

**G2 Beaumaris 1 Thursday 6 December 9.00 - 09.30**

***'Why mouth all the pieties?': Black and women academics' revelations about discourses of 'transformation' at an historically white South African institution (0316)***

**Dina Z. Belluigi**<sup>1</sup>, Gladman Thondhlana<sup>2</sup> <sup>1</sup>*Queen's University Belfast, United Kingdom*  
<sup>2</sup>*Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa*

Clear patterns of inequality and disadvantage, in terms of race, gender and class in particular (Alexander & Arday 2015; Osorio 2009), have emerged from studies analysing access, curricula and institutional culture in higher education. Imbued with political capital, discourses of transformation have come to dominate higher education policy and public rhetoric to the extent that 'transformation' as an empty umbrella signifier 'absorbs rather than emits meaning' (Soudien et al. 2008, p.xx). Depending on the context, transformation has been twinned with such concepts diversity and inclusivity (Preez, Simmonds & Verhoef 2016), social healing (Association of American Colleges & Universities 2017), and social justice and change (Singh 2011). In this paper, we problematize the discourse of transformation which characterises the national rhetoric of an higher education sector in transition – that of South Africa (Preez, Simmonds & Verhoef 2016; Venter 2015), a national context of interest because it provides an extreme example of the complications around the worth and validity of access in higher education (Coetzee, 2016).

In the wake of colonialism and apartheid legacies, the South African state positioned public education in the service of the public good, by acting as a democratizing force, responding to the global economy, and challenging its legacy of oppression. State discourses of transformation oscillate between political democratisation, economic reconstruction and development, and redistributive social policies aimed at equity (Department of Education 1997, p.1.7). The shift from 'crisis' in development rhetoric to the post-apartheid 'rainbow nation' dream (Lebeau & Mills 2008) of a non-racial and non-sexist HE, became entangled in the discourses of 'transformation' in the sector (Badat 2011), which persists today.

However, the lack of change at an institutional level, continues to be the subject of much controversy and public debate (Universities South Africa 2015). Strategies such as quota systems and equity policies for affirmative action have been implemented for a pathway towards achieving 'transformation' at HWI (Badat 2008). The signifier of such 'transformation' was at first taken to be demographic changes in the racial and gender profiles of those students given structural access to the institution, later shifting to those who survive and thrive to *succeed* within its ranks, with funding formulae awarding throughput and completion rates. The challenges and successes of the sector, in relation to educational equity of the student stakeholders, is an active area of professional practice and scholarship.

This paper looks at what is recognised as "the most glaring collective failure" (Transformation Strategy Group and Transformation Management Group 2015, p.11) and "poor picture" of institutional transformation painted by national demographics of the professoriate (Govinder, Zondo & Makgoba 2013, p.5). In 2014, two decades after apartheid

ended, whites made up more than half (53.2%) of the academic staff against a national demographic of 79.2% black citizens (Department of Higher Education and Training 2015)<sup>1</sup>. A panacea for academic equity, 'accelerated development' programmes, were piloted in a number of HWI. Generally small-scale and measured, they incrementally altered institutional demographics in stable ways, permitting access to a select few 'talented' individual academics, while not relinquishing existing constructions of quality which was supported and assured through a three-year intensive apprenticeship program of mentorship and evaluation aligned with performance management in research, teaching and community engagement. In national discourses, the recipients of these EA programmes were explicitly positioned as contributing

*to the intellectual and academic decolonisation, de-racialisation and de-gendering of the inherited intellectual spaces of South Africa's universities, and more generally, to re-orienting universities to serve, in accordance with their social purposes, new constitutional, economic and social needs and development challenges (Higher Education of South Africa 2011, p.11).*

What was omitted from public discourse, in that post-conflict context where power had not shifted from the white intellectual elite, was that such professional socialization models emphasize inclusion to the existing in-group identities predicated on "worker adaptation to the work environment [where] reproduction of organizational norms engenders the most rewards" (Sulé 2014, pp.432–433).

Lauded as successful in the quality of their outcomes, funding shifted to national governmental sources in 2015, for what has become known as 'the New Generation of Academics Programme' (nGAP),.

This paper explores notions of transformation from the perspective of those who are presumed to be beneficiaries of such transformation, and who are tasked to varying degrees, with embodying or effecting transformation in South African higher education. To do so, we elicited the participation of the recipients of the well-lauded academic equity initiatives which aimed to affect the accelerated development of black and woman academic faculty at one historically white institution (HWI) in South Africa, which was progressive in piloting such programmes from 2000. The data generation process was structured by a report-and-respond approach (Stronach and Piper 2004) which utilised questionnaires followed by interpretation member-checking within small group discussions. 27 of the 53 recipients actively participated, engaging in a critical discourse analysis of the 9 notions identified in the comprehensive review of the Integrated Transformation Plans (ITPs) of South African universities (Transformation Strategy Group and Transformation Management Group 2015), namely 'reparation'; 'compliance'; 'relevance'; 'evolution'; 'psychological'; 'contexts'; 'social'; 'review'; and 'mission' (Transformation Strategy Group and Transformation Management Group 2015),. examining in what ways the transformation espoused at the case study institution related to what was experienced as practiced.

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<sup>1</sup> Such racial categorisation is standard in the national equity discourses (RSA 1998). The racial distinctions include 'white' to distinguish those of Caucasian descent; 'black' for those of black African descent; 'Indian' for those of descendants of those known elsewhere as western Asian; 'coloured' is inclusive of those of 'mixed race' or KhoiSan descent.

In our discussion, we will outline an analysis of participants' experiences of the notions of transformation which dominantly were espoused, in-use and mis/aligned within practices at the case study institution. Explanations for the possible reasons which underlie the espoused-practice gaps, in reference to participants' perspectives and the findings of studies in US historically white institutions, will be offered, followed by a discussion of the implications for policy, practice and research in evaluation. Emerging ahead of the implementation of a self-regulatory transformation tool for higher education institutions across that national context, these findings point to the importance of external mechanisms for holding institutions to account for what they espouse.

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