On Pipelines and Precarity: Competing Narratives on the Roles and Functions of Postdocs in South African Higher Education

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Abstract

It is broadly understood that postdoctoral research fellows (hereafter postdocs) play a significant role in higher education's research outputs, teaching and learning, and the rating and ranking of an institution. Largely shaped by the neoliberal turn(s) in higher education from the late 1970s and 1980s, postdocs have become an indispensable yet precarious labour force that higher education institutions have come to rely on. In the South African context, research on postdoc fellowships is relatively new, with limited scholarship focusing on the narratives and voices of these marginalised scholars. In this article, I purposively recruited and interviewed 23 former and current postdocs in three research-intensive universities in South Africa as well as a university vice dean of research, and a former senior official of the Department of Higher Education and Training. I also consulted and analysed various South African higher education policy documents and ministerial articulations regarding postdocs in the country. Through the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews, two competing narratives emerged from the data—that is, the deeply rooted and entrenched idea of the postdoc system as a *pipeline* for novice researchers to transition into established scholars, and the idea of the postdocs as *precarious* scholars whose academic labour is insecure, unstable, and exploited in the university. I conclude the article with some broad systemic implications on the role and function of postdocs in South African higher education, and the need for more research to understand these marginalised scholars.

Keywords: postdocs; higher education; neoliberalism; precarity

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Introduction

In early 2023, the University of Johannesburg (UJ), one of the research-intensive universities in South Africa, released a call for applications for 200 postdoctoral research fellow (postdoc) opportunities, looking for "dynamic candidates" who could exploit the "transformative potential of 4IR technologies in addressing the global Sustainable Development Goals" (UJ 2024). What was particularly interesting about this advertisement was not necessarily the number or volume of postdoc opportunities that were offered (although that was surprising too), but rather the honesty that accompanied that call. The call was accompanied by a notice reminding prospective applicants about the global rankings of the university and articulated the vision of where the university saw itself in the future, in both the rankings and the Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved. This advertisement revealed a deeply embedded conception, at least in this South African university, that recognises the value of postdocs in helping higher education institutions to achieve their research targets, teaching and learning responsibilities, and ratings and rankings.

Research on postdocs in the South African context is relatively new, with scholars beginning to shine a spotlight on the lack of a coherent pathway and professionalisation of the postdoc system in the country, as well as a growing sense that postdocs are "scholars in the margins" (see Kerr 2022a; Simmonds and Bitzer 2017). A large number of the research articles and texts on postdocs continue to have a Global North gaze, with dominant narratives, voices, and experiences coming from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia (see for example Afonja et al. 2021; Chakraverty 2020; Culpepper et al. 2021; Mendez et al. 2023; Woolston 2020a, 2020b; Yadav et al. 2020). Largely missing and under-emphasised in the South African literature are the postdocs' narratives, voices, experiences, and how they grapple with the postdoc system in their lives. In this article, I build on the work of Kerr (2022a, 2022b) and propose what I see as the two emerging, competing, and contradictory narratives on the role and function of postdocs in South African higher education. This, I suggest, has implications for the country's ambitious goals of attracting, retaining, and mentoring the next generation of academics.

Postdocs in Higher Education

As a category within the early career academics (ECAs), postdoc research is extensively researched globally (see for example Aprile, Ellem, and Lole 2021; Bosanquet, Mantai, and Fredericks 2020; Hollywood et al. 2020; Leenen-Young et al. 2021; Spina et al. 2022). Conceptually, there is no universally agreed-upon understanding of what a "postdoc" is and what their responsibilities are. Manual (cited in OECD 2015, 14) defines a postdoc as a "newly qualified doctoral graduate … recruited for a fixed term without the prospect of extension, either with an employment contract or a stipend". This definition is problematic as it potentially includes part-time researchers, assistant professors, or other research posts at a university. At the University of Johannesburg, a postdoc is a "transitionary phase, intended to bridge the gap from doctoral graduation

to employment" (UJ 2024). The postdoc fellowship aims to "fast track further development and honing of [postdocs'] research and professional skills in preparation for future academic or another professional career" (UJ 2024). The same conceptual understanding is also seen at the University of Cape Town (UCT), where postdocs are classified as "individuals who undertake research and gain professional experience for a future academic career, under the mentorship of a host/principal investigator" (UCT 2024). The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), another research-intensive university in South Africa, is unambiguous on the precarious nature of the postdoc fellowship, stating that on "termination, there should be no expectation of employment with the University", with an additional ominous warning that "although exceptions occur, there can be no expectation of further fixed period contracts either on the same or similar terms or on less favourable terms" (Wits 2024, 7).

Postdocs are neither staff nor students. They occupy this liminal space of instability and insecurity. They are short-term, fixed-term contract researchers who are employed within five years of having completed their doctoral qualifications. Postdocs are assigned a mentor, host, or supervisor to work with them, who are meant to guide and assist them in learning about research and publishing. This, it is hoped, helps postdocs to become established scholars in the field. Their roles and responsibilities vary depending on the institutions, departments, and the allocated host. Some postdocs focus exclusively on research production, while others take on teaching responsibilities, some supervision (often with their host), and grant-related work. Thus, it is difficult to generalise about a postdoc due to how complex and varied postdocs are, even at the same university and department. However, as Van Benthem et al. (2020) have asserted, traditionally a postdoc was never meant to be a long-term appointment, but a short-term position for PhD graduates to transition from doctoral work to a post in the university. Daniels (2015), Jadavji et al. (2016), and Mitchell et al. (2013) argue that universities are increasingly witnessing what they term a "postdoc-pile", with some postdocs spending on average four to six years on a postdoc fellowship, that is, being stuck in long-term postdoc programmes, and being unable to obtain a permanent academic post in the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. Powell (2015) writes about the emergence of this postdoc pile-up, commenting on one postdoc's experience of spending 12 years on a postdoc programme, and concluding that the postdoc system is fundamentally "broken". Simmonds and Bitzer (2018), in the South African context, reveal that the postdoc system is characterised by the "struggles [they] endured in establishing permanent employment", resulting in precarity and employment insecurity becoming permanent features of their career paths.

Research on postdocs has largely focused on the professional training aspects and the extent to which they help postdocs to become independent researchers (Horta 2009; McAlpine 2014; Melin and Janson 2006; Yadav and Seals 2019), the growing internationalisation of postdocs (Cantwell and Tyalor 2013; Li and Xue 2022), the factors that lead to postdocs leaving academia (Dorenkamp and Weiß 2018), the racial under-representation in postdoc opportunities and its implication for retention

possibilities (Eisen and Eaton 2017; Patt, Eppig, and Richards 2022; Yadav et al. 2020), and postdocs as precarious scholars (Jones and Oakley 2018; Simmonds and Bitzer 2018).

In a chapter titled "Global Perspectives on the Postdoctoral Scholar Experience", Holley et al. (2018) trace global postdoc experiences by focusing on Australia, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands, and South Africa, revealing the growing neoliberal logic that shapes and influences how higher education institutions think through and conceptualise postdocs' roles. For Holley et al., this is part of a much broader agenda where students have become fee-paying clients and customers, while "courses become products for marketing within the society where they are located" (Holley et al. 2018, 205). The postdocs have had to adapt and respond to this neoliberal climate through: 1) engaging in competition with other early career academics in competition for scarce academic posts, 2) navigating that nostalgic sense that academic employment is no longer as stable, comfortable, and secure as it once was, and 3) having to contend with career development that is increasingly putting a strain on them (Holley et al. 2018, 204–205).

In another article, I argue that the precarious nature of postdocs signifies the neoliberal turns(s) in higher education as represented by the commodification, casualisation, and corporatisation of the public university (Hlatshwayo 2024; see also Badat 2023; Hall 2016, 2018). Students have become fee-paying clients entitled to the curriculum goods of the university, with academics becoming what Mamdani (2007) calls the "scholars in the marketplace". This neoliberal turn in higher education, beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, continues to have real and material effects on the decline of state subsidies for higher education, the introduction of quality assurance regimes, performance management instruments, ratings and rankings—all designed to bring about the "knowledge economy" (Boughey and McKenna 2021). Writing about the invention and social construction of precarity in the German higher education system, Gallas (2018) reveals the intersectional mechanics that drive the scarcity of mid-level academic jobs together with the "publish or perish" pressure ensuring that academics struggle to obtain permanent jobs. Thus, the precarity of academic labour in higher education should be read as part of the growing managerialism, extractivist logic, and capitalist accumulation designed to access, withdraw, and exploit academic labour with little cost. Other research has looked at the bibliographic inequality in terms of the unequal knowledge production on postdocs between the Global North and Global South (see Moyo 2022), as well as the shifting research trends and patterns over decades (see Prozesky 2021).

From the limited publicly available data, in 2007 there were 615 postdocs in the South African higher education sector, and by 2019, this number had increased to 2,867 (Prozesky and Van Schalkwyk 2024, 2–3). In gender terms (between 2005–2010), 40% of postdocs in South Africa were women, while the majority (60%) were men. In the 2011–2016 reporting period, Prozesky and Van Schalkwyk (2024) further reveal that 62% of all postdocs in the country were not South African, thus reflecting the

international trends and patterns confirming that postdocs generally do not undertake postdoc work in their native country (Holley et al. 2018). Very little is known about the plight, voices, and narratives of postdocs in South Africa, including a comprehensive account of their age, contribution, numbers, retention in the sector, and their complex career pathways (CHE 2022, 2). In this study, I contribute to this emerging body of research that explores and theorises the complex voices, narratives, and experiences of postdocs in South African higher education. I reveal the tensions and competing narratives on the roles, functions, and purposes of postdocs.

In the recent report titled *New Guidelines for the Appointment, Retention and Development of Postdoctorates*, Van Schalkwyk (2024) released a progressive and integrated set of guidelines, including those for postdocs, university administrators, the Department of Home Affairs, the South African Revenue Service (SARS), and Universities South Africa (USAf), which are all designed to take into account the diverse and broad nature of the postdoc experience in South Africa. Although not enforceable and purely advisory at this point, these guidelines propose that postdoc appointments be extended from the current term of 12 months (1 year) to a minimum of 24 months (2 years). This will helpfully bring stability, and allow the postdoc to focus on their research commitments without the pressures of producing research units at a fast-paced rate that is unrealistic, inhumane, and not sustainable.

It is nearly impossible to write about precarity in South African higher education, and globally, and the challenges of postdocs without at least commenting on the funding constraints that continue to cripple the post-school education and training (PSET) sector. In the latest South African "Ministerial Statement on University Funding 2024/25–2026/27", the block grants earmarked for universities have been increasing at 0.9%, 0.5%, 5.9% and 4.9%, all below the national inflation in the country (DHET 2024, 3). In real terms, the declines in PSET budgetary allocations over the years reveal the mismatch between a growing sector that has over 1.2 million student enrolment in higher education while the economic and infrastructural investments in the sector are experiencing gradual declines and under-funding. This has resulted in some universities opting to freeze permanent academic posts and relying on part-time contract posts to fulfil their teaching and learning commitments.

Research Methods

In this study, I share some findings of a national research project that focused on the experiences of postdocs in three universities in South Africa—two research-intensive institutions based in the Gauteng province, and one historically black university in the Eastern Cape. Through purposive and convenient sampling, I interviewed 23 current and former postdocs, a senior Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) official, and a deputy dean of research. For my intellectual and philosophical positionality, I am attracted to the critical paradigm, as propounded by leading scholars such as Horkheimer, who argues that "when an active individual of sound common sense perceives the sordid state of the world, desire to change it becomes the guiding

principle by which he organises given facts and shapes them into a theory" (cited in Brincat 2012, 220). For the critical paradigm, exploring, understanding, and conceptualising challenges in society is not enough—research (and education in general) ought to have an emancipatory function rooted in revealing and explicating power, inequality, marginality, and structural oppression. Thus, focusing on postdocs as "scholars in the margins" (Nowell, Grant, and Mikita 2019) aligns with my aim of revealing the deeply embedded competing and contradictory narratives that postdocs confront, and the need to resolve and confront these competing and contradictory narratives.

For this project, I received the necessary ethical clearance and gatekeeper permissions from the three participating universities. The interviews ranged between 45 minutes to two hours in duration. The questions posed to the research participants focused on three aspects of their professional lives: 1) questions on their experiences during their postdoc fellowship, 2) questions on the different types of support they received or did not receive during their postdoc fellowship, and finally, 3) questions on the effect that precarity, casualisation, and employment insecurity have on their lives.

All the research participants gave their consent both in writing and through digital audio recordings. As the literature suggests, postdocs are marginalised, vulnerable, and precarious scholars (see Holley et al. 2018; Nowell, Grant, and Mikita 2019; Van Benthem et al. 2020; Woolston 2020a), and it was important for me to protect the identities of the research participants to enable a safe, conducive, and ethical environment that would ensure that they were free to express themselves without fear of retribution. Thus pseudonyms were used to hide and protect the identities of the research participants.

There were 22 black participants and three white participants; 15 were women and 10 were men. The disciplinary backgrounds were Business Management, Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science, Higher Education Studies, Education Leadership and Management, Psychology, Mathematics, Disability Studies and Sexualities, and Gender and Queer Studies.

Furthermore, various South African higher education policy documents and ministerial public articulations were consulted and analysed as they offered key insights and perspectives into the public discourse (and state thinking) on attracting, retaining, and supporting the next generation of scholars in the country. The policies that were consulted and analysed included the *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for Higher Education Transformation* (Department of Education [DoE] 1997), *The Draft National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa* (DoE 2001), *The Report on the Stakeholder Summit on Higher Education Transformation* (DoE 2010), *The National Development Plan* (National Planning Commission [NPC] 2012), *The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training: Building an Expanded, Effective and Integrated Post-School System* (DHET 2013), *The Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework*

(DHET 2015), *The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training* (DHET 2017), *A Study on Building a Cadre of Emerging Scholars for Higher Education in South Africa* (DST 2018), the *Report of the Ministerial Task Team on the Recruiting, Retention, and Progression of Black South African Academics* (DHET 2019), a ministerial statement (Nzimande 2015), and a National Research Foundation postdoc statement (NRF 2023).

I now turn to the findings.

The Two Narratives on Postdocs

The major theme that emerged from the data is the idea of two competing and contrasting narratives around the roles, functions, and purposes of postdocs in South African higher education. The first narrative, that is the pipeline narrative, suggests that the postdoc is a pathway to permanent academic employment in higher education. And, through the postdoc fellowship, one will gain the necessary skills, attributes, and dispositions that will help one transition into established researchers. There are at least three operational discourses that dominate the pipeline narrative—that is, the idea of the postdocs as: 1) a coherent and integrated pathway into permanent academic employment for ECAs, 2) the deeply implicit idea that the postdoc journey is a necessary skills training programme useful for the professional development of the postdoc in helping them to learn what it means to be an academic, and 3), the assumption that the postdoc fellowship is a useful strategy for tackling the ageing and untransformed academic workforce in the South African higher education system. This is evident in the following statements:

> The challenge is multi-faceted, having to do with the slow pace of transformation, regeneration and change, the ageing workforce, developments in higher education worldwide that demand ever greater levels of expertise from staff, the relatively underqualified academic staff workforce, and low numbers of postgraduate students representing an inadequate pipeline for the recruitment of future academics. (Nzimande 2015)

> Student funding for postgraduate studies must be enhanced to attract high-achieving students to continue to doctoral and postdoctoral programmes and into the academy … This will require "fit-for-purpose" financial packages that respond to the challenges that prevent students, especially South African black and female students, from progressing effectively along this pathway. (DST 2019, 9)

> The NRF's Postdoctoral Fellowship programmes provide funding for young scientists and professionals of the highest calibre to receive postdoctoral research training and international exposure to strengthen their research profiles and career advancement. These are individuals who have completed their doctoral degree studies and are working towards developing their careers as academic researchers. (NRF 2023)

For Nzimande, the postdoc fellowship is an opportunity to achieve the demographic transformation targets in South African universities, to change the ageing (and white) workforce in the academy as well as to enable academics to compete in the knowledge economy (DHET 2015). The postdoc system, at least at policy level, is meant to be some form of training programme on academic labour, and what is required in higher education. Some participants who took part in the study, including a current deputy dean of research at a research-intensive university in Johannesburg, supported this pipeline narrative, arguing that the "basic purpose of the PDRF programme was to drive a halfway house to full academic status" in the university (Interview, Sean).

Scholars such as Ysseldyk et al. (2019), Kerr (2022a), and Dubois-Shaik, Fusulier, and Vincke (2018) critique this understanding of the postdoc as a coherent and integrated pipeline into permanent academic employment. They suggest that if the postdoc is meant to serve as a pipeline into an academic career in higher education, then this pipeline is "broken" and "leaking". They argue that the pipeline discourse is strategically employed to hide the employment precarity, casualisation, exploitation, and abuse that postdocs experience, often at the presumed altar of "growth", "development", and "mentorship" in higher education. In "Career Development or Career Delay? Postdoctoral Fellowships and the De-Professionalizing of Academic Work in South African Universities", Kerr (2022a) rejects the pipeline discourse as limited, unhelpful, and dangerous, as it seeks to normalise and legitimate the de-professionalising of postdocs as they are treated as "postgraduate students" instead of professional employees who work and strive for the university. Extending Kerr's (2022a) critique, the liminal space that postdocs occupy in neither being staff nor students appears deliberate, intentional, and political as it creates conditions of possibility that enable and facilitate the precarity, exploitation, and abuse of postdocs. Put differently, this liminal space of postdocs being neither staff nor students not only creates the precarity that underpins the postdoc fellowship, but also makes them vulnerable and susceptible to abuse and exploitation. In the Gramscian sense (Hlatshwayo 2024), the liminal space is reflective and symbolic of the organic crisis that characterises the very social construction, design, and implementation of the postdoc programmes.

The pipeline narrative, supported through state policies, government public statements, and funding agencies, is counter to the precarity narrative on the role and functions of postdocs in South Africa. A large number of postdocs who took part in the study expressed some frustration, anxiety, pressure, vulnerability, and exploitation in the university. They had concerns around the postdoc pile-up in their lives, not feeling secure, and the effects of employment precarity. The research participants, Thabang, Jacob, and Khosi narrate these challenges:

> No, I am not happy. There's no way I can be happy. If it was the PDRF alone, without maybe getting an additional top-up, I wouldn't even know what to do. I cannot buy a

> house, I cannot buy a car, I do not have an account, because I do not have a payslip. And it's so painful man! (Interview, Thabang)

> You are brought in as a … as a carthorse or workhorse, and, and then there's no real security. You've got no pension, you've got no medical aid, I mean, to … You're going essentially, from month to month. It's a fixed term contract, and it's six months, and you don't know whether that six month is going to be renewed. If it is, then it's another six months. (Interview, Jacob)

> I think I'm the oldest fellow in the programme and I don't know even if there are others that joined maybe during the same year would be two or three. I joined my post-doctoral fellowship in 2017. Counting the years from 2017 to 2023 although maybe 2023 is not yet the full year I have been in the programme I would say five full years as this is my sixth year in the programme. You never feel secure here, especially considering the age that we are having family, having children and having something that would carry us is not secure that you don't even know when you would be renewed, not because maybe you haven't done your work. You have submitted your work and did everything and if anything goes wrong you know that is the end of you. (Interview, Khosi)

In the above quotations, Thabang, Jacob, and Khosi comment on the intersectional challenges of navigating employment precarity, casualisation, and job insecurity, and their effects on their well-being and mental health. For Thabang, the additional employment "top-up" from extra work enabled him to survive the limited stipend from the postdoc fellowship. Jacob felt like he was the "workhorse" of the university in carrying out the teaching and research commitments on a limited short-term contract, with no guarantee of renewal or extensions. More troubling was Khosi's reflection on how she had been a postdoc for almost six years from 2016–2023, echoing the growing concern in the literature with the permanent nature of the "postdoc-ism" and postdoc-pile that was increasingly becoming the new normal in the higher education sector (see also Powell 2015). For Badat (2023), Hall (2016), and Giroux (2010), employment precarity, casualisation, and job insecurity are by-products of the neoliberal effects in higher education, with the growing massification, brain circulation, and competition for scarce academic posts confronting state declines in public funding and proletarianisation of the university workforce. In another article (see Hlatshwayo 2022), I argue that the most damaging effect that neoliberal policies and logics have had on higher education as a sector is the erosion of higher education as a public good necessary for the growth and development of a democratic society (Ndaba 2022a, 2022b; Unterhalter et al. 2019). Higher education is seen as a private good, beneficial to one's self-interest (Hlatshwayo 2022). It seems like postdocs have become the latest victims in neoliberalism's sustained war on higher education, and the commodification of the sector.

Often unseen, invisible, and misrecognised is how the employment precarity can appear to be gendered, sexist, and at times, patriarchal, with women postdocs reflecting on the care work that they need to take on in balancing precarity, family, and work

responsibilities. Writing about what they call the "Black nannies" of the university, Magoqwana, Maqabuka, and Tshoaedi (2019) remind us about un-seen, un-recognised and un-rewarded emotional labour that black women academics take on, often at the expense of their well-being, growth, and progress in the university. This is similar to Coate, Kandiko Howson, and de St Croix's (2015) work on middle-career academic women and how they respond to the pressures of prestige, or what Bourdieu termed the symbolic capital, revealing the ambivalent pressures that women experience when it comes to gaining recognition despite knowing the "rules of the game", and how flawed they are.

England et al. (2016) extend the above argument and suggest that there is also a "motherhood penalty", with organisations tending to see mothers as less committed and less dedicated to their work, simply because they have additional responsibilities as mothers. Although it is not a major theme in the data, the issues of gender surface, with one of the research participants, Benita, narrating the complex challenge of balancing precarity, motherhood, and work in her life, and the impossibility of this task:

> I've got a younger child who's three and half, so you can imagine. It's quite challenging. I don't have a helper at home, so everything depends on me. I've got a child that I have to take care of, and single parenting on top of that. Yes, and I've got two grown-up kids. The other one is at university doing his second year, and then the other one is at a boarding school doing his Grade 9. But the bigger boys are not with me. I have to be in touch with the school. I have to be constantly in touch with this one at varsity. Am also a supervisor again, I must remember when you are a supervisor you put on different kinds of shoes. You have to meet and find a balance. And the role as the researcher for this side, it involves a lot of travelling which when I'm travelling, I have to make plans for this leaving this little one. It's really hard. (Interview, Benita)

Overall, the two emerging narratives on the roles and functions of the postdocs are in tension and conflict with each other. The national policies, public statements, and funding agencies see and read the postdoc through the conceptual understanding of the *pipeline narrative*, that is, the postdoc journey as a useful, necessary, and developmental programme that will help novice scholars transition into a permanent academic career in higher education. Counter to that is the *precarity narrative*, which reflects the employment insecurity, short-term contracts, and casualisation that postdocs need to negotiate in their lives. I now turn to the implications of these two narratives for the future of postdocs and the South African higher education system.

On Implications, and Recommendations

The emerging pipeline and precarity narratives on the roles, functions, and purposes of postdocs in South Africa have at least two sets of implications for the postdocs themselves and the future of the higher education system in the country. The first implication concerns the absence of a national legislation and framework that governs and protects the rights and responsibilities of postdocs in South African higher

education. The absence of this national framework means that there is not adequate clarity on a number of issues: how many postdocs are currently in South Africa, how many are South Africans, how many are women, which fields dominate the research agenda of postdocs in the country, what their contributions are, their total annual research outputs, their interests, what affects their well-being, and perhaps, most important for me, the retention abilities of the postdoc system in enabling and facilitating transitions into permanent academic posts. Put differently, in the absence of well-enshrined (and codified) rights and responsibilities for postdocs, there is limited aid and support for a postdoc who might be having challenges with their hosts or departments. This national legislation or framework will be crucial to understanding the complex realities of postdocs in South African universities and the targeted support they require.

The second implication, directly connected with the first, concerns the liminal space that postdocs occupy in the South African higher education system. As in other countries globally (see Afonja et al. 2021; Chakraverty 2020; Mendez et al. 2023; Powell 2015; Woolston 2020b; Ysseldyk et al. 2019), postdocs are neither staff nor students, and occupy this precarious, insecure, economically and politically unstable liminal space in the academy. They cannot resort to the student representative councils (SRC) for interventions or the university's human resources for guidance. They are an expendable workforce whose precarious labour can easily be accessed, exploited, and discarded. This liminal space of instability has resulted in higher education institutions embracing the logic of mass production and quantity, often at the expense of quality, impact, and postdocs' well-being.

It is in this liminal space that Rhoades (2023) suggests that postdocs in the United States organised and mobilised themselves in forming national associations and trade unions to secure some labour and national bargaining rights. Additionally, these national associations and trade unions offer targeted support for postdocs, advocate their interests, fight for their rights, as well as organise mass support for their issues. I should acknowledge that a National Postdoctoral Fellowship Research Forum has been established recently. It is my hope that in the future, this forum could emerge as a national association with a footprint in all 26 public universities in the country, with real public funding and support from DHET that could enable this organisation to be a formidable force in advocating for the rights of postdocs in South Africa. Furthermore, and in response to the first implication, these national postdoc organisations could begin to trace, monitor, and map the number of postdocs in the country, their well-being, contributions, and their pressing demands.

Conclusion

In this article, I briefly explored what I see as two emerging narratives on the roles, functions, and purposes of postdocs in South African higher education. These two narratives—the pipeline narrative and the precarity narrative—shape, influence, and affect the postdoc experience in the country. The pipeline narrative is premised on the

(flawed) logic that the postdoc journey is a developmental post-PhD opportunity that equips postdocs with the much-needed skills to transition into established scholars in the field. This narrative is strongly articulated and finds expression in national higher education policies, government public statements, as well as critical funding agencies on their postdoc fellowship. It represents and signifies the country's thinking on postdocs, and their roles, purposes, and functions in the higher education sector. The precarity narrative largely serves as a counter to the pipeline discourse, exposing the often hidden and overlooked experiences of postdocs in negotiating precarity, insecurity, casualisation, and employment insecurity. Although not a major theme in the findings, I also revealed, in part, the gendered and sexist nature of the postdoc programmes, and how women postdocs have to balance research, supervision, and motherhood responsibilities in their lives. I reflect a growing sense that the invisible care work that women postdocs (and professional women in general) perform in their daily lives is not seen, valued, and recognised. I end the article with some broad reflections on the need for national legislation and a framework for postdocs to map, trace, and monitor the postdoc experience at a national level.

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