

A Social Realist Perspective in Urban Planning Curriculum Transformation for Sustainability Mainstreaming: Learning From the University of Johannesburg

Trynos Gumbo

Department of Urban and Regional Planning and Head of the School of Civil Engineering and the Built Environment, Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment; University of Johannesburg, South Africa

tgumbo@uj.ac.za

Abstract: Transforming higher education curricula has gained traction in the past few decades, particularly in post-colonial Africa. The discipline of urban planning has not been spared especially in the context of South Africa. Numerous efforts have been exerted to infuse several aspects that among others include locally contextualized curriculum, the fourth industrial revolution tenets and sustainable development principles. However, the extent to which sustainability values have been successfully mainstreamed to ensure transformative practices that promote students' access and success remains an uncharted territory. Consequently, in this paper, I explored the experiences of the urban planning department at the University of Johannesburg in transforming its curricula. In the paper, literature on curriculum development and reform in South African Higher Education was distilled. I adopted a case study research design and a qualitative research approach to gather qualitative data through the application of positionality and documents analyses to reveal the extent to which social realism perspectives have shaped curriculum transformation in the departmental programme development and reviews. The results reveal that curriculum development and reviews within department of urban and regional planning is a complex and messy reality that is shaped by Margeret Archer's structural, cultural and agential emergent powers and properties. This is very evident within the Master in Sustainable Urban Planning and Development (MSUPD), an interdisciplinary programme which enables and supports lifelong and blended learning in sustainable development education. It trains a variety of professionals who find solutions to complex urban sustainability challenges. In conclusion, I recommend that concerted efforts are need to strengthen and infuse sustainability orientations and building blocks of sustainability education that include societal, institutional, environmental and economic imperatives.

Keywords: Curriculum, Transformation, Urban planning, Sustainability, University of Johannesburg

1. Introduction

Globally, higher education has transformed in many ways over the past decades. The changes have been ushered in by shifting social, economic and political organisational systems such as the promotion of the free market system worldwide which has been at the heart of the wide-ranging adjustments in higher education. Globalisation and specifically neo-liberalism has ushered consumerism attributes into higher education, resulting in high numbers of paying students being enrolled to support the competitiveness of institutions. Consequently, higher educational institutions have increasingly been losing their social role as they assume new and diversified roles, mainly linked to providing services which are informed and shaped by market forces. Higher education has gone through massive transformation and adjustments in response to both local and international pressures and demands (CHE, 2016). This was in response to the partial acceptance and enrolment of black students who were believed to have many academic problems (Boughey, 2002). Since the dawn of the democratic dispensation in 1994 in the country, the higher education landscape has been inundated by several contextual factors and challenges ((SADHET 2014; Badat, 2019). Amongst these has been an urgent need to redress the previous imbalances which were brought to the fore by the former Apartheid government which segregated black students. This was coupled with the need to achieve competitive international rankings (Akojee and Nkomo, 2007; Badat, 2003; Barnett, 2004). Thus, chasing international recognition and accolades at the same time has put higher education institutions in a conundrum (Sugrue, Englund, Solbrekke and Fosslund, 2018). In this paper, I adopt and apply Margret Archer's social realism theoretical framework to demonstrate curriculum transformation at the University of Johannesburg (Archer, 1995; Quinn, 2006; Vorster, 2010). I specifically, focus on the influence of conceptualisations and explanations of the structure, culture and agency in shaping the programme development and reviews in the University of Johannesburg (UJ). I start by presenting a brief literature review and research methods before zooming on the findings specifically demonstrating how structural factors influence curriculum transformation in the department. I then discuss the culture which has been shaping programme development within the institution, followed by the influence of the various agents on the way curriculum reform is practised and experienced within the Department of Urban and Regional Planning in the University of Johannesburg.

2. Literature Synopsis on Curriculum Development and Reform in South African Higher Education

The ever-changing South African higher education context demands constant engagements with curriculum development and reform (Lockett and Shay, 2020). Curriculum includes the structure and content of modules and programmes of study; the student experiences of learning and the dynamic and interactive processes of teaching and learning (Fraser and Bosanquet, 2007). It is a product which includes both plans and intentions of modules and programmes as well as a process, which refers to the activities, and effects of modules and programmes (McKenna, 2003b; Clarence-Fincham and Naidoo, 2013). Although multiple efforts have been made to engage with demands for curriculum reforms and revisions, more work still needs to be done to ensure both the product and process orientations of programmes are realised (Fraser and Bosanquet, 2007). A curriculum which is epistemically diverse ensures that all the forms of knowing and knowledge domains including propositional knowledge, practical knowledge, epistemic knowledge and experiential knowledge are infused into meaningful student learning and influence the holistic development of students (Lockett, 2001). Through the production of knowledge and information, universities have been transformed towards having direct influences on high economic productivity at local, regional, national and global scales (Moll, 2004; Vorster and Quinn, 2017). According to Moll (2004), there is a need to improve the theorisation, understanding and implementation of curricula in higher education institutions in response to economic, cultural, disciplinary and learning-related needs of societies and students (Bernstein 1990; Lockett 1995, 2001; Biggs 1996, 2012; Singh 2002; Moll 2004; Fraser & Bosanquet 2007; Barnett 2009)

2.1 Curriculum Development and Reform Concepts and Theories

There are extensive concepts and theories which describe curriculum development and reform. For example, Basil Bernstein's pedagogic device sheds light on curriculum development and reform. It proffers ideas on how knowledge is produced, recontextualised and reproduced to facilitate student learning through the selection, sequencing, pacing and ultimately assessment of appropriate knowledge domains (Sadovnik, 1991; Singh, 2002). Furthermore, Maton's specialisation dimension of the Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) makes a strong argument for the different kinds of knowledge and the knowers which emerge from different disciplines (Lockett, & Shay, 2020). There are ontological (legitimate knowledge) as well as epistemic (legitimate ways) consequences of curriculum development and reform engagements (Clarence, 2017).

3. Theoretical Framework: Social Realism

Social realism as a theory has three components that include, structure, culture and agency. Structure can best be defined as the various societal components which include gender, race and class (Archer, 1995; 1996). In the case of the University of Johannesburg, structure relates to the concepts such as university funding, degree programmes, regulations, policies, strategies, committees which run the institution, the different races, genders and classes of staff and students as well as the classroom venues where lecturers and students meet. The institution operates through a system of strategies which may range from 5 years, 3 years and 1 year to drive the teaching and learning operations. These have a huge bearing on the academic projects of the university. On the other hand, the concept of culture relates to components of social life which include ideas, beliefs, values, ideologies and theories (Archer, 1995; 1996; 1998). Within the University of Johannesburg, there are several dominant ideas, beliefs, theories, values and ideologies which underpin teaching and learning. The institution as a whole and the various teaching departments, schools and faculties have an assortment of values, theories and beliefs about teaching and learning which comprise its culture. Agency on the other hand is best be defined as the social and psychological makeup of individuals which influences the way they respond and act in different situations (Archer, 2000; 2007). In higher educational institutions, such individuals include Vice Chancellors, the Deputy Vice Chancellor, the Executive Deans of faculties, Vice Deans, Heads of Departments, co-ordinators, programme and year co-ordinators and student representatives. These sit in various committees such as industrial advisory boards, regulatory and accreditation bodies, Department of Higher Education and Training committees, Council for Higher Education and the related boards and committees, and representatives of student bodies such as the Student Representative council.

4. Research Methods

This paper explores the experiences of curriculum development and transformation in higher education, particularly how they have influenced sustainable development education. I adopted a case study research design and a qualitative research approach to gather qualitative data through the application of positionality

and documents analyses to reveal the extent to which social realism perspectives have shaped curriculum transformation in the departmental programme development and reviews. A phenomenological case study design and a qualitative research approach were applied specifically to focus on the department of Urban and Regional Planning within the faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment (FEBE) at the University of Johannesburg. The data used in this paper were purposively gathered through semi-structured interviews and observations. Interviews with 25 students and 7 staff members assisted in generating the much-needed data for this work. I conducted online interviews that yielded very rich data, as participants were willing and could conveniently contribute to this work. In particular, the Master of Sustainable Urban Planning and Development (MSUPD) was studied in detail. It is an interdisciplinary programme which was developed and co-ordinated by the Department of Urban and Regional Planning (Table 1). It involves six faculties of the institution which are actively participating in its teaching.

Table 1: MSUPD Modules

First Semester – Foundation and Compulsory Modules - 45 Credits				
Sr#	Code	Description	Faculty	Credits
1	AUPT019	Advanced Urban Planning Theory	FEBE	15 Credits
2	PSUD019	Principles of Sustainable Urban Development	FEBE	15 Credits
3	SUSC019	Sustainable Urban Infrastructure and Smart Cities Development	FEBE	15 Credits
Second Semester – Elective Modules - Choose 3 Modules - 45 Credits				
Sr#	Code	Description	Faculty	Credits
1	UFE9X02	Urban Financial and Economic Management	FEFS	15 Credits
2	UEPG029	Urban Environmental Planning and GIS Applications	FOS	15 Credits
3	UED9X02	Urban Entrepreneurial Dynamics	FOM	15 Credits
4	SOC9X07	Urban Sociology and Social Development	FOH	15 Credits
5	MUP9X02	Urban Policy and Design	FADA	15 Credits
6	IHSD029	Integrated Human Settlements Development	FEBE	15 Credits
Research and Dissertation – 90 Credits				
Sr#	Code	Description	Faculty	Credits
1	MSUP019/ 029	Minor Dissertation	ALL	90 Credits

Source: (Adapted from the Urban and Regional Planning Department Degree Programme Documents; 2022)

These include Faculty of Humanities (FOH); Faculty of Science (FOS); Faculty of Management (FOM); Faculty of Economic and Financial Services (FEFS); Faculty of Arts, Design and Architecture (FADA) and Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment (FEBE). The programme incorporates perspectives from fields such as urban and regional planning, architecture, civil engineering, construction management, building sciences, public policy, sociology, anthropology, development studies, psychology, geography, environmental studies and real estate. The programme trains a variety of professionals who find solutions to complex urban problems such as city planning, municipal service provision, transport, housing and urban design. The MSUPD programme consists of 6 modules; contributing 90 credits; and consisting of three (3) compulsory modules which are completed within the first semester. Three (3) optional modules are completed during the second semester together with a mini dissertation contributing 90 credits. The modules include advanced urban planning theory, principles of sustainable urban development, sustainable urban infrastructure and smart cities development, urban financial and economic management. The compulsory and elective modules balance out the foundational and optional

knowledge and skills. The MSUPD takes cognisance of the needs, expectations and active participation of all the appropriate knowers.

5. Findings and Discussions

The findings of my study reveal concerted efforts in designing and reviewing Curriculum to infuse sustainable development education at the University of Johannesburg. Just like many South African public universities, the University of Johannesburg has adopted curriculum transformation in the past few years. Specifically, the Department of Urban and Regional Planning (DURP) in the faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment (FEBE) has developed new programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels have been developed, which reflect and infuse the sustainable development pillars and building blocks such as the economic, environmental and societal imperatives. Such programmes include the Bachelor of Urban and Regional Planning (BURP) and the Bachelor of Urban and Regional Planning Honours (BURP Hons) at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and the Master in Sustainable Urban Planning and Development (MSUPD), the master's in urban and Regional Planning (MURP), and the PhD in Urban and Regional Planning at the postgraduate level.

5.1 Structures for Curriculum Development and Reform in the University of Johannesburg

There are various committees at department, school, faculty and senate levels which are tasked with handling and advising on curriculum development and promote lifelong learning. There are also policies and roles which guide the designing of new programmes, and these include among others, the Deputy Vice Chancellors, Deans and their Deputies, Education Specialists, Programme Advisors and Heads of Departments, their deputies and programme co-ordinators responsible particularly for managing new programme development and reviews. There are small units within teaching departments which initiate the whole process of curriculum development. The departmental units work closely with a programme development specialist who resides within faculties. When the programme has been put in place, the departmental board advises on changes to be effected before the programme is submitted to faculty committees. At faculty levels, the programmes are perfected, and consultations are done with the Programme Working Group (PWG) which operates at university level. The faculty board assist in shaping the programme before it is submitted to senate structures for checking, approval, and recommendations to external structures such as the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), Council for Higher Education (CHE) and South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). These external structures have guidelines on programme development and reform; hence the institution follows them religiously whenever there are new programmes which are being developed and when existing programmes are being renewed. The MSUPD strongly incorporates and infuses economic, cultural, disciplinary and learning facets and imperatives (Moll 2004). The programme captures and reflects the complexity of higher education in general and the curriculum responsiveness. The purpose and outcomes of the qualification reflect four curriculum paradigms that include positivist (technical knowledge and skills); interpretivist (practical knowledge and skills); critical (emancipatory knowledge and skills) and post-structural (post-positivist knowledge and skills) (McKenna 2004). The design of the programme fulfils what Kathy Lockett coined an Epistemically Diverse Curriculum. The epistemically diverse curriculum device is made up of four quadrants that include Propositional knowledge; Practical knowledge; Epistemic knowledge and Experiential knowledge. It is divided into two halves denoting objective and reductionist knowledge on one hand and subjective and contextual knowledge on the other. On the other hand, Lockett's four ways of knowing is infused into the programme. The first quadrant relates to propositional, or basic knowledge students receive through traditional ways of learning such as attending, listening to lectures, making notes, reading and studying to acquire new knowledge. Students get inducted into the basics of qualifications and knowledge to enable them to build their identities within their disciplines. The second quadrant is about practical knowledge which is obtained through the application of propositional knowledge. Practical knowledge is useful in doing the actual tasks to give students practical competencies and is reflected within the elective modules such as urban policy and design as well as geographical information systems (GIS). The third quadrant relates to experiential knowledge, acquired outside classroom and laboratory environments. Experiential knowledge makes sense because the learning takes place in the real-world contexts through work- integrated learning, various forms of placements and internships which are common that must be maintained in curriculum development and reform. This knowledge is useful, as students are given platforms to engage in reflective and meta-cognitive thinking to develop their personal competencies. The fourth quadrant focuses on epistemic knowledge acquired through evaluation and challenging of existing theories. Students are trained not to just reproduce disciplinary knowledge but engage in epistemic scaffolding. Students develop their own conceptual frameworks and understanding within the research and dissertation writing component of the MSUPD.

5.2 Cultures in Curriculum Development and Reform in the University of Johannesburg

There exists a strong culture of curriculum development and reform within the University of Johannesburg as revealed by data obtained from the semi-structured interviews. The strong values, ideologies, theories and beliefs of the institution shape, inform and guide curriculum development practices to ensure the provision of relevant, empowering and competitive programmes to students. Additionally, there is the idea that knowledge must be relevant to society which the students serve and come from, hence the programmes and teaching materials are developed in such a way that they directly reflect social issues and needs. There is an appreciation that curricula must be relevant to the needs of the industry which employs the graduates. Therefore, programmes are developed to solve industry problems. The institution is also guided by the learning-to-be philosophy, where graduates are trained to attain life-long learning. The graduates are equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills and values to adjust readily to multiple career changes and make a significant contribution. The new education and training system is tailored to support the development of an adaptable workforce. According to Moll (2004), economic responsiveness is the development of programmes to meet labour market requirements. The MSUPD responds well to the needs, expectations and demands of the economic sectors about the training and education of the adequate quantities and qualities of graduates in sustainable cities. The MSUPD curriculum is structured to meet the demands for high qualifications and skilled personnel. The MSUPD was developed to enable it to utilise multiple cultural resources and reflect different cultural heritages and social realities. Students pursuing the MSUPD come from different backgrounds in terms of their work experiences and previous degrees (qualifications). The MSUPD is being constantly updated through the production of new knowledge, as lecturers and discipline experts engage in ongoing new inquiry. The MSUPD programme ensures epistemological access and ontological access which promote student success. Consequently, higher education curricula must be responsive to students' learning needs. The stratified model of curriculum responsiveness means that multiple levels in higher education curriculum transformation need to be recognized and layered to reflect the various forms and strata.

5.3 Agency in Curriculum Development and Reform in the University of Johannesburg

There are several agents which drive curriculum development processes and practices within the University of Johannesburg. These include the active participants such as students, academics, programme co-ordinators, departmental heads and their deputies who have direct influence on what the programme and module contents. In particular, Deputy Vice Chancellors, Deans and their Deputies, Education Specialists, Programme Advisors and Heads of Departments and their deputies as well as programme co-ordinators have a strong bearing on the structure and content of the programmes. There are also academic developers such as co-ordinators and facilitators, educational specialists and programme advisors who offer invaluable advice and train and support academic staff responsible for programme development and reform. These play a critical role in shaping programmes and influence how they are implemented within the institution. There are also external agents who exercise influence on what is taught such as the various facilitators and co-ordinators from the relevant National Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), Council for Higher Education (CHE) and South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) officials. There are also accreditation bodies such as the South African Council for Planners (SACPLAN), industrial advisory bodies which inform our curriculum development and reform practices in the university. The application of managerialism assists in ensuring the success of programme development and reform practices within my institution. According to Biggs (2003), alignment of curricula must be reflected within the outcomes, purpose of the module and programme; the content, methodology and pedagogy as well as the assessment methodologies. The UJ has always made efforts to ensure that there is alignment, coherence and differentiation of curricula over the years. Curriculum coherence refers to the alignment or logics of curriculum elements such as their purposes, learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment and evaluation activities. Curriculum differentiation refers to distinguishing of qualifications, for example between national diplomas and bachelor's degrees or between postgraduate diplomas and honours degrees, or between Master of Philosophy degrees and Masters of Science degrees (Clarence, 2017). The curriculum alignment, differentiation and coherence concepts are clearly reflected and fulfilled by the MSUPD programme as demonstrated in the ensuing sections. The MSUPD structure, purpose, modules, credits and exit level outcomes comply with the department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the Council for Higher Education (CHE) and South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) officials. There are also officials of accreditation bodies such as the South African Council for Planners (SACPLAN) and industrial advisory bodies which inform our curriculum development and reform practices within my institution. The MSUPD programme is pitched at the NQF level 9 and has a total of 180 credits; hence it is clearly aligned with the requirements of a master's degree.

A blended learning approach at module levels is also emphasised, and this corroborates with the alignment at macro levels. The adoption of contact classes on a block basis, and online and remote classes and engagements supports student learning and success, particularly for part time students who are working and who do not have enough time to attend face to face classes. The use of technology for teaching purposes is commendable, given some of the pressures and inconveniences such as the covid-19 and lockdown which has discouraged movement and congregants. The different types of assessments ensure that evaluations on the level of learning and understanding are done, and more support is provided where necessary. There is a system of consultation times, platforms and support from tutors, and all these provisions are commendable.

5.4 Knowledge Structures Within the MSUPD

There exist several disciplinary and knowledge structures. According to Clarence-Fincham and Naidoo (2013), knowledge structures can be classified into hard sciences and soft sciences. The hard disciplines include degree programmes such as chemistry, physics, mathematics and biology, whilst soft disciplines include history, sociology and politics. However, other domains include social sciences characterised by a combination of attributes from both hard sciences and soft humanities, for example, town planning, construction management, quantity surveying, real estate and urban design. As an interdisciplinary programme, the MSUPD falls within the social sciences domain. There are basically two hierarchical and horizontal curriculum structures (Clarence-Fincham and Naidoo 2013). Firstly, hierarchical structures are associated with cumulative and vertical progression and the growth of epistemic access and knowledge production. Secondly, horizontal structures are associated with lateral refinement and growth of epistemic access and knowledge production. The MSUPD is a hybrid structure, where both hierarchical and horizontal elements are combined to give an interdisciplinary programme. In this programme both epistemic access and knowledge production is experienced hierarchically and horizontally.

The Higher Education Qualification Sub-Framework (HEQSF) identifies three qualification pathways which include vocational, professional and general formative. The MSUPD is a professional degree with a combination of both conceptual and contextual coherence and logics and this is reflected in the three foundation and compulsory modules which make up the basic concepts of the programme and the three elective modules which give the main contextual knowledge of the degree.

According to Clarence-Fincham and Naidoo (2013), there are generally three different types of knowledge domains, and these include propositional knowledge, procedural knowledge and dispositional knowledge. Firstly, propositional or body of knowledge can be referred to as the 'know-thats' which are the main theories, concepts and ideas of a discipline. Secondly, procedural knowledge is the 'know-how' which refers to the way knowledge is imparted. Thirdly, dispositional knowledge constitutes the attributes of the students in the whole process of learning. It is also important to note that curriculum logics are comprised of conceptual and contextual coherences or logics. The MSUPD programme demonstrates the presence of all the three types of knowledge and also the two coherences or logics. All the modules have multiple theories and concepts of the sustainable urban planning and development imbedded within them as represented by ideas from the various disciplines. Thus, the programme has both the propositional and conceptual coherences. It is important to note that propositional knowledge is built into conceptual logics, and it is critical to be cognisant of how both the 'know-that and 'know-how' knowledge progresses in both logics. There are also modules which create opportunities for students to learn appropriate contexts of the programme within the field. The procedural knowledge is explicitly represented by the teaching and learning as well as the assessment strategies. Lastly, the dispositional knowledge is evident within the admission requirements and selection criteria of the candidates willing to enrol for the programme.

6. Conclusions and Policy Implications

Transforming higher education curricula has gained traction in the past few decades, particularly in post-colonial Africa. Preliminary results reveal that curriculum development and reviews within the University of Johannesburg is a complex and messy reality that is shaped by Margeret Archer's structural, cultural and agential emergent powers and properties. This is very evident within the MSUPD. The programme trains a variety of professionals who find solutions to complex urban sustainability challenges. I recommend concerted efforts to strengthen the sustainability orientations of the programmes, there is need to infuse all the building blocks of sustainability education. With the massive transformations taking place in South African universities of all types, academic staff need to have strong disciplinary knowledge and experience. Sometimes they have limited knowledge about educational theories, concepts and ideas, and have been given the daunting responsibility of developing and reforming curricula. Improved understanding assists in curriculum development, reform and its

implementation to ensure ontological access, epistemological access and equity of outcomes, particularly for the majority of formerly disadvantaged students

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