Academics and agency

Throughout this book, we have been concerned with the extent to which higher education has responded to the calls for change that have dominated the public and academic space from the late 1980s onwards. In this chapter, we turn to the academics in our universities in order to ask about the demands made on them and the ways they have been able to respond to changing contexts.

In order to do this, we draw on the concept of agency and, following the framework that has underpinned the rest of the book, acknowledge that academics, like all other human beings, have personal powers and properties which allow them to act in relation to the concerns they have and the projects they identify to pursue those concerns (Archer 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000). While individuals have the power to act, they are not completely free to do so as they are always conditioned by (but not determined by) the social and cultural structures to which they have been exposed. This social and cultural conditioning can enable or constrain depending on their personal projects and the power accorded to them by virtue of their position in society.

This chapter therefore begins by looking at the social and cultural conditioning emerging from the disciplines in which academics work, and then more broadly at those in place as the new social and political order in South Africa dawned in the early 1990s and academics began to be called upon to be part of the processes of transformation envisaged for the higher education system. Many of the mechanisms we identify will have relevance to academics beyond South Africa.

The chapter once again calls on many of the ideas and claims made in Chapter Three. However, the purpose of returning to these ideas in this chapter is to look at their impact on academics more specifically.

The conditioning role of the discipline in academics’ identity formation

In much of this book we have made the claim that different disciplines make different forms of knowledge and disseminate these through different literacy practices. A simple
look at a journal article from Somatology alongside one from Sociology alongside one
from Semantics will quickly demonstrate that it is not just the theories and concepts that
differ across fields, but the very nature of knowledge. We have argued that these practices
emerge from the norms and values of a discipline and this means that only those who
are well-versed in such practices are able to enable access for novices. But this argument
has implications for more than epistemological access for students, it has enormous
implications for academics’ identities too. Henkel (2005) argues that an academics’
primary affinity is in fact to the discipline of which she is a member rather than to the
institution in which she is employed.

Becher and Trowler (2001) suggest that a great many social practices that academics
hold dear relate to the discipline they are responsible for both building and safeguarding.
Academics in disciplines with agreed upon methods for creating knowledge may, for
example, enjoy far more collegiality than those where the very notion of truth is contested.
However, it should be noted that increasingly academics work in fields, rather than
singular disciplines and we have at times in this book used the terms ‘discipline’ and
‘field’ somewhat interchangeably, though it can be argued that fields draw from multiple
disciplines. While coming to understand the role of the discipline/field in which an
academic works is key to understanding what it is that they do and value, the extent to
which academics share practices within a discipline varies and probably conditions their
research practices more than it conditions most other aspects of academic work (Trowler
2014). Manathunga and Brew (2012) argue that shifts in higher education, such as those
outlined in this book, mean that many academics now rarely work in singular disciplines,
and this has consequences for their identities and affiliations.

What is no doubt needed is a ‘more nuanced understanding of academic disciplines
and their power’ (Trowler 2014: x). Trowler suggests that many of the generalisations
about disciplines work well from a distance but a close-up look begins to reveal extensive
diversity between disciplines grouped together as ‘cognate’ and fault lines appear even
within any one discipline. Becher’s (1989) much cited metaphor of the university as
comprising ‘Tribes and Territories’ offers useful broad brushstrokes to understanding
how the nature of knowledge affects the practices of academics – why Physics academics
engage in different practices to Philosophy academics, for example – but closer inspection
requires us to take into account the effects of institutional structures and cultures within
which the Physics or Philosophy academic works. As we have argued throughout this
book, the particular histories of universities condition the emergence of any practices
and may complement or contradict the effects of the norms and values of any particular
discipline. Furthermore, changes in higher education globally, in particular its positioning
as the producer of labour for the knowledge economy, has brought about significant shifts
in the organising structures of the academy (Trowler 2014).

The history of the system and the conditioning of individuals

The social and cultural conditioning of the South African higher education system under
apartheid has been outlined in this book. Drawing on Bunting (2006), this exploration
shows how colonialism and the structural development of apartheid associated with it resulted in different groups of institutions with very different cultures and differing abilities to draw on the resources made available by the state.

Cooper and Subotzky’s (2001) ‘historiography’ of South African institutions of higher education along with Bunting’s (2006) work allow for more examples of the way the structural system impacted on the cultural systems of the universities under apartheid. Suffice to say at this point, however, that, as it became evident that a new political order was about to dawn in the late 1980s, different groups of institutions were characterised by very different cultural systems. In general, the historically white English-speaking universities had been conditioned to expect much more freedom in determining their own affairs both at institutional levels and at the level of the individual academic. The technikons and historically black universities, on the other hand, were culturally disposed to accept more management and steering from above, with the historically white Afrikaans-speaking universities being located somewhere between the two with regard to expectations of freedom.

If we look more deeply into this statement, we can gain greater insight into the notions of ‘management’ and ‘freedom’. Bunting (2006: 40) argues that, by the early 1990s, the Afrikaans-speaking universities were ‘instrumentalist institutions which were governed in strongly authoritarian ways’. He goes on to define ‘instrumentalist’ in this context as an institution ‘that takes its core business to be the dissemination and generation of knowledge for a purpose defined or determined by a socio-political agenda’. The valuing of knowledge for its own sake and of the use of academic thinking to ask difficult questions in relation to society and its problems was thus not part of the cultural system. Jansen’s (2001) personal account of his experiences at a historically white Afrikaans-speaking university also provides insights into the authoritarianism that prevailed. The institutions were extremely well run with controls in place at all levels but debate and contestation were not part of the cultural system, and committee and other meetings were often firmly steered by chairs to arrive at predetermined solutions to problems (Bunting 2006).

As we have indicated, the distancing of the historically white English-speaking universities from the apartheid government, on the other hand, led to the development of very different cultural systems. This does not mean, however, that the liberal approach they espoused was, in fact, as claimed. Numerous critiques of the roles of the historically white English-speaking universities during apartheid have been produced (see, e.g. Maylam 2017 for a rigorous history of our own institution, Rhodes University). Many would argue that the historically white English-speaking universities were as complicit in maintaining the apartheid regime as any other.

With regard to academic governance, universities largely followed a ‘collegial’ model derived from Europe where power rested with the professoriate. This meant that senate was a strong body, comprised, as it was, largely of professors who were powerful because of their positions as leaders of their disciplines and the departments that practised them. While discussion and debate were welcomed within this collegial
structure, access to decision-making was limited as the model held power at ‘the top’ of the academic hierarchy, with the result that more junior staff and students did not have access to the spaces where the debate took place.

Over the last two decades, in many universities the head of a department post has become a rotating appointment. This means that other, sometimes more junior, staff also sit on senates and faculty boards because of their appointments at departmental and school levels. In the past many universities followed the ‘Humboldtian’ model by appointing professors as heads of departments and, thus, leaders of the discipline. The professors therefore enjoyed considerable influence in deciding what should be taught and what should be researched. Although the roles of professor and head of department are rarely conflated nowadays, the legacy of this model prevails. Professors still hold considerable power within the disciplines and, in South Africa, this is especially problematic because of the small number of black professors in the country. The CHE (2016), for example, identifies only 27% of professors and associate professors as being black in 2012.

Under apartheid, those historically black institutions that were located in the Republic of South Africa were largely staffed by Afrikaans-speaking academics loyal to the apartheid state (Bunting 2006). This ensured the kind of authoritarian cultural system that had characterised the institutions at which many of these staff members had been educated. Although black vice-chancellors were appointed as the years wore on, their senates continued to be dominated by the same group for some years and authoritarian institutional cultures continued to be the order of the day. Those historically black universities located in the ‘homelands’ were treated as just one more government department and this had a similar impact on culture. Tight controls on every part of academic life meant that the understandings of what it meant to work in a university were limited, although challenges to authoritarianism were prevalent from the mid-1980s onwards. As a result, many of these universities became sites of struggle with a concomitant effect on functioning.

As discussed in Chapter Five, given the mandate to produce graduates and diplomates skilled in specific work areas, it is not surprising that utilitarian views of knowledge and its dissemination dominated amongst lecturers in the technikons. The focus on the production of workers for the apartheid economy meant that little research was conducted in these institutions. Where research did take place, it was always directed at a specific industrial end. This overall framing of the role of the institutions impacted on culture in significant ways, particularly in relation to the way academics understood their own roles and responsibilities.

As apartheid came to an end and institutions of higher education engaged with the process of transformation to ensure that they were relevant in a new social and political order, staff were conditioned by the cultural systems that had sustained their institutions and, in addition, had to work within a system which might not always have been enabling of change. The way staff exercised their agency following the end of apartheid was also conditioned by the series of mergers and incorporations used to ‘size and shape’ the system in the early 2000s (see Chapter Three). Imagine, for example, the clash of cultural
systems as a historically black campus located in a former ‘homeland’ was incorporated into a historically white Afrikaans-speaking university (as in the case of the University of the North QwaQwa campus and the University of the Free State), or the merger of a historically black English-medium university with a historically white Afrikaans-medium university (as in the case of the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education with the University of the North-West, formerly the University of Bophuthatswana). Other mergers had the potential to be more harmonious as, for example, in the case of the historically white Afrikaans institution, the University of Port Elizabeth, merging with Port Elizabeth Technikon, although it is interesting to consider the impact on culture as two institutions focused on different forms of knowledge but both relatively used to tight control from management came together.

One criticism of the mergers and incorporations that took place in the early 2000s was that, with the exception of the University of Natal which merged with the University of Durban Westville, the historically white, more research-intensive universities were left unchanged. This meant that the cultural systems of institutions such as the University of Cape Town, Rhodes University, the University of Stellenbosch, the University of Pretoria and the University of the Witwatersrand were left to continue without the impact of staff from other institutions with very different histories. This allowed particular forms of colonial privilege to continue in these institutions. It is also interesting to note that no historically white English-speaking institution was instructed to become one of the comprehensive universities, all of which have their history in historically black or Afrikaans-speaking institutions.

After the end of apartheid, academics and other professionals working in higher education have increasingly moved between institutional types. As a result, it is not uncommon for individuals to take up positions in a very different kind of institution to the one in which they had previously worked, only to continue to draw on the assumptions and beliefs that held sway in their previous contexts. This can result in clashes that can be profoundly disconcerting for the individual concerned, as the new context is often experienced as ‘unwelcoming’ with the newcomer being perceived as ‘not fitting in’.

The clashes can also work the other way when an individual from a very different kind of institution moves into a powerful position as what Archer would term a ‘social actor’ in a new job. According to Archer, social actors draw some of their personal emergent powers and properties from the roles they occupy. So, an individual might move into a new role in a different institution, and draw power from that role but also exercise agency to draw on sets of ideas and ways of working from a very different context. The result can be a clash as a ‘new broom’ comes in to ‘sweep clean’.

An example of this phenomenon could be a vice-chancellor being appointed at a university of technology after a history of employment at traditional universities, who may not understand the significance of close links with industry for both teaching and research. She might also not understand the extent to which many of the academics she now leads draw on identities as ‘professionals’ rather than researchers. In a similar vein, a director of human resources who moves from, say, a comprehensive university to a research-intensive institution may misunderstand the ways in which academic
governance structures mean that faculty boards and senate are greatly interested in matters related to staffing because of their roles as stewarding the general academic project of the university. The director thus has to work with a very different workforce to those he experienced in previous institutions, a workforce that can then be perceived as ‘difficult’ (McKenna & Boughey 2014).

Finally, imagine a young academic who has been educated in a university of technology. As we have explained in Chapter Five, vocationally orientated programmes often focus on the knowledge and skills needed to achieve learning outcomes which are work-orientated. As a result, the underpinning principles are often not taught. In such a context, if theory is introduced in the process of teaching for outcomes, it is theory ‘for’ the outcome. If the young academic who has been exposed to this sort of teaching then arrives in a department in a research-intensive university where everyone is talking abstract theory unrelated to its utility, including in the staff room, it is not difficult to see how he may feel intimidated and, even, that this particular institution is ‘not for him’.

The point of these examples is to stress the need to appreciate the impact of social and cultural conditioning on the way individuals, and groups of individuals (Archer’s ‘corporate agents’), choose to exercise their agency. We believe that many of the disputes that have arisen in our universities over the years are due to the kinds of clashes we have described here. While we need to work at the development of a coherent higher education system that is open to and provides quality education for all, we also need to acknowledge that we have a differentiated system. Usually differentiation of type is expressed in terms of the qualifications offered. However, our position is that differentiation is much more complex and subtle than this, and that we need to take this into account when we look at academics’ experiences of universities.

Although we have focused on South Africa in this analysis, we believe the higher education systems in other countries are also characterised by divisions between different kinds of institution. In Kenya, for example, a distinction is made, amongst other things, between chartered universities and constituent colleges of universities. It is highly likely that the history of each kind of institution as well as its purpose will impact on its culture and the way it is structured.

Adding to the complexity, the social and cultural conditioning experienced by academics is not only related to the institution. Academics may find themselves being positioned in particular ways based on their race, age, gender, nationality, sexuality and so on. Monnapula-Mapesela (2017) points out the many ways in which the agency of academics can be constrained by the dominant culture beyond the university as well as within it. Thus, even in cases where a black woman is accorded the power of social agency by virtue of the particular position she is appointed into, she may be constrained by the ways in which she is constructed by those around her. She may well be expected to ‘perform’ her expertise in ways not required by other colleagues working at the same level.

Now that we have outlined some of the social and cultural conditioning in place in the early years of democracy, we move to look at some of the ideas conditioning higher education globally as South African isolation came to an end in 1994. We therefore return to the conversation started at the beginning of this book.
New Public Management and managerialism

As we have indicated previously, the concept of ‘New Public Management’ began to gain traction from the late 1970s onwards. New Public Management attempts to make public service organisations more ‘business-like’ by drawing on management models from commerce and industry. Within the overall umbrella of managerialism, the provision of customer services is understood as requiring specific approaches to management in order to achieve efficiency. This usually involves the identification of goals, strategies to achieve those goals, and indicators of progress towards them. The idea of key performance indicators is then introduced in relation to an individual’s execution of a particular role or job.

One implication of this for academic staff has been the introduction of appraisal systems assessing their performance against these indicators. These systems usually focus on metrics and outputs and can ignore the ‘softer’ sides of academic work involving, for example, pastoral care for students, which is typically overlooked in the system. As such work often falls to women in what has been termed ‘academic housekeeping’ (Bird et al. 2004), this can add to the gender imbalances that already exist. Appraisal systems are usually put in place to ‘manage underperformance’. Ironically, they can often fail to do this whilst ignoring those who do work extra hard. There is no evidence that such systems increase efficiencies, while there is ample evidence (Newfield 2016; Shore 2010; Shore & Wright 2015) that they undermine the trust that has been integral to academic work particularly in some kinds of institutions (McKenna & Boughey 2014; Thaver 2010).

Also associated with managerialism is the idea that ‘quality’ needs to be assured, managed and enhanced. Taken together with the notion of customer service, on a practical level, the practice of assuring, managing and enhancing quality then involves eliciting feedback from consumers on an ongoing basis and, also, benchmarking against the performance of other organisations working broadly in the same area. The impact of such initiatives is that they can make staff members risk-averse, particularly in relation to their teaching where they can perceive the need to ‘please’ rather than challenge students because of the impact poor feedback could have on their careers, as discussed in Chapter Four. Nixon et al. (2018) provide evidence of the way the privileging of the ‘student as customer’ can impact on the structure of the curriculum and on the kind of knowledge students are required to engage with in ways that can be seen to be questionable at least. While student feedback is valuable, the need to defend what we described in Chapters Five and Six as ‘powerful knowledge’ is important because, ultimately, this will benefit students who can have a very limited view of what they need to learn based only on their own experience and preferences. As academics are increasingly employed on a precarious basis with 66% of academics in South Africa working on contract (CHE 2020), the need to conform and meet expectations can become stronger. Eliciting positive student feedback can also introduce elements of ‘performativity’ where academics are pushed towards ‘entertaining’ students rather than focusing on criticality and challenge.

The term ‘managerialism’ infers that active management needs to be practised. The impact of such active management has been profound and is most clearly seen in the
establishment of ‘executive’ positions with responsibility for managing different areas of academic life. It is now common to have executive deans who are not necessarily disciplinary leaders with the respect of their colleagues gained on intellectual grounds but, rather, individuals identified on the basis of their management skills to run a faculty (McKenna 2020). Furthermore, traditional deans are appointed by and primarily accountable to their faculty, whereas executive deans are appointed by and accountable to the executive and council, which shifts the balance of power in an institution in fundamental ways.

In a similar vein, it is common to find deputy vice-chancellors and directors with specific responsibility for managing areas such as teaching and learning, research and community engagement. In the case of teaching and learning, very few of those in senior positions have strong backgrounds in the scholarship of teaching and learning, with the result that the fall-back position is on the ‘common-sense’ approaches that we have critiqued throughout this book. The appointment of such key individuals to manage teaching and research corresponds to attempts to increase subsidy by, for example, increasing student throughput or research outputs. This is high-stakes work, given the poor South African performance data detailed throughout this book and what this actually means for the lives of students and the billions spent on grants earmarked for the improvement of teaching and learning. Ironically, however, initiatives introduced by such individuals to improve student performance often draw on ‘common sense’ rather than the research-based and carefully theorised approaches (Moyo 2018). (Trowler 2020 suggests that this is an international phenomenon.)

We argued in Chapter Five for different kinds of understandings to inform initiatives intended to enhance student success; understandings which acknowledge students as social beings and which see success as related to the ability to take on new academic identities. Sadly, although the need to recognise the impact of social context on teaching and learning has been cited for more than 20 years, efforts to get teaching and learning acknowledged as profoundly cultural, social and political endeavours have not managed to challenge dominant common sense in any significant way (see Boughey 2005a, 2005b, 2007, 2010a, 2012a, 2013, for a review).

Another effect of managerialist discourses, alluded to above, has been to weaken the power of the academics themselves. All South African universities have senates. As we have indicated, historically those universities which enjoyed more academic freedom had senates and faculty boards that were populated by the professors who held the power in determining the academic future of the university. Faculty boards and senates and their sub-structures approved curricula, oversaw assessment, approved proposals for research and so on and, thus, were intensely involved in the oversight of the academic project. Obviously, this was not entirely positive as it allowed a relatively small group of individuals, and the beliefs and intellectual positions they espoused, to hold sway over an entire institution. Nowadays, the power of senates and faculty boards has been reduced with the advent of other corporate agents as universities have opened up these bodies to such constituencies. It is now usual, for example, for trade union members and students to have representation on senate.
Furthermore, in many universities, key decisions are made by ‘top managers’ without being deliberated by institutional structures such as faculty boards and senates. When this happens, the council often becomes more directly involved in running the university rather than playing an oversight function on decisions taken within academic structures. Institutional governance thus becomes overtaken by management processes. There have then been a number of instances where seats on councils were highly contested as they open up opportunities for members to promote their own business interests within the institution. All this leads to a more general disempowerment of academic staff.

The growth of managerialism has also resulted in the establishment of very powerful institutional positions such as directors of quality assurance, risk management, intellectual transfer, equity, internationalisation and other functions that have arisen as a result of widening conceptions of the purpose of universities and the claimed need for active management of all areas of academic life. Many of these directorates have relatively large numbers of staff, which has impacted on the ratio of support staff to academics at institutional level, skewing it in favour of support in spite of the rapid increase in student numbers experienced over the years. These directorates exist in addition to those that have been part of institutional life for many years, such as Human Resources, which have also seen extensive growth in scope and numbers.

The power of these institutional managers is often experienced by academics in negative ways as they feel a shift of focus away from the academic project. To add insult to injury, the salaries of the managers usually exceed those paid to academic staff. One result of this lack of parity in salary scales can be a sense that academic work, central to the life of the university, is not as valued. This situation is then exacerbated by the shift towards what is often termed the ‘casualisation’ of academic work, which sees the tenured positions valued by academics replaced by short-term contracts and, even ‘zero-hours’ contracts. What we have described here is not peculiar to South Africa as accounts of the same phenomena abound in the international literature (see, e.g. Barnett & Peters 2018; Fabricant & Brier 2016; McCowan 2018; Newfield 2016).

As the impact of managerialism has been felt, directors and other support staff have also been allocated seats on senates and their key sub-committees. The extent to which institutions are now guided primarily by concerns for the academic project, however it is understood, is worthy of consideration given the many different constituencies represented on governance and management structures.

This is not to say that more representation of different constituencies is undesirable but rather that the nature and purpose of our universities and the academic projects which sustain them need to be held as paramount. In our experience, though, there is generally little articulation of what the academic project of the institution is and so there is little direct engagement in the domain of culture as to how these varied constituencies support it. The extent to which the academic project can be ensured when managers who are not academics hold considerable influence in running the institutions therefore needs to be questioned, especially when the structures in the institution are complemented by a culture of managerialism.
Critical theorists (see Gibson 1986, for an overview) have long been sceptical of ‘instrumental rationality’, or a focus on the means rather than the ends. In the university we have argued that the end is the academic project, which is the primary end towards which all means should be directed. The focus on means is often achieved by drawing on discourses privileging the need for efficiency and effectiveness. Arguably, one of the results of this focus on ‘means’ in our universities is that that bigger questions about ‘ends’ are ignored.

To return to the research that provided the impetus for this book, our work showed that the first cycle of institutional audits resulted in what Archer (1995) terms ‘elaboration’ of the structural system (Boughey & McKenna 2017). For example, complex quality assurance systems were set up, run by quality managers or quality officers. Although the definition of quality used by the HEQC is that of ‘fitness for purpose’, our research showed little consideration being paid to big questions about what the purpose of teaching or the purpose of learning might be in a newly democratic society. The focus was on the quality systems themselves (i.e. on the means) rather than on the ends. Academics were kept busy following and complying with quality assurance procedures and were thus distracted from the concerns which had long been central to the identities of many of them (Henkel 2005).

In many respects, this critique can also be applied to research. Executive positions and research offices intended to drive research have been created partly because of the benefits that accrue from research in the funding formula for public institutions in South Africa (DoE 2004) and the status attached to research, especially in global ranking systems.

The use of funding, through the allocation of subsidy in South Africa, as a steering mechanism has inevitably impacted on decisions regarding the academic project. Decisions related to the introduction of new programmes, for example, are now often driven by considerations of the amount of subsidy that will accrue, regardless of the quality of the programme, since some areas of study attract more subsidy than others. Moreover, and as we have indicated above, the push for research outputs in most universities has not necessarily been driven by understandings of the centrality of knowledge-production in a university per se but rather by funding benefits. For staff, this can mean that more esoteric intellectual interests which might previously have been reflected in curricula are now ignored, and research interests that are less likely to result in publications in the short term are set aside (Nash 2013).

Nonetheless, academics have not entirely succumbed to the demands of managerialism as small victories have been won along the way. For example, as the South African national qualifications framework was introduced there was a call for unit standards to be used to define small chunks of learning. Academics in some institutions were able to resist this call by insisting on all universities being allowed to register ‘whole qualifications’ on the framework. The battle was not only about registration, however, as it was also about the right and power of academics to make decisions about the what and how of academic teaching. That this call came largely from one group of institutions, those that had traditionally had more freedom from the state, while others were much more willing to comply, can be seen to relate to historical conditioning in the system overall.
Staffing in a global structure

The centrality of the concept of ‘new knowledge’ and call for workers who can generate and apply it in the global economy, as discussed previously, has increased demand for higher education across the world. In many countries in Africa, higher education systems are under pressure from students whose home countries in other parts of the continent cannot accommodate them (Oanda & Ngcwangu 2018). In this context, it is becoming increasingly important to understand any university as part of a global higher education structure. As we noted in Chapter Three, possibly the way this is most evident is in the ranking systems. The criteria used by these systems have an impact on the work of academics who are expected to perform in ways rewarded by them.

Writing of the QS/Times Higher Education (THE) world university rankings, Marginson (2007: 138–139) notes, ‘in the Times Higher universe, higher education is primarily about reputation for its own sake, about the aristocratic prestige and power of the universities as an end in itself, and also about making money from foreign students’. As Badat (2010) points out, rankings serve to maintain the social, and one could also argue economic, status of some universities while keeping others out of the game.

In spite of numerous critiques of ranking systems (and, to those of Badat 2010 and Marginson 2006, 2009, one can also add those of, inter alia, Amsler & Bolsmann 2012; Harvey 2008; Taylor & Braddock 2007; Teferra 2017), many African universities have taken up the concept of ranking with vigour. For some universities, attaining a position in the ‘top 100’ of the Shanghai ranking system has become a strategic goal with concomitant impacts on staff members. For example, research counts more in ranking systems than teaching and learning, and community engagement is often entirely absent. Staff employed at a university seeking a ranking may thus be pressured to produce research at the expense of other areas of academic endeavour. If a university chooses to chase a prestigious academic for employment by offering an inflated salary, what impact might this have on its ability to employ others at the chalkface of teaching and learning where staff–student ratios may not be favourable? And how might the protection of prolific researchers from teaching duties then affect the careers of more junior members of staff who are left to cope with huge classes and the resultant marking loads? In South Africa, the goal of achieving a ranking can also mean that the transformation agenda is neglected as ranking systems do not include criteria to drive it. As a result, many institutions pursuing both ranking and demographic transformation of the academic staff body have sought to employ academics with prestigious reputations as researchers from the rest of Africa.

Like many other countries, South Africa is facing an academic staffing crisis as the number of young people choosing an academic career dwindles. One response to the general shortage of academics has been for South African universities to recruit academics from countries across the continent. Sadly, this structural response is often confronted by xenophobic discourses in the domain of culture. Unpleasant incidents and even violence at some institutions are compounded by the difficulty of getting the necessary permissions to work and study in the first place, with work and study visas often taking
many months to secure. Government departments in South Africa often adopt opposing positions in this regard, with some drawing on discourses of pan-Africanism or Southern African Development Community (SADC) relations and others focused on protection of local employment and development opportunities. These all play out in the day-to-day experiences of staff.

The emergence of compliance

For Archer (1995, 1996, 1998), no one is completely free to make choices, but rather individuals are always conditioned by social and cultural mechanisms prevalent at any one time. It is probably fair to say, given our analysis above and the research projects that provided the basis for this book, that, in some South African institutions, academics have been conditioned into compliance in relation to instructions from management and other external stakeholders. In some places, quality managers and quality officers had drawn on the structural and cultural conditions prevalent at the time to garner significant power. The result was the introduction of quality systems involving, amongst other things, programme reviews, departmental reviews and benchmarking. These systems inevitably required a response from academics. In one institution we studied (Boughey 2010b), a 23-point checklist for academics had been introduced. Academics did not respond in the way the designer of the list had envisaged, as the complaint in the data was that they had simply ‘ticked the boxes’, indicating that required actions had been completed without necessarily doing anything.

The need for quality assurance is often balanced by the concept of quality enhancement, and different national processes may shift between emphasising one over the other at different times. As indicated earlier, in South Africa, a project focusing on quality enhancement followed a cycle of institutional audits intended to assure quality. As we write, the pendulum is arguably swinging back towards quality assurance. When shifts such as this take place, we need to consider how agents are using their personal powers and properties to protect the projects with which their offices are associated at institutional levels. The often-impenetrable nature of quality discourses can contribute to the protection of power, as the difficulty in understanding terminology can constrain engagement with what the processes actually involve.

What might be perceived to be our negativity towards quality assurance should not be taken to indicate that we believe that all staff are hugely committed to their work and that quality already exists everywhere. Rather, our point is that the introduction of quality assurance in South Africa overwhelmingly led to compliance and a focus on processes and systems without a concomitant effect on quality itself. The assumption is that the introduction of quality assurance processes (and in some cases performance-management systems) will improve quality and address inefficiencies in the system but, as Archer (1995, 1996, 1998, 2000) argues, unless there is complementarity with the ideas and values in the domain of culture, then the newly introduced structures may result in unintended consequences, such as bureaucracy and compliance.
Ever-increasing demands on academic life

For the last half century, the number of students enrolled in African universities has increased enormously. This has not been accompanied by a sufficient increase in the number of academics employed to teach them. As a result, and in combination with other phenomena such as increased diversity and austerity in the wake of falling state support for higher education, university teaching has become more and more demanding.

Throughout this book we have identified the way the perceived need for ‘knowledge workers’ in the global economy has impacted significantly on the roles assigned to universities in recent years. Students increasingly see a qualification from an institution of higher education as a means of securing work. This understanding very much focuses on the idea of higher education as a ‘private good’ which brings benefit to individuals. Universities have long valued another function, however, of contributing to the ‘public good’ through research which is beneficial to humankind in general and the production of graduates who can contribute to a critical citizenry. Balancing these purposes of higher education with the so-called ‘three pillars’ of academic work (teaching and learning, research and community engagement) is a decidedly complex task.

Community engagement, long specified as the ‘third pillar’ of academic endeavour, is sometimes cited as one means of correcting the balance between the focus on the private good that has emerged since the 1990s and the needs of society more generally (see, e.g. Subotzky 2003). Community engagement spans a continuum of activities from volunteerism to formally-curriculated service-learning courses where students take their learning to communities and, in return, challenge and refine what they have learned by engaging with those communities.

Community engagement also has a critical role to play in allowing universities to identify a niche for themselves in a differentiated higher education system. In South Africa, at least, institutional vision and mission statements often draw on the notion of serving communities, particularly in the case of universities located in impoverished rural areas. However, in the research that underpins this book, we identified little thought having been given to what this might mean for other core functions. How does community engagement link to research? How is so called ‘engaged research’ promoted in strategic planning for research production and capacity development? The potential for the community engagement–research nexus to be a central aspect of a university’s identity has perhaps not been conceptualised as thoroughly as it could have been (Boughey 2012a; Muthama & McKenna 2017). In a similar vein, if service learning is seen as a means of incorporating community engagement into the formal curriculum, how does a university manage and monitor this? The ‘living out’ of mission and vision statements has profound implications for all activities of a university, yet we could see few attempts to make this happen.

Community engagement clearly has much to offer higher education and countries as a whole. The idea that universities should put their learning at the service of communities and, in return, learn from community members is important in developing countries with histories of inequality. Community engagement contributes to universities serving
the ‘public good’ in significant ways. But it does increase the ambit of the university and adds to the workload of academics.

The pressure on staff to perform across the entire spectrum of academic endeavour has increased steadily over time. In promotion procedures, academics at many institutions need to demonstrate that they work across the three pillars. Academics thus need to look *inwards* to disciplinary concerns and to their own position in disciplinary structures by, for example, researching, publishing, reviewing and serving on editorial boards and the committees of professional or disciplinary organisations as well as *outwards* to communities.

As universities have increased in size, concerns about the performance of diverse student bodies have also arisen. Popular discourses tend to attribute poor performance to a variety of reasons including the lack of preparedness on the part of students, as noted in Chapter Four. Other discourses have offered very different reasons, including the lack of readiness of the universities themselves to engage with diverse groups of students (see, e.g. Vilakazi & Tema 1985). This has been taken up by a field known as Academic Development or Educational Development, which often encompasses the development of academic staff as educators (see, e.g. Boughey 2007; Volbrecht & Boughey 2005; Walker & Badsha 1993).

The fact that academics do not need any sort of professional training to teach in higher education has more recently been associated with the poor performance of a system overall, and efforts to ‘manage’ teaching and learning have included attempts to introduce staff development. To a large extent, just as naive thinking locates problems related to poor student performance in deficiencies at an individual level (see Chapter Five), many discourses calling for academics to be qualified as professional educators do the same thing.

As Behari-Leak (2017) shows, the privileging of academics’ agency in the assumption that all that is needed is a course which will allow them to ‘teach better’ is flawed because of the way other cultural and structural conditions enable and constrain practice. She makes clear that the status of some individuals as black women or as foreign nationals means they do not have the authority to impose change. At departmental levels, academic hierarchies come into play, with new ideas proposed by junior members of staff stifled by more authoritative voices resistant to change. The capacity of individuals to bring about change is limited, given the conditions in which they work, which is why such programmes are most effective when they enjoy institutional support and when the focus is not only on the development of cognitive processes of individual academics or on sharing classroom strategies but rather on well-theorised accounts of how curriculum structures and teaching and learning events emerge from the interplay of multiple mechanisms (Quinn & Vorster 2014, 2015, 2017; Vorster & Quinn 2017). The generic nature of some staff development courses means that disciplinary difference as well as social and cultural differences are not sufficiently considered, with the result that their potential to bring about change is unfailingly overestimated.

In spite of these critiques, individual academics are increasingly being required not only to gain some sort of qualification in academic teaching but also to demonstrate their
capacity in this area in order to gain promotion or tenure. In making this point, it is not that we are objecting to the idea of staff development in respect of teaching, but rather observing that the potential of individual academics to bring about change, and thus to impact on poor performance, is limited. In terms of the theory which holds this book together, what we are saying is that although an individual might be able to draw on a set of new ideas to inform practice as a result of completing a course on teaching, the extent to which they will be able to implement new practices will also be enabled or constrained by prevailing social and cultural conditions at classroom, departmental, institutional and, even, system-wide levels.

Alongside the need to demonstrate their competence as teachers, academics also need to show that they are productive as researchers. Pressure on academics to publish is often driven by reward systems such as payment for publication and the role played by research in personal promotion processes. In many places, this has led to a number of unintended consequences including ‘salami slicing’ whereby research findings are divided as thinly as possible, ghost authorship and publications in questionable journals (Muthama & McKenna 2020). In South Africa, Mouton and Valentine (2017) identify a huge increase in the number of papers published in journals categorised as ‘predatory’, a phenomenon common to the entire continent. According to Xia et al. (2014), those who publish in predatory journals are predominantly young and from developing countries. Institutions with a research-rich culture and significant history of producing research are less susceptible to such problems. The history of colonialism has meant that many institutions on the continent have not developed such cultures, a phenomenon exacerbated by previous World Bank policies downplaying the importance of higher education in national development in Africa.

The call for all countries to focus on research production in the knowledge-economy discourse has resulted in enormous pressures being placed on all academics to do research regardless of the institutional contexts in which they find themselves, and also in spite of the fact that many have not yet even qualified as researchers by attaining at least a master’s degree. Academic inflation also means that it has become difficult to attain even an entry-level university position without a doctorate. For example, in 2014, the Commission for University Education (CUE 2014) in Kenya issued a directive that all assistant lecturers must acquire a doctorate by October 2019 to be qualified to teach.

The need to research is also complicated by the nature of knowledge in some disciplines, as discussed in Chapter Five. Areas such as somatology, defined as an interest in assisting people to improve ‘their general wellness and aesthetic appearance through information and practice of healthy lifestyle habits, product use and clinic treatments’ (Durban University of Technology 2018), or dental technology, which ‘trains students to become dental technicians who fabricate removable intra-oral dental appliances in a dental laboratory’ (Vahed et al. 2016), draw on multiple disciplines such as physiology, anatomy and chemistry. However, as we argue in Chapter Five, the knowledge base developed within these subject areas is often very context-specific, and professionals appointed to teach in them have not always had access to the foundational principles needed to undertake research.
As we write, in many institutions across the world there is a drive to produce research in pursuit of what is broadly known as the ‘Scholarship of Teaching and Learning’ (SoTL). While scholarship in teaching and learning is critical if we are to enhance our understandings of what it means to teach and learn in a university, there is a danger in privileging this particular direction at the expense of scholarship in the disciplines, not least because academic teaching is located in the disciplines. Unlike school teachers, academic teachers have much greater control over the curriculum (Bernstein 2000, 2003b). Universities are sites of knowledge production, and understanding the beliefs, values and processes involved in creating knowledge drives academic teaching (Boughey 2012b). If academic staff are diverted away from pursuing postgraduate study in the disciplines and, thus, from deepening their own understandings of the way knowledge is created in their own fields, what does this mean for their ability to understand what it is students actually need to know and learn?

This is not to say that work in the scholarship of teaching and learning should not be pursued, but rather that it cannot be pursued at the expense of an individual’s development in the home discipline. Even more pertinently, the pursuit of SoTL should not be based on the belief that achieving ‘outputs’ (e.g. articles in subsidy-earning publications) is, in some way, easier to attain than in the home discipline. This is not the case as the field of SoTL has its own values, norms, theories and practices in which adepts need to be well versed. The ability to produce work that can be published in high-quality journals requires immersion in the field, as newcomers engage with theories and develop understandings of values, and is not a ‘quick fix’ to the need to produce outputs. The rise of the understanding that SoTL presents an easy way of increasing research outputs is deeply troubling (Muthama 2019).

As we have argued in Chapter Four, the wealth of literature in the field of SoTL, much of it coming from South Africa, provides us with a stockpot of understandings that can enhance higher education by challenging the common-sense approaches so prevalent in the sector, and yet there has been very little engagement with this literature. The rush to contribute publications in SoTL needs to be located in this context of few academics reading extensively in the field. Academics are striving to meet new structural arrangements in the form of personal promotions policies that require them to produce research without the necessary capacity development. While many universities now offer workshops and other initiatives designed to support research capacity, the Archerian framework underpinning this book reminds us that structures require complementary cultures to be effective. The development of a strong research culture takes time but sadly is often not the focus of those who are tasked with increasing institutional outputs.

**Staff demographics**

In South Africa, issues of race remain a major problem in the staffing of universities. The nuances of the way this plays out may be specific to South Africa, but across the rest of the continent, racial, tribal and linguistic differences impact on how individuals can build an academic career (Kisaka et al. 2019).
In 2017, only 44% of academic staff members employed in South African universities were black Africans (CHE 2020) although this group makes up the vast majority in the population overall. If these numbers were to be scrutinised in greater detail, we would see that the majority of these black staff members were clustered in the lower academic ranks with very few comprising the professoriate.

Academic cultures and hierarchies often work to make staff from social groups not well represented at institutional levels feel alienated. This alienation can be experienced in relation to myriad practices, some of which are as mundane as coming together in staff rooms to drink tea in the middle of the morning (Tabensky & Matthews 2015). Given higher education’s ascribed role in the development of a critical citizenry, it is particularly distressing that institutional contexts are experienced by many academics as places permeated by structural racism, sexism, xenophobia and other forms of exclusion. In this regard, it is useful to look at how Kumalo (2021) calls the decolonial movement ‘the desire for ontological legitimacy’.

We needed some of the analysis we have provided in preceding sections of this chapter to argue a particular point about demographics: namely the lack of attraction of an academic career to many young people and, in particular, young black people in South Africa, where black individuals with qualifications are in high demand in almost all sectors of the economy. An academic career can lead to almost overwhelming pressure to publish in institutions where the number of subsidy units against a person’s name can count much more than the quality of those publications. It means pushing to research and publish whilst, at the same time, dealing with ever-growing student numbers and facing demands to perform in the sphere of community engagement.

All this happens in the context of low rewards since academic salaries usually cannot compete with those offered in the corporate sphere. At the same time, the freedoms that have made academic life fulfilling over the years are increasingly being constrained by encroaching managerialism. The autonomy to craft one’s own intellectual project, which may entail building scholarship over a number of years, is being attacked by performance-management systems looking for contributions to targets in strategic plans and other documents. In addition, the precariousness of much academic work now offered on a contract basis also works against the attraction of an academic career.

Attempts to increase equality in the demographic profile of institutions in South Africa and further afield need to take the full context of an academic career into account. Teaching, research and community engagement can be enormously fulfilling, but these positive aspects of an academic life are constrained if the context is one of precarity and performativity.

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7 The 2011 South African census identifies 76% of the total population as Black African (Statistics SA 2012).
Concluding thoughts

In this chapter we have looked at ways in which global, national and institutional contexts enable and constrain the agency of academics. In terms of the framework structuring this book, we have attempted to interrogate how social and cultural conditioning in our universities impacts on the extent to which individuals can exercise their personal powers and properties to bring about change. What we have seen is a re-positioning of academics in institutions in ways which, arguably, have left them less powerful than before and subject to demands on their time and energy, both intellectual and otherwise, which were not prevalent 25 years ago. It is in this context that the agency of academics in explicitly stewarding the academic project is more important than ever.