14 JOURNEYING WITH HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES AND RESEARCH

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This chapter captures different 'stages' of the development of my own journey with the field of higher education (HE) studies and research. It reflects change and development of the field from personal experiences covering five 'developmental stages' and a period of almost 30 years. Stage one represents a novice position from where I knew absolutely nothing about the field of HE and when the learning curve was exceptionally steep. Questions I try to answer include: What literature was available at the time? What were the seminal works? What were the themes that dominated the field? The second stage covers my own master's and doctoral studies. In each instance there were dominant influences, forces and literature that guided my postgraduate work. I explore the question of how these studies influence my perspectives concerning higher education and how they impacted on my future work. The third stage deals with projects and post-PhD research and the initial stages of publishing in the field leading onto a fourth stage where I started supervising PhD students. Stage five represents the present with a broader view is taken within the limitations of one person's perspective to take such a stance. This last section also ties in with the chapter by Bitzer and Wilkinson elsewhere in this book that addresses aspects of higher education as a field of study in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Jules Verne's classic 1864 science fiction novel *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* tells the story of a professor who leads his nephew and a hired guide down a volcano in Iceland to 'the centre of the earth'. They encounter multiple adventures, including close-up meetings with prehistoric creatures and natural hazards. The living organisms

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they encounter as they travel through the rock layers reflect geological time and the creatures they face become more ancient and overtly aggressive. Eventually, after a magnificently challenging journey, they surface again in southern Italy in all peace and tranquillity. From a scientific point of view Verne's story seems not to have aged as well as his other science fiction stories, since much about what 'Centre of the Earth' contains have since been proven wrong. However, a redeeming point to the story is Verne's own belief, told within the novel from the viewpoint of a character that the inside of the earth does indeed differ from that which the characters encounter. The story apparently inspired many script writers, film makers and proponents of other media to produce none less than 13 films, TV series, plays, comic books and music albums with the same title and plot – the latest of which was released in 2008 as Eric Brevig's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth 3D* (http://en.wikipedia/journey3D).

My journey is not in the least as dramatic as the one suggested by Verne and it is far less fictional. In fact, it resembles much more a typical road trip from A to B with the difference that B does not represent a destination, but a viewpoint along the way. No hairy creatures or dinosaurs spotted, but ample rough spots, smooth patches and excitements. Without a modern-day geo-positioning system, I started out with only blurred road maps and pointers that added to the wonder as the journey unfolded. Therefore, to capture a career of almost thirty years in higher education studies and research in one chapter is obviously impossible. I merely aim to generate a few glimpses or perspectives of a thirty odd year journey, closely involving two higher education institutions in South Africa.

Without being aware of it at the time, my potential career in higher education started off with a leadership course at the University of the Free State (UFS or the University of the Orange Free State as it was known then) when I was still attending high school in 1969. It so happened that I was part of a group of head girls and -boys from secondary schools in the Free State province who participated in a leadership course organised by the Department of Culture and in particular involved a person who would later become my mentor and supervisor at FSU, Kalie Strydom. The programme included a week's lectures and activities in Bloemfontein followed by a train trip to Cape Town, a visit to Parliament, a boat cruise to Durban and a plane trip (very novel at the time) back to Bloemfontein. The money for this round trip, priced at less than R100 (which was, of course, a lot of money in 1969), I had to borrow from my dad. During the initial week's lectures at the leadership course, I guess the first seeds were sown for me to attend university as the group was immersed into topics such as 'leadership', 'public speaking', 'management and organisation', 'public etiquette'

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and 'endurance and discipline' – the latter presented at the time by one of Free State's sporting heroes, Ewie Cronjé (father of the late South African cricket player, Hansie Cronjé). The message was clear – a university education takes you into leadership positions and is an option worthwhile to consider. Coming from a small rural town in the Free State, this leadership course contributed to my decision to pursue a higher education and evoked my interest in the topic of leadership which would later become one of the main themes in my PhD studies. This, in turn, allowed me into the 'realms of higher education', which would otherwise have been impossible – I guess.

After compulsory military service in 1970, I joined the University Free State (UFS) in 1971 as a first year BSc student, but shortly thereafter changed to BA with majors Maths and English to pursue a career in school teaching. 1974 represented the year of my *first* encounter with Education as a discipline in the Faculty of Education at UFS by enrolling for the Higher Education Diploma (HED) that would allow me to teach Maths and English to high school students. My first experience with Christian higher education, which was the dominant paradigm at UFS then (and probably is, to a large extent, still the case) included exposure to the works of Christian philosophers such as Abraham Kuyper, HG Stoker, Herman Dooyeweerd (*De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee – A new critique of theoretical thought*), JM Spier (*Orientation to Christian Philosophy*), DFM Strauss (*Science and Reality*), P G Schoeman (*A Christian Education Philosophy*), JJ Fourie (*Theme and variation in Education*) and CFG Gunter (*Aspects of Theoretical Education*). This was supplemented by related works such as *Introduction to Socio- Pedagogics* (PAE Hoffman), *Comparative Education* (PE Jones) and *Responsible Education* (NT van Loggerenberg and AJC Jooste) as well as *Introduction to Pedagogics* (F van der Stoep and W J Louw, who were more representative of a phenomenological stance). I thus had a firm grounding in Christian philosophy of science and education in particular, which was further entrenched by my part-time BEd studies in 1977. Being a Christian myself, I did not object to the views that were propagated *ex cathedra*. However, I later came to realise that there were many other world and life orientations and perspectives that were neglected at UFS at the time (and equally so at its counterpart, the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education). Fortunately, later studies and exposure brought some 'balance' as to my epistemological and ontological perspectives, but I never regretted the firm grounding in at least one philosophical tradition that provided a point of departure to explore and contrast broader and radically different understandings of human and natural phenomena.

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A REAL START: FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

After teaching Maths and English (second language) at a high school for four years, I joined the Bureau for University Education (BUE) in 1979. The late Professor Wynand Mouton, who became vice chancellor of the UFS shortly before, appointed Kalie Strydom, who was teaching at the Faculty of Education, Stellenbosch University at the time, as director of the BUE. The BUE brief was to improve the quality of teaching and learning at UFS. As one of the first support services of its kind (the first being at the former Rand Afrikaans University established in 1976), the BUE rendered three main services as a support unit at UFS, namely to advance the use of technology in teaching, to improve the teaching skills and educational grounding of lecturers and to conduct research into university teaching that would support the BUE's two main functions and promote the field of higher education teaching and learning. My first job at the newly established BUE was to study the latest literature concerning educational and staff development and recommend possible innovations concerning teaching and learning facilitation practices to both faculty committees and lecturers. This brought me to fresh encounters with the field of higher education which I hardly knew anything about, except from what I have learnt during my studies in education and my experiences as an education student. First readings that interested me were mainly from the USA and to a lesser extent from the UK. They included literature on the structure of institutions and systems of higher education in an attempt to make more sense of 'a broader picture'. This broader picture was, of course, heavily shaded by utilitarian motives or what Sue Clegg (2007:1) refers to as "… what works".

An urge to ask the difficult questions about higher education or to properly theorise in those early years was obviously lacking in South Africa. Publications such as those of Rossouw (1993), addressing the complex relationship between higher education, science and culture in the South African context, only became available much later. Authors on systemic and institutional issues and perspectives that come to mind from that era were, amongst others: Anderson (1974), Axelsson and Rosenburg (1976), Baldridge (1971 and 1971a); Clark (1963), Dressel and Mayhew (1974), Goodman (1962), Gross (1968), Kerr (1963), Millett (1962), as well as Pauw (1978) and Viljoen (1977) in South Africa. Authors that published work most relevant to my own inquiries at the time, which were mainly in the areas of professional and curriculum development, included Gaff (1975), D-W Piper (1976), McKeachie (1978), Nicholls and Nicholls (1974), Tyler (1975), Trow (1976) and Wheeler (1967). The important role of academic leadership and management at the departmental level was anything

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but neglected and was propagated by authors such as Startup (1976) and Thomas (1977) at the time.

During the first two years of research into higher education three things became clear. *First*, I realised that the literature on HE was largely dominated by North American authors and what the BUE was doing in terms of the development of teaching and learning was heavily influenced by the available North American literature. The only exception was the work and publications of the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) in the UK that produced outstanding publications on teaching and learning at the time. *Secondly*, it was clear that few academic staff at the UFS knew anything of, let alone having an affinity for, the field of HE research and practice. Academic staff was very much immersed in their disciplinary thinking, research and teaching and hardly took any notice of the limited, but excellent theoretical work that was done on teaching innovation and its links to learning theory. To a large extent it was business as usual for most lecturers with wonderful exceptions here and there in many higher education institutions because of lecturers' personal interest in the field. It thus became extremely hard work to interest academic staff in critically reviewing their (in many instances outdated) teaching practices and to take notice of the broader field of higher education other than merely the disciplines in which they were working. Academic development staff was mainly seen as aliens within the existing 'academic tribes' as they had few academic credentials at the time. Thirdly, it was clear that the field of HE research and development and in particular reform in terms of teaching and learning, was emerging with several units or divisions that started at various universities. The universities of Cape Town, Durban-Westville, Pretoria, Port Elizabeth, Potchefstroom, Stellenbosch, Witwatersrand and others represented cases in time. In spite of political strife and turmoil in South Africa during those years, the development of educational and staff development (at least in the so-called 'white Afrikaans' universities) took new dimensions with a number of fresh initiatives, including the foundation of the South African Association for Research and Development in Higher Education (SAARDHE) and the beginnings of the South African Journal of Higher Education (SAJHE), both which were still active by 2009.

THE JOURNEY GETS TOUGHER: INQUIRING CRITICAL ISSUES

A clear *second* stage of developing more sophisticated perspectives on higher education was embedded in my own master's and doctoral studies. During the early 1980s, the UFS embarked upon an investigation towards a more extensive after-hours and off-campus system of teaching and learning in order to make better provision

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for students outside of the typical 18-25 age group and for off-campus students. One part of this vision was to extend learning provision to other centres such as Kimberley in the Northern Cape as well as the Eastern and Northern parts of the Free State. I attempted in my research, which was in part sponsored by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), to work out an educationally sound system for off-campus studies (Bitzer 1980) and in the process learnt much about non-traditional education designs such as distance and adult education systems. The results of a questionnaire survey amongst 1,159 lecturers, students and potential students lead to a more user-friendly system design for extra-mural studies that was firmly grounded in adult learning theory. Apart from Professors Kalie Strydom and Johann Nortjé who facilitated my study, key sources that particularly influenced my thinking about HE at that juncture included most valuable sources from the Council of Europe (1977), Crossley (1976), Goodman (1976), Houghton and Richardson (1974), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (1974) and the seminal work of Ortega Y Gasset (1964).

My PhD studies took me along a related, but different path when the BUE attracted a grant from the Anglo American Chairman's Fund in the early 1980s to conduct research and development work on academic leadership in universities. I was 'commissioned' to a sub-project that investigated the role of departmental chairs in order to promote effective teaching and learning in academic departments (Bitzer 1984). This journey took me to the USA, the UK, Europe and Israel to investigate elements of university life such as how universities are organised, the roles and functions of departmental chairs as well as educational leadership development. Eventually this endeavour contributed to propose a leadership and management programme for departmental chairs to improve their capabilities in promoting teaching and learning in university departments at UFS. It was at this stage of my career that I realised to a much larger extent the importance of the inter-disciplinary nature of higher education studies as I borrowed and used ideas from management sciences, psychology, industrial psychology, leadership studies and teaching and learning studies in my doctoral programme. Kalie Strydom was once again my promoter and Calvyn du Toit, coming from a background in Business Economics and professor at the then University of Port Elizabeth (currently Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University), was my co-promoter. The work of Baldridge, Curtis, Ecker and Riley (1983), Cohen, March and Olsen (1972), Mintzberg (1979), Montgomery, McLaughlin and Smart (1974), Tucker (1981) and others were of immense value in shaping my ideas around how universities function in different contexts worldwide and how academic departments and disciplines fit the picture.

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I came to realise the immense complexity of university work and the multiple layers of academic and administrative bureaucracy academic leaders and managers were confronted with (see Tucker 1980). I also became acutely aware of the fact that business management models and strategies would not work in university settings if they were not radically adapted to fit disciplinary and academic contexts. By trying to implement such a programme, this important lesson was learnt the hard, experiential way.

A PUBLICATION PATH: HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The *third* identifiable stage of my encounters with higher education studies and research began when I steadily started publishing in the field during and after completion of my doctoral studies. Four major themes dominated the field during this period: (1) Academic leadership and management – particularly as they apply to university departments; (2) Academic staff development and staff appraisal; (3) Student learning and student development, and (4) Quality assurance and quality promotion, especially in courses and programmes of study. If I was working at a university in Europe, the UK, the USA or Australia at the time, I would have probably focussed on any one of the listed themes, but at UFS we were only a few BUE staff and all of these areas were important and urgent to investigate. It was thus a question of breadth over depth, but somehow we did manage to keep up with the latest literature and got involved in several institutional and national projects around these themes. The academic leadership project sponsored by the Anglo American Chairman's Fund assisted to attract one of the most influential exponents of departmental leadership at the time, Professor Alan Tucker, to South Africa. Tucker had presented workshops to department chairs for the American Council on Education all over the USA for many years and we were fortunate to have him contributing at two national and two institutional workshops on departmental leadership. I also visited Tucker at the University of Florida in the early 1980s to establish contact and attend a number of his workshops on departmental leadership elsewhere in the USA. From these activities a number of publications materialised (e.g. Bitzer and Strydom 1986, 1987; Strydom and Bitzer 1990). These publications mainly served to establish a theoretical framework for developmental work on academic leadership and management in departments that, in turn, contributed to the facilitation of workshops and a number of BUE seminars at a national level. These activities added in different ways to new and innovative actions *vis-à-vis* academic leadership and management at a number of universities in South Africa as it later became clear from either studies or actions taken towards improved academic leadership and management.

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Another theme that was very topical in the mid-1980s and will in all probability remain a hotly debated theme in higher education, is academic staff appraisal. At UFS, as at a number of other universities in South Africa, it was a constant struggle to conduct fair staff appraisals, particularly when it came to evaluating the quality of teaching and learning and linking academic performance to rewards. Questions that constantly emerged were: What would be the evaluation criteria? What evidence would be available for judging the quality of teaching and learning? Who would be the 'judges' of quality? How could the appraisal of teaching be done as validly and reliably as possible? Many of these questions are still not properly answered today, but, as Seldin (1984:24) rightly remarked:

> There is no perfect evaluation programme, nor can there be. Such a system will probably always remain beyond reach. But with enough time, effort, and goodwill, we can come reasonably close.

It was for this very reason that Seldin, who was working at Pace University in New York at the time and still writes influentially on the appraisal of teaching and other scholarly activities (e.g. Seldin 1984, 2008), was invited to conduct a number of workshops at UFS and at a national level. When I visited Peter at his home in Croton-on-Hudson in 1986 he observed quite ironically that while many universities in the USA and abroad were asking for his services to update them on his research about staff appraisal, his own institution did not even bother to ask his opinion on the matter. Nevertheless, useful advice and identification of several research opportunities emerged from Seldin's visit during those years (e.g. see Bitzer and Strydom 1987b) and much more clarity were gained on the contextualised nature of university teaching and learning and how appraisal of these activities could both be extremely complex, highly subjective and cause a lot of upheaval amongst academic staff if not handled carefully.

One further important perspective that emerged during my research into educational and professional development during our inquiry into staff appraisal was the importance of an understanding of the relationship between learning theory and student academic performance. During the late 1980s the Centre for Student Counselling (CSC) at UFS was incorporated into the structures of the BUE and I had the opportunity of working more closely with its staff. Koos Venter, the director of the CSC, in particular played an important role of alerting us to the importance of a holistic view of student learning and making the student as an individual the point of concern rather than indiscriminately judging groups of students. The use of David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and the Learning Style Inventory were at a peak of use at the time and therefore much of the literature (Boud 1985; Kolb 1981; Kolb 1984; Brookfield 1983) announced

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and acknowledged this seminal contribution. Insights into learning at the theoretical level assisted me and many academic staff in workshops to see how student learning styles could potentially influence the way university courses were designed and taught. Differentiated learning facilitation in particular received increased attention while it is also interesting to note how Kolb's work influenced training and staff development programmes in commerce and industry at the time. From closer cooperation with student counsellors some publications emerged (e.g. Strydom, Bitzer and Venter 1990) and inspired me to work and further research the area of student talent development and student performance during later years when I joined Stellenbosch University (e.g. Bitzer 2003; Bitzer and Troskie-de Bruin 2004; Bitzer 2005).

The last theme I want to highlight from this period of 'emerging publications' is quality and quality assurance in higher education. During the mid-1980s quality assurance regimes in the Netherlands, the UK, the USA, New Zealand and in a number of other countries really took off. South Africa benefited greatly from an accompanying surge of conferences, publications and work in this regard and it was after visits by colleagues such as Frans van Vught, Peter Maassen and the late Jitze de Haan from the Netherlands (as well as Lee Harvey, who later became the chief editor of the journal *Quality in Higher Education* in the UK) that a project initiated by Kalie Strydom on quality assurance got off to a good start. Institutional, departmental and programme quality came to scrutiny and these early inputs served as promoting the formal quality assurance structures of the later Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). Visiting Professors Herb Kells and James Ratcliff from the USA added to the thrust and this resulted in a conference and number of projects and articles that *inter alia* investigated the difficult tension between quality and equity (Bitzer 1992; Strydom and Bitzer 1993; Bitzer and Malherbe 1995). In 1996 the Unit for Research into Higher Education, which was the first HSRC funded research unit dedicated to researching HE as a field of study and based in the BUE at Free State University, started publishing at least three extensive volumes of material on quality assurance in South African higher education. These publications (see Strydom, Lategan and Muller 1996, 1997; Fourie, Strydom and Stetar 1999) still stand as major contributions to local literature in the early days of quality assurance in the country.

From a historical perspective and as is elaborated upon elsewhere in this book, it is evident that between 1984 and 1994 a lot happened on the political and constitutional front that affected higher education. Alongside these developments and not always in conjunction with them, however, other initiatives also took stage. Amidst the work of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) later chaired by Dr Jairam

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Reddy and the legislation that emerged from that, the themes of academic leadership and management, staff appraisal, student learning and quality assurance stood out as important ones in which work was done at several universities and at UFS in particular. Under the leadership of Kalie Strydom many of these initiatives later became fortuitous as staff trained by the BUE and the Unit for Research into Higher Education were appointed to research and managerial positions in other HE institutions such as universities of technology and others.

TRAVELLING TOGETHER: POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION IN THE FIELD

Postgraduate supervision of higher education studies, particularly at the doctoral level, happened quite late in my career. This came as a notable *fourth* theme in acquiring a further additional perspective on higher education studies and research. However, it was not before 1996 that the first DEd student assisted by my supervision graduated. One problem at UFS (as at many others) was that the BUE was only affiliated to the Faculty of Education for academic purposes and its' staff was not really seen as academics in the full sense of the word. Similarly, higher education was not seen or recognised as a worthwhile branch of educational research. At many South African universities the tension between academic units and academic support units prevailed and to this day remains a sensitive point. Therefore, to supervise doctoral students one had to be 'accredited' as competent by the related faculty which depended on experience and which, in turn, could not be gained without supervising students. I was thus awarded one doctoral student in 1994 with two co-promoterships (the late Professor Dudley Vermaak and Professor Steve Niemann) from the Faculty of Education at UFS. Fortunately for me, this was an exceptionally bright student by the name of Magda Fourie who was also, incidentally, a student friend and colleague. The result was a highly successful graduate, but I think I have learnt much more from the supervisory experience than Magda did. We published together (see Fourie and Bitzer 1994), she later became deputy vice chancellor at two institutions and a chapter from her appears elsewhere in this book.

Between 1994 and 2009 I have supervised or co-supervised a total of thirty-five doctoral and master's students: eighteen at the PhD and seventeen at the MPhil level. The topics of their dissertations and theses varied among the following themes:

- University leadership and governance (1 PhD);
- Assessment in the curriculum (3 PhD; 1 MPhil);
- Curriculum analysis and curriculum frameworks (9 PhD; 3 MPhil);

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- Teaching and learning (3 MPhil);
- Student attrition (1 PhD);
- Student/academic development (2 PhD; 7 MPhil);
- Professional development of academic staff (1 PhD; 2 MPhil);
- Community engagement (1 PhD);
- Quality assurance (1 MPhil).

Due to my direct involvement with curriculum development as well as being appointed in a department of Curriculum Studies later, most of these studies were in the area of curriculum, teaching and student learning. When I arrived at Stellenbosch University and the Centre for Higher and Adult Education (CHAE), we deliberately made a decision to steer clear from, for instance, higher education policy and management studies as other institutions in the Western Cape region were already doing work in those areas.

In terms of research design most projects constituted contextualised case studies either as part of institutional, departmental or programmatic cases. In fewer studies survey designs were used, while phenomenography, grounded theory and action research were all used in only one study each. Most studies had a qualitative research approach and in only a few cases quantitative or mixed mode methodologies were deemed suitable.

One important perspective that I have gained from postgraduate supervision in higher education studies is that it indeed constitutes a specialised area of work that needs a lot of expertise and attention to detail – particularly in the study design phases. As Creswell (2009:7) has aptly pointed out:

> [The] creation of a research design requires looking from the vantage point of a framework, an overall design, as well as focused attention on the detail … which also shows the interrelatedness of the parts of the whole … where each element contributes to and influences the shape of a complete study.

Most studies in the field of higher education contain either inter- or trans-disciplinary elements which make them both interesting and challenging. Over the years I have preferred in most instances to involve co-supervisors or -promoters from relevant disciplines or fields of study who contributed to studies in most meaningful ways and attended to the broader picture of HE studies as well as looking into project detail.

As master's or doctoral students in higher education are usually older and more mature compared to other fields of study, another important perspective that emerged is that

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joint publications with these students are highly valued by them – not only to further their own academic careers, but also to recognise them as potential and upcoming contributors to the field. Through the years I was fortunate in working with a number of such students and co-publish with them (e.g. De Villiers and Bitzer 2005; Beylefeld, Bitzer and Hay 2007; Ernstzen and Bitzer 2007; Crafford and Bitzer 2008). This does not mean that all postgraduates are always happy with their study experiences. Follow-up with alumni and current students is needed to ensure that supervisory capacity and practices constantly improve. When I joined the CHAE at Stellenbosch University in 1998, my colleague Chris Kapp was already working on an extensive study exit questionnaire for HE students which he refined over the years. Recently, after more than ten years of implementation, we took a retrospective stance on the feedback received (Albertyn, Kapp and Bitzer 2008) and tried to determine whether and in which respects studies in higher education indeed contribute to the academic professional development of graduates (Bitzer and Albertyn forthcoming).

One worrying factor through the years was the relatively high attrition rate of MPhil (Higher Education) students in particular. The MPhil (HE) programme at Stellenbosch as it stood in 2009 is a 240 credit programme that includes seven compulsory and two (out of four) elective modules (see www.sun.ac.za/chae). The compulsory coursework modules are: (1) Perspectives in higher education, (2) Student learning in higher education, (3) Foundations of research, (4) Research in higher education, (5) Curriculum and programme design in higher education, (6) Teaching in higher education and (7) Assessment and evaluation in higher education. The four elective modules are: (8) Scholarship in higher education, (9) Technology in higher education, (10) Staff development in higher education and (11) Leadership in higher education. The required research thesis constitutes half of the programme credits and usually spans the latter half of the second study year and goes into a third year. Over the years the attrition in the programme was between 30 and 40 per cent and was mainly due to students not completing their research theses. In the past students could exit the programme with a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) after successful completion of their coursework. However, the Higher Education Qualification Framework (HEQF) stipulates that students cannot exit a programme early with an alternative qualification from 2009 onwards. I have found this ruling unfortunate as MPhil students who complete their coursework, but drop out of a programme before completing the thesis requirement (sometimes because of circumstance), are left with absolutely nothing for their efforts.

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In response to the attrition phenomenon we conducted a study at the CHAE on the problem as it emerged from our higher education programmes (Albertyn, Kapp and Bitzer 2008). The study indicated that increased globalisation, internationalisation and universal change impact highly on postgraduate supervision practices at higher education institutions in general. Our study investigated in particular the experiences of master's and doctoral students in higher education studies where increasingly larger numbers of international students (especially from neighbouring African countries) pursue their studies. Inquiry into a topic such as student experiences reflected something of a more holistic view or 'seeing the bigger picture' rather than merely the topical issues studied in the earlier part of my career. Broad change, transformation and quality, and student and staff experiences of these complex issues come to mind as those that have emerged for me as later important themes of inquiry.

APPROACHING HIGH GROUNDS: SEEING THE BIGGER PICTURE

In 1997 Altbach wrote a thought-provoking article in *Daedalus* in which he asked the question whether there might be an international academic crisis (Altbach 1997). Linked to other concerns (Levine 1997; Clark 1997; Gumport 1997), he outlined problems facing the contemporary university and their effects on the academic profession. One conclusion Altbach arrived at was that the academic profession continued to function without realising basic changes or taking note of the external forces that buffeted universities. Against the backdrop of the inevitability of change he predicted that the working conditions of the professoriate would deteriorate and that the profession's 'golden age' (characterised by institutional expansion and increased autonomy, availability of research funds and growing prestige and salaries), at least in industrialised countries, apparently had come to an end. Altbach also noted that the full-time American professor, on the average, remained largely insulated from the broad changes in higher education and had a little understanding of these trends. If this position reigned in South Africa by the mid-1990s, the situation has drastically changed. For example, the average staff member in local (i.e. South African) higher education has been showered (or literally bombarded) with the realities of radical change and transformational challenges at all levels of academic life. Institutional mergers, policy changes, changing student profiles, pressures to perform excellently in various roles, institutional commitments to public good and language issues are all examples of such challenges the average South African academic could have hardly ignored or escaped. For example, Chrissie Boughey's chapter in a recent book highlighted these and other changes well, also addressing the changes in a higher education context,

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mission and legislation (Boughey 2004). Involvement in and dissemination of higher education studies contributed not only to raise the awareness and implications of these challenges, but involved a number of academic staff in studies at various universities and hopefully contributed to broaden views and understanding.

When I joined Stellenbosch University in 1998, one of my first assignments was to prepare an inaugural lecture (see Bitzer 1998). Due to factors out of my control I had to draft the document under immense pressures and could not devote much time to the task. The topic attempted was: *Higher education as a field of study – Challenges in a time of transformation* (title translated from Afrikaans). In this address I firstly attempted to indicate the aims of recent higher education legislation (e.g. the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997) and explored the concepts *transformation* and *higher education*. Taking these key concepts as a point of departure, I tried to explain the difference between an established discipline (such as Education) and a field of study (such as HE) – also looking into the developmental path and growth of the field since 1974. In South Africa, apparently few publications dedicated to HE have appeared before 1920. The earliest one I could detect was by Malherbe (1925) who recorded the history of education between 1652 and 1922, also including references to higher education. Other early authors included Metrowich (1926), Malherbe and Cook (1938) and Cilliers (1944). In the second part of the lecture I discussed the changing higher education landscape in South Africa at the time and touched upon elements such as the influence of international and national socio-political trends. I concluded by pointing to a number challenges regarding the field of HE studies and research that remained important and seemed unaddressed at that stage:

- Building research capacity via partnerships and promoting postgraduate studies in HE (particularly in Africa and Southern Africa);
- Promoting and supporting research on issues of strategic importance to HE systems, institutions and programmes;
- The promotion of publications on HE and facilitating publication opportunities and outlets;
- Developing programmes of studies in HE among higher education institutions and linking these to the professional development capacity of academic and professional staff, and
- Promoting the field via short courses, workshops, conferences, HE forums and building accessible information systems on higher education.

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Since the inaugural lecture in 1998, I have published more than thirty articles in various journals on topics related to these issues, but the more important question is what the landscape changes were that I had observed along the journey? My attempt at a picture is given in Table 14.1 and I will explain these changes further below.

TABLE 14.1 An observed picture of change in higher education studies and research in South Africa – early 1980s to mid-2000s

Area	Amount of change
Available literature	Evolved from little to almost overwhelmingly much, but mostly from abroad, particularly the USA. South African literature on higher education, especially in the form of books, still appears to be quite limited.
Research expertise	Initially expertise was only available abroad. It gradually became more recognised and available in South Africa. HE studies attracted interest beyond institutional boundaries and increasingly applied more sophisticated methodologies.
Policy studies and analysis	A surge of national policies and policy development, in particular since 1996; an average volume of critique and a lack of implementation studies before 2006.
Research and study leadership	Initially limited and weak. Confined to institutional contexts where only limited pockets of leadership and expertise were available. Currently leadership is more available nationally in more areas of specialisation as more students graduate in HE studies.
Research projects	Initially limited or non-existent. Increased with the evolvement of publication outlets and as funding became more available. Current research (including institutional research) appears to be too voluminous for available local publication outlets. Initially, in-breeding – but now much more cross-breeding via subsystems and regional systems of higher education.
Recognition of the field	HE as a field of study and research is much more recognised now within institutions (demonstrated by funding for research and development units) than in the past. Compared to 'pure' disciplinary recognition, however, appreciation of the field is limited.

In order to justify my views as summarised in Table 14.1, I shall only focus in detail on the first two areas and deal with the rest more briefly due to limited space.

I have already indicated that during the earlier days of HE studies and research in South Africa literature was limited in volume and also limited to particular areas of HE (e.g. teaching and learning) compared to what was available abroad. The *South African Journal of Higher Education* (SAJHE) was only started in 1987 and before then most South African HE literature relevant to the field appeared in SAARDHE conference publications (e.g. '*Excellence in Teaching and Learning*' Conference Papers, 2-4 April 1986, published by the University of Stellenbosch; '*Intercultural issues in teaching and learning in Higher Education*' proceedings published by the University of Natal) or

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books [e.g. '*Universiteit en Onderrig'* (University and Teaching) published by the then Rand Afrikaans University as a Lecture Series in 1968; '*Die suksesvolle dosent*''(The successful lecturer') published by Strydom and Helm at Free State University in 1981]. After 1987 things went much smoother for HE publications. A consolidated index compiled by David Adey, the first editor of SAJHE, of ten years' of SAJHE publications in 1997 indicated a much wider scope and range of publications. For instance, more than 40 articles on student academic support and related issues, 27 articles on the assessment of student learning, 21 on computers in education and 16 articles on Chemistry education in HE were published in the SAJHE. So-called 'bulletins' and leaflets on teaching and learning or other aspects of HE at several universities served as examples of trying to bridge the gap of indigenous South African literature [e.g. the 'Bulletin vir Dosente' (Bulletin for Lecturers) at the then Rand Afrikaans University that started already in 1976, the publication series on university teaching and related aspects at Potchefstroom University under the leadership of Paul du Plessis and Nic Vreken, the 'Bulletin for Academic Staff' at the University of Durban-Westville which started in 1979 and the 'Journal for Technikon Research and Education' which started in 1982].

Two examples illustrating the contrast with the range of publications from abroad and in particular the USA might suffice. The National Institute of Education, US Department of Education, published two volumes of '*Higher Education*' in 1981. These two volumes contained brief overviews of legislative documents, books, articles and other documents under 38 rubrics that varied from topics such as student admissions, student retention and campus planning to curriculum, educational technology and higher education public affairs. The list of publications cited in the reference list spans more than 30 pages, covering the twelve year period between 1968 and 1980. Another example: 1976 saw the third edition of a 537 page book by John Brubacher and Willis Rudy titled: '*Higher education in transition*' describing and commenting on the history of American colleges and universities from 1636 to 1976. In short, the level of availability and sophistication of literature at that period in time seems reasonably clear. I must point out, however, that after 1994 and particularly during the late 1990s and early 2000s literature on HE in South Africa proliferated and as many projects were supported by international charities, useful accounts of research and developmental work in higher education in South Africa were published (e.g. see Cloete, Fehnel, Maassen, Moja, Perold and Gibbon 2002). It remains a pity, however ideologically understandable, that the good work that was done and published on HE before 1994 did not receive any mention in later works.

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Research expertise in any scientific field are normally illustrated by the range and quality of research projects successfully completed, the number of postgraduate students supervised as well as the quality of that supervision, publications that emerge from the research and the number of projects funded in some or other way – preferably by national funding agencies. Apparently, in all of these categories HE studies and research in South Africa was quite immature in the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, at both the level of theory and practice there were exceptions such as an in-depth look at the problem of school-university transition at a conference in 1979 hosted by the then Committee of University Principals (CUP), the seminal work of Johann Pauw (1978) of the then Rand Afrikaans University on the nature of the Western university and its future in an African context, research on student counselling and development of distance education students by Hendrik Gous at Unisa and some of the research done for the so-called Van Wyk De Vries Report on Higher Education in 1974 (see RSA 1974). Overall, however, school and other forms of education received the bulk of the funding for research and HE was not well recognised as a field of study in South Africa. It was only in the early 1990s that the first Unit for Research into Higher Education, funded by the then HSRC and directed by Kalie Strydom was established at the BUE at the University of the Free State as pointed out earlier. In terms of research methodology, research projects from abroad mostly guided methodology (e.g. Chronbach 1946; Popper 1972; Marton and Säljo 1976; Marton 1981), the HSRC had just started to publish more extensive literature on research methodology (e.g. Mouton and Marais 1985; Mouton 1996) and many researchers – in the Afrikaans fraternity at least – used Landman's (1980) 'Inleiding tot die Opvoedkundige Navorsingspraktyk' [Introduction to the Practice of Educational Research] as a prime source for research methodology.

On the issue of HE policy studies and analysis Hay and Monnapula-Mapesela provide a perspective on policy and legislative developments elsewhere in this book. It therefore suffices to say that since 1996 South Africa has seen a surge of debates and documentation. Although these developments provided a rich source for studies and research, the new drafted policies were not necessarily implemented well. It is only by 2004-2006 that new policy implementation really came out of the woodwork and currently (that is 2009) it appears as if the 'policy fatigue' of the early 2000s has made room for a more stabilised HE sector in general and a greater availability of policy critique.

Similarly, leadership in HE studies and research was, in my view, quite limited in its earlier days as the field was emerging. Institutions that established centres or bureaus for teaching and learning development appointed directors who mainly came from

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faculties of Education and had some or other interest in educational technology. These directors took the academic lead as their centres grew and at institutions such as the former Rand Afrikaans University, University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), University of Durban-Westville, University of Potchefstroom, Free State University, Stellenbosch University, the University of Cape Town and the former University of Port Elizabeth. As the field grew, students who had graduated from these units took on leadership roles in HE study supervision and research.

The more limited a field, the more limited its research. In turn, limited research puts boundaries to the field of study. This chicken-and-egg argument also appeared to be true for HE studies in the 1980s. The field was relatively new in South Africa and funding was unavailable – both from internal sources (as only a few people conducted research into HE) as well as the limits due to apartheid where no funding was available from abroad. The Committee of University Principals (CUP), however, supported a number of research and development initiatives in the field by the late 1980s in providing resources for the publication of the SAJHE and organising a number of conferences on burning HE issues. The formation of associations such as SAARDHE and SAAAD (the former South African Association for Academic Development which later became Higher Education Learning and Teaching in Southern Africa – HELTASA) and the forming of the Committee of Technikon Principals (CTP) also contributed to boosting the field. With the formation of new national structures after 1996 such as the Council on Higher Education, Higher Education South Africa (a non-profit company of rectors of HE institutions) as well as an influx of funding from abroad (e.g. the Ford Foundation, Nordic and Scandinavian development funds, Dutch funding) much 'cross-fertilisation' among institutions and regional groupings were stimulated. Examples include issues such as HE student retention, quality in HE, e-learning and others.

Contrary to earlier trends, HE as a field of study and research is much more recognised today than in the previous two decades. Recognition has come in the form of appreciating HE not only as a specialised field within education, but also as a multi- and interdisciplinary area of inquiry spanning disciplines and professional fields of study such as sociology, psychology, history, management, economics and others. Proof was evident in funding from sources such as the National Research Foundation (NRF) which became more readily available, and in the past five years, a number of researchers in the field have been rated and recognised by the NRF. However, compared to 'pure' and 'established' disciplines and professional studies, recognition of HE as a field of studies and research still has a long road ahead in South Africa.

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CONCLUSION

What did I learn from my five-staged journey with HE studies and research? One realisation was that in the early stages the field in South Africa was dominated by North American literature. Also, that there was little affinity among the regular university academics for HE research and development work and the emergence of the field happened mainly through the establishment of staff or academic development units in South African universities. Further, my own master's and doctoral studies assisted me greatly in widening perspectives on curriculum design, modes of HE delivery and academic leadership. The value of the inter- and transdisciplinary nature of HE studies and research clearly surfaced and I also realised how different and incompatible the values of the academic and corporate worlds seemed to be. The start of the publication stage of my journey brought a realisation how difficult it is, particularly in the South African context where resources are limited and staff is few, to engage in 'deep research' in the field. In many instances the pragmatic paradigm (see Creswell 2009) reigned and achieving theoretical depth in several areas of HE inquiry did not seem possible – at least not in my case. This was compensated for to some extent in the PhD and master's studies I have supervised. Making use of co-promoters and study leaders through the years have enriched my views of HE inquiry and also exposed me to different methodologies which would have not been possible otherwise. At the 'high grounds' stage of my journey, I gained a wider perspective of the field as much of the previous work came together in topics of inquiry such as scholarship in HE, changing contexts, transformational challenges and the deterioration of the status of the professorial position in South Africa.

This personal 'journey' made me realise that various important changes in emphases concerning HE studies and research took place over a period of thirty years. Particularly in terms of available literature, research expertise, policy studies and analysis, research and study leadership, the types of research conducted and a recognition of the field. Extending HE boundaries is complex, because the field of higher education studies and research is complex, not easy to de-code and are constantly shifting (Clegg 2007). What might therefore be needed are many more accounts of past and current journeys within the field of HE to extend theoretical and practical vocabularies and to pose new questions for inquiry.

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