

# *Studying at the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg) in the 1970s*

*by Adrian Furnham*

This article is a reflection of my experiences as a student at the University of Natal (UN, Pietermaritzburg). Understanding the past is important because it benchmarks the present. At one extreme are those who believe the old UN was a very fine, almost world standard, university now in ‘vertiginous decline’ as one recent book put it. At the other extreme are those who want to look back at a small, cut-off, apartheid-era, community college with delusions of grandeur that has become, through radical change, a fine, international university known for its rather undefined African scholarship. Of course, there are intermediate positions that speak of change and development rather than improvement or decline. It is still an important issue partly because it reflects on the senior administrators and partly because it influences donors from both state and private sectors. The alumni, of whom I am one, look back mostly, I believe, with pride; rather unhappy with those who challenge their memories. And there are those in high office who see the new university as a vast improvement over the past and are delighted with its new name, structure and reputation.

I entered the university in 1970 graduating with three (not the two usual) major subjects (Divinity, History and Psychology). I then completed an honours degree in Psychology (1973) followed by an MA (1975). I then went to England to complete two further masters degrees: MSc (Econ.) at LSE (1976) and an MSc at Strathclyde in Glasgow (1977). Then I went straight to Oxford to complete a DPhil in 1981. I later received a DSc from London (1991) and a DLitt from Natal (1997). I was a college lecturer in Oxford (Pembroke, 1979–1982) and professor at University College, London (UCL, 1992–2018). I have been an academic all my life.

Many of my friends and classmates have done well academically. One is a professor at Cambridge, another at a top American university. I have contacted a few recently and all say the same. As one, now a multimillionaire in America, who went on to Oxford, noted: ‘I

have the highest regard for the teaching we received at Maritzburg College and the University of Natal. But like all education it was intended (I assume) merely to get you interested; from then onward, you are on your own.’ All universities are what you make of them. They are there to inspire, to teach critical thinking and to widen horizons.

I set out the above not to show off a misspent youth avoiding adulthood, responsibility and productive labour, but rather to attempt to provide some credibility for what follows. It is because I had extensive comparative data from different universities that I believe I can comment on my alma mater relatively objectively.

The question is: can or should one believe the old boy or girl at the class reunion? Or as someone looking back with rose-tinted, behaviour-justifying observations only perhaps tenuously correlated with others’ impressions of the time? I know about selective memory; indeed, published on the topic. Universities have positively cashed in on the tendency of their alumni to have selective memory in attempts to raise money. As a graduate of four, I know their enthusiasm for reminding me, with begging bowl at the ready, of the good old days and how grateful I should feel. I should note that I have made three attempts to give a significant donation to the University of KwaZulu-Natal only to be met by total lack of enthusiasm and follow through.

Thus, I have tried to make this evaluation not too biased, nostalgic or selective a memoir. Psychologists talk of dissonance reduction, marketers of buyers’ nostalgia and historians of particularist interpretations. Of course, this is subjective, but I shall try my best to be honest, if nothing else, to my memory of the past. I have also shown it to half a dozen friends from that period for their feedback and have made a number of changes.

But there is of course an elephant in the room here: the possibility of being some sort of crypto-apartheid apologist. The year 1970 was pretty well both the high point and the mid-point of apartheid (1948–1994). So, anyone claiming anything good about that time stands charged with being a supporter of an abhorrent,

discredited, evil philosophy. What if one heard Germans praising the universities of their country in 1938, or Iberian universities (both Spanish and Portuguese) during the long post-war years of Franco, Salazar or Caetano? It is likely that one would be sceptical. But that should not censor one in trying to be honest.

Surely, one may argue, the values of the surrounding society profoundly influence all aspects of university life ranging from who goes to, and teaches at, a university to what is taught, or more importantly what is not taught. How could an institution propagating the values of the Enlightenment not be inhibited or derailed by the brutality and philistinism of the surrounding society?

For some, then, any positive comment about the university is that of an apologist for apartheid. They would choose to overlook that some universities were sites of resistance, though largely compliant in the 1950s and 1960s. Great liberals, and that perhaps is where the problem lies, were based at universities. With courage they confronted the evils of the system and the hope of a just, fair, democratic society. I shall not go down that path. I am interested in the quality of the education I and others received. This is my evaluation of my past.

### **Personal experience**

The university, founded in 1910, was on three campuses. The oldest of the three, in Pietermaritzburg, literally bordered our garden. I must have had a dozen friends who were the children of professors. We played touch rugby in the Agriculture faculty grounds from the age of 8. We attended plays and concerts in the university's Old Main Hall.

Going to university was a natural extension of school: seventeen of the eighteen boys in 6A (the top sixth form matric class) went there. It was expected. About half of us were the first generation to go to university. I was 16, but only for a few days before turning 17, when I went to university. And the transformation from school to university was a rather unwelcome shock. There were lots of girls, a lot of very unfamiliar people and not much structure. My youth, sheltered upbringing and naïveté soon showed.

The first couple of months had some memorable highlights. In the first week, Freshers' Week, there was induction (read bullying), humiliation and general mayhem. We had to wear large rosettes indicating our lowly status. This made us, like the Jews of Germany with their yellow stars, easy to spot. Older students, always men, could demand various fagging-type chores.

But I was lucky. I was oppidani: I lived at home

and was not resident in the halls where one could be trapped. In fact, I need not have attended any of the evening events where we were taught all the university songs including the university anthem ('Natale solum canimus'); and of course, 'Gaudeamus igitur' (And so let us rejoice) and some pretty bawdy South African drinking songs. The rugby ethos again: cultureless, tedious, compulsory. Many of the students suffered far worse when they were drafted into the army. It was, by-and-large, high-spirited rather than cruel or humiliating and no one ever complained. And until I was 40, I could still remember at least the first verse of many famous university drinking songs.

However, it was certainly the centre of culture in the town. The cultural clubs and societies on campus on the old UNP campus were stimulating: Dramsoc (not the Speech and Drama department), the Choral Society, the Debating Society, Cathsoc, Ansoc, SCA (Student Christian Association), Rag Variety, and so on.

I registered for a BA. In the first week the dean spoke to us. He was a small, impish and mischievous man I later sought out to supervise my MA. He was different: an Afrikaner on a campus, in a town and in a province where over 90% of whites were English speakers. He had been a student with Hendrik Verwoerd, the architect of apartheid. Furthermore, he had been, at least by reputation, a brilliant student, winning scholarships to America and working with some of the famous names in early Psychology. This little man bore a frightening similarity to Goebbels. He had the same limp, the same grimacing smile, the same enigmatic aura. It was also known that he had been an alcoholic; long since dry. And he had connections.

The university of which I remain proud had clever, dedicated men and women. Most were South African born but educated first at home and then overseas. There was that generation who left and returned armed with fine postgraduate degrees to take up comfortable positions in their colonial enclave. And they went to the top-ranked universities. Half of my teachers had been to Oxbridge, but there were others with Princeton, Harvard and London degrees. All were aware that colonial standards were not quite up to those of the metropole and most were determined to rectify that. And that required good teaching.

I was taught by various young junior lecturers just back from the thrill and excitement of their great overseas adventure. But, predictably, the good ones, both in terms of ability and morality, saw the writing on the wall and went abroad to join that great diaspora

of the wandering white South Africans: a lesser breed than the great albatross. Of course, a number of excellent people stayed on including one of my lecturers in English, destined later to become a vice chancellor of the university and much later of a British university. And there were exotic foreigners other than a number of British emigrants like my parents. I was taught Divinity by a white Russian, History by an American and Afrikaans/Nederlands and German by natives of their respective countries.

The university clung onto tradition and liberalism even in those dark days. The period 1965–1970 was probably the high point of apartheid. Sanctions had not bitten. The war against the Portuguese and Rhodesians had not yet intensified. Black people still knew their place. The economy was doing well. The oil crisis had not struck. The gold price was high. But the year I left, 1975, was very different. The revolution had occurred and the Portuguese were pulling out of Mozambique. The Rhodesian bush war was not going well. We were all aware of the security police on campus: indeed, I was interviewed by one. Some of the lecturers were deported. There were student spies, as was later revealed, and an increasing politicisation of everyday life. By the mid-1970s, academic and cultural boycotts had begun. Indeed, academic visitors became very rare and those who did come seemed not to be the best.

Traditions were observed in many ways. Lecturers always wore gowns to lecture. In the sciences they wore white coats. So, I was much entertained by a brilliant lecturer who taught personality theory in a gown, but psychometrics in a white coat. It indicated the extent to which I thought the topics sufficiently and rigorously scientific. Lecturers called you Mr or Miss. They spoke properly – you took luncheon in the senior common room. And so on. The old buildings of the campus dated from 1910 and looked right.

There were only 2 500 students on campus. Departments were small and therefore lecturers taught a lot: by any standard they had a heavy teaching load, which most took very seriously. Most were educated liberals.

I read four subjects in first year, four in the second and three in the third. At one stage I was the only student reading Divinity and Maths in the same year. For most subjects lectures were a note-taking exercise, although we had interesting practicals in Psychology taught by a genius. A teetotaler, he was killed by a drunk driver at 6.00 am one day trying to save his dog on their early morning walk.

First year was difficult. I was noticeably more immature than many friends. I struggled with English, being too literal in my interpretation and too wooden in my writing. Saturdays were still Boy Scout days. Living



*Old Main Building, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg in January 1975*

at home with a sick father and old grandmother was not easy. But I did well in the second year.

### **The selection process**

‘Look to the left and to the right of you’, said the dean of Arts at a first welcome lecture on a hot February morning in 1970; ‘Only one of the three of you will get into second year.’ He was right. The noticeboard under the Jacaranda trees in early December seemed more dominated by Fs than any other symbol or letter like 2/2s or 1sts.

It was not difficult to get to university but it appeared that the selection happened there, not before one got there. It was a deeply inefficient and ineffective policy. It seemed common and cool to plug (that is, fail) your first year. Was this because the state-controlled education policy and syllabus turned out dull students (in every sense)? No: it was because the universities set different standards from the State.

At other universities I have attended and taught at, selection occurred mostly before getting to university. Indeed, at the university where I used to teach, UCL rated among the top ten in the world, I have only known a handful to fail in thirty years. By contrast, around 50% of students in my first year at UNP failed something, if not all their exams. What did this reflect? The poverty of the school system? The high standards of the university?

But was it so easy to go to university? At my school there were seven sixth-form classes (6A to 6G). Each class had around twenty boys. All the top class, except two, and five from 6B went to university making it around 22 of 180 boys, so perhaps I was wrong – it wasn’t that easy.

The dux of the school failed his first year, but another person in my class got only first-class marks for all three years. They both read Engineering. One reason for the failure rate was the contrast between school and university. School was about discipline, order and conformity. Teachers controlled all aspects of your life. Like Pavlovian rats, bells controlled our lives. At university it was entirely up to you. Lectures were voluntary; nothing, it seemed, was compulsory. And, at least if you were in the Arts the workload was fairly light. And you were introduced to new, astonishing liberal ideas. I recall a course on Christian Apologetics in Divinity classes and having to evaluate numerous critiques of which I had never heard before – such as humanist, Freudian, Marxist, rationalist – of Christianity. So, to be totally free and personally responsible

came as a shock. Worse, it was no shame to fail; indeed, possibly the reverse. It was cool, a sign of manhood and a badge of honour. No one mentioned the words dim or lazy. One failed because one drank too much, played too much sport or generally had a good time.

No university I ever attended after UNP was at all like this. At UCL, 1 in 15 who applied was successful. They were selected for, among other things, their conscientiousness, which they were required to practise from day one. None of the South African English-language universities had this ethos. On the question of how widespread that was, I cannot comment; but I do know it was very wasteful for all concerned – students, teachers, their parents and the taxpayer. But nowadays the capacity to pay seems a most important criterion.

### **Teaching versus research**

Of all the academics who taught me, to the best of my knowledge only two (of the twenty or so) had ever written a book. Worse, few published any peer-reviewed papers. In the five years I was in the Psychology department less than half a dozen papers were published by the entire staff. It is very different today.

While I was taught by some very active and talented staff, for example Colin Webb, most seemed not to be engaged in any sort of research. There were few research students in most departments: a handful of masters students, even fewer PhDs. There seemed no culture of research. Indeed, surprisingly few staff had PhDs and often fewer than half the department.

The fact that staff did not have PhDs was not that unusual. Neither my, nor my wife’s, extremely famous DPhil (that is, PhD) supervisors at Oxford had PhDs. At London School of Economics, a third of the staff did not. But they did research; a lot of it. It was expected to publish in the top journals and most had written at least half a dozen books.

We had heard of publish or perish but it did not apply in 1970 at UNP. This said, on the campus there were some famous authors and researchers. International journals were edited in this sleepy, colonial town. But this was the exception not the rule. So why the emphasis on teaching as opposed to research? One reason was the amazing amount of teaching that lecturers had to do. Departments were small; student numbers large. All the departments in which I did my major subjects had around six lecturers. Where I used to teach in London now has over one hundred. I gave about forty lectures a year; most UNP lecturers did that number a month. The teaching, particularly the marking, load was heavy



on the staff. Teaching came first; very much so and you were selected on the basis of it.

There were both benefits and drawbacks to this situation. It does not follow from this that we were well taught, but overall I believe we were. We were taught a lot, rather than always being well taught. To cite one example. To this day I believe I am one of the most knowledgeable people in Britain with regard to psychological testing and psychometrics. This was due to one man, perhaps my brightest teacher, Bruce Faulds. Every Wednesday afternoon (2.00 to 5.00 pm) we completed a psychometric test and marked the test we had done the week before. We had excellent handouts and the best-stocked test library I have ever seen anywhere, including Oxford and UCL. The lecturer was brilliant on theory and technical issues. He believed we should be thoroughly acquainted with the material. We really were. I also had brilliant History lecturers. To this day I tell my students the best criterion of any lecture is that students run (literally) to the library to know more. I remember them as articulate, urbane, scholarly and vibrant.

Some but not all, updated their notes. Some, of course, were mediocre. Such is life. But teaching was their business. This was not the case at British universities where people were hired and promoted on their research; and really only their research. Staff were extremely eager to buy themselves out of teaching. And just as students have learning disorders, some I met had teaching disorders. It seemed to me that my lecturers believed the students' task was to absorb the canon. That is, they had to steep themselves in the acknowledged great works by extensive reading, re-reading and memorisation. Those who absorbed the canon turned information into knowledge and thence wisdom.

Those who had absorbed the canon could quote it at will. It was the mark of a scholar; a person who in conversation could use a Latin or French tag or expression, would find the odd line from Shakespeare or the romantic poets succinctly and beautifully to summarise the point to be made. All disciplines have a canon, but some rather more than others. Literature is the classic example and the Arts in general, but the social and natural sciences too have their classics.

University courses now challenge the concept of examining students' ability to memorise material: AI has changed that. Wags have comically described university education as a process 'where the notes of the lecturer become the notes of the student without passing through the minds of either and where at a later date a garbled version by the latter is vomited up to the

former as proof of learning.' Of course, the canon must be critiqued, or rather analysed, in addition to being absorbed. I felt I was well taught mainly by dedicated scholars, most of whom did not have PhDs, who took their job very seriously.

### **Centrisms: African, European and other**

It's still odd to see Zimbabwean judges wearing seventeenth-century white silk wigs and South African vice chancellors dolled up in their academic finery, also European derived. As for dressing up, it seems, those eager to reject Eurocentrism are a tad hypocritical.

Cynics used to describe the UNP campus as 'Oxbridge on the Dusi'. Many took it as a compliment. Indeed, many of the staff, particularly in the Arts, had Oxbridge degrees. Lecturers taught in gowns or white coats. The prayers at graduation were in Latin. Music by the university choir was classical. We were an English-language university: white staff and white students on the African continent. Were we narrowly and ignorantly Eurocentric; any more than one might find at an Australian, Canadian or American university at the time?

To some extent this accusation was completely true. I never encountered any South African history until third year. There was no South African, or indeed African, literature in the English department curriculum until the late 1970s. There was no course on African religions in the Divinity department then. A few examples of African research were mentioned in Psychology. In fact, Psychology was America-centric and still is. They have the money and the power and invested earlier. There are ten American psychologists for one European. They do very good research and have high standards.

The question of these centrisms was not aired much when I was at UNP. Needless to say, the concept was unknown although we knew of great black African universities like Makerere in Uganda, destroyed by Idi Amin. Curiously, as external examiner at Makerere in 2007, I recommended that the Psychology department do more Africa research. They seemed less interested in researching their own issues, except HIV/AIDS.

Was this Eurocentrism part of the denial of all whites of the time? Were they rejecting African art and culture as unworthy of study? Probably. This certainly was not true of the Fine Art department. Was there an African science? We certainly looked down on African medicine. Is there Australasian physics or Asian chemistry? The argument is really limited to the Arts and social sciences and is as much political as didactic.

Surely the whole point of a university is that knowledge is universal. The language you teach in and the syllabus you follow may be culture-bound, but not the topic. Yes, UNP was Eurocentric. I can't imagine much of an alternative.

### **Conclusion**

For years now I have attended University of Natal receptions at South Africa House in London. We have traditional food, good wine and talks of variable quality. There are ten times as many old whites compared to any other group and some have made significant pilgrimages to get to Trafalgar Square. While reminiscing with many others over many years we have rarely disagreed: we feel deeply grateful and privileged for our education at the university: *Stella Aurorae*, indeed.