The Role of Contexts in the Construction of Academic Identity in Selected South African Universities

David Matsepe[*] and Mugwena Maluleke

Department of Research, South African Democratic Teachers' Union, South Africa

Abstract: Using qualitative interviews and document analysis, that is, national and institutional policies, the study is embedded on the assumption that the purpose of the academic career is knowledge creation, dissemination, and the acquisition and promotion of high-level skills that contribute to scholarship and the support of the economy of knowledge. This implies that academics create knowledge in pursuit of the academic career to develop scholarship. Given the identity-subjectivity-agency theory, the study set out to examine the global and local contexts or dynamics that affect the academic career in constructing academic identity and how they apply to the South African higher education landscape. We argue that the legacy of apartheid affected academic careers differently as higher education institutions were divided, separated, and segregated along racial lines with different purposes. They shaped the roles of academics in different ways, with some enjoying academic freedom and autonomy while some are operating as public servants. Moreover, university academic staff should be encouraged and enabled to advance knowledge. Thus, the study recognizes the need for high-level skills and knowledge creation, which require greater attention to the nature of academic careers.

Keywords: Local context, global context, national policies, institutional policies.

INTRODUCTION

Before 1994, higher education in South Africa was divided along racial lines with English and Afrikaans institutions located in urban areas and historically black universities located in rural areas (Rosenthal, 1961; Szanton & Manyika, 2002; Lulat, 2005; Christiansen & Slammert, 2005; Ogude, Netswera & Mavundla, 2003; Samuel, 2000; Smit, 1989). Some scholars suggest ongoing personal and professional development among young emerging scholars. (Christiansen & Slammert, 2006; Cloete & Galant, 2005), Who develop capacity building and research centers in historically disadvantaged institutions (Glencross & Mji, 2001; Samuel, 2000); and at the then universities of technologies (Lues & Lategan, 2006; Ogude *et al.*, 2003). This is done to strengthen collaborations and partnerships supporting the academic career (Kruss, 2006; Mouton, 2000). This view is echoed by the national policy documents that consider the labor market to support the economy of knowledge as knowledge creation and scholarship (Blankley, 2004; Cloete & Galant, 2005; Koen, 2003; NRF, 2007).

Apart from a brief foray into the legacy, the focus is redressing the racial divides in higher education created by the legacy of apartheid. In terms of the local context, the study argues that the legacy of apartheid affected academic careers differently as higher education institutions were divided, separated, and segregated along racial lines with different purposes. They shaped the roles of academics in different ways, with some enjoying academic freedom and autonomy. In terms of the global context, we argue the key pressures that globalization is bringing to South African institutions include pressures around knowledge economy, knowledge society, technological change, the increasing demand for higher-level skills, to mention a few. These pressures cause significant challenges to institutions themselves and the very same academics working in those institutions.

METHODOLOGY

Using qualitative interviews and document analysis, that is national and institutional policies. They collected through ten interviews and key national and institutional policies from three selected universities, namely, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), University of South Africa (Unisa), and University of Pretoria (UP). On the one hand, the purpose of the interviews was to collect narrative data on how academics constitute their subjectivities that are subject to change over time, depending on the individual's sense of agency in identity formation. On the other hand, the document analysis was undertaken not as a sequence of events but as a process of constituting certain mentalities and forms of thoughts regarding how individuals conceive or interpret their academic careers and the implications for the academic practice in South Africa. Thus, the reason behind selecting 10 participants was that the initial sample size was 15 participants. However, it reached the saturation point with 10 participants. Selected universities were beyond the white-only and

*Address correspondence to this author at the Department of Research, South African Democratic Teachers' Union, South Africa;
E-mail: DMatsepe@sadtu.org.za

black-only categories, or previously disadvantaged institutions, because the legacy of apartheid affected academic careers differently as higher education institutions were divided, separated, and segregated along racial lines with different purposes. The roles of academics were shaped in different ways, with some enjoying academic freedom and autonomy. For instance, in historically white institutions, academics enjoyed academic freedom and autonomy, while historically black institutions were forced to operate as public servants.

FINDINGS

This section discusses the findings of the study. Consolidated the findings into the following two themes emanated from the academics' perceptions and experiences, namely (1) local context; and (2) global context.

Local Context

Given the argument putting forward by the local context, for this study, a significant challenge remained the reconfiguration and coordination of the academic career and practice along with the goals of the new system. Thus, in 1996, in conjunction with the NCHE, the Council for Higher Education proposed a single non-racial higher education system for all. (Bundy, 2006; DoE, 1997) with the advent of the Education White Paper 3 in 1997 to transform higher education on the principle of equity, quality, efficiency, academic freedom, and public accountability (DoE, 1997; Cross, 1998; Ntshoe, 2004; Mabokela, 2001; Taylor, 2004).

Drawing on the brief historical background of higher education in South Africa, two salient tenets emerged for this study. The first is that, with its well-established higher education institutions, South Africa can advance knowledge creation and dissemination to develop the intellectual base needed for its social and economic development (Szanton & Manyika, 2002). However, with some of its dysfunctional institutions of higher learning, South Africa may find it challenging to attract sufficient numbers of individuals who consider pursuing an academic career for prospects (Samuel, 2000). The second aspect is that there is a general concern that, in the past, there was gate-keeping in some of the critical disciplines like research, which restricted employment access on the grounds of race and gender (Christiansen & Slammert, 2005; Kamper 2004; Motala 1991; Samuel, 2000). This may continue to discourage people from pursuing an academic career (Christiansen & Slammert, 2005).

In South Africa, higher education is guided by the Department of Higher Education, Science and Technology (DHEST). Thus, institutions of higher learning exercise their autonomy, and their actions are guided by central controls on funding and the accreditation of programs. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) mandated all qualifications to be registered and comply with the requirements laid down by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC); the body constituted to oversee the quality of higher education programmes. Thus, all programs form part of the roles and responsibilities of the DHEST, which is responsible for policy and the continuous support of national knowledge creation and development. Here, we examine key policy prescripts as presided over by the DHEST.

In 1997, the *Education White Paper 3: A program for higher education transformation* set the agenda for higher education for the last decade. It mapped out the purpose of higher education, including the creation, enhancement, and dissemination of knowledge and the development of sound human resources as the key role and responsibilities of the higher education system in South Africa (DoE, 1997). Maximizing intake at the postgraduate level is pertinent for responding to the high-level skills necessary for social and economic development and providing for the needs of the academic labor market (DoE, 1997). There are serious concerns about the attrition and ageing of well-qualified academic staff; the emigration of graduate labour; the low levels of intake and graduation at postgraduate level; and race and gender inequalities (DoE, 1997). Within this background, postgraduate programs are necessary for capacity building, high-level skills, and knowledge creation. This forms part of the human resource development plan for the higher education system in South Africa (DoE, 1997).

Knowledge creation and dissemination through teaching and collaboration are the primary concerns for developing skills through postgraduate training and development (DoE, 1997). Funding for postgraduate programs is determined by a policy of 'concentration and selectivity. As mentioned, funds will be made available to support new institutional research centers for research and innovation, such as the "Ali Mazrui Center for Higher Education in the University of Johannesburg." This can be justified by clear evidence of the potential for research capacity and competitive success (DoE, 1997).

The White Paper 3 also supports the development of a national research plan which would:

…identify national priorities for research and postgraduate training, processes for the identification and establishment of centres of excellence and niche areas, targets and performance indicators to achieve redress by developing a more representative research community, and incentives for collaboration and partnerships, especially at the regional level, in research and postgraduate training. (DoE, 1997:32).

Notably, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) is responsible for advising the ministry of DHEST on matters pertaining to research capacity, including postgraduate training and research infrastructure, and ways of developing research strength in historically disadvantaged institutions as part of adding to the skills base (DoE, 1997). Furthermore, the *National Plan for Higher Education*, considered in 2001, intended to operationalize the vision of the White Paper 3, and similar views of postgraduate programs were expressed. Attention was given to maximising intake into postgraduate programmes with the view of maintaining existing research capabilities and strengths, and enhancing collaboration and partnerships in research, postgraduate training and development in South Africa (CHE, 2000). Low intake in postgraduate programs was attributed to a lack of knowledge and high-level skills (DoE, 2001).

There is a concern about increasing individuals' skills in science, engineering, and technology and dealing decisively with the impact of the racial and gender profile on the skills base. The then Department of Science and Technology considered the *South African National Research and Development strategy* in 2002 for developing human resources for the demand and supply of high-level skills in the labor market (DST, 2002). The strategy deemed the National Research Foundation (NRF) the principal driver to advance this initiative in line with the National Plan for Higher Education (DST, 2002).

National policymakers are eager to deal with human resource challenges and view the postgraduate programmes as principal drivers for developing high-level skills, particularly in research and innovation. Thus, the goal of academia is to produce highly skilled graduates who will find employment in higher education and the labor market. The policy assumes that more of these graduates will benefit the economy and society and advance development.

In line with the National Plan for Higher Education, there is more clarity on the nature of the capacity building, high-level skills, and knowledge creation in universities. Moreover, the documents from the three case studies included in this study focus on implementing the National Plan for Higher Education.

The Annual Performance Plan of 2019 at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) stipulates the enrolment plan for 2013-2019; strategic research for 2018-2022; and the attendance of extensive networks and partnerships.

On research and knowledge leadership: Wits will amplify its generation of ground-breaking knowledge in niche research and optimize its research visibility internationally. It will continue to build on our established track record of multidisciplinary research groups and thrusts….On Enrolment Size and Shape: The original plan was to limit the headcount enrolment to 35 000 during 2015- 2019. There is a year by year, carefully planned decrease in undergraduate enrolments which will concomitantly be supplemented by an increase in postgraduate enrolments. Due to the lowering financial barriers and the announcement of free education, the enrolments of undergraduates increased significantly during the period 2016 to 2017. However, the increase in postgraduate enrolments is in line with the aspirations of the Wits Vision 2022 Strategic Framework to achieve a 50/50 split between undergraduate and doctoral enrolments by 2022. This ratio of U.G.: P.G. has since been adjusted down to 55:45….On Extensive Networks and Partnerships: The purpose is to grow a limited number of focused partnerships with local and international collaborators, mainly arising from our research priorities and contextual opportunities. (Wits, 2019)

This positions the purpose of academia as knowledge creation and dissemination, high-level skills, and capacity building. However, there is a time for teaching and learning that contributes to training and development, and this result is the substantial creation and dissemination of knowledge. This view is in line with the Annual Performance Plan of 2019 of the

University of South Africa (UNISA), which states that the academic profession is a knowledge base (UNISA, 2019). The view is also anchored by the Annual Performance Plan of 2019 of the University of Pretoria (UP), which indicates that the academic environment's purpose is to create knowledge and its dissemination (UP, 2019).

Given the global dynamics, there is thus a need to encourage people to pursue an academic career to create knowledge and high-level skills to support the economy of knowledge and social justice. This need is about redressing the racial divides in higher education created by the legacy of apartheid. The purpose is to encourage and enable university academic staff to advance knowledge.

Global Context

In terms of the global dynamics, the first point is that these changes in higher education are taking place in the context of globalization. Higher education does not operate in a vacuum but instead influences global dynamics, impacting the local level. The key pressures that globalization is bringing to South African higher institutions center around the knowledge economy, knowledge society, technological change, and the increasing demand for high-level skills, among others. These pressures cause significant challenges to institutions themselves and the very academics working in those institutions. They have to operate within that highly competitive environment, resuming roles driven by technological change, moving into technological changes, the knowledge economy, and knowledge society. This became almost inevitable because, at the national level, the dominant macroeconomic policy (gear) embraces those challenges. The institutional managers also embrace those challenges generally. These demonstrate challenges academics may face in developing their academic identities because institutions and managers (and even macroeconomic policy) were pushing to establish subjectivities aligned to market pressures. This is in line with the CHE (2000) in that there is a need for a global competitive creation of knowledge, high-level skills, and expertise to support the knowledge economy. This is demonstrated by the institutional policy documents that support globally competitive standards (Wits, 2008b) for the sake of international competition and recognition in the global space (UP, 2008).

In the global economy of knowledge, South Africa should pursue the creation of knowledge and high-level skills to address issues of national and international importance (DST, 2002). This implies that encouraging people to pursue an academic career to create knowledge and high-level skills remains a priority (DST, 2002). A general concern is that higher education in South Africa reflects racial divides, which is a worrying factor for transformation (CHE, 2004a). There is a need to create knowledge and high-level skills as universities increasingly seek international recognition and a competitive edge. Given the global competitive advantage, should make efforts to strengthen inter-disciplinary, inter-institutional, and inter-sectoral collaboration within and among institutions (Jansen, 2002; Mouton, 2000) to support the economy of knowledge and social justice (Ravjee, 2002).

The paper sought to explore how these dynamics are framing higher education, particularly the academic career. In any consideration of the future of higher education, international and global aspects must be taken into account. Globalization has ushered in a new era in higher education because higher education institutions have to conform to global and regional standards (Alt, 2002) and must be in line with the global and regional norms for knowledge creation and dissemination (Eurydice, 2005; Kehm, 2007; Reichert, 2005; Sadlak, 2004; Yepes, 2006). Universities are increasingly measured against knowledge output since the advent of global university rankings (Eurydice, 2005; Kehm, 2007; Reichert, 2005; Sadlak, 2004). Higher education institutions are thus beginning to exchange knowledge through student exchange programs and e-learning (Moja & Cloete, 2001) and compete globally for a distinguished workforce (Mapesela, 2002; Moja & Cloete, 2001).

In every global society, the ultimate goal is to support the economy of knowledge in that high-level skills and knowledge creation is a prerequisite (Drucker, 1969; Hargreaves, 2003) because people value knowledge as a national asset for growth and development. This has resulted in a higher demand for people with high-level skills, knowledge, and expertise in competitive labor markets to address issues of national and international importance, including global warming, multiple diseases, economic and social inequalities, among others (Toakley, 2004; Yepes, 2006; Axelrod & Cohen, 2000).

Therefore, it is notable that given these global dynamics, there is a need for high-level skills and knowledge creation that require greater attention to the nature of academic careers. Universities are under

pressure to attract people with high-level skills, knowledge, and expertise to compete globally.

CONCLUSION

It is arguable that given the global dynamics, higher education plays out in a global space for the creation of knowledge and high-level skills in support of the economy of wisdom and social justice. Thus, this study mapped out the legacy of apartheid on academic careers in South Africa. It subsequently looked at racially and ethnically structured higher education systems designed to offer separate and unequal opportunities. It also presented institutional profiles of employment, focusing on the case studies and foregrounding the selected faculties. It then argues that the legacy of apartheid affected academic careers differently as higher education institutions were divided, separated, and segregated along racial lines with different purposes. Thus, the theoretical insights from this study show that the discourses of academic careers in South Africa still require considerable research.

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