Is mentoring higher education's novice academics a safety mechanism against transformation?

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Higher Education is called to respond to multiple, complex, and urgent transformation imperatives such as making higher education institutions spaces that are democratic and inclusive promoting belonging and a social justice agenda (Badat, 2016; CHE, 2016). In the South African context, perhaps one of the starkest reminders of the challenges the sector faces are student activists' movements calling for radical redress and rejection of a 'Eurocentric epistemic' which legitimates global northern knowledges at the expense of global southern ones, as popularised through the hashtags, #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall and #NationalShutdown. Concerns raised by these student movements are neither new, nor dissimilar to the profound concerns emanating from commissioned studies and national reports (CHE 2000, NPC 2011) regarding the consequences of the glacial pace of the transformation agenda in the higher education sector. This glacial pace brings challenges to the role and responsibility of higher education research by bringing into question which level of the system close-up interrogation of higher education's structural and processes would be most effective in influencing rapid change.

Internationally, higher education institutions grapple with the challenge of recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of qualified academic staff to cope with the implications of massification and globalisation. There is also a deep concern that the academy no longer serves the student transformation and the public good quite so much as it serves the economic imperative. In the South African context particular attention is paid to addressing the unequal representation of black and female academics. It is curious that studies examining underrepresentation of black and women academics tend to choose historically white institutions as contexts with very few focused on historically black institutions. This is an indication that transforming the academic profile is not a systemic imperative. It is likely that a different picture may emerge if the questions of underrepresentation were nuanced enough to consider the impact of differentiated institutional purposes, structures and cultures.

The South African sector is also faced with urgent and multi-faceted challenges in academic staffing, challenges which include the 'slow pace of transformation, the ageing workforce, and the relatively under qualified academic staff workforce' (DHET, 2015:3). The Ministry of Higher Education and Training has injected substantial resources to building capacity and developing future generations of academics in public institutions. This paper draws on one such initiative, the national New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) which was implemented in 2015 with the first cohort of academics half way through the six-year duration. The nGAP is positioned as a transformation mechanism to accelerate diversification of staffing current demographics[1] by reserving 80%[2] of new posts for black and or women academics. Black and women academic staff are designated groups

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[1] South Africa's race categories of Black, Coloured, Indian and White have a problematic history, however, still used to measure demographical representation. In 2012 white academics account for 54.3% with Africans making up 31.9% and Coloured staff at 5.2% and Indian academics making up the remaining 8.5%.

[2] The first cohort of nGAP posts was introduced in 2015 and including the 2018 intake the programme has created 373 posts in the sector.

due to their severe systemic underrepresentation in the higher education sector. Increasing the visibility of these underrepresented groups on university campuses is a normative endeavour that is seen to be a moral imperative.

This paper draws on the nGAP to ask questions about its role as a transformation mechanism. Transformation by design is intended to bring about profound and radical changes, often including turbulence (Fourie, 1999), which will result in 'deep and pervasive' changes affecting the all aspects of an institution (Eckel et al, 1998). The structural transformations that the nGAP contributes to university contexts are relatively easy to observe and quantify, one only has to note the change in staffing demographics but cultural transformations are less overt and require close-up examination drawing on socio-cultural frameworks underpinned by realist ontology. Diversifying race and gender representation shifts universities' organisational cultures, requiring the 'old' academic guard to be open to co-developing variations of cultures that the 'new' academics usher in the academy (Fourie, 1999). Adopting any transformation strategy (like the nGAP) is a commitment to rocking the academic boat. It is worth interrogating whether such interventions do indeed rock the boat or whether institutions achieve the targets of recruiting black and women academics by employing what I have termed 'safe bets' (Hlengwa, 2015), these are people who possess the kind of cultural capital (Bourdieu,1986) that is aligned with the established valued in the university and, therefore, likely to reproduce rather than transform dominant institutional cultures.

Typically, ministerial funded interventions are reliant on self-evaluative reports submitted by institutions to effect modifications of the intervention from one year to the next. Rigorous and critical HE research examining systemic interventions is often available once the funding complete (see Boughey and McKenna, 2011a&b; Boughey, 2013, Moyo, 2018) these studies and reports provide valuable insights and recommendations that have bearing on the conceptions and implementation of the next iteration of the intervention. However, as Moyo's (2018) thesis illustrates, the lessons come at a high price of fiscal waste that could possibly be avoided if implementation decisions were informed by timeous research recommendations. In the next section, I briefly describe the core feature of nGAP which is the focus of this paper, followed by a critical examination of the possibilities for deep and pervasive change (Kezar and Eckel, 2002) to emerge and whether institutional cultures constrain transformation that they reduce it to reformist modification.

Mentoring within the nGAP

nGAP is designed for early career academics and spans the first six years of tenure track employment. The programme aligns with McAlpine et al 's (2014) definition of early career of those new to academic employment and pursing postgraduate[3] qualifications, as well as those in postdoctoral pursuits. Core features of the programme include flexible workloads for the first four years, professional developmental opportunities and, the focus of this paper, mentorship. Each academic on the programme is assigned a mentor for the first four years of the programme. It is not surprising that mentorship features strongly as it is positioned as an essential component of nurturing the development of early career academics (Quinn & Vorster, 2012). The mentoring literature features diverse ideas regarding classification of mentoring, ideas related, but not limited, to the appropriate selection and pairing of mentor and mentee, and to deciding the duration of a

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[3] McAlpine (2014) and colleagues do not include postgraduate qualifications lower than doctoral studies, however in the South African institutions mandated with offering mostly professional qualifications will recruit professionals who may still require to pursue Honours and Masters qualifications.

mentorship relationship. Despite these diverse ideas around mentorship, there exists a consensus that the aim of mentoring is the transfer of learning between mentor and mentee, where the experienced mentor engages in deliberate interaction that nurtures the mentee into the academic roles and responsibilities in particular disciplinary and university contexts (Blunt & Conolly, 2006; Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Dhunphar et al, 2018).

Regardless of the approach, the traditional 'master-apprenticeship' model or the seven typologies[4] outlined in the Hanover (2014) study, challenges emerge with regards to the extent to which mentoring might be viewed as a transformational mechanism with the potential of 'rocking the academic boat'.

Transforming or reforming?

South Africa's colonial and apartheid legacies shape the particular political and socio-economic manifestation of transformation. An effect that is prevalent in historically white institutions is that seasoned senior academics are paired with younger early career academics for mentoring relationships. In these institutions, positions of seasoned senior academics are predominantly occupied by white middle age men and nGAP positions are specifically for designated groups of women and black early career academics.

Mentors and mentees are expected to navigate the complex organisational cultures of the academy through discussions centred on, but not limited to, the nature of academic work, academic identity and career pathways. However, it is expected that mentors and mentees have differing vantage points which test the extent to which radical ideology penetrates the established practices.

Mentors and mentees navigate a rapidly shifting higher education system, which is increasingly affected by systemic massification, globalisation and managerialism. However, their experiences are from different vantage points, with the mentees positioned as transformation agents thus bearing the brunt of the responsibility to advocate, conceptualise and demonstrate new and innovative ways of responding to the changing academic climate. Whilst mentors support the notion of transformation mechanisms (nGAP) the intersectionality of race, gender, class and language dynamic often constrain the mentor's ability to fully appreciate the day to day experiences of their mentees. On the one hand, seasoned academic mentors do not have the same level of exposure because they have recourse to the protection granted by their elevated status, access to funding and established research profiles. nGAP mentees, on the other hand, have the desired demographic representation to legitimate institutional committees dedicated to transformation strategies, however, given their junior status, there is a question of whether their inclusion goes beyond symbolic participation.

One of the limitations of nGAP as an effective transformation mechanism is the low number of posts injected into the higher education system. The effect is the lack of critical mass of early career academics, which then reduces the agential capacity required not only to rock the boat, but also to usher in significant, meaningful and sustained change across the sector. Mentors have vested

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[4] Hanover research outlines the following typologies: (1) One-on-One mentoring between a mentor and a protégé; (2) Group mentoring between a mentor a multiple mentees; (3) Team mentoring including multiple mentors and mentees; (4) Peer mentoring where junior staff members mentor each other; (5) E-mentoring where the relationship is conducted on line or a-synchronistical; (6) Informal mentoring where mentee self-selects a mentor and there is no formal agreement (7) Reverse mentoring where the junior staff member has expertise in particular area/s offered to the mentor

interests in maintaining what is perceived to be the corner stones of the academy, therefore it would seem that the concept of mentoring has a built in 'safety' device ensuring that the academic ship does not steer too far away from the familiar, comfortable and existing course.

The mentoring process is embedded within institutional cultures of daily experiences that incorporate interpersonal relations shared in the institution (Mapasela & Hay, 2005). In historically white universities, institutional cultures are dominated by 'whiteness' of academic culture, explained as 'the ensemble of cultural and subjective factors that together constitute the unspoken dominance of higher education of Western, European or Anglo-Saxon values and attitudes reproduced and inflected in South Africa" (CHE, 2007:97). Booi (2015) points out historically white universities cannot easily distance themselves from the history of racisms deeply rooted in every aspect of these institutions. Limited opportunities to examine up-close the impact of 'whiteness' in cross-cultural mentoring relationships, diminish the potential of mentoring as a mechanism of transforming the academy. Close-up research is required to answer the question of whether the mentoring process within an establishment can be used to rock the establishment's boat.

It remains open to question how meaningful and rigorous engagements with the potential to radicalise institutional contexts might be achievable through mentoring approaches that already inadequately acknowledge or else fail to address the intersectionality of race, gender, class and language dynamic of South African higher education. There are studies pertaining to transformation processes and progress in South African higher education as well as studies that focus on the development of early career academics. However, what the sector requires is a close examination of the intersection of a transformation mechanism (nGAP) with mentoring as core feature of developing the next generation of academics.

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