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Why researchers should focus on the triple bottom line: Excellence, ethics and empathy

Significance:

The global demands of a fast-paced, ‘publish or perish’ culture at higher education and research institutions pose several challenges for researchers, especially early-career scholars. In South Africa, the incentivisation of the ‘publish or perish’ paradigm, in a context of historical funding inequities, presents both possibilities and perils. Prioritising integrity within such a system requires a reclaiming of moral agency that subscribes to a high code of ethical conduct, which includes the values of excellence and empathy. We propose an EEE (excellence, ethics and empathy) framework for balancing productivity with integrity, thereby resisting the logics of the research marketplace.

What brings two academics – one from the humanities and social sciences and the other from the health and natural sciences; one involved daily in research undertakings that foster an intellectual hub for social justice transdisciplinary research, and the other who has enjoyed a long and productive career in research management and support – together to write a commentary? The answer is our common commitment to what we have termed the triple bottom line for research. The three markers of this bottom line are excellence, ethics, and empathy, what we call an EEE framework for research within an increasingly corporate and neo-liberal research context that ostensibly values quantity over quality, that counts, rather than weighs.

Notwithstanding our aversion to the commodification of knowledge and higher education, we drew inspiration for the idea of a triple bottom line for research from the business concept of the triple bottom line that focuses on three aspects: people, planet and profit. Writing for the online publication, *Harvard Business Insights* in 2020, Kelsey Miller observed: “The world is full of uncertainty. Monumental challenges—including climate change, poverty, and inequality—are at the forefront of daily life and seemingly becoming ever more urgent.”¹

To respond to these challenges, Miller proposed the ‘triple bottom line’ concept, first proposed by John Elkington². While businesses have generally and almost exclusively focused on profit as the ultimate bottom line, the triple bottom line, Miller explains, is about getting firms to move beyond generating profit as the standard ‘bottom line’ to also considering social and environmental concerns. The idea is not new, but the need to measure financial success in both social and environmental terms was amplified and made most visible during the COVID pandemic, prompting many social activists to point out the importance of a hierarchy in these values: people and planet *before* profit.

While taking lessons from business models for higher education may not be ideal, and indeed some might argue may even be inappropriate, there is a great deal of literature that has emerged in the last decades which argues that higher education institutions are increasingly running like businesses. Scholars such as Sioux McKenna have offered valuable critiques of the corporatisation of higher education, and have argued that the university has become

*[c]onceptualised as an institution focused on producing skills and goods for the market, rather than as a public good focused on knowledge creation and the nurturing of critical citizens who are well placed to address environmental degradation and social injustice.*³

Producing “goods for the market” is directly related to the idea of a ‘knowledge economy’, where the notion of economy is taken literally, rather than figuratively.

Maresi Nerad critically notes:

*Theories of the ‘knowledge economy’ view knowledge, and particularly new knowledge, as a critical resource to enhance a nation’s economic growth....Eagerly seeking to stimulate economic growth, national capacity building and international cooperation as well as competition, governments are allocating substantial funds to increase the research and development capacities of their countries.*⁴

South Africa is no different. Since the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)’s publication of the 2010 consensus report which made the inextricable link between economic growth and development with an increase in high-quality PhDs (and by extension high-quality research), South Africa has seen an unprecedented growth in the number of research articles and PhD graduates.⁵ While one might be tempted to think that this growth and expansion in PhD graduates and research outputs were because of altruistic commitments to growing the knowledge economy, unfortunately there may have been other factors at play. It is hard to ignore contentions that the exponential increase in output was linked to incentive systems provided by South Africa’s Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) via subsidies to institutions to ‘reward’ research growth and expansion.

Keyan Tomaselli has scathingly referred to this incentive system as ‘perverse’, arguing that it has had “unintended and sometimes undesirable” outcomes “that contravenes the intention of the incentive’s designers, in this case the state’s policymakers”⁶.

We have a joint concern regarding what Tomaselli has termed “the perverse incentives of the Department of Higher Education in South Africa”. The research output subsidy system, a noble idea, was designed as both a transformative and research excellence imperative – to align research with the country’s goals of economic



and social advancement, as well as to raise the standard of research outputs by rewarding research productivity that benchmarks with the global academic landscape.

However, the August 2023 DHET communique to university deputy vice-chancellors and senior directors for research tells a different story. Contained within this communique is an acknowledgement of how the subsidy system may have unintentionally enabled unethical practices that ultimately sacrifice excellence and integrity on the altars of productivity:

...despite the significant growth in the volume and quantum of output, various studies over the past ten years have unfortunately also revealed that the policy instrument has produced several unintended negative consequences. Studies conducted by the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST) at Stellenbosch University, on behalf of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) and the Department, have illustrated how a minority of academics have begun to game the system through publications in predatory journals, listing of ghost affiliations and engaging in salami slicing to maximize the number of submissions and the like.⁷

Emerging researchers, by virtue of their arguably vulnerable positions within an increasingly neo-liberal and corporate higher education system, are particularly susceptible to 'gaming the system'. This is not to deny that more senior scholars have also been 'cashing in' on the system. In fact, many provide the means and the platforms for such 'gaming' to occur, as they offer journals and publishing houses that encourage what Tomaselli calls "rent-seeking behaviour". However, the challenges for early-career academics are unique because they are forced through the pressures of the system to hanker after academic success, and many who are first-generation graduates who do not have the luxury of generational wealth, and are exceptional 'firsts' in their families, need to exercise an even greater moral agency.

Challenges facing researchers

There are at least three major challenges that face researchers, especially early-career researchers, in the research landscape in South Africa. Firstly, good research requires funding, and one of the biggest challenges faced by researchers is securing adequate funding for their work. Grants can be highly competitive, and the process of applying can be time-consuming and complex. Secondly, the scholarly process is often slow and iterative, and progress sometimes can only be measured in small increments over many months or years. For scholars in the natural, physical and health sciences, research takes time to execute, and oftentimes the findings and results are uncertain. For humanities and social science scholars, research is not just a mechanistic methodological endeavour, but a creative one, which also requires time and space that nurtures the imagination. Thirdly, publishing research in reputable peer-reviewed journals and recognised academic presses is a challenge. Researchers have to learn to navigate the peer-review process, respond to feedback, meet strict formatting and style guidelines, and develop strong academic writing and editing skills.

These three challenges (there are of course many more), are further complicated by the systemic barriers that women and people of colour experience in an academy that was not designed for them. Given the above challenges, the fast-paced 'publish or perish' framework that is built into the DHET research outputs incentive policy, puts an enormous amount of pressure on researchers to increase the quantity and frequency of their publications in order to be 'successful' in their academic settings.

The question that we seek to address in this Commentary is: How can researchers strive towards excellence, ethics and empathy in their research endeavours within this market-based knowledge economy? While the temptation may be to lean towards non-participation in the system, we would argue that this is a luxury that many women and people of colour cannot afford. Hence, embracing a set of values for ethical functioning within this system may be helpful.

Excellence

Excellence in research has conventionally been defined by rigorous theoretical frameworks and methodologies; original, creative and innovative approaches; and the generation of valuable insights that provide new directions for thinking about real-world problems. It is marked by critical research questions, clear research objectives, robust methodological design and sound ethical conduct, and the resulting insights ought to contribute meaningfully to the field. Excellence is borne out by rigorous peer review and well-argued and substantiated conclusions that advance knowledge in the field. Basic expectations for excellence are that the research is presented in well-organised, systematic and clear ways to facilitate understanding.

It is regrettable, given the need to transform and redress the racial and gender imbalances of the past, that excellence and equity are often pitched to be mutually exclusive values. They are not. While the current asymmetrical racial and gender imbalances within research need to be addressed, to suggest that shortcuts need to be taken on any of the above standards of excellence in order to meet equity and transformation goals, feeds into colonial and patriarchal tropes about intellectual and scholarly capacity, which must be resisted. We must maintain excellence through strategic commitments to develop rigorous and robust standards, rather than compromising rigour for the sake of 'levelling the playing field'. Levelling the research playing field is not a luxury – it is a necessity in a country that bears the shameful scars of its racialised past. However, what is imperative is that the foundation on which we level the field must be rock solid. Otherwise, the little cracks that are allowed to develop will eventually lead to collapse. It is unfortunate that the cracks are already starting to show, as the DHET communique referred to above reveals. We will need to take quick action to mend the cracks and build a firmer foundation. Apart from rigour and robustness, excellence in research also encompasses two other values: ethics and empathy.

Ethics

Inspired by the 'do no harm' approach, almost all universities have implemented research ethics policies. This means that one cannot embark on research, especially with human and other animal subjects, without first obtaining such clearance. Despite research obtaining research ethical clearance, and presumably passing peer review, there have been contested cases of compromised research ethics that have recently come to the fore about the race implications, for example, of research that was published.^{8,9}

The concerns raised about these publications were about the integrity of the scholarly inquiry, which unfortunately is often outsourced to ethical clearance committees that tend to reduce research ethics to a legislative, policy-based, tick-box exercise, without recognising the need for an approach that takes seriously the structural and systemic issues that have entrenched unequal power relationships in research. Embracing an ethical approach requires not only the mandatory statement of one's social location, but a genuine commitment to understanding how particular types of research reinforce racial and gender stereotypes that emerge out of systems of injustice. This means that researchers have to consider shifting their understanding beyond institutional compliance with ethics policies, to a personal commitment to a code of research ethics, what Lahman et al.¹⁰ call "aspirational ethics":

Aspirational ethics are the highest stance the researcher tries to attain in ethics beyond minimum requirements (Southern et al. 2005). Researchers' aspirational ethical stances may differ depending on culture, values, and morals, and are judged and processed internally with no mandated checks. Examples of aspirational stances include relational ethics (Ellis 2007), feminist ethics (Olsen 2005), virtue ethics (Israel and Hay 2006; Southern et al. 2005), narrative ethics (Schwandt 2007), covenantal ethics (May 1980; Schwandt 2007), ethics in practice (Guillemin and Gilliam 2004), caring ethics (Gilligan 1982/1983; Noddings 1984), and an understanding of situational ethics (Guillemin and Gilliam 2004).¹⁰

They combine these forms of aspirational research ethics into a framework called ‘Culturally Responsive Relational Reflexive Ethics’. The widespread critique of Nicolai Natrass’s Commentary in 2020 concerning why black students are less likely to study biological sciences¹¹, arguably required such a culturally responsive, relational, reflexive, ethical framework. As Eureka Rosenberg and Lesley le Grange note in their critique of Natrass’s Commentary:

*As researchers, we need to pay closer attention to the methodology we use, its power to either transform the contexts about which we care, versus inherent methodological biases. The South African Journal of Science needs to publish research in which the scientists of the future and the present will recognise themselves, which means it needs to be based on well-executed research, and a choice of question and method that are both ethically and conceptually appropriate.*¹²

Ethically and conceptually appropriate frameworks for research require an empathetic approach, which is the final point to which we turn.

Empathy

An empathetic approach to scholarly research endeavours and subsequent publications requires that we consider the social and moral impact of both the process and the products of our research. In his book, *The Soul of a University: Why Excellence is not Enough*¹³, Chris Brink urges us to consider not just what universities are *good at* (producing rigorous knowledge), but what universities are *good for* (the university as a public good). The latter approach is needed to understand the perspectives of those who are impacted by research. For example, the recent blockbuster hit film *Oppenheimer* about J. Robert Oppenheimer, the scientist who was at the forefront of the development of the atom bomb in World War II, brought up for scrutiny the ethical dilemmas involved in creating such a powerful weapon. It did so, however, from the perspective of Oppenheimer, not from the indigenous communities whose sacred ancestral land was used for the nuclear testing and research that led to health impairments and environmental destruction which continue to this day.

How our need to advance knowledge and its effects on communities that are impacted by quests for such ‘progress’, requires empathy as well as respect for such communities. The indigenous communities on whose land the atom bomb testing was conducted, suffer to this day from the cancerous effects of those experiments. Ethical clearance committees may not have been formalised at the time, but even if they were, considering the power wielded by the US government, the project was likely to receive ethical clearance because “no direct harm was predicted”. In cases such as this, the moral agency of researchers must be to operate not just within legal parameters for research, but also within ethical ones. Had the researchers adopted an empathetic approach rather than a legal one, the perspectives of the people who considered this space as ancestral sacred land, would have been foregrounded. Moreover, the devastation that the experiments unleashed on these communities, as well as on those who were bombed, would have been at the forefront of their concerns. As critiques of the film demonstrate, even the filmmakers themselves do little to address this.

Conclusion

Our concern in this Commentary has centred around how to foster a research culture that is robust and rigorous, while simultaneously operating within research systems that focus on the bottom line of productivity and profit. Our goal was to provide a moment for pause and critical reflection on the systems of research and rewards within South African higher education institutions, and how they may promote

less than ethical behaviour. Our proposal for a triple bottom line of research – excellence, ethics, empathy – must be taken up with a great deal of circumspection and caution, and we must guard against these values being appropriated and packaged into neat boxes that the ‘university-as-business’ model can simply leverage. We have to guard against what has become known as ‘CSR-washing’ (corporate social responsibility washing) in which businesses ‘greenwash’ (which means to hold fake environmental commitments through clever marketing strategies) or ‘pinkwash’ (to fake a commitment to social justice concerns). Universities run the risk too of ‘ethics’ washing. It is possible, we contend, for researchers (especially those at the early stages of their careers) to navigate the murky waters of reward and recognition, through embracing an EEE framework for research – a commitment to being genuinely ethical, excellent and empathetic.

Competing interests

We have no competing interests to declare.

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