

CHET
POLICY / CHANGE DIALOGUES

REPORT

Black Academics on the Move

**How Black Academics Account for Moving Between
Institutions or Leaving the Academic Profession**

***Overview of the CHET discussion series jointly
hosted with the University of Pretoria***

**University of Pretoria,
Groenkloof Campus
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Contents

Background to the Project	2
Findings	2
1. Racism	2
1.1 Institutional Racism	2
1.2 Racism under the guise of liberalism	3
1.3 Racism in evaluation and expectations	3
1.4 Racism in the form of black “essentialism”	3
2. Poor Management or Leadership	3
3. The Political Sphere	3
4. The Private Sphere	4
Solutions: Short to medium term strategies	4
Issues Raised by the Discussant: Professor N C Manganyi	4
General Discussion	5
Discussion Attendees	8

For a copy of the CHET publication entitled “Black Academics on the Move” visit the CHET website at

<http://www.chet.org.za/publications/bapublic.pdf>

Background to the Project

This project developed in response to a situation that arose at the University of the Witwatersrand. Two senior black staff members resigned in quick succession, one of them to move into the private sector and another to join a technikon. These resignations were a surprise to the Vice Chancellor, and caused him to reflect upon what the institution might not be getting right. He then approached the Ford Foundation to fund a study that would examine why black academics and staff members were leaving higher education and why they chose to move away from an institution with high status and an international reputation.

The chief researcher appointed to the project, Prof Cheryl Potgieter (University of Pretoria), started by clarifying that the project was not about recruitment and retention, but was intended to:

- (a) explore the experiences of black academics in higher education institutions, and
- (b) determine why they have left the academic profession and their reasons for leaving particular higher education institutions.

Thirty (30) interviews were conducted with 23 lecturers, three senior lecturers and two associate lecturers from the following institutions: the Universities of the Witwatersrand, Port Elizabeth, Fort Hare, Western Cape, Cape Town, Free State, Peninsula Technikon, and Cape Technikon. A range of discursive themes which spoke to the aims of the study emerged from transcriptions of the interviews. The data was interpreted using some aspects of discourse analysis.

Findings

The responses of interviewees were grouped under the following headings: racism, poor management and leadership, the political sphere and the private sphere.

1. Racism

1.1 Institutional racism

Practices interpreted as forms of institutional racism emerged as prominent reasons for staff leaving both historically liberal (English-medium) and historically Afrikaans-medium universities. Here, a racial discourse was employed by the respondents as the primary interpretative grid for understanding a lack of institutional change at a general level, and for attitudes, actions and values manifest in particular experiences. The academics who were leaving or who had left historically white universities felt that there was a lack of commitment to transformation and that white staff were still 'in control'. They saw the few key black appointees (in senior

management) as unable to deal with racism at the level of departmental experience.

1.2 Racism under the guise of liberalism

Liberalism was seen as disguising what one participant termed *covert racism*. In this interpretation, the institution is viewed as hiding behind its historical reputation for principled opposition to apartheid in order to avoid examining current practices that could be seen as racist. The kind of practices identified by interviewees included being discriminated against through being seen as 'inferior', not being 'heard', being anonymous or even invisible, being overlooked for appointment and being 'token' appointees.

1.3 Racism in evaluation and expectations

A number of black academics at historically white institutions felt that they had to meet unrealistic levels of performance, failing which they would become the scapegoats for anything that went wrong. In order to succeed, black appointees had to be 'super human beings' who never made mistakes, who excelled academically, who were good teachers, counsellors to black students and made all the necessary adaptations to fit into the institutional and cultural milieu.

1.4 Racism in the form of black 'essentialism'

Respondents identified another discourse operating in the institutional environment that may be called 'black essentialism'. Here, the racial category 'black' is brought into a mutually defining relationship with 'experience' that creates the sense that this arena of knowledge or experience is not only exclusive of 'whites', but inclusive of all 'blacks'. In this discourse, black experience is homogenised and is therefore seemingly accessible to, and 'shared', by all blacks no matter what other differences they may exhibit - for example, of age, social class, locality or political and religious affiliation. Interviewees saw it played out in a number of ways, particularly in the curriculum, when they were given all the courses to teach that had anything to do with 'blacks', or were given the role of counselling black students.

2. Poor Management or Leadership

Many interviewees identified problems at the level of institutional leadership as the basis for their decisions to leave institutions. These issues were raised by participants from both historically white and black institutions and took radically different forms but may be interpreted as activating two primary kinds of discourse. The first overlaps significantly with the identification of institutional racism (see above) and centres on a political discourse focused on transformation. The second relates to conflicting views about the core functions, professionalism and responsiveness of institutions in the contemporary context.

In relation to the second, a number of participants who were leaving historically Afrikaans-medium universities upheld a traditional discourse in which the core function of a university was defined as the pursuit of scholarly academic interests, and they were dismayed by the incursion of

entrepreneurial, managerial discourses that construct the university as a business.

3. The Political Sphere

Some respondents gave reasons for moving between institutions that related to their commitment to a larger national agenda of political transformation. In this view, the conservative history of some institutions was not a disincentive, but a positive challenge. People said that if they really wanted historically Afrikaans and English-medium institutions to change, then in a sense “*they needed to be infiltrated by people with a transformation agenda and history.*” These respondents viewed their movement and resignation as being good for the ‘new’ institution and this seemed to help them deal with the rejection and lack of support they were receiving from their previous places of work.

Many who had left historically black universities (HBUs) were frustrated by levels of nepotism, sexism and political complacency, and joined historically white institutions, justifying their departure by saying that if these former bastions of apartheid were going to change, they needed people who were serious about change to join the academic staff. Political perceptions thus operated negatively to induce people to leave institutions that they thought had stagnated or were too complacent to acknowledge that there was any need for transformation, and operated positively to attract people to institutions that needed to change and seemed to be open change.

4. The Private Sphere

An issue frequently raised as a reason for moving between institutions was family commitments. This is one that has not often been cited in literature. Interestingly, it was not women who were following their partners in their careers, but both men and women moving to areas where they grew up in order to take care of elderly relatives or to be with children who had grown up with relatives while they (the parents) were given the opportunities to study.

Solutions: Short to medium term strategies

The following were suggested as possible solutions to the problems that were experienced:

1. Co-operation should be actively created between national government, higher education institutions, the private sector and donor sector. These sectors need to provide resources and opportunities to retain black academics.
2. Salaries need to be addressed – a suggestion was made of using the scale that applies to civil servants.
3. Equity issues should be addressed by senior management at institutions e.g. a Deputy Vice Chancellor could be given the specific portfolio of equity.

4. Training should be provided in diversity management to all university managers. All staff should attend value clarification workshops, gender and race sensitivity training, etc.
6. Programmes could be designed to encourage and support individual academics in their pursuit of an academic career.
7. Opportunistic strategies should be developed such as modifying current procedures, developing novel alternative procedures and establishing new alliances or co-operative relationships that permit institutions to tap into existing talent.

Issues Raised by the Discussant: Professor N C Manganyi

The report and the presentation were found to be illuminating. The methodology used was sound and conformed to conventions used in the discipline of psychology. The report was presenting a new voice for the audience to interpret. For Prof Manganyi, this was a challenge facing the higher education community, and as discussant he took it up by offering an alternative interpretation of the views expressed in the report, especially in relation to scholarly work and contributions to new knowledge. He drew from his experience as a Vice Chancellor at one of the universities from which respondents were drawn, where he had held separate public meetings with students and senate. In reflecting on the two meetings, he observed that he had found the meeting with students more fruitful and the level of debate and critique of a higher quality in terms of the issues raised than the one he held with senate. He went as far as to say that he had wanted to distance himself from the level of debate at senate. This could be read both as a challenge to the audience at the launch of this report but also as a signal about the level and usefulness of the views expressed by academics in the report.

He questioned the foregrounding of race in the report, which he felt needed some attention and which raised issues that could neither be dealt with in the report nor during the discussion.

Secondly, he raised a concern about the absence of the voices of institutional leaders in the report. It would have been interesting to hear what institutional management had to say about the nature of the issues addressed.

Thirdly, it would have been helpful to have an indication of the scale of the problem addressed in the report. In other words, how serious is it? The study is unable to tell whether black academics are leaving in greater or lesser numbers than white academics. The turnover pattern would have helped to identify the seriousness of the problem. The point was also made that universities and technikons are no different from other social institutions. There are, and will always be, contested social spaces within these institutions (both old and new). The extent of the problem is an important issue that warrants attention because it raises the larger question of general dissatisfaction with academia as a desired profession.

Fourthly, researchers and their subjects seem to be taken aback that racism is alive and well and the question to be posed is “Why is it so surprising in the South African context ?” The challenge is to problematise the surprise.

Fifthly, is there only one victim? Why do we think that blacks, as presented in the report, are the only victims? Affirmative action leaves other people affected, and populism will pretend that this does not exist. As intellectuals this must be recognised and addressed.

Finally, Prof Manganyi raised the point that agency is a very important variable. Black people must not only be presented as victims - when they move it may be as part of empowerment.

General Discussion

It was suggested that changing conditions in the national environment should be located within a global context in which it appeared that academic work and the institutions in which it took place were becoming less and less attractive to all, not only to black academics.

The increasingly international movement of academics also meant that there were many more black non-South Africans in higher education institutions, and their presence added a further dimension to the way in which we speak of the experience of black academics.

A question was also raised about what gets measured, managed and accounted for in institutions. In the report, it appears as though when good blacks move out of academia or higher education institutions, someone has to account for this.

There is also a need to look at the policy framework within institutions in terms of recruitment strategies. It is not the case that all blacks move from these institutions; there are also those who choose to stay. The issue to be probed is why they have stayed. They also appear to stay despite the alienating features of the higher education environment for them.

A related point raised was that the focus should not only be on those who leave (the ‘mobiles’), but those who stay, since they are the hard core who determine institutional culture, practices and the direction of the institution. Those who stay behind define the institution.

The information presented in the report was also viewed in terms of how it contributes to policy and change dialogues. There was some criticism of the methodology used in the research and the question was raised as to whether this was helpful for policy intervention.

A critical issue related to future black academics. Where would they come from? In this respect, concerns as to the nurturing of a new generation of black academics were seen as no different from those in relation to white academics. From a policy perspective, therefore, the general question about

where the next generation of academics is going to come from needs to be asked, and whether this study helps to provide that answer.

Another perspective presented was that an academic environment is generally alienating by its very nature. There is nothing specifically racist about this environment or culture since it does not set out to particularly support or affirm either black or white academics. Academic work, on the whole, is lonely and isolated. This culture is related to the pursuit of academic excellence and in turn, it shapes the nature of institutions. The kinds of expectations that an institution, such as the University of Witwatersrand, has of academics, and the demands it places on them, are challenging (not affirming) to both black and white. Space to develop, and freedom of expression are not given, but always contested. The question that needs to be posed is what makes a black academic a good academic in this environment.

It was noted that higher education institutions have become like corporations with an alienating environment, and with high levels of mobility amongst their staff. Just as people move in and out of corporations, so too will academics move between and out of higher education institutions.

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