

Across the globe and in South Africa, public universities find themselves in an era of unplanned radical change driven by, amongst many factors, massification, increasing pressure to climb the ranking ladders and the need to provide affordable higher education. In South Africa, the need to overcome past inequalities amidst a broader and unstable economic climate contributes to the complexity. Universities are conceptualised as consisting of many dynamic processes that recurrently suffer the influence of the actions of its social actors. The question that arises is: how do university officials maintain legitimacy during this radical change? In an attempt to comprehend the legitimation process of an institution and its leadership, change agents need to be aware of the different stakeholders that affect the legitimacy and what the legitimacy issues relevant to those respective groups are. The over-reliance on compliance may yield positive results in a country with high levels of normative legitimacy and a flourishing economy. However, in South Africa, with a lack of normative legitimacy and poor socio-economic conditions, the rational myths on which public universities are built, seem to no longer meet the legitimate demands of a knowledge institution. There is a need to enhance the understanding of the sense-making of legitimacy during radical change. An informed analysis can provide useful insight for future leaders on steering change in a complex environment. To better understand the complexity of universities, as well as the multifaceted demands, this presentation will focus on the use of sense-making and institutional theory as lenses to explain the radical change.