

Editorial

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This special issue grapples with the complex lived experiences of postdocs in higher education sectors in three countries. Bringing together scholarly work from South Africa, China, and Germany, the articles deal with issues of employment precarity, casualisation, employment insecurity, systemic gender barriers, policy gaps, and the invisible (and invisibilised) role that postdocs play in the academy.

The authors build upon and contribute to a growing body of literature that justifiably laments the role that precarity, successive postdoc positions, existential instability, crude forms of exploitation, and lack of recognition play in shaping the postdoc experience in higher education. As scholars in the margins, postdocs' experiences include mental health issues, institutional abuse, academic labour exploitation and extraction, and xenophobic violence against "foreign" postdocs.

Systematic and scoping reviews show that research on postdocs' experiences in the North American context dominates the literature. We were therefore pleased to receive contributions from various other countries, including South Africa. In South Africa, we and others have been calling for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, and disseminate results, on the demographics, working conditions, and career outcomes of postdocs in the country. This special issue allows us to foreground the postdoc experience and to consider ways to support these marginalised and vulnerable scholars, not only in South Africa, but also in China and Germany. As the authors explain, in these countries the narratives, voices and experiences of postdocs have been missing, and postdocs tend to be invisible in policy aimed at shaping the next generation of academics.

The articles that comprise this special issue were not, however, selected on the basis of any geographical criteria. They represent the outcome of the application of stringent quality criteria. Of the 19 submissions that we received, we considered 11 as suitable



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for peer review. Based on the outcome of the reviews, we decided to publish five. Each of these five articles offers a fresh, nuanced, and critical perspective on the complex lifeworld(s) of postdocs in different contexts, but thematically, they are linked.

Three articles are in dialogue via their shared focus on the crippling effects of precarity on the lives of postdocs. Lei Jiao and Rui Wu, in their application of role theory, show how postdocs and policymakers differ in the way they perceive and construct the roles and expectations of postdocs in China. Emnet Woldegiorgis continues on this path, with a critical analysis of the structural and experiential dimensions of precarity among postdocs in the German higher education system. Focusing on relevant German legislation, he interrogates the intersectional role played by neoliberal policies, growing casualisation of academic labour, exploitation, and dependency on external funding agencies, as key drivers of the commodification and instability of higher education, and in turn, of postdocs.

Extending Jiao and Wu's, and Woldegiorgis's arguments into a more personal realm, Mbuyisi Mgibisa offers critical reflections on living in perpetual precarity as a postdoc in a South African university. He captures the experiences with the phrase "being "facultyless"—an existential and epistemic state of non-being and nonbelonging. Drawing innovatively on Martinique-born anti-colonial political philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon and Argentinian-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel, Mgibisa argues for a reimagining and reconceptualisation of postdoc programmes and policies in South Africa.

Continuing on the topic of the "personal being political", Lulu Wang, Hu Xinzhu, Zhang Jing, Ye Hedi, and Ruyang Li consider systemic gender barriers that pertain to postdocs. They explore how female postdocs in China navigate and negotiate gender-based barriers that hinder their career advancement in the academy. The authors reveal how gender discrimination intersects with limited access to leadership roles and positions, and insufficient institutional support, to impede female postdocs' career growth and progression in China.

Lastly, Fadzayi Maruza and Paul Dipitso's discourse analysis of postdoc-related policy gaps at universities shifts the focus back to South Africa. The authors describe ways in which different South African universities conceptually understand and frame the roles, purposes, and functions of postdocs in their institutional policies. Their article links back to the first article on how policymakers in China construct the postdoc fellowship. Maruza and Dipitso reveal that, in South Africa, a large number of universities characterise postdocs as professional trainees, thereby contributing to many of the issues raised in the other articles in this special issue.

We trust that the work presented here will provide the reader with a much-needed cross-national understanding of the global postdoc condition. We wish to thank all who have submitted their work for our consideration, the peer-reviewers who ensured quality

control, the copyeditor, Unisa Press's project editor, and the editor-in-chief for working with us on this timely special issue that we believe represents a crucial step towards improving the lives of postdocs globally.