Postdoctoral Policy Representation in South African Universities

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Abstract

African universities face challenges regarding retaining postdoctoral research fellows (postdocs) within the continent and their inclusion in the academic research profession. However, there exists a scarcity of research addressing the disparity between policy and practice. Acknowledging this gap, the present study poses significant questions about how universities with established postdoc policies conceptualise and articulate these provisions for postdocs. We explore how these institutions define postdocs in their policies, identifying potential silences, gaps, and recommendations that could enhance the policy framework for postdocs. The evidence for this analysis was sourced from publicly accessible policy documents available on the websites of six South African universities. Employing key themes from the frameworks of "What's the problem represented to be" and institutional logics, we analysed the postdoc policies. The findings indicate that the characterisation of postdocs as professional trainees within these policies results in an ambiguous operationalisation of their roles across all the studied universities, leading to complexities in the governance and management of these researchers. This study contends that the framing of postdocs is significantly shaped by a capitalist perspective that emphasises a cost-benefit analysis of their research roles. Consequently, it recommends that a national policy framework be established to provide standardised definitions, outline criteria for postdoctoral positions, delineate clear pathways for career advancement, and acknowledge the vital contributions of postdocs, thereby assisting universities in developing effective policies.

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Introduction

Postdoctoral research fellows constitute a vital yet increasingly vulnerable segment of the global academic workforce, significantly contributing to research outputs and the prestige of institutions (Hlatshwayo 2024a). Their increase is a direct result of the neoliberal transformation in higher education, which has redefined knowledge as a commodity for the global market (Marginson 2022). In this context, postdocs have emerged as a flexible and cost-effective labour force that universities depend upon, a reliance that is intensified by a severe lack of comprehensive global data on this group, which impedes effective policy responses (Clarke, Kenny, and Loxley 2015; Prozesky and Van Schalkwyk 2024). These challenges are particularly pronounced in Africa, where limited research capacity, chronic underfunding for research and development (African Union 2015; Schneegans, Straza, and Lewis 2021), and systemic infrastructural problems create a detrimental cycle that hampers innovation and scientific output (Ralaidovy, Adam, and Boucher 2020).

In this continental context, South Africa's situation is paradoxical. Comprehensive bibliometric and innovation data consistently demonstrate that South Africa possesses the strongest research capacity and output in Africa. It is recognised as the most scientifically prolific nation based on total publication count and leads decisively in total citations and the number of highly cited papers, which together indicate a superior research volume and impact (Kahn 2022). This dominance is further substantiated by its performance in global rankings, where its universities, particularly the University of Cape Town, are consistently the highest ranked in Africa (Times Higher Education 2024). This combination of factors reinforces its status as the foremost research destination on the continent. This recognition is widely acknowledged, as evidenced by its function as a pivotal centre for postgraduate education. For example, Cloete, Sheppard, and Bailey (2015) discovered that a considerable number of doctoral graduates from South African universities are international students hailing from other parts of Africa, highlighting its significance in regional "brain circulation" (Kahn 2022). It is precisely this standing as a continental powerhouse that makes the precarious situation of its postdocs that are the very engine of this research framework a pressing concern.

On a global scale, the academic labour market is marked by widespread precarity, with postdocs being disproportionately impacted (Jones 2023; O'Connor, Le Feuvre, and Sümer 2023). An oversaturation of PhD graduates in relation to permanent academic roles, a heavy dependence on short-term contracts, and frequently insufficient compensation and benefits characterise this situation. Postdocs often traverse a terrain of fixed-term employment without assured extensions, which leads to considerable job insecurity and hinders career advancement (O'Connor, Le Feuvre, and Sümer 2023). A pivotal, cross-cutting concern is the absence of a universal definition for a "postdoc", which engenders role ambiguity and inconsistent treatment across and within national

frameworks (Hlatshwayo 2024b). This precarity is evident in fierce competition for permanent roles, mental health challenges, and substantial pressure to publish and obtain funding (Jones 2023; Woolston 2020).

In South Africa, the global trend of postdoc precarity is both mirrored and often exacerbated by its uniquely contradictory status as a leading research nation on the continent. Postdocs exist in a specific, transitional space within the academic workforce; they are neither entirely students nor permanent employees, yet all possess doctoral qualifications, a credential held by merely 48% of permanent academic staff in 2019 (Cloete, Bunting, and Van Schalkwyk 2022; Khuluvhe et al. 2021). The number of postdocs in South Africa has surged significantly, increasing from 357 in 2004 to 2,867 in 2020 (CeSTII 2005; 2024). Hlatshwayo (2024a) contextualises this growth through the conflicting narratives of a "pipeline" and a "precariat". The prevailing "pipeline" narrative, endorsed by national policy, frames the postdoc role as a vital developmental phase aimed at nurturing the forthcoming generation of academic faculty and research leaders, thus enhancing the nation's knowledge capital and global standing.

However, this narrative sharply contrasts with the actual experiences of the "precariat". The dependence on externally funded roles positions postdocs as effective income generators for universities, further solidifying their precarious situation (Hlatshwayo 2024b). This issue is compounded by a shrinking public higher education budget, which has compelled some institutions to halt the creation of permanent positions and depend on contingent labour, thereby intensifying a situation of credential inflation where securing a permanent academic career from a postdoc position becomes progressively improbable (Hlatshwayo 2024a). As a result, the pipeline does not lead to stable employment but rather into an expanding, disposable precariat (Kerr 2022). Concerns are further amplified by the diminishing percentage of South African citizens among postdocs, signalling a growing dependence on a transnational precariat whose members encounter additional layers of vulnerability (CeSTII 2024; Hlatshwayo 2024b).

This state of precarity is not uniformly experienced; rather, it is significantly influenced by factors such as gender, nationality, and other intersecting identities. On a global scale, female postdocs encounter a well-documented phenomenon known as the "leaky pipeline", wherein gender disparities become more pronounced at each successive stage of an academic career (Hlatshwayo 2025). Women frequently grapple with the "baby penalty", a situation where maternity leave adversely affects their publication rates and career advancement, a challenge that is exacerbated by the temporary nature of postdoc contracts (Jones 2023). In the context of South Africa, these gender-specific challenges are compounded by the enduring structural inequalities stemming from the legacy of apartheid, potentially placing women, especially those from historically disadvantaged racial backgrounds, in a "double bind" (Bozalek and Boughey 2012). The imperative to publish and secure funding, alongside potential biases in mentorship and networking opportunities, can position female postdocs at a significant disadvantage within an already intensely competitive landscape.

Moreover, international postdocs in South Africa represent a crucial yet particularly vulnerable segment of the academic workforce. Although they are actively sought after to bolster the internationalisation and research output of universities, they often find themselves navigating a complex array of administrative challenges related to visas, work permits, and access to healthcare (Hlatshwayo 2024b). Additionally, they may experience social and professional isolation, face cultural and linguistic barriers, and encounter difficulties in achieving long-term community integration, all of which can adversely impact their well-being and research productivity (Culpepper et al. 2021). Their legal status is frequently contingent upon their fixed-term contracts, rendering them exceptionally susceptible to exploitation and silencing their voices regarding labour rights and institutional governance.

For postdocs with disabilities, the obstacles they face can be significantly more severe, yet this demographic remains underexplored both internationally and within South Africa (Ndlovu 2025). The considerable pressure, competitive atmosphere, and temporary status of postdoc roles can foster environments in which seeking essential accommodations is viewed as a professional liability (Brown and Leigh 2018). The absence of long-term employment security discourages individuals from revealing their disabilities, compelling them to navigate inaccessible workplaces, conferences, and fieldwork opportunities without sufficient support, which can effectively exclude them from the academic trajectory.

The "neoliberal turn" in higher education serves as the ideological foundation for these circumstances. This ideology, which prioritises marketisation, competition, and managerial efficiency, has resulted in the commodification of knowledge and the casualisation of academic work (Hall 2018). Within this context, postdocs are primarily valued for their ability to enhance institutional research output, secure competitive funding, and improve university rankings (Marginson 2022). Various neoliberal logics intersect to influence their experiences: The logic of commodification compels postdocs to focus on the quantity and speed of their publications; the logic of corporatisation positions them as income generators rather than as emerging scholars; and the logic of casualisation is reflected in the widespread use of fixed-term contracts, shifting economic risk from the institution to the individual (Hlatshwayo 2024a). This convergence creates a scenario where postdocs, especially those from underrepresented groups, are both crucial to the research enterprise and rendered highly expendable, a condition that some scholars critically refer to as a form of "modern academic slavery" due to its exploitative characteristics (Steynberg, Grundling, and Venter 2024).

A significant challenge intensifying the predicament faced by postdocs in South Africa is the lack of a cohesive national policy or framework that regulates their status, rights, and career advancement. This situation sharply contrasts with some European countries, like the Netherlands and Denmark, which have more organised national career frameworks and research funding systems that offer clearer directives regarding postdoc contracts, benefits, and their integration into the academic landscape (O'Connor, Le

Feuvre, and Sümer 2023). Nonetheless, the introduction of a national postdoctoral policy in South Africa could serve as a double-edged sword: While it holds the promise of enhanced standardisation, clarity, and improved welfare, it could also pose the risk of diminishing institutional flexibility and generating unfunded mandates within an already financially constrained sector (Hlatshwayo 2024b; Kump et al. 2023).

Another significant concern affecting the global postdoc situation, especially in South Africa, is their systematic exclusion from the governance structures and policy-making processes. Postdocs are predominantly "invisible" within university governance, despite constituting a considerable part of the research workforce (Clarke, Kenny, and Loxley 2015). Their temporary status and absence of formal employment rights at numerous institutions frequently preclude them from participating in faculty senates, university councils, or departmental committees where discussions and decisions regarding research strategy and staff welfare policies occur (Culpepper et al. 2021). This exclusion results in a democratic deficit, wherein those most impacted by research policy possess the least influence over its development. As Prozesky and Van Schalkwyk (2024) contend, this gap in data and governance positions them as the "invisible scholar", a group whose needs and contributions are overlooked in essential institutional datasets and strategic planning. The absence of a unified voice perpetuates a cycle in which policies are formulated for them rather than in collaboration with them, often neglecting to address their most urgent issues related to career advancement, mental well-being, and long-term stability.

The intricate interplay of these global trends and local dynamics establishes a challenging landscape for postdocs in South Africa, marked by significant precarity, insufficient mentorship, and unstable funding (Hlatshwayo 2024a; Simmonds and Bitzer 2018). The wider implications affect individual well-being and the overall quality of research, as postdocs navigate intricate power imbalances and an implicit set of guidelines amidst a perpetual state of uncertainty (Breines and Prinsloo 2025; Solomon and Du Plessis 2023). Nevertheless, despite these challenges, a significant gap persists in comprehending how South African universities conceptualise and articulate institutional policies for postdocs. The scholarly literature is predominantly shaped by narratives from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia (e.g., Chakraverty 2020; Culpepper et al 2021; Woolston 2020), and within South Africa, research specifically addressing postdocs is an emerging field, with scant scholarship focusing on institutional policy frameworks (Hlatshwayo 2024b). This study seeks to fill this gap by posing the central research question: How are South African universities conceptualising and framing policy provisions for postdocs? Through a comparative analysis of policies across various types of universities, this study aims to theorise the competing narratives that underpin postdoc policy in South Africa.

Research Questions

1. How are universities framing postdoc provisions in their policy communications?

2. What knowledge foundations influence the framing of these policy provisions?

3. What are the silences regarding the framing of postdoc policy provisions?

4. How can the current framing of postdocs be questioned and improved?

Conceptual Framework

This research is informed by two social constructivist frameworks: "What's the problem represented to be" (WPR) and institutional logics (IL), which assert that policy is not a neutral tool but rather a social artefact that actively shapes the realities it claims to represent. To start, Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach was utilised to explore how university policies frame postdocs as a "problem" through the process of problematisation. Rather than simply evaluating a policy's effectiveness, this framework takes a critical look at how the policy itself creates and shapes the very issues it claims to address, shedding light on the assumptions that lie beneath. Next, to enhance WPR and address the inquiry regarding the knowledge foundations that shape framing, we incorporate the institutional logics framework (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012). This framework offers analytical instruments to discern the competing value systems and "rules of the game" that form the social context influencing policy. It asserts that institutions are steered by a multiplicity of logics such as the market (competition, efficiency), the professions (autonomy, expertise), the state (regulation, compliance), and the corporation (hierarchy, managerialism). Our examination employs IL to trace the manifestation of these logics within policy documents. The IL framework elucidates that the problem representation revealed by WPR is not arbitrary.

Research Methodology

A qualitative, comparative research design was adopted, employing critical policy analysis to delve into the framing of postdoc policies. The study focused on policies from six South African universities, chosen to represent key institutional types: traditional research, comprehensive, and universities of technology. These include Stellenbosch University (SU), University of Johannesburg (UJ), Vaal University of Technology (VUT), Nelson Mandela University (NMU), Durban University of Technology (DUT), and North-West University (NWU). This cross-institutional comparison highlighted how each university understands postdocs within its unique operational context. The design was selected to untangle the complexities of policy framing, illustrating what and who gets included, overlooked, or excluded (Apthorpe and Gasper 2014). It shows how discourses are reinforced through policy practices that assign specific meanings to the postdoctoral role. This research adopts a holistic interpretation of policy as both a textual and discursive construct (Ball 1993). We view policy not merely as a static, conclusive document, but rather as a practical embodiment of institutional values and intentions that is perpetually interpreted and enacted within a particular social context (Colebatch 2006). This viewpoint redirects the analytical emphasis from a limited scrutiny of formal policy formulation to the dynamic processes

of policy framing how issues are chosen, categorised, and articulated into existence through language (Van Hulst and Yanow 2016).

Importantly, this broad perspective validates the examination of policy communications located on official university websites. In the current digital landscape, university websites function as the primary interface for institutional communication, serving as centralised repositories where official policy is both disseminated and performatively enacted for both internal and external audiences (Saichaie and Morphew 2014). The way a university publicly presents the postdoctoral role on its website through recruitment advertisements, fellowship descriptions, and organisational charts constitutes a significant discursive practice. These communications are not ancillary to policy; they are fundamental to its social existence and implementation, actively influencing the perceived identity, value, and status of postdocs within the academic community (Chong and Druckman 2007). Therefore, scrutinising this digital communication is crucial for comprehending how postdoctoral policy is authentically operationalised and framed in the public sphere.

This research conceptualises framing as a discursive construction process through which meaning is organised and reality is negotiated within institutional contexts. In line with Van Hulst and Yanow (2016), we interpret framing as a sense-making activity that is realised through the selective emphasis on aspects of an issue, their categorisation into defined classifications, and their arrangement into a coherent narrative. This process is essential to policy formulation, as the way a subject is framed within a document establishes the foundational premises for its understanding and management. For the purposes of this analysis, framing is operationalised as the investigation of the specific language, definitions, and categorical distinctions employed in university policy documents to delineate the postdoctoral role. This encompasses an analysis of how postdocs are referred to, what their primary stated purpose is, and which institutional logic whether it be professional development, scientific contribution, or economic efficiency is emphasised to justify their position within the university framework. The emphasis is on identifying the core elements of the narrative constructed by the policy and the specific terminology utilised to create this representation.

Data Collection

Data were collected from university policy and strategy documents. We identified the postdoc policy documents using the appropriate keywords for the search process. These policy documents were publicly available and accessible from each respective university website. As a result, our inquiry encompasses a wide array of policy documents, including strategic plans, fellowship guidelines, annual reports, research strategies, and postdoc recruitment advertisements, thus acknowledging that policy is expressed across various textual genres within an institution. These documents were published between the years 2014 and 2025. Data were thematically analysed using themes from the conceptual framework that guided the study.

Procedure and Data Analysis

We carefully selected key policy documents, such as postdoc policies, research strategies, and annual reports from the university for our analysis. We took a close look at these documents independently to uncover emerging themes, paying attention to both the similarities and differences among various institutions. To make sense of the qualitative content, we employed content analysis, which allowed us to categorise themes effectively. This meant digging into the words, phrases, and conceptual links within the texts, to establish how they communicate meaning, especially those tied to significant thematic areas. Our goal was to extract meaningful insights from the data categories, all while being guided by the study's conceptual framework. We organised the data systematically using tables, which helped illustrate how the way policies and strategic documents are framed influences postdoc practices and outcomes. This approach enabled us to discern the power dimensions in this policy analysis; we focused attention on highlighting the silent voices in framing postdoc policies rather than conveying only the dominant views (Yanow 2007).

Findings and Discussion

How Policy Framings Construct South Africa's Postdocs

This analysis presents a critical examination of how six South African universities frame postdoc provisions through policy, revealing a systematic process of constructing what we term the "manufactured precariat". We demonstrate how policy framing operates as an active process of problematisation that serves specific institutional interests while systematically excluding alternative representations. This discussion addresses our research questions through rigorous critical analysis that engages deeply with both our empirical findings and the broader literature on academic labour and neoliberal transformation in higher education.

Framing Postdocs as a Category of Liminality

The analysis reveals that one university (NWU) has not defined what it refers to as a postdoc while five (SU, UJ, DUT, VUT, and NMU) of the South African universities in this study are framing postdocs through a consistent pattern of definitional liminality that actively constructs the postdoc as neither student nor staff. This framing represents what Ball (1993) identifies as policy as discourse where language does not merely describe reality but actively constructs it. The University of Johannesburg's (2024) policy identifies postdocs as

> [i]ndividuals who are not employees of the University and, therefore, cannot qualify for any UJ employee benefits. They must have recently completed a doctorate and are able to continue their postdoctoral studies in a particular field of expertise to enhance their knowledge and intellect. The guideline for the individual's completion of the doctorate is within the last 5 years. (UJ 2024)

This, with its stark declaration that postdocs are "not employees of the University", exemplifies a performative speech act that institutionally and legally severs them from the recognised workforce. This definitional framing operates as what Van Hulst and Yanow (2016) term a "sense making device" that categorises postdocs into a permanent state of betweenness. The policy definition of Durban University of Technology states that:

> Research Fellowships are temporary appointments normally awarded to individuals within five years of them having achieved a doctoral degree. Postdoctoral fellows are considered as professional trainees of the University. Fellowships are usually offered to candidates for a maximum of 2 years after which under exceptional circumstances a further extension of one year may be considered by the University. (DUT 2014)

The ubiquitous designation as "professional trainees", noted above, or as individuals seeking to "enhance their knowledge and intellect" (UJ 2024) creates what we identify as a "pedagogical precariat", highly qualified doctoral holders institutionally positioned as perpetual learners. This framing, as Cantwell (2009) argues, strategically underpins their treatment as a "low-cost talent pool", allowing universities to leverage doctoral-level skills while systematically circumventing the financial and legal responsibilities of employment through non-taxable stipends (Kerr 2022). The temporal framing further reinforces this precarity. The near-universal five-year limit post-PhD does not, as the "pipeline" narrative suggests, ensure a flow of fresh talent so much as it ensures a constant flow of disposable labour. This systematically manufactures what Hlatshwayo (2024b) identifies as the "precariat" scholars trapped between the public narrative of a pathway to permanence and the private reality of perpetual transience.

This South African policy framing mirrors global trends in the casualisation of academia, while also highlighting unique local intensifications, in contrast to European systems such as those in the Netherlands and Denmark, which uphold more structured postdoc trajectories with defined employment statuses (O'Connor, Le Feuvre, and Sümer 2023). Meanwhile, United Kingdom and American frameworks resemble the South African framing with a similar dependence on casualisation, at least providing superior remuneration; the South African scenario reveals a distinct severity. This situation arises from what Marginson (2022) describes as the "double movement" of neoliberalism within peripheral knowledge systems where there is a simultaneous adoption of managerial practices from the Global North and a deepening of local historical disparities.

Importantly, the uniformity of this perspective across various institutions indicates an appearance of "success" of policy. The deliberate ambiguity creates what we refer to as "strategic equivocality", which facilitates maximum labour extraction while imposing minimal institutional accountability. This exemplifies what Hall (2018, 97) characterises as the "proletarianisation of academic work" where individuals with doctoral qualifications are relegated to a casualised labour force, their intellectual contributions commodified, while their professional growth and job security are

rendered institutionally insignificant. This framing actively generates the very precarity it purports to mitigate, establishing a self-perpetuating cycle in which temporary roles persist as temporary precisely due to the framing approach.

Policy Knowledge Foundations

Beneath the category of liminality lies a complex ideological machinery that rationalises and sustains the postdoc condition. The application of Bacchi's (2009) "What's the problem represented to be" approach reveals how policy assumptions function as what we might call the silent curriculum of precarity, a hidden pedagogy that normalises exploitation through the language of opportunity. When the University of Johannesburg (2024) frames postdoctoral fellowships as an opportunity that "can significantly enhance an individual's education", it performs a sophisticated discursive manoeuvre that individualises what are fundamentally structural problems, representing the "problem" of the postdoc as one of personal development rather than institutional responsibility. This reflects what Ball (1993) identifies as the constitutive power of policy discourse to shape social realities through linguistic choices.

The WPR analysis exposes three fundamental presuppositions underpinning these policy representations that align with global neoliberal trends while exhibiting distinct Southern characteristics. First, the pervasive rhetoric of "career furthering opportunity" (SU 2016) and "experiential learning" (DUT 2014) presupposes a linear academic career path that exists in theory but is lacking in practice. This constitutes what we term the fallacy of assumed progression, a collective fiction maintained despite overwhelming evidence of systemic bottlenecks documented by Woolston (2020) and Jones (2023) internationally, and by Hlatshwayo (2024b) within the South African context. Second, there is a presupposition of a harmonious alignment between institutional and individual interests that masks fundamental power asymmetries. This can be seen in the emphasis on the "important contributions to the research and scholarly mission" voiced in policies such as the VUT's below:

> The Vaal University of Technology (VUT) is developing and growing its research culture. The postdoctoral research fellowship (PDRF) offers recent doctoral degree recipients a period in which to extend their education and professional training, which may serve as a path for further academic and professional development. In addition to deriving individual benefits, postdoctoral research fellows (postdocs) will make important contributions to the research and scholarly mission of the university. (VUT 2015)

Third, North-West University's framing states:

> The NWU, along with most other universities in the South African research and innovation system, is faced by the challenge of having an aging but productive academic population. In support of its drive towards engaged scholarship, the NWU will therefore host postdoctoral fellows and annually make available a number of postdoctoral

> fellowship grants in order to attract recently-qualified researchers to the NWU. (NWU 2025, 1)

This framing of postdocs as solving "the challenge of having an aging but productive academic population" reveals perhaps the most telling presupposition: that early-career scholars represent human capital to address demographic crises rather than intellectual investments. Here, the postdoc is not defined by their scholarly potential but by their function as a demographic stopgap and a fuel for the university's "drive towards engaged scholarship". This aligns perfectly with what Marginson (2022) identifies as the core of the neoliberal university: the commodification of knowledge and knowledge workers. The postdoc becomes a strategic input, valued for their capacity to produce subsidisable publications (Muller 2017) and enhance institutional ranking metrics.

This instrumentalisation is not fixed but rather aggressively expansionist. For example, SU aims to significantly increase the number of postdocs, intending to grow from over 340 postdocs hosted in 2022 to at least 600 by 2027 (SU 2022). A further notable instance is UJ's recent initiative in 2025 to boost postdoc recruitment to 1,000, aimed at fostering and advancing their careers (UJ 2025). The ambitious goals established by these institutions to substantially augment their postdoc numbers are not merely benign growth strategies; they signify a calculated escalation of the precariat. This massification, propelled by the mechanisms of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) subsidy scheme and pressures from global rankings, embodies what Hall (2018, 97) refers to as the "proletarianisation of academic work". The recruitment of international scholars, although enhancing collaboration, further broadens this transnational precariat, frequently leaving them to navigate a complex web of visa uncertainties (Zeleza 2017).

Institutional Logics in Postdoctoral Policy

Our examination of postdoc policies in South Africa uncovers not merely a single logic, but using the framework established by Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2012), we pinpoint five predominant logics that together shape the postdoc as a disposable academic entity. First, we picked up the capitalist market logic, which Marginson (2022) recognises as the primary driving force behind modern higher education, which drives the comprehensive commodification of knowledge and its creators. This abstract logic materialises into a relentless fixation on quantifiable performance, candidly articulated by North-West University (2023) as a pursuit of "productivity and efficiency". Within this framework, postdocs are fundamentally transformed into what Cantwell (2009, 8) critically refers to academics as "entrepreneurs of the self", individuals who bear the exclusive burden of producing quantifiable research outputs while personally facing all financial and professional risks associated with their temporary and unstable roles.

Concurrently, the strategic categorisation of postdocs as non-employees, designated as fellows or trainees rather than as salaried personnel, serves as a calculated strategy to evade institutional responsibilities such as pension contributions, health insurance, and

other employment benefits. This deliberate structure, effectively diminishes the skills of doctoral-level professionals, relegating them to a casualised, cost-efficient workforce. Consequently, this leads to the establishment and perpetuation of what Cantwell (2009, 18) identifies as a "low-cost talent pool", an exploitative economic model that has become essential to the operation of the neoliberal university. This rationale is vividly illustrated in the following policy excerpts from NWU, which expose the implementation of this market-oriented logic:

> PDRFs are not employees of the University and they can therefore not qualify for any employee benefits including retirement funding, membership of retirement funds, or support for a medical aid scheme. (North-West University 2023)

> [They are employed] [t]o emphasise an increase in publication outputs.

and

> The NRF grants that were concluded included grant holder linked bursaries, block grants, freestanding travel grants and bursaries, freestanding postdoctoral research grants and bursaries, SKA student travel grants and bursaries and Thuthuka. In addition, SAMRC [South African Medical Research Council], DTI [Department of Trade and Industry]/THRIP and NWU postdoctoral grants were concluded. (NWU 2023, 52)

The dominant market-oriented mentality exacerbates this performance emphasis, with contract renewals contingent upon their outputs and the funding available, mirroring the demands of knowledge capitalism and global rankings (Schulze-Cleven et al. 2017).

Secondly, the professional logic, which ought to reflect the values and norms of the academic community as articulated by Van Hulst and Yanow (2016), is strategically appropriated to fulfil market-driven goals. When Nelson Mandela University (2025) pledges to "develop and grow the research competence, productivity and stature" of postdocs, it employs the terminology of professional development while subtly shifting its focus towards institutional performance indicators. This exemplifies what we refer to as the appropriation of epistemic values where the genuine cultivation of scholarly identity and expertise is transformed into a tool for enhancing brand reputation and improving rankings. The discourse surrounding mentorship and training, although seemingly altruistic, frequently operates as what Bourdieu would describe as symbolic violence, a method that conceals exploitation beneath the ostensibly neutral language of opportunity. As noted by Hlatshwayo (2024b), this enables institutions to perpetuate the "pipeline" illusion while systematically eroding the conditions necessary for authentic professional advancement. For instance, VUT stipulates that:

> The university seeks to improve its research productivity and visibility.
>
> Postdocs will publish all their research outputs (including creative works and patents) in the name of VUT. (VUT 2015)

This instrumentalises the scientific ethic for the purpose of brand enhancement rather than the cultivation of knowledge. This exemplifies what we term the appropriation of epistemic values, wherein the standards of academic profession and scientific inquiry are undermined and repurposed for institutional competitiveness, illustrating the "academic capitalism" that Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) characterise as a hallmark of modern higher education.

Thus, the science logic, which ought to prioritise intellectual curiosity and the pursuit of knowledge for its intrinsic value, is similarly subjected to instrumentalisation. The stipulation by Vaal University of Technology (2015) that "postdocs will publish all their research outputs in the name of VUT" serves as a clear illustration of how scientific inquiry is relegated to the service of institutional branding. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of "academic capitalism" as articulated by Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), where the foundational norms of scientific practice are eroded and repurposed to gain competitive leverage. The resultant effect is what we refer to as epistemic distortion where research priorities are dictated not by their intellectual merit but rather by their potential for funding and the speed of publication. As Woolston (2020) has documented on a global scale, this pressure engenders what researchers have termed a "hamster wheel" of publication, wherein the incessant chase for outputs compromises the conditions necessary for authentic scientific advancement.

In South Africa, this situation is particularly detrimental, considering the nation's crucial role in tackling continental issues through ongoing, contextually pertinent research (Kahn 2022). The coexistence of these logics reveals a complex system of ideological appropriation. The discourse surrounding "professional development" and "scientific excellence" serves as a deceptive facade, masking the stark extractive nature of market logic. This situation does not represent a balanced pluralism but rather a hegemonic structure in which the market dominates other values. Consequently, this engenders what O'Connor, Le Feuvre, and Sümer (2023) identify in their cross-national analysis as a significant disconnect between the investment in human capital through PhDs and the declining career opportunities available to them, a disconnect that is particularly pronounced in South Africa due to its diminishing public funding for permanent positions.

Strikingly, the state logic, which is intended to offer protective regulation, instead establishes what we refer to as enabling constraint through a convoluted network of regulations that institutionalise precarity while framing it as a bureaucratic necessity. The thorough adherence of Stellenbosch University (2016) to the DHET accreditation standards and South African Revenue Service (SARS) tax regulations exemplifies how state frameworks are employed to regulate rather than empower the academic workforce. This logic is evident in what Zeleza (2017) describes as the additional layers of vulnerability encountered by international scholars, complicated visa requirements, limitations on healthcare, and what frequently amounts to institutionalised xenophobia.

The following excerpt exemplifies the framing of state logics across all six institutions examined in this study:

> – The fellowships paid to Postdocs are exempt from normal income tax on condition that all the SARS regulations regarding remuneration, as described in the SARS Binding Class Ruling issued in accordance with article 78(2) of the Tax Administration Act (nr 28 of 2011) are fully complied with.
>
> – The Postdoc must ensure that he/she does not violate their fellowship or visa conditions with regard to any additional funding paid to them.
>
> – According to the regulations of the Department of Home Affairs, international Postdocs are required to become members of a South African medical aid. (SU 2016)

Concurrently, corporate logic guarantees what DUT's policy aptly describes as "sole and absolute discretion" in managerial decision-making. The complex hierarchies of approval, ranging from heads of departments to vice-deans to executive directors, establish systems of academic patronage that individualise structural precarity as articulated below:

> The PDRF agreement may be renewed if the host and other relevant individuals of authority at their sole and absolute discretion, are satisfied with the PDRF's performance. (DUT 2014, 4)

This bureaucratic framework, despite its appearance of rationality and neutrality, operates as a legitimacy mechanism, as identified by Meyer and Scott (1983), which conceals essential power disparities. This logic renders postdocs what Prozesky and Van Schalkwyk (2024) refer to as "invisible scholars" within their own governance. They are excluded from the committees that shape their working conditions, stripped of collective bargaining rights in most institutions, and subjected to what can be characterised as managerial whim. When the policy at DUT grants authorities "sole and absolute discretion" (DUT 2014, 4) regarding contract renewals, without any representation of postdocs in decision-making bodies, it institutionalises what Fraser (1989) identifies as participatory inequality. Such silence cultivates cultures of academic patronage, ensuring that experiences of precarity are perceived as individual struggles rather than collective issues. The corporate rationale ensures that the burdens of academic labour are systematically shifted downward, while the benefits ascend.

The interaction of these logics gives rise to what we describe as the neoliberal synergy, a self-perpetuating framework where market principles dictate institutional priorities, professional ethics offer moral justification, scientific standards provide performance metrics, state regulations formalise the structures, and corporate hierarchies enforce adherence. This synergy results in the unique contradiction that characterises the South African postdoc experience where scholars are portrayed as both independent

professionals accountable for innovative research and as dependent trainees in need of ongoing supervision, reflecting what Hall (2018, 97) describes as the "proletarianisation of academic work" within the knowledge economy.

What makes the South African context particularly revealing, and indeed concerning, is the way in which these dominant institutional logics interact with the country's unique historical context within the global political economy of knowledge. The desire for international acknowledgement, vividly exemplified by the Durban University of Technology's strategic emphasis on its Times Higher Education World University Ranking and its role within "Emerging Economies", is not merely a neutral quest for excellence as stated below:

> In 2021, DUT was ranked in position 401 (in the top 500) by THE World University Rankings, and in the Top 90 in the World University Rankings "Emerging Economies". Additionally, in terms of World Universities with Real Impact rankings, DUT ranked 35th. In all of these, the University has performed above excellence and needs to continue growing from this baseline and participate in the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings that will help measure impact on localised SDGs and how the University contributes to addressing these. (DUT 2021, 7)

Instead, it engenders what can be critically interpreted as an accelerationist imperative, a frantic, metrics-driven effort to swiftly climb global rankings by utilising a flexible, high-turnover academic workforce. This imperative, as expressed in the DUT *Research and Innovation Blueprint (2021–2030)* (2021), to "continue growing from this baseline" and engage in rankings that assess impact on localised sustainable development goals (SDGs), exposes a deep and painful contradiction. The very mechanisms and policies intended to enhance South Africa's global position and tackle local issues simultaneously reinforce the patterns of academic dependency, epistemic extraction, and systemic casualisation that have historically defined peripheral knowledge systems.

This dynamic illustrates the conflicting essence of neoliberalism within postcolonial contexts (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). South African universities embrace global academic standards, rankings, and impact factors not to attain intellectual independence or cater to African realities, but to engage in a competition governed by externally imposed regulations. The postdoc serves as the pivotal force in this framework: a highly skilled yet disposable employee whose unstable contract reflects an institutional unease regarding prestige. This engenders a harsh contradiction where national academic progress is sought through the exploitation of inexpensive intellectual labour, providing limited long-term security to the very individuals who sustain it.

This formidable interplay constitutes a doxa (Bourdieu 1977), a collection of beliefs so ingrained that they make alternative perspectives unimaginable, influencing all actors within the system (Costa and Teixeira 2013). As a result, it requires a profound rethinking of the institutional logics themselves to break free from what Marginson (2022) describes as the fundamental contradiction of the global knowledge economy:

systems that call for innovation while systematically eroding the conditions necessary for enduring intellectual engagement. For South Africa, a country with a crucial role in the production of knowledge across Africa (Kahn 2022), this calls for the establishment of an epistemology of care, one that prioritises sustainable academic careers and human dignity alongside quantifiable research outcomes.

Silences in Postdoctoral Policy

If the proactive framing of postdocs represents the visible design of their precarious situation, the strategic silences found within institutional policies symbolise its unseen force, imperceptible yet exerting a significant influence that moulds the entire framework. These silences are not mere accidental exclusions but, as Bacchi (2009) suggests, represent active absences that expose the core assumptions and priorities that inform South Africa's strategy regarding early-career research. The unspoken elements within these policy documents convey a great deal about the institutional dedication to maintaining what Hlatshwayo (2024b) describes as a perpetual precariat.

The most significant silence resonates through the lack of established career advancement frameworks. While institutions such as Stellenbosch University eagerly present fellowships as "career-enhancing opportunities" (SU 2016, 3), they fail to provide any concrete routes to permanent academic roles. The assurance of a career pipeline becomes illusory when policies fail to establish connections from temporary fellowships to enduring employment. This silence is particularly troubling when considering South Africa's demographic issues, where, as noted in the North-West University (2023, 2) policy, institutions are confronted with "an aging but productive academic population" yet do not develop substantial succession pathways. As documented by Woolston (2020) and Jones (2023) on a global scale, this results in a harsh bottleneck where aspirations are systematically cultivated and subsequently thwarted by institutional inertia.

The intersectional silences highlight how seemingly neutral policies can perpetuate various forms of discrimination. The total lack of acknowledgement for what England et al. (2016) describe as the "motherhood penalty", or the additional emotional labour identified by Magoqwana, Maqabuka, and Tshoaedi (2019) as the work of "Black nannies" in academia, illustrates how gender and racial biases become ingrained through omission. Likewise, the neglect to address the intricate visa challenges faced by international postdocs or to establish accessible pathways for researchers with disabilities despite NMU's professed commitment to "respect for diversity" (NMU 2025, 4) results in what Brown and Leigh (2018) characterise as ableist structures within academic career trajectories. These silences presuppose what Fraser (1989) critiques as the "universal worker", an unencumbered, able-bodied male devoid of caregiving responsibilities as the standard postdoc subject.

Perhaps the most subtle form of silence manifests at the epistemological level. The "lack of comprehensive quantifiable data" (OECD 2021, 43) regarding postdoc numbers,

career outcomes, and experiences signifies a significant failure in institutional accountability. This absence of data facilitates what could be described as plausible deniability that encourages universities to evade responsibility for issues they choose not to measure. In the absence of effective tracking systems, the extent of the postdoc crisis remains immeasurable, and interventions lack evidence-based guidance. This silence is particularly concerning in light of South Africa's leadership in research on the continent, where, as Kahn (2022) illustrates, the nation contributes a considerable share of Africa's scientific publications yet fails to account for the career paths of the researchers responsible for this output.

These silences collectively operate as what Chong and Druckman (2007) refer to as framing by omission, where the unspoken elements influence understanding as significantly as the articulated ones. They engender what could be termed a schizoid institutional discourse, where universities publicly advocate for development while secretly undermining the necessary conditions to realise it. This exemplifies what Giroux (2010) describes as a public pedagogy of precarity, wherein the hidden curriculum instructs early-career researchers that their vulnerability is a natural and unavoidable state rather than a politically constructed phenomenon.

The ramifications of these silences go beyond individual suffering, posing a threat to the entire research ecosystem. Marginson (2022) contends that knowledge economies rely on the sustainable development of human capital. By neglecting to address career frameworks, institutional representation, intersectional equity, and fundamental accountability through data, South African universities risk incurring what may be termed epistemic harm, thereby undermining the very conditions necessary for ongoing knowledge production. This issue is particularly significant within the African context, where, as Zeleza (2017) emphasises, the establishment of robust research systems is essential for tackling continental challenges.

Challenging and Reframing Postdoc Policy

To effectively challenge this prevailing situation, it is essential to go beyond simple critique and propose a constructive alternative, an essential reframing that seeks to challenge the existing design of precarity. This endeavour requires addressing what Hlatshwayo (2024b) refers to as the conflicting narratives of the "pipeline" and the "precariat". The "pipeline" narrative, which is predicated on the belief in a structured pathway to permanence and serves as a purported solution to demographic renewal (DHET 2015), functions as a potent discursive tool that obscures the systemic reality of casualisation. This narrative, supported by governmental policy and institutional discourse, effectively caters to the market and corporate logics previously discussed, thereby providing a façade of legitimacy to what fundamentally constitutes an extractive paradigm.

A vital initial step in confronting this entrenched system has been catalysed by the groundbreaking efforts of Van Schalkwyk (2024), who advocates for the establishment

of a national framework during South Africa's first national postdoc gathering. This significant initiative marks the inaugural coordinated attempt to formulate a coherent national strategy for postdoc support, directly addressing the policy void that has sustained institutionalised precarity. By uniting key stakeholders, government, funders, university administrators, and the postdocs themselves, this initiative initiates the crucial task of defining standardised definitions, rights, and career trajectories within the higher education landscape.

An equity-focused reframing must build upon this groundwork through what Bacchi (2009) refers to as "problem questioning" revealing the underlying assumptions of the existing representation and investigating alternatives. The core issue lies in the portrayal of postdocs as temporary trainees within an "extractive paradigm", instead of recognising them as early-career professionals within a "developmental ecosystem". The proposed alternative necessitates a fundamental transformation that includes the reclassification of postdocs as fixed-term employees entitled to full benefits and rights. This singular, structural modification would challenge the ideological foundation of the "trainee" identity, compel a tangible acknowledgement of their contributions, and eliminate the financial loopholes that currently perpetuate their precarious situation (Kerr 2022). This legal reclassification must be accompanied by a profound democratisation of governance. The present exclusion of postdocs from the committees that shape their working conditions exemplifies what Young (2002) describes as a "structural injustice". A significant reframing requires assured representation on departmental, faculty, and university level committees, along with proactive support for collective bargaining and postdoc associations.

Critically, this reframing must fundamentally embrace an intersectional perspective. The existing policy disregards the "motherhood penalty" (England et al. 2016), the unpaid emotional labour performed by "Black nannies" in academia (Magoqwana, Maqabuka, and Tshoaedi 2019), and the obstacles encountered by disabled and international scholars (Brown and Leigh 2018), which collectively render these policies overtly discriminatory. A transformation and inclusive-oriented approach necessitate tangible interventions: subsidised childcare, ample parental leave, funded accommodations for disabilities, and specialised support for international researchers navigating visa processes. This approach transcends superficial diversity statements to tackle the specific conditions that facilitate equitable participation.

Ultimately, this entire initiative must be anchored in empirical evidence. The prevailing epistemological silence, which the OECD (2021) identifies as a global concern but particularly pronounced in South Africa, fosters what Prozesky and Van Schalkwyk (2024) describe as "plausible deniability". The national framework initiative should be bolstered by a National Postdoc Observatory, a collaborative effort spearheaded by the DHET, Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), and universities to systematically monitor demographics, career trajectories, and overall well-being. This data serves as

the crucial foundation for accountability and evidence-based policy, disrupting the cycle of anecdotal evidence and inaction.

The implementation of this reframing necessitates confronting what Ball (1993) refers to as the "terrors of performativity", the deeply ingrained dominance of market metrics that renders alternatives to appear impractical. Resistance is woven into the institutional habitus (Bourdieu 1998). Nevertheless, South Africa's status as a continental research leader not only imposes a responsibility but also presents a significant opportunity. Rather than adopting the most exploitative models from the Global North, the nation could draw inspiration from the more organised pathways of the Dutch system, the robust social protections characteristic of Scandinavian models, or the emerging equitable frameworks in other Global South countries such as Brazil.

Ultimately, Fraser (1989, 8) characterises this as a "struggle over needs interpretation". The existing framework, which presents the "problem" as managing a flexible training cohort, results in solutions entrenched in precarity. By redefining the "problem" as one of investing in and nurturing the next generation of research talent, we create the opportunity for what Bacchi (2009) refers to as "thinking differently" about the academic endeavour itself. Van Schalkwyk's (2024) initiative serves as a vital starting point for this national dialogue. South Africa faces a clear choice: to continue as a centre for the extraction of precarious intellectual labour, or to embrace the role of leadership by establishing a knowledge ecosystem based on justice, sustainability, and professional dignity.

Conclusion

The analysis indicates that the widespread instability experienced by early-career researchers is not a mere coincidence, but rather a result of policy frameworks that categorise postdocs as "trainees" instead of professionals, emphasise market-driven logic over sustainable development, and perpetuate strategic silences regarding career advancement and welfare. The country now confronts a crucial decision, either to persist as a centre for precarious academic labour, or to advocate for a new paradigm that regards researchers as valuable intellectual assets rather than expendable resources. By building upon emerging initiatives aimed at national policy reform, South Africa must shift from an extractive model to one centred on equity, redefining postdocs as professionals, ensuring democratic governance, establishing diverse career pathways, and integrating intersectional equity. This challenge transcends mere policy; it represents a moral obligation that will influence whether South Africa's research ecosystem evolves into a model of sustainable knowledge production or continues to contribute to the global crisis of academic casualisation. The intellectual future of the continent hinges on the decision to pursue transformation rather than extraction.

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