

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the research methodology of the thesis. The various issues discussed in this chapter include: (i) epistemological orientation of the research; (ii) the qualitative methodological nature of the research; (iii) the research design; (iv) the research methods; (v) the method of analysis; and (vi) a reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of the research methodology. This chapter is the outcome of my research experience and highlights the complexities and dilemmas I have encountered during the process. A key dimension of this chapter is reflection on where I come from, where I have landed and what I have learnt.

#### 3.2 The Epistemological<sup>172</sup> Orientation of the Research

The research is rooted in a critical social science approach, a tradition with which I am familiar and feel comfortable. The other two approaches are positivism and interpretive social science. As a student activist particularly interested in left-wing politics, I tended to lean towards a critical social science approach as it came ‘naturally’ to me from the onset of this study. The critical social science approach is obvious in the attempt to come to grips with the deeper underpinning social processes that inform the changing nature of management, the interest in the study

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<sup>172</sup> The word epistemology originates from the Greek word *episteme*, which means true knowledge (Mouton, J. & Marais, H.C. (1990). *Basic Concepts in the methodology of the social sciences*. HSRC Series in Methodology. p. 4). Epistemology of science, ‘metatheory’, ‘philosophy of science’, ‘metascience’ are all terms that refer to the nature of scientific inquiry which in turn refers to ‘the nature and structure of scientific theories, the nature of scientific growth, the meaning of truth, explanation, and objectivity’ (Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. (2002). *The practice of social research*. Oxford: O.U.P. p.20.).

of change and particularly institutional change, locating change within a larger social, political and economic context, the attempt to demystify underlying processes and structures in the context of organisational change, and the tendency to point out contradictions or paradoxes within the new organisational arrangements underpinning the new mode of management at Wits.

I was interested in moving beyond a study of the subjective meanings being constructed through interaction studied by the interpretive social science and beyond the positivists who are concerned with studying social realities as if they were social facts and therefore treating the social world as if it could fit into a predetermined paradigm.<sup>173</sup> I struggled with this latter process, as I was constantly eager to have my paradigm of ‘class analyses’ confirmed through the research experience. I had to learn how to allow theory to grow and develop through an engagement with the world, which it seeks to explain.<sup>174</sup> I was therefore essentially continually struggling to move beyond a critical social science approach to becoming a critical social scientist, by being more open to analysis as I engaged with the data.

My engagement with this process necessitated constantly reflecting upon my deep-seated assumptions, holding back my conclusions and claims and attempting to focus on the voices of my informants. I had to learn how to hold out and tread patiently with minimum interference from myself in the conceptual orientation of the research process. Exploring rival theory or contrary explanations was a useful way of keeping in abeyance my deep-seated, ideologically loaded and dogmatic tendencies.

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<sup>173</sup> The notion ‘paradigm’ was made popular by Kuhn, a philosopher of science, and means the basic orientation to research. “In general, a scientific paradigm is a whole system of thinking. It includes basic assumptions, the important questions to be answered or puzzles to be solved, the research techniques to be used, and examples of what good scientific research looks like.” (Neuman, W. L. (2003). *Social Research Methods Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon. p.70.)

<sup>174</sup> Neuman, W. L. (2003). *Social Research Methods Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon. p.67 – 87.

In other significant ways, however, this study departed consciously from a critical social science approach, as I have not attempted ‘to eliminate the division between the researcher and those being researched, the distinction between science and everyday life’.<sup>175</sup> My primary reason for this was my extreme level of exhaustion from having worked in a non-governmental organisation with community based organisations and having been an activist for approximately ten years. I was exhausted and appreciated the energy sapping experience of being an ‘activist researcher’ as inherently required by a critical science approach. Therefore even though the research is not set within a participatory framework, it does strive to fulfil the requirements of praxis<sup>176</sup> through accurately recording the experiences, process and changes in management so that the explanations are valued, and help people understand their immediate environment and allow them to take actions, which possibly could bring about change.<sup>177</sup>

### 3.3 The Qualitative Methodological Paradigm of the Research

This study is a qualitative research study, as it concerns ‘human action from the perspective of the social actors themselves (also referred to by anthropologies as the ‘emic perspective’).<sup>178</sup> Because of my keen interest in societies, how and why people engage in the ways they do, I would instinctively be drawn towards exploring the thinking of social actors; quantitative research allows this only in a

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<sup>175</sup> Neuman, W. L. (2003). *Social Research Methods Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon. p.85.

<sup>176</sup> The word ‘praxis is derived from the Greek word ‘*prattein*’ which means to do (South African Concise Oxford Dictionary. (2002). Cape Town: O.U.P. p. 917). Praxis is the point at which theory and practice meet. The outcome of this process is critical in reformulating theory (Neuman, W. L. (2003) *Social Research Methods Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon. p.85).

<sup>177</sup> Neuman, W. L. (2003). *Social Research Methods Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon. p. 85.

<sup>178</sup> Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. (2002). *The practice of social research*. Oxford: O.U.P. p.270.

very limited sense. The qualitative research paradigm allowed me to: (i) conduct the research in the environment or setting of the managers; (ii) engage with the social process over time within the natural setting; (iii) understand and emphasise events from the perspective of the insiders; (iv) provide description and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation; (v) come to grips with the specificity or idiographic<sup>179</sup> nature of the phenomenon rather than its generalisability; (vi) confront my tendency to follow a deductive approach as a means to confirm my theoretical beliefs associated with the positivist tradition, while an inductive approach based upon an interpretation of the empirical evidence was what was required; and (vii) become the main research instrument as objectivity in qualitative research is defined as ‘gaining trust, establishing rapport’ with the view to generate truth and credible inter-subjectivity.<sup>180</sup>

The table below provides a summary of the differences between qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

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<sup>179</sup> As opposed to the nomothetic strategy of quantitative research which is concerned with establishing regularity in order to establish laws of human action (Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. (2002). *The practice of social research*. Oxford: O.U.P. p.272).

<sup>180</sup> Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. (2002). *The practice of social research*. Oxford: O.U.P. p.270-274.

**Table 4: Differences between Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies**

	<b>Quantitative Studies</b>	<b>Qualitative Studies</b>
Approach to the setting	Controlled settings Selected samples	Natural settings Whole context
Aims of research	Quantitative descriptions Explanation and prediction	Thick descriptions Interpretive understanding (verstehen)
Research strategy	Hypthetico-deductive Generalising (nomothetic)	Inductive Contextualising (idiographic)
Notion of objectivity	Natural science definition: maximum control over extraneous factors.	Intersubjectivity: gaining trust and rapport in order to get as close as possible to subjects/trust worthiness and credibility.

### 3.4 The Research Design<sup>181</sup>

This research project is informed by an empirical research question, which is exploratory in nature requiring an exploratory research design. The study is empirical as new data or existing data need to be collected and analysed. The study is exploratory as this is a relatively new area of investigation in South Africa.

The research design consists of two main components; the literature review and the case study. The literature review entailed attaining theoretical understandings, familiarising myself with research in the area of higher education management

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<sup>181</sup> Mouton and Babbie provide a useful definition of research design as ‘a plan or blue print of how you intend conducting the research’ (Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. (2002). *The practice of social research*. Oxford: O.U.P. p. 74.)

change and gaining insight into specific case studies in this area. As for the case study, I set out to establish what the case should be and understanding the narrative of the case. This I attempted to do by having informal conversations and casually reading through documents such as newspaper articles and restructuring review reports. Thereafter I immersed myself in the case through systematic data collection. Below I discuss further the two key components of the design - the literature review and the case study approach.

My experience of the literature started with a broad overview of changes in higher education. This allowed me to appreciate the extensiveness and evolving nature of research in this field especially in the context of global pressures. My encounter with the literature stretched from changes in modes of delivery in the age of technological revolution, knowledge transfer and knowledge incubators in the context of the ever expanding knowledge economy, the relationships between capital, state and higher education institutions, to the marketisation and commercialisation of knowledge, democracy and stakeholder society and the privatisation of higher education. Eventually my interest in governance, and particularly the changing nature of management caused by the larger changes in the public sector, prompted me to focus upon the changing nature of management. Within this area I have directed my research particularly to changes of power and authority and how this is configured within an institutional context. My special interest in this area flows from my experience as a left wing student activist and my involvement in governance changes within the university, as well as my subsequent realisation that, despite our efforts to gain access to power, power relations remained unaltered. I was intrigued by how this was possible. I began to understand how those in powerful positions influence the eventual outcome of institutional processes. I realised that the achievements of those in marginalised positions might be limited by the course of institutional change.

Studies on the recent tendency globally towards a unitary and universal mode of higher education management focus on: (i) faculty and governance bodies' perceptions of the participation in decision making; and (ii) the impact of the changing nature of management on academic labour. Recently a few studies

investigate managers' opinions of the changing nature of management in higher education. In these instances only a select number of managers, usually at senior levels, is interviewed. No comprehensive study exists which delves into all levels of management and aims to trace its changing mode and management's experiences of this. Furthermore, investigations tend to establish generalisations on a country or country comparative basis and very little attention is given to a specific case study. This may partly explain why conceptually there has been a tendency towards an 'essentialist reductionist' approach in the area of higher education research, as discussed in Chapter 2.

A case study<sup>182</sup> approach to the research has been adopted in this thesis. A single case study<sup>183</sup> has been drawn upon, with the unit of analysis being the university's management. The case study approach was regarded as relevant as the aim behind the research question is to gain insight. In my endeavour to gain understanding of university management within the context of change I needed to provide thick descriptions of the case and 'to take multiple perspectives into account and to understand the influences, of multilevel social systems on subjects' perspectives and behaviours'.<sup>184</sup> I was forced to come to terms with the empirical evidence and this was a constant battle with my own ideological dogmatism.

The value of the case study approach is that it allows the researcher to 'observe the characteristic of an individual unit - a child, a clique, a class, a school or a

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<sup>182</sup> It is interesting that there is no agreement on the origins of case study approach. It has been traced to the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski and French sociologist Frederic Le Play. Others have traced its origins to the Chicago School in North American Sociology which was interested in, for example, unemployment, poverty, delinquency and used small cases to study these issues (Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. (2002). *The practice of social research*. Oxford: O.U.P. p. 281).

<sup>183</sup> There are many other types of case studies such as community studies, social group studies, studies of organisations and institutions, studies of events, roles and relationship and studies of countries and nations (Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. (2002). *The practice of social research*. Oxford: O.U.P. p.281.) Stake (1994) defines case studies differently as intrinsic, instrumental and collective case study (Stake (1994). *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage. p237).

<sup>184</sup> Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. (2002). *The practice of social research*. Oxford: O.U.P. p. 281. Also see Merriam, S.B. (1991). *Case Study Research in Education: A Qualitative Approach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers. p. 14-20.

community'. The purpose of such observation is to probe deeply and to analyse intensively the multifarious phenomena that constitute the life cycle of the unit with a view to establishing generalisations about the wider population to which that unit belongs.<sup>185</sup>

My conceptualisation, sources of data and analytical strategies are informed by the case study approach. Conceptually I had theoretical expectations at the beginning of the study; these provided a guide to structuring the data collection process. I had to remain aware that these theoretical expectations were merely guidelines and not prescriptive categories, which were to mould the social world under investigation. This approach informed the analytical strategies which will be discussed later. The generalisability of the case is informed by 'analytical generalisability' or 'theoretical generalisability', as linkages have been established between previous knowledge or literature and the findings of this study.

As I started to appreciate the value of the data, I enjoyed engaging with multiple sources of data. This is particularly significant in establishing convergence and reliability of the data.

Yin (1994) refers to this as 'converging lines of evidence'. The convergence in the multiple sources of data was established through the use of various research methods and through conducting interviews from slightly different perspectives given the different locations of the various informants.<sup>186</sup> I found this particularly significant, for example, when managers refer to the management information system and the importance of financial information being accurate, and those in charge of the management information systems describe the way in which these systems operate. Establishing these 'converging lines of evidence', gave me a

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<sup>185</sup> Cohen, L & Manion, M. (1994). *Research Methods in Education*. (4th ed.). London and New York: Routledge. p.106-107.  
Also see Stake. (1994). *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage. p. 236.

<sup>186</sup> Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. (2002). *The Practice of Social Research*. Oxford: O.U.P. p. 280-282;  
Yin, R. (1994). *Case Study Research*. California: Sage Publications. p. 230.

sense of a ‘convergence’ in the narrative, the experience of various informants, but also a sense of the larger organisational experience beyond that of the individual informants. This allowed for a holistic account of the social phenomenon. I began to feel that I was privileged to be able to gain an understanding of the institution from different perspectives and spaces which would allow me to gain a holistic picture of the institution.

Given the exploratory research design and the case study approach of the research, this study is best understood as an exploratory case study.<sup>187</sup>

### 3.5 Data Collection Strategies

The data collection strategy consisted of: (i) semi-structured interviews; (ii) focus group discussions; and (iii) documentary analysis.<sup>188</sup>

#### 3.5.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Different sets of semi-structured interviews were conducted. The schedule was used as a guide rather than a prescriptive device. The semi-structured interview was chosen because of its primary strength of greater flexibility in the discussion by the interviewee on the topics or themes.<sup>189</sup> This allowed me to have a conversation with informants and attempt to appreciate what had happened from their perspectives. A total of 80 semi-structured interviews were conducted from 2001 to 2004.

Interviews were conducted with ‘strategic informants’ who were familiar with the recent history of Wits as an institution and so could reflect upon the changing

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<sup>187</sup> Yin, R. (1994). *Case Study Research*. California: Sage Publications. p.234.  
Yin also refers to descriptive and explanatory case studies, just as Mouton and Babbie (2002) refer to the exploratory, descriptive and explanatory research designs (Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. (2002). *The practice of social research*. Oxford: O.U.P. p. 79-81).

<sup>188</sup> Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. (2002). *The practice of social research*. Oxford: O.U.P. p. 74-80.

<sup>189</sup> Denscombe, M. (2003). *The good research guide for small-scale research projects*. (2nd ed.). Milton Keynes: Open University Press. p. 167.

nature of management pre and post restructuring. Other ‘strategic informants’ included participants involved in restructuring who could speak to the process and the outcomes of restructuring. This included interviewees belonging to student organisations, worker unions and academic unions, members who called themselves ‘concerned’ individuals and members of the restructuring team called ‘Wits 2001’. Respondents’ opinions did not necessarily represent the perspectives of the organisations to which they belong. Strategic informants were selected through the ‘snowball technique’.

Interviews were also conducted with university managers. These included: (i) the senior management, namely, the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, the Executive Director of Finance and Academic Registrar; (ii) the five new Deans; (iii) 33 of the 35 new Heads of School; (iv) Directors of units, namely, Human Resource Management, Centre for Teaching and Learning, The Equity and Transformation Office, Support Services and Advertising, Marketing and Communication; (v) Directors of Entrepreneurial Units, namely, Wits Enterprise, Wits Language School, the Centre of Material and Process Synthesis (COMPS), Wits Health Consortium and Wits Plus; and (vi) individuals who were previously heads of departments.

While in all categories all individuals were interviewed, the last category selection was based on a snowballing technique by asking heads of schools or senior academics who were interviewed to refer me to previous heads of departments who had forfeited becoming heads of schools. In all these interviews, I included questions on the backgrounds of the individual managers and their experience of management pre and post restructuring observed through the lenses of their new positions.<sup>190</sup>

The questions raised with the senior management centred on how devolution affected their area of work and altered their responsibilities. The interviews with the deans focused on their appointment, the changes in their faculties, their expectations of their work, devolution and the changes in the nature of their work.

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<sup>190</sup> Refer to Appendix A (Pages 347-367) for all interview schedules.

Interviews with the heads of schools focused on their appointment, their responsibilities and how changes in the school, such as devolution and specifically financial devolution and changes in the school structure, had affected them. Interviews with directors of various units focused on the purpose of the unit, if it was new (such as the facilities management unit), why it had been changed and, if it had been in existence prior to restructuring, how it had changed. Interviews with directors of entrepreneurial units focused on the purpose of the units, what services they offered and how they operated. Interviews with previous heads of departments focused on how the head of school positions compared with the head of department positions, and why some heads of departments did not want to become heads of schools. These questions assisted me in understanding the following: (i) how those in management positions were affected by restructuring; (ii) how the organisational form was altered by the restructuring exercise; (iii) new positions and organisational units introduced as a consequence of restructuring; and (iv) how structures and positions established prior to restructuring might have changed as a consequence of restructuring. Together, these areas allowed me to address the changing nature of management and underpinning organisational shifts.

The various interview schedules were framed to establish the narrative from the specific position of the interviewee and therefore numerous interview schedules were developed.<sup>191</sup> For example, an interviewee working with the restructuring of the financial systems would have a different interview schedule from someone who participated in support services review committee. This approach allowed me to establish converges in evidence, not only from the specific of different sources of data, but also from the perspective of the location of different data sources.

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<sup>191</sup> For more details please refer to Appendix A (pages 347-367).

### 3.5.2 Focus Group Discussions

The focus group discussions consisted of six academics and explored their attitudes<sup>192</sup> to the changing nature of management at Wits. Focus groups were conducted with academics in the faculties of Humanities; Commerce, Law and Management; and Science, particularly the Geo-Sciences. These faculties were selected because they had been affected more significantly by the 1999 restructuring exercise than the faculties of Health Sciences and Built Environment and Engineering.

Participants in focus group discussions were selected on the basis of a random sample by: (i) taking every tenth academic ordered alphabetically in the telephone directory<sup>193</sup> who belonged to the same faculty; (ii) availability and interest on the part of academics; and (iii) the fact that they had been at the institution for a period of five years or more. The significance of the five year period is because the restructuring exercise commenced in 1999, these interviewees would be able to compare their experiences at the institution prior and post restructuring. Focus group discussions were conducted from February to March 2004.

To set up focus group discussions with academics proved to be extremely difficult and time consuming. Eventually only five or six academics attended per focus group discussion from the above mentioned three faculties. If academics were unable to attend the focus group but still indicated interest, they were interviewed individually. Two academics fell into this category.

Those academics who participated in the focus group discussions showed interest in the discussion and in the research making an impact upon the institution. The experience of the focus group discussion gave the research relevance, a concrete format and importance. Even though it was important not to get embroiled in

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<sup>192</sup> Denscombe, M. (2003). *The good research guide for small-scale research projects*. (2nd ed.). Milton Keynes: Open University Press. p. 168-169.

<sup>193</sup> Working through the telephone directory was difficult as it was based on Wits pre 1999. The new telephone directory was released mid July; the data collection for this study was completed during March 2004.

institutional politics (given my activist background) it was precisely this experience that had led me to the question and would not allow me to become completely divorced from significant social processes.

### **3.5.3 Documentary Analysis**

Formal and informal or ephemeral documents were consulted. The documents are discussed with reference to the various periods. The following kinds of documentation were consulted:

From 1984 to 1997: minutes of meetings, which illuminate specific events, namely, the mission statement process, the Forum for Further Accelerated Transformation (FFACT) and the Strategic Planning Initiative of 1997; minutes from various statutory bodies such as Wits council and senate and relevant task groups were drawn upon, in order to gain deep descriptive information and insight about the nature of the particular event under investigation; discussion documents and mission statements inspired by the development of the institutional mission statement; public opinion of interest groups expressed through pamphlets, posters, memorandums and newsletters. Those in positions of power utilise, the formal channels of communications, such as official newsletters and annual reports or create special newsletters, such as the Implementation Bulletin of the Strategic Planning Initiatives or Memorandums that are circulated to staff. Interest groups put forward their views through their own newsletters and more ephemeral forms such as pamphlets.

From 1997 to 1999: more specific documentation was available as Wits attempted to operationalise the vision that it had been developing during the previous period, specifically since the mission statement process. Strategic planning initiatives had been extensively documented and are located within the Strategic Planning Unit, which subsequently has been called the Management Information Unit (MIU). What became known as the 'Makgoba Affair' spilled over from 1995. To understand this issue I drew upon national newspaper articles, Wits official newsletters, articles and position papers inspired by this incident.

From 1999 to 2004: this was a period of policy implementation as a result of which a further wealth of documentation was generated; 13 Support Service Review Reports were released both in draft and in final form, a final report with recommendations - Wits 2001, that coordinated the restructuring process and attempted to integrate support and academic restructuring. On the academic restructuring side, there were the Faculty Restructuring Group Reports, nine Academic Restructuring Review Committee (ARRC) Reports, Academic Planning Reports and Final Reports. As the meaning of the new model was further engaged, a number of workshops were convened during 2003 to discuss the operationalisation of the devolution model. Of particular interest to this thesis has been the documentation pertaining to the devolution of the operational functions and the centralisation of strategic decision making issues.

I reviewed Senate Minutes and SET documentation, post restructuring, to gain an appreciation of the concerns that may have emerged within senate with respect to the changing nature of management within the university.

I also drew upon national newspaper articles that were written about Wits throughout these various periods. To gain a deeper appreciation of the new image of the institution, I developed a descriptive analysis of the image changes in video advertisements, radio adverts, posters, changes in the annual reports and official newsletters of the institution.

These documents were found in different places: (i) university archives; (ii) the strategic planning unit; (iii) individual academics' offices; and (iv) offices of individual senior managers.

In reviewing and analysing documents from 1984 to 2004, I attempted to develop a narrative around changes at the institution and how the management responded to these changes with the view of gaining insight into how management itself changed across this time period.

### 3.6 Reflections on Data Collection

The notion ‘Process as Strategy’ was a problem for me throughout my data collection. How would I know that I knew and how best could I go about knowing? As I came closer to entering the field or dabbling in it sporadically, ‘strategy’ gained dominance and importance. How would I cover all this documentation? I tried out different approaches, ‘modelling’ myself as a seasoned researcher and discovering research strategies that would work for me in the field. From this I realised that the strategies for conducting research are not always clear prior to the data collection phase and may only gain shape through a process of ‘trial and error’ as the research progresses and develops.

The process of ‘practising doing research’, even if only in thought, is an important method of preparing for an interview. One has to practise before doing a live interview. It is about getting people to tell you exactly what it is you want to know. By practising the questions, I could evaluate the significance of the questions and decide whether I had developed the ‘right questions’. I have been consciously engaged in a reflective process throughout the research process. This has resulted in acceptance and becoming comfortable with constant discovery and incompleteness. I had to master the unknown to assist me to address the tensions and uncertainties of the process.

I discovered the process of qualitative research to be an iterative process as opposed to a linear one. Therefore, even though I had developed a fieldwork framework which was enabling, it did not provide all the answers for the research process. Managing the process was essential. I consistently conducted a data audit trail in which I reflected on data collected, what was still needed, sources from which these could be obtained, their location and their relation to the research question and sub-questions. This necessitated constant cross checking and cross referrals, a rather untidy process, with the nagging and constant feeling that loose ends had to remain untied until integration and synergy between various aspects in the design of the study could be established. I learnt to appreciate the significance of small steps towards larger completion. The journey was one of self-discovery.

## **3.7 Empirical Challenges**

### **3.7.1 Challenges Related to Interviewing ‘Elites’**

I have termed interviews with management as ‘interviews with elites’. Interviewing the institutional management was a particularly challenging process. I consider them to be ‘elites’ not only from the perspective of the positions of power and authority but also from their positions of specialised knowledge. The challenge commenced with convincing management that their time would be well spent on an interview session with me. Often this was not very difficult to achieve, as restructuring remained an ongoing process which management dealt with on a daily basis. I was particularly aware that while a great deal was shared with me with respect to experiences, a great deal could not be divulged, precisely because of the responsibility of managers not only to share information but also to conceal information that might be damaging to the institution or the unit.

In some instances I sensed caution in the ways in which questions were answered but in others there was a willingness to share information. This might have been linked to the newness of the positions of heads of school and a willingness to share the frustrations of these new positions with someone as willing as I was to listen. I also realised that heads of school were unable to share all types of information with me, for example, financial information about their schools.

### **3.7.2 Challenges Related to Memory**

Memory, that is, the ability to recall, was not the perfect tool, as interviews commenced two years post the onset of the 1999 restructuring exercise. This left me with the challenge to piece together the narrative. When this was required, I relied upon documentary evidence to assist in closing gaps which might exist.

### **3.7.3 Challenges Related to Accessing Information**

To access the required information was therefore incredibly difficult. One reason for this was the university management’s fear that it could potentially be brought

into public disrepute if institutional information were to get into the wrong hands,<sup>194</sup> especially after the opposition to support services restructuring in 2000. A letter in response to my request to access information from the strategic planning unit illustrates this.<sup>195</sup>

The most difficult interview I experienced was with a financial and business manager who was not willing for me to tape record the interview, did not offer any real engagement and offered closed responses. Five minutes into the interview, I decided to close the interview as I sensed that the interviewee would not be willing to add any significant data to my study.

I considered that the level of aggression, unfriendliness and absence of repertoire would not have led to a meaningful interview. This may have been an incorrect assessment as I may have denied myself access to pertinent information.

I also found that, depending upon the respondents' level of interest and engagement with the restructuring process but more importantly whether they felt positively or negatively about the restructuring, they would offer or engage more or less intensively and enthusiastically with the interview questions. It was particularly encouraging during conversations when interviewees would compliment me on the kinds of questions I was asking, and state that they found the interview enriching, as the questions were sufficiently probing to allow them to engage with and reflect upon current processes and changes within the institution. These were the interviews I most enjoyed and from which I gained the most.

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<sup>194</sup> While gathering data for this thesis, one of the questions which were often asked by managers who had access to information that I needed was, what I would use the information for, a newspaper article or my thesis. Those who had the authority to permit access were visibly consoled when I replied that it would be used for my thesis.

<sup>195</sup> Please refer to Appendix B (page 367) for details of the letter.

### 3.7.4 The Challenge of Confidentiality

Confidentiality emerged as an issue, particularly during the data collection process. Some interviewees would indicate that I should switch off the tape recorder when they were referring to ‘sensitive’ matters; others asked that their names should not appear in the thesis. This revealed sensitivity around the restructuring process and that it had affected participants in personal ways. For me, the issue was about treating all respondents with integrity and therefore being sensitive to their peculiar or specific concerns with respect to the information they were willing to share. I considered the issue of confidentiality to be about protecting the integrity of the respondent, the interview and the data. As a way of dealing with this, I developed an index to code respondents who had requested confidentiality.

## 3.8 The Reliability and Validity of the Study

The reliability and validity of this study has been established through the use of multiple sources of data.

Validity has been worked through by handling the data with the view to develop precise and plausible claims about my engagement with the empirical data. Furthermore, the validity of the study grew as I continued to discover connections between diverse sources of small pieces of data and started developing a web of consistent evidence. The emphasis of this growth in validity has been to establish an accurate account of the experiences of those being studied.<sup>196</sup>

Babbie and Mouton (2002)<sup>197</sup> introduce a third notion of objectivity as to whether the researcher has done justice to the research subject, namely the notion offered

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<sup>196</sup> Neuman, W. L. (2003). *Social Research Methods Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon. p. 184-186.

<sup>197</sup> Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. (2002). *The practice of social research*. Oxford: O.U.P.

by Lincoln and Guba<sup>198</sup>; ‘trustworthiness’ or establishing neutrality of findings. ‘Trustworthiness’ can be established through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility refers to the match between how respondents construct reality and how it is presented in the study. This can be grown by staying in the field until data saturation takes place, triangulation and considering the data from different standpoints. Transferability, which refers to ‘the extent to which findings can be applied to different contexts’, has been established by providing thick descriptions and purposive sampling. Dependability refers to assurance that if the study were to be repeated in the same context with the same respondents, the responses would be similar. The techniques employed to establish credibility were employed in this research. Confirmability refers to ‘the degree to which the findings are the product of the focus of the inquiry and not of the biases of the researcher’. This was established constantly through a confirmability audit trail, during which I reflected on the raw data, the data reduction and analysis, the data construction or development of themes, methodological process notes and reflections upon the development of my research instruments.<sup>199</sup>

During the data reduction process, selection of themes and analysis, I focused on gaining insight into the voice and concerns of the interviewees by drawing upon what they brought into the interview in addition to what might have been asked. The methodological process notes and reflections on the research instruments allowed me to consider whether my instruments were sufficiently focused, yet open to bringing to the fore the respondents’ concerns pertaining to the area of investigation. In addition, the methodological process notes allowed me to reflect on whether I had spoken to the right people and obtained sufficient data for a comprehensive discussion.

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<sup>198</sup> Cited in Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. (2002). *The practice of social research*. Oxford: O.U.P.

<sup>199</sup> Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. (2002). *The practice of social research*. Oxford: O.U.P. p. 174-178.

### 3.9 Data Analysis

An exploratory data analysis approach best describes the data analysis process I engaged in as the project became clearer. As I became more immersed in the data, the context and the case became clearer. During my data analysis, I focused on identifying themes from the interview data. Through identifying themes, I was able to code the data, for example, ‘the roles and responsibilities of managers’ and ‘the practice of managers’.

By using multiple sources of data, I was able to look for repetition in the data, or supporting evidence or differences from various sources of data. Given the qualitative nature of the research and the case study approach, I spent a significant amount of time developing a narrative or ‘thick description’<sup>200</sup> of the case, the context, what happened, what changed and what was the nature of these changes. It was only through developing a narrative that I was able to gather together a picture and identify themes, to provide interpretative insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

The first step in developing a narrative entailed developing summaries of institutional documents from 1990 to 2004. This was initially an open coded process that became more precise as the narrative emerged. The initial open coded process allowed me to discover key events and processes that were critical for understanding the development of the organisation. I attempted to establish this along a time scale to allow for periodisation and to isolate key events and developments, such as the establishment of Forum for Fast Accelerated Transformation (FFACT), or institutional rationalisation processes prior to 1999. As I immersed myself more and more in the data, I was able to establish a breakdown in the periodisation from 1990 and cluster events and processes within specific shorter periods.

As I developed my themes, I kept detailed accounts of my reflections on the research process with respect to data collected and what still needed collection.

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<sup>200</sup> Denscombe, M. (2003). *The good research guide for small-scale research projects*. (2nd ed.). Milton Keynes: Open University Press. p. 271.

As a way of checking the themes that were emerging from my data collection, I brought discussions and checks into follow-up interviews. For example, the idea that heads of schools were overwhelmed with managerial obligations was checked as a generalisable theme, and a theme which could be used to engage with my understanding of how managerialism works at school level.

I found working across the various multi-sources of data challenging as I had a huge amount of data, given that the university, over a longer period of time, had institutional structures and processes in place to minute changes and record institutional developments. Documents were therefore a significant source of data against which the validity and reliability of the interview data could be established.

The data collection and data analysis processes were intertwined and reflective; developing the narrative entailed collection and analysis and so required an ongoing a careful audit trail.

### **3.9.1 The Audit Trail**

I started out to study governance changes and interviewed a number of nationally established experts in the field of higher education to re-establish contact with developments in governance. These interviews assisted me to refine my topic and develop the research proposal.

I started by focusing on the restructuring exercise of 1999, as this was the initial event that had captured my attention. I developed a picture of what had happened, what the agenda was, the process and the outcomes of restructuring and wrote about this. I interviewed strategic informants about the restructuring exercise. I then went on to focus on and interview the relevant managers. I became aware that I tended to concentrate on 'managerialism' without paying attention to collegiality. It was at this point that I investigated how this had affected academics and conducted focus group discussions. The project was conducted in various phases of depth, starting from what had initially drawn my attention to the case (restructuring), moving on to focus more precisely on those occupying managerial positions and how restructuring had affected them. The process of data collection

and analysis was an iterative process and spread over a period of two years. It was a constant back and forth between analysing existing data, collecting new data and analysing again. Only through this continual process, did the narrative become clearer and could the data be analysed.

Throughout the data analysis process, while I was aware of the influence of my own ideas upon the research process, I was also careful not to allow this to influence the data collection and data analysis process.

### **3.9.2 Working with Interview Transcripts**

Questions were clustered along themes, which were informed by my preliminary analysis of data and by my literature review. The interview schedules were sufficiently open-ended to allow respondents to contribute information, concerns, and discussions on areas I might have overlooked in preparing for the interview.

I also allowed a conversation between interviews; if something had been mentioned in one interview which I found interesting and wanted to check in others, I made allowance for this process of discovery to unfold. An example of this was, an issue around heads of schools being graded as administrative and rather than academic staff by the Senior Executive Team. When this emerged, I tried to check what the opinions of other heads of schools were. To some extent, while the schedule was planned and informed by both data and literature, I engaged with new issues, as they were shaped by the continual process of restructuring.

### **3.9.3 Interview Data of Management**

In reducing the interview data, I focused on the answers to the questions posed and searched particularly for ‘quote worthy’ statements. I also created a category of information that was not solicited but volunteered by the respondents and looked at the relevance of this data. Initially I looked at what was common in their responses. Thereafter I looked at differences and similarities in their responses. I was particularly interested in the instances in which there were extensive areas of commonality. This was a concern when considering the interview data of the

deans, because the creation of business entities out of faculties was likely to bring about new areas of contestation.

#### **3.9.4 Interview Data from Strategic Informants**

The specific positions of the informants were taken into account, for example, the position of a union informant compared with an academic or student. The kinds of issues, which would be relevant to the specific constituency or interest group, were illuminated.

These interviews were unstructured; the flow of the interview conversation was open ended, depending upon the kinds of issues raised by the interviewee. I referred to the unstructured interview as a conversation to amplify and signify the free flow of discussion.

#### **3.9.5 Analysing Documents**

I clustered the documents initially as pre 1999 documents, 1999 documents and post 1999 documents. With respect to the documentation of the preceding 1999 conceptualisation process, I was particularly interested in what were the various issues or concerns of the constituencies, in which ways this was expressed, what were the various issues that came to the fore in the conceptualisation of discussions of the mission statement process, FFACT and the strategic planning initiative and whether there were different kinds of perspectives. The 1999 documents focused on the actual restructuring process and the post 1999 documents focused on the new organisational regime and its implementation.

As I worked through the pre 1999 documentation, it became clear that distinct periods from an analysis of managerial change could be identified. Most documentation was concerned with pre 1999 and the actual process of restructuring in 1999. In the main, interviews had to be relied upon for the post 1999 analysis.

Working with documentation at a complex organisation requires an understanding of the relation between documents, how they are coded and the organisational

processes they would have had to filter through before decisions were finally taken. I therefore spent some time familiarising myself with the coding of documentation. For example, an S (Senate) document which is followed by the year and thereafter the number of the documents issued for that year (if A or B etc appears), indicates that there are other documents linked to this particular set of documentation for the specific meeting, while C refers to council. In Chapter 6 reference is consistently made to C or S, in the case of discussions pertaining to restructuring.

I found that the advantages of working with documents are that they are easily accessible, cost effective and permanent and can be crosschecked. The credibility of the documents needs to be evaluated as they are a secondary source of documentation and were produced for purposes other than research. Documents are socially constructed by those who developed them and therefore do not necessarily portray an objective picture of the reality.<sup>201</sup>

### 3.10 Data Management

Critical to developing an audit trail is the consistent organisation of data during the process of collection.

My data management system included developing lists of sources of data, persons interviewed, dates, follow up dates and contact details. I also developed a filing system of both hard copy and electronic versions which changed constantly as my conceptualisation of the project evolved. My tapes were kept safely, labelled and in order. Journals were kept and entries made as often as possible and relied upon as a debriefing technique.

In each instance of the interview process, a comprehensive list of the contact details had to be developed as this was not always readily available in Wits. Only

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<sup>201</sup> Denscombe, M. (2003). *The good research guide for small-scale research projects*. (2nd ed.). Milton Keynes: Open University Press. p.228.

once the list was compiled could potential respondents be contacted and the sample established.

During the data collection process I kept meticulous records of individuals I had interviewed and contact details of secretarial staff. I discovered the critical importance of secretarial staff for follow-up information and gaining access to those in positions of power. It confirms the view that access does not start with the person to be interviewed but long before that.

### **3.11 Limits of the Study**

Upon reflection, the following are ways in which the study might have been methodologically enhanced. Firstly, my study covered too much internal breadth because I interviewed almost all the heads of schools. I could have selected a smaller sample of heads of schools, and categorised them as schools most and least affected by restructuring, and conducted more than one interview with those selected to gain deeper knowledge of the challenges of heads of schools as managers.

Secondly, the focus group interviews should have been conducted much earlier with follow-up interviews, in order to compare academics' experiences during the onset of restructuring from the early 2000s and again more recently. This would have allowed me to gain deeper insight into their perceptions of the impact of the changing nature of management upon their work, and whether this was changing across the period of restructuring. In doing so, I would have engaged more systematically with the notion of 'academic work', what it is and how it has changed as a relational aspect of management.

Thirdly, the study focuses largely on the changing nature of management by drawing upon the voices of managers themselves, thereby tending to advantage the voices from above at the expense of the voices from below.

Fourthly, asking interviewees what they understood by collegiality would have enriched discussions around collegiality, by establishing what managers and

academics understand by this and how they would have characterised how collegiality had been affected.

### **3.12 Conclusion**

Researching this case has taken me on a journey of personal change and self-discovery. I have become much more familiar with the research process and have grown to consider myself not merely as a detached researcher but as a vessel through which data flows, is constructed and critically reflected upon. Most significantly, I have learnt how to ask questions in ways which make sense to respondents and allow them to reflect upon their experience. I now value the fundamental contribution of empirical evidence in presenting a case and have come to understand that theory is exciting and comes alive in the field as we, the researchers, strive towards the unity of explanation and concrete experience.

I now turn to Chapter 4 to discuss the institutional context of restructuring at Wits.