

## The State of Racial Equity at South African Universities

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**ABSTRACT** This article analysed the racial profile of senior staff at South African universities to see if they comply with the Employment Equity Act (EEA). This was done through a broader analysis of official reports and reports derived from empirical studies on this theme. The results from both the broader analysis and selected case studies show that there is still racial inequality in the staff profile at South African universities. Whites dominate in senior positions while Africans dominate in Historically Black Universities (HBUs). This leads to the conclusion that the Historically White Universities (HWUs)/HBUs dichotomy continues to paint the higher education sector in South Africa in a bad light. To address this situation, the article recommends that parallel to increasing the number of students from designated groups at tertiary institutions to undergo training so that they could keep up with their white counterparts, the entire mind-set of giving whites more recognition than other racial groups should change.

### INTRODUCTION

The international literature shows that inequalities have a long history which can be traced in countries like America, France, Germany, Indonesia and Vietnam. These inequalities are reproduced within the higher education sector (Bowen and Bok 1998; Clancy 2006; Nguyen 2006). Racial inequality is irrefutably one of the defining features of South African history. Although this problem predates the apartheid era, the institutionalisation of racial differences following the victory of the National Party in 1948 gave racial discrimination new impetus. Using the racial factor as a means for social organization, the apartheid government managed to order society in two ways. First, there was deliberate social classification where the population was classified into Whites, Coloureds, Indians and Blacks. Second, there was social stratification whereby the society that had been put into little compartments was placed in a hierarchy, with Whites at the top of that vertical ranking and Blacks located at the bottom thus being the lowest category (Mngomezulu 2010). The struggle for liberation heralded by the Defiance Campaign of 1952 and the adoption of the Freedom Charter in 1955 was an attempt by the oppressed Black masses to challenge this political development. Sadly, almost twenty years after the demise of apartheid in 1994, remnants of racial inequality still remain (CHE 2009). This state of

affairs paints a pessimistic picture about the prospects of achieving racial equity in South Africa.

Markedly, the higher education sector was not spared from this racial and social engineering. Universities in South Africa were organized along racial and ethnic lines. This process was prefigured by the passage of the Extension of Universities Education Act in 1959. The Act not only established ethnic and racial universities but also restricted the admission of Blacks to what we now know as Historically White Universities (HWUs). The Historically Black Universities (HBUs) included: The University of the North established to serve the educational needs of the Sotho, Venda and Tsonga ethnic groups. The University of Zululand was established to cater for Zulu and Swati ethnic groups. In line with the racial divide, the University of Durban-Westville was built for Indian students while the University of the Western Cape was built for Coloured students. Although the University of Fort Hare at Dikeni (Alice) was established in 1916 and therefore did not form part of the new set-up, the National Party government resolved that admission to this university would henceforth be restricted to Xhosas. This marked the early phase of the racialization of higher education in apartheid South Africa (Subotzky 1997; Badat et al. 1994; Nieuwenhuizen 2011).

The introduction of the 'homeland' system in the early to mid-1970s saw new universities

coming into the picture. These included the University of Transkei which was established in 1977, the University of Bophuthatswana established in 1980 and the University of Venda which was founded in Toiyoyandou in 1982. Seeing the need to keep the new “independent” states viable, the apartheid government built special-purpose universities. Included in this group were: the Medical University of South Africa (Medunsa) established in 1978 and Vista University which came into being in 1982 at the same time as the University of Venda (Nieuwenhuizen 2011). These arrangements ensured that higher education could not be immune to the apartheid machination.

The new government which came into power in 1994 faced a mammoth task of promoting racial equity in the South African higher education sector. This meant pushing for the revision of student admission and staff employment policies at South African universities. The adoption of the Education White Paper on 15 August 1997 titled ‘Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education’ created optimism that sanity would at long last prevail in the higher education sector in the country under the new political order. The subsequent enactment of the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997) confirmed this ostensible optimism. Other White papers which were adopted in 1998, 2001 and 2004 were meant to uphold the enthusiasm as well as determination and ecstasy brought about by the 1997 White Paper. From this point onwards, higher education in South Africa would be organized differently from how it was planned under apartheid.

All these relentless efforts were important steps in the reconfiguration of the higher education landscape in a democratic South Africa. However, the question that is important for the researchers’ purposes in this article becomes: to what extent have South African universities succeeded in promoting racial equity since the advent of democracy? This question is the primary focus of the researchers’ article. There are two ways in which this question could be tackled. First, we could address it by looking at the student profile at South African universities over the years through longitudinal studies. This would assist us in establishing whether the student racial profile changed over time. Second, we could analyse the staff profile across the universities over the years to see the picture

which emerges. Time and space will not allow the researchers to do both in this article. Instead, the researchers shall focus on the latter (that is, the staff profile). In any case, the former has been somewhat addressed elsewhere (Mngomezulu 2012).

### Conceptual Definitions

From a broader perspective, the term ‘equity’ is synonymous to ‘equality’. Both terms mean that individuals, groups or institutions are treated in the same manner without any discrimination or favouritism. This is the general sense in which the general public uses these concepts interchangeably. But scholars from different academic fields offer a variety of definitions of this concept, some of which are technical while others are similar to the broad definition provided above. For Cassim (2005) the term ‘equity’ means techniques that are exploited to support equal opportunity and warrant fair treatment. The intended goal in this definition is similar to the one - offered above, that is, ensuring that everyone is treated in the same way regardless of class, status, gender, age, religious affiliation, race, creed or any of such defining features of the human race.

Other authors define ‘equity’ within a specific context. For example, Faakye (2007) defines this concept in the higher education setting and talks about equity in higher education. He sees this as a combination of strategies and methods that are used to enable access to those who are deemed disadvantaged. Such individuals or groups may be disadvantaged in the present or may have been disadvantaged in the past. In either case, the idea behind the introduction of equity would be to reconfigure the inter-relationships and ensure that everyone is treated in the same manner.

Therefore, when the researchers talk about racial equity in higher education in South Africa they are talking about an ideal situation where everyone has equal opportunities or where all groups are represented in the higher education sector, especially in terms of employment opportunities. For the researchers’ purposes in this article, by racial equity they mean equal representation of all racial groups in South Africa specifically in appointments to different positions at the country’s 23 universities. This brings us to the researchers’ last concept, ‘employment equity’.

Employment equity in a general sense is a broad concept which derives its meaning from embedded concepts such as race, gender, ethnicity, etc. If the researchers talk about employment equity at South African universities, they simply mean that all categories (defined in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, etc.) are represented when employment opportunities become available at such universities (Sebola and Khalo 2010). In this context, any university where there is unequal representation of racial groups especially in leadership positions is judged to have failed the racial equity test.

### **Contextualising Racial Equity in South Africa from a General Perspective**

Racial equity in South Africa was a conscious decision made by the new government in 1994 with the view to addressing racial imbalances which characterised the apartheid era. The process was set in motion by the adoption of the National Constitution in 1996. Chapter 2, titled 'The Bill of Rights' set the tone of the new government. With reference to equality, Section 9(3) states that "The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race..." (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996). This sub-section focused on the state instructing it not to discriminate against any of its citizens. The next sub-section (4) gave the same directive to individuals within the state, proscribing that "no person may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds in terms of subsection (3). With this instruction in place, the ball was set rolling to ensure that racial inequality became a thing of the past. Subsequent legislation and policies had to take a cue from these Constitutional imperatives.

Following the adoption of the Constitution, all institutions (public and private) had to abide by it and act accordingly. Although universities in South Africa are deemed semi-autonomous, they could not be seen to be acting contrary to the Constitution. It is proper, therefore, to look at how South African universities were linked to the political development that was taking place in the country following the demise of apartheid. Importantly, the researchers need to know if these universities have been able to put into practice the Constitutional imperatives outlined

above. In cases where this goal has not been achieved, it would be interesting to know the reasons for the failure so that alternative routes could be contemplated.

### **METHODS**

This article is a multiple case study which was conducted primarily within the qualitative paradigm with the view to getting a sense of the extent to which South African universities comply with the EEA. The decision to use multiple case study design was informed by Stake's (2005) contention that this mode of operation leads to a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Most of the data was obtained from published documents (official and unofficial) such as the national constitution, the White Paper, and reports compiled by government institutions such as the Center for Higher Education (CHE). However, some quantitative data obtained from official government reports and reports derived from empirical studies conducted on some of the universities was used to illustrate certain conclusions drawn from qualitative data. Different data sets were compared in order to achieve the aim of the study, that is, to establish the extent to which South African universities promote racial equity.

### **RESULTS**

#### **Attempts Made by South African Universities to Promote Racial Equity**

There is no doubt that South African universities want to promote racial equity. This is evidenced by the fact that all universities in the country have equity plans in place. Their employment equity policies are well crafted and aligned to the constitutional imperatives. The preambles of these policies state that they are guided *inter alia* by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996), the Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998), the Skills Development Act (No. 97 of 1998), the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (No. 3 of 1983), the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997), and the Labour Relations Act (No. 66 of 1997) as well as other relevant legislation. This is the general trend across all universities in the country regardless of their types.

Examples of employment equity policies of individual universities attest to the assertion made above that these universities are determined to promote racial equity in line with the Constitutional mandate. For example, the stated purpose of the Employment Equity Policy of the University of Fort Hare, the oldest of HBUs in the country, is “to provide the guiding principles, the institutional framework and basic strategies for the development and implementation of the University’s employment equity programme” (Employment Equity Policy: University of Fort Hare: 5). The guiding principles of this policy are: fairness, non-marginalisation, empowerment, avoidance of tokenism, transparency, accountability, consistency, communication and consultation as well as resources. Under each of these guiding principles the focus is on ensuring that there is no discrimination of any sort, including racial discrimination. Employment Equity Policies of other universities operate within the same framework.

However, despite all these attempts, it is puzzling to note that the reality on the ground paints a different picture. The prevailing situation leads to the conclusion that racial equity at South African universities is like a mirage which keeps shifting the goal post as one comes nearer. The determination is there but the goal seems hard to achieve (Subotzky 1997; Sebola and Khalo 2010; CHE 2009; Sports 24 February 2013). A brief analysis of this situation using statistical data sets will give credence to the assumption that racial equity at South African universities has still not been achieved to-date.

### **The Reality Faced by South African Universities Regarding Racial Equity**

The issue of racial inequality is not only a South African problem (CRER Seminar Report 2012; The Racial Equality Directive 2012; Sellers 2013). However, this problem is more evident in South Africa due mainly to the racial factor (Sports 24 2013; The Herald 2013). The history of South African universities continues to haunt them almost twenty years after the country obtained democracy. In many instances, the staff profile of these institutions of higher learning shows remnants of the old order. The academic and administrative staff at HWUs remains predominantly white while that of HBUs still remains largely black. This is despite the fact that

government has put systems in place to ensure that racial equity becomes a reality and that racial inequality is obliterated. Even government institutions admit that “the profile of university staff employed in public higher education remains racially skewed” (Centre for Higher Education 2009:74). According the Centre for Higher Education (CHE), in the year 2004, only 33% of staff employed in public higher education was African. Three years later (in 2007) this figure remained at a mere 37% thus showing only a slight increase. The figures for White employees were 48% and 44% respectively for the same periods.

Noticeably, the figures for staff in senior management positions across universities during the same period are a bit consoling. Between the years 2004 and 2007, “African staff in senior management positions increased both in number (headcount) and in proportion from 22% in 2004 to 24% in 2007” (Centre for Higher Education 2009:75). But, as we can see, even the 24% was still a very low figure considering that Africans form the largest portion of the South African population. Another point worth noting is that racial equity does not only concern Whites and Africans. Indians and Coloureds also need to be factored in for a balanced analysis. For example, while the number of Africans increased somewhat between 2004 and 2007, the number of Indians at this level increased at an even slower rate while the number of coloureds in senior management positions remained unchanged. The noticeable change was that the number of Whites continued to increase in number but declined in proportion to the other racial groups. Another noticeable change during the period in question was that racial imbalance was even more pronounced in academic appointments, that is, instructional and research staff. White staff continued to fill these types of positions at all levels compared to the other racial groups. Moreover, despite their small national population, Indians seemed to be overrepresented in the appointments. Meanwhile, both Africans and Coloureds were underrepresented in these appointments thus confirming continued racial inequalities.

A quick look at case studies from a few universities around the country provide useful statistical data to help us understand the extent to which South African universities are struggling to ensure that there is racial equality in their staff profile. To a large degree, the racial profile

of the staff at these universities reflects the history of each university. Thus, staff at HBUs is still predominantly African while staff members at HWUs are predominantly white. This immediately leads to the conclusion that racial equity at South African universities remains a problem. There is a plethora of evidence which attests to this assertion as discussed and demonstrated in the tables and discussions below.

It was mentioned earlier that the University of Zululand was an apartheid establishment which catered for the Zulu and Swati ethnic groups. Almost twenty years after the demise of apartheid the student profile at this university is still almost entirely Black. In a way, this is not surprising. The situation cannot change overnight. Strikingly, this black outlook is also discernible in the staff profile of this university, including leadership positions. Table 1 illustrates this point eloquently.

The statistical data presented in Table 1 is revealing. Given the history of the University of Zululand which was outlined earlier in this article, African staff dominate in all the four categories of senior positions captured in this table. The fact that very few Coloureds study and work at this university is the reason for their almost non-existence in the senior positions across the four faculties (Arts, Commerce and Law, Education and Science and Agriculture). Captivatingly, the two faculties which are not headed by Africans are those considered critical in the broader South African education system currently. These are Science and Agriculture as well as Commerce and Law. Africans head the faculties of Arts and Education. These are generally perceived as generic faculties which are not attractive to the private sector and generally offer lower salaries to employees compared to the other two faculties.

When looking at HWUs the picture presented above regarding the dominance of Africans in senior staff positions changes immediately.

The number of Africans who hold senior positions dwindles substantially. A quick look at two universities which fall under the HWUs category confirms this submission and helps us illustrate the point better. An analysis of statistical data adapted by Sebola and Khalo (2010) from the 2008 report of the Department of Labour presents the employment situation at these universities as far as top and senior management positions are concerned.

The data presented in the report shows that at both universities the number of Whites at top and senior management levels surpassed those of other racial groups. At a glance, this could immediately lead to the conclusion that HWUs epitomized by the two institutions discussed here have failed to promote racial equality in terms of the Employment Equity Act. Indeed, this judgement becomes plausible when the situation from other HWUs is brought into the equation. For example, the racial composition of the senior management positions at Wits University painted the same picture as the one shown in the two universities mentioned above. At the latter university (Wits), the number of Africans holding senior positions stood at 2, Coloureds: 0, Indians: 0 and Whites: 7 (Kola 2012: 123). This meant that only two of the four racial groups were represented in the senior positions. Of the two, the gap between Black and White appointments stood at five positions with Whites at the top. This is the reality at South African universities which has left various commentators deeply concerned. Badat (2009) expressed his serious concern about the fact that the composition of academic staff at South African universities still remains predominantly white whereas the national population is predominantly Black.

But when the situation at HBUs is analysed, the indictment of HWUs subsides somewhat. It becomes clear that not only HWUs have struggled to implement the EEA. HBUs also fall in the same trap. The situation at the University of Zululand which was presented in Table 1 earlier

**Table 1: Senior staff profile at the University of Zululand**

| <i>Position</i> | <i>African</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>Coloured</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>Indian</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>White</i> | <i>%</i> |
|-----------------|----------------|----------|-----------------|----------|---------------|----------|--------------|----------|
| Managers (23)   | 17             | 73.9     | 1               | 4.3      | 1             | 4.3      | 4            | 17.3     |
| Directors (8)   | 4              | 50       | 0               | 0        | 2             | 25       | 2            | 25       |
| Deans (4)       | 2              | 20       | 0               | 0        | 1             | 25       | 1            | 25       |
| HODs (39)       | 30             | 76.9     | 0               | 0        | 3             | 7.6      | 6            | 15.3     |
| Total (74)      | 53             |          | 1               |          | 7             |          | 13           |          |

*Source:* Headcount and calculations done by authors June 2013

attests to this logic. Moreover, when looking at the staff profile at the University of the Western Cape the coloured dominance becomes even more glaring. A similar situation prevails at other HBUs such as the University of Venda and others. All these statistical data sets point to the same conclusion that racial equality at South African universities still poses a serious challenge across universities. This is despite all the efforts made by university administrators and government to implement the EEA and other related Acts. Of course, the researchers may argue that the situation has improved somewhat if they consider that in 1994 when South Africa became a democracy as high as 80% of the academic workforce in the country was white (Council on Higher Education 2004). But even this fact should not in any way dissuade us from being deeply concerned about the conspicuous lack of racial equity at South African universities.

The key question which begs for attention is: 'why do these universities find it hard to implement the EEA as expected by government? In other words, if both the National Constitution and subsequent legislation call for racial equity, why can this goal not be achieved? One of the most dominant answers to this question is that South Africa does not have enough properly qualified individuals to occupy senior positions at universities. The Centre for Higher Education (CHE) confirmed this reason, stating that "there are few people qualified for academic work and many academic staff lack Master's and doctoral qualifications" (CHE 2009: 80). This submission can be backed up by statistical data at these two levels of study. The CHE provides the figures for enrolments at both levels.

What is clear from the CHE data set is that while the number of doctoral students increased during these four years in question (from 9, 103 in 2004 to 10, 052 in 2007), the number of students enrolled for the Master's programme decreased consistently (45, 332 in 2004; 44, 321 in 2005; 42, 899 in 2006 and 41, 176 in 2007) (CHE 2009). Certainly, this inconsistency needs further explanation but that is beyond the scope of this article.

The reason confirmed by these figures (lack of suitably qualified individuals to take up senior positions) holds ground in as far as the broader picture is concerned. However, these figures do not answer the question as to why there is racial inequality at South African universities. The latter question implores the researchers to look beyond these statistical fig-

ures and analyse the prevailing racial inequality in the higher education sector in South Africa within the broader historical context. Any attempt to simply look at the figures in their pure form would be a shallow analysis of a very critical element in the country's attempt to promote its nascent democracy and ensure racial harmony.

Some empirical studies come close to helping the researchers answer the question why whites dominate in leadership positions at South African universities except for HBUs. A study by Nieuwenhuizen from the University of Johannesburg (UJ) which covered higher education institutions across South Africa focusing on the Business Management Department came up with interesting results and drew useful conclusions. In this study, the author found that academics from all the designated groups combined, only constituted a mere 40% while whites accounted for the remaining 60%. She concluded that "there is a shortage of black, Indian and coloured academics in business Management and related departments at universities" (Nieuwenhuizen 2011:7006). This view was confirmed by Higher Education South Africa (HESA) when analysing the broader South African situation. It concluded that attracting, appointing and retaining people from designated groups to universities still remains a problem in South Africa due to lack of the necessary skills and experience (HESA 2009).

## CONCLUSION

Racial equity at South African universities poses a real threat to democracy. As demonstrated in the discussion above, despite government attempts to enact laws such as the EEA and other related Acts in a bid to ensure racial equity, available evidence shows that this goal has not been achieved. Even the national constitution emphasises the need for equality but the reality on the ground points towards a different direction. The researchers have shown in this article that the challenge of racial inequality in employment cuts across universities since both HWUs and HBUs are battling to ensure that racial equity is promoted. Among the reasons discussed above is lack of suitably qualified individuals to fill senior positions at universities. As the researchers argued, whites seem to do better in terms of academic qualifications and therefore dominate senior positions, especially at HWUs. The latter point forces the re-

searchers to argue that this lack of skill should not be over-emphasized. For instance, the case study of the University of Zululand shows that there are Africans who qualify for leadership positions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the above, the researchers recommend the following:

- Government should put a monitoring process in place to ensure that what is prescribed in the constitution and other legislation is implemented on the ground;
- Those institutions (public and private) that implement racial equity should be rewarded materially and financially as an incentive;
- The institutions which fail to comply should be reprimanded;
- Previously disadvantaged groups should be capacitated through training so that they could catch-up with their white counterparts;
- Those individuals from previously disadvantaged groups who qualify for leadership positions in terms of academic qualifications but lack experience should deputise so as to gain experience and, later, assume leadership roles.

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