

Are some of us in a parallel pipeline? An analysis of how postdoctoral fellowships are described on university websites, in the context of casualisation and concerns about the academic pipeline in South Africa.

Philippa Kerr

Psychology Institute, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway.
Philippa.kerr@ntnu.no

Abstract

This paper responds to Amanda Hlengwa's thinkpiece by bringing the casualisation and de-professionalisation of academic work into the conversation about racial transformation and the academic pipeline. On one hand, policy discourse in SA higher education expresses worries about the small proportion of permanent academics with PhDs. On the other, it is concerned with the underrepresentation of black and women academics, which is the motivation behind the NGAP program, in which young black and women academics without PhDs are recruited into permanent jobs, with reduced teaching load in the first three years. NGAP thus recognises how important job security is to encouraging young people to pursue a career in academia. This presentation intervenes through a focus on postdoctoral fellows and fellowships. Universities already host thousands of postdoctoral fellows, who have PhDs and are required to publish, but are *not employees* for tax and equity purposes, and are not part of any career development structure that leads to secure employment. I analyse how postdoctoral fellowships are described on SA university websites. Typically these sites claim that postdoctoral fellowships serve two purposes: (a) they help the university achieve its research productivity/excellence goals, and (b) they benefit early career academics by giving them further research training under a mentor/host, in preparation for a future academic career. By promising to prepare postdocs for a *future* academic career in this way, the descriptions thus treat postdocs as perpetual learners, and ignore how many postdocs have already established themselves as accomplished academics *in the absence of secure employment*. The descriptions are also disingenuous insofar as the real reason for constructing postdocs as trainees and learners is more likely a *post-hoc legal justification for the fact they are already not employees*, than because there is any plan being made for the incorporation of postdocs into the permanent academic workforce in future. And the reasons why postdocs are not employees are because (a) this makes their research outputs very cheap and (b) they do not dilute the 'per capita' research output scores of universities that calculate this based on the number of permanent academics they host. Thus, the expressed policy concern with both greater PhD capacity and better racial representation among the permanent staff overlooks how the higher education system is itself incentivising the casualisation and de-professionalisation of academic work. The paper raises questions about the meaning of 'transformation' in a context where academic research has been thoroughly instrumentalised.

Keywords

Postdoctoral fellows, academic pipeline, casualisation, nGAP, transformation