

# THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF FOUNDATION PROGRAMMES IN SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIA TEXTS

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## ABSTRACT

This article reports on research that investigated public perceptions of transformation within South African universities, with a particular focus on the incorporation of foundation programmes into university curricula. Foundation programmes are an initiative on behalf of both governmental and higher education institutions (HEIs) to grant wider and equal access to higher education (HE). However, it is evident that public views regarding university plans and admission policies are varied and the actions on behalf of both governmental bodies and universities are interpreted in diverse ways. These interpretations are problematic if they are misinformed, yet are able to influence or limit participation in HE. The study utilised methods developed within critical discourse analysis (CDA) to closely analyse three media texts that articulate various perceptions regarding the changing HE system. In line with Gee's (1996) model of CDA, these three texts are viewed as individual instances of societal discourses about HE, but also provide insight to ideologies relating to education and access.

**Keywords:** South Africa, Higher Education, foundation programmes, media discourses, critical discourse analysis.



South African Journal of Higher Education  
Volume 29 | Number 1 | 2015  
pp. 238–261

ISSN 1011-3487  
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## INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The challenges of social transformation in democratic South Africa have had significant implications for the higher education (HE) sector in general, and for higher education institutions (HEIs) in particular. The need for transformation stems primarily from the view that education is both a public and private good, and thus has considerable repercussions for development, equity and wealth. However, transforming South African universities has not been an easy process and has involved the restructuring of practices and perceptions which have deeply entrenched ideological underpinnings. These ideologies have affected the way university curricula were, and are still, structured but also perceived. Subsequent to the fall of apartheid, perceptions of the university appear to have taken three principal forms, namely: a product of social discrimination and inequality and thus capable of reproducing social inequalities; an elitist institution, limiting access to only elite social groups (Hall 2012, 20); but, more recently, it is viewed as an institution with potential to aid political reconstruction and development, and thus a key instrument in the transformation process (Lange 2012, 48). Contemporary academic discourses regarding the HE system in South Africa reframe the university as a 'service institution' (Morrow 2009, 103) with the potential to aid social transformation and contribute to the broader 'public good' (Leibowitz 2012).

Since the appointment of Dr Bonginkosi Emmanuel 'Blade' Nzimande as Minister of Higher Education and Training in 2009, the government has encouraged stronger transformation to the university system. More recent South African education policy texts (both official documents and institutional discourses) articulate the structural and institutional changes that will need to take place in order for the university to function well in a developing country, and they frequently deal with issues of equity and redress, that is, granting HE access to those previously excluded for racial, fiscal or educational reasons (see, eg, CHE 2004; 2009).

Practical approaches to transformation have taken on numerous forms, and all target the external and internal reasons for high attrition rates in the HE sector. External factors that impede student success include financial limitations and a secondary school system which fails to prepare students adequately for HE. Since the *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* was published, the difference between secondary-school and HE has been conceptualised as an 'articulation gap', that is, 'a critical systemic fault affecting progression to and through higher education' (DoE 1997a, sec. 2.32). The most cited internal factor for high attrition rates is the nature of teaching and learning in HE institutions, and curricula design which offers little support for students in crossing the aforementioned 'articulation gap' (Lange in Scott, Yeld and Hendry 2007, iv).

Solutions to poor performance in the HE sector take on numerous forms, but include an increase in government funding in the form of grants, as well as bursary and loan schemes like the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS); the

restructuring of admission policies and entrance requirements; a stronger focus on the transformation of teaching practices within the university, that is, a movement away from ‘teaching as delivery’ (Morrow 2009, 42) towards a view of teaching as a supportive mechanism and a stronger focus on the culture of teaching and learning (Lange 2012, 52); and, related to all three points above, additional student support in the form of foundation programmes, funded by the Department of Higher Education (DHET), and written into both governmental education policies and the policies of South African HEIs.

Foundation programmes are a type of learning intervention geared towards increasing access (Boughey 2005, 230) and improving retention rates (Davidowitz and Schreiber 2008, 191–192). Thus, these programmes typically target non-traditional, first-generation students or educationally disadvantaged students. In South Africa, non-traditional, first-generation and educationally disadvantaged students often simultaneously fit the category of historically disadvantaged, that is, black and coloured students.<sup>1</sup> Foundation programmes extend the average degree by an additional year in an effort to provide students with the support needed to cope with tertiary level subjects (see Hlalele 2010, 98; Wood and Lithauer 2005). Apart from content-specific curricula, with a strong focus on subject-related expertise and critical thinking skills, foundation programmes aim to develop the student’s literacy and critical thinking skills in an effort to allow them access to, and movement within, discourses typical of HEIs.

Transformation within universities has attracted the attention of the public and the media. While past discussions around HE were typically dominated by government officials and academics, more recently, and on a global scale, ‘higher education has become more visible – because of growth, cost, and involvement in all aspects of life – (HE) institutions have become the subject of greater public discussion’ (Leveille 2006, 24). The danger in this is that ‘some of the commentary has been grossly misinformed or greatly distorted. To the extent that such information is repeated and replicated, misinformation and distortion can become truth’ (Leveille 2006, 24). Given the dominance of media institutions in society, and the power they have to influence societal perceptions (Herman and Chomsky 2002; Van Dijk 1995), this article aims to address the role that the media plays in representing transformation in HE in South Africa, and to what extent these representations are accurate and promote change and participation in HE rather than impede it.

In line with more recent developments in the fields of linguistics and critical discourse analysis (CDA), the study views reactions to HE transformation as representative of varying ‘discourses’ about HE, which in turn point towards contrasting ideologies regarding the HE system. These discourses articulate opinions about how inclusive or exclusive HE should be, and often deal with issues of race and elitism. A core assumption of this research is that media texts provide access to social meanings about transformation in HE, which are projected through language. It is also assumed that journalists draw on pre-existing discourses and ‘discourse models’

(Gee 1999, 43) about HE and foundation programmes. A close investigation of media texts can highlight the ways in which foundation programmes are discursively constructed and thus also perceived by the public. These discursive constructions reflect, but also have the power to maintain, perceptions about current practices in HE. Since it has already been noted by other scholars that discourse models affect the way teachers behave in the classroom (Spotti and Kroon 2009), analysing with a view to transforming the discourses around foundation programmes could have implications for teaching practices and the ultimate success of these programmes.

As a means to access social perceptions of foundation programmes, the article critically analyses three media texts that have foundation programmes as a central theme. The texts are analysed with the following research question in mind: How do media texts (as a form of public discourse) discursively represent and construct contemporary South African HE practices? In doing so, the research not only investigates public perceptions of foundation programmes, but also provides insight into how key government officials, institutions and students are constructed in the media. The analysis is critical because it aims ‘to highlight the potential social effects of the meanings that a reader is positioned or called upon (interpellated) to subscribe to’ (Locke 2004, 54). The research draws on Gee’s (1996) method of text analysis which is fully described in the methodology section to follow, but first CDA and the nature of media texts and discourses are briefly addressed.

## CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

‘Discourse’ is a complex notion, and takes on different meanings in different contexts and disciplines. Often referring to a stretch of language longer than a sentence (see, eg, Rogers 2004, 4) Kress and Van Leeuwen (in Machin and Van Leeuwen 2007, 59–60) define ‘discourses’ as: ‘socially constructed knowledges of (some aspect of) reality ... developed in specific social contexts and in ways which are appropriate to the interests of social actors in these contexts ...’.

This definition reflects typical hypotheses regarding language use on behalf of CDA theorists: it is always embedded in particular social contexts and is thus linked to, and reflects the underlying norms and ideologies (the ‘patterns of meaning’ [Locke 2004, 54]) of the culture. CDA adopts a unique perspective of discourse as: (1) historical, and produced in particular historical circumstances; (2) ideological, and embedded with the ideologies of the more dominant social groups; (3) and a form of social action, and able to transform, legitimise, and critique social activities and practices (Van Dijk 2003, 353).

As both a theory and a method, CDA investigates language in ways that aim to uncover and make more transparent the underlying, and often ‘taken-for-granted’ norms and ideologies of a particular culture (Richardson 2007, 6). Accordingly, CDA analysts adopt both a socio-cognitive perspective of ‘ideology’ as ‘the basis of the social representations shared by members of a group’ (Van Dijk in Lassen

2006, viii), but also a social-constructivist view which defines ‘ideology’ as ‘serving the purpose of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations’ (Wodak in Lassen 2006, viii). A major premise of CDA research is that the linguistic choices and discourse strategies on behalf of a speaker are not only representative of their individual perspectives, but of broader societal perspectives which the individual learns to adopt (Gee 1999, 2). A close linguistic analysis often reveals hidden power struggles associated with race, class and gender and indicates that language is fundamental in producing and reproducing social norms and practices, but in the process, it also is able to produce and reproduce social inequalities (Gee 1999). As a means of understanding how the (re)production of social life takes place through language, CDA functions as a multidisciplinary tool and not only incorporates theories and concepts developed within the field of linguistics, but also relies on the ideas of key critical social theorists like Gramsci, Bourdieu, Hall and Foucault in order to illuminate the complexities of social relationships that produce and maintain a particular discourse.

Gee’s (1996) method of CDA encourages an analysis of the text on five different, but inter-related levels, namely: (1) prosody, or the ways in which the speaker or writer emphasizes certain elements of the text through linguistic features such as stress or pauses; (2) cohesion, or the ways in which sentences are connected to each other in order to construct an argument; (3) discourse organisation, that is, how the sentences are organised into bigger units; (4) contextualisation signals, or the ways in which speakers and writers indicate and negotiate their perspective of the context and indicate to the reader what sort of person the speaker takes themselves to be (in this communicative event), what sort of person the speaker assumes (or wants) the reader to be, and what the speaker assumes the world to be like (Gee 2012, 120); and finally, (5) thematic structure, which is an investigation into the ways key themes are identified and developed.

Gee’s (1996) framework aims to articulate the ways in which writers present an event or a topic, how they construct themselves and the reader in the text, but also the ways in which the text reflects broader social knowledges and discourses about the event or topic at hand. Gee (2012) makes a distinction between *Discourse* (with a capital D) and *discourse*. The former denotes ‘language-in-society’, and not only includes linguistic features, but the social norms for language use including appropriate topics, appropriate gestures (ie, the appropriate ways of behaving in an interaction) and intonation. Related to this is Gee’s (1999, 43) concept of ‘discourse models’ which are explanatory theories of mind that individuals hold in order to make sense of the world around them. Discourse models are culturally transmitted and channelled through discourse. Thus, the individual journalists’ (as social beings located in a particular culture) discourses are viewed as instances of larger discourses about HE that are present in contemporary South African society, and are representative of ‘discourse models’ about HE in South Africa.

## HE as a sociocultural practice

As stated above, those working within CDA view language use as a means to produce and reproduce social practices. Fairclough (2001) defines ‘social practice’ as ‘a relatively stabilised form of social activity’, while Machin and Van Leeuwen (2007, 61) define a social practice as an event which incorporates the following ‘agreed-upon’ elements: (1) participants, in different participant roles; (2) activities; (3) times and places; (4) dress and grooming; and (5) required tools and materials. These elements are ‘agreed-upon’ in the sense that they are considered to be the customary ways of acting and ‘being’ in a recurrent cultural event.

In this study, HE is viewed as a social practice that includes particular participants (academic staff, students, government officials) in different participant roles. HE is also associated with unique activities, at particular times and places. It requires a socially-agreed upon style of dress, and tools and materials unique to this context. Foundation programmes are thus conceptualised as one, more contemporary, aspect of the broader social practice of ‘doing’ and ‘acting out’ activities and processes related to higher education. By conceptualising HE and foundation programmes as a social practice as a theoretical starting point, the research aims to make more transparent the ‘taken-for-granted’ social norms of dominant South African HE practices. Discursive representations of HE are thus viewed as reflecting, (re) producing and potentially transforming (elements of) these social practices in various ways. Moreover, since individual speakers (in this case the three writers of the newspaper texts) are conceptualised as individuals in a social context, their discursive representations are viewed as emblematic of larger social discourses and ideologies related to HE. These include ideologies regarding education as a whole, ideologies concerning the role of the university in South Africa, and ideologies regarding rights and access to tertiary education.

## CDA and the analysis of HE media texts

Given that, whenever we communicate ‘we always take a particular perspective on what the “world” is like’ (Gee 1999, 2), CDA acknowledges the apparent contradiction in the view that journalists present an impartial or objective take on social reality. Journalists perform according to a set of practices and values to ensure that their work meets the demands of their profession. These practices and values extend to, and are evident in, the type of language journalists use. Although journalistic discourse commonly excludes subjective language and value judgments, the writer’s viewpoint is expressed within the choices that the writer makes: the choice to include particular words, quotes, images, use direct or indirect speech or a particular structure, over an array of potential possibilities (Renkema 2004, 266). According to Richardson (2007, 1), journalistic discourse is unique for three reasons: First, it contains very specific textual characteristics, such as lexical and

semantic intensification strategies, as well as intensification through comparison, in order to encode a sense of heightened involvement on behalf of the author, and create an interpretation that the event is significant or meaningful (White 1997, 108–109). These stylistic features are important for a CDA analysis because they are central to the manner in which social practices are framed, but also to the manner in which these frames are received, that is, their level of believability.

Second, journalistic discourse is unique in its method of text production and consumption (Richardson 2007, 1). The manner in which the text is structured and interpreted is restricted by the genre of the text, or the sociocultural norms which govern the text's production. In other words, as writers and editors construct media texts according to the rules and norms for this particular genre, linguists have recognised that the genre and layout of the text itself influences the interpretation thereof (Frow 2006). Thus, when reading a media text, readers assume a particular stance and reading-strategy, based on culturally-constructed and often unconscious knowledge about the genre to which the text belongs. The readers are influenced by both language use (compression, alliteration, assonance, ambiguity and intertextuality, nominalisation) and generic structure to adopt a particular perspective as 'the truth' (Frow 2006, 6).

Finally, journalistic discourse is unique in its power in civil society and its relation to social ideas and institutions. In fact, Richardson (2007, 1) argues that 'the sourcing and construct of news is intimately linked with the actions and opinions of (usually powerful) social groups'. In the process of text production, journalists do not only selectively represent and transform elements of a social practice in ways that suit their perspectives, but also the ideology of the media institution as a whole, or even simply the perceptions of sectors of society identified as their target readership. Media discourses regarding HE not only represent, select and transform elements of the social practice of HE, but in these representations, they also 'make acceptable' (legitimise) or critique (de-legitimise) these practices. The media provide an overview to what significant events are taking place, and offer powerful interpretations of how to understand them.

When conducting a CDA of a media text, questions do not only arise pertaining to the textual features and the discursive representation of events, but also regarding the choice on behalf of media corporations to publish an article about a particular event rather than another, or the ideology behind what is considered 'newsworthy' by media institutions. According to Hall (in Fowler 2003, 12), what is considered newsworthy is, in the end, a product of a complex process of sorting through and selecting events according to social norms. A CDA of a media text should provide insight into what these social norms are, especially if what 'could have been said' is taken into consideration, that is, taking textual representations on behalf of the writer as part of a selection process and a choice out of many possible options.

## METHODOLOGY

The research conducted was a qualitative study in which media texts were purposively selected. A purposive selection process means that the texts were not chosen randomly, but in accordance with the research assumptions and with the following research question in mind: How do media texts (as a form of public discourse) discursively represent and construct contemporary South African HE practices? It was also assumed that the chosen news articles were especially informative, and that they would be representative or typical of other texts of the same nature.

A qualitative study permits a close analysis of a small number of texts. The empirical data was derived from South African national newspapers and accessed via the electronic database SAMedia. A broad search was conducted within the 'Education' category of the database, but narrowed using the following key words: 'universities', 'admissions', 'assistance', 'foundation programmes', 'tertiary education', 'higher education', 'entrance requirements' and 'Blade Nzimande'. The key words generated access to numerous articles, some of which will be referenced in the analysis below, but only three will be analysed in an in-depth manner.

To further narrow the field of study, the texts were selected from the period May 2009, the commencement of Nzimande's role as Minister of Higher Education, until May 2012. This three-year period was one in which major changes to HE policies took place. While I refer to a number of illustrative examples from various media texts in the analysis, the following section is a record of a critical analysis conducted on three selected articles: 'Shock report on literacy levels at universities' by Jo-Anne Smetherham (2009, 1), published in the *Cape Times* on 11 August 2009 (Appendix A); 'Getting into varsity via the back door', by Gershwin Chuenyane (2010, 6), published in the *City Press* on 24 January 2010 (Appendix B); and 'Matric not good enough for university', by Caiphus Kgosana (2011, 8) published in *The Times* on 26 January 2011 (Appendix C). The articles were selected for two reasons: First, they all explicitly address the topic of foundation programmes, that is, how they are structured or why they exist; and second, the articles were drawn from three different media publications which target very different readerships (The Press in South Africa 2006).

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

As previously mentioned above, the aim of the research was to investigate the ways in which media texts (1) discursively represent foundation programmes (which is conceptualised as a social practice involving particular participants); but also (2) the ways in which these discourses legitimise or critique foundation programmes. Such an analysis works to illuminate the ways in which society at large conceptualises and 'talks about' transformation in HE, but also how the media reflects and constructs

these discursive representations. The following section provides an overview of the discursive construction of foundation programmes, with a particular focus on representations of the three major participants of this social practice, namely: students, academics and government bodies and officials.

## The organisation of discourse

The way in which the news texts are structured to form a cohesive unit has implications for how the information is received. In a manner typical of news articles, all three texts begin with a headline, followed by the author's name and a number of paragraphs which support the headline in various ways. A macro-investigation of the ways in which the paragraphs support the assertion made in the headline provides insight into how the writers position themselves in the text; how information is ranked according to importance; how the writers organise and construct the central argument; and how they construct and establish cause and effect relationships.

The macro-organisation of discourse can be examined by investigating the statements and quotes presented in each paragraph. In all three articles, the writers draw on statistics and direct and indirect quotes from sources that the reader already recognises as authoritative, such as: government bodies (Smetherham 2009), spokespeople from the DHET (Chuenyane 2010), professors (Smetherham 2009; Chuenyane 2010), vice chancellors (Smetherham 2009) and senior government officials like Nzimande (Chuenyane 2010). Since journalists work to construct an image of themselves as knowledgeable and authoritative, these quotations also work as rhetorical devices that assist in this goal. Once the writers have established themselves as reliable, the reader is more likely to accept their perception as 'the truth'. By incorporating these authoritative voices journalists

help to reproduce and sustain the definitions of the situation which favour the powerful, not only by actively recruiting the powerful in the initial stages where topics are structured, but by favoring certain ways of setting up topics, and maintaining certain strategic areas of silence (Hall et al. 1978, 65).

Thus, government bodies, the DHET, academics and senior government officials remain what Hall et al. (1978, 58) term the 'primary definers' of the topic of HE and foundation programmes.

## The discursive construction of participants in HE

### Students

In all three texts, students are represented by the writer, often through the use of either direct or indirect quotes from academics and politicians. None of the texts

provides direct quotations from students or applicants themselves. Two problems arise from this: first, in these texts, and in HE discourses in general, the students' identity is constructed for them. Second, these dominant discursive representations may have powerful implications for how students are perceived and thus treated once inducted into the university system (Spotti and Kroon 2009).

In HE discourses centred on foundation programmes, students are frequently framed as 'not proficient enough' (Kgosana 2011). In her article, Smetherham (2009) constructs and frames students in terms of their literacy skills (par. 1, 10, 15), competency (par. 6, 13) and proficiency (par. 9, 15), all of which are presented as deficient, or below the norm. The noun 'shock', used in the headline, and the adjective 'shocking' (Smetherham 2009, par. 1), assists the writer in constructing the situation as surprising, deeply distressing but also unexpected. In somewhat of a contradiction, Smetherham (2009, par. 6) states that 'the findings [of the National Benchmark Tests Project (NBTP)] *confirmed* what the researchers already knew about student competence'. Thus, the information can hardly be surprising. The adjective 'confirmed' allows the writer to draw on pre-existing discourse models about student competency available to the reader. This simultaneously works as a contextualisation signal to build affiliation with the reader and assists the writer in the construction of him/herself and the reader as concerned bystanders to a defective educational system.

'Preparedness' is a further category used to distinguish students. Smetherham (2009, par. 27) quotes UWC Vice-Chancellor Brian O'Connell as stating 'we get kids that are so badly prepared'. In this quote, even the use of the word 'kids' has ideological underpinnings; rather than 'students', the word 'kids' frames university enrollees not as independent young adults but as dependent children. Coupled with the adjectival phrase 'badly prepared', the quote constructs students as ill-equipped and heavily reliant on HE resources. Chuenyane (2010) also constructs foundation programme students as 'under-prepared', which is repeated four times on the first page. In his article, Chuenyane (2010) refers to the emotional state of the 'under-prepared' students: 'do not despair' (par. 1), he writes, 'if your matric pass gets you into university but is not good enough to gain you entry into your ideal degree programme' (par. 1). The noun 'despair' is significant as it denotes a loss of hope and portrays the applicants as desperate; thus, the situation is framed as dire and unjust. Combined with the use of the personal pronoun 'you', the writer draws the readers' sympathy by referring directly to them and simultaneously constructing the readers as the applicants who have been denied access to university.

A close analysis of these three texts supports Scott et al.'s (2007, 42) findings that 'student under-preparedness' is the most commonly cited reason for poor performance in the HE sector. While the impact of inequalities in the school system cannot be discounted, the connotations of the term 'under-preparedness' have become skewed in public discourse since it is often incorrectly used as a euphemism

for ‘a fundamental inability to cope with higher education’ (Scott et al. 2007, 42). In the media texts, ‘under-preparedness’ frequently co-occurs, and is thus conceptually coupled with, notions of student literacy and competency levels, which are repeatedly framed as deficient. Thus, students are discursively constructed and discounted as lacking the potential to succeed, even once they have been inducted into the HE system. In contrast, there is no clear mention of the fact that students who gain access to HE are in the top percentage of the population in terms of educational performance, a perspective which challenges the common portrayal of many HE enrollees as lacking the potential to succeed (Scott et al. 2007, 42).

### Reasons for students’ educational failure

According to Locke (2004, 56), who analysed the representation of Maori students in New Zealand media discourses,

different discourses construct educational failure differently. Some construct it in terms of an inappropriate or badly designed curriculum; some in terms of ineffective pedagogy. A common one – the ‘deficit’ model – constructs school failure from arising from certain cultural deficiencies in the home of the failing child.

While Locke found that in New Zealand the ‘deficit’ model was prominent, an analysis of the three core texts reveals that educational failure is discursively constructed almost exclusively in terms of a badly designed primary-school curriculum and ineffective pedagogy at secondary-school level.

Smetherham (2009) identifies the cause of low-literacy levels, educational failure and a high-failure rate in universities as a poorly-designed school curriculum and bad pedagogical practices (par. 3–5). The ‘final pilot phase’ of the National Benchmark Tests Project (NBTP) is used as sufficient evidence to condemn the National Senior Certificate (NSC) (Smetherham 2009, par. 2). This article is also the only text of the three that makes reference to the effects that past government policy has on the current school system and consequently also the HE sector. Smetherham (2009, par. 24) quotes Russel Botman as stating: ‘you can see the difference between a student coming from a good former Model C school and a student coming from a disadvantaged background. Even in a six-year programme like medicine, they do not catch up.’

Chuenyane (2010) implicitly assigns blame to the school system by continuously describing students as ‘underprepared’, while Kgosana (2011) assigns blame to the schooling system in various ways. In paragraph seven, incongruities between school and tertiary level curricula are framed as problematic, and attributed to the way in which the school year was (badly) structured. Here the conjunction ‘because’ establishes a cause and effect relationship – that the interruption of classes due to the teachers’ strike and the Soccer World Cup will cause problems at universities in 2011 (the effect). It is unclear whether this assertion is Shadeed Hartley’s from UWC

or Kgosana's, but the construction 'similar problems *were* expected this year' rather than 'similar problems *are* expected this year' attributes the (past) statement to an unnamed speaker or even speakers, thus substantiating the claim while simultaneously constructing the context as problematic. In the most explicit statement which defers responsibility for educational failure onto the schooling system, Kgosana (2011, par. 11) quotes Gill Drenen from Wits as stating 'the ideal was for schools to equip pupils for university'.

The frequent discursive construction of educational failure as stemming almost exclusively from the secondary school system is a narrow and uncritical representation that does not take broader social issues into consideration. According to Lange (in Scott et al. 2007, vii), 'improvement in schooling should not be relied on in itself as the primary means of achieving substantial improvement in graduate output an equity of outcomes in higher education'. In addition, quantitative studies indicate that educational failure in the form of high-attrition rates can be significantly attributed to financial reasons and not a disadvantaged educational background (Scott et al. 2007, 29).

### Reasons for foundation programmes

In this context, the three writers offer only three primary reasons for *why* foundation programmes exist in university curricula, namely: they present an alternative means of gaining access to university (Chuenyane 2010); they assist in widening access to, and participation in, HE; and they help to rectify the problems created by the school curriculum (Chuenyane 2010; Kgosana 2011; Smetherham 2009). Chuenyane (2010) presents the most striking representation of the first category: he uses the synonyms 'alternative access programmes' (par. 2) and 'access programme' (par. 5) for foundation programmes and, similarly, describes foundation programmes as means to gain access to university 'via the back door'. The choice of idiomatic expression is of significance since 'getting in through the back door' typically refers to a secret or underhand means of gaining access to something.

In terms of the role foundation programmes have in increasing access to HE, Chuenyane (2010, par. 19) claims that they allow 'access to students who ordinarily would have been excluded from higher education'. However, the most commonly cited *raison d'être* for foundation programmes is that they can help to rectify the problems created by the school curriculum. Logically, it relates to the most common discursive construction of the reason for educational failure as stemming from problems with the schooling system. Students are framed as cognitively 'underprepared' for HE, and foundation programmes are designed to 'enhance the comprehension of first-year students' (Drenen in Kgosana 2011, par. 11) by developing the language, literacy, critical thinking and mathematical skills that the students are lacking (Chuenyane 2010, par 16; Smetherham 2009, par 16). Foundation programmes are thus presented as a means of preventing high failure rates at university, caused by

students who cannot cope with university curricula. Interestingly, Kgosana (2011, par. 3) constructs students ‘not being able to pass the first year’ as ‘a blockage in the system’, a metaphorical construction which cognitively frames students as a primary obstruction in an otherwise fully-functioning educational system. A cause and effect relationship is also established – that problems in the HE system such as high-failure rates are caused primarily by students’ skills shortages rather than curriculum, teaching or fiscal problems.

Adding to the representation of foundation programmes as helping to rectify the problems created by the school curriculum is the common metaphorical representation of foundation programmes as ‘filling’, ‘bridging’ or ‘closing’ the ‘gap’ of a deficient or ‘disadvantaged’ education (Chuneyane 2010, par 24; Kgosana 2011, par. 8). As mentioned earlier, the *Education White Paper 3* (DoE 1997a) conceptualises the mismatch between secondary school and HE as an ‘articulation gap’, which then manifests in students as a lack of solid foundations which enable them to respond positively to HE curricula (Scott et al. 2007, 42). In the context of the articles, which frame students as underprepared, lacking important skills and generally deficient, the ‘gap’ takes on a new meaning and is portrayed as a deficiency in the students rather than a critical systemic fault. The gap is also commonly portrayed as large or ‘serious’ (Kgosana 2011, par. 5). Although the articulation gap may manifest as student deficiencies, Scott et al. (2007, 44) warn that ‘the problem is in key respects systemic in that it relates to curriculum structures that hinder rather than facilitate the realisation of many students’ potential’. Thus, discourses which focus solely on student deficiencies are presenting a narrow view of a complex situation.

In these texts, foundation programmes are primarily constructed as government rather than university initiatives (Chuneyane 2010, par. 9) as little mention is made of voluntary university initiatives to widen access or transform curricula to aid student success. The discursive construction of universities and government, as participants in HE practices, will be further discussed below.

### Universities, government and government officials

It is clear from the analysis regarding the discursive representation of students that, in some discourses, the university is portrayed as a fully-functional and fair institution, willing to promote change, transformation and equity, but external factors like poor schooling and ill-prepared students threaten the proper functioning of the HE system. Such representations tend to focus on the ‘enormous’ (Smetherham 2009, par. 12) challenges faced by the university.

However, the discursive representation of universities is often entrenched within ideologies regarding access to HE – who should get access to what degree and by what means? Or rather, who does the university *allow* access to which degree and by what means? Such discourses often refer to admission requirements set by universities, who are presented as overly-selective and, often discriminatory,

gatekeepers to HE. Extreme cases portray the university as an elitist institution and as a 'privileged white space' (Grobler 2010, 4) and make frequent mention to the 'ivory tower' (Freeman 2010, 2).

In elitist discourses, university admission requirements are portrayed as excessive and exclusive (Bowman 2011). For example, in an article in the *Witness*, the writer quotes Nzimande criticising the entrance level requirement 'hike' (Mngoma 2010, 17) as 'another example of how universities try to segregate students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds and limit their access to tertiary education' (Nzimande in Mngoma 2010, 17). Mantashe is also quoted by Mngoma (2010, 17): 'the proposed increases in university entry points [is] a form of exclusion'. The verb 'hike' is used frequently in media texts to refer to changes in admission requirements on behalf of universities (see Freeman 2010; Kgosana 2010), as are adjectives like 'stringent' (Bowman 2010), and even 'draconian' (Bowman 2011). These words create an impression of a needless and preventable rise in admissions criteria, and that this increase occurred suddenly and unexpectedly, rather than having grown from experience and practice within the institutions themselves. An increase in admissions criteria is also perceived and represented as a 'lack of transformation' on behalf of the universities (Mngoma 2010).

While the three articles used for analysis in the research do not *explicitly* mention admission requirements, or *explicitly* portray universities as elitist, they do draw on these Discourses and representations in a more implicit manner. For example, the headline, 'Matric not good enough for university' (Kgosana 2011) portrays the university as an entity that evaluates according to unreasonable standards and then excludes matriculants who are conversely framed as unworthy/inadequate/insufficient/deficient. Similarly, Chuenyane (2010) frames a matric pass as being 'not good enough' (par. 1) to gain entry into university.

Further, Chuenyane (2010) describes universities as being 'compelled to put under-prepared students with potential into foundation programmes to address low completion rates and to meet government's higher education equity goals ...'.

In contrast to the description of universities as being 'compelled' (repeated twice) or obligated rather than willing to assist students, the government is portrayed as being willing and generous in its capacity to provide support. Chuenyane (2010) frames the government as 'committed' (repeated three times) to equity and to student success, and makes reference to Nzimande, the 'Minister of Higher Education and Training' as having 'committed R526 million for the next three years to 243 foundation programmes at universities across the country'. Here, agency for the delivery of funding is awarded solely to Nzimande and not to parliament as a whole, but the decision to allocate funding to HEIs for foundation provision is a parliamentary decision that predates Nzimande's appointment.

Similarly, Kgosana (2011, par. 14) presents governmental institutions like the DHET as reasonable and protective over students, which is then contrasted with

an image of the university as dissident, careless and indifferent to students' needs through the use of the past-tense verb 'warned': '(Menon) *warned* universities that they might lose the right to administer the state financial aid scheme for needy students if they failed to spend all the money allocated to them'. The reference to the funding secured by the DHET from the Treasury is a rhetorical strategy that portrays the government as determined to not only increase access to HE, but also as willing to finance 'needy' students. In contrast, universities are portrayed as incompetent in their ability to manage government funding.

All three media texts present the government and government bodies like the DHET in a positive way, often referring to government funding made available to HEIs. The writers frequently incorporate direct quotes from government officials as intensification strategies, as a means for the writers to strengthen their argument by quoting someone considered to be an authoritative voice on HE issues. Referring back to the organisation of discourse presented in the first part of the analysis section, Kgosana (2011) allocates over half of the article to the perspective of Kirti Menon, with seven pointed references in the form of: (1) 'acting deputy director-general for universities in the Department of Higher Education and Training' (par. 2); (2) 'a senior government official' (par. 1); (3) 'Kirti Menon' (par. 2); (4) 'Menon' (par. 4, 13); and (5) 'she' (par 3, 14). Not only does this repetition in the form of synonyms and general words work as a cohesive device that links ideas and paragraphs together, but it works to reinforce the position of the DHET. Since the way in which the discourse is organised indicates the hierarchical order of arguments (Locke 2004, 94), beginning the text in this way places emphasis and importance on government actions and perspectives while simultaneously diminishing others.

## CONCLUSION: FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The research aimed to gain access to and articulate the complexities of perceptions of contemporary HE practices in South Africa. The research drew on ideas developed within CDA by scholars such as Van Dijk (1995), Fairclough (2001) and Kress and Van Leeuwen (2007). These scholars have all highlighted how discourses embed social and political ideologies, which in turn might construct 'taken-for-granted' ways of speaking and acting, and in the process and maintain unequal relationships of power. Gee's (1996) method of CDA was used to guide the interpretation of three media texts which have foundation programmes as a central theme and allowed for a close analysis of these texts according to the principles of CDA. Narrowing the lens in this way not only revealed common discursive representations of these programmes but also permitted a close analysis of the discursive representation of key HE stakeholders. Returning to Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2007, 59–60) definition of discourse above, HE discourses are viewed in the study as having been created in a society by language-users who view HE in particular ways. These

discourses therefore represent ‘socially constructed knowledges’ about HE and thus discursively construct HE practices, but also have the potential to transform them.

The problems in secondary and tertiary level education systems in South Africa cannot be denied nor overlooked, and the media texts do go some way in highlighting the extent and nature of these problems. However, in terms of the thematic structure of the articles, they are similar in representing a deficit model of education. All three represent education in terms of ‘disadvantaged’, ‘gaps’, and frequently refer to students in terms of their ‘failure’, ‘needs’ and ‘difficulties’. Repetition of these concepts work both as a cohesive device within each text and a powerful rhetorical strategy that urges readers to view students as operating deficiently while simultaneously foregrounding notions of insufficiency in the HE system. Narratives which view HE educational failure in affective terms (ie, stemming from psychological and emotional constraints on the student), in financial and economic terms (ie, caused by structurally induced poverty stemming from a complex historical past), as a product of past governmental and institutional policy decisions, or even caused by HE curricula that fail to address the articulation gap, are scant in these three texts. In comparison to deficit representations that dominate the text, very little space is assigned to narratives of human agency, or to the potential of a happy ending. In fact, only one article makes a clear reference to such narratives: ‘Students who have had a poor-quality education, if they have the right attitude, very often can succeed’ (Drenen in Kgosana 2011, par. 10). Thus, all three articles present fatalistic narratives of student success to students, rather than by students. Coupled with deficient representations, such as ‘lacking the necessary skills’, the media presents a powerful stereotype of students entering university on foundation programmes which may have implications of how the students are viewed, view themselves, and participate in HE.

Given the nature of media institutions, a topic addressed extensively by CDA scholars, such as Van Dijk (1995) and Fairclough (2001), it was hypothesised that if the journalists’ discourses were not aligned with popular discourses and discourse models about HE, the texts would not have been published. A critical analysis of the three media texts revealed that ideologies regarding HE are shared. These ideologies underpin both historical and contemporary perspectives as to the type of student that is, and should, be eligible for HE and foundation programmes; the proper function of the university in South Africa; as well as the role of government in HE. The writers not only frame students (of a particular race, class and educational background) as deficient, but discursively construct the university in elitist terms, often by drawing on common discourses and discourse models regarding HE. From a CDA perspective, media discourses produce and contribute to the reproduction of social norms, but also aid in entrenching inequalities (Van Dijk 1995). Thus, media texts like the ones under investigation are likely to play a role in the reproduction of a particular type of hegemony, and ultimately have an influence on perceptions of access to and equity in HE.

## NOTE

1. In this article, race and population groups are designated according to Statistics SA.

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## Appendices

Appendix A: *Cape Times*, 11 August 2009

# Shock report on literacy levels at universities

JO-ANNE SMETHERHAM

SHOCKING new test results show that most first-year students at universities across the country do not have the literacy skills, and only a tiny proportion have the mathematical skills, required in higher education.

The final pilot phase of the National Benchmark Tests Project (NBTP) is a damning indictment of the implementation of, and raises questions about the validity of, National Senior Certificate (NSC) results.

It also explains the high failure rate at tertiary institutions. Previous research has shown that fewer than one in three students at all technikons and universities graduated after five years.

NBTP principal investigator Professor Nan Yeld, who is Dean of Higher Education Development at UCT, said the tests revealed that "the school system is not able, at this stage, to deliver the ambitious new curriculum, particularly in mathematics".

She emphasised, however, that "this is not the same as saying that the curriculum is the problem".

The findings largely confirmed what the researchers already knew about student competence, she said, although "some have been angry that the NSC results gave a different picture".

About 13 000 students at universities including UCT, UWC and Stellenbosch University wrote the assessments in February. The results of the tests were distributed to universities over recent weeks.

The other participating universities were the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the Mangosuthu University of Technology, the Uni-

versity of the Witwatersrand and Rhodes. Over 300 academics have participated in the project.

Only about 7 percent of the students who wrote the mathematics test were found to be proficient, meaning they would not need extra help to pass their first year. The test assessed the skills needed to study first-year mathematics at university.

About 73 percent had "intermediate" mathematical skills and would need to take part in extended or augmented programmes to pass

university mathematics. The remaining 20 percent had only "basic" skills and would need long-term support.

About 47 percent of the students who wrote the tests on academic literacy were proficient

This finding "provides some support for doubts about the large number of students achieving over 70 percent in the NSC examination in this subject," the study authors wrote in a presentation.

The challenges universities faced regarding mathematics were "enormous", they said, and universities' mathematics curricula should adapt to help the struggling students.

About one-quarter of the students were numerically competent - this was a different test to the mathematics test - half had inter-

## Appendix A (Cont.)

mediate skills in numeracy and one-quarter would need extensive support at university.

These skills were central to most university disciplines, where students had to be able to interpret tables and understand percentages and basic proportion and trends, the researchers said.

About 47 percent of the students who wrote the tests on academic literacy were proficient, 46 percent had intermediate skills and 7 percent had basic skills. This test assessed ability in English, the medium of instruction.

The results "strongly suggest that higher education institutions need to provide extensive support in language development – not only for a small minority of registered students, but for almost half of them".

The student sample was representative in terms of gender and demographics, the project leaders said.

Higher Education South Africa commissioned the NBTP out of concern about the standards of the new NSC and low graduation rates at universities.

One of the aims was to assist with the development of university curricula, particularly for foundation courses.

Yeld said the test results were provisional and indicated that problems existed, but more research was needed to confirm this. Testing centres would be set up across this country in September, December and January.

Education deputy director-general Penny Vinjevoed had seen the results, and was working with the NBTP to strengthen the National Senior Certificate, Yeld said.

"We hope that the results of the NBTP and the NSC will converge in a few years and there will be no need for the benchmarking project."

Neither Vinjevoed, nor Education Department spokesman Granville Whittle could be reached for comment.

Stellenbosch Vice-Chancellor Russel Botman said the figures reflected the reality at universities. "You can see the difference between a student coming from a good former Model C school and a student coming from a disadvantaged

background. Even in a six-year programme like medicine, they do not catch up."

UWC Vice-Chancellor Brian O'Connell pointed out that the results "cover the top universities of the country".

"Your common sense would tell you the profile of the students coming to UWC would not be the same as that of the students at UCT, so when you see the general findings you can deduce, more or less, what UWC's figures might look like. Not good. But we know this.

"This is what we are geared to try to deal with. We get kids who are so badly prepared, but if we can hold on to them long enough, work on their self-confidence and get them inducted into the disciplines, we find that they flourish and go on to get Masters' and Doctorate degrees. The talent is there."

Appendix B: *City Press*, 24 January 2010

# GETTING INTO VARSITY VIA THE BACK DOOR

New programme allows under-prepared students to take desired degrees

GERSHWIN CHUENYANE

DO not despair if your matric pass gets you to university but is not good enough to gain you entry into your ideal degree programme.

You can still gain entry to universities across the country via alternative access programmes which extend the years of study from three to four.

At most universities, applicants to these programmes have to write an entrance test, typically in maths, science and English, according to University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) deputy vice-chancellor of teaching and learning, Professor Renuka Vithal.

She says applicants from disadvantaged schools whose prior learn-

ing was adversely affected qualify for admission into the programmes.

For instance, at UKZN students in the bachelor of science access programme do introduction to calculus in their first year.

They also cover the same topics as those in the equivalent regular module of maths.

In addition there is complete supplementary material designed for students who are under-prepared for maths at university level.

Students attend extra lectures and tutorials and undergo additional assessment for the same number of notional study hours as in the regular component.

Universities are compelled to put under-prepared students with potential into foundation programmes to address low completion rates and to meet government's higher education equity goals, according to the Department of Higher Education and Training.

Minister of Higher Education and Training Blade Nzimande committed R526 million for the next three years to 243 foundation programmes at universities around the country.

"The government cannot deliver on its commitment to equity in the

**Universities are compelled to put under-prepared students with potential into foundation programmes**

## Appendix B (Cont.)

higher education system if large numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds fail their first year and drop out.

"The commitment to equity involves more than just entry to higher education.

"It involves also ensuring that all students are able to succeed in their studies and obtain their qualifications," he says.

■ The universities offering these programmes will admit a total of 16 000 foundation students a year from 2010 to 2012.

■ 56% of these foundation students will be following programmes in science and engineering, 24% in

business and management and 20% in education and the humanities.

Vithal says students are provided with further academic skills and abilities so they can understand cognitively advanced disciplinary language, as well extract meaning from increasingly complex written texts and communicate meaning in appropriate written and spoken form.

In addition, she says, students enjoy the benefit of smaller classes and individual attention wherever practically possible.

"They also have access to counselling and tutorial support."

Vithal says the "access" programmes have been successful at UKZN and they have given access to students who ordinarily would

have been excluded from higher education.

She says 2 177 students have been enrolled in the one-year foundation programme since 2004.

Of these, 1 295 have gained admission into the mainstream. Of these, 213 have graduated and 593 students are still registered.

In the four-year extended programme, 3 100 access students have been admitted since 2004.

While it is too early to provide conclusive graduation data, of those enrolled in 2004 more than 1 700 have either graduated or are still registered, Vithal says.

"It therefore seems that the augmented programme is filling in the gaps of a disadvantaged education."

## Appendix C: *The Times*, 26 January 2011

# Matric not good enough for university

CAIPHUS KGOSANA

A SENIOR government official has acknowledged that pupils who have passed the matric maths and science exams are often not proficient enough to continue studying these subjects at first-year university level.

Kirti Menon, acting deputy director-general for universities in the Department of Higher Education and Training, said national senior certificate holders who passed maths and science might have to take bridging courses before enrolling at university to reduce the high first-year failure rate.

"One of the issues was the articulation between the [national senior certificate] physical science and maths, and the physical science and maths offered at universities, and whether the gap could be managed by foundation programmes or academic support programmes to ensure that we do not have a blockage in the system [caused] by students not being able to pass the first year," she said.

Menon told the parliamentary higher education and training portfolio committee yesterday that talks were being held with universities, the Department of Basic Education and matric quality assessor Umalusi.

Shabeed Hartley, director of the science learning centre at the University of Western Cape, said a serious gap was noticed between the quality of the maths and science passes at schools and the maths and science courses offered by universities.

"The quality of the passes they come with to university sometimes does not match first-year requirements," he said.

Similar problems were expected

this year because last year's matrics missed weeks of school because of the teachers' strike and the soccer World Cup.

Hartley said a stigma was wrongly attached to bridging courses and other academic support programmes, which were crucial in closing the gap between school and university level.

Gill Drenen, assistant dean of the science faculty at the University of the Witwatersrand, said that, in her

experience, the commitment of first-year students often determined their success rate at university.

"Students who have had a poor-quality education, if they have the right attitude, very often can succeed," she said.

Drenen said bridging courses were necessary to enhance the comprehension of first-year students, but the ideal was for schools to equip pupils for university.

According to figures produced by

the Department of Higher Education and Training, new university entrants account for 20% of all enrolments. The head count at higher education institutions rose by more than 100 000 from 2005 to last year, with about 842 000 students now enrolled at the country's 23 universities.

Menon told the committee that her department had secured R5.7-billion from the Treasury to fund over the next three years the conversion of

loans to bursaries, in the final year of study, of beneficiaries of the national students financial aid scheme who pass all their subjects.

Some of the money would be used to provide bursaries for needy students at colleges for further education and training. She warned universities that they might lose the right to administer the state financial aid scheme for needy students if they failed to spend all the money allocated to them.