10 steps to develop black professors

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Of the 4 000 professors in SA, fewer than 200 are black.

Xolela Mangcu has a plan to transform SA’s professoriate

Universities are arguably the most influential institutions in any society. Governments, businesses, newspapers, television and radio networks are run by university graduates. Universities produce the theories, ideas, technologies and products upon which the modern world is built. Those who have control of these institutions have a profound influence over the direction of any country. It is worrisome, then, that South Africa’s best universities do not have a black presence to speak of at the highest level of the academic rank – the professoriate. Through their exclusive membership of the senate, professors are the vanguard of formulating the research and academic agenda, which reflects their own subjective dispositions and interests. They also decide who gets promoted, and thus the complexion of the professoriate. In short, universities are the site of cultural and intellectual capital and should receive just the same attention as political and economic capital.

Chasing the latter without the former might satisfy present-day interests, but it does not secure the future for our children.

Only 194 black or African South Africans are professors out of the country’s total of 4 000. This number translates to 4% of the total.

The situation is more dire when it comes to women. Only 34 or 0.85% of the total number of South African professors are women.

What can we do as a country to fix this calamitous situation?

The National Development Plan merely kicks the can further down the road by calling for “a national plan for higher education”. The most specific it gets is to say that Africans and women should make up 50% of research and academic staff.

It seems to me that a number of things need to happen to transform higher education in South Africa.

1. Political commitment is the first principle of any institution seeking to transform itself – whether it is in the public sector, business or higher education. The determination of priorities and allocation of resources depends on this factor more than any other.
The best example I know of this is Neil Rudenstine who served as Harvard University president from 1991-2001. He was probably the most transformative president in that institution’s history.

When Rudenstine arrived, the Afro-American studies department had one professor, which is similar to the situation of the humanities at the University of Cape Town.

By the time he left, he had recruited the best and brightest African and African-American minds – including people such as Henry Louis Gates Jr, Kwame Anthony Appiah and Cornel West. The field of African-American studies is flourishing in no small part because of his efforts.

Could somebody tell me why Imraan Coovadia is not a full professor at UCT? He has won every fiction prize on the planet. If I were heading a university department I would hunt down people like Mcebisi Ndletyana, Brown Maaba, Hlonipha Mokoena, Nokuthula Mazibuko, Nthabiseng Motsemme and Zine Magubane, and secure a fat budget for recruiting talented black academics.

2. We must reject the canard that it takes 20 years from the time one completes a PhD to become a full professor. Take Lawrence Summers, who moved straight from a bachelor’s degree to a PhD programme in economics at Harvard.

He was made full professor right after graduating. If you dig beneath the surface, you will probably find that many of our white colleagues benefited from such accelerated interventions.

3. We must move away from part-time PhDs to full-time PhDs. Part-time students either take too long to finish or drop out. Those who complete their degrees see it as yet another certificate to be added to their CV for the job market in the private sector and in government. Getting students into a PhD programme full time can help to develop an affinity for university life.

Full-time students should conduct seminars, write papers and be required to publish them as a precondition for graduation.

4. Let us develop post-doctoral programmes as a way of developing black intellectuals. This will enable PhD graduates to turn their dissertations into books or to extract chapters for publication as journal articles.

They should be encouraged to give public lectures and seminars where they can be tested by their peers. Post-doctoral programmes also give students time to write grant proposals for their research and to develop international networks.

5. By the time a student enters an academic job, he or she could have a number of research grants that act as subventions of their relatively lower salaries. This will not
necessarily reduce the gap between government and private sector salaries, but it can make an academic life more attractive.

6. The government and business sectors could step in by using graduate students for research instead of relying on short–term consultants. Every government department has millions of rands for research and development, but that money is spent on short-term, mostly white, consultants.

7. We could flatten the hierarchy from five to three levels. There is nothing inherently advantageous about going through the career loops of junior lecturer, lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor and professor.

When people complete their post-doctoral programmes, they can become an assistant professor, associate professor or even a professor.

Coming into the job market as an assistant professor on a tenure track motivates people in a way that coming in as a lecturer or junior lecturer does not. The title of lecturer or senior lecturer could be reserved for those who are not on the academic track.

Because PhDs will have published in journals during their programme and in their post-doctoral fellowship, it should not take more than five years to move from assistant professor to associate professor, and from associate professor to professor, if that long at all. Each case must be treated on its own merit, and not on some golden 20-year rule.

8. Just as some white colleagues are accelerated through the system, many of those who should have long retired are still hanging around, in the process they block funds that can be released for younger academics. University leaderships should put an end to such practices and so must the state.

9. In addition to the training of black PhDs, we should have endowed professorships. International funding agencies like the Ford Foundation have such endowed professorships in the US. But it is also about time that black business comes to the table.

Superwealthy black billionaires in our country could play such a role. Black academics should not have to forever depend on the Oppenheimer family for fellowships when people such as Patrice Motsepe, Tokyo Sexwale and Cyril Ramaphosa have loads of money.

10. We should develop a public intellectual culture in our country. The public intellectual function can take on many forms – from social criticism to community organising.
Academic scholarship is not sufficient to make a good university. Our universities will operate at a quarter of their potential if they have history, politics, anthropology, philosophy, arts and sociology departments without a critical mass of African professors, especially African women.

In addition to their scholarship, these academics can bring historical, cultural and linguistic knowledge that must be at the heart of any globally competitive humanities faculty.

In short, the old ways of exclusion will persist unless our universities adopt innovative strategies for training all our academics, black and white. But if the will is there to increase the number of black academics – and given the breadth of innovation around the world – the old excuses about how long it takes to train blacks or that there aren’t enough blacks will become lame.

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