

It's about more than just widget making

Belinda Bozzoli, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) at the University of the Witwatersrand, talks to **Richard Pithouse**

The large windows of Belinda Bozzoli's 10th floor office open on to a panoramic sweep of downtown Johannesburg. This is no dreaming spire. Sitting up above the crackling urban energy of this infamously divided city it seems unsurprising that her most recent book, *Theatres of Struggle and the End of Apartheid*—a history of the 1986 Alexandra Rebellion—deals with an event so near in time and place. Her earlier work is not all about Johannesburg, but it's all very much engaged with the urgent complexities of South Africa. Her 1991 study, *Women of Phokeng*, researched with Mmantho Nkotsoe, is considered essential reading in the South African historiography dealing with black women's experiences of apartheid. Her 1983 paper *Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies* has become an essential critique of Marxism's failure to comprehend the full significance of gender.

Deputy vice-chancellors of research are not always well-regarded researchers themselves, but Wits has a tradition of appointing top researchers to the post. Before taking up this position in 2003, Bozzoli had held visiting fellowships at Yale, Cambridge, Oxford and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. But the reputation which opened these doors to her was largely formed by her contribution to the Wits History Workshop which, from its beginnings in 1977, was always about a critical engagement with the underside of the South African experience.

Although Bozzoli is clear that 'Being a deputy vice-chancellor kills off your research' she is equally emphatic that 'if you love research this is a wonderful job, because you spend all day with people who are passionate about research. In many administrative positions you have to deal with the people who are unhappy and unsuccessful at the university but in research you deal with people who are passionate about their work.' Bozzoli sees her role in terms of enabling others to take their work forward by accessing resources and networks, and is infectiously excited about the opportunity that her position

gives her to learn something about a wide range of disciplines.

She shares the general view that Wits went through a rough period during the nineties, and ascribes this to the university's location in the cut and thrust of Johannesburg. 'Wits has always been at the so-called 'bleeding edge' of change and development in South Africa. Everything that happens in South Africa happens here first. Wits was a microcosm of what was happening in South Africa in the 1990s.' But, with many others, she takes the view that Wits has reasserted its claim to being one of the best universities in the country: 'I'm very pleased to say that Wits is now a completely different place to what it was ten to fifteen years ago. It's turned around—it is alive with ideas, and full of contention and arguments.' In her reading Wits has been able to turn its location 'in the centre of Johannesburg, at the economic heart of Africa' to its advantage.

The very idea of research management is anathema to some, who see it as the subordination of a creative and critical enterprise to bureaucracies. Bozzoli does not discount quantitative techniques of research assessment, and indeed uses them herself, but stresses that 'as a researcher I know they are not what research at its best is about. It is really about doing the right research well.' And she is clear, very clear, that while applied research projects are essential, research as a whole should not be reduced to 'widget making'.

There are institutions where research management takes the form of bullying academics into productivity without much regard for the content or value of the work being done. But Bozzoli has a clear idea as to what she aims to produce—and that is collaborative work on areas of pre-existing interdisciplinary strength. 'I've spent the last four years developing areas of expertise into research thrusts, and I want each of these to become a major cross-disciplinary institute. Something like environmental science, for example, will include physicists, chemists, sociologists, and biologists. We've already created two overarching institutes at Wits



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—the Institute for Human Evolution and the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research—and we are busy creating more in molecular biosciences, mining and development.'

For her the real key to realising this vision is to generate an enabling environment for researchers, while throwing the net for talent and expertise as wide as possible. 'You can't have good research without good researchers. The way to attract really excellent people is to have an environment in which they can flourish. It's working here. We have recruited a lot of really good people—Germans, Chinese, Zimbabweans, Americans, and of course, people from all over Africa. Our staff is looking very international at the moment. We're very pleased with that—it brings new ideas into a stale system. To me the word university implies universalism.'

When asked how to ensure that research remains a critical project that is independent of power and money, she laughs and replies that 'Wits is the most critical place in the world! The academics here are critical of us, they are critical of each other, they are critical of power, and they are critical of government. People look at Wits and think that there is something wrong because everyone is always arguing with everyone else, but that's how it should be—academics should be contentious people. This is Wits at its best.'

In some circles there's less optimism about recent developments at the National Research Foundation (NRF)—where Bozzoli took over as chair of the board a year ago—than there is about Wits. Bozzoli is a staunch defender of the foundation, arguing that 'it is an outstanding institution. Many African countries, by contrast, have no national funding body—

and it does allow and support independent research.' She is also particularly enthused about how both free-standing grants to students and the research chairs are enabling people to work under their own direction; and how centres of excellence are enabling productive synergies across universities.

But she does concede that communication between the institution and the academics whose work depends on its support has not been ideal of late. 'The new strategic plan was agreed to last year. Then the last President left suddenly. There was a lot of upheaval and disruption, and communication to the research community should have come out earlier. Suddenly researchers received responses from the NRF that they were unused to, and of course that caused some panic.'

She's clear that the NRF is run by its management and not by its board. She emphasises that her role is not to run the institution, and does not extend beyond ensuring proper governance, good strategic planning and broad oversight over the effective implementation of policies agreed to jointly by the board and management.

A number of people have expressed concerns about the foundation's new 'Blue Skies' programme. Bozzoli says that the NRF is willing to take up their concerns at the next board meeting and is committed to 'bringing in experts in systems of peer review to ensure that the way that the NRF reviews its applications is of an international standard.'

But she remains excited about the programme and sees it as an important

alternative to a purely instrumental conception of research: 'I don't think that the state is as supportive of the pure academic project as they could be. The idea that the purpose of research is to produce widgets is very prominent in South Africa. We do need instrumental research, but we also have to ask how we are to live in the world. And maybe that's the virtue of this programme. A philosopher could be supported in doing research on the nature of thought. We need to find answers for practical questions but we are not all technicians—we also need to address questions about what humanity is about.'

While many would welcome this unusual openness to theoretical abstraction, others would caution that in many of the social sciences South African academics largely continue to constrain the value of their work by uncritically importing inappropriate theory from the north. Bozzoli has some sympathy for this line of critique. But she suggests that the Blue Skies programme marks a willingness to take calculated risks on prospects for innovation. In her view this offers the possibility of nurturing the kind of independent innovation that we will require to confront our particular problems.

'A good example is development studies. There is a Western tradition of development studies which I think that we depend on. Our state echoes it daily, often in a fairly dated form. Have we really developed our own development studies tradition? I don't think that we have. I do think that we should be looking at the development theory that we have, and asking

ourselves what it means. We as humanities people haven't provided society with some good development studies instruments with which it can seriously engage. In some areas we really are deficient.'

Whether she's talking about Wits or the NRF, Bozzoli is firmly optimistic. But she does acknowledge that universities and their capacity for innovative and valuable research are fragile. She is clear that 'while money is very helpful, it is not all. To attribute all the problems we have in South African research to a lack of money is naïve, important as funding is. It is also about institutional strength and innovation—you are not going to develop a society without strong and imaginatively constructed institutions.' She stresses the difference between those who seek to administer academic work and those who seek to nurture the free pursuit of ideas, and concludes that 'universities are quite vulnerable in South Africa.'

With regard to her own pursuit of free ideas Bozzoli is uncertain about the trajectory of her next research project. She was, she explains, more than a little burnt out after the intense and sustained engagement with the Alexandra Rebellion that resulted in her most recent book. She has been thinking about working on sexual violence, and has begun the process of collecting material, but she remains unsure about whether or not to enter such 'a painful area', so is 'pondering what to do next.'

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