



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
La Grotto House, Glendarrach Rd, Rondebosch, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650-3733/2, Fax: +27 (0) 21 650-5682
Internet: www.uct.ac.za

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UCT researchers put the university under the lens

Three PhD candidates at the University of Cape Town have focused their respective research theses on the university environment -- with one thesis focusing on the University of Rhodesia from 1945 to 1980. Their conclusions can apply to other organisations as well, especially those dealing with transformation and institutional change.

Learning from the way we were

Abraham Serote, a PhD graduand in Sociology, examines the lived experience of black medical registrars in a predominantly white academic milieu in his thesis, *Blackness in a predominantly white academe: the case of the University of Cape Town Faculty of Health Sciences (UCT FHS)*. He demonstrates how their experience was circumscribed by notions of race and racism.

Deciphering that "black experience" through the lens of Critical Race Theory, Serote shows the complexity of racism and how it is often sustained, at times relying on "colour-blind" blacks for sustenance. He argues that the subjective experience of black registrars morphs into three overarching narratives: (a) those who believe racism is everything and everywhere; (b) the surviving navigators, and (c) "colour-blind" blacks. Recognising these three distinctive narratives enabled him to argue against notions of a singularity of black registrars' experience. Serote contextualises the registrars' diverse black experience by drawing on in-depth interviews with senior white academic staff in UCT FHS.

The thesis concludes with a series of pointed recommendations including, among others, that active strategies for recruitment of blacks into the FHS should guard against locking black academics into a "perpetual development track" and that a faculty ombudsperson should be appointed to adjudicate over disputes attributable to the frailties of the institutional climate and the spectre of race and racism.

Sekhukhuneland-born Serote holds BA, Honours and Master's degrees from UCT and a Postgraduate Diploma in Education from the University of Western Cape (UWC).

Formerly a Spencer Foundation Fellow, he has lectured Sociology at UCT and UWC. His supervisor is Associate Professor David Cooper in the Department of Sociology.

To change the organisation, change the individual

It is the individual who becomes central to change in universities by facilitating ongoing change through conversations and actions, according to Kevin Johnston, a PhD graduand in Information Systems at UCT. His thesis, *Managing change in a university*, analyses the current position at UCT using an interpretive epistemology and a grounded theory research methodology. He found that change takes place organically and is not defined by the outcomes of high-level strategies. Culture is influenced by and permeates the continuing change process, while information technology and business processes can potentially enable or inhibit change. Therefore individuals, processes, structures, technologies, and plans need to support proposed changes. To enable change, universities need to nurture, manage, and develop all individuals to manage change.

Johnston graduated with a BSc from Rhodes University, a BSc (Hons) from Unisa, and an M (Com) from UCT. His supervisor is Dr Lisa Seymour of the Information Systems Department at UCT.

Following the same old path in a brave new world

Maurice Mutowo, a PhD graduand in Business Administration at the Graduate School of Business at UCT, examines change at the University of Rhodesia from 1945 to 1980 in terms of path dependence: the tendency of a past practice to continue even if better alternatives are available. His findings are expected to help managers better distinguish, analyse and understand processes of institutional change, especially within complex organisations operating in business environments characterised by high unpredictability and complexity.

Mutowo's PhD thesis is titled: *A resource-based view of the firm: a path dependency investigation into the sources of sustainable competitive advantage – an empirical study of the University of Rhodesia, 1945-1980*. It uses a grounded theory approach to investigate the sources of sustainable competitive advantage of the University of Rhodesia (UR). His thesis defines and traces the origins of path dependency, empirically verifies its prevalence with respect to the evolution of UR, and shows its contribution to management theory and practice.

Mutowo establishes that the evolution of UR was path dependent and influenced by the dynamic patterns of initial conditions, increasing returns, self-reinforcement, positive feedback and lock-in. Some of the enduring characteristics of UR that define its competitive advantage include the British influence, the system of external examiners, and the elitist and multi-racial character of the institution.

The thesis develops a robust conceptual framework which emerges from an empirical application of path dependency to the evolution of UR. By applying path dependency to the development of UR, his thesis will help managers better distinguish, analyse and understand processes of institutional change. It will

improve managers' understanding of organisational transitions – especially of complex organisations operating in business environments characterised by high unpredictability and complexity.

Mutowo is the Director of the Graduate School of Management at the University of Zimbabwe. He obtained a BA (Honours), MA and MBA degrees from the University of Zimbabwe. He has been studying in the Graduate School of Business at UCT since 2007. His supervisor is Professor Kurt April.

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Please note: Information in this release is based on the supervisor's citation for the PhD thesis. UCT advises journalists to obtain a copy of the thesis and/or interview the PhD graduate to verify and expand on this information.

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Patricia Lucas

Tel: (021) 650 5428 Fax (021) 650 5628

Cell: **076 292 8047**

E-mail: paf.lucas@uct.ac.za

University of Cape Town

Rondebosch

Website: www.uct.ac.za