



# Potholes in the academy: Navigating toxic academic practices in South Africa

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## Abstract

Anyone who has attended an academic conference will have witnessed the number of exceptional projects and research produced by and conducted at various institutions, often led by one or two well-known professors. Despite mostly limited budgets, these professors, academic “rockstars”, if you will, (Smyth, 2017, p. 99) manage to produce many publications in the form of books, reports, policy briefs, op-eds, and attend conferences while managing full teaching loads and supervising lots of postgraduate students. So how do they manage? Without faculty-appointed support, such as Teaching Assistants, these senior academics often use their postgraduate students to do the substantial groundwork in the name of so-called capacity building to get what is known as the much-needed experience they need to advance their careers. In this paper, I discuss toxic academic practices and their impact on new and emerging researchers. Through a critical analysis, I demonstrate that toxic academic practices persist partly because of neoliberal policy contexts created in and through marketisation and techno-rationalism. Using the theoretical lens of Betrayal Trauma Theory (Freyd, 1994) I suggest that creating healthy academic work environments is crucial to realising higher education policy imperatives in South Africa. In this paper, I contribute to an under-discussed challenge in the South African academy, and I highlight how universities, through their philosophies and policies, often reward poor academic behaviour and perpetuate toxic academic environments and discrimination.

**Keywords:** toxic academic practices, techno-rational university, neoliberal policy, university marketisation, social justice, higher education, well-being

## Introduction

Challenges in higher education have intensified given the pervasiveness of toxic academic practices. Contributions to this special issue reflect on ten years of building and maintaining an exceptional academic community that has collaboratively contributed to the discourse on education research in South Africa. However, while it is important to reflect on the gains, it is equally important to use this platform to advocate for socially just, healthy, respectful, and inclusive working relationships and work environments to improve the context of higher

education in South Africa for everyone but, more specifically, for young and emerging researchers. In discussing the phenomenon of toxic academic practices, I make a key contribution to the literature on the mental well-being and experiences of emerging researchers in South Africa.

The COVID-19 pandemic made visible several cracks and weaknesses in education systems globally. Part of this enlightenment was the realisation that teachers at all levels, including academics, often suffer from poor mental health. Academic pressure, compounded by the pandemic, has resulted in “the great resignation in higher education” (Schmiedehaus et al., 2023, p. 1), with poor organisational support, high levels of exhaustion and low levels of compassion being key motivations to leave. It is important that academics learn to take care to create institutional environments that allow others to take care and privilege their well-being. The form, reach, and impact of this special issue provides a critical platform from which to discuss challenges that may undermine the quality of education research in South Africa and to normalise discussions that are often sidelined.

This contribution is a critical analysis of the experiences of young and emerging researchers using Betrayal Trauma Theory (Freyd, 1994) to understand how neoliberalist policies, together with the marketisation and techno rationalism of the university, contribute to creating and perpetuating toxic academic practices and, subsequently, institutional cultures. I problematise how the university, as a site of contention, grapples with balancing public interest with commercial ideologies and, in doing so, perpetuates toxic academic practices rather than addressing them. Furthermore, universities ought to be spaces in which young, aspiring, and promising individuals develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to continue the quest for knowledge and social advancement in a healthy, developmental environment. If toxic academic practices at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are not addressed, the integrity of the academy is at risk.

After the introduction, I situate the discussion of toxic academic practices in higher education in South Africa by highlighting historical legacies, linking Bourdieu’s (2018) idea of institutional subjectivity, and the challenge of reconciling the notion of the public good with prevailing experiences and challenges in higher education. I then discuss the theoretical framework and dedicate the next two sections to defining toxicity in academia and providing some empirical studies relating to this, after which I outline my methodology. I then discuss some key drivers of toxic academia using the values that underpin neoliberal policies, university marketisation, and the impact of university ranking systems together with techno-rationalism as they relate to publications and incentives in the South African academy. In the concluding section, I summarise the focus of the paper and offer suggestions for creating university spaces that are underpinned by integrity and respect.

## Situating the debate

A discussion of education, including higher education in South Africa, is incomplete without acknowledging the historical legacies that have shaped the institutions we have today.

Contemporary student experiences in higher education are situated between a draconian past and a more hopeful democratic future. Despite having ushered in a democratic dispensation, HEIs remain a significant remnant of apartheid and colonial constructs that have not been fully dismantled in the post-apartheid context.

The policy mechanisms instituted by the post-apartheid government resulted in significant changes in South African higher education. The creation of new universities, merging others, and restructuring departments were only three of the instituted changes. However, as Bourdieu pointed out, an institution is successful if it can “exist twice, both in objectivity and subjectivity, in things and minds” (2018, p. 115). The objective dimension, he argued, consists of the rules and regulations of the institution, and the subjective dimension refers to the mental structures and social experiences. In the post-apartheid context, transformation has focused largely on objective transformation (i.e. institutional changes such as mergers and policy changes) with less attention being paid to the personal experiences of staff and students, although the latter issue has received increased focus since the student protests of 2015. In this paper, I centre the subjective dimension by focussing on the experiences of emerging researchers.

The second important concept that frames this paper is the role of the university as a public good in the South African context. As Ndofirepi and Cross (2017) have highlighted, one of the key concerns in higher education today is the extent to which universities contribute to the public good. The basic premise of a public good in the context of higher education is that an educated population will benefit humanity.

But, while higher education is still argued to be a public good, in the last 30 to 40 years, there has been a “shift in the normative terrain” that gives rise to the “‘hollowed-out’ university, the idea, that is, of a university without an ‘ethical centre’” (May, 2001, cited in Cribb & Gerwitz, 2012, p. 342). May’s work is particularly useful here since it indicates how corporate culture, including managerialism, has taken a foothold and redefined academic culture and academic success. Cribb and Gerwitz (2012) have also referenced the increasing corporatisation of higher education institutions and suggest that

[t]he conception of the university as a large corporate organisation concerned with performance management and productivity can also be seen in processes of massification in relation to teaching activities, for example, the steady rise in student’s numbers and the proliferation of programmes. (p. 341)

The idea of the public good, to which universities have an obligation, dates back to the advent of the first European universities (Cuthill, 2012). The South African understanding of the public good is intertwined with the experiences of liberal Western societies, suggesting that the prevailing understanding of the public good in South Africa has a limited history and has not been properly rooted in local experiences. Marginson (2014) argued that the notion of the public good has become ideologically frozen and that we need to look beyond liberal Western understandings because the idea of public good differs considerably between different geopolitical spaces. He noted,

There is no good reason to treat the Anglo-American approach to public/private as normative. Any of the differing national/ cultural traditions have the potential to contribute to the common pool of ideas about and practices of the collective aspects of human existence—including the public dimension of higher education, and strategies for augmenting it. (p. 2)

This sentiment is shared by Molebatsi (2022), who wrote that universities are engaged in place-based development that takes their location into account, and pointed out that this has implications for how the relationships between universities, the public sphere, and the public good are understood.

In South Africa, students enter universities from positions of extreme inequality. This suggests that the notion of what counts as the public in the public good, has never been fully inclusive. As Unterhalter et al. (2019) observed, in relation to colonised states in Africa, “to the colonial administration, the kind of higher education that was thought to promote the public good was one tuned to consolidating the foundations of the colonial economy” (p. 13). Vocational education was never included in higher education since universities cultivated a specific kind of knowledge that fostered a particular cultural capital. Chetty and Pather (2015) astutely noted that one of the fundamental reasons why students from disadvantaged backgrounds fail in South African universities, is that they do not possess the cultural capital necessary for success. Cultural capital is defined as a social currency with embedded value propositions and experiences that help navigate new spaces, including institutions. In South Africa, students often feel alienated from these institutions because the culture is foreign and all-encompassing. The link between cultural capital and higher education is best articulated by Bourdieu (1973) in his paper, *Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction*, in which he highlights three ways in which a person can demonstrate cultural capital: the knowledge an individual possesses; physical objectives that hold social significance; and society’s own views of a person’s cultural capital (the latter often reinforced by institutional norms and behaviours). Given South Africa’s political history and current student experiences, particularly of previously marginalised groups, it raises the question, has the post-apartheid South African university ever been a public good for the *whole* public? Unterhalter and Allais (2022) claimed that a good is public when it extends beyond an individual, thus suggesting a universal benefit. However, looking at the widening inequalities in South Africa, the notion of the public is contested and problematic.

## Theoretical framing

This critical analysis aims to discuss what remains largely “unthought” (Hartman & Wilderson, 2003, p. 184) and often unspoken to enable, more aggressively, certain narratives in the South African Education Research Academy. A psychological theory underscores the discussions about toxic leadership and toxic academic environments since it is useful to highlight the mental anguish and the effects caused by toxic academic practices.

As mentioned above, I use Freyd's (1994) Betrayal Trauma Theory, which speaks to the relational dimension of the phenomenon (i.e. toxic academic practices) through the practices of mentoring, supervising, and teaching. Freyd suggested that abused individuals develop amnesia as a survival and coping mechanism when they are abused by caretakers and by people whom they trust and love. For Freyd,

psychogenic amnesia is an adaptive response to . . . abuse [and] when a parent or other powerful figure violates a fundamental ethic of human relationships, victims may need to remain unaware of the trauma, not to reduce suffering, but to promote survival. (p. 307)

While this theory was focused initially on the trauma of children, it has been successfully used in relation to adults, including those who have experienced toxic leadership in South African universities (Mahlangu, 2020). Mahlangu observed that toxic leadership leads to distrust and impacts negatively on the well-being of employees. In the context of my enquiry, many students and researchers must cope with the self-centredness of supervisors along with intimidation, discrimination, and demoralisation until they have completed the purpose of the dependency such as, for example, supervisor-student relationships.

In the next section, I review the literature related to defining toxicity in academia, and I present some empirical studies related to this.

## Constituting toxic academic practices in higher education

To differentiate between what constitutes a high-pressured workplace and a toxic workplace (albeit in a very sanitised way), Brower (2020) noted that, in a high-pressure environment, one's work is appreciated but, in a toxic environment, no matter how much is done, it is never enough. In a high-pressure environment, one is informed about the bigger picture but in a toxic environment, secrecy is commonplace. In a non-toxic environment, one's ideas matter, but in a toxic environment, one is muted. In a high-pressure environment, work is distributed equitably but, in a toxic environment, it is not. Values such as dignity, trust, and respect are still visible in a high-pressured work environment but are largely absent from toxic ones.

While there is a plethora of admirable, respectful, and genuinely supportive professors, graduate mentors, and supervisors, there are also those who abuse their power and create work environments that contribute to students' mental illness. Burchell-Reyes (2023) reported that, often, "students are overworked, psychologically harassed, and pitted against each other in unhealthy environments that do not foster learning and teamwork" (para.1). Levecque et al. (2017), Shahnawaz and Siddiqi (2022), and Wollast et al. (2018) argued that, given the strong influence supervisors have on their students, it is surprising that a more systematic body of literature, particularly in relation to mental health and dropout rates, is not available on this topic. While the literature relating to toxic leadership and work environments is situated in the discourse on corporate leadership, it is being taken up rapidly in other domains, including those devoted to education research, social sciences, and medical sciences, where working environments are increasingly defined as toxic.

Several authors have sought to define toxic academic leadership, each bringing an added dimension that highlights the complexity of identity in such leaders. I address some of these below.

Dumitrescu (2019) articulated some of the characteristics of toxic academics and the cultures they create. She noted that, first, toxic academics cultivate good relationships with powerful people, including publication organs that give them the opportunity to pursue their goals. Second, these academics often search for students who are promising but who lack confidence or networks and who would benefit from the opportunities these academics offer. Third, these senior academics also provide access to the networks and professional opportunities students may need, attaching the expectation of some form of return for their generosity. Last, they often use students to do the bulk of the work in publications and often in experiments, and then claim this as their own or insist on being first authors of the former. In most cases, students are too afraid to report such behaviour because of the possibility of alienation from their work community.

Wilson-Starks (2003) opined that it is an “approach that harms people and, eventually, the company as well, through the poisoning of enthusiasm, creativity, autonomy, and innovative expression. Toxic leaders disseminate their poison through overcontrol” (p. 2). Reed (2014), while highlighting this complexity, suggested that toxic supervision and leadership cannot always be pinned down to a specific behaviour, but it “is the cumulative effect of demotivational behaviour on unit morale and climate over time that tells the tale” (p. 67).

Scholars have noted other definitions of toxic leadership. Lipman-Blumen (2010) reported that toxic leaders aim purposefully to hurt the feelings of others to maintain power; Mehta and Maheshwari (2014) noted that key features of a toxic leader include self-centredness, a temper, aggression, and unfaithfulness; Jowers (2015) pointed out that toxic leaders display behaviours that have a negative impact on the performance of departments and organisations; and Norton (2016) observed that toxic leaders decrease the morale and motivation of staff by poisoning the environment. These definitions provide insight into the kinds of personalities many students and graduates face when pursuing a career in the academy.

## Empirical investigations into the toxicity in academia

While definitions of toxic leadership and managers are not in short supply, the same cannot be said for recent empirical studies in Africa so I go on to cite some of the international studies that address this issue. Young researchers hone their skills including acquiring the knowledge and dispositions required to cement their paths to professorship, during their graduate studies. This training should occur in an inclusive, dynamic environment under the supervision of patient mentors. However, recent studies on graduate life demonstrate that students are being harassed and bullied, often by staff in senior academic positions, with very little access to recourse and support (Hango, 2021; Pelletier et al., 2019; Smyth, 2017).

A study conducted in Canada on the experiences of graduate academic life suggested that women and minorities are more likely to experience harassment and discrimination.

Furthermore, the harassment is almost always perpetrated by a senior academic staff member and differences, all in favour of men, are reported between men and women when it comes to receiving interesting tasks, being promoted, having differentiated workloads, and being ignored (Hango, 2021). While both men and women have reported experiences of working in toxic academic environments, women have encountered this more often than men.

Together with Dumitrescu (2019), who wrote from a Western European perspective, Pelletier et al. (2019) also used the framework, developed by Padilla et al. (2007), called the Toxic Triangle to understand how toxic work environments manifest themselves in American public universities. They noted the three aspects that were successfully applied to their case study research: a destructive leader; an enabling environment; and susceptible followers. They noted further that

an environment that lacked fundamental checks and balances, coupled with instability and perceived threats, spawned the conditions that brought a toxic leader to the institution, which, in turn, revealed and fostered conformers and colluders. (Pelletier et al., 2019, p. 405)

This study revealed that toxic leaders depend heavily on their extensive social and cultural capital and on a conforming junior cohort to pursue their agendas.

Shahnawaz and Siddiqi (2022) conducted a study in India that sampled 145 students. They included 36 Master's final year students (doing dissertation work), 10 MPhil students, and 99 PhD scholars from ten different colleges and universities in India. The study investigated experiences of supervision in India. The findings revealed that toxic supervision "significantly decreases students' identification with their peers, which is crucial for reducing distress and enhancing productivity as well as engagement" and that "students are also more likely to become disengaged and unproductive because of the cumulative impact of toxicity and poor sense of identification" and that "a supervisor's toxic behaviour increases lack of self-disclosure among students" (pp. 16–17). This means that students are suffering in silence and often do not speak out because of the fear of being ridiculed. The study also confirmed some of the characteristics of toxic leaders, including aggression, self-absorption, authoritarianism, and a lack of professionalism.

In the United Kingdom, Watermeyer et al. (2023) surveyed 781 academic and professional service staff to find out why they were either thinking about leaving their jobs or had already left. The study found that 269 participants, including 157 academics, had already left their posts, and their reasoning coalesced around three points. The first had to do with the work-based culture where there was rampant bullying, discrimination, intimidation, and harassment. The second concerned the crises of leadership and the prevalence of cronyism in that influential academics make decisions born from corporate philosophy and act in self-interest rather than for the benefit of the university and its staff. The third concerned limited financial benefit and career progression. Watermeyer et al. further argued that COVID-19 was a major turning point for many academics who were working in toxic academic

environments because the staff members were no longer willing to endure being unhappy in their work environments.

One of the very few global graduate surveys, conducted by *Nature* in 2017, sampled 5700 doctoral students globally and found that there is a love-hurt relationship since students love what they do and are willing to suffer for it (Woolston, 2017). Of the respondents, 25% noted that they had sought help for anxiety and depression relating directly to their studies. Many of these students also noted that they would change their supervisors if they could, thus highlighting the importance of the academic supervisor in the doctoral studies journey. A report released by the US Surgeon General (2022) entitled “Workplace Mental Health and Well-being” observed that toxic workplaces and toxic managers are detrimental to the health and well-being of staff. Mental health problems and burnout were particularly relevant in the context of higher education, where 35% of respondents reported being burnt out given the culture.

In Chile, using a quantitative cross-sectional study, Acuña and Male (2022) investigated whether there was any evidence of toxic leadership in HEIs. They sampled 1514 higher education academics from two private institutions similar in size and scale. They found that “full-time professors were the ones who suffered the most from the self-promotion and narcissism from their leaders, part-time academics were more affected by unpredictability and authoritarian leadership” (p. 18) and that self-absorbed leaders were the most toxic.

In 2020, Smith and Fredericks-Lowman conducted a systematic review of toxic leadership in higher education, including its effects. They used 20 different sources (dated between 2007 and 2017) including articles, books, conference proceedings, and dissertations to identify trends. They noted that, despite being a common experience, “there has been sparse research specifically looking at toxic leadership, a more complex and comprehensive destructive leadership style in college/university settings” (p. 538). The authors found that the term “toxic leadership” is well defined in the literature, that the role of organisation culture in perpetuating toxic behaviour cannot be overstated, and that toxic leaders often use fear tactics that relay messages to staff members that they are easily replaceable, in the hope that this will make staff work harder but this impacts negatively on their morale. The review also found that several articles highlighted how toxic leaders make decisions without considering the effects on their staff and, at times, engage in faux-empowerment strategies that may include asking for advice as a form of token participation, but that these ideas are never used or incorporated into the work plans.

A commentary provided by a clinical psychologist, Gina Hiatt, in the United States in 2009, that was published in the *Institution of Electronics and Telecommunication Engineers Technical Review*, highlighted an incident in which a university professor came to see her because he had severe writer’s block. The session also revealed that this toxic environment had resulted in several staff members being unable to progress with their work, thus suggesting that this kind of environment results in demoralisation and a lack of productivity. Apart from pointing out the lasting negative effects toxic environments can have on staff and providing some tips on how to deal with it, Hiatt noted that sometimes staff members do not



recognise that they are in a toxic environment. She added, “It’s like living near a garbage dump; after a while, you don’t notice the smell, and you don’t feel like it’s affecting you” (p. 169).

In South Africa, Herbst and Roux (2023) conducted a study in which they investigated the experiences and effects of toxic leadership, with 42 female academics from 18 different HEIs in South Africa. The study employed a mixed method approach, and the Schmidt Toxic Leadership Scale was used to collect the quantitative data, while for the qualitative data they used open-ended questions. The aim of the questionnaire was to ascertain the incidence of specific toxic leadership behaviours. The findings demonstrated that these female academics experienced their supervisors as being self-promoters, abusive, and gaslighting; they had unpredictable behaviours (with one respondent labelling their supervisor as “a snake in suits”) and were self-centred and authoritarian. The women also reported having low morale and heightened distrust, all of which led to an unpleasant working environment. Another South African conceptual contribution by Baloyi (2020) concluded that toxic leadership is destructive to higher education institutions and human relationships since it leads workers to become demoralised.

Regarding the gendered intersectional aspect of such an environment, the terms “baby penalty” (see the title of Ferrara’s 2020 article) and “motherhood penalty” (see the title of Lutter and Schröder’s 2019 piece) apply to women who have children while pursuing an academic career. As is evident, women are punished for having children while pursuing tenured posts. Academia has become weaponised in its demands on people’s time and availability, particularly for women with children. Andrews (2021) mirrored this sentiment by noting that more women have earned doctoral degrees in the United States, but they still lag behind in gaining tenure, getting published, and landing leadership positions in academia.

I offer a synthesis of the literature investigating toxic leadership and toxic academic environments.

- Although both men and women experience abusive leaders, women are ignored and more adversely affected, given fewer exciting tasks, and are less likely to be promoted. This may be because women tend to be more agreeable than men (Costa et al., 2001).
- Graduate students who pursue doctorates and postdoctoral studies are passionate about their careers, so they should suffer for their trade, as the saying goes. Students and researchers often depend on toxic academics to act as references for future employment so they keep the peace and jeopardise their futures. The influence that these professors have in their fields disallows anyone from confronting or challenging them about their behaviour.
- Experiences of discrimination are often not discussed with other colleagues because of the fear of being ridiculed; this suggests that staff and students often suffer in isolation.

- The organisational culture has a significant influence on how toxic leaders operate. Stable institutions are more resistant to toxicity.
- Among employees in the public sector, higher education staff members have elevated levels of burnout and stress related to their work and their work environment.
- Toxic environments result in staff becoming despondent and unproductive.
- Many HEIs do not have the necessary structures (referred to in the literature as checks and balances) to ensure that toxic environments are kept in check.
- Graduates and emerging researchers often tire themselves to please (read placate) their managers, to their own detriment, foregoing their happiness, even to the point of depression. An anonymous academic who wrote an article in the *Guardian* noted that “if mental illness occurred at the same frequency in any other sector, the authorities would be demanding immediate reform, under the threat of litigation and permanent closure. The only reason PhD researchers are exempt from government legislation is because they are students rather than employees” (*Academia is built on exploitation*, 2018, para.1). Graduate students are more susceptible to being abused because they are not considered employees of the university and are therefore not eligible for the same benefits and support.
- The phenomenon of toxic academic practices in higher education is a global challenge and is not confined to developed or developing countries.

## Methodology

This is a conceptual paper that draws on literature and empirical evidence to support the notion that higher education in South Africa is riddled with toxic academic practices that have a negative impact on the mental health of new and emerging researchers. The literature I found focuses attention on three aspects: understanding and defining toxic academic practices in higher education; using empirical evidence to demonstrate the effects of toxic academic practices; and literature that responds to the drivers that allow the perpetuation of these toxic behaviours and practices. I selected literature and empirical evidence from local and international sources. I placed more emphasis on international literature given the paucity of literature on toxic academic practices in higher education and their effects on emerging researchers in South Africa. In the next section, I discuss the key drivers that allow these behaviours to be perpetuated. They include, first, the values that underpin neoliberal policy mechanisms, second, the marketisation of the university and the impact of university rankings, and third, the techno-rational approaches that pertain in higher education with reference to publications and research incentives.

## Drivers of toxic academic practices: The values of neoliberal policy mechanisms, marketisation and university rankings, and techno-rational approaches in higher education

Al-Haija and Mahamid (2021) noted that

the idea of establishing the university is one of the finest and most humane ideas of humanity . . . [it is] considered the noblest purpose, as it is the place of human communication and interaction in its finest form and its highest goals. (p. 17)

The Enlightenment movement of the seventeenth century produced scholars such as Descartes, Kant, Rousseau, and Hegel who postulated liberal values that positioned universities as key knowledge producers, thus cementing the important role of (higher) education in society. However, modern universities were unprepared for the impact of globalisation and how this would affect every aspect of their institutions.

Underpinned by deregulation, free markets, and austerity, neoliberal approaches to higher education have been heavily criticised for their crises-ridden agendas. As a theory, an ideology, and a practice, Venugopal (2015) argued that neoliberalism “is now widely acknowledged in the literature as a controversial, incoherent, and crisis-ridden term, even by many of its most influential deployers” (p. 166), thus highlighting the salience of the challenges associated with this approach. The market orientation of neoliberalism is at odds with philosophies that advocate for the public good, and this tension creates challenges for managing institutions.

So, how exactly does the neoliberal approach affect higher education, and in what ways does it perpetuate toxic academic practices? I offer three possibilities. First, it encourages the use of free market capitalistic values, such as corporatisation, in higher education, thus creating tension between universities as markets and universities as a public good. Second, it encourages a techno-rational approach to research outputs with less consideration of quality and impact, and third, it fuels existing competition between universities globally in relation to, for example, ranking systems, and not always in healthy ways.

### Neoliberalism in higher education: The impact of free-market values on teaching, learning, and research

Giroux and Giroux (2012) argued that the academic values on which modern universities are based are under threat because of the neoliberal hazard of commercialising university education. Political theorist Wendy Brown (2015) explained the conspicuous way in which neoliberalism emerged and then situated itself as the dominant (governmental) logic and reason, resulting in the “substantive disembowelment of democracy.” She noted that

[m]ore than merely saturating the meaning or content of democracy with market values, neoliberalism assaults the principles, practices, cultures, subjects, and institutions of democracy understood as rule by the people. And, more than merely cutting away the flesh of liberal democracy, neoliberalism also cauterizes democracy’s more radical expressions, those erupting episodically across Euro-Atlantic modernity and contending for its future with more robust versions of freedom, equality, and popular rule than democracy’s liberal iteration is capable of featuring. (p. 9)

Brown highlighted the incompatibility of neoliberalism and the public good in pointing out that neoliberalism reflects the model of the market. She added that, in a neoliberal context,

all conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetised. In neoliberal reason and in domains governed by it, we are only and everywhere *homo oeconomicus*. (p. 10)

Neoliberalism does not seek only to privatise; it also categorises and formulates everything according to capital investment. Brown (2015) listed four effects of neoliberal rule on society, including higher education.

First, she notes that the idea of the public good is becoming increasingly difficult to secure and maintain. Market logic makes it difficult to explain why certain services should be accessible to the public and maintained through public funds. Second, democracy itself has been transformed where and when democratic values are balanced with economic meaning reframing how and what people should do. Third, the notion of citizen is replaced by the capitalisation of humans with the pursuit of education seen as a self-investment. Fourth, more value is placed on processes that enhance human capital, meaning that knowledge and information are sought for capital gain, not necessarily for the improvement of society. One of the most profound implications of these effects is the shift in how universities define success and quality. This is particularly evident in the publish or perish concept that is often invoked to criticise academia.

Mirroring corporate structures is also foundational to neoliberal universities, with departments, research units, and faculties resembling those of corporations. This university structure allows for (human) resources to be crowded under one department, sometimes bestowing one person with immense power. This creates opportunities for toxic academic practices to take root since the decisions, including budgetary decisions and knowledge foci, made by such leaders are not often questioned.

### Techno-rationalism: Publish or Perish

In a techno-rational context, numbers are the bottom line. The more one publishes, the more lucrative it is for one as an academic and for the institution. This sentiment is consistent with neoliberal theory that values quantity over quality. So-called rockstar professors with high publication records are often hired by high-ranking universities to increase the stature of the university. Their personal values, ethics, and work relationships are usually not used as criteria for career advancement.

Regular publishing is a compulsory component of the academic key performance indicator (KPI), and the weighting that it carries suggests that it is often used as a key criterion for promotion. The pressure to publish has resulted in an increased number of poor-quality publications (Noor, 2021) as well as instances of plagiarism, cheating, misconduct, and the misrepresentation of data (Retraction Watch, 2023). Despite this, the requirement to publish

in South Africa remains intact because of the financial incentives offered to academics as well as to the institutions they represent. In fact, a significant amount of South Africa's R130bn annual Higher Education budget is allocated to research incentives, with about R120,000 awarded to institutions for a single scientific peer-reviewed paper. The management of incentivisation is cause for concern because the subsidy for publications makes "no distinction about quality [since] a low-quality paper in an obscure journal will receive the same subsidy as ground-breaking research published in a prestigious journal" (Stacey, 2023, para. 5). The subsidy incentivises the production of low-quality research and the creation of paper mills, thus wasting valuable public funds and corroding the quality of knowledge production at South African universities. It is here that opportunistic and toxic academic practices flourish. Academics, even high-ranking professors, have been known to change and adjust data to guarantee being published (O'Grady, 2023). Toxic academic practices also involve professors using students' data and publishing papers as sole or first authors and often not even including the students' names in the publication (Noor, 2021). These professors tend to use graduate students to write up papers, develop extensive literature reviews and analyse large data sets, only to submit them as individually written papers under their own names. If students are lucky, they will get special thanks in the acknowledgement section of a publication. Furthermore, even though the Department of Higher Education has recently clamped down on academics publishing in predatory journals, this route has become attractive to academics wishing to maintain a steady publication record.

While publishing remains a key KPI for academics, so is teaching and learning. However, if academics are preoccupied with pursuing publications, this leaves very little time for quality teaching, learning, and mentoring and gives them very little incentive to do so. Preference is placed on publishing, and the emphasis of the academic project is focused here rather than on mentorship and capacity building, both of which are key to building a cohort of skilled academics.

### University marketisation: The influence of rating systems

The marketisation of higher education is "where the demand and supply of student education, academic research, and other university activities are balanced through the price mechanism" (Brown, 2022, p. 5). Jones (2019) noted that the marketisation of higher education has led to the commodification of courses, competition between and among universities for funding, high levels of bureaucratisation, and managers assuming capitalistic behaviours as publication numbers and university income streams become the measure of success. This degrades the product of higher education and encourages private borrowing and financialisation. Of the many aspects of university marketisation, including the value for money discussion, the ethics of debilitating student debt, the quality of the teaching and learning experience, the influence on course offerings and study flexibility, control disguised as consumer choice, and the role of the state, I focus here on how universities manage their image through university rankings and how this has increased and perpetuated opportunistic and toxic behaviour among academics.

The modern university has appropriated corporate agendas where image is everything. This includes participating in the World University Rankings that lists universities according to their employer and academic reputation, international faculty and international student ratio, and number of citations by faculty, among other things. However, despite the criticisms that this rating system has received (Hamann & Ringel, 2023b; Hazelkorn & Mihut, 2022), universities still use this platform to attract students and revenue.

The competitiveness of these institutions and the drive to increase performance have resulted in hyper-competitive and individualistic working environments that damage the well-being of staff and are counterproductive to progress (Muscatelli, 2020). Further to this, Hamann and Ringel (2023a) pointed out that the ranking systems also “produce and consolidate inequalities [and] instil opportunistic behavior by those trying to anticipate ranking criteria” (para. 6). This means that some academics will use any mechanism at their disposal, including overworking staff, to ensure that they meet the criteria to maintain funding streams as they push for the top-ranking spot.

When students apply to universities, they look ultimately for the best-rated university that will put them ahead in the job market. However, the notion of what counts as best has become problematic. For example, Wilcox (2023) noted that Princeton was listed as the top university in the United States for 2022–2023. However, the university is also experiencing its highest mental health crisis, which has not been noted in the criteria constituting what counts as best. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Harvard were listed as number two and three, respectively, yet both universities also report high suicide rates. A study conducted by the Princeton Review that sampled several universities in the United States asked students to answer the question: “Am I happy at my school?” The survey found that students from Tulane University ranked first, followed by Vanderbilt University and Auburn University. However, on the US News Rankings, these universities were listed as 44, 13, and 17, respectively. This highlights that toxic tendencies are perpetuated through ranking mechanisms that prioritise outputs over the affective.

It must be noted that these aspects discussed above are certainly not the only indicators of toxic academic practices.

## Conclusion

Higher education in South Africa is plagued with numerous challenges, such as leadership ones (see Herbst & Conradie, 2010; and Samier & Schmidt, 2010), a lack of funding (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023), gender-based violence (Anderson & Naidu, 2022; Council on Higher Education, 2019), challenges with digital learning (Moonsamy & Naidoo, 2022) and poverty and access (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023). However, it is critical to highlight and centre discussions about well-being in higher education and to advocate for safe and healthy working and learning environments for emerging scholars.

Reflecting on a decade of work and opportunities provided by the South African Education Research Association, I have centred this critical analysis of education on understanding

cultural, institutional, and structural dynamics that create and perpetuate injustice, inequity, and oppression in higher education in South Africa. I have shown that toxic academic practices are driven not only by ruthless academics but also by the institutional structures and cultures that support these tendencies. Couldry (2010) encouraged us to name the crisis, and the crisis is that many academics in South Africa, especially the rock stars, are toxic, and their behaviours are supported and fuelled by market-oriented socially unjust policies and philosophies. While universities in South Africa fly the flag of democracy and meritocracy, they do not do so in practice.

Harnessing talent, creating knowledge, and initiating technological advancements to develop and expand economies while maintaining respectable levels of citizenship and social cohesion, is a core function of the modern university. However, the recent experiences of mentorship abuse and toxic academic working environments of graduates, including PhD students and postdoctoral ones, exacerbate their struggles with poor mental health and lack of well-being (Henkler, 2021). There is an assumption that university professors are all selfless and morally sound. This is most certainly not the case; the notion of morally sound ivory tower researchers is a fallacy (Pelletier et al., 2019). Not addressing toxic academic practices in higher education is underscored by an assumption that higher education is an elitist space and that academics are morally superior to the rest of the population. In addition, what can also be problematised is the idea of the public good in the context of South Africa; has the notion of the public good ever included the entire public? Given the historical legacies, society has always been fragmented, with exclusion and lack of recognition being at the centre of how we educate.

It is imperative that academic staff be trained on how best to deal with the affective dimensions of knowledge production and people management in an ethical and respectable manner. Universities also need to improve their checks and balances and scrutinise outputs for incentive-worthiness. Funding organisations could also improve their reporting mechanisms to include feedback from graduates and emerging researchers who work with these professors to ensure that students, staff, and researchers are acknowledged for their work and to ensure the eradication of malpractices. There is a desperate need to improve dystopic university settings (Klein, 2017). If these challenges are not addressed, institutions will continue to perpetuate discriminatory behaviours through the behaviours of academic staff, thus negatively impacting the learning experiences and mental health of young and emerging scholars.

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