


Beyond neoliberal policies: Blind spots in the Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework

**Author:**Mlamuli N. Hlatshwayo¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Mlamuli Hlatshwayo,
mhlathshwayo@uj.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 16 Jan. 2024

Accepted: 06 Mar. 2024

Published: 31 May 2024

How to cite this article:

Hlatshwayo MN. Beyond neoliberal policies: Blind spots in the Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework. *J transdiscipl res S Afr.* 2024;20(1), a1439. <https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v20i1.1439>

Copyright:

© 2024. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Attracting the next generation of academics is important for ensuring that the higher education system is sustainable and continues to produce the much-needed graduates who will respond to the growing needs of the knowledge economy. Deeply rooted in the decolonial and transformation struggles in the Global South, academic staffing and recruitment questions are central to representation and diversity in the academy. In this article, I critique what I see as the rising neoliberal logic in South African higher education that frames national thinking and policies on attracting and retaining the next generation of academics in the country. While some policies and legislative frameworks have been proposed in response to this challenge, I particularly focus on the Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework (SSAUF) which has served as an integrated policy framework that guides the country's vision on attracting, retaining and supporting the next generation of scholars. I especially reveal three interconnected and intersectional blind spots that are prevalent in the policy, i.e. (1) the misframed and misrecognised conceptual understanding of early career academics and emerging scholars, (2) the lack of systemic and adequate pathways for postdoctoral research fellows to access higher education as permanent staff members and (3) the ideological (and decolonial) missed opportunities in the policy.

Transdisciplinary contribution: I provide an interdisciplinary critique of ways in which the higher education policy is socially constructed and enacted in the academe, and the glaring blind spots that have real and material implications for early career scholars in South Africa.

Keywords: Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework; early career academics; higher education; transformation; academic.

Introduction

Staffing in higher education is important in that it allows one to map, trace and monitor the different types of academics who are employed as well as the targeted support and intervention they need to thrive. As part of the growing calls for higher education and transformation in the Global South, staffing has become central to the broader call for higher education representation, inclusion and diversity.¹ In the South African context, higher education studies have been preoccupied with reforming what has been broadly agreed as an oppressive, colonising and alienating sector. Various interventions on staffing, access and success, teaching and learning, curriculum reform, funding model(s), the role of institutional culture(s), bridging the gap between schooling and university transition, academic literacy, induction orientation programmes and, more recently, the emergence of the neoliberal university and the selling of (curriculum) knowledge have all dominated the field.^{2,3,4}

The dominant discourses on transforming the demographic profile of South Africa's academic community largely revolve around two competing challenges: equity versus quality concerns.^{5,6} The focus on equity is an attempt to closely realign the academic profile with the demographics of the country. This objective has dismally failed in South Africa. Between 2000 and 2018, African academics constituted 16% of the academic workforce in 2000, and by 2018, this had increased to 44%.⁷ Mixed race and Indian people academics experienced minor increases in the same reporting period, with mixed race academics sitting at 3% of the total academic workforce in 2000 and increasing to 6% in 2018. Indian people academics were 5% in 2000 and had increased to 9% in 2018. In 2000, White people academics dominated the staffing in South African universities, sitting at 63% of the total academic labour force, and by 2018, they had declined to 40%.⁷ While there have been systemic changes in the academic staffing of South Africa's higher education, ensuring that higher education institutions' profiles align with the national demographics remains an elusive dream. More troubling is when we look at the academic staff by post and ranking,

TABLE 1: Academic staff by post level and race.

Years	African people	%	Coloured people	%	Indian people	%	White people	%	Unknown	%	Total
2000											
Professor	196	8	49	2	77	3	2,208	85	71	3	2,601
Associate professor	105	8	14	1	42	3	1,123	87	5	0	1,289
Senior academics	47	6	3	0	36	4	736	89	7	1	829
Senior lecturer	558	11	138	3	323	6	4,039	79	49	1	5,107
Lecturer	2,470	20	674	6	798	7	7,799	64	414	3	12,155
Junior lecturer	830	28	70	2	207	7	1,184	40	675	23	2,966
Below junior lecturer	1,945	16	398	3	652	5	6,870	55	2,646	21	12,511
Other	140	14	4	0	7	1	525	53	310	31	986
Total	6,291	16	1,350	4	2,142	6	24,484	64	4,177	11	38,444
2018											
Professor	602	19	127	4	214	7	2,086	67	96	3	3,125
Associate professor	679	25	141	5	235	9	1,564	58	96	4	2,715
Senior academics	16	21	12	16	13	17	33	43	3	4	77
Senior lecturer	2,217	35	329	5	541	9	3,116	49	146	2	6,349
Lecturer	8,462	45	1,366	7	1,887	10	6,756	36	478	3	18,949
Junior lecturer	2,818	60	196	4	466	10	1,154	25	53	1	4,687
Below junior lecturer	7,525	55	703	5	905	7	4,363	32	113	1	13,609
Other	2,933	37	636	8	547	7	3,805	48	75	1	7,996
Total	25,252	44	3,510	6	4,808	8	22,877	40	1,060	2	57,507

Source: Adopted from Council on Higher Education. Review of higher education in South Africa twenty five years into democracy [homepage on the Internet]. Tshwane: CHE; 2022, p. 148. Available from: https://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/flipbooks/2023/che_review/index.html

where the real crisis emerges. In Table 1, we see how the bulk of the professoriate (full professor and associate professor) in South Africa remains White people.

Looking at Table 1, a few observations can be made. Firstly, White people academics continue to dominate the professoriate levels in South African higher education. In 2000, 85% of all full professors in the system were White people (compared to 8% African peoples), and by 2018, that number had declined to about 67% (compared to 19% African peoples). The same pattern is seen in the associate professor levels, with White people academics sitting at 87% of all associate professors in the sector in 2000 (compared to only 8% of African peoples), and by 2018, they had declined to 58% (compared to 19% African peoples).⁷ Secondly, African people academics are languishing at the bottom of the higher education system in South Africa. In 2018, 78% of African peoples in higher education were at the lecturer grade or below. By 2018, this statistic was worse, with almost a double percentage increase in the number of African people academics occupying junior posts in the academy. It is at this level that we see Early career academic (ECAs) who are languishing at the bottom of the higher education system and have expressed deep concerns about being overworked, stressed, depressed and struggling to cope in the academy.^{8,9}

Another major concern with transforming the demographic profile of academics in South Africa was the racist assumption that the increase in other racial groups in the system would result in a decline in 'quality' and 'standards' in the sector.¹⁰ This racist assumption was based on another erroneous assumption that whiteness *was* tantamount to competence, and therefore access to senior positions by non-whites would lead to the collapse of the public university as we know it.^{10,11} It is this colonising and racist discourse that has socially produced and maintained an alienating institutional

culture(s) in higher education, resulting in black academics feeling that they are bodies out of place and space, and invaders in the universities of their land.^{12,13} Two seminal books illustrate this point – Tabensky and Matthews'¹⁴ book, *Being at Home: Race, Institutional Culture and Transformation at South African Higher Education Institutions*, and Khunou, Haswana, Khoza-Shangase and Canham's¹² *Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience*. Tabensky and Matthews'¹⁴ trouble with the intersectional role that an alienating and colonising institutional culture, whiteness, and the snail pace of university transformation play, not only in pushing black, women and/or gender minority academics to the periphery of higher education institutions but also in frustrating their attraction, retention and success in the academy. In her chapter in this collection, Hlengwa¹⁵ coins what she calls the 'safe bet' phenomenon to describe the various mechanisms in which historically White people universities employ black ECAs whose lifeworld, attributes, depositions, linguistic accents and life experiences, among others, align with the broader hegemonic institutional culture in the university centres, departments or offices. In the process, they reduce the possibilities of these academics challenging, questioning, critiquing and contesting the institutional culture(s) in these spaces.

In their book, Khunou, Phaswana, Khoza-Shangase and Canham¹² reveal the painful challenges of being black in research-intensive universities, and the institutional racism, sexism, harassment, patriarchy and existential insecurity they have to face. In a chapter aptly titled 'Sitting on one bum: The struggle of survival and belonging for a black African people woman in the academy', Nathane¹⁶ reflects on her painful experiences:

I have always felt like I have been sitting on one bum for the greater part of my academic life. I felt I didn't belong. For a long

time, I felt like an outsider looking in: a stranger in a land that was not my own ... my experience of the academic world is that it can be an unfriendly space where there are entrenched practices that are not in the policies of the universities, but reside with certain individuals...the real power lies with the micro individuals and not necessarily within the structure of the institution. These individuals are also known as part of the Big Five in certain corners, and are located in different structures of the university. These same individuals also serve as gatekeepers, creating zones of comfort for others based on clearly criteria known only by the few.

In this article, I attempt to provide an interdisciplinary intervention focusing on the Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework (SSAUF) and its significant blind posts as a national tool for attracting and retaining the next generation of academics in the country. I argue that there is deeply rooted neoliberal logic that shapes and influences the policy. This prevents the SSAUF from making an effective contribution to the staffing of the universities in South Africa.

South African higher education: Context and policies

The South African higher education policy framework has struggled to respond to the emergent calls for transforming and decolonising the sector.^{5,17,18} Six months after the first democratic elections, President Nelson Mandela appointed the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) to 'preserve what is valuable and to address what is defective and requires transformation'.¹¹ Underpinning this critical decision was an attempt to tackle the historical injustices (and cruelty) that have occurred in the higher education system, and to move the sector away from the racist, segregationist or oppressive logic of the apartheid regime.⁶ Under the apartheid regime, black South African were prohibited from attending the then 19 White people higher education institutions and were only permitted to enrol in the six institutions of higher learning that were racially demarcated for them.⁶ It should be recognised that the primary function and purpose of higher education, at least in the apartheid logic, was meant to: (1) entrench White people supremacy in the country and (2) use the Bantustan higher education institutions to tribalize and bifurcate the black South African into obedient and docile political subjects. Frustrated by what they saw as the snail pace of institutional reforms and transformation, the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall protests of 2015/2016 rose to demand urgent systemic changes in the sector.^{19,20,21}

Various policy and legislative frameworks recognise and articulate the importance of transforming academic staffing in the South African higher education sector. These include the following:

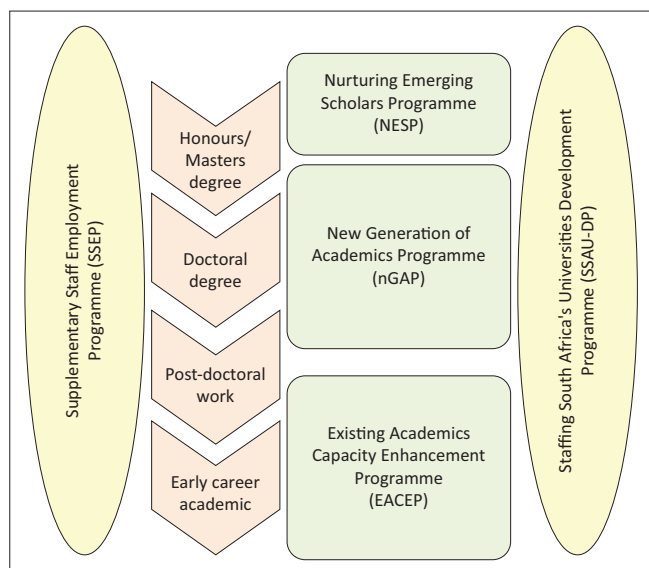
- Education White Paper 3 – A Programme for Higher Education Transformation (1997)²²
- The Draft National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa (2001)²³

- The Report of Stakeholder Summit on Higher Education Transformation (2010)²⁴
- The National Development Plan (2012)²⁵
- The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training: Building An Expanded, Effective And Integrated Post-School System (2013)²⁶
- The Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework (2015)²⁷
- The Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training (2017)²⁸
- The Study on Building a Cadre of Emerging Scholars for Higher Education in South Africa (2018)²⁹
- Report of the Ministerial Task Team on the Recruiting, Retention and Progression of Black South African Academics (2019)³⁰

Cloete, Buntin and van Schalkwyk¹ suggest that the dominant discourse that underpins the post-apartheid higher education staffing policy prescripts is threefold: (1) a concern with the shortage of academic staffing in public universities in South Africa, highlighting the growing mismatch between the increasing student enrolment in the sector while the number of academic posts has not kept up; (2) a concern that a large number of academic staff in South African universities are underqualified and (3) the ageing White people professoriate that has not been countervailed with a growing black professoriate in the sector (see¹, pp. 3–4). While all the aforementioned policy documents offer insight into understanding the staffing challenges that plague the South African higher education sector, I focus specifically on the SSAUF, which is considered an integrated and landmark policy document meant to respond to all the aforementioned challenges.

Introducing the SSAUF, the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation Dr Blade Nzimande argues that its introduction was meant to respond to the two pressing policy challenges facing the higher education sector – i.e. an ageing White people professoriate and the pressing need to strengthen the quality of the academic staffing.³¹ Commenting on these challenges, Nzimande correctly argues that one of the urgent tasks facing the sector that SSAUF will attempt to tackle is the 'challenging imperative to recruit, support and retain black and female academic staff to address their very serious under-representation at all levels in the sector'.³¹ The SSAUF is an integrated pathway meant to provide diverse access to higher education for the next generation of academics in South Africa. Figure 1 gives an overview of the SSAUF.

The SSAUF comprises three core programmes and an additional two programmes meant to supplement the three. These are the Nurturing Emerging Scholars Programme (NESP), the New Generation of Academics Programme (NGAP) and the Existing Academic Capacity Enhancement Programme (EACEP). The two additional programmes are the Supplementary Staff Employment Programme (SSEP) and the Staffing South Africa's Staffing South Africa's Universities Development Programme (SSAU-DP).



Source: From The Department of Higher Education and Training. *The Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework*. Tshwane: DHET; 2015, p. 16.

FIGURE 1: An overview of the Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework.

The NESP is meant to identify students in the early phases of their studies (i.e. at the honours level). This programme is designed to attract talented students and has a 3-year focus that includes a master's degree scholarship and an additional 1-year academic internship in one of the public universities in South Africa. The NGAP programme, arguably the most influential and impactful of the three core SSAUF programmes, is designed to recruit new (and youthful) academics against the pressing needs of the different disciplines in the universities. The minimum requirement is a master's degree. The NGAP scholars are often contractually tied to a 6-year period, where the 80/20 workload split applies, with 80% of their academic workload dedicated to the completion of the doctoral qualification, and 20% used to gain some experience through co-teaching and co-supervision. The EACEP programme is largely internally orientated and meant to support existing staff to obtain their doctoral studies. One of the two additional supplementary programmes, the SSEP enables universities to recruit specific skills on a needs basis and only temporarily. It is meant to support and bring in retired academics or distinguished professors who can help fill the vacuum of supervision or research capacity. The SSAU-DP is meant to be cut across the different programmes, providing targeted support in all the different programmes and helping the different categories or types of scholars get the necessary support they need.

Overall, the SSAUF is an inclusive and well-integrated programme designed to attract and retain different types of academics into the South African higher education system. Largely designed to resolve the ageing academy in South Africa, and the need to transform the staffing demographic profile of the universities, the programme is ambitious in its orientation with a few blind spots that need to be resolved so that the policy could have a more meaningful impact.

Conceptualising ECAs in the academy

There is no consensus in the literature on what constitutes an 'early career academic' in higher education.^{32,33,34} The consensus seems to be that an ECA is someone within the first 5 years of the post-PhD track, with an emphasis on research capability.^{35,36,37} Gale³⁸ has sought to challenge the programme's focus on research and proposes an alternative perspective on ECAs' life journeys in teaching-orientated higher education institutions, where research is not the dominant and primary focus. Anderson, Johnson and Saha³⁹ describe the 'typical' ECA journey and entry to academia as an excellent undergraduate student who completes their PhD and is subsequently employed in the department.⁴⁰ This definition largely applies in the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States, but does not speak to the South African realities.

In the South African context, the ECA category is broad and complex. ECAs in South Africa include PhD graduates within the first 5 years of their graduation. It also includes young scholars who have completed their master's degree qualifications and are currently registered for their doctoral degree. The ECA category also includes those who are registered for their master's degree and are already being mentored and trained to assume teaching and learning responsibilities in the department. Like the ECA entry into the academy in the international literature, the ECA's journey in South Africa also has multiple pathways and entry into higher education, with some deciding to do their postgraduate qualifications part-time, while others balance work and family responsibilities. I agree with Bosanquet, Mailey, Matthews and Lodge,⁴⁰ Spina, Smithers, Harris and Mewburn⁴¹ and van Hilten and Ruel's³⁴ idea that conceptually (and empirically), the very idea of ECA needs to be moved beyond age, as that will leave a significant number of what I call 'older' ECAs, who often return to academia in their 40s/50s. A large number of these ECAs are often located in postdoctoral research fellowships (postdocs), with employment precarity/insecurity, job hopping and migration putting a strain on their being and families. It is these postdoctoral students, through their employment precarity and instability, who have become useful 'research mules' for higher education institutions as they struggle to keep up with the neoliberal demands for the public or perish discourse, rankings, ratings, grants or funding and other metrics that drive the competitive nature of the sector.

Philosophical orientations

In the 'Prison notebooks', the late Italian philosopher Gramsci⁴² argues that there are two types of crises in political society. The first crisis, what he calls the 'conjunctural crisis', is often unplanned, spontaneous, often provoked by an event and does not result in any fundamental change in society. This crisis is often easier to control, manage and neutralise, and does not threaten the very basis of the social order, and those who occupy the hegemonic power. The second crisis is

largely structural and erupts to challenge the very logic and basis of the society. This crisis cannot be controlled, contained or neutralised. For Gramsci,⁴² this type of crisis is called the 'organic crisis', as it challenges not only the basis of the social order but also the hegemony itself. In the traditional Gramscian sense, the organic crisis occurs when citizens begin to organise and mobilise themselves outside of the formal structures of society, planning, enacting and constructing alternative structures of belonging. This results in the state, or organisation, facing a legitimacy crisis. It could be argued that higher education in the Global South and South Africa confronts an organic crisis, with scholars such as Heleta,^{2,3} Kumalo⁴ and Ndlovu-Gatsheni⁴³ correctly suggesting that the university in South Africa is a colonising and marginalising institution that continues to disregard black students and black' lived experiences and intellectual traditions.

The organic crisis in South African higher education combines with the neoliberal university to produce new forms of marginality in the sector.

Globally, the neoliberal order was signified and represented through the then Regan and Thatcher administrations that promoted privatisation, deregulation and globalisation, and rejected the idea of the public good of education, seeing it instrumentally as a private good beneficial to one's own well-being.^{44,45,46} In South Africa, these neoliberal logics are visible with the conception of students as fee-paying clients who are entitled to the curriculum goods of the university. Academics, as sellers of curriculum knowledge, are referred to by Mamdani as the scholars in the marketplace. This commercialisation, corporatisation and managerialism have had devastating consequences in higher education, with the introduction of performance management instruments and narrow conceptions of quality assurance socially constructed as the panopticon meant to monitor, supervise and police academic labour.

On the blind spots in the programmes

Although the SSAUF is a progressive policy document that attempts to confront and tackle the never-ending challenges of the diverse and inclusive staffing in South African higher education, especially bringing in the historically marginalised academics, three significant blind spots persist in the framework. These are: (1) the misframed and misrecognised conceptual understanding of ECAs and emerging academics, (2) the lack of systemic and adequate pathways for postdoctoral fellows to access higher education as permanent staff members in the South African academe and finally (3) the ideological missed opportunities in the policy itself.

One of the significant policy gaps in the conceptualisation of the SSAUF programmes is the deeply embedded neoliberal gaze in the social construction of the programmes. The programmes

have an orientation towards what I would call traditional ECAs, who are often young, are in their early 20s/30s, have just completed their master's degree qualification and are supported to complete their doctoral qualifications. While this makes sense from a political-economic perspective in terms of the perceived return on investment in supporting, funding or mentoring youthful ECAs and emerging scholars as the feeder programme for attracting the need for a new generation of academics in higher education, this tends to isolate and marginalise 'older' ECAs who tend to languish in the bottom rankings of the higher education sector with little support. These scholars, often first-generation students who leave the academy after obtaining an undergraduate degree, usually work during their undergraduate studies and are forced to leave the sector after graduating to help support and provide for their families.^{47,48} These academics tend to return to higher education in their 40s/50s and find that they are not supported, mentored or recognised in teaching and learning, supervision and, for some of them, registering and completing their doctoral qualifications. This is a systemic gap in the SSAUF in general and in the subprogrammes in particular, as none of the programmes is specifically targeted at helping develop, train and mentor these 'older' ECAs and their particular needs in the academy. In 'Too late to come back? The paradox of being a 50-year-old "early career" black female academic', Msimanga⁴⁹ narrates the need to rethink the *African people time* when it comes to 'older' ECAs who are African people women and who have to balance raising a family, employment precarity and academic responsibilities. She troubles the taken-for-granted assumption of a continuous trajectory for an academic career, suggesting that conception often betrays black women academics who often return to higher education 'late':

The concept of "African people time" has mostly negative connotations, perceived as a culturally entrenched tendency to a relaxed attitude to time. It is often likened to tardiness and lack of punctuality [Mbiti 1969]. The flip side of the coin is that African people time might represent a different consciousness with respect to time ... the time of womanhood, of motherhood, and blackness as an academic takes its cues from the shadows that signal the shifting positions of the black woman, the mother and the academic that casts it. Whereas academia upholds the illusion of the congruency of the standard chronology of a career with the chronology of a person's life, African people time might acknowledge the reality that career time is out of joint ... That it comprises a biologically determined child-bearing age. African people time might be sensitive to the child-like development of the older African people woman who comes back to further her education in her adult years.⁴⁹

In the aforementioned quotation, Msimanga narrates on what has recently been termed the 'motherhood penalty', in how women are increasingly seen as less dedicated, less passionate and less committed to their academic responsibilities primarily because they are not trusted to deliver in the workplace because of their motherhood responsibilities.⁴⁹ This sexist and patriarchal assumption is often deeply embedded in organisational culture that tends to see and read men as more competent and more reliable than women. Thus,

the SSAUF could be socially responsible for acknowledging the diverse pathways to an academic career that different scholars make, so as to avoid marginalising women academics.

The second blind spot in the SSAUF is the lack of a systemic and coherent pathway between the postdoc journey and obtaining permanent employment in higher education. In one article, I argue that the national policies on attracting, training and retaining the next generation of academics in South Africa have two competing discourses and narratives when it comes to postdocs, i.e: (1) the pipeline discourse that seeks to suggest that postdoc fellowships are a necessary stepping stone to learning the skills, attributes and competencies that will help them to obtain a permanent post in the academy (author); and (2) discourse from postdocs shows that they see themselves as precarious workers whose only function is to help the neoliberal university metrics. Articulating the pipeline narrative, Minister Nzimande argues that:

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 under qualified academic staff workforce, and low numbers of postgraduate students representing an inadequate pipeline for the recruitment of future academics.³¹

In her seminal article 'How to Exploit Postdocs', Stephan⁵⁰ writes about the colonially extractive manner in which postdocs have become what I would call the 'research mules' of higher education, are being responsible for making sure that the institutions of higher learning are able to meet their research targets, and can compete for the rankings, ratings, benchmarking, quality assurance and other metrics that constitute the lifeblood of the neoliberal university today. These postdocs are often overworked, overextended, underpaid and exploited under the false discourse of 'professional training' and giving them a 'pathway' to a research career in the academy. Kerr⁵¹ and Jaeger and Dinin⁵² write about the never-ending plight of the postdocs, socially constructing this 'postdoc-ism' – that is, the permanent nature of the employment insecurity, exploitation and research productivity that is expected of postdocs. In 'The Academic Precariat: Postdoctoral fellows in South African higher education', the Council on Higher Education reports that the typical postdoc responsibilities include teaching in 'undergraduate programmes or courses, co-supervising postgraduate candidates, and conducting research and publish'.⁷ This flawed conception and definition, adopted from Holley, Kuzhabekova, Osbaldiston, Cannizzo and Mauri,⁵³ and Simmonds and Bitzer,⁵⁴ betray the present realities on how postdocs are largely employed to be the 'research mules' in the university, as their primary job is to increase the research productivity of higher education institutions. Thus, they are not holistically trained, mentored or developed in terms of teaching and learning, postgraduate supervision and community engagement.

From the little publicly available data, we know that in 2020, there were at least 2 867 postdocs in South African higher

education, averaging about 110 postdocs per 26 public higher education institutions, even though this is never the case as some universities have more resources, investments and infrastructure to attract more postdocs than others. Most interesting was that between 2012 and 2017, the postdocs who are South African citizens declined from 46% to 39%.⁷ This has meant that South African had made up almost half of the postdocs community in 2012. What happened to these scholars? Did they get absorbed into permanent academic employment? Did they choose to leave the higher education sector? All these questions still linger. Furthermore, the conceptual instability and confusion on the role, function and purpose of postdocs is real. Put differently, postdocs are neither staff nor students, but 'something' in between. They are short-term employed researchers, who completed their doctoral qualifications less than 5 years ago, and are assigned with a mentor, host or supervisor who will work with them often on a broad thematic area that will allow the postdoc to become an established researcher in a particular field. Postdocs usually have to produce two research units per year, and their roles and responsibilities tend to vary depending on the institution that they are based at. Some postdocs exclusively conduct research, while others tend to take on teaching, some postgraduate supervision (usually together with their host, or a permanent academic staff member) and some grant-related work. Thus, it is difficult to speak of *the postdoc* because of their varied, complex and diverse nature. It should also be noted that the nature of the work and responsibilities of a postdoc also depends on the host, mentor or supervisor, with supervisors with grants and research chairs often involving their postdocs in some of their own work, training and mentoring them on the different research activities and projects they are involved in.

Van Benthem, Nadim Adi, Corkery, Inoue and Jadavji⁵⁵ remind us that, traditionally, postdocs were meant to be short-term positions necessary for bridging the gap between the completion of a PhD and obtaining a post at a university as a professor. More recently, what was meant to be a short-term contract has increasingly become scarce and hypercompetitive, with some postdocs spending 4 years – 6 years on a postdoc programme, resulting in what is called a 'postdoc pile up', i.e. being stuck in the postdoc programme and unable to transition into a permanent academic post. Thus, the SSAUF is blind to the plight, experiences and contributions of postdocs in South African higher education. At present, we do not have a national database tracing the number of postdocs we have in the country, how many are South Africans, the types of support and interventions they need, their contribution and challenges.

The final blind spot that I see in the SSAUF is an ideological and decolonial one. The emergence of the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall in 2015/2016 offered us an opportunity to rethink the very purposes of higher education and its role in challenging and dislodging racialised (and structural) coloniality in society.^{6,51,52} There is little disagreement in the field that South African higher education has not systemically challenged the deeply entrenched racism,

sexism, Eurocentricity and/or patriarchy that underpins the sector.^{54,55,56} The SSAUF was proposed at the height of the Fallist protests in 2015. This was a missed opportunity to align the SSAUF agenda with the decolonial agenda, ensuring that the policy is not just interested in transforming the sector but also in decolonising higher education to enable different ontological bodies and epistemic traditions to access, thrive and succeed in the academy. In 'Epistemic freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization', Ndlovu-Gatsheni⁴³ reminds us that the central organising struggle in the 21st century rests on the epistemic line, i.e. that ever-lingering struggle over those whose humanity, essence, being and becoming have been historically challenged, questioned and disputed. Gordon⁵⁶ rightly calls on us to shift the geography reason from Eurocentric modernity and its colonising logic to the Global South. The SSAUF could have aligned with this explicit ideological orientation and at least demonstrate that the African people National Congress-led government understands that: (1) the neoliberal democratic consensus is inadequate for tackling structural reforms in higher education, and (2) that the tension between an impositionist state and institutional autonomy is flawed as the public has an ethical obligation to contribute – through research, teaching and learning, and community engagement – to the needs of a developmental state. Thus, the SSAUF missed an opportunity to explicitly align with the decolonial aims and objectives.

Conclusion

South African higher education is in an organic crisis as it struggles to adequately respond to the ethical calls for institutional transformation and decolonisation. The SSAUF, introduced in 2015 as a panacea to the ageing White people professoriate in the country, and the need to attract, retain, mentor and support an emerging black academic population, continues to be a real struggle in the sector. While the SSAUF is a progressive policy that articulates, diagnoses and, to some extent, attempts to respond to the staffing pressures that the higher education system is facing, there are still glaring blind spots in the policy. In this article, I have proposed three blind spots that act as a policy gap in the SSAUF: (1) the misframed and misrecognised conceptual understanding of ECAs and emerging academics; (2) the lack of systemic, adequate and real pathways for postdocs to access the higher education as permanent staff members and (3) the ideological missed opportunities in not enacting a decolonial agenda in the framework. Based on the aforementioned discussion, the following specific recommendations were made:

- This intervention was a broader policy analysis of the SSAUF in general. Future research could offer a closer analysis of the different programmes within the SSAUF, and the extent to which the NGAP, NESP and EACEP programmes have made a quantitative staffing contribution in transforming the demographic profile of academics in the country. This research could also look at the retention capabilities of the different SSAUF programmes.

- There seems not to be a national policy and framework dedicated to capturing the experiences of 'older' ECAs and postdocs. The academics continue languishing at the bottom of the higher education rankings and hierarchy. A policy intervention is required to support their needs. This includes capturing academics by age, their experiences and the particular kinds of support and interventions that they need.
- The literature on postdocs' narratives, voices or experiences is dominated by the global North, particularly insights from the United Kingdom, United States, Canada and Australia.^{53,57} Postdocs' voices from the Global South remain limited. Future research could provide a narrative inquiry, revealing the complex lifeworld(s) of the postdocs and their precarious experiences in South African higher education.

Acknowledgements

This article is dedicated to the memory of the late social justice and public intellectual, Professor Sechaba Mahlomaholo (23 May 1958 –13 January 2024), may his memory be a blessing to us all.

Competing interests

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

Author's contributions

M.N.H., is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (No. Sem 1-2023-051).

Funding information

This work is based on the research supported by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS), grant number CRP22/1105. The opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed are those of the author and are not to be attributed to the NIHSS.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

- Cloete N, Bunting I, Van Schalkwayk F. *Analyses of the academic staffing of SA public universities*. Stellenbosch: SCISTIP; 2022.
- Heleta S. Decolonisation of higher education: Dismantling epistemic violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa. *Transform High Educ*. 2016;1(1):1–8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v1i1.9>
- Heleta S. Decolonizing knowledge in South Africa: Dismantling the 'pedagogy of big lies'. *Ufahamu J Afr Stud*. 2018;40(2):47–65. <https://doi.org/10.5070/F7402040942>
- Kumalo S. Explicating abjection—historically white universities creating natives of nowhere? *Crit Stud Teach Learn*. 2018;6(1):1–17. <https://doi.org/10.14426/cristal.v6i1.132>
- Badat S. Transforming South African higher education, 1990–2003: Goals, policy initiatives and critical challenges and issues. Pretoria: CHE; 2004.
- Breetzke GD, Hedding DW. The changing demography of academic staff at higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa. *High Educ*. 2018;76:145–161. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0203-4>
- Council on Higher Education. Review of higher education in South Africa twenty five years into democracy [homepage on the Internet]. Tshwane: CHE; 2022 [cited 2023 Oct 10]. Available from: https://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/flipbooks/2023/che_review/index.html
- Maluleka P. Teaching in the time of crisis: A decolonial take of my experiences of online teaching at a rural university in South Africa. *Afr Perspect Res Teach Learn*. 2021;5:78–94.
- Mbatha N, Satimburwa N, Msiza V, Zondi T. The academia of ECAs: Navigating academic terrain through critical friendships as a life jacket. *Educ Res Soc Change*. 2020;9(1):31–44. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2020/v7i2a3>
- Lewin T. Early career women academics: A case study of working lives in a gendered institution [homepage on the Internet]. PhD unpublished. Bloemfontein: University of the free State; 2019 [cited 2023 Oct 10]. Available from: <https://scholar.ufs.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/b4c7c6e4-f27b-4aed-824b-e7a86677e4cb/content>
- The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa. National policy development framework 2020 [homepage on the Internet] [cited 2023 Oct 10]. Available from: https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202101/national-policy-development-framework-2020.pdf
- Khunou G, Phaswana ED, Khoza-Shangase K, Canham H. Black academic voices: The South African experience. Cape Town: HSRC Press; 2019.
- Mahabeer P, Nzimande N, Shoba M. Academics of colour: Experiences of emerging Black women academics in curriculum studies at a university in South Africa. *Agenda*. 2018;32(2):28–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2018.1460139>
- Tabensky PA, Matthews S. Being at home: Race, institutional culture and transformation at South African higher education institutions. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press; 2015.
- Hlengwa A. How are institutions developing the next generation of university teachers? *Crit Stud Teach Learn*. 2019;7(1):1–18. <https://doi.org/10.14426/cristal.v7i1.170>
- Nathane M. Sitting on one bum: The struggle of survival and belonging for a black african woman in the academy. In: Khunou G, Phaswana ED, Khoza-Shangase K, Canham H, editors. *Black academic voices: The South African experience*. Cape Town: HSRC Press; 2019, p. 178–194.
- Badat S. Differentiation and disadvantage: The historically black universities in South Africa: Report to the Desmond Tutu Educational Trust. Education Policy Unit, Bellville: University of Western Cape; 1994.
- Badat S. Trepidation, longing, and belonging: Liberating the curriculum at universities in South Africa. Tshwane: University of Pretoria; 2017.
- Alasow JG. What about 'Rhodes (University) must fall'? *Daily Maverick* 23 March 2015 [cited 2023 Oct 10]. Available from: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2015-03-23-what-about-rhodes-university-must-fall/>
- Maxwele C. Black pain led me to throw Rhodes poo [homepage on the Internet]. *Business Day Live* 2016 [cited 2023 Oct 10]. Available from: <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/2016-03-16-black-pain-led-me-to-throw-rhodes-poo/>
- Valela N. The Rhodes to perdition: Why Rhodes was never ready for the BSM [homepage on the Internet]. *Daily Maverick* 26 March 2015 [cited 2023 Oct 10]. Available from: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2015-03-26-the-rhodes-to-perdition-why-rhodes-was-never-ready-for-the-bsm/>
- The Department of Education. *Education White Paper 3 – A Programme for higher education transformation*. Pretoria: DoE; 1997.
- The Department of Education. *The draft national plan for higher education in South Africa*. Pretoria: DoE; 2001.
- The Department of Higher Education and Training. *The report of stakeholder summit on higher education transformation*. Tshwane: CEPD; 2010.
- South African Government. *The National Development Plan*. Tshwane: GCIS; 2012.
- The Department of Higher Education and Training. *The White Paper for post-school education and training: Building an expanded, effective and integrated post-school system*. Tshwane: DHET; 2013.
- The Department of Higher Education and Training. *The Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework*. Tshwane: DHET; 2015.
- The Department of Higher Education and Training. *The Commission of inquiry into higher education and training*. Tshwane: DHET; 2017.
- The Department of Science and Technology. *The study on building a cadre of emerging scholars for higher education in South Africa*. Tshwane: DSI; 2018.
- The Department of Higher Education and Training. *Report of the ministerial task team on the recruiting, retention and progression of Black South African academics*. Tshwane: DHET; 2017.
- Department of Higher Education and Training. SSAUF [homepage on the Internet]. Tshwane: DHET; 2017 [cited 2023 Oct 10]. Available from: <http://www.ssauf.dhet.gov.za>
- Osbaldiston N, Cannizzo F, Mauri C. 'I love my work but I hate my job' – Early career academic perspective on academic times in Australia. *Time Soc*. 2019;28(2):743–762. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X16682516>
- Timperley C, Sutherland KA, Wilson M, Hall M. He moana pukepuke: Navigating gender and ethnic inequality in early career academics' conference attendance. *Gend Educ*. 2020;32(1):11–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2019.1633464>
- van Hilten A, Ruel S. The Chihuahua and the space princess writing in the margins: Antennarratives of two (older) women early career academics. *Gender Work Organ*. 2022;1(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12910>
- Hemmings B, Kay R. Research self-efficacy, publication output, and early career development. *Int J Educ Manag*. 2010;24(7):562–574. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09513541011079978>
- Laudel G, Glaser J. From apprentice to colleague: The metamorphosis of early career researchers. *High Educ*. 2008;55:387–406. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-007-9063-7>
- Price E, Coffey B, Nethery A. An early career academic network: What worked and what didn't. *J Further Educ Train*. 2014;39(1):680–698. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2014.971106>
- Gale H. The reluctant academic: Early-career academics in a teaching-orientated university. *Int J Acad Dev*. 2011;16(1):215–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2011.596705>
- Anderson D, Johnson R, Saha LJ. Changes in academic work. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia; 2002.
- Bosanquet A, Mailey A, Matthews KE, Lodge JM. Redefining 'early career' in academia: A collective narrative approach. *High Educ Res Dev*. 2017;36(5):890–902. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2016.1263934>
- Spina N, Smithers K, Harris J, Mewburn I. Back to zero? Precarious employment in academia amongst 'older' early career researchers, a life-course approach. *Br J Sociol Educ*. 2022;43(4):534–549. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2022.2057925>
- Gramsci A. *The prison notebooks*. London: The Electric Book Company; 1999.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni SJ. *Epistemic freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*. London: Routledge; 2018.
- Hlatshwayo MN. Social capital and first-generation South African students at Rhodes University. MA unpublished. Grahamstown: Rhodes University; 2016.
- Tight M. The neoliberal turn in Higher Education. *Higher Educ Q*. 2019;73(1):273–284. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12197>
- Harvey D. *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2005.
- Olssen M, Peters MA. Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: From the free market to knowledge capitalism. *J Educ Policy*. 2005;20(3):313–345. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930500108718>
- Vincent L, Hlatshwayo MN. The that bind: The ambiguous role played by social capital in black working class first-generation South Africa students' negotiation of university life. *S Afr J High Educ*. 2018;32(3):118–138. <https://doi.org/10.20853/32-3-2538>
- Msimanga A. Too late to come back? The paradox of being a 50-year-old 'early career' black female academic. *S Afr J High Educ*. 2013;28(6):2013–2026. <https://doi.org/10.20853/28-6-5697>
- Stephan P. How to exploit postdocs. *Bioscience*. 2013;63(4):245–246. <https://doi.org/10.1525/bio.2013.63.4.2>
- Kerr P. Career development or career delay? Postdoctoral fellowships and the de-professionalizing of academic work in South African universities. *Br J Sociol Educ*. 2022;43(4):550–565. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2022.2045902>
- Jaeger AJ, Dinin JA. *The postdoc landscape: The invisible scholars*. London: The Academic Press; 2017.
- Holley K, Kuzhabekova A, Osbaldiston N, et al. Global perspectives on the postdoctoral scholar experience. In: Jaeger AJ, Dinin JA, editors. *The postdoc landscape: The invisible scholars*. London: The Academic Press; 2017, p. 203–226.
- Simmonds S, Bitzer E. The career trajectories of postdocs in their journeys of becoming researchers. In: Du Preez P, Simmonds S, editors. *A scholarship of doctoral education: On becoming a researcher*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media Press; 2018, p. 273–294.
- Van Blenthem K, Adi AM, Corkery CT, Inoue J, Jadavji, NM. The changing postdoc and key predictors of satisfaction with professional training. *Stud Grad Postdoc Educ*. 2020;11(1):123–142. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-06-2019-0055>
- Gordon L. *Shifting the geography of reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing; 2007.
- Ålund A, Emery N, Jarrett B, et al. Academic ecosystems must evolve to support a sustainable postdoc workforce. *Nat Ecol Evol*. 2020;4(6):777–781. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-020-1178-6>