



**BLACK
ACADEMICS
ON THE MOVE**

*How Black South African Academics Account for Moving
Between Institutions or Leaving the Academic Profession*

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INTRODUCTION

South African institutions of higher learning are undergoing major revisions in the areas of policy, leadership, staffing and student enrolment. Some aspects of these revisions may be understood as responses to recent shifts in student populations, including declining student numbers, while others are responses to policy imperatives to overcome the constructed divisions and inequities of the apartheid past. For example, historically white universities and technikons have had to address the issue of imbalances in the racial and gender demographics of their students and academic staff.

Research indicates, however, that not only is there a paucity of black academics at most institutions, but that they still, for the most part, occupy the lower ranks within academia. There has been an overall increase in the number of black students, especially at the historically white Afrikaans-medium universities, but there has not been a corresponding change in the composition of members of staff, especially academic staff. Mbabane (2001) refers to this situation as “new wines into old vessels”.

New black academic staff have usually been employed at one end or the other of the employment spectrum – at the lecturer level or at a senior management level, illustrated by the fact that the figures for black women employed at the professorial level have not advanced on pre-1994 levels. For example, the primary researcher for this project is one of only two black women employed at the professorial level at the University of Pretoria (Equity Office figure, October 2001).

In a paper entitled “Employment Equity Challenges for Higher Education”, Loyiso Mbabane (2001) points out that blacks are dominant in senior posts at the historically black universities (HBUs)

but that fewer than 20% of senior positions are occupied by blacks at the historically white institutions. A break down by gender indicates that black women academics are scarcer than men and also occupy lower ranks.¹ The number of black women academics holding doctoral degrees is also extremely small.

The historically black universities and technikons, such as Fort Hare, the University of the Western Cape and the Peninsula Technikon, employ a large number of the small pool of black academics. Recently, a number of academics who have taught at the HBUs have been moving to historically white universities, to positions in government or, in certain instances, into the corporate world. Some black academics who have moved to white universities have spent a short space of time there and have subsequently resigned or become frustrated with the experience. Interestingly, a number of black academics who have been at HBUs for a long period of time (pre-1994) are leaving these institutions and moving to historically white universities and other places of employment. The higher education sector in South Africa, however, is still predominantly white and male and the relatively few black academics in the system seem to be moving between institutions, with a large number having exited the world of higher education altogether, or currently considering moving to other spaces.

As well as being a policy imperative, there have been comments from various quarters that highlight the importance of diversifying staff at universities in terms of race and gender. In certain documents this sentiment has been captured by the discourse that recognises the importance of black intellectuals if the “African Renaissance” is to materialise. The shortage of black academics in general, and more specifically in higher-level posts, thus has an impact on a range of educational and socio-political transformation goals.

The above context has been sketched in to inform the purpose or aims of the study.

| Aims of the Study

The primary aim of the study is to explore the experiences of black academics at various higher education institutions in South Africa and to determine:

¹ See Mbabane, 2001, for more detailed information on gender, race and rank in South African universities.

- Why they are leaving (or have left) a particular institution; or,
- Why they have left the academic profession.

A secondary aim is to determine what changes should take place at institutions that might encourage faculty to remain at an academic institution and to contribute to what has been called the “African Renaissance”. The crucial role of African intellectuals in the “African Renaissance” has been raised by a number of writers and social commentators.

| Key Research Questions

- For black academics, what have been critical experiences (both negative and positive) at these universities and technikons?
- What are the reasons for leaving particular institutions?
- Why have they chosen to join another academic institution?
- Why have they chosen to leave academia?
- Do they think that gender and/or race has impacted on their experiences at the institution? (This question was to guide the researchers and was not asked directly. In fact talk regarding gender and race as variables usually surfaced in the earlier questions.)
- What do they think needs to be changed or what needs to be instituted at these institutions that could contribute to a positive work climate for currently employed (black) academics and to attract new academics?