also due to South African apartheid policy.

The previous history of the dialogue, the dialogue itself and its follow-up were all extensively documented, in view of the lively interest in the affair both within the VU, especially by the university council, and outside the VU. In the context of this presentation a schematic summary will suffice:

1. In 1971 and subsequently in 1973-1974 the VU sent letters to the PU expressing its problems with apartheid. The answers received from the PU confirmed the existence of fundamental differences of opinion, which made the VU university council in 1974 decide to formally terminate the exchange agreement. But from both sides the necessity and the willingness to dialogize were expressed. This was also strongly recommended by Dr. Beyers Naudé.
2. In 1974 the PU decided to organise an International Conference of Reformed Scholars at Christian Universities to be held at Potchefstroom in 1975, and invited a.o. the VU to attend. The VU decided to accept the invitation. It wanted to account for its identity as a ecumenical Christian institution in a meeting with its traditional Reformed sister-institutions from North America and South Africa. The PU welcomed the participation by the VU. Soon after this exchange of letters in 1974 it became known that the South African government had restricted the freedom of Dr. Beyers Naudé's Christian Institute. The VU protested sharply to the South African government. The VU delegation to the Potchefstroom conference, mainly consisting of deans and former deans, felt that in attending the conference the VU could not ignore the government attack on Dr. Beyers Naudé and his Institute. Consequently he was invited to join the delegation, which he accepted. Though the VU stressed that it should be free to decide on its delegation, the PU then withdrew the invitation.
3. So the VU did not attend the 1975 conference in Potchefstroom, but it presented a report on the reasons of its absence to the participants. The

conference, taking note of the absence of the VU, appealed to VU and PU for dialogue, which took place in Potchefstroom from 2 till 5 March 1976. Dr. Beyers Naudé joined the VU delegation on 4 March.

4. Though it appeared that the PU restricted itself much more than the VU in making official statements on non-university matters, its delegation was very critical with regard to e.g. the government decisions on the Christian Institute. It became also clear that the PU wanted to admit black students, though gradually. From both sides it was concluded that further dialogue would make good sense, especially at personal level. The written report on the dialogue, presented as a public document, however was rejected by the PU rector, who had attended the dialogue but did not act as a spokesman.

5. Consequently the VU concluded that PU was not a reliable partner for dialogue and decided to terminate all relations with PU. It must be kept in mind that between the date of the dialogue and the exchange of letters about the report the Soweto youth revolt and its repression had started. The final overall impression at VU side was that within the PU differences of opinion were much greater than expected, but that the PU could anyway not permit itself the risks of alienation from its apartheid supporting constituency. This explained the double-faced performance of the PU-rector, but it also made further efforts from VU-side meaningless, apart from the disgust about government repression in South Africa. The Christian Institute was 'banned' by the South African government in 1977.

6. The VU decision to terminate relations with the PU was explicitly characterized as self binding for VU management and administration, but not binding on faculties and individual staff members, in view of the nature of the university organisation. A formal boycott decision with regard to South Africa in general was never taken by the VU.

7. But until after the *Wende* in 1990 relations between the VU and South Africa were very weak, at all levels.

### *The case of pre-entry science*

1976 till 1992 was the period in which the VU was very active and successful in development cooperation with universities in southern Africa outside South Africa. The start was made with the universities in Botswana, Swaziland and Lesotho. Other partners became the universities in Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi, and the Ministry of Education in Namibia. The disciplines in which cooperation was started, were basic science (pre-entry and teachers training), earth sciences (incl. natural resources and environment), and applied socio-

economic research.

For description and analysis I refer to the presentation by Kees van Dongen. In the context of my presentation I will discuss the organisational and managerial problems which had to be solved, especially in the field of the basic science pre-entry projects, which turned out to be a general priority in southern Africa.

The first VU-delegation to the University of Botswana in 1976 was confronted with a 'vicious circle': very weak teaching of science and mathematics in secondary schools, very few first year students sufficiently qualified to be admitted to the Faculty of Science, low output of that faculty for post-graduate training in engineering, medicine and science teaching. The VU was requested: assist us to break that circle, through fast-working, possibly unorthodox interventions. The answer was:

1. Identify talented, potential students for science independent of their scholastic achievement in secondary education.
2. Set up a tough pre-entry curriculum (sciences, mathematics, English and study skills) at the university to train them during at least half a year for admission to the first year in science.
3. Provide good teachers for that training.

Cross-cultural testing specialists at the VU Faculty of Psychology developed a fairly reliable combination of procedures for 1). Cooperation between VU staff members (Faculty of Science) and their Botswana colleagues provided 2), and 3) was done by recruiting a number of dedicated young Dutch science teachers, some with teaching experience in Africa or Indonesia, to work for a number of years at the University of Botswana as VU employees funded under the Dutch government program for university development cooperation. It was their job to implement the curriculum and do the so-called pre-entry training. They also contributed to the upgrading of under-qualified science teachers in rural secondary schools.

This pre-entry project, though relatively expensive, was highly successful from the very beginning: the Faculty of Science in Botswana got its students. Comparable projects were also implemented in Lesotho, Swaziland, and Mozambique, and after 1991 this practice was introduced in South Africa.

Was this what university development cooperation should do? The draft for the

first review of the Botswana project for the Dutch funding agency was rather negative: this was no university business. But at the same time a regional review by the highly respected Swedish development cooperation agency SAREC identified the project as exemplary. So funding was continued, for many years.

Although the VU Faculty of Science was involved in the implementation of pre-entry by providing senior staff members who had responsibility as to the content of the project, the administrative side was fully handled by the new VU Office for International Relations (later: Development Cooperation Service; at present: Centre for International Cooperation). But also the science teachers seconded to the partner universities belonged to the staff of that Office, and not to the staff of the Faculty of Science.

Very soon the number of pre-entry projects grew, senior expertise concerning content quality became available within the Office, and the Faculty of Science could not provide enough staff members for project responsibility on the basis of personal experience in development cooperation. Consequently most projects were fully managed and quality-controlled by the Office, which in this way became a specialised extra-faculty structure for specific professional academic work outside the university and outside the country, but work for which the university was responsible concerning organisation, finance, and quality, in good cooperation with the African partner university.

Learning from practice made clear that large scale university development cooperation required an innovation in university work and organisation by setting up a satellite or parasite structure, fully devoted to this new university business and profession, and strongly supported and monitored by university management, a.o. by coordinating with the partner universities through regular visits. Knowing your partner and his situation is necessary for an adequate performance in development cooperation.

What I want to stress in looking at the case of pre-entry science is that a new interface of the university with its outside world in untraditional commitments may require adaptation of its organisation. In the present day understanding of the role of universities in so-called knowledge based societies this seems to me to be an interesting lesson. Since knowledge has also been recognized as vitally important for development (cf. World Bank Report 1998/99, 'Knowledge for Development'), and since developing countries usually are also poor in knowledge institutions, universities in these countries and their partners in countries with a longer knowledge tradition are in the ironical situation that their traditional

organisation, which is closely identified with guaranteeing quality, may be in their way to deliver new quality.

### *Main partners since 1992*

In 1992, the landmark year in the VU relations with South Africa, two years after the *Wende* in South Africa, the VU returned to South Africa by starting its cooperation with the University of the North, still one of the main partners of the VU in South Africa. UNIN is situated in the poorest, relatively densely populated, rural northern part of the country. It is a rather big, 'historically black' university, founded under apartheid, serving a large region, struggling and surviving.

Unfortunately the cooperation with UNIN was handicapped by lack of funding under the Dutch government scheme to support the 'new South Africa'.

The first project in the cooperation was, of course, pre-entry science: training each year 150 under-qualified students for admission to the three science-based faculties at UNIN (Mathematics and Natural Sciences, Health Sciences, Agriculture). This project was run from 1992 till 2000, funded by the European Union, and from 2000 onwards funded by UNIN itself. The VU was not allowed to tender for the third phase of the project, starting in 1998. A Finnish team replaced the VU-team, and served the last two years, 1998 till 2000.

The second field of cooperation was law. The VU Law Faculty joined a consortium of South African law faculties (Potchefstroom, Pretoria, Cape Town) to support the UNIN Law Faculty. In South Africa such cooperation between strong and weak usually generates severe tensions between the partners. It will take a long time before differences in quality will no longer be associated with the history of apartheid. A foreign partner, provided that it has localized its commitment, can assist in balancing this type of national cooperation.

Health sciences was a third field, to build up research capacity through training in the methods of epidemiological research. Health problems were abundantly available in the region of the university, and not much was known about them. University management and organisation became the fourth field of cooperation. The relevance of good governance and institution building has been recognized also in university development cooperation. The VU has included this element in its pattern of expertise for cooperation with its partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

When funding of the VU pre-entry team at UNIN ended in 1998, cooperation in a similar project was started with the University of Pretoria (UP). The VU has a cooperation agreement with UP since 1998 and is still involved in the UP foundation year, training under-qualified black students for studying in the sciences.

The Potchefstroom University became another main partner of the VU in South Africa, transformed as it had been in the context of the 'new South Africa'. Gradually the cooperation was built up with a great variety of activities, e.g. postgraduate training in law, research in economic sciences, consultancy to assist the PU in setting up a new degree program in business mathematics.

The leadership of the PU and the VU communicated closely, and cooperated also in the field of modernization of university organisation and management. Quality improvement in this dimension of university performance has been recognized as a priority across the world. Though national university traditions, systems and contexts differ, professionalisation of organisation and management is a fruitful domain for international cooperation. The Potchefstroom University embarked on an ambitious program of research development, supported by a sophisticated combination of internal and external assessments. In the South African context this was an innovation, for which use was made of experiences at Twente University and the VU.

The VU also started to prepare cooperation with the predominantly black University of the North-West in Mafikeng, as a corollary of the cooperation with Potchefstroom. In 2003 a government decision merged the universities in Potchefstroom and Mafikeng to the multi-campus North-West University (NWU). The VU has offered to assist this university in its capacity building program. NWU will now be the obvious partner of the VU, continuing the tradition of cooperation with the former Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education.

A fourth partner to be mentioned is Stellenbosch University, with which the VU has a cooperation agreement. The projects presented in our conference by Professors Schutte, Martin, and Van der Beek are examples of cooperation between Stellenbosch University and the VU.

#### *Pattern of VU relations with South Africa*

I will not try to take stock of the present-day contacts, projects and partnerships

of the VU in South Africa. As can be expected in a strong Dutch university with an old South African connection, they are many and varied, most of them maintained by academic colleagues in the context of research as an international enterprise, but very often also connected with specific South African topics. South Africa is a country with a strong academic tradition and an abundance of opportunities for interesting research. It is also a country that attracts Dutch students for their semesters of internationalisation.

But, additional to the present-day customary academic relations between the Netherlands and South Africa, the VU pattern of relations with South Africa has some specific characteristics, reflecting old (e.g. the relation with Potchefstroom) and new (development cooperation) VU tradition. The VU cooperates with 'historically black' and still rather weak universities. The VU experience in modernization of organisation, management and quality assessment has provided an important field for cooperation with South Africa, since South African universities are under heavy pressure: less budget and more students, more equity in the composition of staff and student body, quality improvement, research relevant for the problems of the country, etc. When this analysis of the specific VU pattern is correct, there is no indication that it will become outdated in the coming years. South Africa's problems, also in the field of knowledge, are simply overwhelming.

Maintaining this specific VU pattern involves not only VU people at faculty level, but also the Centre for International Cooperation and specialists from administration departments. It is supported at university executive level. South African universities are faced with a complex combination of modernisation demands, on the one hand in line with what universities have to go through all over the world, on the other hand the consequences of the 'new South Africa'. The VU cooperation pattern seems to be a good match for this situation. And so the well-known VU slogan applies: *Noblesse oblige!*

### *Epilogue*

The VU commitment to development cooperation emerged in the sixties, at a time of no concern about strategy, mission and quality of universities in the sophisticated sense of the last twenty years. It was primarily a commitment in line with what people in our country, outside and inside the university, felt to be an urgent moral obligation. It was also supposed to make new sense for a university like the VU as a Christian institution. Development cooperation has become part

of the professional identity of the VU and plays an important role in its present-day relations with South Africa.

The VU performance with regard to South Africa since 1972, including breaks and reorientations, is too specific to derive general university policy lines, but it does agree with what I consider to be good modern university practice:

- \* quality of university performance requires taking into account a plurality of norms and values, according to university tradition and scientific knowledge paradigms, but also according to societal functions of knowledge;
- \* this plurality must be integrated, which can be only be done in specific contexts, usually in a rather casuistic way;
- \* innovation remains the main issue.

### *Acknowledgement*

Thanks to Dr. Jan Donner, Dr. Wim Noomen, Prof. Dr. Gerrit Schutte, and Dr. Gerard Thijs I could improve on earlier versions of this paper.

### *References*

Berg, J. van den (n.d.) *Een geheel andere Waardemeter. Beschouwingen van Prof. dr. J.H Bavinck over het rassenvraagstuk en over Zuid-Afrika*, Amsterdam: Bekking.

Brinkman, H.J. (1994) 'Development cooperation between universities: Experience gained by the Vrije Universiteit 1976-1991', in J.W. Gunning, H. Kox, W. Tims and Y. de Wit (Eds), *Trade, aid and development, essays in honour of Hans Linnemann*, New York: St. Martin's Press, pp. 247-57.

Botha, M.E. (2000) 'Christian scholarship for reconciliation? The Free University of Amsterdam and Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education', in: W.E. van Vugt and G.D. Cloete (Eds), *Race and reconciliation in South Africa*, Maryland: Lanham.

Giliomee, H. (2003) *The Afrikaners. Biography of a people*, London: Hurst.

Memorandum on the relationship between the Free University Amsterdam and the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education. *An exchange of views on Apartheid* (1975), Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit.

Verslag van een samenspreking tussen delegaties van de Vrije Universiteit en de Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoër Onderwys (1976), Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit.