WRITING THE HISTORY OF SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES: TRENDS AND THEMES

P. Maylam
Emeritus Professor of History
Rhodes University
Grahamstown, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This article examines the historiography of South African universities. In recent years a number of histories of individual universities have been published. The article traces the evolution of such historical works and discusses the different types of such histories that have appeared over the years. The main part of the article focuses on the most significant themes that have been addressed by the authors of these histories.

Keywords: South African universities, higher education history, differing ideas of universities

There is a vast literature on the history of South African universities, and it is growing all the time. In the past seven years six histories of such universities have been published. Four of these were occasioned by centenaries (Wotshela 2017; Manson 2018: Grundlingh and Nasson 2018; Phillips 2019), a hundred years after a significant re-structuring of the country's higher education sector between 1916 and 1918. These four appeared alongside two other histories (Guest 2015; 2017; 2018; Maylam 2017). Research into this field has recently been given further momentum by Saleem Badat who is overseeing a large project on the histories of South African universities, based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN).

This field of research is not just driven by an interest in history for its own sake. It has a wider significance in the context of current issues within the higher education sector, the most important of these being the transformation imperative. Addressing this requires an understanding of what needs to be transformed, which in turn necessitates an examination of the past: how have South African universities evolved over time, and what aspects of their past most need to be transformed?

This article builds on an earlier article on the historiography of South African universities by Bronwyn Strydom (Strydom 2016), and falls into three main parts. The first examines the evolution of historical writing on South African universities over a period of ninety or more years, identifying different phases in this historiography. In the second part there is an attempt to characterise and classify the different kinds of university history that have been published.

The third, most substantial section draws out the more salient themes that can be found in these texts, and considers the ways in which these themes have been handled by different authors. The coverage is not comprehensive as some universities have had little written about their history – something that Badat's project is aiming to correct. In this article greater attention is given to the histories of the four historically white English-medium universities than to others.

PERIODISING SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY HISTORIOGRAPHY

The beginnings of this historiography can be traced back to 1929 with the publication of two books: Eric Walker's *The South African College and the University of Cape Town* – a chronological study, in which the last chapter is devoted to the early years of the University of Cape Town (UCT) (Walker 1929). Second, there is Metrovich's short descriptive book on how higher education developed in South Africa from the founding of the University of the Cape of Good Hope (UCGH) in 1873 through to the 1920s, highlighting key developments in the years 1916 to 1918 (Metrovich 1929). A second phase runs from about 1960 to 1981. There appeared in the 1960s two histories of Fort Hare (Burrows, Kerr, and Matthews 1961; Kerr 1968), as well as histories of Stellenbosch (Thom 1966), and the University of Natal (Brookes 1966). Then came Currey's history of Rhodes (Currey 1970), and Boucher's history of the University of South Africa (UNISA) in the early 1970s (Boucher 1973), followed later in the decade by a collection of essays on UCT edited by Lennox-Short and Welsh (Lennox-Short and Welsh 1979). Two books that appeared in 1981 mark the end of this phase: E.G. Malherbe's autobiography which covers his time as principal of the University of Natal (Malherbe 1981), and a collection of essays on the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) (Oosthuizen et al. 1981).

All of these were produced by insiders closely associated with the institutions that they were writing about. And they can be characterised as bland, sanitised accounts which generally failed to situate their universities in the country's broader socio-political context. The books by Boucher and Currey did not include the word "apartheid" in their index. Universities are largely represented in these texts as ivory towers operating apart from the society in which they were embedded.

An important turning-point came in 1982 with the publication of the first volume of Bruce Murray's history of Wits University (Murray 1982). Although also an insider – teaching for many years in the university's history department – he can be seen as the first author to subject a university's history to critical examination. It is also a history based on much more thorough, in-depth research than had been the case with any previous study. While recognising Wits as a centre of liberalism, Murray also gives considerable attention to the ways in which the

university functioned in a segregated society during the 1920s and 1930s. He shows how Wits was slow to admit black students at a time when there was no legal bar preventing this, and when such students were eventually admitted it was only in small numbers (Murray 1982, 297–317). Murray set a trend – thereafter it would be difficult to characterise universities as entities that were somehow able to function apart from their broader social and political context.

There followed in 1993 the first volume of Howard Phillips' history of UCT, covering the years 1918 to 1948 (Phillips 1993). Like Murray's book, this is based on a thorough combing of UCT's records and provides a detailed account of UCT's early history that is both balanced and critical. Four years later Murray's second volume appeared, taking Wits' history from 1939 to 1959 (Murray 1997). The themes of race and segregation again feature prominently – he draws attention to Wits' practice of students being academically integrated, but segregated when it came to campus social life.

In the past twenty or so years several more histories of South African universities have been published, many of which are covered in Strydom's review article (Strydom 2016, 64–66). At least six further histories have appeared since this 2016 review article. Bill Guest's three volumes on the history of the University of Natal (as it then was in the period covered in his history) were published between 2015 and 2018 – 1269 pages of text covering the years 1909 to 2003, appearing in the space of four years – a remarkable achievement (Guest 2015; 2017; 2018). Luvuyo Wotshela's history of Fort Hare (Wotshela 2017), and Paul Maylam's history of Rhodes (Maylam 2017) came out in 2017. In the following year came the publication of Andrew Manson's history of UNISA (Manson 2018), and an edited collection of essays on the history of Stellenbosch (Grundlingh and Nasson 2018), followed in 2019 by Phillips' second UCT volume, going up to 1968 (Phillips 2019).

Many of these histories have been occasioned by anniversaries, and more particularly, centenaries. Murray's first volume appeared in the year of Wits' diamond jubilee (1982), and the second volume on the university's seventy-fifth anniversary (1997) (no substantial work appeared in 2022, Wits' centenary year). Phillips' first volume came out on UCT's seventy-fifth anniversary (1993), and the second close to its 2018 centenary (2019). A centenary history of Rhodes, by Richard Buckland and Thelma Neville, was published in 2004 (Buckland and Neville 2004). The histories of Fort Hare, Stellenbosch and UNISA were all occasioned by centenaries.

In some cases there are different claims as to when the centenary actually occurs. The Lennox-Short and Welsh collection of essays was published in 1979 to mark what was claimed to be UCT's 150th anniversary, implying that the university's history dated back to the 1829 founding of the South African College, out of which UCT grew, rather than to the actual

establishment of UCT in 1918. It is a similar story with UNISA – does it date back to its founding in 1918, or to the creation of the UCGH in 1873? The title of Andrew Manson's book, *UNISA 1873–2018,* implies the latter. Similarly, H. B. Thom's edited book, *Stellenbosch, 1866–1966*, implies that the university's history dates back to the founding of Victoria College, Stellenbosch's precursor.

SOME FEATURES OF UNIVERSITY HISTORIES

Strydom has drawn attention to a particular genre of university history – one that is commissioned by the university itself, often commemorative in character, perhaps celebratory. Moreover, nearly all the histories of South African universities have been written by insiders who have had what has often been a long-standing association with their university in one form or another. One such history not written by an insider is Manson's history of UNISA.

This tendency gives rise to questions. Are authors constrained, inclined to withhold criticism, if the work is commissioned? Can such histories be construed as a form of advertising, produced in such a way as to highlight the university's academic record and achievements with a view to attracting a new generation of able students? What are the advantages and disadvantages of insider accounts? It may well be that insiders have a keen understanding of their institution, as well as convenient access to archival and oral sources. At the same time their insider status may well give rise to a certain reticence, an unwillingness to be critical, or a fear of appearing biased.

Particular problems can arise when covering recent times. It could be difficult criticising living people who might have been associated, more or less, with the author; and also somewhat thorny to be praising particular individuals or departments while omitting others. Coverage of the recent history of universities has been sparse, with one exception. Of all the histories discussed in this article, Manson's history of UNISA provides the most detailed coverage of the post-apartheid era – coverage which makes up about 40 per cent of the book. It seems that being an outsider he felt able to be more direct and critical in his handling of this era, mentioning a number of individuals, both positively and negatively, and not being afraid to recount controversies and scandals.

The authors of other histories have been more wary and reticent about venturing into the post-apartheid era. Guest's third volume ends in 2003, prior to the merger which gave rise to the establishment of UKZN in 2004. Phillips' second volume goes up to 1968, although there may be two more volumes to follow. Murray's second volume ends in 1959.

There is, though, a significant body of literature on the post-apartheid higher education sector. Some analysts have examined the overall state of higher education with a particular

focus on transformation (Cloete et al. 2002; Badat 2009)). Much has been written about student activism, with the 2015–2017 "fallist" protests very much to the fore (Maylam 2020). There is an illuminating collection of essays on institutional culture at South African universities (Tabensky and Matthews 2015); and a critique, at once both light-hearted and cutting, of the managerialism, bureaucratisation and bean-counting that has come to beset universities (Tomaselli 2021).

There are, too, books written by or about university principals/vice-chancellors in the post-apartheid era – these can be characterised, in varying degrees, as critical, polemical, self-exculpatory, contentious. Chetty and Merrett's book on UKZN presents a sharp critique of Malegapuru Makgoba's term of office as principal (Chetty and Merrett 2014). Adam Habib has written a defence of his own handling of student "fallist" protests at Wits during his time as vice-chancellor (Habib 2019). Jonathan Jansen has reflected upon his own experience of the protests during his tenure as rector of the University of the Free State, while also drawing on the recollections and views of a number of other university heads (Jansen 2017). More recently David Benatar has offered his interpretation of turbulent events at UCT in recent years, suggesting that the previous vice-chancellor, Max Price, failed to stand firm against illegal, unethical behaviour on the part of some students and staff during the protests (Benatar 2021).

The various authors of university histories have structured their accounts in different ways, so that different aspects are given varying emphases. Murray has devoted more attention to the politics of university life than have most others. Phillips, Guest, and the editors of the Stellenbosch history have prioritised academic matters in their accounts – about a half of Phillips' two volumes focuses on faculties, departments, individual academics, research and teaching, and more than half in the case of the Stellenbosch history. In Manson's UNISA history all the chapters, except for one, centre on the tenure of individual principals. Wotshela's Fort Hare history contains the most about students, with almost half of the book comprising short profiles of distinguished graduates.

THE MAIN THEMES IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY HISTORIES

If the primary function of a university is to engage in teaching and research, it is not surprising that the academic enterprise should feature so prominently in university histories. But universities are not purely academic institutions, however much their executives and academic leaders might have over the years proclaimed them to be such. It goes without saying that universities cannot operate outside the political and socio-economic sphere. It is therefore necessary to go beyond the academic realm in examining some of the main themes to be found in the histories of South African universities.

A primary theme centres on the very idea of a university – its overall purpose and ethos – a theme that has long been salient in the broader, global history of universities. In medieval Europe, for instance, universities had a firm Christian basis, with theology being the dominant discipline that shaped all others. From the fifteenth century a more humanist ethos came into universities, with God being de-centred but not removed. The origins of the modern university are often traced back to early nineteenth century Germany, the key figure being Von Humboldt, who helped found the University of Berlin in 1811. He stressed the importance of both teaching and research, with a special emphasis on the study of culture, more particularly a national culture which was deemed crucial to a sense of nationhood (Readings 1996).

A number of different ideas and influences have shaped the overall ethos of South African universities over the past 120 or so years. In the early decades the British influence was particularly strong – this not surprising given that most of the first academics to teach in South Africa were graduates of British universities.

This British influence took various forms. First, there was the Oxbridge model, which Harold Silver has characterised as Oxbridge colonisation, with the importation of prevailing assumptions about higher education (Silver 2006, 131). In the case of Oxford in particular, the emphasis was upon teaching and learning and not on research, at least until the 1930s. It was also about character-building, training for leadership, instilling a sense of superiority among the elite. This partly explains why the study of classics was so important in the early years of South African universities. Classics had long been one of the foremost disciplines at Oxbridge, and an instrument of social exclusion that set the educated elite apart from those deemed their inferiors (Maylam 2017, 10–12).

A second British influence emanated from Scotland, where university education differed somewhat from the Oxbridge model. It was more democratic, favouring an open admissions policy that gave opportunities for all, departing from Oxbridge's elitism. It also gave much more attention to the natural sciences and medicine in the early years of the twentieth century than did Oxbridge. Perhaps the major Scottish influence on South African university education in the early years was the stress on a broad, diverse curriculum, rather than on any narrow specialisation (Boucher 1969, 99–102; Silver 2006, 125; Readings 1996, 34). Phillips specifically mentions how this Scottish emphasis on breadth influenced UCT's arts faculty in its early years, while also noting the number of Scots who filled academic posts at the time (Phillips 2019, 183).

A third British influence came to bear specifically on the University of Fort Hare – the utilisation of the university as an instrument to undertake a "civilising" mission. As Wotshela has put it, Fort Hare was founded "by the vestiges of missionary guidance," and tasked "to

civilise students so that they bore a resemblance to Englishmen" (Wotshela 2017, 26). This "civilising" function was evident in the university's curriculum which prioritised subjects such as theology, education and social work (Cloete et al. 2002, 4).

While one should be wary of essentialising the overall character of universities, it is possible to identify other ideas that have shaped their ethos in South Africa over the decades. One has been the idea of a "national" university – an idea akin to the Humboldtian notion. But in a past South African context the term "national" tended to be viewed in either racial or narrow ethnic terms. When a campus of the Transvaal University College was established in Pretoria (the future University of Pretoria) in 1908 it was viewed as an institution that would promote white unity, and a broad white South Africanism, in the aftermath of the South African War (Thumbran 2018, 41). This was a kind of racialised nationalism.

In the following decades, as Afrikaner nationalism gained momentum, the country's university system came to be determined by a narrower ethno-nationalism. In 1957 J.H. Viljoen, the minister of education, described the National Party's higher education policy: "The necessity of maintaining ethnic ties in university institutions follows from a conviction that the future leader during his training ... must remain in close touch with the habits, ways of life and views of his population group". This idea was affirmed in the 1974 report of the government's Van Wyk de Vries commission of enquiry into universities. The report rejected the idea of universities being "supranational" institutions, stating that "Nowhere in the world is the idea found that a university can thus dissociate itself from the national context" (Oosthuizen et al. 1981, 13, 16).

This was, of course, the higher education element in the greater apartheid project – a project that the white Afrikaans-medium institutions readily supported. Grundlingh notes that cultural nationalism infused Stellenbosch University in the early decades of its history, the institution coming to serve as the "cradle of Afrikanerdom," and operating as a kind of political training centre for Afrikaner nationalism, while at the same time trying to keep apace with international scientific and intellectual trends and developments (Grundlingh and Nasson 2018, 28–32). When the University of Pretoria (UP) was established in 1930 it at once became an Afrikaner institution, with Afrikaans becoming the sole medium of instruction (Thumbran 2018, 44). Later the university would become deeply involved in the greater apartheid project, with Afrikaner nationalists holding prominent executive and academic positions. UP alumni became key figures in National Party cabinets, while other graduates assumed roles as important state functionaries (Thumbran 2018, 48, 54–56).

Similarly, the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU) was established in the 1960s with the aim of enriching the Afrikaans language and culture and improving Afrikaner economic

prospects (Klee 2017). RAU's first rector, Gerrit Viljoen, issued an injunction to students at the university's founding: that they should honour the Afrikaner spirit and character; and that their membership of the Afrikaner community, together with the Protestant Christian ethic, should be their guiding values (Brink 2010, 191).

This notion of a "national" university was applied to universities for black students during the apartheid era. Each bantustan was to have its own university, while UDW was established for Indian students, and the University of the Western Cape (UWC) for coloureds. But the notion that these universities would somehow inculcate and promote specific indigenous ethnic cultures was entirely spurious as the management of these institutions was placed in the hands of apartheid apparatchiks, and the curriculum and teaching did very little to promote indigeneity. In the early years of the University of the North (Turfloop), for instance, in the 1960s and 1970s white academic staff outnumbered black academics by 3:1, and all senior positions were held by whites, most of whom were right-wing Afrikaners; and the Broederbond exercised considerable control over the institution at this time (Heffernan 2017a, 25–26). As Anne Heffernan notes, "This revealed an important disconnect between Turfloop's articulations of its own purpose," giving "the lie to the premise of an African university for Africans" (Heffernan 2017b, 199).

Running counter to the notion of a national university has been the idea of a liberal university – an idea generally assumed, albeit questionably, to characterise the four historically white English-medium universities. This liberal idea had key components: that universities should be autonomous, as a community of scholars pursuing and disseminating knowledge without government control or interference; that they should enjoy academic freedom, being free to admit qualified students regardless of race, and to decide who may teach and what may be taught.

During the apartheid era Wits and UCT were at the forefront in proclaiming the liberal idea, and in protesting against racial restrictions imposed on universities by the apartheid government. But questions have come to be asked about just how liberal these universities were at the time. Teresa Barnes has made this point forcefully in the case of UCT, arguing that "many of UCT's academic practices in the apartheid era were shot through with complicity" (Barnes 2019, 63). While she has a point, her case relies rather too heavily on her critique of the role of A.H. Murray, who was UCT's professor of philosophy from 1937 to 1970, as well as being an important intellectual supporter of apartheid, and a key, if somewhat clumsy, state witness at trials of political activists.

A further idea of a university was that associated specifically with UWC, which came to be known in the 1980s as the "university for the left". In 1987 Jakes Gerwel became vice-

chancellor and from the outset of his term of office declared UWC to be the intellectual home for the democratic left (Lalu 2012a, 40; Lalu 2012b, 109–19).

Another idea of a university has become manifest in recent decades across the world – although it is questionable whether it can be called an idea at all. It is the university characterised by growing bureaucratisation, managerialism, corporatisation and the commodification of knowledge. It is the university that proclaims its own excellence – so much so that this might be called, cynically, "the excellent university". But as Readings points out, no one actually knows what excellence is, and he further suggests that this appeal to excellence masks the fact that there is no longer any idea of the university at all (Readings 1996, 13–16, 19).

Underlying most of these ideas of a university has been some kind of political agenda, whether it be nationalism, liberalism, leftism, or neo-liberalism. Yet an examination of the histories of South African universities, especially the historically white English-medium institutions, reveals a general denial of any such agenda – a denial often expressed in the claim that universities are and should be apolitical. For instance, Phillips shows that at UCT in the early decades of the twentieth century there was a widely held view that universities should stay above contemporary politics (Phillips 1993, 129–30, 186). It was a similar story at Wits, where Raikes, who served as principal for twenty-six years up to 1954, warned students against political involvement. His successor, Sutton, even went so far as to claim that the Wits protest against the 1959 legislation imposing apartheid on universities was not political (Murray 1997, 117–118).

This notion that universities should be, and were, apolitical was utterly spurious. What it meant was that universities were generally content with the white supremacist *status quo.* In 1921 A. R. Lord, a highly regarded professor of philosophy at Rhodes, could describe the institution as one "where we have neither politics nor propaganda, but, we hope, are making good South Africans" (Maylam 2017, 49). The notion was not only spurious but impossible to sustain over time. From the 1960s universities became gradually more overtly and directly involved in politics as numerous academic staff and students, at universities other than the white Afrikaans-medium institutions, voiced their opposition to apartheid, often in the face of hostility from within their institutions.

Another theme that arises in the historiography is closely related to the idea of a university – one that concerns relations between the university and the state, and the related issue of race. This was a contentious issue for the white English-medium universities and the black universities during the apartheid era. While the latter fell under tight state control, albeit control that was resisted by students, the former tended to have a more ambivalent, equivocal

relationship with the apartheid state and its racist policies.

Before the National Party assumed power in 1948 universities were generally not bound by racially restrictive laws, but the four white English-medium universities chose, on their own accord and in varying degrees, to practise racial segregation. Wits, for instance, gradually started to admit black students from the 1940s, albeit in small numbers. While practising academic integration, the university also followed a policy of social segregation. Black students were excluded from social and sporting events, and the Wits library had a separate black reading room. B. W. Vilakazi was appointed as a language assistant in the Department of Bantu Studies in 1933, later obtaining a doctorate in the 1940s, but was never given a full lectureship. Murray states that before World War Two Wits' professional faculties "serviced rather than challenged the system of white supremacy in South Africa" (Murray 1982, 94, 298–299, 312–313; 1997, 47–52).

Phillips tells a similar story in the case of UCT, while Barnes, as already stated, has highlighted UCT's complicity with apartheid. As Phillips shows, UCT admitted only a small number of coloured and Indian students before 1940. And, like Wits, UCT practised social segregation, banning mixed dances, providing separate toilets in the library, among other restrictions (Phillips 1993, 114, 192–193; 2019, 268–270).

Of the four white English-medium universities the University of Natal (as it then was) and Rhodes were undoubtedly the most conservative and compliant in adhering to segregationist and apartheid policies and practices. Natal refused to admit black students until the 1930s. It did eventually change its stance somewhat, admitting black students from 1936, but only according to the strict principle of academic segregation, offering separate classes off-campus at weekends. Similarly, a separate medical school for black students was established in Durban in 1951. E. G. Malherbe, the university's principal from 1945 to 1965, has sometimes been lauded as a liberal, but he was a firm proponent of academic segregation (Guest 2015, 62, 123, 178–184, 225–232).

Rhodes was even more complicit. It refused to admit any black students until the late 1940s, and then only admitting students into postgraduate courses not offered at Fort Hare, but by 1959 only about five such students had been admitted. Rhodes' management did lead a protest against the 1959 legislation, but as Bruce Murray put it, defending university autonomy "enabled Rhodes University to mount a fervent campaign in support of its right to decide for itself to exclude blacks". What made Rhodes' record even worse was its award of honorary doctorates to prominent figures in the apartheid state: first, in 1954, to the minister of education, J.H. Viljoen, a leading proponent of apartheid education; and then, in 1962, to the state president, C.R. Swart, who in his earlier capacity as minister of justice had presided over the

growing repression of opposition organisations in the 1950s (Maylam 2017, 54–56, 131, 136, 138–139).

This relationship between universities and the state has been closely connected to the matter of university financing – another theme covered in these histories. The Stellenbosch history devotes a whole chapter to finance (Calitz 2018, 61–91). The key issue has been the dependence of universities on their government subsidy, which may partly explain the tendency of university managements over the years to be cautious, or compliant, or complicit, when it came to political matters during the apartheid era.

Phillips notes that a new funding formula, introduced in 1954, increased UCT's state subsidy to just over 60 per cent of the university's income, compared to the pre-1948 level of 40–50 per cent (Phillips 2019, 260). The state subsidy for universities remained relatively high through the apartheid era – for instance, between 1979 and 1985 Rhodes derived 75–80 per cent of its income from the subsidy (Maylam 2017, 353). Was this a government strategy to prevent universities stepping out of line? There were times when the government threatened to reduce the subsidy for universities as they increasingly became sites of anti-apartheid protest. In the post-apartheid era the proportion of university income derived from the subsidy has been drastically reduced in real terms, thereby causing a corresponding escalation in student fees – an issue which in part gave rise to widespread student protests from 2015.

How have historians covered the main business of universities – teaching and research? As already stated, some have devoted most of their coverage to the greater academic project. But a common theme does emerge from most of these histories – that in their early decades South African universities were essentially undergraduate teaching institutions that only developed a research culture later in the twentieth century.

This emphasis on teaching was almost certainly due to the Oxbridge influence, as well as to a lack of research capacity in the early decades of the twentieth century. This was very much the case at Rhodes where an undergraduate education was designed to prepare students for service in administration, business, and the professions (Maylam 2017, 10–12). Murray notes that in 1939 Wits was mainly an undergraduate university with a particular focus on training for the professions (Murray 1982, 4). It was the same at UCT, where before 1948 teaching was prioritised – teaching that largely took the form of tradition-bound Oxbridge-style lectures, there being minimal interaction between lecturers and students until the introduction of tutorials in the early 1950s (Phillips 1993, 142–143; 2019, 41–42). As late as the 1960s H.B. Thom, Stellenbosch's principal, claimed that a major purpose of the university was character-building and the nurturing of young Afrikaners (Grundlingh and Nasson 2018, 44).

How successful was this teaching? A common picture emerges of students performing

poorly at the white English-medium universities in the mid-twentieth century. This was probably due to the poor teaching at many schools, where the practice of spoon-feeding and cramming as a means toward passing exams meant that many students arrived at university ill-equipped to manage higher levels of study. Failure rates were high. At the University of Natal in the early 1950s the rate was about 50 per cent (Guest 2017, 87). At UCT about 45 per cent of first-year students failed in 1965 (Phillips 2019, 43–44). Senior figures at Rhodes in the 1950s bemoaned the low academic standards – students gained prestige in the social and sporting spheres, while those who studied hard were considered odd by their peers (Maylam 2017, 109).

The slow shift toward research came quite late. In 1938 the government established the National Research Council (Murray 1982, 281). At UCT the establishment of a research committee in 1944 provided some initial momentum – in the 1960s there was a 117 per cent increase in the number of postgraduate degrees, compared to the 1950s (Phillips 2019, 40). During the first few decades of Rhodes' history research was actually discouraged if it interfered with teaching, but a standing research committee was established in 1943. A research culture at the university only began to develop in the 1960s (Maylam 2017, 68, 110, 116). Stellenbosch seems to have developed as a research institution from the early 1990s (Calitz 2018, 87).

In more recent decades this shift towards research has gained significant momentum, but with mixed results. The shift has been in part precipitated by the government's subsidy formula which rewards a university's research outputs in the form of publications and postgraduate degrees. It is a formula that rewards quantity more than quality, giving rise to the publication of many mediocre articles which might end up being read by hardly anybody. It has also had the effect of undermining the teaching function, as the top academics tend to devote their attention to research and postgraduate supervision, leaving undergraduate teaching to junior or casual staff – an undesirable trend.

In recent discourses around university transformation the theme of institutional culture has come to the fore – a theme not given much coverage in the histories of South African universities. It is, though, possible to glean from these histories some elements of student culture and the ways in which it has changed over time.

For much of the first half of the twentieth century white student culture could be characterised as prim, proper and genteel, with occasional touches of frivolity and rowdiness. It was a culture that revolved around societies – debating and drama the most prominent – sport, dancing and rag. Departures from this seeming decorum came in the form of pranks and inter-house raids; and for decades much controversy surrounded the ongoing, repugnant practice of

initiation that befell new students. Student culture was generally constrained by enduring Victorian codes of behaviour and accompanying restrictive rules and dress codes, imposed by university authorities according to the *in loco parentis* principle (Phillips 1993, 193–199; Guest 2015, 95–98; Maylam 2017, 28–31).

This culture began to shift from the 1960s, perhaps influenced by the more permissive trends emanating from Europe and the US. At Rhodes, for instance, students began to protest against the restrictive residence rules and dress codes, giving rise to a civil disobedience campaign in 1971 (Maylam 2017, 161–168). But even as late as the 1970s an air of complacency to some extent still pervaded white student culture. As one former UCT student leader remarked in the late 1970s, many white students saw university life as something of a picnic: "From the protected environment of home and a fashionable school," he wrote, "we move straight to the isolated and even cossetted sanctuary of a white university" (Harrison 1979, 170–171).

From the 1980s student culture shifted in more significant ways. The racial demography of the historically white universities changed; restrictive rules – on residence intervisiting, for instance – were relaxed; old dress codes disappeared so that students could just about wear what they liked; issues relating to gender and sexual orientation came to be discussed openly. More recently the broad theme of institutional culture has come to the fore – there being a widely held view that in many South African universities this culture remains eurocentric and amounts to an expression of whiteness, thus being alien to the black majority of students at these institutions (Tabensky and Matthews 2015).

Just as student social culture has shifted over the decades so has student political culture. The early twentieth century was characterised by political acquiescence and deference to authority. The National Union of Students (NUSAS) was founded in 1924 and encouraged some interest in political matters, but in 1934 it resolved not to admit Fort Hare into the organisation – it was later admitted in the 1940s (Murray 1982, 340–341). Before 1940 the two main issues taken up by the Wits SRC were initiation and the restriction on Sunday sport (Murray 1982, 149–150, 348–351). In the 1940s the vast majority of Rhodes students, all white, tended towards conservatism or apathy (Maylam 2017, 73).

A turning-point came in the late 1960s with the beginnings of more confrontational forms of protest at some white universities – although it must be recognised that at Fort Hare more active, assertive forms of protest dated back to at least the 1940s (Massey 2010; Wotshela 2017, 28). There may have been some inspiration and boldness derived from the 1968 French student revolt which even went so far as to threaten the government's hold on power. This was also the year in which the black consciousness South African Students' Organisation (SASO) was

founded under the leadership of Steve Biko, giving rise to a broader political movement which would have far-reaching consequences in the country's political arena (Badat 1999).

In South Africa the first ever instance of militant protest at a white university occurred at UCT in 1968 when students engaged in a sit-in at the main administration building following the UCT council's decision not to appoint Archie Mafeje to a position in the anthropology department – the council having backed down in the face of government objections to the appointment of a black academic (Phillips 2019, 318–324). There was a similar case at Rhodes the following year when a small number of students joined together in a sit-in at the council chamber in protest against council's refusal to appoint Basil Moore, a left-leaning white theologian, to a temporary lectureship. Unlike the Mafeje case, this was an entirely voluntary decision made by the council without any government intervention (Maylam 2017, 151–155).

These events, and others, marked the onset of a period of escalating student militancy at a number of universities – a phase which lasted through to the mid-1990s. From the late 1960s the University of the North was a major centre of student activism and protest. The inaugural conference of SASO, founded on black consciousness principles, was held at the university in July 1969. Thereafter lecture boycotts became commonplace, and outspoken student leaders, like Onkgopotse Abraham Tiro, Frank Chikane, Cyril Ramaphosa, Mosioua Lekota, came to the fore. In the 1980s there were violent confrontations between students and police on campus. In June 1986 the university was closed, with 200 students being detained (Heffernan 2017a, 41–51, 60–61, 87–97, 179–183). There then followed a rather strange lull in student politics – two decades during which student activism was either isolated or sporadic, and generally somewhat subdued. This period of relative quiescence ended quite abruptly in 2015 when student protest revived in dramatic ways.

One theme that has not been given much significant attention is that of gender – a topic for further research. There are references to gender issues in the various histories, but the theme is not brought to the fore. Two aspects are given mention in some histories – the first being the discrimination against women academics in the early decades of the twentieth century. At a number of universities married women could not hold permanent academic post. At Wits Margaret Hodgson was forced to resign from her history post in 1934 following her marriage to William Ballinger. It was not until 1968 that married women could take up permanent academic posts at Wits (Murray 1982, 329–334; Murray 1997, 160). Women were also subjected to discriminatory salary scales at different universities at various times, and forced to retire at the age of fifty-five, five years earlier than men (Phillips 1993, 142; Maylam 2017, 67–68; Manson 2018, 117–118).

The second aspect to gain some coverage has been the sexism that long pervaded student

culture. As Phillips notes, in the 1950s "[m]asculinity suffused almost every aspect of student life". Men students dominated SRCs, student societies and newspapers, while women served as drum majorettes or appeared in beauty contests. In 1961 the UCT student newspaper carried a picture of the "Girl of the Week" (Phillips 2019, 279–280). Similarly, as late as 1972 the Rhodes student newspaper would display a picture of the "Bird of the Week" (Maylam 2017, 172). It is difficult to determine the extent of sexual harassment and abuse at universities in the early decades of their history, but it is well-known that these have become major issues on campuses across the country in recent decades.

The architecture and spatial geography of universities is another theme that has been little developed. There is Teresa Barnes' characterisation of UCT "in its aloof location, with its centralised, neo-classical form and, on its central axis, its patron Cecil John Rhodes in bronze glowering northward, across Africa [no more!], as representative of British colonial power" (Barnes 2019, 135).

There are a few interesting essays on South African university architecture. Noeleen Murray has presented a probing analysis of UWC's changing architecture. There were at the outset the dreary, functionalist designs, following the 1960s Public Works Department's modernist style – the original "bush college design" – grey and soulless. Then in the 1980s and 1990s there was a shift toward democratic design principles, with new buildings constructed to disrupt the uniformity of the older style – one example being the new student union, designed to create "a convivial, communal public space" (Murray 2012, 64–80).

Roger Fisher demonstrates how shifts in architectural styles could run parallel to political and cultural change. In its first two decades, from 1908, the architecture of the Pretoria campus of the Transvaal University College displayed a British colonial character, following the style of Herbert Baker. When it became UP from 1930, buildings came to be designed by Afrikaner architects concerned to project Afrikaner culture. The university library, for instance, with its grey, granite exterior, foreshadowed the Voortrekker Monument (Fisher 1998, 224–225).

Basil Brink's article on buildings at UNISA and UP shows how the National Party government used architecture to express political power and to display the expertise of apartheid's state apparatus. The new UNISA building, opened in 1972 and likened to a sewing machine, was supposed, in its brutalist, modernist form, to proclaim the country's state-of-the-art design and construction technologies, while being a symbol of progress, prosperity and superiority (Brink 2012, 4, 17–20).

Closely related to architecture is the visual culture of universities, a theme addressed directly by Brenda Schmahmann (Schmahmann 2013), but one that has been given little coverage in university histories. It requires more attention, given that it became an issue during

the recent student protests, especially at UCT. This visual culture takes various forms – art works, symbols, logos, regalia, among them – and is often viewed as overly representing a colonial or western heritage, being alien to many members of university communities.

Another theme little considered in these histories is that of community engagement. In recent years South African universities have come to give more attention to this responsibility as they try to shake off their "ivory tower" image. Of all the historians considered here Phillips provides the most coverage of this topic, highlighting UCT's record in this regard – extra-mural studies, its summer school, student-run clinics and social welfare centres in black communities, and its involvement in Kirstenbosch garden (Phillips 1993, 161–170; 2019, 240–253). Some coverage of this theme is also to be found in Guest's history, with adult education having been one of the University of Natal's strengths (Guest 2017, 77–80; 2018, 444–451).

By way of contrast Janeke Thumbran shows how UP's departments of sociology and social work from the 1930s played a dual political and social role in their engagement with the coloured community at Eersterust. On the one hand, the sociology department – headed by Geoffrey Cronje, a leading proponent of the racial ideology that underpinned apartheid – used Eersterust as a research site in its effort to constitute coloureds as a race group that was markedly distinct from whites. On the other hand, the social work department would later make more direct interventions in Eersterust, with an emphasis on community work, child welfare and combating alcoholism (Thumbran 2018, 136–157, 172–177).

My last theme to be considered is that of conflict management. Readings has made the point that a university is presumed to serve as a model for a rational, harmonious community in which the sane, measured pursuit of learning and scholarship is the norm. But, he says, universities are not good models at all, as few communities are more petty and vicious than university departments (Readings 1996, 180–181). This point is well made as the discord and strife that can beset departments is all too familiar – ideological disputes that become personalised; clashing egos; bitter competition for resources, posts, promotion, recognition; conflicts over inequitable teaching loads; authoritarian heads of department.

Some conflicts can engulf the whole university, creating a crisis for the institution. Examples of such cases can be found in some of these histories and other texts: the Stibbe affair at Wits in 1922 (Murray 1982, 76–89); at UCT the controversy around the non-appointment of Mafeje in 1968, and later, in the 1990s, the wrangling surrounding Mahmood Mamdani and the African Studies curriculum; at Rhodes the Field case in the 1940s, and the crisis surrounding the dismissal of Robert Shell in the late 1990s (Maylam 2017, 81–100, 259–260). At the University of Natal/UKZN there were the controversies surrounding two principals, Owen Horwood in the late 1960s (Guest 2017, 370–383), and Malegapuru Makgoba in the early 2000s

(Chetty and Merrett 2014).

These crises were poorly handled – inevitably so in cases where the principals themselves were playing questionable roles in the controversies. These episodes, and the regularity of interpersonal conflicts and disputes within departments, do raise questions about the nature of university governance and about the very idea of a university itself. One such question might be, to what extent does the current drift towards the corporatisation and bureaucratisation of universities, the commodification of knowledge and scholarship, the ranking of universities, departments and individual academics according to their outputs and supposed performance, pose a threat to the integrity of academic endeavours and create the likelihood of more and more university crises?

REFERENCES

Badat, S. 1999. *Black Student Politics, Higher Education and Apartheid: From SASO to SANSCO, 1968–1990.* Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.

Badat, S. 2009. "Theorising institutional change: Post-1994 South African higher education." *Studies in Higher Education* 34(4): 455–467.

Barnes, Teresa. 2019. *Uprooting University Apartheid in South Africa.* London and New York: Routledge.

Benatar, David. 2021. *The Fall of the University of Cape Town.* Politicsweb Publishing.

Boucher, M. 1969. "Some Observations upon the Influence of Scotland in South African University Education." *Historia* 14(2).

Boucher, M. 1973. *Spes in Arduis: A History of the University of South Africa.* Pretoria: University of South Africa.

Brink, Basil. 2012. "Built with sand, rock and Broederbond: Brian Sandrock's buildings for the University of Pretoria and the University of South Africa." *South African Journal of Art History* 27(3): 1–27.

Brink, E. 2010. *University of Johannesburg: The University for a New Generation.* Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg.

Brookes, E. H. 1966. *A History of the University of Natal.* Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.

Buckland, Richard and Thelma Neville. 2004. *A Story of Rhodes: Rhodes University 1904–2004.* Braamfontein: Macmillan.

Burrows, H. R., Alexander Kerr, and Z. K. Matthews. 1961. *A Short Pictorial History of the University College of Fort Hare, 1916–1959.* Lovedale: Lovedale Press.

Calitz, E. 2018. "Finance over a Hundred Years." In *Stellenbosch University, 100, 1918–2018,* edited by A. Grundlingh et al., 61–91. Stellenbosch.

Chetty, N. and C. Merrett. 2014. *The Struggle for the Soul of a South African University.* Pietermaritzburg.

Cloete, N., P. Maassen, R. Fehnel, Teboho Moja, T. Gibbon, and H. Perold. (Ed.). 2002. *Transformation in Higher Education: Global Pressures and Local Realities in South Africa.* Lansdowne: Juta.

Currey, R. F. 1970. *Rhodes University, 1904–1970: A Chronicle.* Grahamstown: Rhodes University.

Fisher, Roger. 1998. "The native heart: The architecture of the University of Pretoria campus." In *Blank Architecture, apartheid and after*, edited by H. Judin and I. Vladivlasic, 220–235. Cape Town: David Philip. http://hdl.handle.net/2263/7348.

Grundlingh, A. and B. Nasson. 2018. "SU and the South African Politics of Apartheid: Context and Change." In *Stellenbosch University, 100, 1918–2019,* edited by A. Grundlingh et al., 41–60. Stellenbosch.

Grundlingh, A. et al. (Ed.). 2018. *Stellenbosch University, 100, 1918–2018.* Stellenbosch.

Guest, Bill. 2015. *Stella Aurorae: The History of a South African University: Volume 1: Natal University College (1909–1949).* Pietermaritzburg: Natal Society Foundation.

Guest, Bill. 2017. *Stella Aurorae: The History of a South African University: Volume 2: The University of Natal (1949–1976).* Pietermaritzburg: Natal Society Foundation.

Guest, Bill. 2018. *Stella Aurorae: The History of a South African University: Volume 3: The University of Natal (1976–2003).* Pietermaritzburg: Natal Society Foundation.

Habib, Adam. 2019. *Rebels and Rage: Reflecting on #FeesMustFall.* Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball.

Harrison, H. 1979. "Student life in the seventies." In *UCT at 150: Reflections,* edited by A. Lennox-Short and D. Welsh, 169–172. Cape Town: David Philip.

Heffernan, Anne. 2017a. *Limpopo's Legacy: Student Politics and Democracy in South Africa.* Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Heffernan, Anne. 2017b. "The University of the North and Building the Bantustans, 1959–1977." *South African Historical Journal* 69(2): 195–214.

Jansen, Jonathan. 2017. *As by Fire: The End of the South African University.* Cape Town: Tafelberg.

Kerr, A. 1968. *Fort Hare, 1915–1948: The Evolution of an African College.* London: Hurst.

Klee, J. N. 2017. "The Establishment of the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU), 1955–1975". Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, North-West University.

Lalu, P. 2012a. "Campus: A Discourse on the grounds of an apartheid university." In *Becoming UWC: Reflections, Pathways and Unmaking Apartheid's Legacy,* edited by P. Lalu and N. Murray, 36–61. Bellville: Centre for Humanities Research.

Lalu, P. 2012b. "Constituting community at the intellectual home of the left." In *Becoming UWC: Reflections, Pathways and Unmaking Apartheid's Legacy,* edited by P. Lalu and N. Murray, 108–119. Bellville: Centre for Humanities Research.

Lennox-Short, A. and D. Welsh. (Ed.). 1979. *UCT at 150: Reflections.* Cape Town: David Philip.

Malherbe, E. G. 1981. *Never a Dull Moment.* Cape Town: Howard Timmins.

Manson, Andrew. 2018. *UNISA 1873–2018: The Making of a Distance Learning University.* Pretoria: UNISA Press.

Massey, D. 2010. *Under Protest: The Rise of Student Resistance at the University of Fort Hare.* Pretoria: UNISA Press.

Maylam, Paul. 2017. *Rhodes University, 1904–2016: An Intellectual, Political and Cultural History.* Grahamstown: Institute of Social and Economic Research.

Maylam, Paul. 2020. "Student 'Fallism' in South Africa, 2015–16: Some Diverging Analyses." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 46(6): 1237–1247.

Metrovich, F. C. 1929. *The Development of Higher Education in South Africa 1873–1927.* Cape Town: Maskew Miller.

Murray, B. K. 1982. *Wits, the Early Years: A History of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and its Precursors, 1896–1939.* Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand Press.

Murray, B. K. 1997. *Wits, the "Open" Years: A History of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1939–1959.* Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand Press.

Murray, N. 2012. "A campus apart." In *Becoming UWC: Reflections, Pathways and Unmaking Apartheid's Legacy,* edited by P. Lalu and N. Murray, 62–87. Bellville: Centre for Humanities

Research.

Oosthuizen, G. C., A. A. Clifford-Vaughan, A. L. Behr, and G. A. Rauche. (Ed.). 1981. *Challenge to a South African University: The University of Durban-Westville.* Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Phillips, Howard. 1993. *The University of Cape Town, 1918–1948: The Formative Years.* Cape Town: University of Cape Town.

Phillips, Howard. 2019. *UCT Under Apartheid: From Onset to Sit-in, 1948–1968.* Auckland Park: Fanele.

Readings, Bill. 1996. *The University in Ruins.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Schmahmann, Brenda. 2013. *Picturing Change: Curating Visual Culture at Post-Apartheid Universities.* Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Silver, H. 2006. "'Things Change but Names Remain the Same': Higher Education Historiography 1975–2000." *History of Education* 35(1): 121–140.

Strydom, Bronwyn. 2016. "South African University history: A historiographical overview." *African Historical Review* 48(1): 56–82.

Tabensky, P. and S. Matthews. (Ed.). 2015. *Being at Home: Race, Institutional Culture and Transformation at South African Higher Educational Institutions.* Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

Thom, H. B. (Ed.). 1966. *Stellenbosch, 1866–1966.* Cape Town: Nasionale Boekhandel.

Thumbran, Janeke. 2018. "The 'Coloured Question' and the University of Pretoria: Separate Development, Trusteeship and Self-Reliance, 1933–2012." Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota.

Tomaselli, Keyan. 2021. *Contemporary Campus Life: Transformation, Manic Managerialism and Academentia.* Cape Town: BestRed.

Walker, Eric. 1929. *The South African College and the University of Cape Town, 1829–1929.* Cape Town: Cape Times.

Wotshela, Luvuyo. 2017. *Fort Hare: From Garrison to Bastion of Learning, 1916–2016.* Sandton: KMM Review Publishing, and University of Fort Hare.