In this response, we address the misrepresentation of our article by Rene W Albertus on higher education decolonisation processes in South Africa. We respond to her claim, based on a misreading of our article, that at the University of Cape Town white academic staff are promoted faster than black staff and restate the major findings of our quantitative analysis of 11 years of promotion data. We used time to promotion as a proxy for fairness to examine patterns of promotion at the university. In general, there was evenness across various categories with few systemic differences; there were no consistent differences between times to promotion by gender or for those categorising themselves as “Africans”, “Whites”, “Coloureds” and “Indians”. However, international staff, those in more junior positions, with higher qualifications and in certain faculties enjoyed quicker promotion time. We discuss the possible explanations for the findings reported, and the role of affirmative action recruitment policies to ensure redress.

Subjects: Education - Social Sciences; Higher Education Management; Study of Higher Education

Keywords: higher education; decolonization; equity; transformation; gender; ethnicity
In the article by Rene W Albertus on “Decolonisation of institutional structures in South African universities: A critical perspective” recently published in Cogent Social Sciences (2019) the following statement is to be found:

A study by Sadiq et al. (2019) found that white academics at the University of Cape Town were promoted approximately 1.85 years faster than Non-Whites.

This statement fundamentally misrepresents the findings in our manuscript, cited as Sadiq, Barnes, Price, Gumedze, & Morrell, 2019 that was published in Higher Education (DOI: 10.1007/s10734-018-0350-2). The most serious problem relates to the claim about white academics getting promoted 1.85 years faster than “non-whites”. This is inaccurate and a remarkably selective and biased citation. It takes the result from a subset of lecturers, and inaccurately extrapolates it to all UCT academics even though we state clearly that “overall there was no significant difference between times to promotion for those categorising themselves as “Africans”, “Whites”, “Coloureds” and “Indians”. Our full paragraph reads:

(Overall there was no significant difference between times to promotion for those categorising themselves as “Africans”, “Whites”, “Coloureds” and “Indians”. In the subset analysis of lecturers, the 122 academics who declared their ethnicity as “White” had a median of time to promotion about 1.75 years quicker than their 29 colleagues who declared their ethnicity as “African”. Among the South African academics promoted, the 24 academics who declared their ethnicity as “Asian” had a quicker median time to promotion (by ~1.87 years) compared to their 24 colleagues who declared their ethnicity as “African” (Table 3).

The (mis)citation is compounded because Albertus has quoted the one situation where there is a delay in promotion of African lecturers (not all “Non-Whites”) and fails to mention that in other instances other non-white lecturers had a more rapid promotion. Furthermore, she fails to replicate the plausible explanation we report for this phenomenon, namely that some African lecturers are appointed under an affirmative action policy which precisely recognises their past disadvantage and needs for redress, so if there are “White” and “African” appointable candidates, the “African” candidate should be appointed even if less experienced or less published. A possible result of this policy is that “African” staff may have further to go to meet promotions criteria to senior lecturer than “White” colleagues. Once this initial hurdle has been completed, there is no evidence at the more senior levels of racial differences in the progress rates of staff.

Albertus should have explained these complexities but did not. This may well be an effect of the current climate which assumes that historically advantaged universities like UCT are “racist” and were complicit with apartheid (Barnes, 2018; Worgler, 2014). Other literature, however, argues that the current challenges facing these universities cannot be reduced to such characterization and should take into account the agency of the state, students and communities (Habib 2019; Hodes, 2017; Jansen, 2018).

A hallmark of academic publishing is working with evidence and working with such evidence with accuracy and integrity. We believe that, at least in the case of how Albertus has cited our article, the manuscript published in Cogent Social Sciences falls short of these standards and calls into question the accuracy of her citations.

For the sake of clarity, here we summarise what our article argued. The system of academic promotion provides a mechanism for the achievements of staff to be recognised. However, it can be a mechanism that creates or reflects inequalities, with certain groups rising to the top more readily than others. In many universities, especially in the global North, white men are preponderant in senior academic ranks. This leads to concerns about sexism and racism operating within processes of promotion. There is a global sensitivity that academic hierarchies should be demographically representative. In this study, we examine the data on eleven years (2005–2015) of promotions at the University of Cape Town (UCT), a highly ranked, research-led university in South Africa. Its historical roots lie in a colonial past, and
despite substantial increases in the number of black scholars, its academic staff complement is still majority white. In the recent period, this has become a focus of transformation efforts to accelerate the number of black academic staff recruited and the numbers being promoted. Such measures complement major demographic changes in the student body which is now majority black. A quantitative analysis using time to promotion as a proxy for fairness was used to examine patterns of promotion at the university.

Our findings reveal that, in general, there was evenness across various categories with few systemic differences. However, international staff, those in more junior positions, with higher qualifications and in certain faculties enjoyed quicker promotion time. International staff having a shorter time to promotion than South Africans may be explained by the recruitment policy which purposefully, as a reflection of the country’s labour laws, privileges South African candidates over non-South Africans. This would result in international academics usually entering the university with stronger track records than their South African colleagues, advantaging them in the promotion process. Possessing higher qualifications also correlated, as one would expect, with quicker time to promotion. We found quite substantial differences between the rates of promotion across the universities seven faculties with staff members in Law faculty being the fastest and those in the Science and Higher Education faculties the slowest to promotion. It is not easy to explain these differential rates but one possible explanation relates to discipline-specific factors.

There were some differences in time to promotion associated with self-declared ethnicity (taken as synonymous with race), but these associations were not consistent. The system of promotions is complex and it is difficult and problematic to identify one factor as having more explanatory weight than others in analyzing differences in time to promotion. Although our findings provide some quantitative evidence of UCT’s success at creating a fair system of academic advancement, broader demographic transformation remains a priority. However, this cannot be addressed in isolation from the wider higher education enterprise which includes challenges of funding and governance as well as the role of the state.

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