

OPENING GATES: REFLECTING ON THE LIAISON ROLE OF THE DESIGN EDUCATION FORUM OF SOUTHERN AFRICA AT A TERTIARY LEVEL

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Abstract

The paper reflects on how DEFSA has delivered on the Forum's first aim, with specific focus on the liaison activities that takes place at a tertiary level. This aim, as documented in the DEFSA Constitution, reads "Ensuring that liaison is maintained between relevant primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education in matters pertaining to design education, between technikons, universities, technical colleges, private institutions, education authorities and the design industry" (DEFSA, 2007a).

This paper focuses on the manner in which liaison has been maintained over the past 18 years, through the use of the DEFSA conferences, between tertiary institutions and between similar design disciplines. The liaison activities are associated with gates of opportunities that are opened and as a result connect people, institutions and design disciplines nationally and abroad. The reflection is conducted over three time periods; past, present and future.

The first time period described as the Technikon phase, reflects on the past history and liaisons that took place from DEFSA's inception in 1991 to the announcement of the higher education institutional mergers in 2002. The second period reflects on the present, which includes the merger period. This phase described as the Higher Education merger and restructuring phase, reflects on the impact of the merger, the restructuring of the design education landscape, design programme offerings and the role that DEFSA fulfilled during this period. Lastly, the third period presents a future projection by reflecting on the current expectations and challenges that impact on the future of DEFSA.

To date, no reflection or evaluation of the role and function of DEFSA has been conducted. This study is therefore limited to information that could be obtained from DEFSA Executive Committee Minutes, conference records and Discipline Workgroup reports. However the lack and absence of well documented data impacted negatively on the literature survey that formed the basis of this study.

The reflection indicates that DEFSA has established a well connected network of design educators across southern Africa. The restructuring and transformation of the higher education landscape had a visible impact on the offering of regular conferences and a reduction in the institutional membership. The Forum will have to reinstate their effective network in order to be acknowledged as a worthy and effective promoter of design education.

Keywords: *DEFSA, institutional liaison, programme liaison, design education network*

Introduction

Since the inception of the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (DEFSA) in 1991, the annual (at times bi-annual) conferences have been the most prominent event of the Forum. As a result, the delivery and organization of conferences is the main focus of the DEFSA Management Committee. Conferences provide the ideal opportunity for DEFSA to deliver on the majority of the sub-aims as presented in the DEFSA Constitution, of which the main aim of the Forum is to "foster design education in the Southern African region" (DEFSA 2007a). The target audience of the DEFSA conferences are members from tertiary education across the southern African region. Over the past 18 years DEFSA has aimed to ensure that conferences provide attendees with the opportunity to network and exchange research and design knowledge and ideas. Furthermore, discipline workgroup discussions were included in the conference programme to stimulate discussion between similar design disciplines. This paper distinguishes between two types of liaison activities that take place at conferences. These types of liaisons are networking and interaction between individuals from different institutions and between individuals from similar design disciplines. These two activities would form the

main themes within the reflection that is conducted over three time periods; past (1991-2001), 2002 to present and lastly the future.

The reflection, conducted for this study, is considered important since DEFSA has received both praise and severe criticism over the past 10 years. Since 2002, Minutes of the Management Committee meetings indicate that the planning and presentation of annual conferences has become very difficult. The restructuring and reformation of the South African Higher Education Institutions (HEI) have impacted on the workload of design educators and as a result on the performance of the Forum. Furthermore, the focus on delivery of institutional research output has placed a larger emphasis on peer reviewed conference papers and reduced opportunity for discipline workgroup discussions. DEFSA has to address both challenges and expectations that are presented in the current educational environment in order to ensure that it continues to deliver on the aims as presented in the Forum's Constitution.

This paper therefore poses the following research question that pertains to the two types of liaison identified as themes for this paper:

How has DEFSA delivered over the past 18 years the Forum's sub-aim, to ensure that liaison is maintained, in matters pertaining to design education, at a tertiary education level?

Against this backdrop, the aim of the study can be stated as follows:

To reflect on the past and present higher education environment, in order to determine the challenges and expectations that should be considered by DEFSA in order to ensure that the Forum continues to maintain liaison at a tertiary education level.

Scope of the study:

Although the Forum strives to maintain liaison between primary, secondary and tertiary education levels this paper will only reflect on the liaison that takes place at a tertiary education level. The delimitation of the study area is required in order to keep the study manageable and focused. The author does not intend to create the impression that liaison between primary and secondary level is unimportant. On the contrary, DEFSA has made various proposals, to the previous Department of Higher Education, to plead for the recognition of design as a school subject.

Research Methodology

The execution of this study depended on the availability of the information such as: Minutes of Management Meetings, Annual General Meetings, President's reports, Conference Proceedings and Discipline Workgroup reports. It became evident that a clear record keeping system has not been kept consistently since 1992. The Secretariat was relocated from the Design Institute to Cape Technikon in 1999, thereafter to Bloemfontein in 2001, and finally returned to Pretoria in 2003. In 1999 Ms Mel Hagen, then President of DEFSA, indicated that a permanent location for the Secretariat needed to be identified, ideally one that is not linked to the location of the President (DEFSA 1999). Fortunately, DEFSA has appointed a contract Secretariat since 2006, but it became evident that various past records had been lost over time.

The lack and absence of well documented data therefore impacted negatively on the literature survey that formed the basis of this study. As a result the author was dependant on personal copies of DEFSA records that were kept since 1998. It should therefore be clearly stated that the author's involvement in DEFSA's management committee, over a significant period of time, assisted in the mapping of processes and events. The sequence of events and decisions would not have been evident to an outsider conducting this study. It should also be stated that it is the intention of the author to remain objective in the reflection that is conducted; however, due to the author's involvement in the Forum, it is impossible to exclude personal opinion and interpretations in the study, specifically in the future projection of DEFSA.

Brief description of DEFSA

Since 1986, an annual Design Education Conference was organized by the Design Institute of the South African Bureau of Standards (SABS). These conferences provided an opportunity for design educationists, from tertiary education institutions, to present papers and discuss common concerns based around a central theme (Design Institute of the South African Bureau of Standards 1990).

Hagen ([S.a]: 1) explains that DEFSA “grew out of the Standing Committee on Design Education, which was established at the instigation of the Design Institute of the SABS in 1985”. In 1991, the Standing Committee was reconstituted as the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa, and was officially launched at the first national conference hosted by Cape Technikon. Ms Adrienne Viljoen, manager of the SABS Design Institute continued to provide support and encouragement to DEFSA after the official separation from the SABS. The Secretariat of DEFSA remained with the SABS Design Institute until 1999 (DEFSA 1999).

From 1991 until 2007, DEFSA has presented twelve national and five international conferences, of which the majority were hosted by Technikons. Hagen ([S.a]: 3) explains that originally the focus of the DEFSA activities were presented around the requirements of tertiary education. Hagen ([S.a]:3) further explains that DEFSA came to the realisation that a close interconnectedness exists with the entire design education system. DEFSA therefore decided to expand into the general education arena and include all levels of design education. The date of this decision is not clearly stated by Hagen, but is estimated as between 1998 to 1999 by the author.

The first Design Education Forum of Southern Africa Constitution was approved in April 1996. The Constitution states that the Forum’s operation is co-ordinated by a President, Vice-President and Management Committee that are elected bi-annually at the Annual General Meeting (DEFSA 2002a). In 2007 the position of Vice-President was altered to that of President-Elect. The office bearers and committee members are not remunerated for any services. Until 1999, the Constitution clearly stated that members and office bearers had no right, of whatever nature, to the income of DEFSA. The funds was utilised solely for the furtherance of the aims of the Forum (DEFSA 2002b). The Forum is therefore dependant and indebted to the personal efforts and commitments made by people in the design education system that are willing to participate in the Forum’s activities. To date seven presidents have been elected by the Forum. It is evident that these presidents were nominated for their individual strengths and management experience in higher education. They are;

- 1991 – 1994: Stan Slack. Mr Slack was from the previous Cape Technikon and is referred to as the original visionary of the DEFSA.
- 1995 – 1998: Prof. Ian Sutherland was involved as an educator, manager and researcher at the previous Sultan Technikon and is to date involved in the promotion of design education at the Durban University of Technology.
- 1998 – 1999: Eric Dinkelman was also Dean at the previous Technikon Pretoria and was considered as a design education curriculum expert until his retirement.
- 1999 – 2002: Mel Hagen was also Dean at the previous Cape Technikon and she made significant contributions to the expansion of DEFSA activities particularly into the school education levels.
- 2003 – 2004: Dr. Rudy de Lange was a manager and researcher in the Graphic Design discipline at the Free State Technikon and provided valuable insight into national research funding.
- 2004 – 2008: Colin Daniels is to date Vice Dean at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology and he provided leadership to the Forum during the national merger period.
- 2008 to date: Amanda Breytenbach is currently a Vice Dean at the University of Johannesburg and has been involved in design curriculum and higher education quality assurance since 2004.

From 1991 to 2001, the conferences and activities of the Forum ran parallel to a period of dramatic change within the government of South Africa. The 1994 election brought about a national paradigm shift which demanded complete transformation and reconstruction in the country. DEFSA commenced at a time in which state governance of the National Party made a clear distinction between universities and technikons. Bunting (2002) explains that the pre-1994 government motivated that the essence of a university was *science* and that the essence of a technikon was *technology*. The differentiation between institutional type as well as qualification type resulted in an educational system where each institutional type delivered programmes that related to a teaching and learning methodology as described by state policy. Universities therefore concentrated on the teaching and research of basic fundamental principles of sciences while technikons concentrated on the application of scientific principles to practical problems and to technology. Technikons furthermore focused on the promotion and transfer of technology within a particular vocation or industry (Council of Higher Education 2002).

The rigid division between universities and technikons further resulted in establishing specific policies relating to the function of each type of institution. The regulation of higher education programmes and qualifications were described in the following policy documents (Council on Higher Education, 2002):

- A Qualification Structure for Universities in South Africa- NATED Report 116 (99/02)

- General Policy for Technikon Instructional Programmes- NATED Report 150 (97/01)
- Formal Technikon Institutional Programmes in the RSA- NATED Report 151 (99/01)

At a national level, the technikons were managed by the Council of Technikon Principals (CTP) which determined the strategic direction of technikons in relation to their programme offering and programme quality assurance.

Initially DEFSA was largely supported by design educators from technikons. Hagen ([S.a]:1) identifies that during this period the technikons were the main providers of design education in the formal education sector. DEFSA was therefore mainly supported by institutions that offered design programmes with similar teaching and learning strategies and methodologies. Conferences and liaison activities gave technikon design educators the opportunity to discuss similar challenges and experiences that impacted on the offering of their vocational programmes. The third national DEFSA conference serves as an excellent example where DEFSA focused on the challenges that technikons faced with the introduction of the degree programmes.

The third national DEFSA conference took place in March 1994 and was entitled *Access to Design Education*. The format of the conference is described as “a workshop on common design issues and the rearticulation of technikon design programmes for BTech [Bachelor of Technology] degrees” (Hagen [S.a]:5). The focus of this conference was a response to the promulgation of the Technikon Act (No.125) of 1993. This Act enabled technikons to become degree-awarding institutions (Committee of Technikon Principals [S.a]). The division between universities and technikons resulted in an education programme structure that did not give ample attention to articulation possibilities between the different types of educational systems (Council of Higher Education 2002). The introduction of the technikon degree programmes aimed to give appropriate recognition to the tertiary nature of technikon education and address the need of equivalence between technikon and university qualifications (Committee of Technikon Principals [S.a]). In 1997, with the publication of the Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (SA, 1997), the government announced a vision for the establishment of a single, national co-ordinated system. It was evident that the rigid division between the technikons and universities required rethinking with the proposal for a combined centrally co-ordinated system.

During the technikon phase DEFSA assisted in bringing tertiary design educators and institutions across southern Africa together. The DEFSA conferences provided opportunities for design educators, although they were mostly from technikon institutions, to connect and as a result DEFSA has established a well connected network of design educators. The 2000 President’s report (DEFSA 2000) notes that although DEFSA is a small organisation it has a very extensive network that reaches out to the broader design community. From 1991 to 2001 DEFSA has managed to present seven national and four international conferences, in total 11 conferences. Conference attendance lists indicated that DEFSA conferences attracted between 100 and 120 delegates per conference.

At the end of the technikon phase Mel Hagen, then president of DEFSA, explains that the strengths of DEFSA is not in its formal membership but in a highly effective network (Hagen [S.a]). However, in the 1999 President report (DEFSA 1999), Mel Hagen lists ten goals that DEFSA aimed to achieve before 2001. One of these goals was to extend the DEFSA network to become a comprehensive network that links both private and public tertiary education institutions as well as industry contacts and relevant regional and national government departments. Cape Technikon, organisers of the seventh National conference in 2000, indicated that deliberate efforts were made to broaden the target audience even further to areas such as Engineering Design, Architecture, Craft and school sector (DEFSA 2000). It was evident that institutional membership has grown significantly during this phase, and that DEFSA was required to address the needs of a wider tertiary education audience.

The following institutions were members of DEFSA by 2001:

- Cape College
- Cape Technikon
- East London Technikon
- Inscape Design College
- M L Sultan Technikon
- Montebelo Design Centre
- Peninsula Technikon
- Port Elizabeth Technikon

- Pretoria Technikon
- St. Andrews College
- Technikon Free State
- Technikon North West
- Technikon Witwatersrand
- University of Pretoria
- Vaal Triangle Technikon

Higher education merger and restructuring (2002 to date)

The first five years of the post-apartheid South Africa was landmarked by the emphasis placed on the development and introduction of new policies and legislation. In higher education the period after 2001 signifies a time period of dramatic change in both the restructuring of the higher education landscape and the approval of a new programme qualification framework.

In 2002 the Minister of Education, then Kadar Asmal, announced that the number of public higher education institutions would be reduced in order to improve the institutional landscape of the higher education system. The Transformation and Restructuring policy (SA, 2002) presented the new institutional landscape and the mandatory mergers in higher education. The consolidation resulted in the reduction of the number of public institutions from thirty-six to twenty-one. This did not lead to a decrease in provision, as all the existing sites of delivery were continued; but it did lead to new institutional and organisational forms. The new higher education landscape represented three types of institution, traditional universities, universities of technology (replaced the term technikon) and lastly the introduction of a new institutional type referred to as comprehensive institutions (SA 2002). The term comprehensive institution is used in the Transformation and Restructuring Policy (2002) as a reference to the merger of a technikon and a university structure.

In July 2004, the Ministry of Education presented the first draft Higher Education Qualification Framework (HEQF) and it was finally approved in October 2007 (SA 2007). The HEQF aims to establish a single qualification framework for higher education and, as a result, indicates a shift away from technikon-type degrees, since these programmes are not included as qualification-types within the framework. The predicted outcome was that the technikon degrees, approved in 1993 and implemented in 1995, would have to be removed from programme offering structures over an undisclosed time period.

The announcement of the national higher education mergers in 2002 signifies the beginning of a time period that is described as turbulent and uncertain by members of DEFSA (DEFSA 2002c). The restructuring and reformation of the South African Higher Education Institutions (HEI) has impacted significantly on the design education landscape. The national mergers have caused an unexpected reduction in the number of DEFSA institutional members and the availability of institutional funds for both the hosting and delivery of conferences. In September 2001 DEFSA allocated the institutional hosts for the annual conferences from the time period 2002 to 2005 (DEFSA 2001). A year later, September 2002, the Management Committee discussed the impact of the mergers as well as the financial cut backs that were already being experienced within higher education (DEFSA 2002c). It was proposed that DEFSA should introduce longer periods between conferences and that alternative structures such as mini seminars should be considered.

The impact of the mergers was greater than expected. None of the conferences, as allocated in 2001, could be hosted by the identified institutions from 2003 onwards. The SABS Design Institute offered to assist DEFSA during the merger period and hosted the 2004 and 2005 DEFSA conferences. Keynote speakers were identified and invited for these two conferences and during this time period DEFSA was indebted to the support that was provided by the SABS Design Institute. From 2003 to 2005 it was not possible to present conferences at which academics were given the opportunity to deliver peer reviewed papers. However a positive aspect, that was evident during this period, was that ample time was provided for discipline discussion group sessions at the 2004 and 2005 conferences. A chair person was nominated for each discipline discussion group, prior to the conference. The discussion groups were requested to present a report to DEFSA, reflecting on the discussion that took place in each group. Topics such as staff workload, issues relating to research and curriculum challenges in relation to the promulgation of the HEQF were documented (DEFSA 2004, DEFSA 2005). Judging from the reports, conference attendees used the group discussions as an opportunity to exchange

questions pertaining to the impact of the mergers and national response to the proposed introduction of the HEQF. The DEFSA network was still in place and providing members with the opportunity to provide support relating to merger issues across institutions.

In 2006 the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University hosted the first pre-merger conference followed by the fifth international conference that was offered by the Cape Peninsula University of Technology in 2007. This conference received a record breaking number of 130 abstracts and 200 conference delegates (DEFSA 2007b). The feedback that was received from the 2007 DEFSA conference reflects a plea for the inclusion of discussion group meetings in the programme (DEFSA 2007c). Evidently the group discussion sessions provide design educators with the opportunity to interact and exchange information across discipline and institutions.

Future of DEFSA (beyond 2009)

A glimpse into the future is seldom accurate, but careful strategic planning could assist in mapping the road ahead. Although DEFSA had excellent conference attendance in 2007, the proposed number for the 2009 conference has indicated a potential drop of 75 percent in conference attendance. The author is aware of the unique factors that have impacted on the 2009 conference, such as location and date of the event, but DEFSA will have to reinstate their effective network in order to be acknowledged as a worthy and effective promoter of design education. Institutional membership has also reduced significantly during the merger years. In 2007 DEFSA had 11 Institutional members and 22 individual members and currently nine institutional members are registered with DEFSA. The assumption that can be made is that the highly effective network has reduced in size and as a result DEFSA is not fulfilling the liaison role between higher education institution and individuals effectively. In 2009 it also became apparent that due to the merger the contact details of the majority of the members have changed and that DEFSA had an extremely outdated membership contact list. These factors raise reasons for concern and require of the Forum the necessity to revisit their operation to ensure that DEFSA delivers on the aims as stated in the constitution.

In 2008, the DEFSA Management Committee took part in a strategic management planning session. The Committee was divided into three discussion groups that discussed the following three critical areas; DEFSA website, research and conference requirements and DEFSA profile. It became evident that these three areas are tightly interwoven and that the profile of DEFSA is dependant on a well organised peer reviewed conference that meets academic requirements as well as a revised website which could keep members up-to-date with the latest DEFSA activities. In addition the research discussion group has presented six recommendations to DEFSA for consideration to improve the DEFSA profile and as a result reinstate the effective network between design educators (DEFSA 2008). Relevant aspects pertinent to this study are extracted from the list of recommendations in order to identify the critical areas that needs to be addressed by DEFSA in the immediate future;

Debate topical design education issues

DEFSA should use conferences, workshops and seminars to stimulate debate on topical issues that are pertinent to design education in southern Africa. Actively engage in the matters that required attention such as the re-education of programme offering and increase in postgraduate design education programmes.

Redesign the DEFSA website to improve communication with members

The research cluster identified that the DEFSA website was in an embarrassingly bad state. Past conference papers are missing and the website information is outdated (DEFSA 2008). At the February 2009 Management Committee meeting, a committee member reported that his institution refused to fund his travelling costs to attend the meeting. The institution made this decision due to fact that he was not listed as a Committee member on the website and that the website indicates that the Forum focus on liaison activities between relevant primary secondary and in specific Universities of Technologies (DEFSA 2009). Closer inspection revealed that the DEFSA website was incorrectly updated and poorly maintained by the Forum over the past five years. Immediate action was taken and DEFSA appointed a website designer to redesign the ten year old website. The new website was launched in September 2009.

Rethink the purpose of the website to expand the DEFSA network

However the revised website is only the first step to address the concerns as presented to the Committee. DEFSA will have to rethink the purpose of the website. The previous website was only used for the publication of conference documents and basic information that relates to DEFSA. It is recommended that the new website should become the central communication channel of the Forum. Upcoming events, useful research articles, showcasing of national design activities and contact details of design educators could ensure that the website attracts regular visitors. The interaction that took place annually at conferences could be replaced with opportunities of more regular interaction could be achieved through a well maintained, regularly updated website.

Get the fundamental requirements right

Fundamental requirements refer to the basic, essential conditions that need to be in place when DEFSA engages with activities such as organising conferences and regular contact with members. To date, DEFSA has received severe criticism for not meeting the fundamental requirements. Conference proceedings have to meet the Department of Higher Education and Training requirements in order for authors to claim research output funding. It is essential for DEFSA to get the fundamental right to ensure compliance to higher education expectations.

Conclusion

DEFSA has made a significant contribution to the design education sector over the past 18 years. The Forum has organised twelve national conferences and five international conferences over this period of time. The DEFSA conferences provided design educators with the opportunities to connect and interact and as a result DEFSA has established a well connected network of design educators across southern Africa.

At the start of the millennium, DEFSA has already realised that the strength of the Forum is not in its formal membership but in its highly effective network (Hagen [S.a]). In 1999, DEFSA decided to extend the network to become a comprehensive network that links both private and public tertiary education, secondary education and industry (DEFSA 1999). Sadly, the restructuring and transformation of the higher education landscape has impacted negatively on the aspirations of the Forum, the offering of regular conferences and a reduction in the institutional membership. This event also exposed the weakness of DEFSA, which is that the network is dependant on the consistent efforts and inputs of key people to ensure that the links in the network remains connected.

Members of the Management Committee, the President and President-Elect are nominated by the institutional members. The Forum is dependant on the efforts, time and energy that are invested by these individuals in addition to their daily workload. Unfortunately, these individuals are not remunerated for their services and DEFSA has minimum leverage over the performance of the key representatives within the network. The Forum can only function at an optimal level if it is managed by self-motivated highly effective individuals that support the cause of design education.

Since 1991 DEFSA has witnessed the introduction of dramatic changes in the rearticulation of the technikon programme structure and expects even greater change with the implementation of the HEQF. To date, DEFSA has provided design educators the opportunity to debate national requirements and propose solutions relevant to the design education environment. DEFSA should remain to be actively engaged in topical design education issues and strive to foster design education in southern Africa region.

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Short Biography

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