

Counting on demographic equity to transform institutional cultures at historically white South African universities?

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ABSTRACT

The post-apartheid higher education transformation project is faced with the challenge of recruiting and retaining black academics and other senior staff. But when we shift the focus from participation rates to equality–inequality within historically white universities (HWUs), then the discourse changes from demographic equity and redress to institutional culture and diversity. HWUs invoke the need to maintain their position as leading higher education institutions globally, and notions of ‘quality’ and ‘excellence’ have emerged as discursive practices, which serve to perpetuate exclusion. The question then arises as to which forms of capital comprise the Gold Standard at HWUs? Several South African universities have responded to the challenge of recruiting and retaining black academics by initiating programmes for the ‘accelerated development’ of these candidates. The ‘Accelerated Development Programme (ADP)’ on which this investigation is based was located at one HWU. The paper draws on interviews with 18 black lecturers who entered the academic workforce through the university’s ADP. Employing a theoretical framework of social and cultural reproduction, we examine how racialised, classed and gendered assumptions remain deeply entrenched in the values, norms and practices of historically white measured universities in South Africa. Our findings suggest that it is difficult for even the most conscious and personally invested agents to interrupt the naturalised norms and values that form part of the existing institutional culture. Agents struggle to interrupt normalised practices because of the highly valued currency of capital possessed by dominant actors in the form of white-middle-class habitus disguised as academic experience and ‘excellence’.

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Introduction

Transformation of higher education has been conceptualised as encompassing equity and redress, diversity, social cohesion and social inclusion, institutional culture, curriculum and research, teaching and learning, and community engagement (Department of Education, 1997). But in the context of neoliberalism, globalisation and financialisation, universities are concerned with measuring the progress of change to predict when transformation of higher education will be achieved so as to increase their reputation and stakeholder valuation. The contested ‘Equity Index’, for instance, devised by Govinder, Zondi, and Makhoba (2013), seeks to measure equity against research productivity