

## PART 1: SPECIAL SECTION

### CULTURAL CONTEXT OF (UN) BELONGING AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

#### “I FOUND MY PEOPLE”: ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT, TRANSFORMATION AND THE NEXT GENERATION PROFESSORiate AT UCT

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#### ABSTRACT

Questions of inclusivity and transformation are central in higher education. In South Africa, these imperatives have the additional weight of post-apartheid redress. Attempts to address these questions seldom contemplate how transformation will be achieved. Efforts to achieve transformation often don't attend to the critical question of how to nurture relationships among academics. We argue that building trust and a sense of belonging expands notions of academic development and transformation. In this article we discuss the Next Generation Professoriate (NGP), a mid-career academic development initiative at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Building human connections was an intentional part of this initiative's transformative process. The programme emphasized global South location as a commonality as it sought to encourage new forms of knowledge production and collaboration.

**Keywords:** university transformation, academic promotion, career development and support, mentoring, trust, collegiality, southern theory

## INTRODUCTION

South African Higher Education has been the object of close attention for decades but particularly since Minister Kader Asmal issued the National Plan for Higher education in 2001. Transformation of universities was initially conceptualised at an institutional level and as a state-led exercise. Although the concept of transformation was seldom defined over time it became reduced to meaning a radical change in the composition of staff and students along race and gender lines. Importantly for this article, the question of how transformation would be achieved was hardly ever broached.

Over time the magnitude of the challenge of meeting demographic equity targets became apparent and the state stepped in with its Staffing South African Universities Framework document (2015) which set out a series of national interventions designed to realize the development of a pipeline that would systematically transform the gendered and racial profile of academic staff. Universities themselves undertook initiatives to develop staff capacity. In this article we describe one initiative, the Next Generation Professoriate (NGP), at the University of Cape Town (UCT) that worked with mid-career academic staff. We argue that the initiative shows that part of the challenge of transformation is lost when it is reduced to a demographic project. We argue that how transformation is approached is critical. It needs to be understood holistically and that its success is wrapped up in the means used to achieve its goals. Transformation initiatives often depend on elements that are not easily quantifiable nor initially “obvious”. Devoting resources and creating rules to achieve the goal of demographic transformation are no guarantee of success. On the other hand, understanding the importance of belonging unlocks the full potential transformation and shapes how it is pursued.

In a recent collection on the potential of transformation, Matthews and Tabensky (2015) highlight both a broader vision of what can be achieved – “transformation means to attempt to change higher education institutions such that they no longer reflect the values promoted by apartheid but rather reflect the values embodied in South Africa’s 1996 Constitution” (Matthews and Tabensky 2015, 3) – and that the question of belonging is central. Especially on grounds of race and gender, staff and students historically have felt excluded and have thus not felt “at home” (Maseti 2018). These staff may feel alienated, demotivated and excluded. They will feel a lack of confidence in themselves and in the institution to recognise their worth. It is these feelings (often alongside the desire to be better rewarded) that propel some staff members to resign and seek greener pastures (Theron and Barkhuizen 2014). Changing institutional culture therefore becomes a key part of transformation.

The Next Generation Professoriate (NGP) was intended to support academic progression into the professoriate of black and female staff. A key element – both goal and mechanism –

was to develop a culture of belonging. This took the exclusive focus off the success of individuals and promoted a cohort system which placed emphasis on building a collective sense of identity. This approach found ready acceptance amongst NGP members, was embraced and was central to its success.

The NGP became a place of friendship, trust and support. It was a safe place which proved fertile for pursuing new forms of knowledge as well as surfacing the specific conditions of being an academic in the global South. Transformation was conceptualised as a process to rethink ways of being an academic and exploring new ways of making knowledge. Interdisciplinary approaches were discussed, collaborative projects between NGP members and beyond were conceived and new networks, often including insertion into UCT's leadership structures, were formed. The road to transformation – how to get there – was as important as the final destination.

In this article we review debates about transformation and provide context for the emergence of the NGP. We describe NGP activities and then show how NGP members embraced its collegial, participatory and inclusive approach. In the final section we show how a bigger vision of transformation can be achieved when programmes operate to generate trust, friendship, confidence and collaboration. We show how new knowledge forms and interdisciplinary collaborations emerge.

## **TRANSFORMATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION.**

It is not surprising that with the end of apartheid in 1994 radical change in higher education was on the agenda. The non-participation of black and female staff and students in the higher education system dated back to the inception of universities in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and the historical patterns of inequality persisted to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Extension of University Education Act No 45 of 1959 has notionally provided for greater participation of black staff and students but only within a segregated and unequal system. It was within this context that “black” and “white” universities became synonymous with disadvantage and advantage respectively.<sup>1</sup> State-led measures were designed to sweep away the apartheid legacies though there was no blueprint on how to do this or even agreement on what an equal system would look like.

The new ANC government sought to transform universities as a form of social redress (Cele and Menon 2006). The country's new (1996) constitution created a foundation for a number of laws that were intended, amongst other things, to change staff demographics. The Labour Relations Act No. 66 of 1997, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act No. 75 of 1997, the Employment Equity Act No. 55 of 1998 and the Skills Development Act No. 97 of 1998,

imposed an obligation on universities “to draft their respective recruitment policies and to guide their recruitment practices” (Khunou 2018, 8). When in 2001 Kader Asmal announced his National Plan for Higher Education, his primary purpose was to reconfigure the national higher education landscape and he recommended institutional mergers as the main instrument to achieve this. Although the document is light on detail regarding changes to staffing demographics there is no doubt that state funding would be used to encourage institutional compliance. Each university was obliged to produce an institutional plan which specified demographic targets. “The student and staff equity requirements that the institution would have to meet” would be outlined and these targets would be tied to levels of state funding (Asmal 2001, 55).

In fact transformation targets were seldom specified although the pace at which staff demographics was changing was frequently noted with concern. The numbers of black and African staff members did rise after 1996 but the increases were most notable in formerly “black” universities (Gibbon and Kabaki 2006, 132). Van Schalkwyk et al. comment that debates about transformation feature “an oversupply of rhetoric and a dearth of empirical data” (Van Schalkwyk et al. 2022, 613). “[T]he absence of a clear articulation of transformation, accompanied by a lack of indicators and targets to track progress over time, hinders the progression of the discourse to equally important dimensions of performance such as efficiency, success and productivity” (Van Schalkwyk et al. 2022, 613). We would add that when transformation is understood solely as achieving quantifiable indicators, key elements are overlooked. Nevertheless, the numbers are important and there is no denying that the ambitious targets set by the Department of Higher Education were not met, especially in the formerly “white” universities.

In 2012 of 4000 full and associate professors at South African universities, 75.6 per cent were white, 14 per cent were black African, 4.5 per cent coloured and 5 per cent Indian (Africa Check 2014). Questions consistently were asked about the failure to address demographic inequality with the suggestion that sexism and racism were causes of this failure. These debates were increasingly conducted in the media, local and international. For example, in 2014, Xolela Mangcu a UCT staff member in the Sociology department stated: “After decades of institutional power it is not surprising that white academics would have a sense that the institutions of higher education, particularly the predominantly white universities, belong to them by right. How can you teach history, political studies, anthropology, arts, without a single black full professor in those departments? It is simply unconscionable in this day and age that the University of Cape Town would not have a single black South African woman who is a full professor.” (*The Guardian* 2014). In 2016 the *Mail and Guardian* headlined a story, “We need more black

professors”, noting that in six universities over 70 per cent of professors were white (Govender 2016). In addition, it was charged that processes such as promotion were skewed against black and female staff (Sadiq et al. 2019). Zethu Matebeni at the UCT Institute for the Humanities at UCT challenged: “we are often told that it takes about 20 years for an academic to get to a full professor position. This is an incorrect claim, as there have been (and still are) white academics whose careers were fast-tracked and who received professorships even without a PhD. Such processes need to be monitored at universities. How are ad hominem promotions conducted, and who gets to be promoted, when? A number of black academics often share that they do not believe they would ever be promoted, even when they are well-published” (*The Guardian* 2014). In more general terms, fingers were pointed at “institutional culture” – as being unfriendly, unsupportive and discriminatory. Defending the slow rate by which new black staff were being appointed, Max Price, Vice Chancellor of UCT argued in 2014 that there was a national shortage of black professors not least because qualified black Africans could get much better paid jobs outside of universities (Kamaldien 2014). In 2016 the point was remade by a UCT spokesperson: “UCT has a high staff retention rate which demonstrates loyalty and continuity for the university. But in terms of transformation, this challenges the ability of the university to achieve employment equity through shifting the demographic profile of its staff. High retention rates restrict movement and a change in the number of staff of all race groups within the university.” Among the more radical responses to address demographic inequalities was proposed by UNISA. Staff should be promoted on grounds of race. Jonathan Jansen commented at the time: “In an effort to boost black appointments and others from ‘designated groups’, UNISA has decided that the university is merely a place of employment where academics are advanced racially in order to make the campus look like the country. ... it (has) dropped the bar so that the weakest academics can be promoted in the name of employment equity. It is, quite frankly, disgraceful and the damage inflicted on a once great university, incalculable” (Jansen 2019).

## **THE PROGRAMMING OF TRANSFORMATION**

The focus on institutional change and especially on demography meant that more detailed plans began to be developed. These came both from the state which realized the legislative edict alone was not enough, and from universities themselves.

In 2015 the Department of Higher Education and Training released the Staffing South African Universities Framework (SSAUF). While the document emphasized the importance of quality education and the need for production of skills to meet social and economic development needs, its major focus was on demographics. “It is no secret that the higher

education sector currently finds itself in somewhat of a crisis in relation to the size, composition and capacity of its academic staff” (DHET 2015, 3). Its goal was to produce a university staffing complement “who are fully representative of a democratic South Africa” while it noted “the slow pace of transformation” (DHET 2015, 3).

The framework conceived on a national scale of a pipeline of black academics being created, supported and promoted through a series of initiatives including the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) and the Future Professors Programme (FPP). Other transformation initiatives were channelled through the National Research Foundation (NRF) which increasingly directed funding towards people designated as belonging to historically disadvantaged groups.

These initiatives were coordinated nationally but effectively had to be implemented at university level. Universities thus experienced national top-down pressure for transformation while also hosting internal critique and pressures, including that racism and sexism were preventing black and female staff from progressing and being promoted.

When universities engineer change in their staffing complements they have at least three challenges – initially to attract and appoint, then to ensure progress and finally to ensure that these staff members do not leave. Almost all of the state’s focus initially was on new appointments. As time went on it became apparent that attention needed to be paid to supporting academics especially in a context where many came from disadvantaged schooling backgrounds and had not been prepared for or inducted into the competitive publish-or-perish university culture. The question was what to do and how to do it.

The need for staff support has been widely recognised around the world. Forms of mentorship are widely recommended as a way of supporting academics. And a range of studies have shown both their efficacy and limitations especially when they are used to focus on black and female staff members (Gardiner et al. 2007; Ibarra, Carter, and Silva 2010; Thomas, Bystydzienski, and Desai 2015). South Africa has surfed the same global wave with a key document from the Universities of South Africa (USAf), a body that represents all 26 public universities, endorsing the central importance of mentorship in the progress of academic staff (Newman and Bawa 2019). This enthusiasm stretches across the African continent where similar challenges of staff progress and retention and institutional culture prevail (Somefun and Adebayo 2020). Conversely, a lack of mentorship is often identified as a reason for the failure to retain staff or to preside over their promotion (Mouton et al. 2018, 11).

The challenge facing universities is to combine a focus on the individual with the interests of a group and to address the demand for transformation both at scale and at level of the individual. There are many challenges in this process. To support an individual academic to

realize potential may well result in competition with colleagues and promote individualism. To focus on a group may risk losing sight of individual needs. Working with individuals has the advantage of creating close relationships between mentee and mentor, optimizing disciplinary knowledge and niche expertise. Upscaling this to a group is difficult particularly when members of a group may have different research interests and strengths, be at a different stage of their academic careers and be battling with problems that are particular not general. Yet to make an institutional impact demands more than working with a few individuals. The issue of scale is not one only of numbers, it is also about how institutional cultures can be influenced. Individuals are unlikely to make a significant impact on institutional culture whereas a group may well by their numbers and locations, do exactly that.

The challenges facing mid-career staff are somewhat different from those of staff in the earlier stages of their careers. Mid-career staff generally have completed their postgraduate studies, have begun to publish and supervise postgraduate students and have administrative responsibilities. While they may be discharging these roles responsibly the nature of academia is one that rewards achievements with promotion, a move up the hierarchy. In order to be promoted one has to demonstrate productivity beyond the expectation that attaches to the position that one occupies. While some move along the journey towards the position of full professor serenely, for others it is a struggle that generates anxiety and insecurity. Promotion is not automatic, it has to be achieved, and so the anxiety focusses on tasks to be achieved, hurdles to be cleared. Interventions to support mid-career staff need to focus on these individual predicaments while at the same time, to answer the demand for change at scale, attending also to the needs of colleagues in the same situation.

A sense of belonging may be developed from a variety of factors. Collegiality, fairness, inclusion in processes, opportunities for participation at different levels of institutional life and a sense of institutional recognition and appreciation may all contribute to a sense of belonging. In a study to examine the slow progress of early career academics and students on the US west coast, often explained in terms of bias, a study recommended that “Departments should adopt transparent policies and expectations for student progress that are communicated clearly to all. Professors and mentors should take time to build trust and rapport with students”. The study concludes: “It is time we laid to rest the ‘see you in five years’ model, rooted in the specious notion that brilliance will find a way. Brilliance is most reliably nurtured through structure and trust.” (Mendoza-Denton, Patt, and Richards 2018, 301). In our description of the NGP we highlight the importance of trust and associated relational features in the process of building belonging and seeking the professional advancement of members via promotion.

The description of NGP that follows relies on a number of sources. The NGP has a

dedicated site on UCT's webpage which features newsletters and news stories about the programme's activities, members and achievements. These are all publicly accessible at <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/transformation/next-generation-professoriate/>. Our description also relies on our own involvement with the NGP. Morrell was the founding director of the programme and Jaga and Patel were members of the programme. In addition, Jaga and Patel gave accounts of their experiences at the *Reimagining the Academic Project symposium* held at the Breakwater Campus at UCT on 3 December 2021 which have been an important source as well.

## **FROM THE BOTTOM-UP – UCT RESPONDS!**

UCT has a recent history of creating mechanisms to support staff. One of the earliest and most successful of these initiatives was the Emerging Researcher Programme (ERP) established in 2003 (De Gruchy and Holness 2007; Holness 2015). The ERP was located in the Research Office itself established to support research activities in all seven faculties. The ERP invited early career staff members, especially those joining UCT, to enrol for a suite of activities that would guide them towards getting an NRF rating, completing their PhDs and publishing academic articles. It was essentially a “research mentoring programme” that emphasized collegiality and the need to build “a community of researchers” (De Gruchy and Holness 2007, 25–27). Within three years membership had reached 200. The programme centred on a core staff of four people based in the UCT Research Office and supported by a group of mentors including retired UCT professors (senior scholars). The programme featured “cooperative leadership” with the team working closely together. Membership involved induction and, thereafter, close engagement with mentors in one-on-one settings complemented with seminars and group sessions. The “centrality of personal interaction” was constantly emphasized (De Gruchy and Holness 2007, 23).

Notwithstanding the success of the ERP, there was a widespread view amongst staff that there was not enough support and that this impacted the progress and satisfaction of black and female staff. In addition, UCT's professoriate was dominantly white and male. If transformation meant attending to racial and gender demographics there was a clear reason why more energy and attention should be devoted to supporting mid-career staff in their quest for promotion.

In response to these challenges, the NGP was launched in 2015. The programme was supported and funded by the Vice Chancellor, Max Price. “The initiative is about ensuring we have role models that will inspire aspiration in students as well as creating a more inclusive environment for all academic staff” (UCT News 2015).

The founder and director of NGP was Robert Morrell who had himself worked in the



Research Office and borrowed heavily from the approach of the ERP. In fact the NGP grew out of an existing programme, PERC (Programme for the Enhancement of Research Capacity), which had been based in the Research Office. PERC was a soft-funded programme designed to support mid-career staff, African research collaboration and interdisciplinary research. NGP also aimed to support mid-career staff but its goals and modus operandi were different from those of PERC. In the first instance, its membership was targeted – black and female academic staff at senior lecturer and associate professor level. In the second instance, its primary goal was to support these staff members to succeed in being promoted. The overall demographic goal was to increase the numbers of black and female professors at UCT and in this way contribute to changing the existing profile which was predominantly white and male. An additional goal was to contribute to building a new institutional climate that was more welcoming, more open and more collegial.

The context in which the initiative was launched was challenging. In March 2015, before the NGP had officially been launched, the #RhodesMustFall movement was launched at UCT. Excrement was poured over the statue of Cecil John Rhodes and this sets in train a process that led to the removal of the statue. It also sparked a national movement as, around the world, protests demanded the removal of statues that symbolized white supremacy or colonialism. Hard on the heels of the #RMF movement came the #FeesMustFall movement which for much of 2016 and 2017 captured national headlines as students engaged in mass, and often violent, protests. The two universities most affected were UCT and Wits (Habib 2019; Benatar 2021). As Jonathan Jansen (2018) commented, the protests that characterized these years threatened the very existence of universities, their knowledge mission and their freedoms to pursue knowledge production and dissemination, teaching and supervision. The protests generated racial polarisation. Ideological camps developed and the middle ground was eroded. Common commitments to an academic project of lecturing, debate and research which serves as a basis for identifying with one's fellow lecturer and the institution were no longer able to sustain collegiality. The whole tenor of university life changed so that disciplinary proceedings and grievances became increasingly preferred as a way of dealing with disagreement and conflict.

It was in this environment that the NGP came into existence. The first step was to recruit 35 members (five members for each faculty) – an arbitrary number but one judged to be the limit of what one person, the director and sole employee of and in NGP, could handle. The process of member selection was fraught with difficulty because of heightened suspicions. NGP was considered by some as a form of managerial co-option, by others as a trojan horse, designed to fragment black unity on campus. Others doubted the sincerity or potential of the initiative and yet others criticised the white, male leadership of NGP. Nationally such initiatives carried

some stigma – nobody wanted to be seen as needing special support (Durrheim et al. 2007). For prospective members there were different challenges. As Manya Mooya (School of Construction Economics and Management) reflected a few years later about joining: “There could be a perception that because you’re a member of the cohort you get ‘wind in your sails’, i.e., you get extra support that is not available to everybody – and I was not keen to be associated with something like that. Many of us in the cohort are very conscious of that element” (Segar 2018).

With all these suspicions it was decided to devolve membership selection to Faculty level. Each of the seven faculties at UCT was asked to nominate five members. Each member had to meet the eligibility criteria which were borrowed from the then defunct L rating category of the National Research Foundation (NRF). These were:

- black researchers
- female researchers
- those employed in a higher education institution that lacked a research environment
- those who were previously established as researchers and have returned.

Faculties approached the work of nominating in different ways. Some Deans simply identified staff members, while others set up complex processes to identify all who were eligible and then developed ways of identifying those who were most deserving. This was not in all instances purely meritocratic. In some cases, faculties looked at their staffing profiles and identified departments where there was a shortage or absence of black and/or female associate or full professors.

Not all of those who were selected by their faculties took up the opportunity. Some expressed suspicion and reservation and in the first year of the programme, some exited the programme for reasons that ranged from a belief that they were doing well on their own and that others would benefit from inclusion, to a feeling of discomfort at being part of a privileged group of academics. It is nevertheless important to remember that transformation goals invariably involve some costs and dangers. The NGP was not an initiative for all seasons or all people. It was not a house that could accommodate everybody. A new sense of belonging and even intimacy was provided to its members but academics who were not nominated for membership felt excluded.

From the outset the focus was on organising activities that would give members the chance to meet, to get to know and work with one another. The major vehicle for this were the quarterly

writing retreats. These were held at local scenic venues. The idea was to focus on a set of self-identified writing tasks but in a context of natural beauty and in the company of friends. As we indicate below, this strategy worked very well. The writing retreats combined the need to build individual academic profiles and to operate collectively. Coming together as a group, as an identified cohort, achieved the latter goal. It also, over time, produced belonging.

In addition to the writing retreats, there were quarterly lunches and teas, both of these were informal events, scheduled to allow those with time to gather and chat. Many cohort members had never met one another. UCT is a geographically dispersed campus and the seven faculties are effectively organisational silos. A net effect of this is that academics may well not even know members of their own faculties let alone those in other faculties. One of the major goals of NGP was to create community, to break down the walls of isolation which was a prerequisite for generating a sense of belonging.

A further factor was that cohort members came from a wide array of departments, with different disciplinary loyalties and varying research interests. How could this diversity be accommodated in the NGP? Similarly, the political views of members were likely to vary and in the white-heat of the Fallist years, how would it be possible to accommodate, indeed, even encourage dissent, debate and tolerance for differing views. One answer was to develop an interdisciplinary milieu in which people discussed their research work with colleagues from very different backgrounds. Intellectual cross-fertilization occurred with heartening results. For example, Amir Patel and Yumna Albertus from the Faculties of Engineering and Built Environment and Health Sciences respectively, developed a spin-out company to translate Amir's engineering research in human biomechanics into applied benefit for sport scientists and clinicians (Morrell 2021b). In our dealings, social and academic, it became clear that what we all shared was location in the global South. This gave us a common reference point and, as with interdisciplinarity, generated new research avenues.

## **CONNECTION, CARE AND COURAGE IN TIMES OF CHANGE**

In this section we discuss how the NGPs goals were achieved. We argue that NGP activities fostered values of connection, care and courage. These ingredients are central to building the sense of belonging and trust required to form the basis of academic development and transformation.

Intentionally building connections involved breaking down faculty and departmental silos. There was no better place to pursue this than at the quarterly writing retreats. In these informal spaces, with no explicit agenda set for two and a half days, members were able to relax, socialise and focus on catapulting individual writing projects. Slowing down, self-care and connection

were the catalysts for finding the space and momentum to work on writing – the life blood of academic life and success. Set in beautiful surroundings, away from the humdrum of the day-to-day, members from across the university, from different backgrounds, and at different career stages converged. Despite institutional differences, it was quickly apparent that the glue that bound the group was a common purpose – to contribute quality scholarship and research to their disciplines, to provide relevant and engaging learning opportunities for students, and to be agents of change in the unfolding academic project. Joint meals, coffee breaks, walks, early morning runs and shared lifts, resulted in conversation and connection that is simply not possible within the confines of the ivory tower of UCT. It is at these writing retreats that many cohort members who had previously felt disconnected expressed the sentiment: “I found my people”.

Building connections between academics across the university was not an incidental outcome of the programme, but rather lay at the heart of the initiative’s transformative process. The NGP director described his approach as

“I focussed on what binds people together, what academics have in common. I highlighted anxiety and ambitions, hopes and disillusionment, joys and sadnesses. I focussed on our common humanity.” (Morrell 2021a, 1).

The creation of spaces of care formed the second cornerstone of the programme. Many cohort members have described the NGP as a safe space within the university. A space to share, experiment, celebrate, critique, have fun, be vulnerable, and express opinions without fear. These are all behaviours that created a sense of togetherness. Safe spaces do not spontaneously materialise, they are built on trust, and trust must be earned. This process of building trust amongst a diverse group of people requires careful attention to – what in management speak – would be described as the *how* rather than the *who* of the cohort. The NGP was not a grouping that cohered around doctrines or disciplines, but rather had a distinctive character or set of unwritten norms that shaped how members engaged with one another. Respect of difference, enthusiasm, compassion, encouraging leadership and “critique as a form of caring” – laid the foundations that allowed members to be friendly and unconstrained. On offer too were individual and group coaching sessions focused on self-growth and actualisation. Group coaching sessions provide an intimate growth space for smaller groups within the cohort, meeting on a quarterly basis to share, reflect, support and reconfigure. It is in this culture that flourishing and growth happened.

An example of a different culture and way of navigating the career progression ladder was the baseline assessment and progress reporting that were part of the NGP routine. Members

worked with the former programme director to set career progression targets which were calculated in relation to UCT's promotion rules. These rules, separate for each faculty, describe what needs to be achieved in order to successfully apply for promotion. To ensure that support was provided to allow cohort members to navigate the pathways to these targets, the relevant Dean and Head of Department were included in agreeing on the baseline for each member. Whilst the fields of the general institutional annual performance review and the *ad hominem* promotion criteria are reflected in these assessments, the *how* is quite different. Navigating progress and defining milestones are based on numerous conversations about where members are at, and their intended and anticipated trajectories. The setting of targets is grounded in members' values and real-life opportunities and constraints. Who the members are matters in these discussions, and helps to keep milestones real, relevant and achievable. As life happens, adjustments are made along the way, with no compromise on quality, standards, individual growth and contributions to the academic project. Each member's trajectory is as unique as the individuals because the process is driven by who members are, not by the fields specified on the official forms.

Whilst the *how* of the NGP explains much of its success, it takes a certain kind of *who* to get the *how* right. Cohort members are kind, generous and caring. They are also smart, leaders in their fields, and role models to their students. Getting this combination right takes visionary leadership and investment in whole people. The hours spent by the former director of the NGP in conversation, listening, reflecting and adjusting are attributes that are difficult to capture in a job description. Leading by example is a key ingredient in the success of the NGP. The former Director and founder of the NGP is a B-rated scholar, with various accolades to his name. As a leader, he did not shy away from difficult conversations, emotions or situations. During the dark times of the pandemic, he shared his own experiences of vulnerability whilst reflecting on the state of the nation and the world in his weekly Friday emails. These emails as well as the regular zoom teas quickly became the highlights of the lock-down work week, at a time when many felt isolated. The NGP provided a refuge and space of care during times of disconnect.

Building a cohort based on a culture of belonging marks a significant contrast to the target-based approach inherent in other transformation initiatives. Shifting norms and values takes courage. Courage for UCT to have had the vision to create and resource the NGP in 2015, and to its commitment to find ways to continue beyond the retirement of the former NGP director. The trust that was placed in the former director to curate the cohort with relative autonomy is part of its success. The free-floating structure, untethered to a specific faculty or department, allowed the NGP to "fly under the radar", allowing for experimentation and flourishing. The success of the NGP is also clearly tied up with the courage of its leadership, to experiment with

doing things differently and in being the difference. The leadership of the former director gave the cohort confidence, clarity and courage which, in turn, led members to embrace leadership opportunities and responsibilities within UCT. By the end of 2021 eleven NGP members were acting or appointed as Heads of Department or Division. Many had also accepted stints as Deputy Deans. And 21 were members of Senate. Doing differently is shown to result in making a difference. The NGP attracted loyalty from its members which is a feature of feeling connected and belonging. Once academics became members they tended to remain, exiting only when promoted to full professor or leaving UCT for employment elsewhere. The NGP demonstrated the value of connection, caring and courage as cornerstones for re-imagining approaches to transformation.

## **BEING IN THE NGP AND IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH – NEW RESEARCH FOR A NEW WORLD**

The NGP brought people together from diverse disciplines, different faculties, people of different nationalities, race, gender, religion and age. The one thing that they all shared, however, was location in the global South. This proved to be a very strong point of connection and enabled new journeys into the world of collaborative and transdisciplinary research.

An NGP initiative was the creation of a Southern theory reading group led by the director of the NGP that took its inspiration from Raewyn Connell's *Southern Theory* (2007). The group met regularly to provide a space for knowledge sharing on issues emphasising context, decolonising knowledge production, and using knowledge for activism. Collegial dialogues continued in informal spaces of the NGP lunches and writing retreats. The reading group created room for experimenting, where one could push boundaries, and test ideas with colleagues, for new ways of teaching, research, and management for a new world. In turn NGP colleagues would in caring ways act as a trusted sounding board, sharing insights and contacts, to improve on projects, all with a deep sense of care.

The focus on the Southern location drew attention to Northern impositions of ideals on Southern contexts drawing parallels across different topics and disciplines on various challenges experienced across the globe. This did not mean rejecting projects from the North. In Southern contexts these challenges constellate in particular ways because of colonial histories and where inequalities and resources are different. Hence these conversations nudged one to embrace plural ways of knowing –to move from the *or* to the *and*. This shift opened space for diverse voices, diverse perspectives, for multiple alternatives and built and strengthened dialogue across disciplines and contexts. The value of transdisciplinary approaches to addressing these complex global issues, such as for example, supporting

breastfeeding at work or an equitable COVID-19 recovery, then became obvious (Jaga 2020; Jaga and Ollier-Malaterre 2022; Stumbitz and Jaga 2020).

Through trusted interactions the NGP helped grow the confidence of black and women academics. Many felt a sense of discomfort in continuing to research in ways that were dominant in their disciplines. The orthodoxy often enshrined male leadership and upheld Eurocentric ideas of knowledge and knowledge production. NGP encouraged women to challenge themselves and dominant discourses in their fields and to explore alternatives in a space where their performance was not being judged.

New questions were able to be asked, recognising multiple knowers and multiple knowledges, calling for partnerships while questioning universalisms. New ways of generating knowledge and practices can effect relevant change, advance equality, and contribute to social justice across the world. That the NGP had become a safe and trusted space to share incomplete ideas and vulnerabilities with other colleagues is where the true value lies and the impetus for transforming societies exists. If the academic project can foster this safety, care, and genuine trust that encourages being bold in following purpose then universities can redefine leadership from its southern location in the African context.

## **CONCLUSION**

By the end of 2021, NGP could boast of 33 promotions to Associate and Full Professor amongst its members. In quantitative terms, therefore, it could claim to have made a significant contribution to altering the demography of the institution's academic hierarchy. On the other hand we have argued that its greatest contribution was to show that building collegiality and a collective spirit was itself a contribution to transformation. The social environment of NGP produced new relationships and a host of collaborations, networks, knowledges and leaders. NGP took transformation to a deeper level, one not easily measured, but possibly more enduring.

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## **NOTE**

1. References to race are never without complication. In this article we use the unfortunate race labels bequeathed by apartheid – black, white, coloured and Indian – because these still have analytical

utility. Where universities receive a racial label – for example “UCT is a ‘white’ university”, we use single quotation marks to indicate that the label may not be accurate – all South African universities are open, not racially designated, institutions – but is nevertheless a commonly used way of describing such institutions.

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