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I have been asked to reflect on the ET group as an instance of the relationship between the research activities of the university and the requirements of mass organisations, in this particular example, the largest trade union organisation in the country.

Some seven years back COSATU requested a small group of academics to investigate the impact of sanctions on the economy and this soon expanded into a wider ranging study of the underlying causes of economic crisis. Over a three year period, a group of some fifteen researchers, mostly full time university teachers, produced a series of reports presented to COSATU seminars and ultimately published in book form.

The project was very low key and low budget. All the researchers were employed full time in other jobs, mostly university teaching. The papers prepared for the group were essentially spin offs of other academic research, often part of thesis work. Although the output was of a pretty high standard, the process was very slow. In keeping with the times it tended to be critical in its character, oriented more towards revealing the causes of the crisis, than to resolving it.

The relationship of the ET work to the university was very individualised - in part constraining, insofar as teaching requirements forced most ET members to work in their own time; in part enabling, insofar as universities are research oriented and insofar as they do offer a degree of flexibility in work practices.

I should say parenthetically that for the most part the air that pervaded ET was fairly distinct from the normal unpleasant air of the university seminar room. It was a genuinely collaborative effort. I solm not sure what made it such - I think that the experience of working in the service of political organisation combined with the participation of COSATU representatives in the ET meeting acted to focus attention to the collective task at hand rather than personal aggrandisement.

In part caused by frustration, a frustration exacerbated by the demands of a rapidly changing political climate that demanded quicker responses around policy related issues, ET began to constitute itself as a more identifiable, better resourced institution. It did this by formally establishing its co-ordinating centre on UCT campus - the place of employment of the ET co-ordinator - and by employing a part-time administrator and by buying out 50% of the teaching time of the co-ordinator. It increased its budget about three fold, although this still left it on a relatively low budget. Output - both quality and quantity - has improved - in part some of the extra budget was used to finance minimal research costs arising from individual projects, something that the ET had not done before. But output was still too low. There were a number of reasons for this:
• The capacity of researchers to devote themselves full-time to ET was still effectively zero. Indeed teaching duties at the various universities have become decidedly more onerous.

• In addition, the researchers having drawn on their thesis and related research in the first round were now often being asked to move into relatively new ground with the high startup costs that this entails. They were also being asked to work in the area of policy research. Indeed - and I will return to this - my experience is that it is frequently undervalued for its alleged lack of academic weightiness.

Partly in an attempt to address these shortcomings, ET has moved into a third phase of its work. What we have done is to identify a substantial - but coherently defined - body of policy research, basically around industrial policy. Twenty three people will work full time on this for a period of fifteen months. Sixteen of these are researchers each with responsibility for one or other sector of manufacturing. Many of the researchers are university staff members and we have bought them out of their university employment for the duration of the project. The trainees - six in all - are mostly union employees and some are nominated by the ANC-DEP. The researchers are all contractually bound to produce reports at workshops scheduled at specific times and to submit a book length monograph at the end of contract period. The project co-directors will then draw on this material and are themselves contractually bound to produce within a specified time period a volume that seeks to identify an industrial strategy for South Africa.

A clear relationship with COSATU and the ANC is worked into the project design. Each researcher will consult with the relevant COSATU affiliate in the sector and results will be made available to COSATU at specified intervals.

In the funding of the ISP I have been struck by the approach of one of the larger funders who have managed to combine a politically progressive approach with a very hard nosed approach to research and accounting. Hence, whilst our relationship with COSATU is clearly a very important part of their decision to support the ISP, alone it will not be sufficient to ensure our funding. Additionally we were required to present a very detailed research outline, one that demonstrated, on our part, a strong prior knowledge of the research issues and methodologies and of the administration structures necessary to control the funds budgeted. Hence in response to our research proposal and budget, we will get back a ten page response querying, inter alia, our lack of attention to gender issues, our willingness to use IDRC criteria in our research, and the budgeted cost of advertising for researchers in the press. This is infinitely preferable to the type of responses that demands the barest of budgets, the modest token listing of research activities, and is only really concerned with the supporting letter from the appropriate general secretary. It is on the other hand equally distinct from the response from two very large funders who sent us perfunctory responses, one saying that it was not prepared to support industrial policy research because it was implicitly critical of market driven solutions whilst the other refused to support industrial policy research undertaken by researchers linked to the trade union movement.

While the ISP proceeds the rest of ET will function pretty much as before - our
work on macro-economic issues, urban development, rural development and agriculture, the services sector, labour market, etcetera, will continue. In general, if the ISP is successful it will point the way forward for ET - this is the establishment of networks of researchers, working full time to detailed contracts, around tightly drawn themes. I have little doubt that this is the appropriate format to generate the required output. I do however think that it is vital that this be cast within a general non-specialised framework - I am struck by a personally observed tendency in the development policy industry to very narrow areas of specialisation and am anxious that, within ET, we develop the specialisation necessary to produce high quality research policy but that it be located within a framework sufficiently eclectic to produce coherent policy.

But the long and short of it is that ET is an organisation that seeks to bring together university based researchers in order to assist mass organisation in the formulation of economic policy. Even though not all ET researchers are not actually employed by a university, ET's location within the university's structures provides it with a very strong university flavour and orientation. At the same time the co-ordinator, the administrator, and several of the researchers have very strong union backgrounds; the COSATU representatives at ET meetings are a powerful presence.

So What Lessons?

In the main I think that the two types of institutions need each other rather badly and I'm rather concerned that if they do not begin to appreciate the politics and sociology of each other a little more the distance may grow rather than narrow in a post-apartheid regime. It's a disturbing possibility that, finally comes the revolution, all the policy oriented university researchers who have been vainly attempting to get the university to understand the importance of policy work, and the mass organisations to appreciate the potential role of the universities, may with initial relief charge off to the Reserve Bank or some deadly establishment for the privilege of doing policy work in institutions that, they will discover, are even more bureaucratic and unresponsive to real world competitive pressures than are the universities.

Why is this Disturbing?

When the Reserve Bank and the DBSA and the IDC and all the other official research capacity is controlled by the people, so to speak, then who needs the universities for research purposes? This is wrong - these organisations rely to a surprising extent on the universities for their research capacity; secondly, whatever happens the universities will remain teaching and research institutions with major resources - intellectual, financial and other - to devote to research and it would be a travesty not to tap these or worse hand it over to others; and thirdly, and more complicated, the universities are relatively autonomous - and whilst I would not wish to exaggerate the actual independence of the university, it is true that their researchers are not absolutely dependent on some minister or union general secretary, as the case may be, and are somewhat more likely to produce objective research than are in-house research organisations.
organisations themselves. When organisations develop the self confidence and the internal research capacity that is necessary to evaluate research based proposals they will presumably understand that policy proposals from academic researchers are not always tantamount to an arrogant imposition but are merely the logical and appropriate conclusion of a body of research work. You have to conclude a body of policy research with a policy recommendation. There’s no way around that. The conclusions don’t have to be accepted and presumably one will turn increasingly less to a researcher whose recommendations are consistently unacceptable and in conflict with the trajectory of the organisation.

This is related to a failure on the part of many organisations to understand the notion of academic freedom - sometimes the fear that the unions, for example, will dictate the outcome of a research project does reflect the class structure of a university and is not matched by an equal concern about capital’s ability to determine research programs and outcomes. But to an important extent it is based in a real concern that researchers should be able to develop independent conclusions and that research that seeks to rationalise the pre-determined conclusions of powerful interest groups is hagiography. If mass based organisations are to deal with universities then they have to appreciate this and maybe doing so involves seriously challenging the power structures of the universities and those who merely trumpet academic freedom to disguise some narrow self interest.

In the ISP we’re treading on some very thin ice - because it’s absolutely certain that in some regards we are going to come up with conclusions and policy recommendations that are opposed to the immediate short term interests of some of the unions at some time. I think that there are more or less sensitive ways of presenting difficult recommendations; I think that there is a real legitimacy in giving those in the outside world the right to ponder over the implications of unpalatable findings before they are released on the world; I think that in the event it is appropriate that the researcher should extend her research so as to recommend measures designed to ameliorate the implications of the research findings. But in the end I do believe that the researcher has a general right and duty to reveal her conclusions. I am aware that ET generates some controversy within COSATU - some of these reflect issues that we must address; others are merely competing political interests; but others reflect the degree of tension that is essential in a relationship between a research organisation and a political organisation. I would rather that the ET was the object of persistent disquiet than that it was viewed as some tame instrument for providing intellectual respectability to decisions that intrinsically deny that respectability.

At the risk of expressing banal and self evident conclusions, I think that the mass democratic movement has to develop a coherent policy with respect to the universities. If the universities are viewed as important contributors to policy formation then surely one requires coherent and systematic discussion at the highest levels of the mass democratic movement and the universities. The fruits are considerable, as anyone who attended the UCT technology colloquium will verify. Here was a concerted and self conscious attempt by the MDM to harness the universities to the wider social need. And it succeeded, partly because, in this instance, the MDM
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treated the universities as serious and legitimate contributors to policy formation and the general health and welfare of the nation. The response from the university, though in some quarters initially skeptical, was ultimately extremely accommodating, when they recognised the seriousness with which the unions were posing fundamental research questions. The recent MERG initiative may represent the first attempt to construct a fruitful and formal relationship between the universities and the mass organisations.

The trick in constructing a productive relationship between university research and mass organisation involves an understanding of progressive research, one that recognises that whilst these two words are legitimately linked they are each possessed of relatively autonomous fields, with their own politics, institutional materiality and constraints - an approach that assumes that one monopolises political rectitude whilst the other represents intellectual rigour will keep these two worlds, worlds apart.