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# Institutional Curiosity

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*Institutional Culture* is a collaborative endeavour between the University of Pretoria and Emerging Scholars Initiative Press (ESI Press). This book includes the writings of fourteen UP academics in different genres such as opinion pieces, thoughts, and reflections. This collection had at its aim illustrating the reimagination of the University of Pretoria and how it may look in the future from the perspective of UP academics. Two questions were the drivers of these writings: *How do we think UP looks now?* and, *How do we think UP should or will look in the future?* First, this work is exceptionally significant because all authors belong to the institution about which they wrote. Subsequently, the authors provide the reader with an insider perspective, (Lindbeck, & Snower 2001). These authors are well-positioned in that they are writing *about* the institution from *within* the institution. Second, all authors have some institution knowledge (Corbett, Grube, Lovell, & Scott, R., 2020), which further proved to be valuable and is evident in all the writing pieces. These are authors who know the institution and this fact enhances the credibility and significance of this work.

Last, this work is timely. During the COVID-19 pandemic the entire educational arena came to a complete standstill for a brief moment in time. For a moment, there was a worldwide pause in education before all academic staff frantically started developing emergency plans to navigate their professional identities, professional contexts and teaching practices to navigate the unfamiliar and threatening circumstances. This ‘pause’ encapsulated more than the rethinking of teaching and learning practices to include a deep reflection on the nature of tertiary institutions in its entirety. Globally, much has been written about the changing landscape of tertiary institutions, (Burki, 2020; García-Morales, Garrido-Moreno, Martín-Rojas, 2021; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020; Paudel, 2021). In *Institutional Curiosity*, the publication addresses in innovative ways with a fresh approach

on how policy can be used to generate change, debate, and institutional curiosity, rather than being perceived as a form of control and coercion.

The title, *Institutional Culture*, is concise and well-selected. It summarises the gist of the entire book in an apt phrase. The cover design by Alastair Crewe complements the content in that the image of the feather pen in an 'old' inkpot links with the idea of personal and authentic writing such as personal thoughts and opinion pieces.

The book is divided into eleven sections. Each new piece of writing is indicated with a clear heading followed by the identity of the author(s). I thought it especially fitting that the book was not divided into chapters which might be an alternative divisional possibility. The fact that the division is merely indicated by the title of the consecutive writing piece, creates the idea of all writings being equally significant and strengthens the idea of 'personal' writing.

The book is introduced by Mary Crewe, the former Director of the Centre for Sexualities, AIDS, and Gender (CSA&G) at the University of Pretoria. In the Foreword, she introduces the book with a powerful metaphor about pearl fishing. She compares the upsetting of the natural sedimentation of the academic institution to the way in which pearl fishing 'upsets' the ocean floor. The foreword is written powerfully, and the author succeeds in setting the scene for what follows: the disturbance of layers of history, several engagements in topics such as change, continuity, knowledge, and excellence. Furthermore, she unpacks the rationale for the title of the book: to challenge the term of 'institutional culture' by extending this to 'institutional curiosity' and by so doing, changing the narrative. The author clarifies the way in which the publication reflects how the University could be re-envisioned, and address questions raised by institutional culture. According to Mary Crewe, 'one way to think about institutional culture and all that arises from it is to change the narrative to institutional curiosity'.

Authors in this work dealt with several contemporary and pressing issues concerning reimagining the future of UP. All authors agree that the landscape in higher education is changing, and that it should be ensured that we *shape* the landscape, rather than being left behind. The views of authors are critical of the previous regime and how the inequalities were exacerbated by the pandemic (among other factors) but also optimistic. Professor Siona O'Connell commented on the effects of prevailing inequalities and social engineering "that characterised the apartheid system" (p.14), despite nearly three decades of democracy. She

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offers practical suggestions for engagement with these issues in an attempt to pave the way towards a better future. It is worth mentioning that although authors engaged in a critical way with certain issues, they are also hopeful. I appreciated the positive tone evident through all the writings and several authors provide helpful suggestions to alleviate some of the fears and concerns they shared.

Authors engaged with UP as *learning space* from different perspectives. In this book, UP is reimagined as a shifting and dynamic learning space within the broader contextual city of Tshwane and the surrounding community is addressed. Authors showed how the immediate and broader context in which the institution is situated, can be utilised to learn from each other and the surroundings. I found the section on the “city as classroom” (suggested by Profs Stephan De Beer and Jannie Hugo, p. 26) especially insightful. Additionally, the changing nature of this learning space were considered from varying angles with a strong focus on how the pandemic changed the educational landscape of the institution. Authors engaged critically with the advantages of hybrid learning spaces. However, they also highlighted disadvantages such as online-fatigue experienced by students, the lack of opportunities for socialisation and especially how the pre-existing socio-economic gap might be widened to an even larger extent.

Extending UP as learning space, authors also engage with issues regarding this learning space as being a *person-centred learning space* in the future. They dealt with a range of topics focused on the person within the changing learning space. Matters of family structures, sexual harassment, poverty, the intersectionality of race, class and gender were deeply interrogated in various sections in this work and unpacked from divergent points of view. Exceptionally significant points were brought to light in all the writing pieces, and it would be interesting to view the next volume in this series.

Each writing piece concludes with a reference list and in certain cases, words of acknowledgment. All authors have used a wide range of recent and relevant sources. The book ends with the Index as last section. This section consists of an alphabetical, detailed list of scholarly terminology with correlating page numbers which makes for easy reference by readers.

*Institutional Culture* is an important collection of opinion pieces, thought and reflections by writers from within the institution, the University of Pretoria. This book is a brave collaborative attempt to unlock the possibilities for the future of this institution in what is expected to be a series of publications surrounding this topic. During the book launch of *Institutional Culture*, the Vice-Chancellor, Prof Tawana Kupe, described the book

as ‘pushing the frontlines, intersections and opportunities that arise with institutional curiosity to pave the way for us all in one way or another to be both activists and intellectuals.’ The publication includes contributions from Prof Siona O’Connell, Prof Christian W.W. Pirk, Prof Stephan de Beer and Prof Jannie Hugo, Ms Heather A. Thuynsma, Prof Faheema Mahomed-Asmail and Dr Renata Eccles, Prof Cori Wielenga, Dr Aqil Jeenah, Dr Chris Broodryk, Prof David Walwyn, Dr Sameera Ayob-Essop and Prof M. Ruth Mampane, and Prof Nasima M.H. Carrim.

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