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Conceptualising transformation and interrogating elitism: The Bale scholarship programme

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In this article, we consider the extent to which a scholarship programme at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) engages with the challenges of transformation. This scholarship programme highlights the transformative potential of a programme that focuses on excellence for a previously under-represented group, but also demonstrates how this type of programme reaffirms the dominant notion of excellence within the university space, which could be read as a reproduction of inequitable practices. Theoretically, we make use of Bourdieu's concepts of 'field' and 'capital' to understand how a space that is socially elite, such as a university, engages with the issue of change. Transformation efforts such as Bale have meant that previously disadvantaged individuals have opportunities to pursue a university education, these efforts have also served to maintain and perpetuate elitism. This happy "marriage" between elitism and transformation ensures that the university remains elite, while simultaneously pursuing demographic equity and diversity. Bale students who successfully complete a university education reap many benefits, through their access to the cultural capital of a Wits degree. However Bale consists of an exclusive group of students who will personally benefit, while the broad interests of a top-notch University are served.

Keywords: Transformation, Elitism, Bourdieu, Capital, Field, South Africa, Higher Education

Introduction

In this article, we consider the extent to which a scholarship programme at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) engages with the challenges of transformation. This

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scholarship programme highlights the transformative potential of a programme that focuses on excellence for a previously under-represented group, but also demonstrates how this type of programme reaffirms the dominant notion of excellence within the university space, which could, in some instances, be read as a reproduction of inequitable practices. Theoretically, we make use of Bourdieu's concepts of 'field' and 'capital' to understand how a space that is socially elite, such as a university, engages with the issue of change. We argue that social and intellectual capital are of a mutually reinforcing nature, and thus become difficult to separate.

Transformation is neither a single objective, nor an orderly process (Samoff, 2005). While transformation has been used broadly to refer to multiple efforts and challenges nationally, considerable attention has been paid to transformation as implementing system-wide and ideological changes within higher education (see, for example, Makgoba, 1996; Beckmann, 2008; Oloyede, 2008). Against the backdrop of these transformation efforts, Wits introduced the Bale scholarship programme (Bale) in 2006. This programme provides first-generation, academically talented Black women from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds with the necessary financial, academic, social, and psychological support needed to aid their adjustment to, retention, and graduation from university. The intention was that this support would enable them to not only graduate within minimum time and supply high-level skills for the labour market, but also make a significant contribution to society. The programme contributes to the reconfiguration of the nature of academic hegemony in South African higher education. A question that has not been addressed is whether this type of scholarship programme successfully transforms the elite nature of intellectual capital.

Central to Wits' transformation agenda is the notion of excellence. Given the merging of discourses of excellence and transformation in Bale, our aim in this article is to conceptually assess whether this marriage functions to perpetuate intellectual and social elitism while being viewed as an inclusive exercise. Although we acknowledge that universities are, by default, privileged and elite spaces, the notion of elitism (and excellence) itself can function to mask inequitable practices. This article argues that, inasmuch as the university's transformation agenda aims to move away from past discriminatory practices and achieve excellence, the University inadvertently replicates elitist practices through its transformation efforts.

Women in Science, Engineering, and Technology and the Bale scholarship programme

Despite the steady but slow increase in their involvement in Science, Engineering, and Technology (SET), women continue to be under-represented in these areas. The female student population in the Natural Sciences is consistently lower than that of male students across Africa (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Identifying women with the talent to excel in SET should be an essential component of social and economic

development, because the exclusion of women in the "knowledge domain of society will aggravate existing gender inequalities" (Taeb, 2005: 7). Bale aims to increase the number of women in SET and simultaneously provide opportunities to Black students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

As part of the recruitment process, Wits asked educators and school principals to nominate excellent Grade 12 learners residing in the areas of Gauteng, Limpopo and Mpumalanga, who were in the top 5% of Grade 11 and achieved a minimum of 65% in Mathematics, Science, and English on higher grade in their Grade 11 final examinations. Nominators were required to rank and comment on the nominees' academic achievement, motivation levels, personal qualities, involvement in community service, leadership, and English communication skills. Nominees who received a firm offer from their chosen Faculty were awarded scholarships. In total, twenty students entering the University in 2007 and 2008 were awarded the Bale scholarships; ten students registered in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment and the remaining ten students registered in the Faculty of Science.

Of the twenty Bale students, one failed her first year of study and her scholarship was subsequently terminated. Nineteen students obtained continued funding for the maximum of four years. Nine students (45% of cohorts 1 and 2) completed their undergraduate degree in minimum time (eight of whom are registered in the Faculty of Science and one in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment). The current target, set by Wits, indicates that 70% of students should graduate in the minimum time plus two years (Wits, 2004: 11). Currently, the Bale programme is on track to reach this target, as fourteen students (70% of the entire cohort) are expected to graduate within the required time frame. This target is well above the national target of 30% for SET (Ministry of Education, 2001), as set by the Department of Education. We now turn to examine how the broader transformation discourses in the academy and at Wits, in particular, interact with the principles of Bale and how, theoretically, we can make sense of them using Bourdieu's concept of 'capital' and 'field' in relation to higher education.

Transformation in the academy

The transformation efforts taking place within higher education are linked to the national socio-political-economic post-apartheid transformation project (Van Wyk, 2006). Transformation has thus become a ubiquitous concept that embodies divergent meanings. As noted by Soudien (2010: 882), it is necessary to illustrate the diverging emphases that have been placed on transformation. Our intention is not to provide an exhaustive account of the utilisation of transformation in higher education, but rather to demonstrate the multiple and varying ways in which it has been employed.

Transformation in higher education has been utilised in the context of examining issues of race and gender (see, for example, Mabokela, 2001; Erasmus, 2006; Shackleton, Riordan & Simonis, 2006). This literature speaks to the challenges that

women and Black individuals continue to face at universities across the country (including issues of participation, success, retention, and discrimination as well as issues of promotion faced by staff), particularly at the historically White universities (HWUs). The manner in which university staff and management have been affected by transformation efforts has also received considerable attention (see, for example, Makgoba, 1997; Mapesela & Hay, 2006; Portnoi, 2009; Hemson & Singh, 2010). Transformation has also come to refer to the changing institutional structures of the university, addressing issues of equity, access, efficiency, effectiveness, and redress (see, for example, Cloete & Moja, 2005; Van Wyk, 2006; Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007; Beckmann, 2008). Furthermore, transformation has been discussed as a curriculum, teaching, and research imperative (see, for example, Waghid, 2002; 2008; Esakov, 2009; Van Wyk, Alexander & Moreeng, 2010). In addition, transformation has been discussed in the context of the university's role in globalisation and internationalisation (see, for example, Kishun, 2007; McLellan, 2008). Yet another focus of transformation has found expression in higher education policy endeavours (see, for example, Eckel, 2001; Muller, Maassen & Cloete, 2006; Cloete, 2006). The aforementioned discourses of transformation are not necessarily mutually exclusive; the following section focuses on how these intermeshing transformation discourses have been dealt with at Wits.

Transformation at the University of the Witwatersrand

By analysing speeches; university governing documents and reports; publicly available information as well as the mission, vision, aims, and values statements, it is apparent that Wits has conceptualised transformation by focusing on three areas, namely diversity and demographic equity; excellence, and inclusivity.[1] These areas are not mutually exclusive, indeed, according to the Into the future: Transforming Wits report, "Transformation is, most importantly, a multi-dimensional process. It cannot be fully understood by singling out only one aspect" (Wits, 2004: 2).

Diversity and demographic equity

The University utilises a broad definition of diversity that includes race, gender, ethnicity, language, religion, and so on, but also diversity of scholarship. The focus on diversity and attaining demographic equity has been central to transformation efforts at Wits:

> *Transformation is a process of negotiated organisational change that breaks decisively with past discriminatory practices in order to create an environment where the full potential of everyone is realised and where diversity — both social and intellectual — is respected and valued and where it is central to the achievement of the institution's goals (Wits, 2004: 2).*

Based on this definition, transformation refers not only to respecting and valuing diversity, but also to acknowledging it as fundamental to the university's aims. This definition notes the need to transcend the discriminatory practices of the

past, thereby recognising past institutionalised racist and patriarchal practices that inhibited demographic equity.

In discussing Wits' transformation agenda, Vice Chancellor Loyiso Nongxa stated that Wits "should strive to reflect a future South African society which is successful, which will be heterogeneous and which will derive its strengths from its rich diversity with regard to beliefs, language, and religion" (Wits, 2003: 11). Furthermore, he called for the eradication of "race and gender stereotyping in academia" (Wits, 2003: 5). This perspective on transformation is consistent with the aim of achieving demographic equity. For instance, the University needs to work toward "destroy[ing] the association between being black and not doing well" (Wits, 2004: 13). In other words, achieving demographic equity is aligned with dispelling long-standing myths and unfounded claims, particularly about groups of people whose opportunities were limited due to apartheid policies and practices.

In addition, demographic equity has been discussed by monitoring student enrolment and access. The University noted that "intelligent strategies are needed to manage enrolment that will be sensitive to, amongst others: staff-student ratios, race, gender, socio-economic diversity, [and] disability" (Wits, 2005a: 10). Transformation is not limited to racial representivity, but also focuses on delivery, efficiency, and effectiveness (Wits, 2005b: 3).

Excellence

Excellence at Wits refers to academic excellence, excellence in service, and internationally acclaimed excellence. While transformation initially centred on diversity and demographic equity, this focus has been broadened to include a focus on excellence. For instance, it has been noted that:

> *Conversation about transformation at Wits ha[s] moved from a strong focus on staff and student demography to one which views a change in demography as a part of the larger project of transformation, which will broaden and deepen the levels of excellence in all the relations and functions within the institution (Wits, 2004: 1).*

It follows that transformation cannot be about compromising standards, but should instead be "first and foremost about the pursuit of excellence" (Wits, 2004: 4). This is not to say that excellence is not compatible with diversity and demographic equity at Wits. Indeed, "excellence and equity need not be intractably cast in conceptual tension and greater staff diversity can indicate greater equity ... [and] potentially contributes to excellence" (Wits, 2004: 30).[2] The transformation discourse at Wits has thus worked toward dispelling the myth that excellence, diversity, and equity are competing priorities.

With respect to academic transformation imperatives, the University recognises a need to assist students in achieving excellence. This would be done by providing assistance to, and understanding the needs of students for whom English is not their home language and students who have not had the opportunity to acquire academic

skills during high school (Wits, 2004: 12-13); Bale endeavours to accomplish these practices.

Inclusivity

The transformation discourse at Wits has consistently held that transformation should be an inclusive development that considers all members of the University community:

> *Transformation should be for all of us, by all of us, and for everything that we hold dear and will make us sit comfortably among the best institutions in this country, the region and the world … The will and the commitment to transform must become everyone's business (Wits, 2005b: 6-7).*

Transformation is intended to benefit all University members and the University urges everyone to participate in transformation efforts. In espousing this approach, Wits elicits a united front that takes all of its members into consideration. Furthermore, the University denounces exclusionary approaches and notes that these are equated with apartheid ideology (Wits, 2005b: 7). Similarly, Vice Chancellor Nongxa has insisted that transformation at Wits must not be viewed as "a process of empowering some people at the expense of others" (Wits, 2003: 4).

Interrogating elitism at the university

In interrogating elitism, Bourdieu's concepts of 'field' and 'cultural capital' (of which intellectual capital is a subset) are helpful in showing how it is the nature of elite spaces to reproduce themselves, by claiming a sense of academic autonomy. A 'field' is a social space that functions according to certain organising principles that meditate and reproduce systems of social classification (Bourdieu, 1993). Higher education is understood as a particular type of field that operates differently to say economic and political fields.[3] In a field, people adopt positions and strategies in relation to their social location, in order to attain social and cultural capital or maintain their position of power within this space.

'Cultural capital' can exist in the 'embodied state', as in one's comportment, in the 'objectified state', as in the form of cultural goods, and in the 'institutionalised state'. The institutionalised state is of most interest, in this instance, because educational qualifications as a form of objectification fall within this state. The degree confers properties in the form of cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee (Bourdieu, 1997: 47). In other words, this form of cultural capital is available to 'outsiders', albeit with the constraints of achieving the degree in the first place (functioning within the strategies of the given field). A university education is a form of institutionalised cultural capital, called intellectual capital.

It could be argued that a division exists between intellectual and social capital because of the purported autonomous nature of the academy. However, we adopt Naidoo's stance that the two are mutually reinforcing. According to her, "[h]igher education is conceptualised as a sorting machine that selects students according to

an implicit *social* classification and reproduces the same students according to an explicit *academic* classification, which in reality is very similar to the implicit *social* classification" (Naidoo, 2004: 459, emphasis in original). In other words, higher education as a field produces its own strategies for reproducing itself (such as Wits' academic requirements for excellence), but these are closely aligned with social capital outside the University. It thus follows that higher education "reproduces the principles of social class and other forms of domination under the cloak of academic neutrality" (Naidoo, 2004: 460). In describing the transformative outcomes of the Bale programme, it conforms to the supposedly neutral academic requirements of the University (excellence) which reproduces the social capital that has dominance beyond the University. This is borne out in the employment statistics of different graduates discussed below.

By appealing to academic merit (excellence), the University seemingly separates issues of social and intellectual elitism. A scholarship programme such as Bale, while working towards transforming the higher education sector for women in SET, simultaneously functions to "codify the appropriate capital required to enter the university field, [and becomes] a crucial locus of struggle because it serve[s] to legitimize or delegitimize principles underlying the recognition of existing capital in the field" (Naidoo, 2004: 465). This then highlights how Bale contributes to transformation at the University, by broadening access, but almost paradoxically reconstitutes academic hegemonies between HWUs and historically Black universities (HBUs) in the South African landscape. This reveals the truly multidimensional nature of transformation efforts, where outcomes of this type of programmes are nuanced, complex and, at times, even contradictory.

The current (historically informed) state of higher education substantiates the theoretical understanding of the reproduction of social and intellectual capital. While exclusion from higher education is no longer formally characterised by racism, it has been reconstituted through the medium of class, and the transformation debate can thus be rendered in these terms (Soudien, 2010: 883). For example, in their investigation of university drop-outs, Letseka and Maile (2008) found that 70% of the families of drop-outs held low economic status. Nevertheless, being part of the elite who have a higher education qualification does not necessarily equalise the life opportunities of graduates across racial groups. In fact, unemployment rates for individuals from HWUs were significantly lower than those from HBUs, with a large discrepancy between unemployment rates for African graduates (40%) from HBUs relative to those of White students graduating from HWUs (10%) (Bohrat, Mayet & Visser, 2010). While African students' chances of being employed increase if they attend a HWU, they are still worse off than their White peers in finding jobs (Bohrat *et al.*, 2010). Corroborating these figures, in a survey of employers' attitudes it was found that university of study was important in making decisions about who they employed, with few trusting the quality of the degrees from HBUs (Gultig, 2000: 45).

These statistics speak to engrained inequality in the higher education system despite efforts to demographically and culturally transform tertiary spaces. HWUs continue to be places associated with quality, prestige, and racially inequitable experiences, even where demographic representivity might be near reached (Gultig, 2000: 51). HBUs and HWUs are on two differing transformation trajectories. HWUs remain elite spaces, where the qualifications are considered valuable and high quality precisely because of their historically gained privilege in comparison to qualifications proffered at HBUs. Transformation means radically different things at these institutions. HWUs are concerned with demographically transforming to become 'representative' of the wider population, while closely guarding what they consider to be their excellence, ingrained in their institutional and cultural norms. HBUs, on the other hand, have always been 'representative' in the crude racial sense, but because of their historical disadvantage, need to pursue a transformation agenda that focuses on improving the quality of their qualifications.

The 1995 White Paper on Education and Training initiated a philosophical tension between the political and educational: "balancing the political imperative to transform the philosophy and ideology which underpins South African education while at the same time fulfilling an economic imperative" to develop a system that will educate a more competent workforce (Gultig, 2000: 40). This establishes a tension between protecting elitist spaces and the need to substantively transform the system. When considering elitism, the debate as to whether excellence and democratic values are incompatible (Smith, 1986: 1) appears to be a red herring. Smith speaks about the need for "open elites" of demonstrated merit, but this idea seems to run into trouble when contrasted with Bourdieu's explication of the different forms of capital in society – the manoeuvring of economic, social and cultural capital in protecting and reproducing elite spaces.

Social capital, as networks of institutionalised relationships (Bourdieu, 1997: 51), is instructive in understanding continued social and intellectual elitism at HWUs, as it allows for the co-opting of 'outsiders' in the name of transformation, while maintaining elitism and the value of cultural capital:

> *If the internal competition for the monopoly of legitimate representation of the group is not to threaten the conversion and accumulation of the capital which is the basis of the group, the member of the group must regulate the conditions of access to the right to declare oneself a member of the group (Bourdieu, 1997: 53).*

The notion of academic excellence maintains this monopoly, as demonstrated in Wits' transformation discourse, indicating that one may be admitted to, and remain in the institution if one is able to successfully navigate the University academically, socially, and institutionally. Bale functions to maintain these forms of capital by providing access to an elite University space, while protecting the purported neutrality of the University's academic agenda.

The reproduction of elite spaces must be legitimated by appeals to excellence and high standards. When an elite group is critiqued or challenged on "the arbitrariness of the entitlements transmitted … the holders of this capital have an ever greater interest in resorting to reproduction strategies capable of ensuring better-disguised transmission" (Bourdieu, 1997: 55). The University has a vested interest in protecting the economic value of its degrees, and will welcome new people into its space, but only on terms that preserve its social, intellectual, and economic capital. The University embraces a form of transformation which protects its social and intellectual elitism by providing access to a unique group of Bale students in the name of quality and excellence.

Bale can indeed be viewed as a transformative project at Wits. The scholarship programme recruits and sponsors academically talented Black women who have performed exceptionally well, but who do not have the financial resources to pursue a university degree. This endeavour actively contributes to demographic equity and diversity at the University, and thus to the transformation agenda. However, it is pertinent to interrogate transformation, as did Van Louw and Beets (2011). They pose the following questions: "transformation … for whom, for what, and with which results" (Van Louw & Beets 2011: 179)? While the discourse of transformation at Wits has been anchored in demographic equity and inclusivity, excellence has also played a key role. This pursuit of excellence invokes being among the best and most exclusive universities in the world – part of an elite group of students and intellectuals. However, the South African case is particularly bound up with histories of race and class for institutions that previously restricted access to these prestigious educational opportunities. Undoing this legacy is complicated work, because in South Africa elite spaces continue to conflate race, class and academic ability. Transformation and elitism are tactfully intertwined and are manifested in Bale, but do not address the crucial issue of institutional culture. It is undeniable that specific norms, values, practices, and beliefs are embedded in institutions. The institutional culture at HWUs serves to maintain and renew privilege. More so, it legitimates old social elites and simultaneously conjures new ones, thus recreating the elite social strata. In other words, structures designed to reproduce privilege will do so regardless of the particularities of participants. The crucial issue is the nature of social and intellectual capital that can be accrued by individuals and that feeds into institutional reproduction of privilege. Indeed, participation in Bale is reserved for only the most distinguished academically talented women who qualify; as such, Bale recipients can reap the benefits of belonging to an exclusive group.

Conclusion

While transformation efforts such as Bale have meant that previously disadvantaged individuals have opportunities to pursue a university education, these efforts have also served to maintain and perpetuate elitism. In this view, transformation consists of actively recruiting a limited number of academically talented Black women, whose

families have scarce financial resources, to become part of an elite group that has, for the most part, been previously dominated by White men. This happy "marriage" between elitism and transformation ensures that the university remains elite, while simultaneously pursuing demographic equity and diversity. We should not ascribe excessive intent to those operating within the institution in terms of protecting privilege, because individuals within these spaces do not necessarily conspire to exclude certain groups or maintain privilege; instead, individuals tend to conform to normative practices that "contribute to both the accumulation of field specific capital and to the reproduction of the structure of 'social space'" (Naidoo, 2004: 460). The dual transformative and elitist aspects of Bale allow the university to *kill two birds with one stone*. There is no doubt that Bale students who successfully complete a university education reap many benefits, through their access to the cultural capital of a Wits degree. However, it is noteworthy that Bale consists of an exclusive group of students who will personally benefit, while the broad interests of a top-notch University are served.

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Endnotes

1. This is not to say that the concept of transformation has not been conceptualised in additional ways by particular departments, units or entities at Wits. The three areas mentioned, however, reflect how the University as a whole has grappled with the transformation discourse.
2. This quote draws heavily from Subotzky's (2001) work.

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