A Mammoth Task: Developing and Strengthening Design Research in South Africa at a National Level

Amanda Breytenbach

Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The paper commences with a brief description of the post-1994 South African higher education environment and the transformation that has taken place over the past ten years. The position of the Design research output production is explained within the national context. The introduction to both the national and Design higher education context serves as a background to explain the role and responsibility of the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (DEFSA).

Since the inception of DEFSA in 1991, the Forum aspired to engage with national, regional and institutional design education requirements and expectations. As a result, the DEFSA design education conferences have been the most prominent event undertaken by the Forum over the past 19 years. Due to the increase in national and institutional research output requirements, it is expected that research standards and the quality of DEFSA conferences are continually revised to meet national research output criteria. The Forum sees itself as an active participant in the development of design research and postgraduate research activities in South Africa. The paper will reflect on the mammoth task that DEFSA currently faces to continue active participation in the delivery of accredited research output in South Africa, in a multidisciplinary design context, while meeting national and institutional expectations.

The conclusion will turn the focus to the international design education community and stress the importance of international support and participation in the development of design research. The final reflection will explain the specific needs of a design community of which the majority of educators are described as young, inexperienced design researchers and the challenges that they experience in a developing and geographically isolated country such as South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1994, higher education (HE) in South Africa (SA) has witnessed drastic changes in its political ideologies and focus. The post-1994 government was required to transform an educational system that was not only racially divided but also divided into rigid groups in terms of the functions that these institutions were permitted to perform. Bunting (2002) describes that during the 1980s, the Apartheid government introduced the terms *universities* and *technikons*. "The National Party government believed that it had been able to identify the essence of each of the two types of institutions into which it divided the South African higher education system; the essence of a university was science and the essence of a technikon was technology" (Bunting 2002:37).

The post-apartheid political ideologies were required to restructure and reform the fragment HE environment in SA. Past Minister of Education, Kader Asmal identified in the foreword of the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) that: "The victory over the apartheid state in 1994 set policy makers in all spheres of public life the mammoth task of overhauling the social, economic and cultural institutions of South Africa to bring them in line with the imperatives of a new democratic order." (SA 2001: Foreword).

The post-1994 HE state governance therefore fulfils an important function in guiding, rebuilding the nation and driving transformation that is necessary in post-apartheid society in South Africa. In this paper, particular focus is placed on role players, such as the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (DEFSA), that aims to assist in the mammoth task of strengthening and developing national research goals.

I. POST-1994 SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

In SA, the time period from 1994 to 2007 gave rise to a number of education acts, policies and discussion documents which aim to reform and transform a diverse and fragmented pre-1994 higher education environment. In 1997, the publication of the Higher Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (SA 1997: 1.13), stipulated the transformation requirements for the HE system and its institutions. The requirements were; increased and broadened participation, responsiveness to societal interests and needs and lastly cooperation and partnerships in governance.

The White Paper (SA 1997) and the NPHE in South Africa (SA 2001) presented a strategic direction for a number of changes and improvements, relevant to this paper, that made significant impact on the HE research environment from 1997 onwards. These changes are;

Firstly, the publication of the Transformation and Restructuring policy (SA 2002) which indicated the restructuring of the public HE landscape and compulsory merger of institutions and resulted in the reduction of HE

institutions from 36 to 24 (SA 2002). The previous technikon-type institutions were either repositioned as universities of technology or merged with traditional institutions. The latter merger-type resulted in a new institutional type referred to as a comprehensive institution, which is the merger of a research-focused institution with a technology-focused institution.

Secondly, the inclusion of private higher education in the HE landscape that adheres to similar quality and qualification regulatory systems as public HE (Council on Higher Education 2004). In January 2010, there were 78 registered and 22 provisionally registered private HE institutions in South Africa (Council on Higher Education [S.a]). This increase contributed to a significant growth in private providers offering design programmes and participation in national design forums and associations.

Thirdly, the NPHE (SA 2001) present five priorities that relates to postgraduate higher education and research; increase graduate output ─ especially doctoral graduates, increase research outputs, sustain existing research capacity and create new centres of excellence, facilitate partnership and collaboration in research and postgraduate training; and promote articulation between the different elements of the research system (SA 2001:70). This paper focuses on the second priority that focuses on the increase in research outputs.

II. DELIVERING RESEARCH OUTPUT IN SOUTH AFRICA

The *Good Practice Guide for Quality Management of Research* (Council on Higher Education 2005:14) defines research output as knowledge outputs that is the result of academic or scientific research. In South Africa, research output is recognised, when presented in the form of journal articles, books and conference presentations. The journal articles, books and conference presentations have to adhere to accreditation requirements defined by the previous Department of Education (DoE), to ensure that researchers receive accreditation for the their research output (SA 2003).

Sadly, these requirements narrowly defines research output only as textual output where the research is an original, systematic investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge and understanding (SA 2003). Research output such as artefacts, creative outputs, design and patents are not accredited, although these forms of output are delivered within art and design disciplines. National research accreditation systems therefore force design researchers to focus on the delivery of textual research output, which neglects a vast body non-textual output delivered by visual art, design and architecture disciplines.

The result of the national research accreditation system is that academics prefer to deliver papers at conferences and publish articles in journals that strictly adhere to these requirements. In South Africa, very few opportunities exists for design researchers to either present papers at design focused conferences or in local design journals. The Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (DEFSA) conferences are the only, regularly organised, design conference that focuses on the delivery of accredited design research output in South Africa. The University of Pretoria publishes the only accredited design journal, *Image and Text*. Design researchers are therefore reliant on international conferences and international journals, that adheres to the DoE research output criteria, to ensure delivery of research output.

III. THE DESIGN EDUCATION FORUM OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

A. DEFSA Membership and Focus Areas

The Design Education Forum of Southern Africa has its origins in the Joint Standing Committee on Design Education which was established at the instigation of the Design Institute of the South African Bureau of Standards (SABS) in 1985 (Hagen [S.a]:1). In 1991, the Standing Committee was reconstituted as the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa.

DEFSA commenced at a time in which state governance by the National Party made a clear distinction between universities and technikons. During the initial period of its formation DEFSA was largely supported by design educators from technikons. Hagen ([S.a]:1) suggests that the dominant membership of technikons may be attributed to the fact that during this time, they were the main providers of formal design education.

Today, the design disciplines that are associated with DEFSA membership institutions includes Fashion, Graphic, Industrial, Interior, Jewellery Design and Photography as well as emerging disciplines such as Multimedia Design and Digital Animation. The combination of the various design disciplines creates an opportunity for multidisciplinary interaction and exchange.

In 1999, the DEFSA Management Committee (DEFSA 1999) identified the need to extend the DEFSA network through the forging of links to both private and public traditional universities, secondary education institutions as well as industry and relevant regional and national government departments. Hagen ([S.a]:3) explains that DEFSA came to recognise that a close interconnectedness existed within the entire design education system.

Until 2000, institutional membership comprised eight technikons, one university and one college (DEFSA 2000). The presence and increase of private institution, at a national level, indicates a drastic increase in private institutions membership during the past ten years. By 2009, the institutional membership comprises three universities of technology, seven private schools and two universities. The two universities are comprehensive institutions and their institutional membership is a continuation from the prior involvement as technikon institutions. Unfortunately, an absence in institutional membership from traditional universities remains to be evident (Breytenbach 2009).

Since DEFSA's inception, design education conferences have been the most prominent event undertaken by the Forum, resulting in the delivery and organisation of conferences becoming the Management Committee's main focus. Conferences provide the ideal opportunity for DEFSA to deliver on the majority of the sub-aims presented in the DEFSA Constitution, the main aim of which is to 'foster design education in the Southern African region' (DEFSA 2007).

It is essential to recognise that DEFSA is a forum and not a professional body, and as such, it relies on the contributions that are made by individuals within the Executive

Management Committee as well as individual members who are willing to participate in DEFSA activities.

B. Strengthening and Developing Design Research through Design Conferences

From 1991 to 2009 DEFSA presented twelve national and five international conferences, the majority of which were hosted by previous technikons. The target audience for DEFSA conferences comprises members from HE institutions across the southern African region.

The stated aims of DEFSA conferences are to ensure that attendees are provided the opportunity to interact and network, engage with research and exchange design knowledge and ideas (Breytenbach 2009). DEFSA has therefore provided design educators with opportunities to debate topical national and international design education issues. Discipline specific workgroup discussions have sometimes been included in conference programmes.

Breytenbach (2009) identifies that DEFSA conferences have assisted the development of design research in South Africa and exposed young inexperienced researchers to research activities. DEFSA aims to create a podium for both inexperienced and experienced design researchers from which they can present current and topical research. Young researcher gets the opportunity to test new ideas and gain experience in conference presentations while experienced researchers share knowledge and set conference standards. As stated earlier in the paper, the majority of the DEFSA membership institutions stems from a past technikon institutional environment. Dyason, Lategan and Mpako-Ntusi (2010) explain that an emergent design research culture exist in the emerging universities of technology (previous technikons) and present examples of institutions that are fostering and developing research at these institutions. In addition, emerging postgraduate design programmes such as Industrial, Interior, and Multimedia Design are not developed and established at a Doctoral level and in SA, there are not academics currently qualified at a doctoral level in these disciplines.

DEFSA conferences further aim to attract and encourage participation from the broader design and art fields such as Visual Art, Art History, Architecture and Engineering. The inclusion of related disciplines assist in stimulating and encouraging inter-, multi- and transdisciplinary research and discussions.

Conferences have also provided South African delegates with the opportunity to meet and engage in discourse with prominent international design educators such as professors Richard Buchanan, Ken Friedman, Carlos Hinrichsen, Karen Blinchoe, Ezio Manzini, Piet Kommers and Linda Drew, to list a few. Due to South Africa's geographically isolated position from mainstream design activities and research, international speakers stimulate the exchange of international ideas and best practice examples.

Finally, the DEFSA conference publications document research output, which can serve as reference to both national and international scholars. In 2009, the editors of the only accredited design journal in South Africa; Image and Text, assisted in reworking and publishing six conference papers in a special edition of this journal.

C. Challenges and Expectations in Delivering Accredited Design Research Output

Unfortunately, since 2001 the Forum has received negative criticism in relation to the presentation and publication of research output of DEFSA conferences. In 2004, the research discussion group submitted a feedback report indicating that DEFSA was required to take urgent action in relation to the publication of outstanding conference proceedings. The report further indicated DEFSA should adopt a double blind peer review process and ensure that national research output related to conference proceeding requirements are implemented (DEFSA 2004).

In 2007, past president of DEFSA, Ms Mel Hagen made a concerted attempt to get conference documentation and processes to acceptable national and international standards. International assistance was received from Dr David Durling of the Design Research Society, who assisted in the development of a peer review evaluation template. Although improvements were evident in the submission and peer review management of papers, problems were still evident in the publication of the final set of conference proceedings. The problems were due to a lack of knowledge in the application of national research publication requirements within both the conference steering committee and DEFSA Management Committee (Breytenbach 2009).

A dramatic turnaround in approach and presentation of DEFSA conferences came in 2008, when the DEFSA Management Committee agreed to embrace radical and drastic changes and address the challenges and expectations presented to the Forum. Furthermore, the Committee identified that probably the most important contribution that DEFSA could make over the next ten years, is to assist in the development and delivery of design research output in South Africa. In 2009, the DEFSA Management Committee finally achieved the research output requirements as prescribed by national requirements with the presentation of twelfth national design conference. The conference proceedings was published in January 2010 on the DEFSA website.

The *2009 Conference Proceeding Feedback,* presented in 2010 to the Management Committee, indicates that serious challenges remain within the offering of DEFSA conferences (DEFSA 2010a). The report identifies that it was difficult to find a sufficient number of appropriately qualified and experienced peer reviewers, which resulted in matching first-time reviewers with experienced reviewers in the double blind peer review process.

The report further indicates that a number of authors did not adhere to conference format and submission requirements and neglect to engage critically with the peer reviewers feedback. This phenomenon was mostly evident among the first-time conference presenters and therefore inexperienced researchers. The DEFSA management committee suggested that DEFSA should in future, provide additional conference presentation assistance to assist inexperienced researchers (DEFSA 2010b).

Lastly, in the feedback report (DEFSA 2010a) the compilation and editing of the published 2010 Conference Proceedings, is described as an extremely time-consuming task, which is conducted as an act of goodwill towards DEFSA. It was suggested that the editor(s) should be remunerated in future for fulfilling this responsibility.

IV CONCLUSION

This paper presents a brief description of the post-1994 South African higher education environment and the transformation that has taken place over the past ten years. It identifies that although national strategy aims to increase, develop and strengthen research output, various challenges exist in the higher education system, which impacts on achieving the desired national objectives. Research output such as artefacts, creative outputs, design and patents are not recognised and accredited although these forms of output are delivered within art and design disciplines. The result of the national research accreditation system is that academics prefer to deliver papers at conferences and publish articles in journals that strictly adhere to national requirements.

The paper furthermore presents a brief overview of the Design Education of Southern Africa (DEFSA), who is considered in this paper, as an active role player in strengthening and developing design research in South Africa. The reflection identifies that the DEFSA conferences assist in the development of design research in South Africa and expose young inexperienced researchers to research activities, such as presentation and publication of conference papers as well as participation in panel discussion at conferences. The conferences furthermore enabled design educators to interact and exchange design knowledge and ideas.

However, the paper also identifies that the national demand for an increase in research delivery and the focus on the production of accredited research outputs by tertiary institutions has placed a greater emphasis on peer reviewed conference papers that strictly adhere to national research standards. This activity requires the participation and involvement of experienced and knowledgeable people in the organisation of DEFSA conferences. Experienced researchers are able to guide the implementation of relevant processes and procedures and ensure the achievement of standards that meet national and international expectations. DEFSA received very serious negative criticism from 2002 to 2007, which could have resulted in the termination of the Forum. Fortunately, the Management Committee acknowledged the important contributions that DEFSA makes and aims to continue and improve the offering of design conferences. It is also evident, that regardless of difficult challenges and dependence on the goodwill of design researchers in South Africa, DEFSA is continually striving to meet national and international research requirements, in order to ensure the production and delivery if research output.

Finally, it is evident in the paper that a geographically isolated countries such as South Africa with emerging design disciplines, have to face various challenges in order to develop and sustain a design research culture. South Africa does not have a sufficient number of postgraduate supervisors as well as experienced peer reviewers for evaluation of research output. International assistance could relief the immediate situation. The evaluation and peer review of national research output could benefit greatly from the assistance of experienced, international discipline experts.

The involvement of international design experts and researchers could not only assist in relieving immediate burdens but also in exchanging research knowledge and share international best practices.

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