Ethnographying the PhD pipeline: the long walk from whiteness to diversity at North-West University, South Africa

Dr. Frans Kamsteeg
Lisette de Groot, BSc

This paper describes the outcomes of an ethnographic casestudy at North-West University in South Africa on diversity among PhD students at the Potchefstroom campus. In 2004, the former white Afrikaner Potchefstroom University of Higher Christian Education merged with the black homeland University of Bophutatswana in Mafikeng (Kamsteeg 2011). Ten years after the merger the Transformation Oversight Committee, installed by the ANC government, is now trying to establish to what extent the universities have accomplished the restructuring required to transform into institutions representing the diversity of the new South Africa. This transformation process was the explicit motive behind the government led merger operation that reduced the number of higher education institutions from 35 to 23 in 2004.

Ten years later Dutch VU University Amsterdam rector Prof Frank v.d. Duyn Schouten attended the NWU 2014 graduation day at the NWU Potchefstroom campus together with NWU’s Vice-Chancellor Prof Dan Kgwadi. Both men noticed that the doctoral graduates still largely consisted of white men and (less) women. Apparently the university’s transformation effort had hardly been able to bring about more ethnic diversity among the future scholars of the institution. How is it possible that PhD students at North-West University are still predominantly white? To understand this we need to know more about the political context of transformation in South Africa’s higher education, but we also need an overview of the current number and division of doctorates in the country in general. Little is known about the factors restricting the number of doctorate diplomas in the country, but recently The PhD Study by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAF) concluded that South Africa does not produce enough doctorates ‘in relation to the developmental needs of the country (2010: 15).’
The ASSAF research shows that in 2007 the country produced the relatively low number of 1274 doctoral graduates, largely consisting of white males in their thirties or forties, black female students being the most underrepresented. This number will have slightly increased in 2013, the year in which NWU produced 168 doctorate students, the majority of which graduated in Potchefstroom (NWU 2013). No data are available on gender and ethnicity, but the picture shows mostly white men.

The ASSAF study has identified pipeline, institutional, financial, and administrative constraints on the route towards the doctorate degree. Adding to that, it also concludes that institutions tend to “grow their own timber”, which in the case of NWU would explain why Potchefstroom continues to produce the same type of doctorates over the years. Arguing along a similar line Academic Freedom in a Democratic South Africa (2013), by UCT scholar John Higgins attributes the slow path of transformation to the ‘culture of whiteness’ that is still pervading South Africa’s universities. Former Afrikaner universities, such as NWU, would be particularly suffering from the consequences of this cultural resilience. In this paper we then try to answer the question what factors affect the PhD pipeline at NWU (Potchefstroom), with a particular focus on those factors that are related to institutional culture, such as language, group identity and tradition.

Critical race theory (Nkomo, 1992), cultural cloning (Essed 2002) and two seminal South African studies on whiteness and organizational culture (Steyn 2001; Jansen 2009) constitute the basis for theorizing the outcomes of the ethnographic field study that will be done among PhD students and graduates in Potchefstroom between February and May 2015.

References