Transformation in a tertiary-education institution: A case study

J. P. Viljoen
Technikon Pretoria

S. Rothmann
Potchefstroom University for CHE

ABSTRACT

Tertiary institutions in South Africa are undergoing transformation and staff are continually being faced with major changes. The objective of this study was to investigate the experiences of staff of the transformation process. A qualitative research design based on the phenomenological paradigm was used. A sample of 12 staff members and four managers of a satellite campus of one tertiary institution were interviewed. The empirical results indicated that external factors such as changes to the client base, laws and regulation by the state are regarded as triggers for organisational transformation. Factors such as management and leadership, communication, feedback and organisational culture play, according to the participants, an important role during the organisational transformation process.

INTRODUCTION

Tertiary-education institutions world-wide are developing a disturbing imbalance with their environments (Clark, 2000). These institutions face an overload of demands but are equipped with an under-supply of response capabilities, especially concerning finances. To align themselves better, they need to enhance their response capability and to contain more effectively the demands made upon them.

Clark (2000) identifies four trends that create turbulent environments for tertiary-education institutions. First, demands for participation change student entry from the elite to the mass to universal. The growing entitlement of young people to receive more education after secondary schooling leads to a lifelong entitlement both for repeated professional training and cultural enrichment. Second, more occupations exact requirements of knowledge and skill not provided by secondary education. The high-knowledge fields, changing faster than people are able to change their skills, hold tertiary-education institutions responsible for up-to-date education. Third, government and private sector increasingly exhort tertiary-education institutions to assist them in solving societal problems on a broad spectrum. Fourth, the globalisation of knowledge propels its growth at an accelerating pace.

A similar transformation of education institutions in South Africa is necessary because of changes in the political, economic, technological and social environments (Bainbridge, 1996; Brill & Worth, 1997). Du Toit (1996) points out that changing education, in the form of finding a better match between the opportunities and the threats of a changing environment and institutional strategies, is a difficult and complex matter.

The total transformation of tertiary education in South Africa is regulated by the Higher Education Act (101 of 1997) (South Africa, 1997). This act is directed at correcting past educational discrimination and at ensuring equal opportunities for higher education. In an effort to bring about change, Section 31 of this Act states that institutional forums should be created. An institutional forum (or transformation forum, as it is also called) includes all role players at a specific tertiary-education institution, and this forum has to advise the council of the institution concerned. According to the report of the Council for Higher Education, a struggle exists for the management and control of these forums (South Africa, 1998/99).

According to Bainbridge (1996), transformation is necessary to ensure a better fit between an institution and the unique needs of a changing environment. Transformation may be thought of as “drastic changes triggered by external environmental factors”. Gouillart and Kelly (1995: 7) define organisational transformation as: “The orchestrated redesign of the genetic architecture of the corporation, achieved by working simultaneously although at different speeds along the four dimensions of
re reframing, restructuring, revitalization and renewal”. Transformation is thus a deep-seated process which affects all aspects of institutions. The collaboration and inputs of all the staff in the institution are crucial in ensuring its success and positive outcomes.

The institution selected for the purpose of this study finds itself in such a transformation process. According to Van Rensburg (1997), transformation is a relatively complex and time-consuming process which requires change in perspectives, attitudes, values and norms. The management and employees of the tertiary-education institution are the means by which transformation has to take place. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the managers' and employees' experiences of organisational transformation. Research regarding the managers' and employees' experiences of transformation at an institution can provide insights into the possible factors which may prevent the transformation process from succeeding. More knowledge about managers' and employees' experiences of organisational transformation can therefore be used to manage the transformation process in such a way that productivity and effectiveness are maintained.

The objective of this study was to assess the experiences of transformation in their institution by the staff of a tertiary-education institution.

ORGANISATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

According to the New Oxford Dictionary of English, the concept of transformation refers to “a thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance” (Pearsall, 1998, p. 1968). Senge et al. (1999) state that the word “transformation” is deduced from the Latin word “transformare”, which means “to change shape”. Transformation is a specific type of change which can be distinguished from other types of change in the sense that it implies not only a change of form but also the creation of something new.

Organisational transformation can therefore be seen as a process whereby an organisation changes its form, structure and culture in order to adapt to environmental changes. According to Botha (1997) transformation focuses on more than one aspect, is of a specific duration, and is directed at drastically changing the status quo.

Transformation is contrasted with evolutionary change, which implies that change happens gradually and over a long period of time (Breu & Benwell, 1999; Dlamini, 1995). King (1997) refers to evolutionary change as “routine” change. Evolutionary change is similar to what Espejo, Schumann, Schwaninger and Bilello (1996) describe as “first-order” change. First-order change results in similar things being done as they were previously. Transformation (which is also referred to as revolutionary change or second-order change) represents a break with the past way of doing things. It is radical in nature and implies dissociation with the past (Dlamini, 1995; Van der Merwe, 1998). King (1997) refers to this type of change as a “clean slate” philosophy.

In first-order change existing frames of reference and dominant schemes of interpretation (i.e. preconceived ideas that are used to evaluate reality) of individuals stay the same in first-order change (Breu & Benwell, 1999). Second-order change, in contrast, implies paradigm changes, including transformation of individuals' frames of reference. The fact that transformation is related to revolutionary or second-order change is also evident in the statement that “transformation requires radical change” (Benjamin & Mabey, 1990: 327).

Organisational transformation in tertiary-education institutions in South Africa therefore includes: revolutionary change (in the sense that previous management practices and ways of doing things are discontinued); qualitative change (which is difficult to measure, but which changes the experiences of organisational members); and multi-dimensional change (which affects all structures, processes and procedures and which requires changes in values, norms, attitudes, perceptions and behaviour).

Organisational transformation is triggered by external environmental changes (Cummings & Vollmann, 1996; Ivancevich & Matteson, 1996; Worley, 1997; Pendlebury, Grouard & Meston, 1998). External factors in South Africa which trigger transformation in tertiary-education institutions include the business environment (Pendlebury et al., 1998), globalisation and competition (Bainbridge, 1996), political forces, legislation and technological changes (Cummings & Worley, 1997).


Tertiary-education institutions are largely dependent on state subsidies and student numbers. In this regard the gradual disappearance of boundaries between different
types of tertiary-education institutions, the disappearance of the difference between historically disadvantaged and advantaged institutions, the restructuring of tertiary education and the competition from private educational institutions, have forced institutions to transform (Bainbridge, 1996; Ivancevich & Matteson, 1996; Pendlebury et al., 1998). Innovative thinking is also required to ensure effective strategies in an environment characterised by insufficient resources for education.

Khosa (1996) believes that tertiary-education institutions are an integral part of the social environment. These institutions should promote social change through social, economic and scientific development. They should also help find solutions for societal problems (Gourley, 1995). Tertiary-education institutions should therefore serve society by developing people.

The drive for affirmative action is another trigger for organisational transformation. Affirmative action is a positive, planned, short-term intervention directed at correcting unfair discrimination of the past, and empowering individuals and groups affected by it to compete fairly with others (Seroka, 1999). The Employment Equity Act (Act 55 of 1998) (South Africa, 1998) is directed at correcting the effects of unfair discrimination in the past. According to Manamela (1997), tertiary-education institutions should compile an affirmative-action strategy regarding recruitment, selection, development, and promotion. It seems that few women and people of colour are currently involved in academic and managerial positions in tertiary-education institutions in South Africa (South Africa, 1998/99).

According to Coetzee (1999), the following actions are important in implementing the transformation of tertiary-education institutions:

1. Communicate the real meaning of transformation to those who are affected by it.
2. Facilitate a shared vision and a common ideal for all role players.
3. Build confidence in the process of transformation by creating win-win situations.
4. Use an inclusive rather than an exclusive approach.
5. Regard transformation as a process which may take time and which should be developed and maintained.
6. Develop a unique process for each institution.
7. Create the relevant structures needed to implement transformation.

Implement conflict management mechanisms.

Use a strategic approach to ensure that the institution stays financially viable and competitive.

Communication with employees plays an important role in managing transformation effectively (Quirke, 1997; Kekana, 1999). Quirke (1997: 76) says in this regard: “It seems that now communication does not simply have a role in managing change, it has the role”. Employees in transforming institutions may experience intense feelings of pain, fear, vulnerability, uncertainty and anxiety. Holthauzen (1998) compares individuals' reactions during transformation with experiences during mourning (Kübler-Ross, 1969). These phases include denial, resistance, understanding, action, collaboration, and institutionalisation.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

**Research design**

This research study can be described as qualitative research from a phenomenological approach. The objective of this type of research design is to analyse the experiences of participants without predetermined expectancies, and to try to understand the data from their point of view (Moustakas, 1994).

**Sample**

A purposive sample (n = 16) was taken from all the staff at a satellite campus of a tertiary-education institution (n = 36). These participants were included because they had experienced organisational transformation at the tertiary-education institution. Therefore they had first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon that was being investigated. The sample included administrative employees (n = 6), academic staff (n = 6), and management, (n = 4).

**Data collection**

Qualitative data collection (an interview), based on the phenomenological paradigm, was used in this research. The researcher studied the phenomenon without predetermined expectations or categories, and tried to understand the data from the perspective of the participants, as suggested by Moustakas (1994).

An interview that was tape-recorded was conducted with each respondent under relaxed conditions. The interview was informal and non-directive, with the central question - “How do you experience the transformation of the tertiary-education institution?” - being asked and explained to each respondent. “Experience” was defined as “What do you
think?”, “What do you feel?”, and “How do you act?” The researcher asked the introductory question and made sure that each respondent understood the question.

The researcher’s attitude was one of unconditional positive regard, and the respondent was allowed to do as he/she felt. Non-directive conversation techniques, for example minimal encouragement, attentive listening, clarification, paraphrasing, reflecting and summarising were used to gather information. Enough time was allowed, and a relaxed atmosphere was created to help the participants feel at ease, as suggested by Kretting (1991).

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked by two independent transcribers. Content analysis was used to analyse, quantify and interpret research data systematically and objectively, as suggested by Moustakas (1994). The universe of the content to be analysed was defined and categorised. The units of analysis were words and themes and were identified by reading through the written transcriptions of the data. Dominant themes and sub-themes were identified. The meanings of the themes were transformed from concrete language into the language of science. These themes were checked and verified by two industrial psychologists for accuracy. The data was quantified by counting and ranking the objects in each category. The concrete language used by the respondents was translated into scientific language and concepts. The exact words of the respondent were used as proof, and themes were confirmed by literature references, as suggested by Kretting (1991).

RESULTS

The participants’ experiences of organisational transformation are summarised in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Managers</th>
<th>Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Changes in the client base contribute to transformation.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Management and leadership are not in line with the expectations of participants.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Participants are affected by the stressors associated with organisational transformation.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Affirmative action is regarded as organisational transformation.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Organisational transformation has implications for participants’ intrapersonal functioning.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Organisational transformation causes changes in organisational culture.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Involvement of staff contributes to ownership during organisational transformation.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theme 1

Changes in the client base lead to organisational transformation. This theme entails that the institution works with new types of students who have different backgrounds and expectations from those with whom the institution worked previously. Most of the current students came from an impoverished background. Participants indicated that changes in expectations of students required pro-active steps by the management of the institution. One participant verbalised the expectation of a student as follows: “The tertiary institution has got to change its ways according to how we think it should operate.” He mentioned that “… as a result of student demands we became pro-active”.

Some members of staff regarded the expectations of students in a pessimistic way by interpreting them as “demands” and “prescriptions”. These expectations related to examination concessions, the payment of fees, transport of students, the administrative infrastructure, and provision of sport facilities. Participants felt frustrated by the reactions of non-conforming to demands: “If they cannot get their way, they start to toyi-toyi …”. “They put pressure on you until they get what they want.” These behaviours were attributed to the fact that students thought that changes occurred too slowly. Students of the institution came from a disadvantaged background and had to study in garages, “locations” and shacks, often without electricity, space and privacy. Managers expressed the opinion that staff members should take these aspects into account when judging students’ expectations. Staff members, however, were more concerned about the effects of these circumstances on students’ academic performance.

Participants also mentioned that the change in the student population from predominantly white to predominantly...
black was also related to transformation. Managers (all of whom were white) said that they were regarded as “leftovers from apartheid” by students in other race groups. These students were (in comparison with white students) also more influenced by student leaders.

**Theme 2**

Management and leadership are not in line with the expectations of staff. This theme was mentioned by 14 participants and concerns the way in which management and leadership take place during transformation. Staff expressed their dissatisfaction with the way in which the process of transformation was being handled by managers and leaders. This theme was evident in the following verbalisations: “I think that something is wrong with the management of this campus”, “… they talk a lot, but do little …”, “There is not sufficient control … the type of control we knew previously …” and “They allow things to drift…”

It seemed that management’s ability to adapt to changing circumstances was not acceptable. Participants verbalised it as follows: “A line should be drawn by management …”, “Management tend to submit to demands …”, “Management acts inconsistently …”. It appeared that management knew that staff blamed them. This was confirmed by the following verbalisation from a manager: “I think they feel that, you know, I am not holding the reins tight enough”.

**Theme 3**

Staff on various levels are affected by transformation-related stressors. This theme was mentioned by 13 participants and indicates feelings of stress associated with organisational transformation. The behaviour and actions of students and management, as well as the non-execution of rules and regulations, were regarded as stressors. Managers reported that currently (compared to the past) they thought differently about students. Staff members indicated that they often felt aggressive towards management. At other times they just kept quiet. The actions of students sometimes made them feel frustrated, powerless, uncertain and anxious. Feelings of demotivation and tiredness were also attributed to management’s actions.

**Theme 4**

Affirmative action is regarded as organisational transformation. This theme was mentioned by 13 participants and concerns legislation and its effect on the institution. The following verbalisations confirmed this theme: “Transformation is for me a threatening aspect, because you hear that certain people have to move into specific jobs…”, “I think we have to change our views regarding the people who are going to work with us …”. Participants mentioned that they were not against affirmative action, but that their job security was threatened by it. It was clear that the possibility of affirmative action contributed to feelings of insecurity in participants. “It is a threat to me … there will be no more opportunities for promotion …”, “I wonder whether they will replace me within a year from now?” and “Males in South Africa are exposed and that is hard.”

**Theme 5**

Organisational transformation has implications for the intrapersonal functioning of participants. This theme was mentioned by 13 participants and shows their inclination to adapt to new demands. One manager said that organisational transformation required a “change in your personality”. Another one stressed that “one has to transform yourself to another thinking pattern.” It was also said that “transformation will happen … I want to change and that is what I am going to do.” Staff members indicated that they found themselves in a “transition period” and “we should adapt in order to survive.”

**Theme 6**

Organisational transformation requires changes in the organisational culture. Managers who referred to this theme acknowledged that the institution had rules,
regulations and ways according to which things should be done. However, they indicated that pressure by student leaders and organisations necessitated that rules should be bent because of a “new type of student” studying at the institution. However, staff members mentioned management's inability to apply rules and regulations consistently and said that they submitted too easily to pressure from student leaders and organisations. This theme illustrated by the following verbalisations: “It feels as if students took the place over”, “There are rules and regulations … students cannot apply rules as they want to …” and “It seems that management is afraid of students because they accommodate them all the time.” This contributed to staff members experiencing powerlessness and anger.

Theme 7

Involvement of staff increases ownership during organisational transformation. This theme is about transparency, openness and involvement of people during organisational transformation. Managers acknowledged that participative management was necessary during organisational transformation. They associated participative management with “transparency”, “democracy” and “involving people to ask their inputs”. They felt unsure whether this really happened in practice. Staff members mentioned that they never got the opportunity to provide inputs. They expressed it as follows: “We do not get the opportunity to give ideas before decisions which affect us are made”, “Staff members are not considered when decisions are made.” However, they showed a need to be involved: “If they get our inputs, they will realise what the problems are” and “In that sense we did not transform”.

Theme 8

The instability associated with organisational transformation contributes to feelings of pessimism. Managers attributed this instability to the actions and protests of students: “I saw it brewing up …” and “Oh, I thought trouble is coming here …”. They believed that transformation would not have happened if it were not for the “revolution” and “…showing their dissatisfaction in a strong manner”. It had an impact on management: “…it sent a shock wave through management …”. Staff members mentioned that they experienced the uproar as a threat: “It was a very upsetting thing …” and “You are not safe at work … one is unsure about what will happen next…” One manager said that the students' behaviour angered him. Staff members referred to student unrest as “mass action”, “dancing” and “unpleasantness…”. Staff members experienced student actions as a threat to their safety: “People are afraid of mass action …”, “I feel threatened …”, “If they start dancing at the campus, I feel afraid …”

Theme 9

Changes in laws and regulations necessitate organisational transformation. Eight participants referred to this theme. The Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997) (South Africa, 1997) prescribes the establishment of transformation forums in tertiary-education institutions. These forums have to advise the councils of institutions regarding transformational issues. All the managers in this study regarded the establishment of the transformation forum as a positive step, because the forum contributes to organisational transformation. Although it took time to establish the forum, members gradually started to develop a working relationship. One manager verbalised his experience of the transformation forum as follows: “Attendance of this forum caused me to change my paradigm. It was shocking to see the attitudes of students who were part of the forum … the way they challenge senior management was unbelievable”. However, staff members who were not part of the transformation forum expressed pessimism about the forum. This pessimism is evident in the following verbalisations: “The transformation forum does not succeed. It will slowly die … in any case students walked out of the last meeting of the forum”, “Students are always changing the goal posts”.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that changes in the client base of tertiary-education institutions contribute to organisational transformation. Many students at the institution came from a disadvantaged background and have to study in difficult circumstances. Staff should be made aware of the context in which the students' behaviour should be interpreted. A deprived social background is an important driving factor for transformation on academic and management levels (Gxwala, 1995). Therefore, it is necessary that the educational institution should change its strategy and form in order to adapt to a new type of client (Swart & Van Vuuren, 1998).

It seems that the changes in the expectations of students require pro-active steps by the management of the institution. Effective transformation of the institution implies that the expectations of students and staff should be managed. It is evident from the results that staff members regarded expectations of students more negatively than managers did. It seems that staff members had certain implicit and explicit expectations of management during organisational transformation and that they were dissatisfied because these expectations had not been met (Stanz, Slabbert & Schepers, 1999). Staff members were of the opinion that students were in a better position to negotiate about their expectations and needs than the staff were.
As pointed out earlier, participants mentioned that the change in the student population from predominantly white to predominantly black was also related to transformation. Managers (all of whom were white) said that students from other race groups regarded them as “leftovers from apartheid”. These students were (in comparison with white students) also more influenced by student leaders. The emotions associated with changes in the client base, as illustrated by this, should also be managed by the institution.

It is clear from the results that staff members were dissatisfied with their leaders' handling of organisational transformation. The uncertainty associated with organisational transformation may have contributed to a tendency in staff members to be critical towards the management of the institution (see Brill & Worth, 1997; Gordon, 1991; Gouillart & Kelly, 1995; Van Rensburg, 1997). This uncertainty can be attributed to dependence of staff members on authority (management). Staff members also expected management to take more control of the situation at the institution, because they thought that this would reduce their uncertainty. It could therefore be expected that the transformation of an educational institution will be associated with dependency and authority crises, which will be solved gradually if staff members accept more responsibility for their own role in organisational transformation. Own unresolved authority issues could also be regarded as a possible reason for authority crises during organisational transformation.

Flexibility of managers during organisational transformation, which is a positive attitude, was interpreted by staff members as inconsistency, which may increase the uncertainty of both groups (Manamela, 1997). In moving from the current state to the desired state, managers should be aware that staff members may resist the implementation of organisational transformation because of its uncertain outcomes, and blame them for being inconsistent (Brill & Worth, 1997; Gordon, 1991; Gouillart & Kelly, 1995). Staff members tended to blame management for the problems associated with organisational transformation, which is indicative of an external locus of control (Le Roux, Schmidt, & Schepers, 1997). Ineffective coping strategies could be associated with negative outcomes of organisational transformation (Fouché & Rothmann, 2001).

Some managers and staff members viewed organisational transformation as being the same as affirmative action. It seems that they viewed affirmative action as a threat which affected their job security. The perception of individuals that affirmative action is a threat is associated with feelings of insecurity and powerlessness. Participants indicated that they understood the necessity of affirmative action to correct past imbalances, but said that their job security and future promotion possibilities were negatively affected by it.

Transformation-related stressors affected the staff members of the tertiary-education institution. The actions and protests of students, as well as non-adherence to rules and regulations, were regarded as stressors. The instability associated with organisational transformation contributed to feelings of pessimism, fear, powerlessness, insecurity and anxiety. The result of these feelings was that staff members felt demotivated and tired. It seems that individuals need to change their perceptions, attitudes and coping skills to adapt effectively to organisational transformation.

The results show that changes in organisational culture are required by organisational transformation. New ways of doing things in the tertiary-education institution are necessary to adapt effectively to environmental forces. Change in the organisational culture is, however, difficult to accomplish because staff members perceive deviations from the status quo as inconsistencies. On the other hand, it seems that involvement of staff members increases ownership during organisational transformation. By maintaining openness and involving staff members in managing the transformation of the institution, they feel part of the process and show commitment towards it. It is a source of concern that staff members expressed the opinion that they were not involved in managing transformation at the institution.

Managers expressed positive feelings regarding the transformation forum at the institution. Although they experienced the transformation of the institution as a difficult process, the forum was seen as essential to promote transformation. Exposure to the forum contributed to knowledge and insight regarding organisational transformation, as well as to positive attitudes towards it. It seems, however, that problems were still experienced in rising above the hostile nature of campus management (South Africa, 1998/1999). Staff members who were not part of the transformation forum expressed pessimism about the forum.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following application-oriented recommendations should be considered:

Firstly, ways to adapt to the changes in the client base of the tertiary-education institution should be investigated; specifically, the implementation of training programmes for managers, staff members and students to manage
diversity should be investigated. Secondly, an institutional transformation forum for the specific satellite campus should be established to make it possible for those who are affected by transformation to participate in the forum. This may contribute to staff members feeling more included in decision-making about issues that affect them. Participation in this forum could promote their understanding of transformational issues.

Thirdly, the affirmative action policy of the institution should be explained to all staff members, and current staff should be developed to promote the implementation of affirmative action.

Fourthly, the pressures placed on staff and managers to transform themselves require that they should employ constructive strategies to cope with transformation-related stressors. More research on the coping strategies and the possible development of constructive coping strategies is therefore necessary.

Fifthly, managers of the tertiary-education institution should be trained in transformational leadership, participative management and management of diversity.

LIMITATIONS

A limitation of this research is that the empirical study included staff from only one campus of a tertiary-education institution. It is not possible to generalise the results to other tertiary-education institutions.

Quantitative research regarding employees' experiences of organisational transformation should be undertaken in the future. For example, the role of management and leadership in transforming tertiary-education institutions should be researched. Furthermore, the effects of self-development programmes, which are designed to empower staff members and managers in tertiary-education institutions to cope with transformation, should be evaluated. Students should also be included in future studies.

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