

## Post-doctoral ‘Studies’ in Africa: Are we Witnessing the Birth of a New Terminal Degree?

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**D**uring the World Science Forum held in December 2022 in Cape Town, South Africa, Peer-learning for Emerging Researchers’ Knowledge and Advancement (PERKA) convened a high-level critical reflection on early-career researcher development in the post-PhD phase. During the closing session of the event, and with a certain degree of trepidation, we witnessed the launching of a set of guidelines for designing and implementing impactful post-PhD support programmes in Africa.

Based on experiences gathered from 10 African post-PhD support initiatives and the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) Centres of Excellence,<sup>1</sup> these guidelines are meant to steer the implementation of such initiatives across the continent. After two

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days of discussion, it was clear to us that the urgent search for workable models was motivated by a strong push for post-PhD standardisation. The driving forces behind the increasing demand for post-doctoral and early career researcher programmes are now also starting to call for more

structured and institutionalised forms of post-doctoral programmes within African universities.

Through the voices of those pushing for standardisation of post-docs and early career research programmes on the grounds of addressing the insufficiencies of currently available doctoral training, universities in Africa may be witnessing the early stages of the birth of a new tertiary higher education qualification.

The research hypothesis here is that post-doctoral training seems to be rapidly developing into a new terminal degree following the untimely devaluation of the doctorate as a terminal university qualification.

While these developments seem to be a logical follow-on from successful investments in doctoral

training in Africa to fulfil the need for a more qualified university professoriate, they may also lead to the premature placement of post-docs at an early stage of academic transition, experimentation and professional development in African universities, which, as research has demonstrated, are often not invested in research as their core academic activity (Felleson and Mählck 2013).

Assumptions that investing in quickly generating large numbers of doctoral graduates in Africa would lead to more knowledge economy/ society jobs on the continent have been disproved. There is no direct correlation between the number of doctorate holders in many countries in the Global South and the number of knowledge economy/ society jobs (Hamdan et al. 2020).

Possessing a doctorate is still not regarded as a minimum entry-level requirement in most African countries for the academic profession, because teaching is typically regarded as its core activity. As universities in Africa become 'diploma mills' (Paterson and Luescher 2022), we have witnessed the rapid devaluation of university degrees and the premature placement of doctoral graduates in academic positions at the same time as candidates without doctoral degrees are also being appointed into other academic positions.

The 'structure of the cognitariat' (Newfield 2010) in most African economies is such that those economies are struggling to jump-start industries that mainly require blue collar, factor-driven economy labour, as can be seen in Mozambique, which is experiencing a boom in the discovery of natural resources such as oil and gas.

The pundits who assume there is a large-scale demand for so-called knowledge workers to take up knowledge economy jobs fail to grasp that the unemployment of highly qualified professionals such as engineers is not because they are unqualified, but because the structure of the economy in many African countries does not require personnel with this level of professional skills.

Job opportunities for doctorate holders, including post-docs, are still mainly in higher education institutions, where they are employed as teaching staff, especially by public institutions (CHE 2022). However, a doctorate is seldom mandatory for academics in private higher education institutions because their jobs consist mainly of teaching duties. As long as public higher education institutions have no budget for research, and private institutions have no reasons to invest in research, as this is completely disconnected from the needs of the market, the main employment prospects for doctorates and post-docs will remain in academia.

Academic institutions in most African countries have no significant incentive to create research careers within the current structure of the academic profession. The research expertise and profile of most African academics is therefore not necessarily built as an integral part of their academic work, but as a subsidiary ad hoc activity, generally requiring individual (financial and time) investment in an academic context that is seldom conducive to nurturing a research culture and career.

The implication here is that that post-doc or early career research programmes referred to above are proposing a solution to a problem

that does not yet exist. The rise of the post-doc is an important feature of the academic job crisis in Western societies prematurely transplanted into the African context. The disconcerting signs of its premature metamorphosis into a new terminal degree reveals both a lack of understanding of the current state of the academic profession in Africa, and a propensity for importing ready-made solutions for a set of problems that have not yet been adequately described.

In Europe, the post-doc emerged mostly as a practical and temporary solution for dealing with the lack of fit between the small number of available tenured and tenure-track academic positions and the large number of doctoral graduates (Horta 2009). While there is a slowly growing number of doctoral graduates in many African countries, there is no convincing evidence of a similar mismatch between the number of academic vacancies and the number of doctoral graduates.

In Europe, while waiting for a job opportunity in academia or in a non-academic career, post-docs engage in research, often milking data from their doctorates and disseminating results through publications, whereas in Africa, a significant number of academics start their teaching careers without a doctorate, and therefore consider the post-doc as a sabbatical, as well as a career-advancing opportunity, that is, a requirement for promotion. As the doctorate slowly becomes a minimum entry requirement into the academic profession, the trend may be changing. However, more data is needed to determine the extent to which there is a mismatch between the number of vacancies in African academia and the demand for academic jobs by holders of doctoral degrees.

This is particularly important considering two of several reasons. Firstly, a significant number of academics in African universities still pursue doctoral studies mostly for promotion into higher academic and managerial ranks, not necessarily or primarily for mastering their research capabilities. Accordingly, the increasing politicisation, conflict, and competition for top and middle-range academic managerial positions in the faculties is linked to the increase in the number of doctorate holders who have no clear research career pathway.

The solution then is not to create post-doc positions, especially as most of the doctoral graduates already hold academic teaching positions. Instead, universities in Africa need to create more explicit research careers and, when necessary, clearly integrate the research component into academic careers' job descriptions and workload. Creating more post-doc positions, often involving turning long-standing non-tenured professional positions into positions for post-docs, and heeding the calls for more structured and institutionalised programmes, will simply exacerbate the lack of incentives for post-docs to pursue academic research careers.

At the moment, the incentives for obtaining a doctorate to advance a research career is less attractive than obtaining one to qualify for an academic managerial position with the associated control over resources including exercising power over established academics with a good research profile, which the recently launched Carnegie-sponsored Guidelines for Post-Docs describe as 'independent researchers' (IRs) (Mentz-Coetzee and Sienaert 2022).

A major problem with this classification is that it mixes two kinds of criteria on the same scale: the education degree, and the academic rank, including roles performed in research teams and fund-raising. The status of IR is viewed as the final stage in a process which starts with obtaining an undergraduate university degree, moving on a Master's or PhD, and then progressing to becoming an IR. In most universities in Africa, the academic profession, including the mastering of research, is still not necessarily established only by the university degree, but by seniority in academic rank.

Secondly, in most universities in Africa, an academic career is often devoid of a research component, although publications have become an increasingly important requirement for promotion. Research is still not a major integral part of academic work and life, even though the rhetoric says the contrary. However, overwhelming evidence shows that, apart from few institutions that have decided to pursue a more explicit intensive research agenda and profile, most universities in Africa do not have a designated budget line for research. It is a well-established fact that research in African universities is often and mostly sponsored by external funders. This means that the academic profession in most universities in Africa is still designed for a teaching career, not for a research career. Conflating the pursuit of a post-doc position with a pathway towards a research career can therefore be misleading.

Some of the academic management conflicts in faculties and academic units referred to above are a result of the allocation of teaching workload to academic staff. The research component of an academic position is seldom acknowledged

in staff timesheets, even though the production of research outputs is now paradoxically becoming a requirement for promotion in the academic ranks.

This paradox is the visible face of a higher education system and its institutions which reflect both a lack of nominal internal differentiation, and a lack of functional differentiation in the academic profession, work, and career.

This is not always the case. In some higher education systems and institutions, the academic profession and career path are differentiated according to institutional types, academic units and profiles of those pursuing teaching and research careers or some combined version of the two.

For example, in Germany, academics pursuing their academic careers in a university of applied sciences – though encouraged and depending on the discipline – are not necessarily required to hold a doctoral degree. However, work experience of at least three years outside the academy (e.g., in industry) is a must to take up a position at this type of higher education institution. By contrast, the main requirement for a research career and eligibility for a full professorship in a comprehensive university (a civil servant position in Germany) requires holding a doctorate and aggregated other forms of post-doctoral training, such as habilitation in social sciences and the arts and humanities (DAAD 2020).

While the specifics of what constitutes a terminal degree in most of the world's higher education systems varies, depending on academic discipline and field of study, for the most part, the doctoral degree is considered the highest-level degree in most systems.

In conclusion, the relevant questions to be asked about the rise of the post-doc in Africa and the calls for structured and institutionalised programmes are: What is the post-doc for and what is its purpose in universities in Africa? What is the problem for which the post-doc is a solution in universities in Africa? Until we convincingly address these questions, after examining the structure of the academic profession in Africa, we run the risk of prematurely creating another unnecessary terminal university degree.

### Note

1. See: <https://arua.org.za/centres-of-excellence/>.

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