Wits University’s response to HIV/AIDS: flagship programme or ‘tramp steamer’?

Murray Cairns¹, David Dickinson² and Wendy Orr³

¹ School of Public and Development Management, University of the Witwatersrand, Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa
² Wits Business School, PO Box 98, Wits 2050, South Africa
³ Office of Transformation and Employment Equity, University of Witwatersrand, Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, current address: The Esop Shop, 34 Jan Smuts Ave., Forest Town, Johannesburg, 2193, South Africa

* Corresponding author, e-mail: dickinson.d@wbs.ac.za

HIV/AIDS is a threat to the creation of human capital and development prospects in southern Africa and South Africa. The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) is a well-regarded institution of higher education in Johannesburg. This paper outlines the university’s qualified failure to implement its HIV/AIDS Policy through a comprehensive set of programmes. However, as we describe the decommissioning of this potential flagship programme to a ‘tramp steamer,’ we identify a number of challenges to the policy’s implementation: the necessary scope of an effective programme, the limits to existing capacity, and the need to secure funding. We suggest that the key to failure of HIV/AIDS programmes at Wits lies with the configurations of power within the university and the funding logic that militates against institutions of higher education assuming the high cost of HIV/AIDS programmes. Such institutions receive funding and fees irrespective of whether or not students complete their education as HIV-positive or negative, are aware of their HIV status or not, and — if HIV-positive — are enrolled in a disease management programme or not. This financial logic, in which universities bear the cost of student HIV/AIDS programmes but receive little short-term benefit, poses a threat to the region’s future human capital. While institutions of higher education may well recognise the moral imperative of responding to HIV/AIDS for the benefit of society, current funding models do not support this. Four suggestions are put forward to address this unfortunate political economy configuration; they involve changing funding formulas, securing direct funding from business as the primary recipient of the human capital created, soliciting international donor funding, and direct ring-fenced funding offered by government.

Keywords: cost, financing, holistic response, policy, programme planning and management, South Africa

Introduction

On a late summer day in March 2001, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits University) launched its HIV/AIDS Policy (Wits University, 2000) at a General Assembly (only the ninth such event in the university’s history) on the library lawns of the East Campus in Johannesburg. Publicity material later stated:

A General Assembly is an infrequent and significant event in the life of the University, constituted only for matters of major significance. The purpose of this General Assembly was to place on record the University’s concern over the HIV/AIDS epidemic, to launch the University’s new HIV/AIDS policy and to commit the University to combating the disease and mitigating its impact (Wits University, 2001).

The occasion was attended by prominent university figures, including the Chancellor, Justice Richard Goldstone, and the Chair of Council, Judge Edwin Cameron. After an initial period of inaction, a high-powered committee, the HIV/AIDS Programme Executive (HPE), was established in 2002 to drive policy implementation. It began working on projects that included the incorporation of HIV/AIDS education into academic curricula, an HIV prevalence survey, a workplace programme, the possibility of providing antiretrovirals to students, and a ‘one-stop-shop’ service for students to access HIV testing and counselling. Five years later, the only remnants of these planned programmes were a student voluntary counselling and testing (VCT) service and sporadic workshops for students. The HPE had suffered a loss in membership through resignations, and today remains without sufficient resources for adequate policy implementation.

After reviewing some of the literature about HIV/AIDS responses in South African universities, we outline what happened at Wits, which resulted in the HIV/AIDS programme’s reversal of fortune, and we relate learning points relevant to higher education institutions concerning their responses to HIV/AIDS. We do so by drawing on our experiences as members of the HPE during the period being discussed.

Several significant challenges to policy implementation, which arise from the institutional nature of a university, are also explored. It is argued that these challenges have numerous important implications. First, there appeared a need to broaden the scope of the proposed response to
HIV/AIDS. Second, there was an increase in the expected cost of the programme since resource-constrained entities, necessary for aspects of implementation, resisted on the grounds of increased workloads. Third, mistiming of the programme start-up in relation to the university’s budgetary cycle generated implementation difficulties.

These were major challenges. Nevertheless, we argue that a full explanation of why the envisaged ‘flagship’ HIV/AIDS programme at Wits instead became a ‘tramp steamer’ — in the words of one internal HPE document — actually rests within the configurations of power and the political economy of HIV/AIDS in and beyond universities and other institutions of higher education.¹

A critical issue facing institutions of higher education is the cost-benefit relationship in funding HIV/AIDS programmes — that is, the poor ‘return on investment’ from such programmes. This is completely different to the model that applies to the business sector: the majority of students who are eventually affected by HIV will not be at university when they develop AIDS, while affected employees may still work at the organisation. Consequently, the cost of mounting HIV/AIDS programmes for students at universities represents a cost without any prospect of direct benefit accruing later. Until this is clearly understood, it is unlikely that higher education institutions will respond vigorously and holistically to the epidemic. We point out the major implications this has for the development of the nation’s human capital and thus advise that the situation should be addressed with urgency.

**HIV/AIDS and higher education institutions**

The imperative that institutions of higher education should respond to HIV/AIDS has been recognised on different grounds. Kelly (2000) points out the physical and psychological impact HIV/AIDS has on society, the direct challenges that HIV/AIDS presents to institutes of higher education (and other educational institutions — a point extensively researched in regard to public schools by Peltzer, Shisana, Udjo, Wilson, Rehle, Connolly, Zuma, Letlape, Louw, Simbayi, Zungu-Dirwayi, Ramlogan, Magome, Hall & Phurutse (2005), and the responsibility of such institutions to society. Regarding the latter, Kelly (2000, p. 2) calls for “ensuring the development of individuals qualified in the specialisations and numbers required in an AIDS-affected society”.

The response to HIV/AIDS by higher education institutions must be multifaceted because of the complex set of activities they conduct as educational institutions, research organisations, workplaces and agents of social development. The strategy taken by the Higher Education HIV/AIDS Programme (HEAIDS, 2004) positions institutional responses in six categories: 1) effective policy, leadership, advocacy and management; 2) effective HIV prevention (among employees and students); 3) effective care and support (among employees and students); 4) teaching appropriate to the HIV/AIDS era; 5) appropriate research/knowledge creation; and 6) community outreach.

An extensive review of the response of South African institutions by HEAIDS (2004) emphasised the progress made by these institutions since an earlier survey in 2000. But the report also pointed to significant gaps in the various responses. This included limited coordination of different programme elements and “the limitation of finances [which is] a pervasive element throughout this report…” (HEAIDS, 2004, p. 46). The latter point specifically raised the question of programme sustainability once HEAIDS funding for aspects of campus responses to HIV/AIDS ended.

**Methodology**

This article is based on participatory observation of the processes described. All three authors were founding members of the HPE (HIV/AIDS Programme Executive) at the University of the Witwatersrand. David Dickinson was seconded on a 20%-basis as a strategic adviser to the project, initially for a two-year period; this involved running the HPE office (assisted by a part-time administrator), which was housed in the Department of Transformation and Employment Equity directed by Wendy Orr. All three authors worked together closely during this period, while having frequent discussions both inside and outside of HPE structures. This article is based on our observations during numerous meetings, workshops, discussions and briefings, as well as the archives of the HPE office. Following the closure of the HPE office we continued to meet and in time put together an analysis of what had happened. This was drawn up as an internal document presented to the HPE (which was still meeting though barely functioning). Later, it was developed for a presentation made at the second South African AIDS Conference in Durban in June 2005.

**The case study**

This case study can be better understood by first sketching some peculiarities about the ways in which universities function. To begin, although academic staff are obviously present to teach, far greater emphasis is placed on conducting and publishing research. The academic standing of a university is directly linked to the quality and quantity of its research output. Thus, any additional demands on academics must compete with their two primary duties: teaching and research. Second, the structure of university governance, as prescribed in the Higher Education Act (Government of South Africa 1997), consists of four bodies: Council, Senate, Student Representative Council, and the University Forum. These are overlaid by whatever management structures the institute decides to put in place. The management hierarchy is usually relatively ‘flat’, and the locus of real power is not always at the top of the pyramid. This complicated structure of governance and management makes the introduction of new programmes (if it is to be consultative) invariably long and tedious. Third, the majority of the institute’s ‘managers’ are academics who do not see management or administration as their primary function. Finally, decisions about a new programme (and funding for the programme) are regularly made on the basis of whether or not that programme is part of the university’s ‘core business.’ Combined, these factors create a complex and challenging environment.
In December 2000, the Council of the University of the Witwatersrand adopted a new, wide-ranging HIV/AIDS Policy. This policy was launched amidst much fanfare at a University General Assembly in March 2001. As university policy documents often do, it then languished on a shelf for almost a year. In February 2002, two staff members initiated a discussion on an appropriate strategy for implementing the policy and, after a number of presentations to the university’s Senior Executive Team (SET), the HIV/AIDS Programme Executive (HPE) was established, with reporting lines directly to SET, and chaired by one of the university’s three Deputy Vice-Chancellors. The function of the HPE was to implement the university’s HIV/AIDS Policy. The HPE was conceptualised as the executive committee of the larger HIV/AIDS Forum, which, while recognised as a valuable information-sharing body, had not yet been able to drive the policy into action. With the help of the HPE’s senior, high-powered membership as committed and enthusiastic ‘drivers’, success seemed likely.

The HPE first met on 23 May 2002. A part-time Strategic Advisor was seconded from the Wits Business School, and an office with a part-time administrator was established in the university’s main administration building. Over the next few months a strategic plan was developed for the implementation of all aspects of the HIV/AIDS Policy (excluding research, which was being dealt with via a separate process). The plan encompassed the following:

- Student HIV/AIDS education inside the classroom (integration into academic curricula)
- Student HIV/AIDS education outside the classroom (e.g. HIV prevention programmes, life-skills development)
- Counselling and testing services for students
- Staff education and the establishment of a workplace peer education programme
- Counselling and testing for staff
- Infrastructure for supporting implementation of the above
- A campus-wide prevalence survey
- Communications and publicity.

The budget included the appointment of a programme coordinator in addition to the existing Strategic Advisor and administrative support for the programme. This team would implement the programme alongside a full-time student response coordinator (at that time paid for by HEAIDS); in-house providers of clinical services, counselling and training; the Heads of Schools; and the university’s medical aid scheme.

Extensive consultation around the plan took place with managers, Heads of Schools and other stakeholders. At the end of the consultation process there was general consensus about the direction in which the plan would take Wits. However, a contentious issue was the provision of antiretrovirals (ARVs) for students, although there was agreement that this should be explored.

The strategic plan was costed, and in August 2002 a start-up budget of R3.1 million for 2003, and subsequent annual budgets of just under R2 million, were presented to SET and the university’s Financial Resources Allocation Committee. The budget excluded provision of ARVs, as this was felt to be beyond the resources of the university (even so, funding would be pursued for this from external sources). Senior members of the HPE gave strong indications that overall programme funding would be forthcoming. However, by the end of 2002 there was still no clarity about funding and a number of the planned initiatives had to be put on hold. This was despite significant ‘revving-up’ of a variety of university constituencies on the assumption that programmes would proceed.

Early in 2003, the HPE was informed that while no final decision had been taken, it was unlikely that all aspects of the strategic plan would be funded, and so the HPE office was instructed to select funding priorities — a de-motivating task given the expectations that had already been raised. In April 2003 it was reported that a one-off allocation of R1.35 million would be made to fund student education, service interventions and some workplace training. While the funding would allow for some level of HIV/AIDS programmes at Wits, it clearly fell short of the strategic plan drawn up by the HPE and approved by SET and Council.

In September 2003, the HPE met to discuss the future of programmes to support the HIV/AIDS Policy at Wits, as well as the future of the HPE itself. It was agreed that the HPE and AIDS Forum would, for the foreseeable future, meet as a joint body. The HPE did meet jointly with the AIDS Forum a few times, but the whole enterprise lost impetus, without separate meetings of the HPE proceeding in order to drive policy implementation. The meetings became repetitive and formulaic and attendance reached an all-time low.

The student programme nevertheless continued to operate. Student peer educators were trained and various educational events were staged, particularly in residences. With the completion of building work at Campus Health and the employment of two full-time HIV/AIDS counsellors, uptake of VCT increased dramatically, yet did not achieve the target set out in the strategic plan (1 480 HIV tests were performed in 2004, as opposed to 5 000 projected in the plan’s).

Other aspects of the HIV/AIDS programme, however, did not materialise. Although training for some staff peer educators was conducted, because they emerged from training into a vacuum in respect of workplace HIV/AIDS programmes, they found it very difficult to put their training to use. Incorporation of HIV/AIDS into the academic curriculum continued — or not — in an ad-hoc, voluntary fashion. And the structured input by the university that had been envisaged for all first-year students was not pursued.

In March 2004 the Vice Chancellor called a meeting of the HPE to reassess the situation. At this meeting it was agreed that the HPE should meet again separately from the AIDS Forum, on a quarterly basis or more frequently if specified. Today, the student HIV/AIDS programme continues to be implemented along the lines originally envisaged, but with little of the energy that saw its inception. Other aspects of the university’s policy remain essentially unimplemented and the prospect of any dramatic up-turn in activity seems slight.

Implementation challenges

The next three sections examine key challenges encountered by the HPE as it attempted to implement the flagship programme.
The dilemma of choosing an incremental versus integrated strategy

The HPE’s strategic plan was intended to be holistic and able to address all areas of university life affected by HIV/AIDS. However, the committee’s initial attempts to proceed incrementally were overtaken by the need to put in place an integrated (‘complete’) response; this was in fact welcomed by many members of the HPE and often praised for being holistic. At the same time it challenged (increased) the level of resources required. The HPE’s strategic plan was forced to expand as a result of pressure to widen and deepen its response.

An example of the pressure to widen the response is contained in the HPE’s decision to investigate the provision of ARVs to students. This had not formed part of earlier versions of the strategic plan, although it was initially identified as an issue that would ultimately have to be confronted. However, in investigating the provision of VCT for students and while anticipating possible reactions to release of the proposed sero-prevalence survey, the HPE quickly realised that its objectives would likely only be fulfilled by widening its immediate concerns to include the provision of ARVs to the university population. (With the government’s subsequent roll-out of antiretroviral drugs, this particular problem is now mitigated.) Nevertheless, any university-based HIV/AIDS programme is likely to face pressures to widen its programme, since any successful intervention is likely to increase need and necessitate additional responses.

An example of how the work of the HPE was deepened is the issue of key performance indicators (KPIs) for Heads of School. KPIs were seen as a management tool that the HPE could use to ensure that its workplace and curriculum programmes were being carried out throughout the university. What was not fully appreciated was that there was no bedded-down system of KPI use within the university which could be simply adapted to include HIV/AIDS responsibilities. Thus, the attempt to introduce KPIs in relation to an HIV/AIDS-related response required the HPE to pursue this particular objective within Wits Human Resources structures; requiring much time, effort and still more resources, this eventually became bogged down before disappearing from the agenda.

Several effects of the widening and deepening of the HPE’s response were: greater coherence in its strategy; greater demand for human and financial resources; diversification (and diversion) of HPE energy into areas peripheral to HIV/AIDS, yet necessary for the successful implementation of its strategic plan; and, as discussed next, widened resistance to the HPE’s activities.

Resistance and resources

The work of implementing the Wits HIV/AIDS Policy was undertaken in the context of an organisation undergoing a difficult transition from nine academic faculties to five, and reduction of the number of individual academic units from more than 100 ‘departments’ to 35 ‘schools’. At the time of the first HPE meetings and the formulation of the Wits HIV/AIDS Policy, many details about how the new structures would function and relate to each other and to the centre, had not been finalised. The governance structures that managed the relationships between the Deans and Heads of Schools were in the process of being formalised, and the vertical and horizontal power relationships between the Deans and Heads of Schools were still largely untested and shifting. Meanwhile, there was growing awareness throughout the university that the demand for resources was outstripping availability, and that schools would be facing increasing financial constraints.

In order to maximise possible income through the government’s funding formula, the university substantially increased its student intake between 2000 and 2003, but did not proportionately increase the number of academic staff. On one hand, academic staff were required to teach larger classes (a greater workload), and on the other hand, they were still expected to conduct research and even increase their research output.

Against this background, the HPE adopted strategies to achieve programme goals through academic staff based in the schools. In order to ensure that the schools mainstreamed HIV/AIDS into their curriculum, it was proposed that the KPIs of the Heads of Schools should be used to drive and monitor, inter alia, the inclusion of HIV/AIDS in the curricula. Under the circumstances, however, the Heads of Schools reacted vociferously to this plan and rejected it outright.

It became clear that asking people to take on the extra responsibilities of implementing the HIV/AIDS programme in a resource-constrained environment was not straightforward. The Heads of Schools resisted the additional workload and the ‘managerial’ connotations that these KPIs implied. Given their considerable horizontal power within the university’s hierarchy they in effect had to be ‘bought off’ through the promise of additional funding with which to carry out the role requested of them. To maintain the involvement of schools, and as a further compromise on the original plan, the HPE’s proposed HIV/AIDS budget was thus increased to include limited salary subvention to schools to cover the cost of academic time spent on HIV/AIDS-related curriculum development.

Delays

One of the most crucial confounding factors to the implementation of the HIV/AIDS Policy was the delay between the time of adoption and approval of the HPE’s strategic plan and the allocation of funding. The plan, with the associated budget, was approved in principle by the HPE, SET and Council in mid-2002, yet funding (far less than what had been requested) was only allocated in April 2003.

One reason for the delay was that the HPE request for funding was not synchronised with the university’s own budgeting cycle. This, in effect, was a failure of the HPE to coordinate its plan of action with the financial timetable of the university (despite the Executive Director of Finance being a member). As a result, when the HPE’s strategic plan was brought to a point where finance was required to follow it through, no decision on whether finance would be forthcoming was available.

A side effect of this situation was the strain placed on the relationship between those responsible for implementing the HPE’s strategic plan and the senior members of the
university who sat on the HPE. Essentially, communications broke down between these two groups of HPE members. One group were frustrated at the lack of any decision over funding and the need to make unsupported promises to those whom they had mobilised, and the other felt unable to share information about the growing financial constraints. Another side effect was a loss of credibility of the HPE in the eyes of university staff. Exciting and innovative strategies were described, staff were won over (sometimes with difficulty), they were ready to act — then nothing happened.

Finally, it was impossible to maintain the impetus and enthusiasm built up during the consultative and planning processes, as there was no immediate evidence that anything concrete would ever happen. Staff who had once been supportive lost interest. HIV/AIDS programmes necessarily involve a wide range of people and cannot be turned on and off at whim. Once begun, they must be maintained, and promises along the way must be real if commitment and interest are to be secured.

The political economy of HIV/AIDS programmes in an educational institution

As outlined, the proposed HPE budget of R3.1m was initially stalled and then drastically reduced. This was despite support and commitment from senior members of the university who served on the HPE. Initially, this failure to fund the approved strategic plan appeared to be a product of the leadership struggle occurring within (and beyond) ‘the 11th floor’. However, the resolution of this struggle in late 2002, with the departure of the Vice Chancellor and appointment of an acting Vice Chancellor, made it clear that behind this temporary paralysis of decision-making were more enduring financial constraints facing the university — with expenditure stretching ahead of income and reserves almost depleted.

A sustained period of financial restrictions obviously sets up a difficult environment in which to introduce new expenditure items, especially if they include a significant degree of recurring costs as the HPE budget did. Thus, the simple answer as to why the HPE did not secure the funding it required is that funding was not available. This is true to an extent, but it is far from the complete answer.

Institutional power and budget allocation

This section explores the additional considerations, looking first at the configuration of power within universities, and second at the broader political economy faced by universities. Critically, we point to the far-from-ideal situation in which these two considerations work against the imperative to protect a key component of the nation’s future human capital within the AIDS epidemic. Management theory indicates that for a project to succeed it must have:

- A clear case for implementation
- Professional and efficient management
- Buy-in from major stakeholders
- Senior management support (Kanter, 1984; Peters & Waterman, 1995).

Interestingly, although the HPE and its strategic plan appeared to fulfll these criteria, it did not succeed. We suggest that the weak link within these four criteria was the case for implementation. While this had been ‘won’ with relative ease on the basis of moral economy (i.e. that the university should be responding to HIV/AIDS), it was not secured in terms of political economy, either within the university (as described in this section) or within the wider, national environment (described in the next section).

Considering the particular distribution of power within Wits (and possibly universities generally), and financial constraints, provides a more rigorous answer to the question ‘Why was it that the HPE’s proposed budget was cut rather than other items of expenditure?’ Within Wits, a configuration of horizontal power, additional to Heads of Schools as previously described, can be identified namely: the five Deans, who together with the Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellors, Registrar and Executive Director of Finance made up the university’s Senior Executive Team (SET) at that time. While the latter posts are charged with promoting the university as a whole, the first concern of deans is the well-being of their faculties. The HPE had significant representation (and active support) from the highest managerial positions in the university, but no deans as members.

The inclusion of deans in the HPE was considered, but quickly dismissed as impractical given that there were five (too many to include on the HPE), and there was limited value in having only one (since he/she would represent only their faculty and not faculties generally), and because it was extremely unlikely that any of them would feel it was their particular responsibility to devote time to another committee. It is precisely their individually localised, yet collectively extensive role that gives deans horizontal power. While they are not collectively accountable, their individual support must be secured, and that support will depend on how any proposal will influence the dean’s own sphere of responsibility (i.e., their faculty).

Members of SET, including deans, understood the arguments put forward by the HPE about the importance of responding to HIV/AIDS at Wits. Numerous times, deans had set the pace by emphasising the moral imperative of responding to HIV/AIDS. Thus, on one occasion when a head of school refused on religious grounds to allow condom dispensers placed in his school, he was lambasted by a dean at a SET meeting as expressing ‘frivolous objections to the biggest problem in the country’; this resulted in a SET instruction to the head of school. When HPE members faced stiff resistance from heads of schools (principally on the grounds of additional workloads) in persuading them to implement HIV/AIDS programmes, it was the deans who came to further workshops and stressed the need for everybody in the university to take responsibility for HIV/AIDS.

Yet, the cost of financing the HIV/AIDS programmes would be felt differently by the deans and other members of SET. While deans might welcome a university response to HIV/AIDS, they did not want the cost of such a response to be at the expense of the budget and activities of their own faculties. By contrast, other members of SET had to juggle the competing demands and benefits of university-wide initiatives, but with less concern than deans about individual faculty budgets. While these competing emphases might be mitigated when budgets are expanding, they become difficult in times of financial constraint.
Thus, within SET, it was a given that funding of HIV/AIDS programmes would not cut into faculty budgets. Hence, any funding allocated had to be drawn from the limited budget for new projects. At the end of 2002, requests for allocations from this pot amounted to more than double the available funds. The HPE received about one-third of what was deemed necessary for a holistic university response to HIV/AIDS. Other projects received full funding, and substantially more than for the HPE plan. In an environment of financial constraint, competition for limited funding is all the more fierce, while it is likely to be determined by the relative power of lobby groups.

Given that the HPE aligned making a case for implementation, assembling a capable implementation team, obtaining support from stakeholders and the highest levels of university management — the relative power between the deans and the rest of SET, and the relative power of the groups competing for limited additional funding, may explain why the HPE did not actually obtain the required resources. While acting in parallel, but not, we stress, in a coordinated manner, the deans prevented the HPE (and proposals for some other new projects) from accessing funds as it would have meant cutting into their faculty budgets. In the end, rejecting the thrust of the HPE's strategic plan, through allocating only limited resources, was the least painful option for all members of SET, given the financial restrictions and the configuration of institutional power.

The configuration of institutional power within any organisation provides pointers as to how resources are likely to be distributed. The overall availability of resources indicates the likely level of institutional conflict around this distribution. However, decisions will be situated within a wide set of considerations that emanate from without, yet penetrate into, the organisation.

**The broad picture: education and economy as components of society**

The political economy of student-focused HIV/AIDS programmes provides a stark example of the wide range of considerations that bear down on most universities — and which may considerably shape their responses to HIV/AIDS. Thus, a set of conditions worked against Wits’ intention to vigorously respond to HIV/AIDS within the student body. Below, we compare the situation as faced by companies in regard to employees and HIV/AIDS, and by universities in regard to their students and HIV/AIDS.

Employees numerically form the largest constituency within a company. They are likely to remain with the company for long periods, building generic and company-specific knowledge, skills and experience. Within the context of the AIDS epidemic, companies make calculations regarding the relative cost of allowing the epidemic to ‘run its course’ (i.e. with a loss of human capital), against the cost of prevention and treatment programmes and the potential to save human capital as a result. While such calculations do not always make an overwhelming case for the financial benefits of intervention (Dickinson & Stevens, 2005) they generally suggest that there is some net financial benefit which can be added to a range of arguments in favour of running HIV/AIDS programmes (e.g. the beneficial impact on employee morale and external relations).

While the same situation is applicable to universities with regard to their employees (the academic and support staff), it is not the case for the students who are the component numerically forming the largest internal constituency. The largest portion of university income originates from government subsidies and student fees. The policy on government subsidies is shifting from one based on volume of student enrolment to ‘student throughput’ (i.e. funding is linked to students graduating). But, given the likely age of HIV infection, and the relatively short time that students spend at the university, both those subsidy models, as well as student fees, provide income irrespective of whether a student, even upon graduation, is HIV-positive or negative, aware of his/her HIV status or not, and — if HIV-positive — enrolled in a disease management programme or not. Thus, in contrast to a private-sector company, a university is faced with a situation wherein it must bear the entire cost of any HIV/AIDS programme for students (programmes that will likely have little or no direct benefit to the institution itself), despite the Department of Education’s emphasis on the need for tertiary institutions to address HIV/AIDS.

From a national perspective, interventions to prevent HIV infection and promote treatment initiatives among tertiary-level students clearly make sense, because such interventions safeguard an essential component of the nation’s future human capital. Undoubtedly HIV/AIDS impacts on the economy, and consequently on the ability of the state to subsidise universities and the ability of families to pay student fees. Despite this, there are still no links between the cost to higher-education institutions of implementing student HIV/AIDS programmes and the benefits that such programmes would have for society. While institutions of higher education may well recognise the moral imperative of responding to HIV/AIDS for the benefit of society, current funding models do not support this.

Currently, neither government subsidies nor student fees bear any connection to the extent of the HIV/AIDS programmes that universities may choose to implement. Thus, we observe that a set of powerful political economy equations is currently stacked against universities mounting comprehensive, and therefore expensive, responses to HIV/AIDS. The contrast between the relative cost-benefit of HIV/AIDS programmes to organisations (including universities as employers) and the nation as a whole, on the one hand, and to universities in regard to their students on the other hand, is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. It seems that no financial incentives are in place to encourage a response by universities to HIV/AIDS among students because students are not generally at universities long enough for either prevention or treatment initiatives to ‘pay back’. Indeed, the bulk of university financing — subsidies and student fees — is independent of the impact of HIV/AIDS, in the short and medium term. Consequently, any university HIV/AIDS programme simply represents a cost that is hard to accommodate within increasingly difficult financial circumstances faced by most universities. Even so, the imperative for universities to mount comprehensive HIV/AIDS programmes and make a significant contribution to protecting the nation’s future human capital within the AIDS epidemic is critical. In the next section, we
suggestion how the current set of disincentives that work against universities responding to HIV/AIDS could be turned around.

Conclusions and recommendations

With some exceptions, the response of the University of the Witwatersrand to HIV/AIDS fits into the general picture of responses by higher education institutions to HIV/AIDS in southern Africa: this is a picture of inertia and only limited achievement of policy. At Wits, despite aspirations to establish a flagship HIV/AIDS programme, we ended up with a tramp steamer. Better than nothing — but the diminished programmes fail to rise to the challenge that HIV/AIDS presents, and if this situation remains unchanged, we must all live with its consequences for generations to come.

With the benefit of hindsight, this paper provides a level of detail and analysis about the qualified failure of Wits University’s HIV/AIDS programme. There is, of course, much more that could be said, but we have chosen to focus on critical issues: ones most likely explaining the general inertia surrounding implementation as well as certain limitations of HIV/AIDS programmes as they may exist at other institutions of higher education in South Africa and southern Africa. We hope that by drawing attention to these the response to HIV/AIDS can be improved.

We have pointed out several challenges to programme implementation within institutions of higher education. First, we highlighted the trouble with implementing a partial HIV/AIDS programme, because of the interconnected nature of its key elements. This will be true for any institution, not just ones of higher education. However, within the tight budgetary constraints that universities face, this is particularly onerous. Second, the under-funding of educational institutions and the resulting high workloads imposed on staff tightens the financial constraints around attempts to introduce comprehensive HIV/AIDS programmes: there is simply no slack left within these organisations to allow them to take on additional tasks without compromising existing responsibilities. This raises the direct costs of any programme beyond what they would be within less stressed organisations. Third, we pointed out the need to not only secure stakeholder buy-in (something relatively well achieved at Wits) but also to link the building of support with firm, up-front commitment to funding the programmes that are being sold to constituencies.

In retrospect, these implementation challenges — the necessary scope of an effective programme, the limits to existing capacity, and the need to secure funding — appear obvious. But we are concerned that other institutions of higher education are making the same mistakes, as programmes are uniquely developed within each organisation. While each institution has particular needs, we suggest that a guide to the actual costs of implementing a comprehensive HIV/AIDS programme based on a per-employee and per-student basis should be drawn up. This would save considerable work on the part of each institution, and by providing a realistic cost estimate up-front, for instance, might help to avoid some of our mistakes.

Beyond these implementation issues, we have explored the configurations of power within Wits and how these saw the proposed flagship HIV/AIDS programme being decommissioned to a type of tramp steamer. We argued that within a constrained financial environment the horizontal configurations of power (notably represented by faculty deans in this case) restricted the ability of senior management to re-allocate funding to new projects. Moreover, competition existed for additional available funding from lobby groups that were active beyond the formal structures at Wits. We feel these are sobering observations, as Wits’ HPE included two Deputy Vice Chancellors and the Executive Director of Finance among its members, and the HPE’s strategic plan was approved at the highest levels. Management theory indicates that high-level support should exist at other institutions of higher education in South Africa and southern Africa. We hope that by drawing attention to these the response to HIV/AIDS can be improved.

We have pointed out several challenges to programme implementation within institutions of higher education. First, we highlighted the trouble with implementing a partial HIV/AIDS programme, because of the interconnected nature of its key elements. This will be true for any institution, not just ones of higher education. However, within the tight budgetary constraints that universities face, this is particularly onerous. Second, the under-funding of educational institutions and the resulting high workloads imposed on staff tightens the financial constraints around attempts to introduce comprehensive HIV/AIDS programmes: there is simply no slack left within these organisations to allow them to take on additional tasks without compromising existing responsibilities. This raises the direct costs of any programme beyond what they would be within less stressed organisations. Third, we pointed out the need to not only secure stakeholder buy-in (something relatively well achieved at Wits) but also to link the building of support with firm, up-front commitment to funding the programmes that are being sold to constituencies.

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With some exceptions, the response of the University of the Witwatersrand to HIV/AIDS fits into the general picture of responses by higher education institutions to HIV/AIDS in southern Africa: this is a picture of inertia and only limited achievement of policy. At Wits, despite aspirations to establish a flagship HIV/AIDS programme, we ended up with a tramp steamer. Better than nothing — but the diminished programmes fail to rise to the challenge that HIV/AIDS presents, and if this situation remains unchanged, we must all live with its consequences for generations to come.

With the benefit of hindsight, this paper provides a level of detail and analysis about the qualified failure of Wits University’s HIV/AIDS programme. There is, of course, much more that could be said, but we have chosen to focus on critical issues: ones most likely explaining the general inertia surrounding implementation as well as certain limitations of HIV/AIDS programmes as they may
perspective of South Africa and the African continent this institutional rationality is potentially disastrous (as we believe it is being repeated across many institutions of higher education); it is urgent that this logic be reversed. The financial equation stacked against institutions of higher education that wish to resource comprehensive responses to HIV/AIDS must be reconfigured or it will remain a major obstacle.

We make four, not mutually exclusive, suggestions in regard to the above. These suggestions focus on the South African environment, though we believe elements of them could be implemented across the continent. In brief:

1) The formula used in funding institutions of higher education could incorporate a range of HIV/AIDS programmatic targets. These could include input in HIV/AIDS education, and uptake of voluntary counselling and testing and antiretroviral programmes. Although this might easily fit into the existing mechanism of state funding, we register concerns, including potential complexity and ethical concerns about linking finance to programme uptake.

2) We propose that businesses directly fund HIV/AIDS programmes in institutions of higher education, as they are the main beneficiaries of the human capital developed there. This makes long-term business sense: interventions to safeguard the supply of human capital, which will in turn sustain their operations in the future. It would also provide an important and high-profile contribution in combating HIV/AIDS. We consider this an attractive solution and one not without precedent since some businesses have already contributed to university HIV/AIDS programmes.

3) Funding for comprehensive HIV/AIDS programmes within institutions of higher education could come from the international donor community. To an extent this has already been provided through HEAIDS; even so, what we suggest is on a larger scale, and hopefully more easily accessed than is some current donor funding. The advantage of this proposal is its potential to be replicated across the continent (which is unlikely in regard to the first two suggestions). We believe such funding could ultimately make a major contribution to the global campaign against HIV/AIDS and also in contributing to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

4) Given the situation’s urgency, our fourth suggestion is the simplest: that government allocates additional ring-fenced funding for HIV/AIDS programmes in all institutions of higher education. The economic logic is obvious. It requires only political will.

Notes
1 The document outlined a third possible scenario, continuing the shipping theme, of the Titanic – in which the strategic plan sank without trace.

2 The HPE comprised: the Deputy Vice Chancellor: Deputy Vice Chancellor: Research, the Deputy Vice Chancellor: Deputy Vice Chancellor: Academic, the Executive Director of Finance, the Dean of Students, the Director of Transformation and Employment Equity, the Director of the Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development, the Head of Communications, an SRC representative, and two Strategic Advisors.

3 A possibly ambitious target given the proposed appointment of two, albeit dedicated, VCT staff and the workload generated by pre- and post-test counselling.

4 ‘The 11th floor’ is the colloquial term for the university’s executive management, as most have offices on the 11th floor of Senate House.

Acknowledgements — A presentation based on this paper was made at the Second South African AIDS Conference, Durban, June 2005. Valuable comments were provided by two anonymous reviewers. We acknowledge the ongoing efforts of those still making a contribution, under difficult circumstances, to the fight against HIV/AIDS at Wits University.

The authors — Murray Cairns was Marketing and Academic Delivery Manager of the Wits Graduate School of Public and Development Management. David Dickinson is Associate Professor in Industrial Relations & HIV/AIDS in the Workplace at the Wits Business School. Wendy Orr was formerly Director of Transformation and Employment Equity at Wits University and now consults in the corporate sector on BEE (black economic empowerment) and transformation.

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