

*This is the first collection of writing by various UP academics about reimagining UP and how it may look in the future. These are opinion pieces, thoughts and reflections about the University and other collections will be published as contributions are received.*

## Foreword

Mrs Mary Crewe

*Pearl fishing is not mere historical retrieval. It involves moving along the jagged ocean floor and upsetting its natural sedimentation in order to recover those hidden treasures. To reach them, the diver must often mess up the layers of the ocean by testing the broken edges, ruptures, and discontinuities of the past instead of treating them as elements in a smooth continuous path.*

Seyla Benhabib (2022)<sup>1</sup>

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Reimagining UP resembles the practice of pearl fishing. It requires that we upset the natural sedimentation of the academic institution, disturbing layers of history and tradition, to identify and assess the ruptures and discontinuities of the past, and comb for hidden treasures to inform how we think about the re-imagined institution and dream of a different future – both these activities will ultimately determine how we manage it.

This collection of essays, *Institutional Curiosity*, engages in a certain mode of pearl fishing. The contributors to the collection seek out novel ways in which to engage in debates about change, about continuity, about knowledge, and about excellence. Some individuals employed at UP are thinking in a re-imagined way about how to interrogate the University's layers of history and tradition, and reveal new and hidden treasures of thought.

The UP Senate conference, which was scheduled for 22 and 23 February 2021, focused on reimagining. The full title of the conference was Reimagining Higher Education – Frontlines, Intersections, and Opportunities. In exploring

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<sup>1</sup> Benhabib, S. 2022. 'Thinking without banisters.' *New York Review of Books*, 24 February 2022.

Reimagining UP – or engaging in Institutional Curiosity – various members of staff were asked to reflect how the University could be re-envisioned. Initial responses and discussions were challenging. Many people agreed to write up and share their insights.

As so often happens with this kind of engagement, there was a high attrition of anticipated written contributions. The Covid-19 pandemic, institutional work demands, isolation, work schedules, and deadlines got in the way of certain submissions. Some colleagues feared that speaking freely might be damaging to their positions in their departments and in their faculties. Their anxieties reflect the importance of nurturing and protecting institutional curiosity and reimagination. We should try to understand these fears in the context of ideas and the challenge that a University represents. What this collection then provides is interweaving thoughts from discussions and engagement, and papers written by colleagues in various faculties and departments on what it might mean to reimagine UP.

8 Many of the debates about change and reimagining UP address questions raised by institutional culture. A great deal has been written about institutional culture: what it means and understanding what it represents. Often such debates are construed in predominantly negative terms: the institutional culture and the narratives that support it underpin, hide, buttress, and support discrimination and inequalities based on race, class, gender, and other forms of exclusion. In many cases papers about institutional culture address the oppression of the status quo, and the challenges of confronting and changing it. All too often, the questions that arise are status quo questions, which tend to evoke status quo answers. Often answers or solutions mitigate the status quo – they ease the impact but do not change it much, nor do they address how the status quo might be tinkered with or challenged.

One way to think about institutional culture and all that arises from it is to change the narrative to institutional curiosity, or as John Higgins suggests, development of a critical literacy<sup>2</sup>. Curiosity is the bedrock of academic research, debate, and teaching. Curiosity generates critical thinkers; critical thinkers ask critical questions and endeavour to answer them in critical ways, which often raise further questions and initiate new debates, rather than merely providing answers and easy solutions. It is not the answers themselves that are important, but rather the search for the answers, asking questions in a fundamentally different way,

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2 Higgins, J. 2007. 'Institutional culture as byword.' *In Review of Higher Education in South Africa: Selected Themes*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education, 97-123.

challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, and fostering a scepticism that fuels a critical, as well as an institutional, curiosity.

The anti-discrimination policy (ADP) recently adopted by UP allows for such critical engagement. Does the University lead or follow the society in which it is based? How can a policy be used to generate curiosity, debate, and change, rather than be perceived as a form of coercion and control? All aspects of the ADP require critical literacy: how do we reimagine the ways in which we think about or 'perform' race, class, gender, violence (symbolic and normative), xenophobia, and faith-based discrimination? How do we foster an intellectual and critical leadership that avoids easy solutions and allows for descriptions rather than explanations and understanding?

Institutional curiosity creates the possibility of what Stuart Hall called metaphors of transformation<sup>3</sup>. Hall wrote that these metaphors need to satisfy two needs. They should allow us to imagine what it would be like if the prevailing cultural values are challenged and transformed, and if old social hierarchies are overthrown and new meanings and values appear. However, he continued that such metaphors should also have analytic value. They must provide ways of thinking about the relation between the social and symbolic domains in the process of transformation or reimagination.

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Institutional curiosity is a different way of looking at the University. It involves reimagining the intellectual space and the ways in which the University could be reformed through curious intellectual engagement with the institution. It concerns, in the words used by Seyla Benhabib to describe Hannah Arendt's work, 'thinking without banisters'<sup>4</sup>.

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3 Hall, S. 1996. 'For Allon White: metaphors of transformation.' In Morley, D. & Chen, K.H. Hall (eds), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge, 287-305.

4 Benhabib, S. 2022. 'Thinking without banisters.' *New York Review of Books*, 24 February 2022.