

[Un]blurring the Challenges Facing Post-Graduate Students in South African Universities: An Afrocentric Youth Perspective

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Abstract

South African senior academics do not accentuate the importance of the “publish or perish” mantra as required for young emerging scholars. This continued unfair and/or unjust practice is perpetuated further by a lack of attention to the problem, including less interest in research country-wide by some senior academics. It is in this context that—where this injustice is reported—it is often undermined and/or side-lined, or even critiqued. This paper is revisiting all of the various challenges faced by young emerging scholars in South African universities. Due to the complicated nature of the conduct of research in South African universities, the author did not pin-point any university by name, as this is the practical thorn that is evident country-wide and has been a systemic, strategic instigation to side-line emerging scholars in producing knowledge through various methods of gate-keeping. It is also delaying post-graduate students in the system for them to not see the importance of the continuation of post-graduate studies. Afrocentricity has been deployed as a theoretical lens, together with unstructured interviews and document reviews to collect data.

Keywords: Afrocentricity; challenges; emerging scholars; research interest drivers; publish or perish; post-graduate qualifications



Introduction

Knowledge production (research) is very important in the productive development and growth of any country, worldwide (Griliches 1979). Unfortunately, for Africa and South Africa, only limited research output is documented. This article investigates if the situation has resulted from the unjust practice (employed by some senior academics in South African institutions of higher learning) of gate-keeping knowledge of research production to benefit themselves. In the year 2011, countries globally recorded as little as 1.77% of their entire Growth Domestic Product (GDP) on research production, despite top African countries like South Africa leading with only 0.76% of their total GDP. It is within this context that this paper attributes this cause to the practice of gate-keeping knowledge production techniques from young emerging researchers.

The situation is exacerbated by a lack of governmental financial investment in research journals and books, a component that serves as the leading driver of low quality research throughout the African continent (Olukoju 2002). This is arguably amongst the many reasons driving the decline of investment in research within African countries like Nigeria, Gambia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. This lack of funding contributes to the crisis in academic publishing and research output, slowly turning it into a circus for self-gain; and not for the benefit of the growth of the nation. Instead, predatory research journals (seeking to enrich themselves) include researchers who do not have a love of researching, but are publishing for funds (Wallace 2019). We still have journals—that cannot be named due to ethical reasons—which do not desire to publish quality research reports and/or articles, but instead publish works for the interchange of publication fees (Wallace 2019).

The future of research, both on the African continent and in South Africa, leaves emerging scholars in the hands of senior academics, even though very little is done to provide the former with the relevant support, especially during the early stages of their publishing career (Kumwenda et al. 2017). Most importantly, the research profiles of these young emerging scholars are relatively new; and the efforts of establishing confidence and competence in these researchers, for them to join the competitive international research production stage, need attention. This is why the most pertinent research that guides African policymakers is still of defective quality and quantity on the African continent. In addition, the established political processes are ineffectively correcting, evaluating and compensating for the research production shortfalls (Kumwenda et al. 2017). For a country and government to survive well within the contemporary global pragmatic sphere—where all countries have placed their national interests at the top of their agendas (Shai 2016)—South Africa also needs young emerging scholars who can be trained to invest their time in research production. Emerging academics should be exposed to advanced data techniques to research societal issues that Africa and South Africa are facing. They should be empowered to play a role in driving political decisions that are informed by both qualitative and quantitative empirical evidence.

This paper is centrally concerned with outlining the most recent challenges facing young emerging scholars in their attempts towards making fruitful scholarly contributions to the development and growth of South Africa and the African continent, largely through their relevant scientific contributions. This paper aims to employ Afrocentricity as a contextual lens to discuss the various challenges facing young emerging scholars within the fraternity of scientific contribution. The objectives are to: i) analyse key drivers of research interest in young emerging scholars; ii) provide a deep reflection of different challenges facing young emerging scholars in South Africa; and iii) critically mirror the different challenges by interpreting them to make meaning.

Theoretical and Methodological Interpretations

This paper is informed by the Afrocentric theoretical framework because of its ability to signify the importance of historical, cultural and ground conditions in the deep reflection and analysis of African problems. The paper did not adopt any Western-Eastern informed theoretical frameworks, because they would be foreign to what is taking place on the African continent (Asante 2003). Alternatively, the paper seeks to unmute the historically marginalised emerging voices of young scholars within the faculties of scientific knowledge production (Rapanyane 2020a). Various viewpoints are explored to ground-root the Afrocentric character of this paper. First, the author's epistemological identity is uncompromised throughout the process of conceptualising and operationalising this research (Rapanyane 2019). Second, the unit of analysis for this research paper is South Africa's academic institutions. Third, this paper is grounded on the experiences of the author and responses to the semi-structured interviews that were conducted to study the contribution of emerging young scholars in academia (Shai and Iroanya 2014). Fourth and last, the principal driver behind this research paper has been to promote the interests of Africans by generating a clear understanding of the important challenges facing emerging young scholars in the existing South African institutions of higher learning (Rapanyane 2020b).

The latter is contextually important, particularly when one seeks to understand the machinery of global knowledge production—mostly by global Northern (Angled) views emerging from the “Wealthy West.” By adopting Afrocentricity as the theoretical and contextual lens, the author has placed himself at the analytical centre of the African problem (which pillars the theory's principle) and also unmutes the historically marginalised genuine voices of young emerging scholars within South African academia (Asante 2003). Significantly, this paper is making an important academic contribution by philosophically and historically showcasing that the Afrocentric youth perspective is one genuine voice that can objectively communicate the realities of most young emerging scholars (Rapanyane and Sethole 2020).

Methodologically, this paper is informed by a qualitative research approach. This comprises a combination of semi-structured interviews and document analysis to provide sufficient answers to the central question and deeply reflect on the objective. The analysed documents in this research paper are a composite of various journal

articles, books, media reports and website reports. Complementarily, in the research study that directed this article, the author interviewed a considerable number of post-graduate students, especially master's (4) and doctoral students (3), emerging significantly from different fields and universities. All the ethical considerations were explained broadly and agreed upon. The interviewees all opted to remain anonymous, motivating for the use of the de-identification tool for anonymity. In order to maintain credibility, the data gathered have not been manipulated and/or injected with personal views. The entire sampling method only earmarked already much-interested post-graduate students who were at an advanced stage of completing their dissertations and theses, including those who were already junior lecturers aspiring to become great scholars by engaging in various methods of publishing articles and books. Dependability was maintained by not involving any outside perspectives (especially of those who were not interested in research activity and those who were not yet doing full research). Informed by this, the main sample utilised in the collection of data was drawn coherently from the previously-mentioned focus group of listed students who only managed to give their scholarly views on time. The analytic technique utilised for analysing the collected data was the Thematic Content Analysis (TCA), which is broadly articulated by Anderson (2017). In order to identify themes, the collected data were read, re-read, illuminated and placed into the relevant categories (research interest drivers, challenges facing young scholars, and authors' interpretations of the challenges facing young emerging scholars). The intention was to familiarise the author with themes directing the principal objective (Terre-Blanche and Durkeim 2002). The process of analysis included the re-categorisation of the data again and again, and also fracturing it into smaller, understandable and relevant themes that made sense. All these themes were interpreted and highlighted to make meaning in responding to the questions underlined within the semi-structured interviews. The ensuing part of the paper will explore the principal research interest drivers among emerging young scholars.

Research Interest Drivers in Young Emerging Scholars

There are multiple ways through which young emerging scholars can stimulate a strong research interest. The author principally became more intrigued by research when he enrolled for an honours degree (International Politics), during which he fully came to think of how interesting the journey of research could be (Rapanyane 2018). The combination of analytic tools, methods, techniques, explored theories and the collection of data, coupled with intriguing methods including the whole writing process, made the author see that more could be explored within the research career fraternity (Rapanyane 2018). Despite other challenges that the author has personally undergone throughout the research journey, research within the academic circles remains his number one priority to this day. For some, research is an important tool for the post-graduate education sector, while for others, classroom learning is superseded by expansive critical interactions with junior and senior researchers outside of the classroom; and such interaction continues to be amongst the principal drivers of strong research interest.

It is an almost impossible task to speak for millions of researchers globally. However, it is important to indicate that for some, their strong research interest is driven by books, journals articles and various reports that they have read and engaged with to generate knowledge; which then simultaneously generates prodigious research interest (Fournier-Viger 2016). Others have observed how scientists have been able to assist in recommending scientific solutions and policy initiatives through their genuine exploratory techniques on different scientific platforms (Ishaku 2020). The author is reminded of the various former mentees and associates who were strongly motivated to become researchers as a result of various classroom discussions. As a range of scientists (who had contributed to various fields) were discussed, the deliberations were able to stimulate a research interest to join a team of scientists who may contribute significantly by producing knowledge and earning their scientific recognition and/or fame. Students are inspired to be like many others who have researched and produced scientific works that are being used to teach in institutions of higher learning. Others have been told the stories of different scientists and a community of scholars who are well recognised in their various fields of specialty, including the likes of Archie Mafege, Tshehloane Keto, Lwazi Lushaba, Asante MK, James William Dubois, Siphamandla Zondi, Ndlovu-Sabelo Gatsheni, Runoko Rashidi, Anta Diop, Martin Bernal, Ama Mazama, Kgothatso Shai, and many more scholars who have contributed significantly to their various fields of specialty (Rapanyane, Sethole, and Tirivangasi 2020; Sophia 2020).

We also cannot over-emphasise the fact that some students have developed greater research interest from engaging daily with relatives who survive on research funds or earn their living through research, while others have chosen the research journey from a very young age when they joined institutions of higher learning. This is mostly led by the fact that lecturing in private and public institutions of higher learning in South Africa requires one to be research active and to continuously publish for any promotional recognition (CHE 2015, 102; MacFarlane 2011). This requirement compels lecturers to extensively engage in knowledge production and/or research for a longer period. Despite these motivations discussed above, there are several challenges faced by young emerging scholars in South African universities.

Various Challenges Facing Young Emerging Scholars and Researchers

Most academics and the community of scholars, as well as the general population, see and understand a researcher as someone who has obtained a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and/or Master of Arts (MA) degree and ultimately got employment at a college or university—and that is it (Aarhus University n.d.). The author of this paper does not share this general view. A researcher should be someone with love and passion for research, after having completed his/her post-graduate studies. This might be a person who has indeed completed a PhD thesis and has engaged in various mechanisms that produce further knowledge, including the publishing of research reports in journal articles and books outside the field of their academic qualifications (The Conversation 2013). Researchers should not publish only because they are ultimately and completely

compelled to do so after funding; they should do so because they intend to persist in contributing towards scholarship development within their special areas of interest (The Conversation 2013). That is particularly why a PhD holder should meet certain requirements before being admitted to being a professor. These requirements would typically include the total number of postgraduate (Hons, MA, and PhD) students one has produced, and a certain specified number of journal articles published in indexed accredited journals. Requirements (ranging from the various number of students to written journal articles and published books) form the basis of one becoming an associate/assistant professor or a full professor (Subbaye 2017). It is within this context that the current paper has fully adopted the voices of researchers who are either MA or PhD students with an ultimate strong interest in research. Equally, they have been the centre of analysis, as they are facing various challenges regarding publishing, including finishing their studies on time.

Those who are either MA or PhD students have expressed their views on various difficulties facing their keen research interest in their various subject fields. This article explores some of the key problems that they are encountering in the early stages of their research career. Some of these challenges include the lack of motivation for research sustainability and support, encompassing the absence of encouraging words from mentors, senior academics and well-advanced researchers within their different fields. Some have centred their views on the lack of financial support to enable them to do field research. Some young emerging scholars are being delayed in their successful graduation, even when they have completed their studies; whereas some are gate-kept within the university's post-graduate system for a very long time, frustrating these students until they deregister and exit the system. Some of the emerging scholars emphasise that they are not able to arrange consultation time with senior academics (well-established researchers) who are obliged to assist them. This is due to the fact that the academic environment is often busy and time is constrained, with only limited opportunities for engagement with emerging young scholars on research and publishing. The findings of this study leave no doubt that the combination of inadequate funding schemes, unavailable laboratory equipment for data collection samples, and the challenges of field or practical research work, have all become huge barriers in the process of knowledge production and research interest development. This is coupled with the absence of inspirational figures in research. During the interviews for this study, the verbatim responses of MA students encompassed the following:

... during my first attempt at publishing, I wanted my supervisor to help me so that I can write a journal article about maritime law. But he postponed my journal article meetings until I saw that he was never interested. (Male respondent)

There is need for mentorship programmes and placement opportunities where young African researchers can be given opportunity to showcase their skills. (Female respondent)

If you knew, I had helped some lady from University of Pretoria with research, and she managed to obtain 83% and here I am stuck with mine. (Female respondent)

Some of the emerging scholars, who were also PhD students, indicated that they were academically mentored by supervisors who had minimal interest in research. These supervisors are doctors and professors who have completely paused on writing and publishing. As such, their interest in research engagement has also paused, including their involvement in knowledge production discussions and external research consultations (Rapanyane 2020b). This is a practice that discourages many emerging scholars from continuing with research careers, or even considering being researchers as one of the possible future career options. Similarly, the very same challenges are valid for the publication of manuscripts in appropriate Department of Higher Education (DHET) indexed and accredited journals, as articulated broadly by Wallace in “Publish and be Damned: The Damage Being Created by Predatory Publishing” (Wallace 2019). Responses generated in the interviews with PhD students explain these challenges:

The principal challenge is the problem of lack of funding to these emerging young scholars and also know-how to structure a research paper/journal article. (Male respondent)

The main issue relates to the research funding required and we are not even considered when we are applying for it. They award funding to selected topics. (Male respondent)

PhD students additionally argued that South African public and private universities need senior researchers, programmes and schemes that favour the enhancement of young emerging scholars with different, innovative ideas. Relevant funders should start financing emerging scholars in order to promote a culture of research and the collection of primary data sources (Matebeni 2014). There are few black professors in South African institutions of higher learning (Mafukata and Musitha 2017). It is discouraging that some MA and PhD students, who were interviewed in a study by Matebeni (2014), argued that their supervisors had turned into teachers and not subject specialists or researchers. Furthermore, supervisors claimed to have become overwhelmed with too many teaching responsibilities, to such an extent that they no longer had time to offer research consultations. Even in favourable cases of co-authorship between a supervisor and the student, the former often does not contribute much to improve the manuscripts of the emerging author. Moreover, they do not even write papers of their own and invite their potential emerging supervisees as co-authors to show their confidence in the young researchers. This article contends that such interaction should happen, since scholarship is all about knowledge production, motivation of young emerging scholars, and the contestation of ideas (Nyawasha 2020). There is no doubt that all of these combined challenges jeopardise the future of young emerging scientists and prevent them from enhancing their research skills and publishing in high-impact journals; an undesirable situation that jeopardises their careers, since they are without any knowledge of research and publishing.

The paper also wishes to submit the argument advanced by Maserumule (2012, 2), who indicates that:

When the young become old; it refuses to consider new perspectives and inevitably reproduces itself in hegemony used as a firewall against anything new. One can just imagine the extent of conservatism of the old, especially when the antagonists of emerging knowledge are septuagenarians, whose ideational outlook is steeped in the past, determined to impose the irrelevance of their scholarship orientation as relevant. (Maserumule 2012, 2)

Additionally, Maserumule (2012, 3) emphasises that “In appropriating to itself the self-proclaimed epithet of the connoisseurs of scholarship, swashbuckling its gerontological imagination as the finite of science, the old disturbs the birth of the new.” Bearing this in mind, it is no surprise that some of our post-graduate students have been delayed in the university system for a very long time for various reasons that are only known to their supervisors. It is unfortunate that they (the students) are not able to confront the situation directly, as their future lies undecided in the hands of the “self-proclaimed connoisseurs of scholarship.”

Interpretations of the Challenges Facing young emerging Scholars: Are the Post-graduate Qualifications enough in the Research Fraternity?

When considering the challenges discussed in the above section, one might have to argue that to become a scholar, academic, and/or scientist (including a researcher), a post-graduate qualification is not enough. This career option is mainly for those who join academia only to earn a living. One aspect that should be remembered is the real reason why one ends up registering for a post-graduate qualification. If these challenges are known at an early stage, then scholars will ultimately understand the difference between emerging young scholars who register for post-graduate qualifications with the intention of obtaining employment and earning a living, or those who aspire to become researchers who want to contribute to their specific areas. Within this context, South Africans are not immune. An MA or a PhD comes with more than the attachment of letters to the surname. It comes with responsibilities in the subject field and one cannot hope to just graduate and be provided with a life full of research output and publications (Gruszczynska 2016). Some scholars (including emerging post-graduate students and post-doc studies) are mostly unrehearsed for the workload required in securing a good future in the research fraternity.

Even if the writing and submission of a research report progress smoothly, all that is left is the reality of walking the same path that other well-established researchers have done. Those who have completed their studies on time, often experience confusion and difficulty processing the extensive time they have taken preparing for something that now, on completion, only brings emptiness in their lives. Those who are active job seekers are often consumed by the process and end up in areas that offer them little sense of intensity and purpose, and they are forever lost for academia (Robins and

Kanowski 2008). The central argument is not to bring all emerging scholars into the publishing fraternity. The essential argument here is to make all MA and PhD holders aware of the significance of enhancing their research profiles at an early stage. This would increase their chances of employment and further development within the institutions of higher learning (Lee and Kamler 2008). It is without a doubt that all these challenges are difficult and, in some instances, impossible to handle. A well-structured mechanism addressing some of the challenges can become a wonderful point of departure towards being a researcher.

The discussion above highlights one leading challenge, namely the accessibility of research funds. A lack of research funds constitutes an unforeseen paradox that causes young emerging scholars to become completely disconnected from the research world (accessing research mentors, research career advice, conferences, professional research development, and networking) (Gruszcynska 2016). The author's interpretation of the data collected in this study, is that the combination of inadequate research funds and difficulty in finding employment, demotivates aspiring researchers completely. Because they are without any institutional affiliation or an administrative system that manages everything related to research, accessing some of these research funds ultimately becomes a big problem.

The abovementioned challenges are exacerbated by the lack of support from supervisors. This is the norm and practice during and after the official student-supervisor relationship. Some students, who can maintain some kind of informal association with their previous mentors, report mismatch and misguided expectations (Gruszcynska 2016). Several academics were able to secure academic posts when the economic climate was still congenial, however, many have now become completely disconnected from academia, due to the harsh reality faced by those who are still attempting to find academic posts. Even those who are still connected to their supervisors are not being mentored because official relations do not allow such. This is a very disturbing and frustrating situation (Gruszcynska 2016). The very same post-graduate students, who are grappling with research funds while searching for part-time or full-time jobs (sometimes there are family expectations that contribute to the pressure), find it impossible to consult with these senior academics and well-established researchers who gate-keep publishing techniques (Wolff 2015).

The issue of publishing in academia to survive (publish or perish)¹ does not only enhance one's skills in research, but also ensures that an emerging young scholar becomes an authoritative voice and an acknowledged expert in the subject. This expertise ultimately becomes appealing to universities as the predominant employers of academics (McGrail, Rickard, and Jones 2006). This is one of the most demanding challenges of opting to be an academic, and at times reflects a complete picture of what young emerging scholars go through. The collected data at the author's disposal reveal

1 This is an aphorism that describes the pressure of publishing academic work in order to succeed in the academic career. This is an institutional pressure that is most prevalent at research universities.

that most of what the post-graduate students desire, often does not materialise easily. Even when they finish their studies, and are awarded academic posts, the complete life of the coveted lectureship does not come easily. The reality is that their lives will now be a combination of intensive teaching, financial demands, a sobering mix of academic politics, administration and limited social life; all in the realm of a new set of principles to “publish or perish” (Bretag 2012; Robins and Kanowski 2008). These young emerging researchers often feel the systemic burden of pressure. They either succumb to the wonders and delusions of thinking they are in the right spot; or they opt out of academia to serve the general society in any manner that enables them to earn a living. Even the living earners (who stay in the system) are still pressured heavily by their peers who extensively engage in research and knowledge production. Zaini (2009) believes that the building block of a victorious academic career is “publishing, publishing, and publishing.” This is endorsed by Ophof (1997), who highlights that universities with an exemplary research reputation to maintain, extensively need scholars who can engage in publishing research findings that are indexed in high-impact journals.

Summary of Major Findings

- It has been revealed in this study that the major research interest drivers include: interest in doing post-graduate qualifications; outside classroom discussions with field researchers who are also working in government research institutions, including non-profit organisations [NPOs].
- Leading inspirational research figures are those who have also managed to develop research methods, including theoretical frameworks that can be used to analyse data (e.g., Molefe Kete Asante).
- Another finding has been that some emerging scholars have developed a keen research interest through obtaining post-graduate qualifications, including MA and PhD degrees, while others were motivated a bit earlier in their honours studies. This implies that there are multiple inspired researchers in South African public and private academic institutions. This is despite the fact that they are not trained at an earlier stage and given enough information for early research career preparation and development to contribute and compete worldwide.
- This paper has discovered various challenges faced by young emerging scholars, which include a lack of funds and research grants as well as a lack of inspirational researchers to motivate these young emerging scholars into following academic careers.
- Other challenges may include manuscript proofreading fees when a young emerging scholar is writing; lack of data on journal submission procedures; lack of mentorship mechanisms to train young emerging scholars from as young as those registered for an honours degree. A significant challenge is the cohort of supervisors and lecturers who are no longer interested in research and are now focused on teaching and learning responsibilities.

- It would be disingenuous to forget that key challenges include the demotivation to continue with a research career, as some supervisors make it difficult to excel in mastering the skill of writing, publishing, and presenting research papers in conferences, which may even include reducing a full dissertation into publishable research manuscripts for journal submissions.

Recommendations

Research funding should be prioritised to invest in young innovative minds that will contribute to the productive growth of South Africa. South Africa does not need research funding bodies that are extensively exacting, by financing particular research topics and leaving others out. We need a governmental research funding body, as well as a non-selective private research body, that is able to fund all research initiatives of all societal importance to enhance the knowledge of policymakers in terms of policy directives. We also need a committed government that channels enough funds towards the training of post-graduate students for their early academic careers, thereby realising the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). South African senior academics, including those who have lost interest in research, should stimulate their knowledge production focus to stay research active and become motivational figures to the emerging community of scholars. Senior academics and the well-established community of academics need to collaborate and network with pertinent research stakeholders, such as South African research institutes and government research bodies. This will encourage them to commit to publishing. South Africa also needs unconventional research organisations that can directly liaise with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) for the sole intention of research funds administration. This would encourage independent researchers, who are still outside the university system, to continue with their research initiatives, as they know that their publication fees will be covered.

Conclusions

In this Afrocentric paper, the author has presented a clear objective of underlining all the challenges faced by young emerging scholars. The paper also evaluated if holding an MA or PhD qualification is enough to become a full-time researcher. Equally, the author has outlined several key research interests that drives the journey of many emerging researchers, including early career researchers in various fields. The paper sought to showcase that research interest has significant origins that are important in shaping the career of a future young scholar in South African universities. The challenges which are faced by young emerging scholars are highlighted from the responses of some participants. This paper also engaged the question of whether holding any post-graduate qualification can inherently qualify one as a researcher earning a good living. The paper highlighted the difference between those who come into academia only to earn a living, and those who are interested in research and furthering knowledge production and research output. After a careful analysis of the presented data, this paper submits that holding any post-graduate qualification qualifies one to earn a living,

although not as a researcher. Several policy directives are outlined to be taken into consideration by the South African higher education sector in resolving these issues faced by young emerging scholars.

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