

## Chapter 3

# How Do Schools of Education Position Themselves Within the South African Higher Education Sector: The Case of the Wits School of Education

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*In this chapter, we reflect on how Schools of Education position themselves for identity and acknowledgement globally, and how this applies in the context of a top-ranked South African university, Wits University, which asserts a research-led identity and vision. We look closely at the Wits School of Education (WSoE), whose origins are rooted in a policy process of re-structuring the higher education landscape under the first democratic government. After a brief historical summary of teacher education and its transformation, we give an overview of the policy for the development of teachers in South Africa, and proceed with the WsoE's development of sustainable research capacity. We outline and reflect on the effect of the School's research development strategies, which include the School's rebranding of its vision, institutional re-structuring, and an expanded research-collaboration footprint to include the Tübingen School of Education, whose research strategy is outlined in Chapter 2. The chapter closes with recommendations for continued developments.*

### 1 Higher education policy in the South African context: past and present

The Schools of Education in South Africa came about through a contentious policy process of re-structuring the higher education landscape under the first and newly-appointed democratic government. In the days of the Apartheid government, teacher

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education took place largely in institutions called Colleges of Education (Cross, 1986). In the 1960s, these Colleges were purposely proliferated in the “homelands”: designated rural and isolated areas of the country that have poor economic activity (Jensen & Zenker, 2015). Homelands were built on discriminative principles, dividing the black community further along ethnic lines, as each homeland was assigned to a specific ethnic group. The governance and economic empowerment in these homelands were notoriously weak and inconsistent. The Apartheid state created silent but brutal competition between the different homelands, which consequently filtered into the embedded Colleges of Education, for access to funding and infrastructural development. As a result, some colleges were internally better equipped than others, thereby promoting the divisive policies of the Apartheid government along administration lines.

In the early 1990s, following the debut of the democratic government order, policy reviews of many economic sectors for a post-Apartheid South Africa, including education, were prioritized. These were epistemologically driven by the long-standing desire for redress, the eradication of social inequities, and the restoration of the marginalized black community's dignity (Clercq, 2020). Immediately after April 1994's democratic elections, the government, through a presidential proclamation process, established a national commission into higher education (NCHE) in the December of the same year. Its terms included advising the government on issues related to the re-structuring of higher education for a post-Apartheid South Africa, and its re-calibration for a successful repositioning within global education economies.

In this context, the perspectives on the Colleges of Education at that time were not positive (Jansen, 2003). Policy debates were polarized between retaining the Colleges of Education and merging them with higher education institutions. Ultimately, the decision favored their abolition through a merger process that incorporated the 109 Colleges of Education into 22 of the 26 newly merged public universities. The reasons offered for merging rested on two major factors: the aforementioned political redress and institutional administration efficiency. Firstly, the arguments for political re-dress were overwhelmingly driven by the desire to resolve the Apartheid legacy, focusing on the need to eradicate racial segregation and discrimination by integrating the education system into a single coherent instrument (Baloyi & Naidoo, 2016). Secondly, the consolidation of the unequal Colleges of Education, which were scattered across the country, into a few institutions, was to achieve economies of scale through reducing unit costs and economies of scope, enabling presence and footing in global discourses (Cloete & Muller, 1998; Jansen, 2003; Mzangwa, 2019). Despite the unitary legislation that ushered in the proclamation of the mergers, the participating parties did not

have the benefit of a neat, theoretically supported antecedence. They had to plough through the complex cultural differences, power imbalances, and staff anxieties in multiple different ways (Jansen, 2003), some of which continue to bedevil the identity of Schools of Education within the higher education sector. These will be made clearer with reference to the Wits School of Education (WSoE) as we unpack its institutional development.

Today, the task of initial teacher education primarily rests with public universities regulated and monitored by the legislative principle and procedure, in accordance with the 1997 Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997). The legislation states that “it is desirable for the HEIs [Higher Education Institutions] to enjoy freedom and autonomy in their relationship with the state within the context of public accountability and the national need for advanced skills and scientific knowledge” (Department of Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, p. 2). While autonomy is granted, the government, through the Ministry of Education, monitors, supports and regulates processes and policies applied in the HEIs. As mentioned earlier, the merger of the Colleges of Education into universities took different forms. In this Chapter, we highlight the institutional development of the WSoE as a sub-unit within a university that asserts a research-intensive identity in its vision and culture. We examine the institutional development of the School as a College of Education that was determined to shape its identity as it entered the merger with our university, Wits University.

The School was then known as the Johannesburg College of Education (JCE) and strove for what Jansen (2003) called the protected enclosure kind of merger. Through exceptionally strong leadership, the School argued for favorable terms of incorporation that ensured the School would remain physically intact as a unit with its own designated campus. Among the achievements were the ring-fencing of its financial reserves for the purposes of teacher education; the negotiation of professorships for its senior staff; and the defying of long-standing rules for academic professorship. The School headship was also considered as the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, thereby elevating the school to a faculty in its own right. No other College-University merger achieved such a feat at the time. The School operated as what Jansen (2003, p. 35) called a ‘quasi-independent facility’ for the specific training of pre-service teachers. While this arrangement did not mean that the School disregarded the university regulations, it did mean that the School had managed to buy transitional time to settle in and shape its identity and legitimacy within the larger institution.

## 2 The WSoE in the contemporary higher education landscape

Despite the institutional success achieved through the transitional protective enclosure, as with many cases globally, the WSoE experienced a difficult road to retaining and bolstering its legitimacy within the wider university. As Marques and Powell (2020) point out, the demise of the Schools of Education generally resulted from the wider university's lack of understanding of education studies. Education is a multidisciplinary field that focuses on both education knowledge and the practice of disciplines that, in some cases, have conflicting views and impermeable territorial discipline boundaries (Lawn & Furlong, 2009). As such, the integration of Schools of Education into South African universities has predominately taken shape via two distinct models.

The first is a centralized model in which a School of Education is exclusively a stand-alone sub-unit of the university, with provisions for both content courses and pedagogy all offered under one roof. The second is a decentralized model in which a School of Education focuses mainly on the provision of pedagogy and the related practices. Content courses are taught at the originating academic disciplines in different faculties across a university. The WSoE employs the centralized model for the provision of programs in both the undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. As with many Schools of Education around the world, the WSoE teacher education curriculum names the subjects of specialization according to the originating academic disciplines. Subjects of specialization include those that are taught in the four phases of the South African School education system. These are: the foundation phase (Grades R–3); the intermediate phase (Grades 4–6); the senior phase (Grades 7–9); and the exit phase, further education and training (Grade 10–12). The teaching of the subjects of specialization is accompanied by pedagogical methodological courses fostering a range of educational aspects grounded in a theoretical framework that describes teacher knowledge for teaching—Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK). The teacher education curriculum entails a policy-regulated ratio of theoretical learning and learning through school-based teaching experience.

The centralized model, combined with the School's location outside of the main campus, has had a downside for the School's visibility. Time and again, it is like a 'lost child', with fewer spontaneous institutional interactions with the wider university community, other than through the administration link of the Faculty of Humanities and sparse pockets of research collaborations at an individual level. The result of these perceptions is the School's continuous struggle for recognition of the unique governance dynamics resulting from its large size, which earned its faculty status at some

point. In particular, this is a struggle for the recognition of its role in navigating the adverse socio-economic impact on students, and for its conceptual existence as an academic discipline with important contributions to research and the generation of new knowledge within the humanities. Marques and Powell (2020) remind us that the battle for recognition of education's legitimacy as a discipline is not only a local issue, but also a global one. It stems from the tensions between the academic field and the field of practice (Biesta, 2011). In the sections below, we unpack how the WSoE, as a force of recognition, asserted its legitimate presence within the complex structure of a higher education institution that has asserted its identity as a research-intensive university.

### 3 Institutional shaping forces

In order to understand the strategic shifts within the WSoE as it re-positioned itself for increased reputational recognition, we drew on Marques and Powell's (2020) conceptualization of the School of Education as an 'organizational strategic actor' (OSA) within the wider university institution. OSA is a term that originates from Krücken and Meier's arguments (2006). According to these authors, OSAs commonly find themselves competing not only for material resources such as funding, but also for symbolic resources such as a favorable reputation profile and legitimate recognition of their existence. While this competition is inherent to the university institution, it also extends externally into the broader field, such as the higher education sector.

External factors such as the dwindling funding, as well as the rating and rankings of the university research outputs, have all placed enormous pressure on universities as institutions. The interconnectivity between funding and the research evaluation system, which uses the research rating system to distribute research funding according to criteria and indicators of quality judged by peer review, has intensified the competition among universities. In this system, peer-reviewed research is perceived as a commodity, the currency of academia, and is increasingly judged not in terms of intrinsic worth, but in terms of its performative measures and income generation (David, 2019). Marques and Powell (2020, p. 837) add that the evolution of scrutiny by media such as Times Higher Education, which are ranking universities' performance and that of sub-units such as faculties and Schools, can be understood as "shaping forces" that exacerbate the competitiveness of the environment in which universities and Schools are embedded. Unlike in a commercial market, the competition created

by the ranking system among universities and their sub-units is being managed and controlled by a third party, for instance the media organization and Higher Education Funding Councils, which set the framing for the competition in the place of consumer needs. At the time of writing this chapter (2021), the WSoE has been competitively ranked as 3<sup>rd</sup> in the list of best public Schools of Education in the African continent by the Times Higher Education, and located within the 201–250 bracket of the 400 plus list of global universities by the Times Higher Education subject rankings.

We further acknowledged two perspectives that conceptualize university positioning as a social construct (Maringe, 2006). These are the environmental determinism perspective and the managerial rationality perspective. The former is developed, similar to Krücken and Meier (2006), around the quest for legitimacy in order to comply with the pressures of the surrounding environment. In this case, legitimacy is seen as more important than efficiency in sustaining organizational survival (Mampaey, Huisman & Seeber, 2015), making universities more inclined towards using exogenous influences as a rationale for adaptation and compliance in the educational environment. Key factors of the external environment might include the political pressure, such as the pressure to produce certain types of graduates, or in this case, teachers in specified numbers, in order to meet systemic teacher needs and requirements. The external environment might also include resource availability, for example, government funding for certain types of programs, such as teacher preparation programs, as is the focus of the WSoE and other Schools of Education such as the Tübingen School of Education (see Chapter 2). But it could also include significant international pressure to produce graduates with global skills, such as those for the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the context of the 4 IR. Institutions thus seek legitimacy in the extent to which they can demonstrably show relevance to such external environmental forces.

The second perspective, the managerial rationality perspective (Mampaey et al., 2015), posits internal purposiveness led by the thoughts and actions of the institution's senior leaders. In the case of the WSoE, this internal rationality arises from the pressure to be a legitimate part of a demonstrably research-intensive university with aspirations for global eminence. The WSoE has developed its vision as a research-led professional School focusing on research as the overarching pillar. Managerial rationality, in this case, is thus seen as a strategic process that responds to internal organizational pressure for conformity and legitimacy (Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011).

#### 4 Re-positioning of the WSoE to lead

In the last five years (2016–2021), the WSoE has persistently emphasized the development of emerging, upcoming researchers, as well as the professional development of a specific cohort of academic staff without doctoral degrees. A large proportion of this cohort has come through the historical ‘protective closure’ merger arrangement mentioned earlier, which was introduced at the inception of the School. It is in the last 2 years of the same period that the School, under new leadership, purposefully re-asserted its identity (Mampaey et al., 2015) by renewing its vision as a research-led School of Education. This vision was immediately matched with a vigorous implementation strategy that saw the rebranding of the School, in line with the isonymism associated with the battle for gains in symbolic resources, particularly reputation and legitimacy (Marques & Powell, 2020).

Some of the vocabulary used in the formulation of the vision is similar to the criteria used in the national and global instruments for ranking. In our School's case, the words ‘research-led’, ‘high-impact’, and ‘visibility’ found their way into the statements describing key operational components of a professional teaching school. In contrast to the trend observed with the branding of leading and top-ranked Schools of Education, and despite the School's high position in the ranking of African Schools of Education (Higher Times Education, 2021), the School adopted a developmental approach, rather than an affirming position of leadership and rank (Marques & Powell, 2020). Part of the reason for this was the fruitful impact of efforts to develop early career researchers, who were continuously bolstered by the presence of a group of esteemed scholars. The latter were cream-of-the-crop achievers and highly ranked in their own right. Additionally, it was due to the recognition that this crop of scholars was leaving the School due to retirements, resignations and emigration. At the same time, the School was experiencing growth in student numbers, resulting in large classes and high workloads, while the funding prospects that would have allowed those leaving to be replaced with scholars of the same academic rank were shrinking. A perceived pattern of juniorization was emerging, as the School turned to replacing higher ranked academics with multiple junior academics (Nettelbeck, Hajek & Woods, 2012).

It is for this reason that the strategic re-branding of the School had to be matched with an equal and continued emphasis on professional development and support. Equally important was developing an organizational culture of unity, belonging and caring that would knit the different components of the new vision together. To this end, the School underwent internal organizational re-structuring, resulting in the elevation of

three previously existing major operational portfolios considered to be drivers of change. These are Research, Graduate Studies and Teacher Education Programs. While each of these portfolios had unique, independent roles, the magic was in their outlook for seamless interactivity, which enabled a smooth delivery of research-led teacher education. The Research portfolio experienced the most structural overhaul compared to the other two portfolios, since they have ties with teaching programs that are bound by tighter university policies and accreditation requirements. The resulting structural change marked the beginning of a new culture of research activeness within the School.

## 5 Re-structuring research at the WSoE

As a School that was becoming academically younger, moving towards the research-led vision and also defending the rich historical reputation it has inherited, all the operational components had to be harmonized to function effectively, while also establishing a sense of continuity (Bak & Kim, 2015). Drawing on previous internal analyses regarding the nature of research work conducted at the School, seven broad themes emerged, which were translated into research structures called 'Research Thrusts' (RTs). The RTs became the virtual organizational research structure that overlaid and freely intercepted the traditionally fractionalized teaching disciplines. A Research Thrust had to have (i) members from more than one discipline, so as to facilitate collaboration between multiple disciplines and increase the potential for large-scale research. Furthermore, the research conducted in a Research Thrust had (ii) to show increased articulation with local or global education and socio-economic challenges, so as to increase the impact factor of the research produced by the School. Membership in a Research Thrust was voluntary and disposed to a healthy mix of both seasoned and emerging researchers. In adopting this approach, the School reciprocally fostered cultural tolerance, the ethnic and gender diversity favoring institutional cultural transformation. The formation of themed RTs further encouraged internal discourse for large-scale research projects based on cross-cutting themes such as Assessment and Technology in Education, thereby enlivening the desired teaching-research nexus (Bak & Kim, 2015). The RTs also doubled up as academic developmental hubs, through which the School's financial and other resources could be accessed and channeled accountably to support the research vision.

The organizational restructuring of research in the School gave a voice and visibility to a traditionally silent research presence, which was often conducted in silos and whose



output was known to few. These outputs were discussed more in human resource activities, such as probation and promotion meetings. In the new structure, the articulation between the RTs and the Research Committee of the School was strengthened. The Research Committee brought a new role: supporting and promoting the visibility of the research work conducted within the RTs. The main strategy for this was putting on designated, promotional School-wide seminar events throughout the year.

Two prominent events are 'Research in the School of Education' (RiSE) and the 'Research Bonanza'. RiSE aims at creating an institutional culture of celebrating research activeness and fosters the dissemination of newly published research outputs. At a RiSE event, authors of new publications are given an opportunity to promote their outputs through presentations and visualization on displays. The event further serves as a formalized process for capturing the School's subsidy-bearing publications throughout the year. On the other hand, the Research Bonanza targets the research work of all academics and graduate students who are afforded an opportunity to present their publications and work in progress. Included in the Research Bonanza are opportunities for hands-on workshops. The School's activities, particularly teaching, come to a complete halt over a 2-day period in order to give precedence to a vibrant and a festive research moment. The event is strategically opened to the wider university as part of what Marques and Powell (2020) call a continual fight for legitimacy. The event is also open to the participation of important external strategic partners such as the sister Schools of Education within the Province, and the Provincial Department of Basic Education. Both the RiSE and the Research Bonanza promote the renewed vision by heightening the visibility of the research work within the School.

As with many Schools of Education, such as with the Tübingen School of Education, the WSoE has, in its journey of renewal and the foregrounding of the refreshed research-led identity, packaged itself in narratives with prestige words (Sidhu, Ho & Yeoh, 2011), which have become instrumental in attracting attention. However, what is unique to the School is the purposeful decision to adopt a developmental role in re-building its research portfolio. The re-structuring of the research portfolio by forming themed RTs has facilitated access to academic research scholarships, while reciprocally giving attention to the attainment of institutional goals for research visibility and impact. An equally important element in this journey has been securing infrastructural facilities that have 'the look and the feel' that support the vision. However, this goal has required innovative strategies for securing funding.

## 6 The Wits School of Education: Funding

A majority of South African universities are state-owned, so the government is expected to subsidize them, while also sponsoring eligible low-income students through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Funding in higher education, especially in South Africa, is linked to issues of accessibility, cultural capital, and intellectual capital. In recent years, cracks have begun to surface in the funding of higher education, despite the established history of cost sharing in South Africa post-Apartheid (Wangenge-Ouma, 2012). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been experiencing unprecedented fiscal constraints in the face of a ballooning student enrolment. While this development signifies a major policy improvement in re-dressing the ills of the past Apartheid regime through wider access to higher education, it has also introduced new developmental constraints. Against the backdrop of our country's poor economic growth over the last 5 years, as well as the new demand for online provision of education due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic segregation between well-resourced and poorly-resourced universities has been heightened. In an effort to meet the financial and resourcing demands, universities have turned to student tuition fees, placing enormous pressure on students, especially those from working-class families. These socio-economic conditions have favored the emergence of private business practices within universities, threatening the fundamental goal of education for the public good (Dlamini, 2018). Thus, there is an inherent conflict in reducing higher education to what Natale and Doran (2012) termed the "contemporary face of education" (p. 187), which leans towards the commercialization of education. While we are cautioning against this commercialization, we have no doubt in the possibility of public good and the market-oriented approach to tertiary education co-existing. However, to avoid structural discrimination and low participation of the historically disadvantaged, their implications for values must be confronted and balanced.

The WSoE has remained resolute in maintaining the fine balance between the HEIs' intentions to reform and recalibrate, and the encouragement of participation by funders. The School derives its funding from the university central budget and through third stream income. As a result of dwindling budgets for operational activities and student funding challenges, the School has created a position known as 'Academic Head Funding and Innovation'. Fundraising activities to support students and procure resources required the synergy of creative strategies to ensure successful results in the new position. Given that generally, there are very few corporations aligned with initial teacher education, the WSoE had to be very creative and innovative in its

drive for funding. Unlike other Schools in the university, which have significant interaction with industry by commercializing new technologies originating from academic research, the School of Education's mandate is to produce high quality teachers. The commercialization of new technologies in other Schools resulted in extra funding for student bursaries, infrastructural development, and research activities from concept to application in society (Cullen, Calitz & Chetty, 2020). It is for these situational reasons that the establishment of the Academic Head Funding and Innovation portfolio was inevitable.

The School relied on the funds generated through the portfolio to pursue innovative ways of mitigating financial barriers to support student bursaries and staff development, particularly early-career academics. The operational strategy, driven by the head of the Funding and Innovation portfolio, was to pursue heads of division in the School, in order to develop short courses and long-term projects as part of the third stream income. A short course policy was developed on the financial sharing ratio with the Head of School and the Business & Finance Manager, and was approved by the Schools' executive committee. The financial sharing ratio meant that the school retains 60% of the profit, while the division was given access to 40% to be used for research activities, human capital development, and conference participation.

In addition to this, the benevolent fund was established. Staff in the School contributed a portion of their salary to support the most marginalized and financially struggling students in the School. Another source of income was CORY (Cost Recovery), a percentage amount charged in research and externally funded consultancy projects as part of the Schools' public mandate on community engagement and beneficitation. These diversified sources of income allowed the School to provide a supportive, high-quality research environment for academic staff and educational environment for students. The creation of a supportive and empowering environment was in line with the university transformation agenda to ensure inclusiveness. Furthermore, in an effort to bridge the funding gap, the School has maintained positive relations with the philanthropic community at a local and international level. All this shows that the School has, in the face of diminishing resources, remained resolute in responding to issues of access, inclusivity and forward thinking. In this context, the development of a purpose-driven infrastructure precinct is an example of the School's forward thinking towards innovation.

## 7 Infrastructural development and investment

The transition of the WSoE into a research-led School through the innovative virtual RTs was to be accompanied by suitable infrastructure development. This was to create efficient physical spaces for collaboration, transcending the boundaries of the traditional academic disciplines housed in the School's 9 divisions. To achieve this, the WSoE then embarked on a journey to create multiple infrastructural precincts to support research and collaboration among academic staff and postgraduate students. The newly created portfolio of Funding and Innovation became significantly instrumental in securing the needed funds. The funding strategy was thus tied to the RTs' work as the hub of knowledge production and the development of transformative pedagogies. This paid off positively, as intra-university financial support was secured through grants and various research project initiatives. Aware of the deeply rooted institutional structures and cultural norms, the RTs provided an innovative and productive platform for academics to collaborate and share knowledge, with the aim of realizing sustainable education change in a multilevel and interconnected system (Corbo, Reinholz, Dancy, Deetz & Finkelstein, 2016). The RTs were seen by funders as providing a framework for creating and sustaining institutional change to ensure systemic improvement in active teaching and learning practices.

Several signature facilities were created with funds secured through the Funding and Innovation portfolio. One of these is a Research Hub exclusively used by academic staff. There is also a Postgraduate Lounge for postgraduate students. These spaces were strategically refurbished and modernized to provide an environment conducive to knowledge production. They foster an institutional culture that promotes research in practice, where research and teaching activities interactively and reciprocally influence each other. For academic staff, the provisioning of the Research Hub meant a sanctuary for deep thinking and the advancement of research in daytime: a sharp contrast to the traditional experiences of research happening only through the sacrifice of private time. In addition to the research facilities, the School has made noticeable advances towards improving computational technologies to support the transformation of our traditional instructional activities to online learning.

When the progress made by the School with respect to the infrastructural development project are placed within the context of challenges in securing funding in the South African higher education sector, an impressive and warming picture of the School's research-centered future emerges. The new infrastructure has gone a long way in positioning our School, appropriately, at the forefront of innovation against all odds.

## 8 Concluding remarks

We stated the focus of this chapter as offering insight into the struggles and successes of Schools of Education, specifically one located within a university that strives for top global rank among the research-led universities. Looking closely at the journey travelled by the WSoE in asserting its legitimacy, we outlined the forces exerting influence on its being and re-positioning, and make concluding remarks. The School draws its legitimacy from both the exogenous and the endogenous contexts. Its position as an eminent national resource is based on the excellence associated with its leadership in teacher preparation responsibilities, while its internal positioning is strongly aligned with institutional ambitions to become a highly-rated, research-intensive university. The recently experienced global disruption to education due to the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) came at the heels of a nascent transformative research journey within the School. It was targeting a reinvigorated research-led focus, unaware of the incoming wave of disruption, which tested not only its will to drive research, but also its resilience. As with many Schools of Education globally, the School's preparedness to retain the desired level of research activity, and gain ground towards realizing the new vision in the face of a global, large-scale disruption, will be judged in time.

The years 2020–2021 were marked by increased stresses related to fully digitalizing learning and teaching. This was a new experience for many of the educators and researchers, who now had to shift focus to the more urgent issue of learners' needs and difficulties with engaging in an online learning environment (Zhong, 2020). As a result, it remains to be seen whether the implemented re-structuring of the research element within the School, as well as the investment into creating a supporting infrastructure and a conducive environment, will bear fruit. However, it is clear that new ways of supporting and cultivating research that is conducted remotely are to be sought. One of these is digital competence and the subsequent resilience to be built. We conclude this chapter by acknowledging that in the face of a changing and constraining education environment, fully realizing the research-led vision will continuously require our collective ingenuity, in order to bounce back from each crisis and bounce forward into a new reality.

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