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Navigating the human dimensions of curricular change: Resistance, identity, and leadership in a university-wide reform

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Abstract

Higher education institutions globally face pressure to transform curricula, but top-down reforms often fail due to faculty resistance. This article reframes such resistance not as obstructionism, but as a diagnostic signal of a profound misalignment between a reform's strategy and an institution's culture and identity. Through a dual-lens analysis of a curriculum renewal project at a South African university of technology, we synthesise macro-political and micro-conceptual data to deconstruct this misalignment. Employing a critical adaptation of the McKinsey 7-S Framework (Peters & Waterman, 1982) alongside Pinar's (2011) concept of currere, our analysis reveals a fundamental clash between the reform's imposed hard elements (strategy, structure) and the institution's ingrained soft elements, rooted in a legacy technikon mindset. This tension is common to vocational-to-university transitions worldwide threatened the professional identities (currere) of faculty, making resistance a logical defence. We conclude that successful transformation requires a human-centred approach that actively diagnoses and aligns with institutional culture.

Keywords: curriculum transformation, post-school education, policy implementation, faculty resistance, organisational change, institutional culture, academic leadership

Introduction

The post-schooling landscape, both globally and in South Africa, is in a state of perpetual flux. Confronted by the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) realities of the 21st century, characterised by rapid technological advancements, profound geopolitical shifts, and urgent calls for epistemic justice and sustainability, higher education institutions are under

immense pressure to transform (George, 2023; Ochoma, 2020). The curriculum, as the heart of the academic project, sits at the epicentre of this transformative imperative. Echoing the call for this special issue, we argue that curricula are not static, technical artefacts but fluid, dynamic processes that can pioneer positive change. To do so, we must invoke curriculum as a verb, an active process of becoming that moves beyond prescriptive policy to engage with the messy, complex realities of a changing world (Le Grange, 2019).

However, the path to transformation is fraught with challenges. Visionary policy mandates, often designed with the best intentions at a strategic level, frequently collide with the complex human realities of implementation. This paper addresses a central paradox in curriculum reform: "Why do well-intentioned, and even essential, large-scale transformations often fail to gain traction, instead generating widespread faculty resistance?" We contend that the answer lies in a systemic failure to account for the deep-seated historical, cultural, political, and identity-based dynamics of an institution. Resistance, we argue, is not mere obstructionism. Instead, it is a predictable, meaningful, and data-rich response to top-down change processes that fail to acknowledge the lived experiences, professional identities, and institutional histories of the curriculum workers tasked with implementation.

This paper presents a case study of an institution-wide curriculum renewal project (CRP) at a South African university of technology (UoT). The CRP was a bold and visionary reform, mandating, among other things, the integration of a 30 per cent general education (GE) component into all undergraduate programmes to foster more holistic, critically engaged, and adaptable graduates. Despite its laudable goals, the project faced significant faculty resistance, confusion, and implementation difficulties. Our study moves beyond a surface-level analysis of this resistance to deconstruct its underlying causes. We employ a unique, dual-lens methodology, synthesising two complementary doctoral studies to create a thick description of the reform (Yin, 2014). One study provides a macro-level political analysis of faculty-wide resistance (Sunder, 2025), and the other provides a micro-level analysis of the conceptual struggles over a single, yet critical, compulsory component: numeracy (Rathilal, 2020).

To analyse this complex interplay of institutional and human factors, we ground our study in the McKinsey 7-S Framework of organisational change (Peters & Waterman, 1982), complemented by theories of professional identity. We argue that the CRP's failure to meet its goals stemmed from a fundamental misalignment between the reform's hard elements (its mandated strategy, structure, and systems) and the institutions' deeply ingrained soft elements (its staff, skills, leadership style, and shared values). This discord, we contend, was rooted in a legacy "technikon mindset," a pragmatic, vocational orientation that was incompatible with the liberal, holistic vision of the reform. We draw on Pinar's (2011) conceptual tool of *currere* (the individual's lived professional journey) to examine its friction with the institution's shifting identity, articulating how this misalignment manifested as individual and collective resistance.

This paper aims to contribute actionable lessons for academic leaders and curriculum scholars. It argues that successful reform demands more than a compelling vision. It requires a deep, sustained investment in building shared understanding (sense-making), fostering a sense of belonging among all stakeholders, and providing robust support to build the new individual

and institutional capacities necessary for sustainable change. By explicitly linking curriculum reform to the human dimensions of organisational change, we offer theoretically grounded strategies for navigating the critical challenges of educational transformation in our rapidly changing world.

The context of transformation: From technikon to university in post-apartheid South Africa

To understand the dynamics of the curriculum reform, one must first appreciate the unique and turbulent context of the South African higher education landscape. The sector has been in a state of near-constant transformation since the end of apartheid in 1994. A key structural change was the merger of various institutions and the re-designation of technikons—vocationally focused institutions—into UoTs. This was not merely a name change; it represented a profound and often ambiguous shift in institutional identity, mission, and purpose (McKenna & Powell, 2009). While this study is grounded in the specific history of one South African UoT, the tensions we explore are not unique to this setting. They mirror the challenges of academic drift and identity crises observed globally during the dissolution of binary education systems. Similar frictions were evident during the Dawkins Revolution in Australian higher education in the late 1980s (Harman, 1989) and the post-1992 re-designation of polytechnics in the United Kingdom (Pratt, 1997).

These tensions between vocational heritage and university aspiration are not unique to the Global North; they resonate deeply with the experiences of the Global South, where the academic drift of technical institutions frequently outpaces institutional culture. Bernasconi (2008) documented similar tensions in Latin America, where the push for university status often results in isomorphism: institutions adopting external forms of a university while their internal cultures remain rooted in vocational training. This misalignment is mirrored in Brazil, where the creation of federal institutes (*institutos federais*) generated significant conflict between a historical legacy of technical training and a new, aspirational mandate for holistic education (Frigotto, 2018). Similarly, in India, efforts to integrate vocational education into the university sector have historically collided with a rigid hierarchy that privileges theoretical abstraction over practical skills (Agrawal, 2012; Mehrotra, 2014). Closer to home, the recent upgrading of polytechnics to technical universities in Ghana reveals a parallel trajectory, highlighting how the shift in institutional status often creates a crisis of purpose, where the pressure to adopt academic norms clashes with the established competency-based training model (Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2019). In these diverse contexts, as in ours, the strategic mandate to become a university inevitably collides with entrenched practical epistemologies and rigid cultural histories, suggesting that the resistance observed in this study is a structural feature of the transition rather than a local anomaly.

Faculty in these contexts often view the integration of skills-based or GE components as the dilution of disciplinary purity, mirroring the resistance observed in this study. The UoT at the centre of this study, like its peers, was born from this transition. Its legacy as a technikon had

cultivated a specific institutional culture and a distinct professional identity among its academic staff. This technikon mindset was characterised by:

- Pragmatism and vocationalism: The primary purpose was to produce work-ready graduates for specific industries. Curriculum was driven by the needs of employers, and practical application was valued above theoretical abstraction.
- Disciplinary silos: Academics were hired primarily for their industry expertise, not their pedagogical or theoretical knowledge. Their identity was rooted in their profession (as an engineer, a nurse, a designer) rather than a broader academic identity.
- A culture of compliance: Historically, technikon curricula were often nationally prescribed in the convenor system, fostering a culture of implementation rather than innovation and critical design.

This established culture was suddenly thrust into a new and demanding environment. As a university, the institution was now expected to compete in a landscape dominated by neoliberal pressures of performativity, global rankings, and entrepreneurialism (Fataar, 2018; Rossouw & Goldman, 2023; Sarpong & Adelekan, 2024). Simultaneously, the powerful decolonisation movement, catalysed by student protests like #RhodesMustFall, demanded a radical rethinking of Eurocentric epistemologies and a commitment to epistemic justice (Le Grange, 2016; Mbembe, 2016). The UoT was thus caught in a crucible, grappling with its vocational legacy while aspiring to become a socially responsive, critically engaged university relevant to both local imperatives and global demands. It is within this complex, tension-filled space—this state of institution-in-becoming—that the ambitious CRP was launched. The project's vision was to catalyse this transformation, but its top-down strategy would soon collide with the deeply ingrained cultural and identity-based realities of the institution.

A framework for analysis: Integrating organisational and human dimensions

To deconstruct the complex dynamics of this curricular reform, a simple cause-and-effect model is insufficient. We require a framework that can simultaneously analyse institutional structures and individual human experiences. We integrate the McKinsey 7-S Framework (Peters & Waterman, 1982) of organisational change with the curriculum concepts of currere and professional identity to provide a holistic and layered analysis.

The McKinsey 7-S Framework: A diagnostic tool for organisational alignment

The McKinsey 7-S Framework is a classic tool for analysing organisational effectiveness and guiding change (Peters & Waterman, 1982). Its enduring power lies in its holistic perspective, positing that an organisation is a complex web of seven interdependent elements. For a strategy to succeed, these elements must be aligned; a change in one element inevitably impacts all others.

We acknowledge the inherent tension in employing a corporate management framework to analyse a higher education context, particularly within a study that critiques the neoliberal pressures of corporatisation and managerialism in universities (Fataar, 2018). We do not adopt the McKinsey 7-S model as a normative prescription for how universities should function, nor do we suggest that academic institutions are synonymous with corporations. Rather, we utilise the framework heuristically to diagnose the specific nature of the CRP's failure. Given that the curriculum reform was initiated through a top-down, strategy-driven approach typical of new public management, the 7-S Framework provides a fitting lens to deconstruct the reform on its own terms. It allows us to demonstrate a critical paradox: that even by the standards of strategic management, the reform was flawed because it privileged the hard elements while fundamentally misreading the soft elements that define the university's unique institutional culture. To diagnose this paradox, we utilise the framework's distinction between the two categories.

The hard elements

These are the tangible, formal, and more easily identifiable aspects that management can directly influence through policies, plans, and mandates.

- Strategy: The organisation's plan for building and maintaining a competitive advantage. In this case, it refers to the CRP mandate itself and the imperative to transform institutional identity.
- Structure: The way the organisation is structured, including the hierarchy, reporting lines, and the formal divisions of tasks and authority. For example, the creation of the GE task team, and the appointment of curriculum champions.
- Systems: The daily activities and procedures that staff engage in to execute the strategy, such as the new curriculum planning templates and quality assurance workflows.

The soft elements

These are less tangible, deeply embedded in the institution's culture, and harder to change.

- Shared values: The core beliefs, values, and assumptions that shape norms and behaviour. This includes the tension between the reform's liberal education values and the staff's existing values regarding vocational training.
- Staff: The employees and their professional identities. This refers not just to headcount, but to who the academics perceive themselves to be (for example, discipline specialists vs. holistic university teachers).
- Skills: The actual attributes and capabilities residing within the organisation. In this context, it highlights the dominance of a technikon mindset versus the required skills for interdisciplinary curriculum design.
- Style: The style of leadership adopted within the organisation. This encompasses how leaders interact with employees, and whether the management culture is facilitative or directive.

This framework provides a powerful diagnostic lens to identify friction between a new strategic mandate and the existing organisational reality. In higher education, reforms often focus heavily on the hard Ss, for example, rewriting policy (strategy) and changing organograms (structure), while neglecting the soft Ss. This study will illuminate that it is in the soft elements that curriculum reform lives or dies.

Currere: The lived experience of change

To deepen the McKinsey analysis, which can lean towards a functionalist view of the institution, we overlay it with the Pinar's (2011) concept of currere. Pinar argued that curriculum is not merely the course syllabus (the noun), but the active running of the course (the verb). Currere focuses on the educational experience of the individual subject, in this case, the academic staff member or curriculum developer. It involves a recursive process of looking back at the past (regressive), looking forward to the future (progressive), analysing the present (analytical), and synthesising these into a new professional identity (synthetical).

In the context of the UoT, currere allows us to understand the academic not as a passive implementer of policy, but as a subject with a biography, professional history, and identity rooted in a specific disciplinary tradition. When a reform mandates GE, it often disrupts the staff member's currere, challenging their conception of themselves as discipline specialists.

By pairing the McKinsey 7-S model (which diagnoses the system) with currere (which illuminates the subject), we can analyse the tension between the institution's strategic intent and the individuals' lived reality. This integrated framework moves the analysis beyond blame, offering instead a systemic and empathetic deconstruction of why visionary reform often falters.

Methodology

The uniqueness of this study lies in its methodology, which synthesises two complementary, in-depth doctoral theses (Rathilal, 2020; Sunder, 2025) into a single, cohesive analysis. This dual-lens approach allows for an unparalleled depth of inquiry, connecting the macro-political landscape of the reform with the micro-level conceptual struggles of its participants.

The overarching methodology is a qualitative, interpretive case study focused on the CRP at a single UoT. This approach is appropriate for exploring the "how" and "why" questions at the heart of the reform's challenges, seeking to understand the phenomenon from the perspectives of those who lived it. The synthesis draws upon two distinct but interconnected data sets.

Study 1: The macro-political lens

This study (Sunder, 2025) presented a panoramic analysis of the reform, interrogating the political and cultural dynamics that informed patterns of faculty-wide resistance. Data were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews with two key groups. The first comprised of senior university leaders (the architects of the reform). The second group consisted of curriculum champions from the engineering, health sciences, and arts and design

faculties, academics tasked with leading the reform at the faculty and department levels. The study employed a critical biographical approach akin to Pinar's (2011) currere to capture the lived experience of the reform. Interview data were subjected to reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023), specifically isolating themes related to power, identity, and institutional culture. The analysis contrasted the leadership's narrative of visionary transformation with the curriculum champions' narratives of imposition and identity threat.

Study 2: The micro-conceptual lens

This study (Rathilal, 2020) zoomed in on a single, critical component of the reform: the mandated inclusion of numeracy/quantitative reasoning. It sought to understand how a conceptually complex mandate was interpreted by academic staff who were not specialists in that field. Data were generated through an audit of curriculum documents (curriculum maps, module descriptors, study guides) across seven undergraduate programmes, alongside semi-structured interviews with curriculum champions, heads of departments, and the mathematics department. To analyse the underlying organising principles of knowledge practices, this study employed Maton's (2014) Legitimation Code Theory (LCT). LCT was used here not as a grand theory, but as a specific diagnostic tool to reveal conceptual confusion, pedagogical uncertainty, and practical challenges that arose when a broad policy mandate met the specific realities of a particular knowledge domain. Specifically, this study examined Specialisation (what makes this knowledge special, is it skills or "knower" attributes?) and Semantics (is the knowledge context dependent or abstract?). This approach helped determine whether staff viewed numeracy as a transferable critical skill or merely as context-bound calculations.

Synthesis of findings

By weaving these two analyses together, we create what Geertz (1973) would call a thick description. We are able to move beyond a simple account of resistance to show precisely how it manifested, connecting the granular, on-the-ground confusion over a concept like numeracy with the larger, institution-wide political and identity-based struggles. This layered approach provides a robust and deeply contextualised understanding of why the reform faltered. The overlapping data reveal three primary themes: the clash of identities, the conceptual void regarding numeracy, and the leadership and capacity gap or failure of sense-making.

The clash of identities: The "sword of Damocles"

Sunder's (2025) analysis revealed that the CRP, and the GE imperative in particular, was perceived by many curriculum workers not as an opportunity for pedagogical growth, but as a sword of Damocles (van Koller, 2011), a looming threat to established practices. The executive leadership's vision of a university-first identity collided with the lived reality (currere) of academic staff, creating profound identity dissonance. In engineering, resistance was often framed through the lens of external accreditation bodies (e.g. ECSA). Staff used these professional accreditation requirements to shield against the mandate, viewing compliance with their professional bodies as the dominant force over internal university directives (Sunder, 2025). Similarly, health sciences staff argued the mandate "diluted the whole focus," likening

the GE imperative to "the tail wagging the dog" (Sunder, 2025, p. 149). These findings suggest a fundamental clash between the institution's trajectory towards a liberal arts model and the entrenched vocational identities of staff who felt ill-equipped to teach soft skills.

The conceptual void: The case of numeracy

While the broader GE mandate faced political resistance, the specific numeracy component faced conceptual paralysis. Rathilal (2020, p. 182) noted that staff definitions ranged broadly from "just counting" to "making and justifying clinical judgments." Using LCT as a diagnostic lens, the analysis exposed three specific barriers:

- Weak Autonomy: Discipline specialists felt they lacked the expertise to design numeracy curricula, leading to a sense of powerlessness.
- Confused Specialisation: There was no consensus on what numeracy was. Some viewed it as a technical skill (knowledge code), while others viewed it as a feeling for numbers or common sense (knower code).
- Context-bound Semantics: The dominant approach relied on strong context-dependence (semantic gravity), where numeracy was locked entirely into disciplinary contexts (e.g. dosage calculations) without rising to the level of transferable critical reasoning.

Lacking epistemic confidence, staff often defaulted to tick-box compliance, assuming numeracy was embedded in their courses without explicitly teaching it.

The leadership and capacity gap

Both studies indicate the institution underestimated the soft elements of change. Sunder (2025) highlighted a leadership vacuum where the vision was not translated into operational reality. One curriculum champion noted that while the mandate required a "major mind shift," the implementation remained "almost in a technikon style," suggesting the reform was assimilated by the very culture it sought to change (Sunder, 2025, p. 148). The leadership was strategically ambitious but culturally timid, failing to prepare staff for this shift. Rathilal (2020, p. 169) corroborated this, noting that staff felt abandoned to "figure it out," thus, failure to make a "concerted effort."

Methodological limitations

While this dual-lens approach provides a rich description of the reform, we acknowledge inherent methodological limitations. First, the heavy reliance on interview discourse, particularly post-hoc reflections, carries the risk of retrospective rationalisation. It is possible that participants retrospectively framed their resistance as a principled defence of professional identity, rather than acknowledging more pragmatic, structural drivers such as workload avoidance or administrative fatigue. To mitigate this, the macro-political narratives were triangulated with the micro-conceptual documentary audit in Study 2, which provided objective, real-time artefacts of how the curriculum was actually enacted and diluted. Second, because our data are strictly bounded by the specific faculties sampled in these two doctoral

studies (engineering, health sciences, arts, and management), our findings capture the dominant narrative within these groups, rather than an exhaustive or universally homogenous faculty response.

Findings and analysis: A case study in organisational misalignment

Applying the McKinsey 7-S Framework to the rich, synthesised data reveals a stark and systemic misalignment between the CRP's visionary goals and the institution's operational reality. From the perspective of institutional leadership, the CRP was rolled out through a series of logical and necessary hard elements providing a clear blueprint for transformation. The hard elements of the reform were fundamentally incompatible with the four soft elements that constituted the institution's cultural and human reality, which were deeply rooted in the legacy technikon mindset.

The imposed hard elements: A vision for radical change

The leadership of the UoT introduced the CRP with a clear and ambitious strategy. The goal was to transform the institution by creating a more holistic, liberal, and socially responsive curriculum. This was a direct challenge to the narrow vocationalism of the technikon legacy. The macro-political thesis documented, through interviews with senior leaders, a powerful vision to break the mould of the technikon and produce not just technicians, but citizens. The strategy was to fundamentally transform the institutional identity by mandating a holistic, interdisciplinary curriculum.

This strategy was translated into a new structure, most notably the mandate that 30 per cent of all undergraduate curricula be dedicated to GE. New roles, such as curriculum champions, were created, and faculties were required to redesign their entire programme qualification mix. The 30 per cent GE mandate was experienced as a shock to the system. In Sunder's (2025) study, one curriculum champion described the mandate as requiring significant restructuring of programme space to accommodate non-core engineering components. To manage this structural change, a series of formal systems were implemented, including new templates for curriculum design, quality assurance checkpoints, and project timelines, and were put in place to manage and monitor this large-scale change. The macro-political analysis highlighted the faculty's frustration with these "endless templates" and "bureaucratic hoops." The micro-conceptual thesis on numeracy provides the most telling example of these systems backfiring. The new curriculum template included a simple tick-box for graduate attributes like quantitative reasoning (QR). The discourse analysis of curriculum documents revealed that this system became a tool for performative compliance. In numerous instances, a module was ticked as being QR-intensive simply because it involved calculations, without any substantive change to its content, pedagogy, or assessment.

From a purely managerial perspective, the hard elements were clearly defined and logically cascaded. The strategy was visionary, the structure was mandated, and the systems were

designed to ensure compliance. However, this top-down, rationalist approach fundamentally neglected the soft underbelly of the institution.

The ingrained soft elements: A culture of resistance

As alluded to earlier, the hard elements of the reform were fundamentally incompatible with the four soft elements that constituted the institution's deep-seated culture and identity. The shared values lie at the epicentre of the organisational dissonance. The CRP was explicitly imbued with liberal arts values, critical citizenry, interdisciplinarity, and the public good. However, the macro-political analysis revealed that the faculty's dominant shared values remained deeply rooted in the legacy technikon mindset: pragmatism, industry relevance, and the private good of immediate employability. This clash was not abstract but felt acutely on the ground as a conflict between educating citizens and training practitioners. One senior academic in the health sciences faculty articulated this clash and expressed concern that the inclusion of GE components was disconnected from the immediate professional demands placed on graduates (Sunder, 2025).

This sentiment was echoed by an engineering curriculum champion, who dismissed the GE components as mere nice-to-have luxuries that detracted from the core technical skills that industry demands. The micro-analysis of numeracy provides concrete evidence of this value conflict in action. While the institutional vision for numeracy was broad and critical, within departments it was consistently narrowed to instrumental, job-specific calculations—skills that aligned with the faculty's pragmatic values. Consequently, the reform was perceived not as an educational enhancement, but as a direct threat to the institution's core purpose. In both cases, the resistance was rooted in a defence of professional competence rather than mere obstructionism.

As the macro-political analysis established, the staff's professional identity (currere) was overwhelmingly that of the practitioner-turned-educator. They were engineers, radiographers, clinical technologists, chemists, and designers hired primarily for their industry experience and disciplinary expertise, not as curriculum theorists or philosophers of education. The CRP, however, implicitly recast them in a radically new role, that of broad-based academics responsible for interdisciplinary design. This created a profound identity crisis because the mandate required them to perform a role for which they felt unprepared and which did not align with their sense of professional self. The numeracy case provides the most direct evidence of this friction, with disciplinary experts expressing deep discomfort. Some disciplinary specialists expressed discomfort with teaching numeracy because they claimed they did not see themselves as maths teachers (Rathilal, 2020). Such statements were not merely expressions of confusion; they were a defence of a specific professional identity against an imposed, alien role.

This identity mismatch was underpinned by a stark skills gap. As the numeracy thesis demonstrated with painful clarity, the faculty lacked the specific pedagogical repertoire required to implement the reform: conceptualising interdisciplinary modules, teaching critical citizenship, and differentiating numeracy from procedural mathematics. The discourse analysis

of meeting transcripts is a catalogue of conceptual confusion, where academics struggled to imagine how such competencies could be taught or assessed beyond standard calculations. The institution's leadership assumed these skills could be quickly developed through a handful of short workshops, but this solution was woefully inadequate to bridge this competency chasm. It failed to appreciate that the curriculum reform required not just technical training, but a deep pedagogical and philosophical shift; specifically, the soft skill of sense-making in a complex educational environment, which was precisely what was missing.

The leadership style, as narrated by the curriculum champions in the macro-level study, was consistently described as visionary but unequivocally top-down and directive. The CRP was presented as a non-negotiable mandate, "a decree from on high," rather than a shared project. While this command-and-control style may be efficient for technical implementation, it proved counterproductive for a reform requiring deep cultural and philosophical buy-in. It fostered a sense of imposition and disempowerment among faculty, reinforcing the view that change was being done to them rather than with them. Curriculum champions reported that while the mandate was clearly articulated, there was insufficient guidance regarding its rationale and implementation (Sunder, 2025). This directive style precluded the crucial process of collective sense-making; the numeracy case illustrates that without a facilitative process to guide implementation, the definition and implementation of the new curriculum became fragmented and inconsistent, resulting in tokenistic compliance.

The struggle to implement the numeracy component serves as a microcosm of this systemic misalignment. It demonstrates, with granular evidence, how a visionary curriculum reform (strategy), when imposed upon an institution with incompatible shared values, staff identities, and skills, faces predictable resistance. The numeracy case is not an isolated incident but a clear illustration of the broader institutional dynamics: the soft elements of the organisation actively resisted and diluted the hard mandate. Consequently, the reform was not defeated by active sabotage, but by the weight of the institution's existing culture, resulting in a curriculum that was technically compliant but pedagogically unchanged.

Discussion: Reframing resistance as a signal of misalignment

The deconstruction of the CRP through the 7-S Framework provides a powerful lens for reinterpreting the narrative of faculty resistance. In reframing resistance, we must be careful not to romanticise every act of opposition as a principled defence of professional identity. As literatures on organisational change suggest, resistance in higher education is multifaceted and can often be strategic, driven by material concerns such as workload intensification, resource scarcity, or protection of disciplinary boundaries for political gain (Trowler, 1998). We do not dismiss these factors; indeed the endless templates and bureaucratic hoops lamented by curriculum champions in the macro-political study point to valid fatigue with the administrative burden of reform. However, to reduce the widespread resistance observed in the CRP to obstructionism or turf wars would be a category error. The sheer depth of the emotional response, the anxiety, the articulated feelings of incompetence, and the specific crises of

confidence signal that this was not just a battle over resources, but a battle over meaning and self. Rather than viewing the faculty as luddites obstructing progress, we see their actions as a response to a change initiative that was perceived as culturally and structurally incoherent.

The resistance was a systemic immune response to a strategy that the organisation's "soft tissue" perceived as alien. It was the collective currere of individuals, with their established professional identities and values, pushing back against a new vision of institution-in-becoming that failed to create a space for them within it. This perspective has profound implications for leading curriculum reform. It suggests that leaders must move beyond the transmission model of change, where a vision is developed at the top and simply implemented below. Instead, successful transformation requires a sense-making approach (Weick, 1995). Sense-making is the ongoing, retrospective process of creating shared understanding and plausible interpretations in the face of ambiguity. The CRP failed, in large part, because it short-circuited this process. It provided answers (30% GE) before the community had had a chance to grapple with the questions: "Who are we as a UoT?" "What kind of graduates do we want to produce?"

This failure highlights several crucial lessons. Firstly, deep cultural and identity work must precede or, at the very least, accompany structural change. An institution cannot simply mandate a new identity; it must create the conditions for that identity to be co-constructed and internalised by its members. Secondly, capacity building is not a once-off workshop. It is a long-term, sustained investment in developing not just new technical skills, but new ways of thinking, new professional identities, and a new sense of belonging within the transforming institution. Finally, leadership in times of change must be less about directing and more about facilitating. It is the art of holding the space for difficult conversations, navigating ambiguity, and building coalitions of shared understanding.

Conclusion and recommendations: Towards a human-centred approach to reform

This paper has argued that the success or failure of large-scale curriculum transformation hinges on its ability to navigate the complex human dimensions of organisational change. Through a unique dual-lens case study of a CRP at a South African UoT, we have deconstructed how a visionary reform can be derailed by a fundamental misalignment between its mandated hard elements and the institution's deeply ingrained soft elements. The resulting faculty resistance, we have argued, should be understood not as mere obstruction, but as a critical signal of this underlying institutional pathology.

The journey of the UoT from its technikon past, its institutional becoming, was disrupted by a visionary strategy that did not adequately account for the currere of its people. The failure to build shared values, skills, and a sense of collective ownership ultimately rendered the structural changes ineffective. From this deep, synthesised analysis, we offer the following recommendations for academic leaders, curriculum scholars, and policymakers who are committed to navigating the challenges of educational transformation:

- Prioritise a diagnostic and dialogic phase: Before launching any large-scale reforms, leaders must invest significant time in understanding the institution's existing soft elements. Frameworks like McKinsey 7-S can be used as diagnostic tools to identify potential areas of misalignment. This phase must be dialogic, creating spaces for the entire academic community to engage in sense-making about the institution's identity, values, and purpose. Institutions must formalise a cultural diagnostic phase instead of standard consultation. This requires establishing cross-faculty task teams to explicitly map existing shared values and audit the professional identities (currere) of the staff before mandates are finalised.
- Adopt a distributed and facilitative leadership style: Transformational change cannot be driven by a single visionary leader. A distributed leadership model that empowers curriculum champions, department heads, and faculty members fosters a sense of shared ownership and responsibility. The role of senior leadership should shift from directing to facilitating, curating conversations, and managing the tensions that inevitably arise.
- Invest in long-term, holistic capacity building: Capacity building must go beyond technical workshops. It must be a sustained, long-term investment that addresses not only pedagogical skills but also supports the evolution of professional identities. This requires creating communities of practice, mentorship programmes, and spaces for reflective practice where educators can safely navigate the personal and professional challenges of change.
- Treat resistance as data: Rather than seeking to overcome or silence resistance, leaders should treat it as valuable qualitative data. It provides critical insights into the anxieties, identity-conflicts, and cultural barriers that the reform is encountering. Engaging with resistance constructively allows for the co-creation of more realistic, sustainable, and culturally resonant solutions. Institutions must build formal feedback loops into the reform rollout. When tick-box compliance emerges, it must trigger a structural pause-and-review protocol, using this data to realign the hard strategy with the soft reality.

In the VUCA world, the call to transform curriculum is non-negotiable. However, as this study demonstrates, the path to meaningful and sustainable transformation is not paved with policy mandates and project plans alone. It is built through a patient, empathetic, and deep investment in the human beings who are at the heart of our educational institutions. Successful reform is ultimately about creating a shared journey—a process of collective sense-making that aligns the becoming of the institution with the lived journeys of its people (currere).

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