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‘How open are our doors? A comparison of academic staff transformation at the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand’.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background to the research

This research emerged out of a deep interest in transformation and the way in which structural and experiential dimensions of race, class, and gender are reconstituted in transitional societies. Given the importance of education in firstly fragmenting the race and class experience of South Africans via the policy of Bantu Education, and then acting as a locus for struggle and a site of struggle, meant that education would inevitably also play a pivotal role in transforming post-apartheid South African society.

One of the most interesting aspects of post-apartheid educational experience is what Cooper and Subotsky (2001) have termed the skewed revolution. It was this phenomenon, of the very slow demographic change within the academic workforce, that captivated my interest in both the structural location and experience of academics in historically 'white' universities in post-apartheid South Africa.

Research focus

The specific focus of this research was academic staff transformation. The research was based on a very particular notion of academic staff transformation; it is therefore defined below, in order that the focus of the research be clearly understood:

Academic staff transformation is premised on an understanding of academic staff as 'workers' within a workplace that has historically been both elitist and exclusive in terms of race, class, and gender. Therefore, transformation of this workplace refers to attempts to ensure equity, equality, and a progressive institutional culture within the workplace.

Academic staff transformation incorporates government directives and deliberate institutional attempts with the aim of affecting demographic, procedural, attitudinal, and experiential change amongst academic staff. In addition academic staff transformation

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also takes cognisance of organic institutional change and any unintended consequences that accompany such change.

The principle guiding question was 'how effective has academic staff transformation been at the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand?[1]' The research examined this question from four angles: i) the historical engagement of UCT and Wits as employers, with race, class, and gender; ii) government directive and the legislative context that impacts upon transformation of workplaces and in particular higher education workplaces; iii) the institutional role and response of UCT and Wits to the race, class, and gender of their academic staff within the post-apartheid context; and iv) academics' experience of UCT and Wits as workplaces. Collectively, this allowed for the determination of the nature and extent of academic staff transformation by gauging the nature and extent of continuity and change within these workplaces.

Theoretical context

According to Tight (2004), over the last 20 years there has developed an emerging field of higher education research (Tight, 2004: 12). This field overwhelmingly emerges from or within education faculties and therefore exhibits some the same general tendencies as education studies, such as: being positivist, instrumental, and solution seeking (Tight, 2004: 12).

If researchers located outside of the field of higher education studies (in this instance, within sociology) were to keep within the parameters set by higher education studies, their work, although useful, would merely amount to sociology in higher education. In order for the field of higher education to benefit from the differing perspective brought by those outside of its parameters (within any other discipline), what is then needed, in this instance, is sociology of higher education. Tight concurs with this position: "I would, therefore, like to register a plea for continuing and more critical, challenging and theoretical research into higher education" (Tight, 2004: 12).

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It is from this angle that I approach the field of higher education, as an interested scholar located outside of higher education studies itself. This research draws on the combined approach to the study of organisations epitomised by Bourdieu's notion of capital. That is, it incorporates structural and systemic understanding typical of the sociology of work approach, such as is found within Kraak (1996) and Bezuidenhout (2004); and also utilises cultural and symbolic understanding typical of the 'cultural exchange' approach imbedded within some diversity scholarship, such as Erasmus and de Wet (2003), and Ngazimbi (2005).

By doing so, this research is then able to comment on transformation within UCT and Wits from a macro perspective but also with micro-level insight. This allows for the analysis of power relations in terms of the structural production and reproduction of inclusion and exclusion, in addition to individual attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of inclusion and exclusion[2].

Rationale

This research is significant because of its holistic focus on a sector undergoing minimal transformation, its comparison of two well established institutions with a historical ideology of liberalism and international connectivity, and the fact that it is being conducted a significant length of time since the formal demise of apartheid. These factors are discussed at length below.

Twelve years after the formal demise of apartheid, South Africa has celebrated its first decade of democracy, and it is thus a time of critical reflection into the 'successes' of social change and transformation. Both UCT and Wits as Historically Advantaged Universities (HAU) were embedded and conditioned by the colonial and apartheid regimes. Despite their liberal claim to be 'open universities', they were for all intents and purposes 'white' institutions serving the colonial elite. It is therefore an opportune time for reflection on how far they have made good on their promise to become institutions of equity and excellence in the post-apartheid era[3].

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Whilst higher education transformation in the post-apartheid period has become a topic of increasing academic interest, there still remain several areas in need of further investigation. Firstly, much of the focus on higher education transformation has been on the rapidly and organically changing student demographics, with less attention being paid to the somewhat static, slow, and partial change in academic staff demographics.

Cooper and Subotsky (2001) refer to this phenomenon of rapid student change and minimal academic staff change as the 'skewed revolution'. The skewed revolution is particularly distorted at HAU. For example, between 1988 and 1999, the proportion of black academics at UCT grew at a third of the rate as that of black students[4] (Derived from Cooper & Subotsky, 2001: 37; Subotsky, 2001: 27 and Mabokela, 2000: 121). Furthermore, in 2005, white academics still accounted for over 75 percent of all academics at both UCT and Wits (University of the Witwatersrand, 2005: 8).

Although discrepancies between changing student and staff numbers are evident elsewhere, particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States of America (Safia Mirza, 1995: 148), its salience is greater in South Africa, where there is a lack of representation of majority groups in academic employment, not minority groups as is the case in the aforementioned countries. Further exploration as to why academic staff transformation has been minimal is clearly a priority.

Secondly, an exclusionary institutional culture remains cited as the primary reason for the poor retention and lack of promotion of black and women academics at South African HAU (University of Witwatersrand, 2003; Potgieter, 2002: 25 and University of Cape Town. 2000). Research also suggests that, in addition to structural and procedural inequalities, relationships of patronage act as restrictive mechanisms slowing the pace of transformation (Johnson, 2005: 93 - 95, Lewins, 2004: 50 and Ismail, 2000). Therefore it is crucial to examine not only the experiential dimension of working within a university, but to also examine the structural dimensions, complexities, and contradictions of the workplace that impact upon academic staff transformation.

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Thirdly, transformation, and the kind of responses that it evokes, have their roots in South African history. It is only recently that this connection has been seriously explored within literature on HAU and hence further examination of institutional continuity and change is necessary (Mabokela & Magubane, 2004). The research utilised a multi-faceted approach to explore attitudes and to examine whether a hybrid mix of both the old and new regimes of institutional functioning existed. It has been argued that such an approach is not well developed within South Africa and needs further elaboration and investigation (Davies & Holloway, 1995; Rassool, 1995 and Erasmus, 2000)[5]. A historical approach also provides insight into the relationship between race-based and gender-based transformation, which is an area in need of further exploration as most research has tended to prioritise one type of transformation without examining the connections between the two and the impact they have on each other.

Fourthly, the research aims for a holistic view of academic staff transformation. Such an approach requires one to examine both the macro and the micro perspectives, that is, an exploration of the institution as a whole and its various constituent parts. By researching academic staff's experiences from a variety of positions, and from examining the position of a variety of other stakeholders (such as managers), in addition to exploring a variety of programmatic responses, one will be able to generate a substantive understanding of the complexity and interconnectivity of existing knowledge on academic staff transformation.

Fifthly, this research is a comparative study. With a few exceptions, most existing comparative research tends to focus on institutions of difference, such as previously advantaged and disadvantaged institutions, previously Afrikaans and English institutions, or universities and technikons. By focusing on institutions of similarity, I hoped to notice commonality and difference, thereby adding complexity to our understanding of universities in the post-apartheid era.

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Therefore, the selected institutions had to be very similar. UCT and Wits were deemed comparable on the basis of their institutional history as English speaking, 'open' universities; the fact that they have not gone through the merger process; and their similar size. The elimination of as many contrasting (extraneous) variables as possible has enabled the comparison to be valid, in that differences should be due to the specificity of the particular site/institution rather than being due to extraneous variables.

Lastly, there are several crucial factors that make this comparison of UCT and Wits both interesting and important. In the public consciousness, UCT and Wits are recognised as the top two universities in South Africa because they are research-centred, internationally recognised and connected, and able to access substantial foreign funding because of their reputation and networks. Thus, if there is going to be a breakthrough in higher education transformation in South Africa, it must occur within these institutions.

The apparent classificatory similarity of UCT and Wits does not subsume the fact that there are significant differences between the two universities when it comes to implementing transformation. Hence, another dimension of the research was to explore and understand why it is that these differences occur[6]. It was of crucial importance to explore issues such as these in order to add depth to the study and to illustrate the importance of micro-politics within each university.

This research has aimed to touch on these issues and thereby contribute to the expansion of research into academic workplaces and, on a broader level, to contribute to discussions on transformation within large public institutions.

The rest of the report

Chapter two traces the history of academic staffing at UCT and Wits concentrating on five key areas: academic staff demographics, institutional policy and institutional practice of academic staffing, institutional culture as experienced by women and black academics and the role of government intervention in academic staffing.

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Chapter three aims to locate this research within existing literature on higher education transformation in South Africa and to motivate for a sociology of higher education. The literature review encompasses an analytical discussion of some of the main theorists in the area of transformation as workplace change and as institutional culture change

Chapter four is concerned with the research methodology. It discusses both the practical dimensions of conducting research and provides an experiential account of the process. It reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of the research, and discusses some of the complexities of actually researching this topic.

Chapters five and six discuss the research findings. Chapter five is concerned with Wits whilst chapter six focuses on UCT. The findings from each institution have been separated in order to provide a comprehensive discussion of each institution, detailing: contemporary academic staff demographics, institutional transformation agendas and programmes, academics' perceptions of transformation, academics' experiences of working within the institution, and an evaluation of institutional transformation.

Chapter seven discusses the emergent themes that arise out of chapters five and six, principally reflecting and accounting for institutional similarity and difference, in addition to considering the implications this has for workplace transformation.

Chapter eight concludes the report by examining the significance of the research findings for transformation in higher education, and outlines future directions for research.

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Chapter One Endnotes

[1]Henceforth, the University of Cape Town is referred to as UCT and the University of the Witwatersrand is referred to as Wits.

[2]This is merely a brief synopsis of the theoretical context of this research, the full discussion appears in chapter three.

[3]Although this report focuses primarily on equity, excellence has been included here because of the way in which these institutions, themselves, frame their role.

[4]Cooper and Subotsky (2001) note that the proportion of white students declined from 78% in 1988 to 53% in 1998 (Cooper & Subotsky, 2001: 37). Meanwhile, white academics accounted for 95% of all academics at UCT in 1988 and only declined to 88% in 1999 (Subotsky, 2001: 27 & Mabokela, 2000: 121). A similar pattern was evident at Wits.

[5]The aforementioned authors discuss the changing academic workplace and the resultant cultural entanglements. In the South African context, this is an area that still requires further exploration.

[6]The specifics of these differences are part of the findings and are therefore discussed later in the report.

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