

Published as “The Institutional Crisis of the University of Transkei” in *Politikon*, vol 28, no2, November 2001.

**Structural Constraints, Managerial Ineptitude, and
Stakeholder Complicity:**

**A Study of the Institutional Crisis of the University of
the Transkei**

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Structural Constraints, Managerial Ineptitude, and Stakeholder Complicity: A Study of the Institutional Crisis of the University of the Transkei¹

Abstract

This article is a study of the institutional crisis of UNITRA. Its principal thesis is that UNITRA's institutional crisis can only be really understood as a product of the dialectical interplay of structural and agential variables. The primary structural factor informing this crisis is UNITRA's location in the institutional landscape of higher education - a location that confines it to servicing financially poor and academically disadvantaged students – which mires the institution in a vicious cycle of student strikes, political instability, falling enrollments and high failure rates, declining subsidies, and ultimately financial bankruptcy. Agential variables include among others, managerial failures to develop a strategic plan and establish administrative and financial systems of control, and the omissions and commissions of other stakeholders like council, staff, students, the Department of Education, and the Chancellor of the institution, all of whom either contributed to the collapse of governance structures and cooperative governance and/or failed in their legislative duty to act as a check against poor management and inappropriate behaviour among all internal constituencies. Agency behavior and decisions thus entrenched UNITRA's structural location in the landscape of higher education, thereby catapulting it into the crisis and institutional malaise that it currently finds itself mired in.

I: Introduction

In a desolate part of the Eastern Cape, on the road connecting the cities of Durban and East London, lies the town of Umtata. Once a thriving centre of commerce and public administration in the bantustan republic of Transkei, Apartheid's first official homeland, Umtata is now a shadow of its former self. The transition has not been kind to this part of the world. With the integration of the homelands, and the establishment of the post-apartheid regime, provincial government was centred in Bisho. Umtata as a result lost much of its civil service, the main employer of the town's inhabitants. Then the town's industries, and those of its neighbours, like Butterworth, closed up and withdrew to other parts of the country. There was no reason for

¹ This article is an edited version of a report commissioned by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET). I would like to express my appreciation to Sam Thobakgale who served as a research assistant for this study. In addition, I would like to thank Ian Bunting, Nico Cloete, Jonathan Jansen, Thandwa Mthembu, and Angina Parekh for commenting and advising on various drafts of the original report. Most of all, however, my gratitude goes to the academic and administrative staff, council members, government officials, students, and university managers who gave up their valuable time to share information and their views on the problems at, and solutions for, UNITRA. It should be obvious that the views expressed and the conclusions arrived at in this report are solely mine, and no individual/organization should be held responsible for them.

them to remain. The tax breaks and other incentives that the homeland regime had used to encourage the establishment of industries now fell away. Those who could, followed the jobs and left the town. But many others remained. Unemployment is now excessively high, even by South African standards. Crime is spiraling out of control. Umtata is dying.

On the outskirts of this desolate town lies the University of Transkei (UNITRA). By default it is now the largest employer in the town. Like its host, this institution is a shadow of its former self. Established in 1977 by the homeland regime to showcase its newly found 'independence' and create at least the façade of statehood, it is now a monument to apartheid's folly. UNITRA is in financial crisis. Its student enrollment is falling, and its failure rate incredibly high. There are questions raised about the quality of its graduates. Many in the public debate on higher education question its credentials as a higher education institution and call for its closure. Yet there are still others, both inside and outside the institution, who believe that UNITRA can be salvaged. These individuals demonstrate that its graduates now occupy leading positions in business, provincial and national government, and the judiciary. They highlight its medical faculty, and the innovativeness of its pedagogy. They argue that its crisis is not unique, and like other Historically Black Universities (HBUs), it embraced transformation and directed its attention to servicing the most financially and academically disadvantaged of our citizenry. And, finally, they point to the social catastrophe that the closure of UNITRA would likely lead to for the residents of the region around the Kei river.

This article is a study of the institutional crisis of UNITRA. Originally commissioned by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET) to further the debates and discussion on higher education transformation in South Africa, the article begins by detailing the principal elements of UNITRA's crisis. Thereafter, it turns its attention to, and the bulk of the article focuses on, the causes of the institutional crisis. Finally, the article comments on the proposals advanced by the various stakeholders to address this crisis. The article serves two purposes. At the most basic level, it informs educational authorities and policy practitioners in the higher education arena as to the causal factors underlying the institutional crisis of UNITRA, and provides them with some assessments of the various recommendations being advanced to address this crisis. At the more fundamental level, however, it benefits from, and contributes to the growing international literature on conflict and change in higher education institutions. Benefits from this literature arise not only from noting that these processes are not unique to South Africa, but also from assimilating the comparative experience of these processes in both the industrialised and developing worlds.² The article

² For just some of the literature, see L. Cerych and P. Sabatier, 1986, *Great Expectations and Mixed Performance: The Implementation of Higher Education Reforms in Europe*, Stoke-On-Trent: European Institute of Educational and Social Policy; B. Clarke, 1998, *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities*, Oxford: Pergamon; D. Court, 1999, "Financing Higher Education in Africa: Makerere, The Quite Revolution", unpublished mimeo; Rollin Kent, 1998, "Institutional Reform in Mexican Higher Education: Conflict and Renewal in Three Public Universities", unpublished mimeo; D. Levy, 1986, *Higher Education and the State in Latin America: Private Challenges to Public Distinctiveness*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press

also adds to this literature by highlighting the experiences of a particular layer of South African universities, the HBUs, and critically analyses the conflicts and change occasioned in these institutions as a result of social and financial pressures emanating from South Africa's political and economic transition.

In terms of the research methodology, this study locates and analyses UNITRA within the framework of the historical evolution of HBUs in South Africa. Thus considerable attention is placed on understanding how the structural location of UNITRA, both in geographic and institutional terms, impacts on the efficient functioning of the organisation. Data for this study is derived from official documentation, including letters, reports, papers, put into the public domain by the University, and state agencies like the Department of Education (DOE) and the Auditor-General's Office. In addition, various other informal forms of documentation provided by individuals and constituencies associated with the institution were utilized as sources of data. This was supplemented by a number of interviews conducted with university managers, representatives of university constituencies, governmental officials, and individuals formerly associated with the institution. Interviews with internal university personnel were conducted on a site visit to UNITRA undertaken at the end of November 2000.

II: Elements of the Institutional Crisis

The institutional crisis of UNITRA is not new. Indeed, this crisis has been developing and been evident for some years. UNITRA itself has been the subject of numerous investigations since 1998. In September 1998, the then Minister of Education, Professor Sibusiso Bhengu, appointed Advocate Skweyiya as an independent assessor to conduct an investigation into the crisis of UNITRA.³ Partly as a response to Advocate Skweyiya's recommendation, the Auditor-General appointed a consortium of PriceWaterhouseCoopers in March 1999 to investigate the financial situation of UNITRA and to assist it through the preparation of a Business Plan "to move towards a higher level of self-sustainability and financial independence".⁴ Subsequently, the new Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, appointed a consortium of professional auditing firms to undertake business, performance and forensic audits on five public universities, including UNITRA. These investigations all concur that UNITRA is confronted with a multi-level crisis.

The most obvious and publicly exposed element of this crisis is its parlous state of finances. Since 1997, the institution has been running major annual deficits, and the auditor-general's commissioned study

Peter Roberts, 1999, "The Future of the University: Reflections from New Zealand", *International Review of Education*, vol. 45, no. 1.

³ This appointment was made in terms of sections 44 and 45 of the "Higher Education Act", No. 101 of 1997.

⁴ Office of the Auditor-General, "University of Transkei: Business Plan 1999", prepared by a consortium of PriceWaterhouseCoopers, p. 1.

projected a cash flow deficit of R60 million by the end of 1999.⁵ When UNITRA was unable to meet its normal operating expenditure at the end of 1999, the Department of Education (DOE) intervened and convinced the banks to provide an additional R50 million credit line facility for the institution. By the end of 2000, however, UNITRA was once again unable to cover its operating costs and was receiving monthly top-ups from the Department of Education. A large chunk of the Education Ministry's approximately R100 million redress fund intended for HBUs has effectively gone to enable UNITRA to continue keeping its doors open.⁶ These temporary band-aid solutions have not facilitated a financial turnaround. It is estimated that UNITRA's cash flow deficit at the end of March 2001 is likely to be R125 million while the state subsidy it is likely to receive in April 2001 is in the region of R95 million.⁷

Table 1: State of Finances of the University of Transkei 1994-1998*

	1998	1997	1996	1995	1994
Revenue	184,469,672	197,227,492	172,788,133	177,843,212	124,023,440
Expenditure	207,927,255	239,437,469	169,756,703	139,099,822	123,632,175
** Annual Surplus/Deficit	(23,457,583)	(42,209,977)	3,031,430	38,743,390	391,265
*** Revenue Fund/Year End	(50,454,690)	2,623,187	45,303,810	69,416,771	33,154,233

* The figures are drawn from financial statements in the auditor-general's report

** Includes salaries and operating expenditure, but excludes capital expenditure

*** Includes salaries, operating and capital expenditure

The institution's financial crisis is in part a product of low student enrolments.⁸ As Table 2 demonstrates, overall student enrolment rates have declined steadily since 1997. After reaching a historic high of 7 038 enrolled students in 1996, UNITRA has been experiencing a 17 percent decline on average per annum in its student enrolment rates. Its 3 793 students enrolled in 2000, represents a 46 percent decline on its 1996 student enrolment. This pattern of declining student enrollments has afflicted most faculties within the institution. Indeed, in certain faculties like Arts and Law, the consistent decline in student enrollment dates back to 1994. The only faculty to buck the trend is Medicine, which has increased its student enrollment by 41 percent from 390 students in 1994 to 550 students in 2000.

Student enrollment figures are not as yet available for 2001. However, despite an intensive and vigorous recruitment campaign, there is unlikely to be a major turnaround in this regard. Indeed, the Department of Education requested UNITRA to suspend first year enrolments in 2001, and it was only after the mobilisation of UNITRA's constituencies that the Ministry conceded and allowed the institution to enroll

⁵ Ibid, p. 4.

⁶ Interview with Nasima Badsha and Ahmed Essop, Chief Director, Planning and Support, Pretoria, 17 January 2001.

⁷ These estimates were provided by UNITRA's Director of Finance, Mr. J. W. Marler.

⁸ This translates into financial crisis because expenditure, and in particular the staffing component and structure, has remained relatively constant in this period.

first year students. This was allowed on the proviso that registering students will be informed of the possibility that they may be required to transfer to other institutions to complete their degrees.⁹

Table 2: Student Admission in the University of Transkei 1994-1998*

Year	Arts	Economic Sciences	Education	Law	Science	Medicine	Total	% Growth Rate
1994	1924	808	1972	1159	365	390	6628	(1)
1995	1896	862	2043	1131	415	404	6751	2
1996	1601	955	2716	973	409	384	7038	4
1997	1555	1011	2308	819	328	372	6393	(10)
1998	1296	977	1345	701	469	456	5244	(22)
1999	1028	813	1159	566	438	482	4486	(17)
2000	824	687	777	504	451	550	3793	(18)

* These figures were drawn from data provided by UNITRA's Academic Registrar, Prof. P. N. Luswazi.

The Ministry's decision not to enforce the suspension of first year enrollments in UNITRA registered with some disquiet in certain quarters. Many in the country question the academic credentials of UNITRA as well as those of other HBUs and believe that closure of such institutions is in the national interest. Questioning the academic credentials of these institutions is not new. Prior to 1994, the HBUs, particularly those located in the bantustans, were rarely perceived as serious academic institutions, and such perceptions have carried through into the post-apartheid era. Moreover, they have been reinforced by the exodus of skilled and highly trained staff from these institutions, who have had other employment opportunities opening up for them in the post-1994 period. Not surprisingly, management and staff at UNITRA bristle at this questioning of their institution's academic credentials. They accuse critics of being prejudiced against rural institutions,¹⁰ and point to their alumni, some of whom now occupy senior positions in business, government and the judiciary.¹¹

Table 3: Profile of Academic Staff – August 1998*

Faculty	Professor	Associate Professor	Senior Lecturer	Lecturer
Arts	12	3	28	73
Economic Science	3	1	9	16
Education	6	2	9	34
Law	3	0	8	7
Medicine	28	38	28	20
Science	10	8	12	54
TOTAL	62	52	94	204

* Source: Untitled UNITRA report on the Restructuring of Faculties and Programmes

⁹ Interview with Nasima Badsha and Ahmed Essop, Chief Director, Planning and Support, Pretoria, 17 January 2001.

¹⁰ This charge of urban bias was leveled by both Professor D.N. Jafta, the Dean of the Arts Faculty, and Professor P.N. Luswazi, the Academic Registrar, in separate interviews with them at the University of Transkei, 28 November 2000.

¹¹ Interviews with Professor Luswazi and Professor Chabane, 28 November 2000.

The counter-argument notwithstanding, however, a balanced assessment of UNITRA's staffing profile clearly calls into question the ability of the institution to discharge its academic responsibilities in a manner commensurate with sound higher education academic and intellectual practice. As Table 3 indicates, the majority of academic staff at UNITRA is concentrated at the lower end of the academic spectrum and most do not as yet have a doctoral degree. Former Vice-Chancellor Moleah himself recognised this problem as early as 1995 when he argued in his State of the University address that "...our academic programmes are seriously handicapped by staff shortages, with critical posts remaining unfilled. There is a chronic shortage of necessary resources and equipment. Our staff development remains lacking, which continues our being too bottom heavy in our teaching and research staff".¹² The situation does not seem to have improved dramatically since then. This is evident in the 1997 and 1998 UNITRA Annual Reports where Deans complained of staff shortages, poor qualifications, high staff-student ratios, and low research productivity.¹³ UNITRA's official documentation, then, point to serious problems within the institution around staff credentials and infrastructural provision. Such problems are bound to have an impact on the institution's ability to deliver high quality teaching and research. Although UNITRA is not the only institution to suffer from such problems, its institutional crisis has focussed attention on it, and it is thus more vulnerable to the charge of offering poor quality academic programmes.

By far the most debilitating element of the institutional crisis, however, was UNITRA's managerial incoherence and strife. Advocate Skweyiya's investigation into the discontent at UNITRA clearly details a history of 'acting positions' and abnormal, unprofessional managerial relations.¹⁴ Between 1992 and 1994, UNITRA went through two acting principals. It was hoped that much needed stability would be realised with the appointment of Professor Moleah as Vice-Chancellor and Principal in 1994. But this was not to be. Indeed, the institution hobbled on without a Vice-Principal (Academic) until 1997, and remained for the entire of 1996 without an academic registrar until Professor Luswazi's appointment. For much of Moleah's tenure and after, other senior posts including those of financial managers, human resource directors and administrative registrars remained unfilled for long periods. In addition, as noted by Skweyiya, Moleah's relationship with other senior managers was completely strained. He bypassed them, excluded them from substantive decision-making, and in some cases even replaced or appointed new managers in violation of university procedures. These strained relations clearly impacted on the ability of the institution to function as a cohesive entity. As the report of the consortium of auditors concluded:

Good communication by management, pivotal to the formation of mutual trust, was found to be lacking, preventing the formation of effective relationships. The inability of management to develop these essential, mutually beneficial relationships among senior

¹² Prof. A.T. Moleah, "State of the University Address", 20 February 1995, University of Transkei, p. 2.

¹³ See University of Transkei Annual Report 1997, pp. 6-18, and University of Transkei Annual Report 1998, pp. 6-22, both of which were published by the Office of the Vice-Chancellor.

¹⁴ Advocate T. L. Skweyiya, "Report on the Affairs of the University of Transkei", *Government Gazette*, 20 November 1998, pp. 16-20.

managers, and between them and other staff makes it virtually impossible to achieve adherence to their plans and decisions.¹⁵

Governance procedures similarly broke down for much of this period. The Skweyiya investigation clearly detailed the complete collapse of university structures including the Council, Senate, Academic Planning Committee (APC), and the University Personnel Committee (UPC). Even when they met, Skweyiya maintained, there was very little constructive and productive discussions.¹⁶ This resulted from the fact that both the pre-and post-1997 councils spent much of their time addressing inter-managerial strife and campus crises. The other university committees, including the Senate, APC, and UPC rarely met for they were effectively marginalised from substantive decision-making. Even when they met, they tended to be preoccupied with personality clashes and other matters surrounding the inter-institutional strife at UNITRA. Skweyiya's negative assessment is supported by the auditor-general's report which also noted the collapse of the university's committee system, and urgently called for the re-establishment and vitalisation of Council, Senate and other committees that enabled representative and transparent management.¹⁷

With the breakdown in management and governance processes, administrative systems completely disintegrated. The investigation of both the auditor-general and the consortium of auditors found UNITRA's administrative systems near complete collapse.¹⁸ Financial controls over income and expenditure are inadequate, and there is very little substantive control over fixed assets. No internal audits are conducted, and the management of outstanding debt is hopelessly inadequate. Almost all of the general human resource practises, including performance reviews and reward policies, are not implemented. Employee's abuse of their contractual obligations is rife. Maintenance of infrastructure is poor, leading to substantial long-term costs for the institution. In general, almost all sections of university operations in UNITRA are mired in crisis. It is this overall institutional crisis that has made UNITRA the subject of such intense scrutiny, and ultimately prompted Kader Asmall to appoint an administrator to the university.

But even this did not arrest the decline and crisis of the institution. The administrator, Dr. Nkosi, found himself mired in similar inter-managerial strife. His inability to rejuvenate the committee system or reestablish the administrative systems of control resulted in the financial deficit continuing to spiral, academic moral remaining at an all time low and inter-institutional strife being very much in evidence. Indeed, the failure of the administrator's stewardship was beyond dispute when a combined university structure, including senior managers, sent the Department of Education an unsolicited, unflattering

¹⁵ Prof. J. T. Steele, "Findings of the Audit of Five Public Universities", undated and unpublished, pp. 1-2.

¹⁶ Advocate T. L. Skweyiya, *op cit*, p. 21.

¹⁷ Office of the Auditor-General, *op cit*, p. 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 40-47; Prof. J. T. Steele, *op cit*, pp. 2-4.

assessment report of his year at UNITRA.¹⁹ This in part prompted the Ministry to send in a new administrator, Professor Nicky Morgan, in January 2001.

UNITRA's problems thus continue. Spiraling financial deficits. Declining student enrollments. Low academic moral. Continuous turnover in management. Collapse of governance structures and procedures. Inadequate administrative controls and systems. In short, UNITRA is mired in a serious and complete institutional malaise.

II: Conceptualising the Crisis

The institutional crisis at UNITRA, and that at other HBUs, has provoked a strong response from both government and the general public. Many of the responses conceptualise the crisis as a result of poor management and/or unrealistic expectations by students. While these factors might contribute to aggravating the problems at particular institutions, they on their own cannot account for the crisis at UNITRA, nor that at the other HBUs. In fact, there are major methodological problems with this conceptual account, which emphasises poor management as the root of the crisis. How does this conceptual account, for instance, explain the fact that different universities experienced a similar institutional crisis simultaneously? Moreover, how does it account for the fact that even with a change in management the crisis has persisted? This suggests that there are variables beyond poor management that must be considered in any understanding of the crisis at HBUs. More specifically, it must be asked whether the structural location of HBUs (in both geographic and institutional terms) propels such institutions into crisis?

i) The Structural Location of UNITRA

UNITRA, as indicated earlier, was a bantustan university. As such it was created for the training of, and to serve as an employment reservoir for, the Transkei homeland's middle classes.²⁰ It was never intended to be a research university of any note. Rather, its purpose was to serve as an undergraduate teaching college for the training of civil servants and their families. As a result of this mandate, it became a site of political contestation with one group buying the homeland ideology, while another used the institution as a platform against apartheid. In any case, as a result of the both its institutional mandate and its inevitable politicisation, the university was for a large part of its history shunned by leading lights of the South

¹⁹ This report, simply entitled University of Transkei, and dated 22 November 2000, was authored by a team representing students, staff, management, and the Umtata Community.

²⁰ Professor Chabane defines the role even more narrowly. He maintains that "before 1994 ... the university's position was basically to provide education, higher education ... to the vast majority of civil servants and teachers in the region who needed to improve their qualifications. That's what the vision was. And, to provide a fairly cheap, relatively cheap, higher education to the poor people around this region." Interview with Prof. Chabane, University of Transkei, 28 November 2000.

African academy. UNITRA, like other bantustan HBUs, was thus always perceived as a grade lower than other historically white South African universities who adopted the ethos of, and undertook the same kind of activities as their first world counterparts.

This institutional structural location of UNITRA as a lower grade bantustan university situated in the capital of the homeland had two significant implications for the institution in the era of apartheid. First, it had a captive student market. Apartheid restricted the educational mobility of students on the basis of racial and tribal ancestry. Moreover, with no other university in the Transkei, the homeland's middle classes, many of whom were located in Umtata, were restricted to UNITRA as their only avenue to higher education. This meant that a significant proportion of UNITRA's students had the financial resources and were academically relatively well prepared for tertiary education. Second, as a bantustan university, UNITRA was not a financially autonomous institution. In fact, it was treated as any other department within the homeland civil service, and had its finances taken care of by whichever regime was in power in the Transkei. In a very real sense, UNITRA was simply another line item in the budget of the Transkei's Department of Finance. A culture of financial accountability and modern systems of financial control were thus almost non-existent in the institution even as late as the 1990s.

This cocoon environment of UNITRA was shattered with the onset of South Africa's democratic transition. In fact, the transition almost turned the institutional environment on its head. Unlike previously, UNITRA was forced out of its academic isolation, and was now required to compete with other universities in South Africa. Or as Professor Chabane puts it, "...we were now going to be accepted as equals with other universities. We were now going to be treated as fellow South African citizens, unlike in the past, where UNITRA was just one of the so-called bush colleges." Like other HBUs, UNITRA's first response was to stress its disadvantage status, and claim that it aspired, like its historically white counterparts, to be a research university of excellence. Using its political capital, and the fact that it serviced a disadvantaged student base, UNITRA demanded specific allocations from the state for infra-structural build up to bring it on par with its historical white counterparts. In the words of ex-Principal Moleah, "UNITRA must be brought up the playing field, before any talk of leveling the playing field".²¹

The new competitive spirit, however, had its most dramatic impact in the area of student enrollment. Historically white universities, confronted with the charge of having being complicit in the oppression of the black population, went out of their way to demonstrate their commitment to both equity and transformation. This resulted in an aggressive recruitment drive on the part of these institutions to siphon off the cream of the black student population, many of whom were either located in, or would have been previously destined for the HBUs. Initially, institutions like UNITRA either did not care or notice the difference, for the transition had opened the floodgates of learning and thousands of students were

²¹ Prof. A.T. Moleah, "State of the University Address", 20 February 1995, University of Transkei, p. 5.

knocking on their doors. But when the dust settled two to three years later, two things were apparent. First, the black middle classes had abandoned the HBUs.²² In the case of UNITRA, this was facilitated by the transfer of much of the homeland's administration to Bisho, and the physical relocation of the families of the civil servants to East London. Second, the top black students were no longer at institutions like UNITRA. Lured by generous bursaries or simply by the desires to be more marketable or belong to more prestigious universities, these students moved on to either the Afrikaans or English speaking historically white universities. UNITRA had by default become a higher degree institution that serviced the poorest and the academically most disadvantaged component of our society. Just as importantly, this poor and academically disadvantaged sector was largely recruited from the increasingly depressed Umtata and surrounding areas.

These shifts in student enrollment coincided with a new era of financial accountability. The post-apartheid regime, in its zeal to demonstrate its fiscal prudence, demanded that all tertiary institutions become financially self-sustainable. Moreover, the new regime was committed to standardising the funding of tertiary institutions in South Africa. This meant that UNITRA was now obliged to be financially accountable. It had to take responsibility for its finances, and could no longer be guaranteed of automatic top-ups from the Ministry of Education. Second, UNITRA had always be funded at a level higher than that of other institutions. In an effort to rectify this abnormality, the Ministry gradually brought UNITRA's funding in line with that of other institutions. The net effect was steep declines in the government subsidy starting in the 1996 financial year. With no history or culture of fiscal prudence, UNITRA was now expected to become financially accountable in an era when it was experiencing significant declines in both its government subsidy and its student fee income base.

The structural location of UNITRA in the post-apartheid educational landscape, then, meant that it catered for the poorest and academically most disadvantaged. This is the foundation of UNITRA's institutional crisis. Poor students, unable to afford the fees for higher education, resorted to mass action, and the result was that boycotts around fees and exclusions became an annual event. These continuous boycotts undermined the already fragile public confidence in the institution, and increasingly UNITRA's programmes began to be perceived as being of poor academic quality. The marketability of UNITRA's graduates suffered, and the best staff and remaining few good students left as soon as other offers and opportunities became available. Moreover, with the bulk of its students academically disadvantaged, the university's failure rates sky-rocketed. And, since the government subsidy was calculated on both admissions to, and through-put rates of institutions, UNITRA's finances were quite severely affected. The net result was low morale, high staff turnover, rising failure rates, and increasing financial deficits, all of

²² Elite and middle class flight from public universities is not a peculiarly South African phenomenon. In Mexico, for instance, the upper and urban middle classes have begun to shun public universities in favour of private and in public nonuniversity institutions. For a discussion of this, see Levy, op cit.

which bred corruption and instability. A vicious cycle of destruction began to perpetuate itself within the institution.

UNITRA's institutional crisis thus emanates from weaknesses in the structure of higher education. Elsewhere I described this as follows:

The discriminatory funding formulae and the racialised nature of admissions in the higher education system lead to a situation where institutions are financially penalised for addressing the needs of the academically weakest and poorest of South Africa's students. This systemic contradiction lies at the root of the crisis of HBUs. As long as this systemic contradiction is not addressed higher education cannot be truly transformed. A long-term solution, then, must be directed to addressing the systemic contradiction in higher education. This would entail revising the funding formulae and compelling all higher education institutions, and in particular the historically white universities, to share equitably the burden of addressing our racialised educational legacy.²³

The solutions to UNITRA's problems thus lie in breaking the institutional structural logic that confines it to poor and academically disadvantaged students. Some of course believe that financially well off and academically good students are unlikely to move to places like UNITRA because of their rural location. In fact, Ahmed Essop Chief Director of Planning and Support in the Department of Education sees this as one of the primary obstacles inhibiting HBUs from attracting a better coterie of students.²⁴ While he is undoubtedly correct about the cultural unattractiveness of places like Umtata or Alice, it should be noted that some prestigious institutions across the world are located in rural settings, and have no problem attracting both academically and financially well off students. Even in South Africa, geographically isolated universities like Rhodes and Stellenbosch have had no problem attracting the cream of South Africa's student populace. Granted that these university towns have a vibrant student cultural milieu that makes them attractive. But such student cultural milieus did not always exist. Instead, they were created and facilitated by the staff and students of universities around which these towns were built. Similarly such student cultural milieus can be established in other settings if the appropriate resources and innovativeness is applied to these areas. The geographic structural location of UNITRA, then, need not become a permanent liability to the institution and could be transformed in ways that make it an attractive option for financially well-off and academically good students. Only if this happens would the structural conditions be available for UNITRA to transcend its background and become a truly excellent and representative centre of higher learning in South Africa.

ii) Managerial Contributions to the Institutional Crisis

²³ Adam Habib and Angina Parekh, 2000, "Transforming South Africa's University System: The Case for Strategic Mergers", *Perspectives in Education*, vol. 18, no. 3, p. 43.

²⁴ Interview with Nasima Badsha and Ahmad Essop, Pretoria, 17 January 2001.

Structural conditions prone UNITRA to crisis. But it was actors who translated this potential for crisis into reality. Evidence for this thesis lie in the fact that while almost all HBUs are in crisis, its severity and form differs quite substantively across institutions. The University of Durban-Westville (UD-W), for instance, has a financial deficit of less than R20 million, while that of the University of North and UNITRA exceeds R120 million. Institutional crises also tend to become less or more severe in different institutions. Fort Hare's and Medunsa's crises have eased in the last year, while UNITRA's has been aggravated. This suggests that variables beyond structural conditions, and in particular actor behaviour, must be factored in any understanding of the institutional crises confronting HBUs.

Structural conditions thus prone HBUs to crisis, but they do not make the collapse of these institutions inevitable. A skilled leadership with an appropriate vision, managerial ability, and political will may indeed avert institutional crisis and collapse. Such a leadership would have to understand the structural constraints confronting the institution, and chart a strategy to overcome these structural obstacles. In the case of UNITRA, this would have involved establishing a vision to restructure the institution in a way that would enable it to overcome the legacy of poor public perceptions of its academic programs, and just as importantly, free it from only servicing academically disadvantaged and financially poor students. A skilled leadership would have also had to legitimate itself, unite the various constituencies on campus behind this strategic vision, and thereby create an institutional spirit that would promote cooperative governance. This would have meant, at the minimum, drawing all stakeholders into the institutional turnaround project and reinvigorate the governance structures in UNITRA. Ultimately, if a turnaround was to become a reality, UNITRA's leadership would have had to forget 'management as usual', or even managing as other HWU institutions would have. Instead they would have had to innovate, specialize, and reorganize, and thereby create a niche market for UNITRA that would have enabled it to survive as an equal academic player in the new competitive higher education arena in post-1994 South Africa.

Clearly UNITRA's leadership were not up to this task. Its management, which was dominated for much of its post-apartheid history by Vice-Chancellor Moleah, was either incapable of, or did not see it as necessary to undertake any of the requisites identified above. Moleah's tenure at UNITRA extended from mid-1994 to mid-1999. When he arrived, UNITRA was just making its debut in the world and its political capital was at an all time high. It was in financial credit for over R60 million. Moreover in the year of his arrival and in the subsequent two years, UNITRA's student enrolment recorded successive historic highs. Yet when Moleah left office, UNITRA was facing a comprehensive institutional crisis, with huge financial deficits, falling student enrolments, collapse of managerial structures, and flagging staff moral.

Almost all interviews conducted with those internal and external to the university, point to Moleah as the principal actor responsible for this state of affairs. Although some of the charges laid at Moleah's feet might result from personal grudges held by individuals as a result of previous altercations with the vice-

chancellor, a careful independent review of his behaviour and management does suggest that the indictment is indeed warranted. In fact, the independent investigations like those conducted by Advocate Skweyiya and the auditor-general's office have also arrived at similar conclusions. Moleah's management was deficient in a number of ways. First, he lacked an appropriate strategic plan to develop UNITRA into a serious and well-respected institution of higher learning. The sum total of his vision, was a staff upgrading programme and a request that government provide UNITRA with a one-off grant to enable it to undertake infrastructural upgrading that would bring its facilities in line with those of HWUs.²⁵ While necessary, these elements on their own do not constitute a strategic plan. As indicated earlier, such a plan should reflect an understanding of the constraints on UNITRA, and how the university could be extricated from its current institutional structural location. Moreover, although there was flurry of activity and plans in the first few years of Moleah's term, these seem to have come to naught. As Professor Chabane maintains:

You know, we had to come up with new strategic planning documents. They sent in people from USAID to come and assist and things like that. But because of the style of governance of the administration by Moleah, even those efforts did not bear any fruit because people came, documents were written and things like that but there was no way of disseminating this information amongst the university communities. So the documents just remained in the files without having being owned by the institution.²⁶

Second, Moleah's managerial style both with individuals and constituencies left much to be desired. He ignored much of the university's rules and selection processes and appointed hand picked individuals to senior managerial positions. These individuals were empowered to bypass structures and ignore normal rules, processes and procedures required for transparent governance.²⁷ The result was a collapse of important operational structures that involved stakeholders and that serve as checks and balances in the management of public institutions. Moleah's interaction with other senior managers was also strained. Perhaps the most serious was his interactions with Professor Noruwana whose contract he tried to prevent being renewed and whose vehicle he refused to allow to be parked next to his on the grounds that this could jeopardize his security.²⁸ In a sense, Moleah's interactions with Noruwana suggest that all sense of trust and team spirit had broken down within the management, and as a result it was no longer capable of providing unified leadership to the institution.

Moleah's divisive managerial style was also reflected in interaction with constituencies like the students, staff, and council. In fact, Moleah was not above playing the politics of patronage, and often played

²⁵ This strategic vision was articulated in Moleah's inaugural address, state of the university address in 1995, and in the annual reports during his term in office.

²⁶ Interview with Prof. Chabane, University of Transkei, 28 November 2000.

²⁷ One example of this was the concentration of power in the hands of the Service Manager, Mr. Norman Bunn, who took over the responsibilities of the House and Physical Planning Committees. A major part of his responsibility included physical maintenance, security, gardens and grounds, allocation of physical space, housing for all staff, tendering procedures and transport. See Advocate T. L. Skweyiya, *op cit*, p. 20.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p.16.

constituencies against one another thereby aggravating tensions and divisions within the institution. Nowhere was this more evident than in the case of his conflict with the first council during his tenure, chaired by Fatima Meer. Moleah began his tenure with unanimous support for his candidacy. But within two years he was in major conflict with the council of the institution. The substance of the conflict was around a series of decisions in which the collective council differed with Moleah. These revolved around the payment of a salary to a staff member in accordance with university procedure, the renewal of deputy vice-chancellor Noruwana's contract with the institution, and council's refusal to sanction major capital expenditure when the financial resources were not available. Moleah's behaviour in the subsequent conflict was problematic on two grounds. First, he simply ignored council, defied its decisions, and proceeded to implement his own. This is unacceptable given the fact that council was his superior, and was statutorily defined as the most senior authority of the institution. Second, Moleah, playing the politics of patronage, co-opted students and some of the staff on to his side. The result was that he generalised the conflict across the institution, publicly undermined the authority of the council, and thereby weakened the checks and balances that were statutorily established for the management of public institutions. Clearly, the quid pro quo for student support was financial. Professor Chabane maintains that in the conflict with the council, Moleah could only hang onto his position through the students:

The students are the ones that went and carried him on their shoulders and brought him through the gates, threatening to deal with anyone who touched him. And part of that was to allow the students to do as they pleased... If anything he spent a lot of money on them. The SRC was splashing money left, right and centre and he was kind of using that as bait. The result was that students took advantage of that and they didn't pay and so the costs escalated.²⁹

Chabane's conclusion is that this ultimately aggravated the culture of non-payment of fees among students, thereby increasing the deficit that currently threatens the financial viability of UNITRA.

This then takes us to the final and most serious deficiency in Moleah's tenure at UNITRA, namely his financial mismanagement of the institution. Other than the unnecessary financial resources expended by playing the politics of patronage, Moleah also undertook a massive capital expenditure programme on his ascension to office. In his tenure, he built a new library, administrative block, and residence for students. Besides the fact that the tenure process and construction phase was riddled with corruption, cost-overruns, and shoddy workmanship,³⁰ most of the individuals interviewed question the necessity of the capital expenditure programme in the first place. They point to the fact, for instance, that the existing library could have been renovated, or just as importantly that the student residence now stands empty. Even more serious, however, is the fact that Moleah did not have the financial resources available to undertake such a

²⁹ Interview with Prof. Chabane, University of Transkei, 28 November 2000.

³⁰ An independent investigation into the construction program revealed a significant amount of irregularities. See P. Culligan's "Report on Current Project Planning, Irregularities in the Span of Control

massive capital expenditure programme. In fact, he seemed to have believed that if he went ahead and simply undertook the infrastructural development, government would subsequently feel pressured to come up with redress funding to cover the costs.³¹ But the plan backfired, and the capital expenditure plunged the institution into serious financial deficit.

Moleah was to a significant extent the architect of UNITRA's institutional crisis. But the broader managerial ranks must also take responsibility for the crisis. How is it that no significant player within the managerial ranks rose to challenge Moleah's rule or question his decisions? Indeed, it does seem as if UNITRA has been cursed with a particularly weak batch of managers in the post-1994 period. The investigation by the auditor-general's office, conducted in the post-Moleah period, indicated that managerial capacity within the institution was quite limited.³² It was this assessment that prompted acting vice-chancellor Malaza to resign and take up a directorship of research at the University of Cape Town. Similarly, the stewardship of Dr Nkosi, UNITRA's first administrator, did not achieve its desired end. In fact, as indicated earlier, Nkosi was unable to even discharge the Department of Education's limited mandate of restoring governance and establishing administrative systems and processes of control. Even now the institution has not been able to throw up somebody of the calibre of Derek Swart who arose from within Fort Hare's ranks to address its own institutional crisis. In response to President's Mbeki's request to do so at the end of 2000, UNITRA was only able to forward the name of deputy vice-chancellor Noruwana who has to date not demonstrated the capacity or vision to lead UNITRA. Once again Professor Chabane's remarks are instructive in this regard:

The Academic Planning Committee met to address this issue and you know what they did? When we were told that we must identify someone from within, you know what they've done? They identified the vice- principal who has been here since Moleah's time, the person who was at the centre of controversy with Moleah. Now, that immediately tells you that there is a dearth of leadership within. How can you go and identify someone who has not only been discredited by the commission, ... but ... has been at the centre of things and he has not been able to effect any change? It shows you that there is something wrong. That's what I mean by the leadership crisis. It's there.³³

iii) Stakeholder Contributions to the Institutional Crisis

Demonstrating managerial ineptitude must not be interpreted by any means to suggest that other stakeholders are exempt from complicity in the crisis. In fact managerial ineptitude was only allowed to continue as long as it did because of other stakeholders behaviour. The most obvious stakeholders that need

Exercised by Consultant, and High Costs of Present Project Management Appointment, and Recommendations to Revise the Current System”.

³¹ Ahmad Essop also felt that this was Moleah's game plan. Interview with Nasima Badsha and Ahmad Essop, Pretoria, 17 January 2000.

³² Office of the Auditor-General, op cit, p. 21.

³³ Interview with Prof. Chabane, University of Transkei, 28 November 2000.

to be taken to task are the internal constituencies, staff and students, both of whom allowed themselves to be used and manipulated in Moleah's game of patronage. Thus, it was students and staff affiliated to the local branch of UDUSA who sided with Moleah in his conflict with Council, and prompted by narrow, short-term financial gains, returned him to the campus under the threat of violence.³⁴ Senate, as the statutory established committee with the highest academic decision-making authority within universities, refused to take any significant position and thereby effectively remained paralysed for much of the Moleah era.³⁵ This ultimately undermined the system of checks and balances, established by the legislation, to ensure transparent, good governance and management at public institutions. The result was delays in appropriate intervention and an aggravation of the institutional crisis at UNITRA.

But all blame cannot be placed at the door of internal constituencies. The second council in the Moleah period, chaired by Dumisane Ntsebeza, must also take a large share of the blame for the institutional crisis, if only because it refused to act timeously. Only in the end, when the crisis had become all too obvious, and the Skweyiya commission had issued a damning indictment of Moleah's management, did the council move to act against the vice-chancellor. Part of the reason for Council's reluctance to act might emanate from the fact that Moleah had played a disproportionate influence on the selection of council members. In fact, interviews conducted and the Skweyiya commission indicate, that there was a widely held view within UNITRA that this was Moleah's handpicked Council.³⁶ Ntsebeza and Moleah were known to be close friends, and for a while there was the rumour that Ntsebeza inappropriately benefited by renting his house in Umtata to university officials. Although the Skweyiya commission exonerated Ntsebeza for any fraudulent or illegal behaviour, it was moved to remark that council members should be careful not to engage in activities that might compromise their independence.³⁷ In the light of this, rumours continue to persist about the Ntsebeza-Moleah relationship, and whether this undermined Council's capacity or will to act as a check against inept management.

Council's complicity in the institutional crisis of UNITRA is mirrored in the behavior of the Chancellor and the Department of Education. The Chancellor, who is President Mbeki, is expected to be above the fray and serve as a unifying figure for the institution as a whole. Yet, in Moleah's conflict with the first Council, the Chancellor acted inappropriately, sided with the vice-chancellor, and undermined Council's right to act as a check against autocratic and dictatorial management. In the 'Gumbi conflict' between Moleah and Council, the Chancellor intervened, demanded the professor's resignation and agreed to limit her back pay

³⁴ The investigation conducted by the auditor-general's office revealed that the SRC overspent on average by 70 percent per annum.

³⁵ Professor Chabane suggests that the Senate's paralysis might in part stem from the fact that most of its members are expatriates who are reluctant to get embroiled in political conflict. Interview with Prof. Chabane, University of Transkei, 28 November 2000.

³⁶ Advocate T. L. Skweyiya, *op cit*, p. 22.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 23.

to June 1995, in defiance of a council resolution.³⁸ More seriously, when Moleah appointed his own council, thereby effectively dismissing the first one, the Chancellor, without any consultation with the original council chair, gave Moleah's illegitimate actions a blessing by attending the graduation ceremony. Thus when asked about the appropriateness of the Chancellor's intervention, the first Council chair commented that "the chancellor played rather a pernicious role in the whole thing. ...the chancellor accepted a council, which we would claim, usurped our rights".³⁹

The Minister of Education's behavior was very similar. In the conflict between the first Council and Moleah, Minister Bhengu clearly sided with the latter. When the council chair as a result of a resolution passed at the special meeting of council on 14 March 1996, submitted a report to the Minister and requested his intervention in the conflict, the plea was ignored. Prompted for a response with regards to the Minister's and the Department of Education's stance, Nasima Badsha and Ahmed Essop were unable to cast any light on the matter. In fact, they were even unaware of council chair's request for intervention, and claimed that there was no correspondence on file in this regard.⁴⁰ Moreover, when Moleah appointed a new council, and effectively dismissed the first one, the Minister and the Department of Education stood by and did not intervene, even though this was in blatant disregard of the legislation and all normal corporate governance procedures. Mxoleli Nkuhlu, UNITRA's Legal Administration Officer, expresses a widely held view within UNITRA that,

With the intervention of the Ministry he (Moleah) was allowed to be at the helm and continue to plunder the resources of the institution. The power had been taken away from the institutional leadership... so much so that he was given a free hand ... to set up a council of his own, which, in the view of a number of people on campus, was more characteristic of people who were dancing to his tune.⁴¹

The behavior of the Chancellor and the Minister does suggest that they condoned Moleah's action. More significantly, their behavior had the effect of undermining the structures of governance within the institution that were legislatively established to serve as checks on management and prevent maladministration and institutional crisis. Thus, it is difficult to fault UNITRA personnel who claim that they have to pay the penalty for an institutional crisis in part created by acts or omissions of the political authorities themselves.

³⁸ The council's resolution passed on 23 November 1995, and subsequently reconfirmed on 5 December 1995 and 14 March 1996, upheld the not-guilty finding of the disciplinary hearing and moved that Professor Gumbi should be paid her salary and benefits up to the end of December 1995.

³⁹ Interview with Fatima Meer, Durban, 15 November 2000.

⁴⁰ Interview with Nasima Badsha and Ahmed Essop, Pretoria, 17 January 2001.

iv) The Role of Structure and Agency in the UNITRA Crisis

The story of the evolution of UNITRA's institutional malaise, developed in the preceding pages, demonstrates that the university's crisis is a product of both structural factors and agential behaviour. The primary structural factor informing the crisis is UNITRA's location in the institutional landscape of higher education. This location confines it to servicing financially poor and academically disadvantaged students. The result is increasing student debt and high failure rates. UNITRA as an institution is penalised for this. Its subsidy, currently predicated on both enrollments and through-put rates, is lowered as a result of the high failure rates – a situation further compounded by its steadily declining student enrollments. Students are increasingly being encouraged to explore other avenues of higher education because of the perceptions of academic crisis and political instability at institutions like UNITRA. Such perceptions arise from the continuous student strikes that emerge around student fees and academic and financial exclusions. The institutional structural location of UNITRA thus fosters a vicious cycle of student strikes, political instability, falling enrollments and high failure rates, declining subsidies, and ultimately financial bankruptcy. It is a self-perpetuating legacy that lends UNITRA to institutional malaise and crisis.

UNITRA's structural location thus creates the potential for institutional crisis. But the potential need not have become a reality. As indicated earlier, an institutional leadership with an understanding of the structural constraints on the university, and the managerial skill to chart a strategic plan out of this structural logjam may have succeeded in averting an institutional collapse. But the actors in UNITRA's saga were clearly unable to do this. Instead they translated this structural potential for crisis into actual reality.

Two sets of actors are identified in the preceding pages, namely management and other stakeholders. Management, in both the Moleah and Nkosi periods was incapable of executing its duties. It did not demonstrate the vision or develop a strategic plan that identified its structural problems and chart a solution to them. Its vision was effectively one of infrastructural upgrading so that UNITRA's facilities would be brought on par with those of HWUs. Like almost all commentators on higher education in South Africa in the mid-1990's, UNITRA's management assumed that massification of higher education would continue. More importantly, it did not recognize the structural implications of solely servicing academically disadvantaged and financially poor students. Instead, the UNITRA management welcomed the move in the early years and assumed that disadvantaged students would become their niche market. While laudable, it was a suicidal institutional strategy. In a neo-liberal economic environment where financial sustainability is the name of the game, the reliance on disadvantaged students became a liability. The lack of fee-paying students limited the institutional space for cross-subsidisation. Moreover, it pruned the institution to an ever-deepening vicious cycle of annual fee protests, instability, and negative perceptions, ultimately leading

⁴¹ Interview with Mxoleli Nkuhlu, Legal Administration Officer at UNITRA, 29 November 2000.

to falling student enrollments and increasing financial crisis. The management's strategic plan, then, instead of charting a solution to the crisis, in fact entrenched UNITRA's institutional structural location and thereby aggravated the crisis.

The failure to develop an appropriate strategic plan, however, was not the only weakness of the UNITRA management. Indeed, just as serious was its inability to establish administrative and financial systems of control that would have enabled it to provide effective administration. Systems of administration in the university had always been weak in particular because the institution had for much of its history been regarded by the homeland regime as just another government agency. Yet instead of addressing these administrative weaknesses, the UNITRA management undermined the few administrative controls that did exist through its decisions and behavior. Perhaps the most serious of these was its inability to harness the collective energies of staff and students into a common project of building the university. Rather, management in both periods, partook in institutional conflicts, manipulated divisions within the university, and ultimately undermined the possibility for cooperative governance.⁴² The result was to generalise across the university the struggle among constituencies, particularly over resources, thereby aggravating the culture and climate of conflict, instability, and institutional malaise.

Other stakeholders, including the institutional expressions of staff and students, and council, the department of education and the chancellor, all of whom in various ways could have served as checks on management and arrested this decline into institutional malaise, failed to do so. In some cases these stakeholders failed to execute their legislative and constitutional responsibility. Instead, through omission or acts of commission, they allowed themselves to be manipulated and divided. The result was a collapse in the governance structures of UNITRA and a failure in the effective functioning of the system of checks and balances that were legislatively established to prevent maladministration and institutional crisis. The failures of management and other stakeholders in developing a strategic plan, establishing cooperative governance, and restructuring the systems of administrative and financial control, then, led to the entrenchment of UNITRA's structural location in the landscape of higher education. And, it was this structural location that catapulted it into the crisis and institutional malaise that it currently finds itself mired in.

UNITRA's crisis is thus a product of the dialectical relationship between structural variables and agential behavior. It is a product of its historical structural location in the higher education landscape, the ineptitude of its management, and the failure of its internal and external stakeholders to execute their legislative function of acting as a check against poor management and inappropriate behaviour among all internal

⁴² Cooperative governance is an integral feature of the philosophy governing the transformation of higher education in South Africa that is implicit in the Higher Education Act of 1997. It recognizes competing and complementary interests, interdependence and common goals, and requires of all institutional stakeholders to share accountability, responsibility and power. See the Department of Education, 1997, "Education

constituencies. Structure and agency, and their interactions, have defined and continue to inform UNITRA's crisis. Is this likely to change? Is UNITRA likely to arrest its decline, and find a way out of its structural institutional malaise? This is the question that currently preoccupies the attention of both higher education scholars and policy practitioners in South Africa.

III: Options for the Future

What is it that needs to be done at UNITRA? Clearly the university cannot go on with business as usual. If things are left as they are, UNITRA is unlikely to overcome its institutional crisis. In fact, the institution is likely to sink deeper into debt with all the subsequent repercussions for its academic legitimacy and financial stability. Should UNITRA be closed down, as some would argue? Or, as many in UNITRA would hope for, should it be restructured as a developmental higher degree institution directed to addressing the needs of, and catering for residents in, the Umtata region? Finally, should it be merged with other institutions in the Eastern Cape as the Council on Higher Education (CHE) intimated in its 'Shape and Size' document?⁴³

Clearly, the first option, which is closing down UNITRA, is not feasible. If it were to be exercised, it would represent a socio-economic disaster for the Umtata region. The unhappiness and tension such a decision would engender within the structures of the ANC, and the political protests it is likely to elicit in the Transkei region of the Eastern Cape suggests that there is unlikely to be the political will within government to close down UNITRA. But there is a substantive case, other than 'realpolitik', for retaining the institution. South Africa is a developing nation struggling to integrate itself into the competitive, knowledge based global economy, and its economic success is largely dependent on its ability to develop the human resource base of its citizenry.⁴⁴ This effectively means that the country may need to maintain all its higher education institutions if the human resource needs of the country are to be met. If these institutions are not doing what is required, or if students are not enrolling in them, the reasons for this must be determined and the problems addressed. Simply closing down educational institutions is not the answer. Neither is such a decision in the political and socio-economic interests of the nation.

White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education", General Notice 1196, Pretoria: Government Printer.

⁴³ See Shape and Size of Higher Education Task Team, Council on Higher Education, 2000, *Towards a New Higher Education Landscape: Meeting the Equity, Quality and Social Development Imperatives of South Africa in the 21st Century*, Pretoria: Council on Higher Education, p. 61.

⁴⁴ The CHE 'Shape and Size' document quotes Jan Sadlak of UNESCO who maintains that there is a clear correlation between the level of participation in higher education and economic development. Sadlak's view is that "any society that does not give at least 12% of the age group access to higher education does not have any chance to survive in the type of future that lies ahead". Quoted in Shape and Size of Higher Education Task Team, Council on Higher Education, op cit, p. 48.

Should UNITRA, then, simply be restructured and redirected to catering for the residents of the Umtata region? This is clearly the preferred option of staff at UNITRA. Most of those interviewed within the institution recommend this option with the caveat that an appropriately skilled management is put in place.⁴⁵ But even if an appropriate management is found, and UNITRA directed to catering for the residents of the Umtata region, the university is unlikely to resolve its current crisis. In fact, it is likely that the institution would be plunged further into crisis. This is because the crisis is largely the result of structural factors, namely that UNITRA's institutional location means that it is primarily the home of financially poor and academically disadvantaged students. Redirecting the institution to catering for Umtata residents, while noble, is unlikely to address this problem. Rather it is likely to aggravate these structural problems especially since Umtata is undergoing a severe economic recession. When those interviewed in UNITRA were confronted with this scenario, the response most often was that the state should take responsibility for completing subsidising UNITRA. This is, however, unlikely given the government's commitment to a restrictive macro-economic policy. UNITRA's recommended solution, then, is unlikely to address the current crisis confronted by the institution.

The CHE option of merging institutions in the Eastern Cape has a far greater potential of addressing this crisis.⁴⁶ But it is dependent on how the merger is done. More specifically, specialisation has to be a central plank of the merger. If this is not done, and institutions remain as they are, the existing problem within the higher education institutional landscape will continue to manifest itself, but this time within the single institution itself. Thus the UNITRA and Fort Hare campuses will continue to run deficits, and thereby pull the entire merged institution into the crisis. If the merger, on the other hand, is undertaken on the principle of specialisation, then, the student pool, both advantaged and disadvantaged, rich and poor, is likely to be equitably distributed. In effect, this would amount to a transformation of the structural institutional location of the Transkei and Fort Hare campuses. If a good, visionary management is put in place, and appropriate administrative systems established, then, the merged institution would be both financially cost effective and have the best chance of meeting the human resource needs of the region. In addition it would represent a fundamental and equitable transformation of the higher education landscape in the Eastern Cape.

Is this option likely to be undertaken in the near future? If we were to go by the fears of UNITRA, and other university staff in the Eastern Cape, the answer would be yes. But a more sober assessment suggests that this option is unlikely in the near future. There is currently too much opposition within the universities for such a merger. Of the interviews conducted at UNITRA, almost all opposed the merger option.⁴⁷ Much of this opposition was motivated on the grounds that staff members are convinced that a merger is simply

⁴⁵ Interview with Dr Nkosi, UNITRA, 28 November 2000; Interview with Prof. P.N. Luswazi, UNITRA, 28 November 2000.

⁴⁶ Shape and Size of Higher Education Task Team, Council on Higher Education, *op cit*, p. 61.

⁴⁷ The exception was Mr. Nkuhlu who supported a merger of universities in the Eastern Cape, but felt that it needed to be undertaken sensitively.

another mechanism to effect retrenchments and closure. Some also expressed a concern that the institutional culture of HBUs would be lost in the merger process.⁴⁸ Moreover, the Department of Education has to date not demonstrated the political will to tackle entrenched interests within the universities.⁴⁹ Neither has it provided firm and decisive leadership within the higher education arena. This timidity of the Department of Education, together with the opposition within universities, suggests that mergers are unlikely to be undertaken, in the Eastern Cape at least, in the near future.

IV: Some Concluding Reflections

UNITRA's institutional crisis can only be really understood as a product of the dialectical interplay of structural and agential variables. The primary structural factor informing this crisis is UNITRA's location in the institutional landscape of higher education - a location that confines it to servicing financially poor and academically disadvantaged students – which mires the institution in a vicious cycle of student strikes, political instability, falling enrollments and high failure rates, declining subsidies, and ultimately financial bankruptcy. Agential variables include among others, managerial failures to develop a strategic plan and establish administrative and financial systems of control, and the omissions and commissions of other stakeholders like council, staff, students, the Department of Education, and the Chancellor of the institution, all of whom either contributed to the collapse of governance structures and cooperative governance and/or failed in their legislative duty to act as a check against poor management and inappropriate behaviour among all internal constituencies. Agency behavior and decisions thus entrenched UNITRA's structural location in the landscape of higher education, thereby catapulting it into the crisis and institutional malaise that it currently finds itself mired in.

This institution's story is not unique. Although there might be particular elements of this experience specific to UNITRA, much of it has been experienced in, and can be generalised to, the other HBUs. This suggests that there are number of lessons that can be drawn from the UNITRA experience and applied elsewhere.

⁴⁸ Interview with Professor Luswazi, 28 November 2000. Prof. Luswazi argues that, The historically black universities in America, many of them died, when they were linked to white universities. I'm saying no, because if you link a powerful partner ... to a weaker one, then its obvious that the weaker one gets swallowed up. We also have questions about the history, that there's history here, there's history at Fort Hare. Fort Hare is the cradle ... of African intellectualism. How then do you maintain Fort Hare, that history, as a heritage site, if you merge it with Rhodes.

⁴⁹ The Australian experience suggests that government pressure is indispensable for facilitating mergers among universities. See Grant Harman, "Australian Experience with Institutional Mergers in Higher Education", paper delivered to the National Seminar on Higher Education Management Reform in China, Shanghai, 28-30 July 1999.

First and foremost, there needs to be the realisation that UNITRA's crisis is largely a result of the institution's structural location in the higher education landscape. And this is the same structural location as that of other HBUs. The crisis of HBUs thus emanates from a single structural source, and there is unlikely to be financial stability and academic credibility in these institutions so long as this structural problem is not addressed. Second, the UNITRA experience suggests that bad management can seriously aggravate an institution's crisis. Firm, transparent and able management is necessary at these institutions. Yet, when selecting senior management, stakeholders at HBUs are often more concerned with political considerations rather than managerial ones. If political considerations were set aside, HBUs might attract a far better coterie of managers than they currently do.

Third, the UNITRA experience suggests that the best antidote to bad management is effective governance, particularly at the level of Council. Council's primary role is to monitor management and to see that it operates within the framework of institutional and legislated policies. Firm decisive leadership at council is indispensable if an institution is to be well managed. It particularly becomes necessary in institutions with poor managers. When such managers are not checked, institutions can be virtually destroyed. Given this onerous responsibility of Council, the UNITRA experience suggests that far more attention needs to be paid to how councils are constituted. Currently management's and in particular the vice-chancellors have far too great a role in determining the make-up of their council. The result is that councils can become buddy networks, which makes it impossible for them to play their role of effective check on management.

Finally, the UNITRA experience suggests that firm decisive leadership and timely interventions by the Department of Education are also necessary. The department's failure to intervene in 1996 and 1997 in UNITRA undermined the academic credibility and financial stability of the institution. And, when the department did intervene through the administrator in 2000, the damage had already been done. It is an open question whether the administrator is an appropriate institutional mechanism to arrest institutional crises at HBUs, re-stabilise these institutions, and re-establish their administrative, financial and governance systems. The limited experience of UNITRA suggests not. It seems as if this task is too huge for any single individual, and the department might want to consider the deployment of a diversely skilled team to stabilise institutions in crisis. Moreover, while the Department of Education has to chart a careful path between institutional autonomy and intervention, the UNITRA experience does suggest that it needs to be more open to intervening earlier, especially when councils make the request, or when blatant mismanagement or violation of the legislation is obvious. Failure to do so simply aggravates the crisis and forces the department to deal with a far bigger problem later than would have been the case had it originally intervened.

The failure to arrest crises at HBUs is one of the more serious failings of the post-apartheid regime. This is because the collapse of institutions like UNITRA does not simply represent a case of institutional collapse,

but one of societal collapse. As indicated earlier, HBUs are not only educational and intellectual institutions, but they are also in most cases the largest employers in the region. Their closure is thus not simply an educational failure; it is ultimately a social catastrophe. Umtata and the Eastern Cape more generally, have been designated by the Department of Trade and Industry as an area intended for economic rejuvenation. Yet there has not been a coordinated governmental response to the social malaise of the Transkei. Had there been such a response, the Department of Education's intervention would have been far more than the simple re-establishment of administrative systems. It would have involved the establishment of a plan and the investment of resources for the revitalisation of UNITRA, as a catalyst for the economic rejuvenation of the entire region. It would have involved a coordinated intervention from the Departments of Trade and Industry, Education, Health and Transport to not only turnaround UNITRA, but the entire Transkei as well. For it is only such a coordinated intervention that can rescue UNITRA and other rural HBUs from institutional collapse, and enable them to make the social and economic contribution they were intended to make to the regions within which they located.