Transforming the Culture of Higher Education in South Africa

By Beverley Thaver

Opening up the conversation about institutional culture and race in South African universities.

Stumbling blocks remain on the road to a fully equitable culture in higher education in South Africa. Between 2003 and 2006, I conducted two research studies that probed the nature of the transformation of higher education institutions in the country. The first study focused specifically on institutional culture; the second examined the implementation of employment equity in the academic profession while also considering aspects of institutional culture. Both studies sought to track the extent of the changes at one historically white institution with the goal of identifying remaining problems and, ultimately, determining what could be done to address them. I present here a review of the qualitative data from these two research projects, which were funded, respectively, by the National Research Foundation and the Swedish and Dutch governments through the Education Policy Consortium.

In South Africa, the idea of institutional culture occupies a large space in policy and institutional discourses about higher education. The 1997 South African government white paper A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (online at http://download.che.ac.za/documents/d000005/White_Paper3.pdf) and its regulatory instrument, the 2001 National Plan for Higher Education, signaled the need for institutions to "change their institutional cultures," and that goal has become one of the elements of the framework meant to unify a fragmented national higher education system.

These two documents locate some of the systemic problems in South African higher education within the domain of culture. From these documents, it appears that the higher education system may become more efficient if we reform the culture of institutions. A relationship is drawn between the apartheid-based norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions within institutions and the new cultural norms that, it is assumed, will come with the establishment of a critical mass of black academics. By implication, new entrants to South African higher education will be carriers and creators of different cultural norms and practices.

Following the foundational values outlined in A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education, the National Plan for Higher Education established several policy goals for the reconfiguration of the higher education system. One of these is improved equity among staff. The plan notes that, in efforts to improve staff equity, "an important strategy that institutions have largely ignored is the need to change institutional cultures." At the same time, the plan identifies challenges (and opportunities) that continue to confront the higher education system in the fledgling democracy.

At the institutional level, certain South African symbols and rituals are being reconfigured. Buildings at some historically white institutions, for example, are being renamed, drawing on African symbols. Furthermore, women and black faculty are being appointed. The responsiveness of institutions to efforts to improve equity and address social divisions among faculty is influenced, however, by historical and institutional contexts. Thus, for example, where the languages of either English or Afrikaans predominate, proficiency in the predominant language is deemed crucial. Similarly, in instances where the demographic profile of faculty has historically been largely white, whites tends to be...
favored in appointments. In other words, many believe that race is overdetermined as a criterion in the recruitment process. Several media reports and policy review documents have emphasized the exodus of black academics from certain institutions, and specifically from historically white institutions, where a white, male, and Eurocentric institutional culture is perceived as a substantial barrier to black academics. There is thus a perception that the conditions required for establishing a critical mass of black academics may not yet exist.

A quick mapping of the problem at the system or policy level, at the institutional level, and at the public level (in media reports) reveals that institutions are being pressured to make their cultures more reflective of the democratic ethos. My observation is that much disquiet exists about the notion of change in some quarters, not least because culture is difficult to define. This difficulty is compounded by a methodological dilemma: where to search for the problem inside the institution. My research projects’ data present a picture of how academics from one historically white institution navigate their way through the systemic reform that centers on the “need to change the institutional culture.”

To study institutional culture one must look at both a self-contained structure (the institution or organization) and the pattern of social practices within it (the culture). Why focus on the academic? In South Africa, as elsewhere, academics constitute one of the social groups whose function is to produce, analyze, and explain systems of belief. Academics are subject to a system of patronage—today in South Africa the patron is the state—that threatens the autonomy of the intellectual. In light of this, we can learn much from how academics position themselves in society. More specifically, in terms of the function of knowledge, do they, for example, value knowledge for its own sake or take a more instrumental view of knowledge? Is the academic merely reproducing the cultural capital of the dominant group? These questions beg a bigger question about the relationship of academics to the democratization of society. Studying the culture of higher education can begin to lead us to some answers to these complicated and difficult questions.

Techniques Used in the Study
My study examined the meanings that South African academics attach to the idea of institutional culture and the extent to which they have perceived changes in that culture since the birth of democracy in South Africa. A semistructured interview was administered to nineteen academics at a historically white institution who volunteered to participate. The white and “colored” racial categories were equally represented (42 percent each), while black Africans accounted for 16 percent of the participants. Women accounted for 21 percent of those interviewed and men 79 percent. The white male academics were mainly at the professorial level.

I received a range of responses to the question “How do you interpret the culture of your institution?” (see sidebar). Since the policy goals emphasize the need to move beyond colonial and apartheid-based norms, I have isolated those statements that resonate with this shift.

Responses to the Survey Question “How Do You Interpret the Culture of Your Institution?”

Values of Eurocentrism
It is Eurocentric and colonial, hostile to those not of European origin.
The colonialism is reflected in the architecture: it is constructed in such a way as to make it look like a long-established university, giving it an Ivy League symbolism.

The dominance of the English culture
You only stick to English, nothing else, it does not take into account the existence of other population groups. You have to be white and English-speaking, which then makes you more welcome.

The heterogeneity of culture
There are disciplinary, student, staff, and academic subcultures. There is not one culture, with different cultures operating across the university.

Historical memory
Things have been happening in the same way for a long time, and these are controlled by those who have been there for a long time; the practices are naturalized.

The shape of the culture
Middle class and elitist culture.

Social relations among faculty
Much emphasis on collegiality.

The black-white binary system of thought
Black people are perceived in a deficit framework, having to be brought up to speed. There is a need for special attention to be given to black faculty in order to get them on track. White academics are automatically perceived as being developed and hence on the track of excellence.

The “public” discourse on transformation
There is silence around transformation debates, much fear and victimization.

Secrecy—you cannot talk openly about transformation for fear of being victimized.

Perceived allocation of unequal standards
Lack of uniform criteria for evaluating standards among black and white academics.

The relationship of academics to society
Emphasis on individualism, liberalism, and the need to be somewhat detached from society.
Some Reflections

The respondents' descriptions of the cultural component of the institution suggest conflict between black and white academics. At times, the conflict is overt, insofar as black academics (including most of the colored academics) do not shy away from asserting the preponderance of a white, male, Western culture and rationality. For others, it is covert: the novelty of black people entering the institution is qualified by remarks such as "excellence cannot be compromised."

A recurring comment among white respondents is that institutions embody several different cultures—in other words, there is no single culture in an institution. By contrast, black respondents signal that there is a dominant, unspoken culture into which one needs to be assimilated—a white, male, middle-class, Eurocentric culture.

A further key theme that emerges from the data involves the defense of autonomy, independence, and liberalism. Respondents invoke this defense as part of a shift to a more inclusive democratic project. Yet, there is a silence around the notion of citizenship and what this means: Does the black academic have to work harder in order to be recognized? Does the black academic have to assimilate into the white culture? Here competency in the English language would be perceived as a key cultural attribute.

Many comments concerned the practices of the state. The state, in visible and invisible ways, is perceived to be creeping into the institution. This perceived incursion reinforces the view that the state should have a limited role in the affairs of the institution. Most of the white respondents and one colored respondent favor minimal state intervention, while the majority of the colored and black African respondents favor a stronger hand.

Collegiality is presented by institutions as a guiding norm, but emphasizing collegiality hides or masks the conflict among academics coming from different backgrounds. Collegiality in this respect represents a significant challenge for all academics—black and white, male and female—who must work together in the same space.

A historical framework distinguishes English institutions from Afrikaner institutions—the former are seen as valuing knowledge for its own sake and the latter as valuing instrumental knowledge. Language is thus the bearer of specific institutional cultures. In this sense, the two colonial powers are fighting for hegemony, with culture being the domain around which the battle is fought. However, a large silence emerges about evolution of culture inside historically black institutions.

The Way Forward

In thinking about a program for cultural change, what tools are at our disposal? Our current thinking—in the aftermath of half a century of politics based on scientific racism, which embraces essentialized notions of race—sets up a standoff between white and black academics. Of course, the situation could be (and, in some instances, is being) inverted by elevating black identity, but that approach remains steeped in racial discourse. It is worthwhile to note that the bureaucratization of the democratic political redress project is inadvertently reproducing the old apartheid social categories. As an alternative to this, the postmodern view seeks to counter racial dichotomy with multiple and fragmented identities.

I wonder whether our efforts to change institutional cultures should be guided by postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha’s notion of the third space located between essentialized and nonessentialized identities. Is there a space for thinking freshly about where we are heading, so that we can avoid reproducing the polarized history from which we have emerged? Is there a space for movement beyond race, factoring into such a discussion the structural elements that have harnessed our progress?

Or perhaps the question is really whether we have emerged from race-based politics. Can we talk freely about a baseline of cultural norms and practices that constitutes (rather than defines) what it means to be a South African as well as a global citizen? If we cannot do that, we will be reproducing old hierarchies that hamper social cohesion and, in turn, knowledge innovation. 😐

Note

1. The terms “colored,” white, and black are used in the social classificatory sense, as they were under apartheid. I do not agree with these apartheid labels but nevertheless use them for the sake of clarity and out of necessity to refer to statistics thus defined.