Reflections on equity and diversity at higher education institutions in South Africa

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Abstract

Equity and diversity have become part of the dialogue, debate, policy and scholarship at higher education institutions in South Africa. These have appeared through the transformation agendas at institutions, focussing on a number of different issues: student access and development, staff equity, institutional climate or culture etc. This paper reflects on the issues of equity and diversity in higher education institutions through the development of a framework of domains into which existing research may be classified. The organising framework incorporates the variables that impact the development of equity and diversity, documents the research and practice, and identifies areas for further research in the field of equity and diversity in higher education institutions.

INTRODUCTION

This past decade has seen unprecedented changes in the higher education landscape as the policies of the democratic government “reshape the higher education landscape to meet the goals of equity, democratization, responsiveness and efficiency” (Cloete et al. 2002). Equity and diversity are concepts that are derived from legislation attempting to redress the imbalances of South Africa’s historical past. The concept of equity refers to the use of processes, tools and mechanisms to promote equality of opportunity (both equality of access as well as equality of outcomes) in ensuring fair treatment of all. Diversity is about acknowledging and managing differences to attain multicultural institutions in which there is no form of discrimination. Equity and diversity are thus featured in the policies and in their implementation in higher education institutions in South Africa, more particularly through the transformation agendas in these institutions. A ten-year development history makes it interesting to reflect on the issues dominating the debates on equity and diversity in both research and practice.

In early 2004, the author was involved in an international study attempting to benchmark equity and diversity at higher education institutions in five countries across the globe. The empirical work of the study involved an assessment of the equity and diversity practices at selected higher education institutions in the country. A careful consideration of the findings, and an assessment of the research
work undertaken in the arena, led to the conceptualisation of a number of issues that were being addressed and those that still need to be addressed in the broad field of equity and diversity. This article aims to identify and reflect on some of the key issues in staff equity and diversity at higher education institutions in South Africa. It focuses on the university as an equity employer though some reference is made to student equity. The article does not report on the findings of the study mentioned earlier as this is the subject of another paper.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSMENT

There is an abundance of research into equity and diversity in higher education institutions both globally and in South Africa. There are, however, increasingly divergent strands of research as these efforts focus on a variety of different issues. This paper identifies a framework of domains into which existing research may be classified. These domains in themselves reflect the variables that impact the implementation and outcome of equity and diversity initiatives. They also provide some guidance on the issues that need to be addressed by researchers and practitioners in the broad area of equity and diversity in higher education institutions in South Africa. Interestingly the framework, which provides a macro view of equity and diversity, may be used in exploring initiatives and research in both profit-making corporates and indeed in non-profits. It may also apply to other human resources policies that may be implemented in organisations. Reference is made in the paper to the implementation of work family issues in organisations.

![Diagram of framework]

**Figure 1:** Framework of domains of research and practice in equity and diversity
The commitment of an institution to equity and diversity is documented in the initiatives implemented to achieve equity and diversity. This domain in Figure 1 relating to Initiatives (domain 4) documents the equity and diversity initiatives implemented in higher education institutions in South Africa. The domain presents an arena of inquiry into the types and intensity of initiatives (the extent to which they surpass the minimum laid down for Higher education institutions). These initiatives are hampered by a number of barriers to the effective implementation of equity and diversity. These are reflected on in domain 3 in the Figure. The equity and diversity initiatives of an institution are influenced to a degree by the key drivers (motivation/rationale). These are speculated on in domain 1 which in essence explores the underlying rationale driving the implementation of the initiatives. Domain 4 explores the impact of the particular configuration of the organisation. The demographics of the organisation will influence the intensity and type of initiatives implemented. The outcomes domain (5) reflects the results of the initiatives (which may be assessed in different dimensions). All these domains operate within the confines of an institutional climate (domain 6), which determines how the drivers are interpreted, how the barriers are negotiated and what results are expected through the implementation of the initiatives. Each of these domains is reflected on below.

**KEY DRIVERS FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

This domain (1) in Figure 1 incorporates the factors associated with the adoption and implementation of equity and diversity initiatives. The underlying reasons motivating any human resource initiative in organisations are generally related to efficiency or some other measure of output of the organization. In South Africa, it is generally accepted that equity and diversity initiatives are implemented in response to the legal obligation to comply. A fairly comprehensive legislative and policy framework is in place guiding equity and diversity and the agenda for transformation in higher education institutions in South Africa. These are: the Constitution, the Higher Education White Paper (1997), the Higher Education Act, 1997 (Act 101 of 1997), the Employment Equity Act (EEA) of 1998 and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000).

In reality, South Africa’s political and social transformation has indeed impacted on and contributed to the transformation agendas being dominated by the principles of democracy, equity and social justice in higher education institutions. This impact has manifested in initiatives of varying intensities in different institutions with a range of consequences and effects. It is anecdotally known that some institutions are at the forefront of the development of equity and diversity while others are way behind. This variability in institutional response to the legislation suggests that there could be other factors motivating the adoption of equity and diversity even in higher education institutions. As a key informant (in the empirical study) commented ‘equity activities are motivated by one of three
imperatives: the legislative imperative, the strategic imperative and the moral imperative’. These dynamics are complex and may to some extent be explained by the theories that attempt to explain organisational decision-making.

The first of these is Institutional theory. Institutional theory holds that organisations become isomorphous in response to pressures from the environment (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). A variety of institutional pressures (emanating from regulations, norms, laws and social expectations) are placed on organisations such that they respond in very similar ways. It may thus be argued that the legislation compels organisations to comply with the adoption of equity and diversity policies in higher education institutions. Further, changes in the demographic profile of staff and students have played a role in increasing the pressure on institutions to comply. Public attention to issues of equity and diversity has heightened the pressures on institutions to achieve equity and diversity.

Responses to equity and diversity may also be influenced by two factors: namely, the visibility of the institution and the extent to which their reputation has been built on social legitimacy. Hence institutions that have a strong history of ‘struggle’ would be concerned about their public image and respond both quickly and positively in the development of equity and diversity. These hypotheses derive from an examination of institutional theory the manifestation of which merits further investigation in organisational motives.

In examining organisational responses to institutional pressures, two interesting pieces of research are noted. Oliver (1991) elaborated a continuum of strategic responses to institutional pressures. The theory holds that depending on a number of factors such as the characteristics of institutional constituencies and the congruence of organisational norms organisations may respond to institutional pressures in a variety of modes ranging from passive compliance to direct and active defiance. Goodstein (1994) builds on this framework in an investigation of institutional pressures on organisations responding to work–family issues. The research concludes that organisational conformity to institutional expectations may be a function of the strength of the pressures and expectations regarding the effects of responding to those pressures on technical outcomes.

The Resource Dependence theory provides an alternate explanation of why firms may want to adopt equity and diversity initiatives. This theory (Pfeffer and Salancick 1978) holds that an organisation will react strategically by adopting policies that affect the acquisition of resources. It may be speculated that firms will want to attract a pool of black, women and disabled people (who are from the designated groups) who could become useful resources to the organisation/institution. The model thus suggests a focus on the human resources benefit to the institution. Increasing the attractiveness of the institution to people from the designated groups results in a larger applicant pool thus enabling the organisation to be more selective in their appointments.

A third theory which might be useful in determining the rationale for the implementation of equity and diversity relates to what is commonly termed
‘managerial interpretation’. This hypothesis holds that organisations will adopt policies that are deemed to be relevant and tied to some positive measurable outcome for the firm. Sometimes referred to as the ‘business case’ the firm will look for a strong business motivation for the implementation and commitment to a policy. The business case calls for a valid business reason for the implementation of equity and diversity.

**ORGANISATIONAL CONFIGURATION**

This domain (2) in Figure 1 relates to the demographic characteristics that impact the adoption of policies. It may be speculated that organisational factors such as the size of the institution will impact on the adoption of equity and diversity. It may be hypothesised that larger institutions will be subjected to more institutional pressure and would therefore be more likely to implement a range of equity initiatives. Geographic location and racial profile of staff might be variables influencing the adoption of equity and diversity. There seems to be a dearth of research into the various aspects of organisational configuration that affect the implementation of equity initiatives at higher education institutions in South Africa and these need to be explored.

**BARRIERS TO ADOPTION/ IMPLEMENTATION**

This domain (3) in Figure 1 focuses on the factors that may inhibit the facilitation and successful implementation of equity and diversity initiatives. An understanding of the barriers could assist in the development of appropriate strategic interventions in higher education institutions. Some of the factors explored in research are raised here.

There have been comments that the treatment of universities like business presents a major challenge to the implementation of the Employment Equity Act in the university context. As the core business of a university or technikon requires highly specialised skills (which take an extended amount of time to acquire) the employment Equiy Act presents a particular set of challenges and constraints for the higher education institution as an employer (Portnoi 2003). Higher education institutions in any country are characterised by many organisational elements such as the function, management style and product, which are argued to be different from business organizations. Moreover, owing to the highly segregated public institutions of the past, the divergence from typical industry employers becomes even more pronounced. Portnoi (2003) highlights five challenges and constraints that set higher education institutions apart from normal business. These relate to: compliance with various pieces of legislation (employment equity legislation and the specialised higher education legislation); the pool issue (lack of qualified
applicants and poaching); funding and rationalisation; universities as a unique workplace and the individual legacies of universities. These issues are incorporated into the discussion in the paragraphs below.

Cooper and Subotzky’s (2001) research concludes that South Africa has experienced a ‘revolution’ in the increase in proportion of black students in higher education. The ratio of black students in total university enrolment increased from 32 per cent in 1990 to 60 per cent in 2000 while in technikons enrolments rose from 32 per cent to 72 per cent over the same period. Thus by 2000, there was a majority of African students both in universities (60%) and technikons (72%). These demographic changes must be amongst the most remarkable in the world during the 1990s (Cloete 2002). The currently skewed demographic profile of academic staff within higher education institutions in South Africa raises the question of whether transformation is taking place at all. Fourie (2001 p.) believes that it is ‘not happening. The transformation process is slow and lethargic, that the gap between the historically advantaged and historically disadvantaged institutions is as wide as ever’.

The National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) supports the view that the staff composition at HEIs has not changed in line with student composition. Blacks, women and those with disabilities remain under-represented in academic and professional positions (NPHE 2001). This is supported by Cooper and Subotzky’s (2001) analysis of the higher education workforce over a ten-year period (1988–1998). In the decade under analysis, African staff increased from 30 per cent to 38 per cent. For white staff a decrease from 55 per cent to 47 per cent overall was observed. Coloured staff decreased from 11 per cent to 9 per cent and Indian staff increased from 4 per cent to 5 per cent. In senior management positions, black academics have slowly and steadily increased their overall presence from approximately 9 per cent to just over 16 per cent between 1994 and 1999 (Subotzky, 5.a.). This is no reflection of equity in executive management. Whites still dominate senior positions especially at historically white institutions.

The National Plan for Higher Education 2001, 35, 36 notes three difficulties in achieving equity and diversity:

1. Low numbers of black and women postgraduate students
2. Inadequate levels of support for postgraduate students
3. The inability of higher education institutions to compete with the private and public sectors in terms of salaries

Portnoi (2003) highlights this as the ‘pool issue’ which in essence refers to firstly, the small cohort of qualified black applicants, ‘poaching’ and ‘special qualifications’. All employers face a similar challenge in that there remains a shallow pool of black staff. This Portnoi (2003) suggests may be attributed to the poor educational backgrounds of blacks, which places them behind whites in terms of formal qualifications and skills, specifically in the technical or scientific fields.
This dearth of qualified applicants from the designated groups has also led to ‘poaching’ or ‘raiding’ of qualified people of the designated groups, who remain highly sought after by other educational institutions, government, businesses and non-governmental organisations (Mkhwanazi and Baijnath 2003). The lure of more competitive salaries and the ongoing crises experienced at higher education institutions adds to the difficulty of attracting and retaining quality staff. These factors have been explored in the study by Potgieter (2003) who examined the reasons for black academics moving out of their institutions.

The upsurge in the pool of black academics from the rest of Africa, is a strategy that has the backing of the government (as mentioned in the National Plan for Higher Education). This is, however, only a short-term solution to providing role models for black students and change in the institutional culture. Mkhwanazi and Baijnath (2003) warn that due consideration must be given to the effect of this policy in weakening higher educational institutions in the rest of Africa by spirit ing away their best academics, many of whom do not return to their home countries. It may be speculated that higher education institutions might be placed in double jeopardy as they face the challenges of the attraction and retention of black staff. The lack of competitive parity in salary scales and the changing conditions placed on higher education institutions (through restructuring) must result in attitudes that could send out negative signals to young people considering careers in academia, which in turn exacerbates the ‘pool’ of staff from the designated groups.

An assessment of barriers to the implementation of equity and diversity must of necessity focus on the issue of gender. Gender equity in higher education is increasingly becoming the subject of attention and research both globally and in South Africa, particularly since the promulgation of the Employment Equity Act. Gender inequalities have been observed in management, curriculum and instruction in higher education institutions (Subotzky, undated). About 36 per cent of all faculty in 1998 were women, an increase from around 30 per cent in 1993. ‘While this is an encouraging trend, women remain under-represented in the higher ranks, qualification levels, and in fields of study other than those traditionally associated with women. In 1997, men still constituted 90 per cent of professors, 78 per cent of associate professors, and 67 per cent of senior lecturers, but only about 47 per cent of the junior ranks’ (Subotzky, undated). Zulu (2003) presents the reality of women as at 2002. The survey data clearly indicates that women are concentrated in positions that ‘carry less power and are associated with less mobility such as student affairs, student fees, payroll, public relations etc’. The study indicates that women are underrepresented in the senior academic positions such as deans, vice-chancellors, registrars and so on confirming the notion that ‘the higher the position the less visible women become’. Of the possible senior and top-level positions available at higher education institutions, only 13.2 per cent were filled by women between 2000 and 2002 (Zulu 2003, 101).

This may be attributed to the widely held view of the ‘glass ceiling’, which stymies access to leadership to women. From a theoretical perspective, other
reasons cited for women’s under-representation in management and leadership positions relate to gender role assumptions and their socialisation. Socialisation patterns are determined largely during early childhood when young children are socialised into female and male roles and responsibilities. This is then confirmed in the ‘masculine ethic’ prevalent in higher education institutions. The persistent view in organizations relating to men and women is that women are more committed to family than to work and men are more committed to work than to family (Cook 1994). Zulu (2003) notes that it is this gender stereotyping which leads to women not aspiring to be leaders, and encountering barriers when they attempt to enter leadership positions.

A further barrier to the attainment of gender equity is the exclusion of women from the ‘old boys’ network’. Zulu (2003) reasons that women are disadvantaged by not having formal and informal information sharing networks that men enjoy. Perumal (2003) relates this to the notion of power and advocates positive ‘employment contexts, which recognise and validate women’s ways of being and knowing’. This is being addressed partly in an international research project examining gender equity in Commonwealth Higher Education (including South Africa) The project aims to explore the interventions ‘relating to access, curriculum transformation and staff development in Uganda, Tanzania, Sri Lanka, South Africa and Nigeria’ (Unterhalter et al. 2003). Such research is needed to examining the interventions that remove the barriers to gender equity in higher education institutions.

An important but often ignored barrier to equity and diversity relates to the geographical location of institutions of higher education. Institutions located in isolated geographical locations, present particular challenges to equity and diversity. The isolated location of most historically disadvantaged institutions contributes to their isolation of academics and students who prefer urban sites of learning.

Research is needed that addresses the systems, work processes, and structures or practices that inhibit higher education institutions from adopting and implementing equity and diversity initiatives.

**EQUITY AND DIVERSITY INITIATIVES**

The actual initiatives (domain 4 in Figure 1) that are implemented in institutions reflect the commitment to equity and diversity. At a minimum, Employment Equity Plans need to be developed and submitted to the Department of Labour. Some institutions have designed interventions for the attraction and retention of academic staff. Others have developed programmes for the development of existing staff. Mkhwanazi and Baijnath (2003) attempt a baseline study of equity development programmes at higher education institutions in South Africa. The authors examining in particular, the strategies to recruit and retain staff, and a particular strategy to develop high potential staff (Growing our own timber, GooT)
implemented at various institutions of higher education in the country. They conclude that there are ‘few meaningful, successful equity development programmes in existence at South African higher education institutions’ (p. 106). A particular dimension of equity and diversity, namely, policies for sexual harassment is documented by Wilken and Badenhorst (2003). Of the eight universities investigated, they conclude that the policies seem ‘incomplete and lacking in many respects’.

Equity and diversity initiatives need to be encouraged and documented so that an assessment of progress may be concluded and ‘best practice’ may be identified and shared amongst institutions of higher education.

**OUTCOMES**

As higher education institutions throughout the world move into an environment characterised by marketisation, massification and entrepreneurialism, managerial efficiency emerges as the dominant paradigm. Accountability and performance measurement in general and the measurement of equity and diversity initiatives in particular appear to be gaining considerable currency and relevance to higher education institutions. This domain of the framework incorporates the debates and ensuing research.

South Africa has placed performance measurement on the agenda of higher education institutions since 2000 (CHET 2004). The early model attempted to measure the performance of higher education against government-determined goals for the higher education system. The inadequacies of this (the 2000 model) led to the development of further initiatives in 2001 and again in 2003. The Centre for Higher Education Transformation Report documents these and the most recent model developed this year (CHET 2004). The model links indicators and targets for the higher education system and for higher education institutions to ten goals. Interestingly and importantly, staff and student equity are featured as groups of goals, the indicators of which include head counts, success rates and proportional calculations. The Centre for Higher Education Transformation seminar is part of the project entitled: *Performance indicators and benchmarks for universities and technikons in South Africa*. The project aims to develop a proposal for a project on performance indicators in South Africa and six other African countries. Participants at the seminar thus included representatives from higher education institutions and ministries in Nigeria, Mozambique, Kenya, Tanzania, Botswana and Egypt (CHET 2004, 2).

Despite this development, higher education institutions in South Africa as at 2003, appeared reluctant to adopt performance management systems and practices, especially in so far as it pertains to the management and appraisal of academic staff at institutions of higher learning (Franzsen 2003). They are indeed ‘slower than their international counterparts in establishing performance as a formal management practice’ (p. 136).
In the specific measurement of equity and diversity, a number of issues have been raised. At its simplest, the Employment Equity Act in South Africa requires an assessment of the reality against the targets set by the organisation. These occur in the employment equity plans, which, in effect, ‘force’ an institution to think through the positive action measures that will deliver equity in the institutions. Equity in this context is still measured in ‘numbers’. Recent research advocates the use of a variety of measures and metrics to measure the outcome of equity and diversity initiatives. Bensimon et al. (2004) espouse ‘results’-based measures rather than focus on ‘facts’. In their measurement of equity, they focus on the enrolment and achievements of students in different faculties in higher education institutions with the goal of achieving equitable race-based educational outcomes. In similar vein in the measurement of gender equity, Unterhalter (2004, p. ) calls for the move away from a ‘resourcist approach’ which relies on simple descriptive measures of gender equity to a ‘capabilities approach’ which focuses on ‘a metric of capabilities, that is what state of mind and form of action is valued’. What is clear is that achievement of equity cannot be concluded using simple metrics of ‘equal numbers’. More comprehensive metrics are needed.

An assessment of outcomes of equity and diversity may be undertaken effectively through ‘benchmarking’. Benchmarking entails comparison with peers, a process that provides the opportunity to measure past performance against that of peers, identify drivers of future performance and devise strategies to address these.

A compelling model to measure equity and diversity may be found in ‘the Diversity Scorecard’ now named the ‘Equity Scorecard’. The concept emerged in 2001 when it became evident that equity, while valued in principle at many institutions, is not regularly measured in relation to educational outcomes for specific groups (Bensimon 2004). Attention is thus focussed on the accountability side of diversity, that is, (for student equity) exploring the link between access to institutions and results in educational outcomes. The Scorecard is based on the concepts underlying the Balanced Scorecard of Kaplan and Norton (1992). The model focuses on four perspectives of performance and may be applied to different aspects of the organisation. In the arena of student equity these are: Access, Retention, Institutional Receptivity and Excellence. The access perspective or access indicators enable assessment of the extent to which under-represented students gain access to the institution’s programmes and resources. The retention perspective refers to the continued attendance from one year to the next and/or to the completion of degrees. It includes indicators such as the retention rates of under-represented students or their participation in what may be termed ‘hot programmes’ such as engineering or computer sciences. Institutional receptivity refers to the measures of institutional support that have been found to be influential in the creation of affirming campus environments for underserved students. The excellence perspective refers to ‘minority student achievement’ (Bauman et al. 2004). Bensimon et al. (2004) advocate a practitioner-as-researcher model to implement the Scorecard. This transfers the research role to a team of ‘institutional
insiders’. They promise “an approach that can actually make a difference in the understandings and actions” of faculty and staff of particular higher education institutions.

In assessing the outcomes of equity and diversity, the flip side of affirmative programmes deserve note. This relates to organisational justice, particularly perceptions of procedural justice within the institution. It may be speculated that ‘non-targeted groups’ perceive an injustice in the implementation of affirmative action programmes. This is particularly relevant to white staff at higher education institutions who suffer low morale, as they perceive injustice in the system. This issue is worthy of investigation as it transpired in the empirical work of the author and surfaces regularly in informal discussions on equity and diversity.

**Institutional climate**

While Institutional Receptivity is a perspective on the Scorecard (reviewed above), this framework notes it separately. The organisational culture and climate presents the overarching variable that impacts on each of the domains of equity and diversity of the framework in Figure 1. Each institution has a unique culture that manifests in a climate that will determine the direction and intensity of the initiatives. A positive culture is one that embraces the notion of equity and diversity and will manifest in an environment that fosters these values. It may be hypothesised that the climate will determine the ‘drivers’ of equity and diversity, the manner in which the ‘barriers’ are managed and indeed in the actual equity and diversity initiatives. The climate may also impact on the definition and measurement of the outcomes of equity and diversity. It is thus critical in any assessment of equity and diversity to incorporate an assessment of the institutional climate and culture. This has been advocated and undertaken as may be evidenced from an examination of the Equity websites of various higher education institutions in South Africa, which document their climate surveys.

The importance of such an institutional environment to promoting black equity in higher education institutions is underscored in a study by Potgieter (2002) who attempts to identify the reasons for black academics moving out of institutions. A number of reasons are presented from the qualitative research: institutional racism, racism couched as liberalism, racism in evaluations and expectations, racism/black essentialism, poor management or leadership, responding to the new environment and political and private sphere. It appears obvious from the report that an enabling environment (the right climate) is necessary to achieve equity and diversity in higher education institutions in South Africa.

**CONCLUSION**

As higher education moves increasingly into a more competitive, international ‘educational industry’, universities compete for resources by adopting a ‘market
focus’. They develop better linkages with industry; devise ‘income-generating’
programmes and increase their international activities. These objectives are
matched by the need to address the historical inequities of the past and attain
equity in staff and student populations.

As institutions grapple with transformation and with reinventing themselves,
scholarly activity in the arena abounds. This paper reflects on several issues in the
field of equity and diversity located within an organizing framework that facilitates
a broad view of the research and practice. The framework also identifies areas for
further research in South Africa.

NOTE

1 The new term for technikons is now a university of technology.

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