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To be or not to be an academic: South African graduate students' vocational choices

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ABSTRACT

In the post-apartheid era, South African universities are striving to attract and retain diverse faculty, as mandated by the 1998 Employment Equity Act (EEA). While the focus on faculty is critical to the transformation agenda, it is informative to step back and consider the factors that influence graduate students' decisions regarding joining the academy. This qualitative study explores the educational experiences and vocational decisions of 50 masters and doctoral students from the EEA's "designated groups," who are poised to become academics. Factors influencing graduate students' vocational choices should be taken into consideration as universities strive to attract more diverse faculty.

1. Introduction

South African higher education institutions are currently grappling with a myriad of reforms in the post-apartheid era. One significant item on the transformation agenda is attracting and retaining faculty members from a wide spectrum of backgrounds. After decades of segregation and discrimination in the higher education sector, as in other domains, universities seek to adjust their faculty member complements to reflect the full range of South African society and the increasing diversity of university students. Motivated in part by the 1998 Employment Equity Act, which requires all employers with more than 50 employees to implement an employment equity plan, universities have begun to focus on setting goals towards achieving a more equitable workplace.

Much of the attention thus far has been at the faculty level, regarding faculty experiences and professional development, and strategies for retaining a diverse group of faculty. Developing and maintaining a set of faculty members that is reflective of South African society is critical to the transformation process; however, it is informative to take a step back and consider the factors that may influence masters and doctoral students' decisions regarding joining the academy. While a growing body of research investigates the masters and doctoral supervision process (e.g., LeGrange and Newmark, 2002; Lee, 2007; Lessing and Schulze, 2003; Olivier, 2008; Ngcongo, 2000; Van Der Westhuizen and De Wet, 2002) and additional research has explored academic writing at the graduate level (e.g., Bailey, 2001; Naidoo and Tshivhase, 2003), the factors that influence graduate students' career choices have not been a focus of study. Addressing this gap in the literature, the present research contributes to an understanding of the vocational choices of graduate students from underrepresented groups within the context of diversifying the academic profession in South Africa.

Thus, the purpose of the present study was to address the faculty diversity issue from a fresh perspective, by delving into the standpoints and perspectives of masters and doctoral students who represent the pool from which emerging academics may be drawn. Graduate students have unique circumstances and make vocational choices that are particular to the individual; however, as will become evident below, numerous commonalities may exist. Based on the research conducted, four central factors are discussed regarding graduate students' career decisions, as well as four components of the general graduate student experience that may contribute to students' perceptions of working in the academy. Understanding graduate students' experiences while pursuing a degree and the complex factors that contribute to their decisions regarding their careers is significant as South African higher education institutions strive towards equity in their representation of faculty.

2. The South African context

Subsequent to the demise of apartheid and the installment of a democratically elected government in 1994, the higher education sector in South Africa has been grappling with a myriad of transformation agendas and policy initiatives aimed at redressing the inequities of the past. As such, higher education institutions are faced with conflicting priorities as they attempt to create more

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equitable workplaces. The Employment Equity Act (EEA, 1998) has the most direct impact on equity concerns with regard to faculty. The Act stipulates that all employers with 50 or more employees, including higher education institutions, must implement an employment equity plan to redress the inequities that exist as a result of past discrimination. In South Africa, employment equity initiatives focus on people from the "designated groups"—that is, Black people (including African, Coloured and Indian people), women, and people with disabilities.[1] The EEA impacts employers, employees, and potential employers in significant ways (Portnoi, 2003). Employers must review their policies and practices to eliminate discriminatory elements and are required to conduct their recruitment, selection, and retention procedures according to the Act. Promotion possibilities, job security for current employees and employment prospects for potential employees are also contingent to a large degree on the Act.

Aside from the Employment Equity Act, three other labour laws from the new political dispensation impact university employers: the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (1997), the Labour Relations Act (1995) and the Skills Development Act (1998). In addition, legislation and initiatives related to higher education specifically include the 1997 Higher Education Act and the 2001 National Plan, quality assurance measures, new funding frameworks, and institutional mergers, resulting in 21 institutions in place of the original 36 institutions that existed as the first democratically elected government was installed in 1994. All of these complex developments, which are part of the general transformation agenda of post-apartheid South Africa, pose challenges to the higher education sector as it struggles to respond to competing demands.

Although the higher education sector has been undergoing a period of transformation with the new, democratic political dispensation, it still retains many of the characteristics of its historical legacy. Mirroring other sectors during the "separate development" and "own affairs" period of apartheid, the higher education system in South Africa was formally divided along racial lines. As with higher education, the basic education system was racially divided, providing an inferior education for Blacks, particularly Africans. These historical factors combine to explain the dearth of people from the designated groups who are currently appointed as faculty members in the university sector. People from the three Black designated groups together constitute only 38% of all faculty members as compared to 62% White faculty members (Department of Education, 2006), despite the fact that Whites comprise just 9.1% of the national population (Statistics South Africa, 2007). Moreover, of the 1484 individuals in the management category at higher education institutions, only 24% are African, while 61% are White (Department of Education, 2006).

These statistics illustrate the lingering permanence of apartheid and are a matter of concern for higher education institutions desiring to achieve equitable workplaces. All higher education institutions are currently implementing employment equity plans, as required by the EEA, to address the current reality in terms of faculty diversity. In addition, other measures have been created, such as "growing one's own timber" programs for graduate students or faculty development programs for emerging academics. Some of these initiatives are sponsored by funding agencies, and may be successful in limited ways, yet the broad goal of faculty diversity remains a significant challenge for the higher education sector in South Africa.

3. Vocational choice theories

Graduate students pursuing masters and Ph.D. degrees have many career options, including academic positions, research posts in institutes or with government, and private sector employment. Moreover, the decision regarding which career to pursue is often a complex one. A number of theories regarding vocational choice exist to address the multifaceted career decision. Some of the earlier theories, such as Super's (1956) theory of vocational development, focus on characteristics and differences in abilities, interests, and personalities. Holland's (1973) theory of careers also highlights personality traits and posits that people in various vocational groups have similar personalities. Holland's theory is an example of person–environment fit theories, in which satisfaction regarding one's job is connected to the congruence between personality and the environment in which one works. Super's later work (1963) focuses on self-concept more specifically. He argues that by selecting a career a person makes clear what kind of person he or she is, as this choice coincides with his or her own perception of the self. Herr (1970) concurs with Super that career choice is an effort to implement one's self-concept. Other earlier theories, such as Ginzberg et al. (1951), also consider career choice to be a developmental process that involves discrete stages. Theories from this period also suggest that career choice is essentially a compromise between individual and social factors, and between self-concept and reality (e.g., Ginzberg et al., 1951; Super, 1956).

More recent vocational choice theories continue to focus on the way in which individuals interact with their environments in making a career decision. For example, Krumboltz's (1996) theory of career choice is explained as a social learning theory, in which people use interaction with counselors and others who provide career guidance to make their occupational choices. This theory assumes that individuals are not passive, but rather are actively involved in the decision-making process. In addition, Gottfredson (2002) suggests a theory of circumscription and compromise in which a person develops a cognitive map of career choices based on images collected from the environment and stereotypes held. She argues, as do earlier theorists, that "individuals identify the occupations they prefer by assessing the compatibility of different occupations with their images of themselves" (Gottfredson, 2002, p. 184), thus reflecting a continuing focus on self-concept theory. Much like the earlier vocational choice theories, Gottfredson's theory focuses on developmental processes and indicates that decisions are circumscribed by the options available to an individual and that one makes compromises based on the realities one encounters.

Despite the preponderance of theories regarding career choice, Lindholm (2004) points out that there is a dearth of literature that assesses the career choices of academics in particular. Lindholm's study of U.S. faculty members examines the personal and environmental factors that led them to pursue their careers retrospectively. She found that participants reflect that they had an inherent attraction to academic work and that they emphasize the fit between their personalities and their work, a finding that was earlier posited by Corcoran and Clark (1984) and that resonates with vocational choice theories. Lindholm's participants were attracted to their work due to a combination of factors including intellectual curiosity, opportunity, and encouragement. Though a few were "accidental academics," most had experiences early in life in which role models played a part, and were encouraged to join the academy by advisors, particularly in their undergraduate years. In addition to Lindholm's study, in one of the few writings that focuses on the career path of academics in particular, Baldwin

[1] Traditional population group labels—African (indigenous), Coloured (mixed race), Indian (continental) and White (European)—are used in this paper as this is the current academic convention in South Africa. The term "Black" is used here to encompass African, Coloured, and Indian people, as in the EEA. Though racial categories are contested, the purpose of using racial terminology in the discourse on higher education is to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of equity measures, not to single out or distinguish between groups for discriminatory purposes.