As with almost every aspect of South African society, colonial and apartheid racial politics provide the central reference point for understanding the history of South African higher education. Apartheid policies determined everything from the racial profile of university staff and students to the selection of disciplines taught at particular institutions. With the philosophy of “Bantu Education,” that education should prepare Africans for their “rightful” place in the hierarchy of the oppressed, access to high quality tertiary education was beyond the reach of most Black South Africans. Legal segregation at universities ended in 1983. Twenty years on—and more than a decade since serious efforts at institutional transformation began—“transformation” remains an elusive goal.

Apartheid No More presents a series of case studies on the efforts of higher education institutions—both historically White and historically Black—to “transform” into more inclusive and equitable institutions in the post-apartheid era. The case studies look at experiences of transformation at the systemic level, as well as at perceptions of (primarily) Black students and staff. Broadening access does not necessarily bring with it a “welcoming supportive environment for a diverse group of students” (p. 13); without exception all the contributors who report on perceptions of Black students and staff highlight their alienation and a variety of ways in which institutions and faculty are failing to meet their needs.

Although billed as case studies of Southern African universities, with the exception of the University of Namibia, all the institutions discussed are located in South Africa. Many of the authors are based in the United States, but have spent extended periods in South Africa; the collection thus combines an informed “outsider’s” perspective with the insights of South African academics. Undoubtedly all of the institutions concerned have moved on to some degree since the research on which this collection is based. The central points made, however, remain of concern.

The collection starts with a broad overview of transformation processes at the University of Port Elizabeth (UPE) by Ann Austin. UPE was established in 1963 as a dual medium (English and Afrikaans) White university. UPE has a conservative history, and is in some ways a “classic” apartheid creation. From the late 1980s, UPE has attempted to recreate itself through a process it terms “negotiated transformation” involving all relevant institutional and societal stakeholders. Austin’s chapter is rooted in a theoretical understanding of organizations—including universities—as complex systems and cultures, and she approaches transformation at UPE systematically within the context of the various elements which comprise the system: institutional mission and values as stated publicly, the embodiment of these values in policy through the “Strategic Master Plan”, and various initiatives which translate these policies into practice.

These processes have been intended to take UPE from being a conservative, “top-down” hierarchical organization to one with a broad sense of ownership “in which multiple stakeholders participate in decision making.” This has been accompanied by changes in demographic profiles, cultural change, and changing patterns of (inter)relationships within the university itself and between the university and the wider community. UPE appears to have made significant strides towards systemic transformation, but it has not all been smooth sailing, and transformation is an ongoing goal.
A central theme of the collection is that while transforming demographic profiles and redressing disparities is essential, transforming—and assessing progress towards transformation—must go beyond “bean counting” to permeate every aspect of the institution, at structural, cultural and individual levels. Although the remaining chapters give insights into a range of issues or measures relating to transformation, Professor Austin’s chapter is the only one to offer a comprehensive systemic overview of organizational change, identifying central elements of change, and ingredients which have contributed to those areas in which UPE has made substantial progress towards transformation.

Dora Daniels looks at the experiences of ten Black academics—out of a then total of sixteen—at the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU). Like the University of Port Elizabeth, RAU is a product of 1960s apartheid education policy. In the early 1990s, RAU’s profile changed from that of a white, Afrikaans university to one with a majority of Black students, with tuition offered in both English and Afrikaans. RAU has been successful in developing a more diverse student body, less so in promoting academic diversity.

At the time of the study, RAU’s policy was to appoint staff from any population group on merit, but the South African constitution requires that affirmative action be a priority. As a result, there was a pervasive sense that recently-appointed Black staff were affirmative action appointees, lacking full academic credentials. Black staff interviewed for the study all believed that they met the necessary academic criteria, but felt that (while immediate colleagues were supportive), most White staff and students saw all Black appointments as affirmative action, and felt that they were engaged in an ongoing struggle to prove their “worth.” RAU was seen as a “closed, conservative environment” (p. 51), which needed to do more at institutional level to provide support for new Black staff.

From RAU we are taken to Stellenbosch University, with Reihumetse Obakeng Mabokela’s chapter on language policy at that institution. Although both Stellenbosch and RAU historically catered for White Afrikaans speakers, their post-Apartheid paths have been very different. Where RAU made a policy decision (not always implemented in practice) to offer courses in both Afrikaans and English, Stellenbosch University has been determined to retain Afrikaans as the primary medium of instruction, arguing that full-scale dual medium would be too costly, and that students have the option of attending universities in English (1). Where RAU now has a majority of Black students, Stellenbosch has seen the least change in the demographic profiles of students of all the universities surveyed in this collection. Mabokela likens Stellenbosch University’s language policy to “pouring salt into an open wound” (p. 70), and describes an environment that is both linguistically and culturally inhospitable to African students. By failing to accommodate the linguistic needs of African students, she argues, the university cannot achieve its stated goal of “inclusiveness.”

Two complementary chapters consider transformation at the University of the Witwatersrand. In “Stumbling towards racial inclusion” Kimberly Lenease King gives an overview of Wits’ historical and recent admissions policies, while Rochelle L. Woods discusses Black student experiences at Wits in “Oh sorry, I’m a racist.”

Although Wits challenged the National Party on issues of racial Segregation, engaged in “critical research designed to undermine the apartheid government” (p. 73), and was one of the first South African universities to start to feel its way towards transformation, the path towards transformation has been—and continues to be—among the most troubled in South Africa. King believes that Wits has been unable “to adopt a broader, systematic approach to change” and that its approaches to transformation have been piecemeal (p. 87), dating back to a 1983 Senate resolution granting faculties discretion over admission. Some faculties introduced alternative admissions criteria to increase Black student access and retention rates—but as not all did, there were differential rates of growth between the faculties over the years which followed.

While some Wits faculties have been relatively successful in their efforts to increase Black student enrollments and retain Black students, increasing access is just one element required to give students from disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunity to succeed; both King and Wood believe that Wits has yet to fully address the challenges of “inclusion.” Woods argues that an increase in Black enrollments does not mean that “racism within the university no longer exists or that it is declining” (p. 92); rather, a more subtle—but no less damaging—“everyday racism” which defines routine, daily behaviors has replaced legal apartheid.

Language and cultural issues combine with racism to “help shape the racialized educational experience of Black students.” (p. 103). While some of the incidents Black students report in their dealings with White staff
and students are clearly overtly racist, others—although interpreted as racist by the students—are less clear-cut. To debate whether Eurocentric cultural references or jokes constitute racism on the part of lecturers would miss the point Woods is making. “Taking the narratives as a whole, Black students get the message that they are not wanted on campus and that they do not belong there” (p. 108).

A lack of understanding of the obstacles faced by Black students is not unique to historically White institutions. Nicole Norfles’ study of transformation at Vista University and the University of Zululand highlights the need to engage both staff and students fully in the transformation process and to go beyond “access” in developing appropriate strategies. While many of the student concerns reported in this chapter overlap with those of Black students at historically White universities, one in particular stands out: the need for marketable skills and recognized credentials.

In the only chapter on an institution outside South Africa, Rodney K. Hopson describes the effects of apartheid policy on higher education in Namibia, approaching it through “the lenses of social reproduction and cultural hegemony” (p. 124). Hopson emphasizes the role which African universities have to play in national development—a point which could be made more strongly throughout the collection. While the chapter is useful in outlining the effects apartheid and “Bantu Education” had beyond South Africa’s borders, one would wish to hear more about initiatives at the University of Namibia itself, rather than just the broad policy sweep.

A solitary technikon perspective is offered by Sonjai Amar Reynold’s chapter on historically disadvantaged technikons (HDTs). In the hierarchy of apartheid higher education institutions, historically disadvantaged technikons were generally bottom of the heap. Technikons were established with teaching as their main mission; only in the last ten years have they been able to confer degrees, and it is only during this period that research has been included in their mission. Combined with the poverty of resources allocated to HDTs during the apartheid era, this means that academic staff at such institutions have fewer advanced degrees and that research output at these institutions is lower. To the general problems of “transformation”, HDTs must thus add the pressure to develop an institutional capacity for research.

Reynolds looks at the challenges facing these institutions in research capacity development, curriculum and staff development, and gender equality, and describes a USAID/TELP-funded strategy for collaborative textbook development that five HDTs—in collaboration with four U.S. institutions—implemented to address these challenges. Apart from the value of the actual textbooks produced, the project has contributed to staff development in the participating technikons. While the description of this initiative is useful in and of itself, it is a pity firstly that Reynolds does not locate technikon research within the national research funding system, and secondly that the efforts—successful and otherwise—of national research funding and development agencies to develop research capacity in technikons are not mentioned.

All the case studies included in the collection make some contribution to our understanding of higher education transformation issues in South Africa, and the impact of successive accounts of Black student alienation is substantial.

Overall the collection would have benefited from a stronger editorial presence, both at the level of attention to detail (a reference to the “Maori people of Australia” [p. xi] is only the first in a series of niggling oversights and errors of fact), and of pulling together more of the common themes. This includes providing a more comprehensive overview of systemic issues such as the relationship between national and institutional policy, and between management capacity and policy implementation.

Although language is raised as an important issue by individual contributors, the full scope and impact of language-related factors is not drawn out as a central issue. Language is not just one of a list of problems, but a primary legacy of apartheid legislation, which reinforces—and at times creates—many of the major stumbling blocks to transformation.

The work does gender a disservice. While many of the contributions refer to the need to address gender inequities as a transformation-related issue, one gets the sense that “gender” is included as a category only as part of a politically correct checklist, rather than out of any real understanding of inequities which are deeply-rooted in higher education worldwide. In practice the collection pays only the scantest of lip-service to gender, lumping as a single category “the racial and gender disparities promoted by the National Party government” (p xvii).

Indeed, without diminishing the central role played by apartheid, a greater awareness generally of international trends in higher education would have been useful. Apart from internal and external pressures for trans-
formation relating to the legacy of apartheid and the transition to democracy, changes in the SA higher education system also reflect international trends and debates, around—for example—quality, qualifications frameworks, unified higher education systems, multi- and cross-disciplinarity and “managerial” approaches to education.

Note

[1]. The Stellenbosch University council recently adopted a new language policy and plan which retains its commitment to the use of Afrikaans as the primary language of instruction, while continuing to recognize the need for the use of English in certain contexts. In addition, the University undertakes to contribute by means of particular initiatives to the development of isiXhosa as an academic language” [Language Policy of the Stellenbosch University 2002. http://www.sun.ac.za/taal/LangPolFinal2002.doc]

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