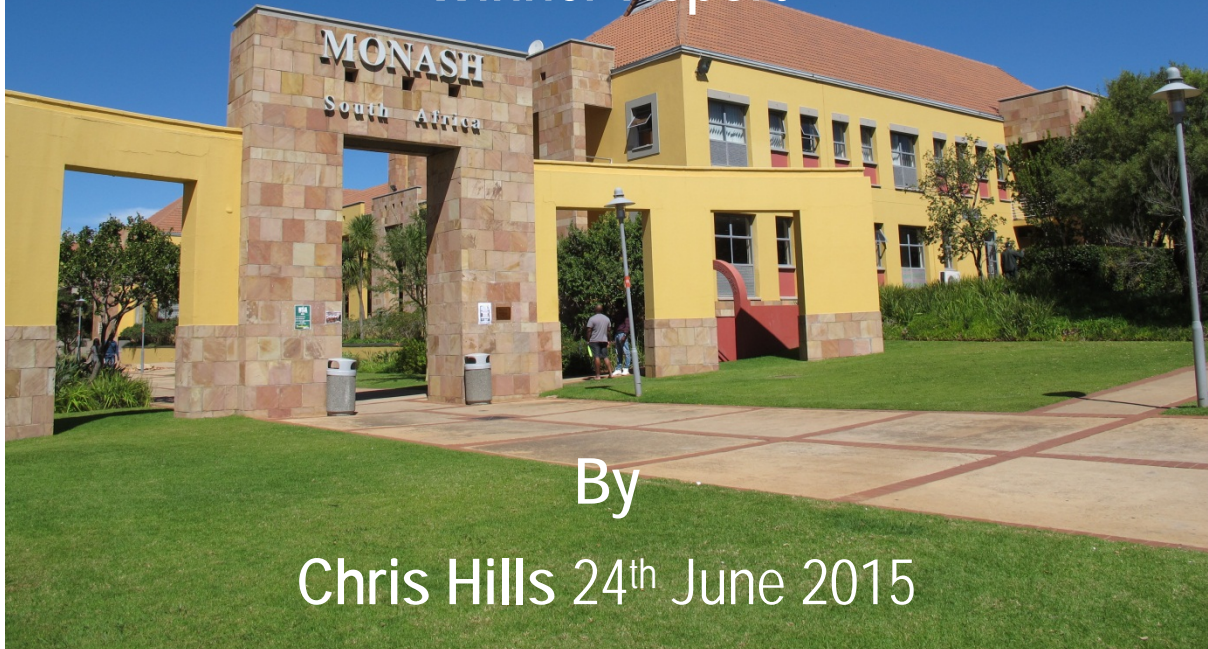


The 2014 MONASH / AFSAAP Postgraduate Prize Winner Report



By

Chris Hills 24th June 2015

From the relatively freezing conditions of my Sydney office I write this blog on reflection of a wonderful three months away...

I was lucky enough to be awarded the AFSAAP/Monash University prize for best postgraduate paper presented at the 2014 AFSAAP conference held in Dunedin, New Zealand in December of 2014. I received the good news in January, just as I was planning fieldwork for my PhD – some of which took place in South Africa – so the timing was great! My trip to SA was my sixth during the past decade, but the first where I have had the opportunity to talk about the nature of my research and conduct interviews for my thesis, which I did at multiple institutions. In South Africa I spent time travelling from Cape Town to Bloemfontein, Johannesburg and back to the Cape and enjoyed every minute of it.

March to May in SA this year was a particularly frenetic one on campuses and in some of the cities as an upsurge in xenophobic violence, the likes of which had been unseen since 2008 occurred, and huge protests were held at universities around the country surrounding the need to decolonize higher education. I spent a particularly riveting week at the University of the Free State attending multiple lunchtime seminars with University management, student representatives and academics on the issue of statues, memorials and decolonization. The students were particularly forthright in putting forward their ideas and all the discussions surrounding race, education, transformation and memorials were absolutely fascinating and – at times – heated and emotional.

The day at Monash ZA Campus at Roodeport on the outskirts of Johannesburg was one of the most enjoyable days of my entire three months away. Recently (2001) established, Monash has four schools, around 2,600 students and with the campus being on the outer edge of the city of Johannesburg means that it doesn't have the cramped feel of many of the other places of higher education I had visited. Many of the buildings are painted a bright yellow and combined with disposition of many of the staff and students, meant that I was made feel very welcome. My host, Kevin, who was the head of the Monash Society of Politics, gave me the grand tour whereby following I gave my presentation on post-conflict Liberia in a medium-sized lecture theatre to approximately 40-50 students and a few staff. The reception was great, I sensed that everyone was quite engaged and I received some valuable feedback and questions on my approach and the nature of my research. Following the talk and lunch with the Politics Society I was lucky enough to meet with both the senior members of the School of Social Sciences and the Monash South Africa Research Manager, both of whom showed a great interest in my work and who talked to me about the history of the university, Monash's ongoing relationship with AFSAAP and the complexities of work in the academy in a South African context. I left Monash that day vowing to return and to see how this impressive small institution flourishes in the years to come.

After my day at Monash, my fieldwork took me to other universities within South Africa, but also later to Kenya, Uganda and Ghana. Many of these places I had been before, however without such a strict timeframe, and without having to meet so many deadlines for interviews. Though South Africa was definitely logistically the easiest of all four, I enjoyed my time in all the different countries, for different reasons. East Africa was great to see old friends, revel in the busy nature of Kampala and Nairobi; Ghana was memorable for being able to soak up the history of the Nkrumah mausoleum and spend time at a super impressive West African University; and South Africa for the chance to speak at Monash, UCT and UFS, to see the Comaroffs speak in Bloemfontein, to interview some of my academic idols during the course of my fieldwork and to once again walk up and enjoy a beer at the top of Table Mountain.

Sitting back in the familiar surrounds of Sydney Uni campus on reflection the three months seems to have passed by in an instant. Yet this fleeting trip was one which was full of great memories, some really valuable empirical research and one that also helped to boost my confidence by putting my research out there in an African setting. Being able to double up the AFSAAP/Monash talk with my interviews made it all so much easier financially and I thank both AFSAAP and Monash University for this. I would implore upon any and all postgrads thinking of applying for the prize this year to absolutely go for it. I didn't think I would be in with a chance, however as the one lucky enough to win, I can assure you it is not only great for your C.V., but also is the perfect way to get your research out there in a supportive and exciting academic setting on the continent.

I wish you luck this year.

Best,

Chris