ACADEMIC FREEDOM EXPERIENCES AMONG POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCH FELLOWS IN SOUTH AFRICA: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATISATION AND TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

Academic freedom is a fundamental principle in higher education, but discussions about it often centre on faculty members and students, overlooking other groups like postdoctoral research fellows (PDRFs). This article combines empirical research and a review of literature to examine various aspects of academic freedom, including the institutional context and diverse university policies that shape PDRFs' experiences. It focuses on how shifting power dynamics affect PDRFs and highlights the need to transform existing policies to create a more democratic academic environment. Drawing on Mamdani's concept of unfreedom, the article critiques entrenched academic norms that stifle academic freedom for PDRFs. It explores the consequences of restricted academic freedom on the career development and intellectual growth of academics, particularly those in precarious positions like PDRFs. The findings uncover stereotypes and institutional practices that limit academic freedom, hinder transformation, and impede the democratisation process within post-apartheid universities. These practices not only constrain individual creativity and career progression but also diminish overall job satisfaction, especially for PDRFs. The study argues that many of these constraints originate from university bureaucracies and academic hierarchies, funding models, and power imbalances. It offers strategies for addressing these challenges and fostering a more inclusive academic environment. The article concludes by emphasising the importance of ensuring academic freedom for PDRFs and the role of collaboration between universities, research institutions, and funding bodies in promoting

equitable power relations and clear expectations. This study calls for urgent reforms to enhance transformation and democratisation within universities, especially to protect the academic freedom of those in precarious positions like PDRFs. It advocates systemic changes to ensure that academic freedom is extended to all stakeholders.

Keywords: academic freedom; democratisation; Postdoctoral Research Fellows; power dynamics; university policies

INTRODUCTION

Academic freedom is increasingly recognised as a key factor in promoting transformation and democratisation within post-colonial African universities. This article examines the South African context to highlight how the legacy of apartheid remains central to understanding academic freedom in Africa, as it does in other regions globally. Drawing on the works of Mamdani and other decolonial scholars, the historical perspective provides a compelling framework for exploring academic freedom. Alternative approaches often prove too narrow and can be misleading, especially when considering contemporary challenges such as the growing corporatisation and managerialism evident in the language and practices of university leadership.

The article examines various stereotypes and practices that have come to symbolise academic hierarchies, funding issues, and power dynamics within contemporary South African universities. These dynamics have severe repercussions for already vulnerable groups, such as Postdoctoral Research Fellows (PDRFs). Despite the internal threats to academic freedom posed by university systems, the authors argue that there is still an opportunity to revisit and reform some of the policies and practices established by university bureaucrats that restrict the freedoms of PDRFs.

We contend that while post-colonial universities appear entrenched in corporatisation and managerialism, it is hoped that if deliberate action is undertaken with the aim of reinforcing the university's primary mission as a public good. Post-colonial universities, in this sense, have the potential to realign themselves with Krüger's (2013, 9–11) vision of embracing decolonial imaginations, positioning themselves as leaders in the production of new knowledge through active engagement with local communities. PDRFs can play a pivotal role in this engagement and academic scholarship. Therefore, the article seeks to answer how post-colonial universities can be transformed and democratised to empower PDRFs better, positioning them to advance their academic and research careers while playing an essential role within the university.

UNDERSTANDING ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND EXPLORING MAMDANI'S CONCEPT OF 'UNFREEDOM'

In efforts to conceptualise academic freedom, it is important to recognise that its meaning varies across different contexts. This suggests that its development within African universities is still in its early stages, though some institutions have made more progress than others. In examining the idea of academic freedom in the South African context, Higgins (2014) argues that it has often been perceived as a received idea, with those defending it risking being labelled as reactionary or conservative. By challenging this labelling, Higgins follows in the footsteps of Mamdani, adopting a historical and critical perspective that calls for a reassessment of past positions and decisions in South Africa's higher education system. Central to Higgins' (2014) argument is the idea that academic freedom is deeply embedded in academic life, setting it apart from freedoms in other professional fields.

Du Toit (2013) observes that debates about academic freedom in South Africa have often been overly general, with a focus on institutional autonomy and the freedom of individual academics. This article adopts Higgins' (2014) conceptualisation, advocating a more nuanced and critical approach to academic freedom that scrutinises actual practices and texts. This approach encourages engagement with the complexities, contradictions, and discursive practices that shape academic freedom (Higgins, 2014). Drawing on Mamdani's work, it is possible to examine often overlooked practices that may restrict academic freedom in a post-apartheid university setting.

At the forefront of the institutions associated with an entrenched culture of academic freedom are the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the University of the Witwatersrand. According to Appiagyei-Atua, Klaus, and Karran (2016, 2), the tone for a definition of academic freedom is set by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), that defines it according to five key freedoms associated with academic staff, which include the freedom to:

- Express one's views related to their institution or working space.
- Avoid institutional censorship.
- Participate in professional or representative academic bodies.
- Engage in teaching and holding discussions.
- Carry out research, dissemination and publication of results.

In addition to the five mentioned, the two international bodies are said to emphasise academic freedom within an institutional framework, which is termed the institutional form of academic freedom. The definition often reflects a narrower conception, as it highlights academic freedom

within the scope of academics, thus not embracing other stakeholders such as students and PDRFs. It is from this angle that Appiagyei-Atua et al. (2016) sought to broaden the definition to include students and institutional autonomy and protection from government sanction in their practices. However, in this article's context, such an extension remains inadequate as PDRFs are neither students nor academics; hence, any mechanism that does not specifically mention them falls short and has no potential to assist in addressing their precarious situation.

In explaining the concept of academic freedom, Webbstock (2008) highlights its inevitable link with institutional autonomy. The reason for linking academic freedom with institutional autonomy is mainly because institutions need to fulfil their main goal of serving society. To do this, the pursuit of academic work and scholarship requires space in which the institutions can formulate context-relevant policies while also having the capacity to establish partnerships both nationally and internationally, following their institutional, societal and national goals. This means they need to be insulated from unnecessary, narrowly construed political interference that could disrupt their strategic goal-seeking agenda. It is essential to note that the authors are by no means suggesting that institutions deserve absolute autonomy and freedom, as these come with obligations that are usually spelt out in policy and legislative frameworks.

Mamdani's Concept of 'Unfreedom' – A Conceptual Framework

Mamdani's decolonial works, particularly his examination of slavery and other historical challenges Africa has faced, provide valuable insights into contemporary experiences, especially regarding freedom. To delve deeper into conceptions of freedom in the South African context, Mamdani's (2018) ideas will be explored alongside those of other decolonial scholars, including Webbstock (2008), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), and other thinkers such as Moyo (2020), Olsson (2023), Ndlovu (2024), and Nyoni and Chiramba (2024). In one of his key works on unfreedom, Mamdani critiques Patterson, who frames freedom primarily as a Western, geographically bound concept. In contrast, Mamdani (2018) argues that while freedom may have Greek origins, its modern essence is rooted in temporality rather than geography, making it a universal concept.

Mamdani, in his writing, equally reflected in the later aforementioned decolonial writers, seeks to disrupt binaries that oversimplify contemporary relations without acknowledging the complexity of the interactions that shape social relationships. As noted by Sitze (2017), post-colonial democracies have set their goals of transforming society from tribal, racial and other categories that undermine differences and democracy limitations of the transformation projects, especially in historically White universities. The traditionally Black universities also face tribal

divisions (Sitze 2017, 770). Equally so is the importance of a historical perspective that seeks to show the dangers of underestimating the deeply entrenched effects of historical experiences such as slavery, racism and tribalism. Of importance is how this legacy has tended to create illusory moments of redress, which has combined with the ills of neoliberalism to reinforce, albeit in covert means, the very echelons of the colonial system. This situation has occurred within a context of transformative policies that, in theory, have breathed hope into the previously marginalised majority populations, while a lack of meaningful structural changes has pushed the masses further to the margins. Such is the situation with freedom, particularly academic freedom, within a South African context where the constitutional democracy is deeply entrenched, yet impatience and contestations regarding the constitutionally derived rights and freedoms have become common. The contradictions posed by diverse interpretations of South Africa's Bill of Rights, especially in terms of practices linked to it as noted in Cross and Ndofirepi (2016, 124), have cast doubt on the entrenchment of freedoms, even in universities that might claim to have embraced and encouraged a deep culture of academic freedom. The challenges with academic freedom, especially for individuals and groups in precarious positions such as PDRFs and other emerging scholars, leaves one to believe that the slow nature of the wheels of transformation could be indicative of a well-intended process that is somehow stuck within the clutches of colonial legacies, that keep defining university culture in African universities.

This thus brings the argument closer to Mamdani's views that in a modern world, no one can be considered free, and that it is safer to investigate the situation through a lens of levels of freedom. Therefore, the conception of freedom that PDRFs experience must avoid being seen through a binary lens in which they could be mistaken as victims of a situation. Instead, they ought to be seen as occupying a position of relative freedom while the hosts, the university academic managers and ultimately the university as an institution, experience various levels of freedom relative to state and societal influences. It can be argued that, as much as the state can be viewed as occupying a higher position relative to the university and its stakeholders, it cannot be said to be an absolute beholder of freedom, as it must also rely on the cooperation of some university stakeholders to promote and secure its interests.

Taking the argument on freedom further, Webbstock (2008) draws from Mamdani's legacy of unfreedom in which universities' allegiance seems to be split between different internal and external masters. Internal masters would include, although not limited to, pressure from university management and other pressing academic obligations, while external masters would include society, the state and other stakeholders who expect the university to serve their interests. It is in this regard that Webbstock (2008) proposes a view that encompasses decades

of attacks on academic freedoms – that universities have lost their standing in fulfilling their initial goal of public good. The argument is extended to indicate that universities seem preoccupied with their own survival, probably due to the neoliberal pressures linked to managerialism they are reeling under (University of Cape Town Ethics Committee, 2022). This argument points to the importance of their academic freedom and institutional autonomy, so they can function and meet their institutional, societal and national imperatives. The case, therefore, is more compelling for the South African context in which pressing socio-economic needs and a legacy of inequality have shaped the transformation and democratisation agenda.

It is important to provide an overview of some of the violations of academic freedoms in universities to clarify how this article's arguments will be presented. Drawing on African and South African contexts, Bentley, Habib, and Morrow (2008) identified various threats to academic freedom. They argue that the post-apartheid environment in South Africa stands in sharp contrast to both the apartheid era and to situations in parts of Africa and the broader world, where academics often face harassment, and in some cases, are attacked or even killed. While university managers still tend to blame state bureaucrats as being responsible for curtailing academic freedom, there is an increasing belief that the major challenge lies with institutional bureaucrats themselves. The common quest for corporatisation and managerialism has tended to corrode collegiality. Two keynote speakers at the 2024 CHE conference captured this situation well when one alluded to internally manifested university challenges being likened to some "modern form of witchcraft" while the other speaker likened the internal challenges to some "blood thirsty vampire." It is therefore time that meaningful post-apartheid transformation and democratisation take place; institutional introspection needs to occur to appreciate the realities that shape and curtail academic freedom for academics, particularly those in precarious positions such as non-permanent staff and PDRFs, in particular.

METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

The article employs a combination of empirical data and a desktop review. Empirically, 10 participants – five females and five males – at various stages of their postdoctoral fellowships were conveniently sampled. All participants were identified from a comprehensive university in Gauteng and came from the Faculty of Education. The selection process followed a snowball sampling technique, starting with participants known to the authors, who then aided in recruiting additional participants. To minimise bias, efforts were made to avoid selecting participants from a single network by ensuring recommendations came from diverse groups and not from the same networks. It was easier to get the required sample as the university in question

has many PDRFs in the targeted faculty. Data collection was done through semi-structured interviews, with the data captured as both descriptive statistics and narratives. The analysis involved coding the interviews, categorising them into themes, and organising the data accordingly.

The systematic desktop review involved identifying key themes and search terms such as "academic freedom," "unfreedom," "PDRFs," and "democratisation." Searches were conducted primarily through Google Scholar, with relevant articles downloaded and saved. A total of 58 articles were initially collected, which were further screened for relevance, resulting in 28 articles being used for data extraction and thematic organisation. The inclusion criteria focused on texts on PDRFs, particularly concerning their experiences of academic freedom. This is related to the literature focusing on local and international contexts. This literature was then interpreted and integrated into the analysis.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM – A HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY OVERVIEW

This article views academic freedom as an inevitable necessity for all the core pillars of university activities; that is, teaching, research and community engagement. Bentley, Habib, and Morrow (2008, 24) argue that today, a relevant conception of academic freedom "needs to be coupled with reform of the university system, meaning protection of academic freedom while coming to terms with prevailing economic and political realities." Bentley, et al (2008) contend that the concept of academic freedom has deep historical roots, citing instances of its restriction that can be traced back to ancient times. For example, Socrates was executed for allegedly corrupting the youth of Athens with his ideas, and Galileo faced life imprisonment for advocating the Copernican view of the solar system. There are further reports of teachers being dismissed for teaching about Darwinism (Tolman, et al., 2021, 2). In this sense, academic freedom's evolution has not ceased to draw controversy, especially regarding the African university context, whose identities cannot be detached from the colonial legacies or contesting ideological interests and institutional culture and practices. It is for this reason that some scholars like Olsson (2023) have suggested that academic freedom itself, just like the modern post-colonial university, is a prescribed doctrine deeply entrenched in the colonial system that needs to be wholly abandoned. This perspective is grounded in the argument that, in its current form, the principles underpinning academic freedom represent an imposed framework, with the norms of the university establishment reflecting structures that were transplanted onto the African context. While such a view might draw some sympathy, especially from some decolonial scholars, it is practically untenable to abandon a good cause because something is

tainted by colonial legacies. This would imply surrendering to the imperialistic post-colonial illusions that remain deeply entrenched within the university in the Global North, as it is in the Global South. The latter thus suffers from this dilemma more than the former due to the colonial legacy. This argument becomes an important foundation for this article, which seeks to understand the academic freedom experiences of PDRFs within universities in South Africa, one of the progressive constitutional democracies that, however, still grapple with the colonial legacy's influence on freedoms in general.

From the foregoing arguments, it is essential to note that the diverse experiences of academic freedom experienced in South Africa, as is the case globally, are linked to how it has evolved in different countries and university contexts. Altbach (2007) notes how insecure academic freedom is in many countries. In some instances, academic freedom has come under constant attack from within universities and external forces, with the latter commonly coming from the state as it seeks to control the narratives. However, as noted by Matei, Popovici and Joly (2022), despite this, debates on academic freedom continue to be widespread, albeit in the complex academic and political environments associated with it. It is from this premise that scholars have presented well-documented cases on how academic freedom has been curtailed in different countries.

Altbach (2007, 49) presents a list of notable cases that have represented the suppression of academic freedom in various countries globally. A case of the arrest of a prominent sociologist, Professor Saad Eddin Ibrahim, was recorded in Egypt, where he was accused of defaming the country (Doebbler, 2003). The same article recently carried a report of a student in Kosovo who was expelled for wearing a head scarf after the school interpreted it under the law that prohibits wearing religious uniforms in schools (Shala, 2024). Elsewhere in Iran, a social scientist advocating democracy was sentenced to death, and in the same context, Sajadi (2023, 4) has highlighted how women's protest movements have been forced to lower their expectations for change, while generally civil liberties have been curtailed. Green et al. (2024) have documented a wide range of cases pointing to increased censorship in the People's Republic of China.

The University Context and Notions of Academic Freedom, Transformation and Democratisation

Historically, universities have transcended their obligations of knowledge generation and serving what has commonly been referred to as the public good. In this regard, though focusing on Poland as a case, Szadkowski (2025) presents the difficulties associated with the inevitable

state involvement in ensuring that universities perform the public good, especially the risk that the state ends up overreaching spaces where it ought not be present. This has mainly been driven by the position of the university, whose autonomous position has been impossible to sustain due to its proximity to the state, whose interests always linger around the institutions. This does not mean that states have blatantly ignored the need for universities to be autonomous, but past experiences have seen universities being spaces of change that, in many instances, have taken the form of protests and movements. This has led to states concluding that it is too risky to grant universities autonomy. It is for this reason that Ndereyimana (2021) notes that despite academic freedom and university autonomy being at the forefront of entrenching democracies, this remains a complex mechanism to guarantee. What is common within university spaces has been practices that curtail freedoms despite the universities claiming otherwise. As a result of the complex nature and diverse practices regarding academic freedom amid its contestations, Szadkowski (2025) suggests that universities in different parts of the world tend to experience diverse levels of academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

The dire situation of compromised academic freedoms, especially in universities in post-colonial Africa, is presented by Moyo (2020), who uses notions of imperialism to highlight how the university has become a place of academic illusion for the border intellectual. From his analogy, diverse illusions, including the illusions of academic freedom, academic choice, academic institutional culture and intellectual sovereignty, tend to run very deep and contrary to realities. This situation tends to be manifest in universities in the Global North and South, hence, the 2015 Fees Must Fall protests that gripped South Africa's universities equally emerged in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, albeit in different forms and for various causes (Antje and Miller 2024). These experiences within the universities, particularly those in Africa, where government control still lingers and holds sway on institutional autonomy, equally imply limited space for academic freedom and democratisation. Such a situation thus becomes even more untenable for PDRFs who are usually "the forgotten" when it comes to policy mechanisms directly meant to define and promote their experiences as an important cohort within the university. While students might embark on protests to express their unhappiness with some issues as highlighted by Antje and Miller (2024), PDRFs find themselves constrained as their small numbers and, in particular, their responsibilities impose limits on partaking in organised meaningful protests.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

PDRF Experiences of Funding, Productivity and Managerialism – Implications for Academic Freedom

The PDRFs were mainly passionate about their careers, especially in the early stages of their journey. There was, however, the revelation that the passion usually fizzled during the journey, mainly due to disappointments with packages or challenges with host relations. Among the main problems raised, all participants (90 per cent) highlighted that the funding they received had a huge bearing on their commitment to the newly found career PDRF path, as it depended on the sponsorship. Internal funding included faculty and host funds, while external funding came from public and private organisations. The most common form of sponsorship seemed to be faculty research funding through the university research grants. This accounted for six of the 10 participants (60 per cent), while the other four received funding from external sources such as the National Research Foundation (NRF). The authors found a correlation between the amount of funding the PDRFs received and their motivation. Fellows who received higher remuneration demonstrated greater motivation compared to those receiving lower internal funding. However, it is important to note that both groups of participants appeared to be under significant pressure to meet their primary contractual obligation of producing research outputs.

The influence of funding and the accompanying pressure of productivity tends to be common with PDRFs in South Africa; however, it also represents how managerialism and the increased casualisation of the workforce could be responsible for the increased accountability placed upon universities. Importantly, research outputs are tied to incomes that are usually inadequate. In countries such as Australia, Sweden and Finland, public funding tools are employed to measure productivity quantitatively (Holley, et al. 2018). A key point in this argument is that PDRFs are often forced to accept precarious employment contracts due to the limited job opportunities, particularly in Africa and specifically in South Africa. This creates a situation where PDRFs are effectively silenced, as they find themselves in vulnerable positions with little influence over decisions that significantly impact their futures. This dynamic suggests that the exploitation of those in precarious positions, prevalent in colonial universities, remains a prominent feature in post-colonial universities.

Of importance in these findings was the commonality of the approach by hosts who seemed to believe that the PDRFs were already prepared to deliver their academic obligations with minimal mentorship. This article uses the concept of minimal mentorship from a qualitative perspective in which hosts would play a supervisory role to ensure that the mentee follows through with their contractual obligations. In this regard, some participants reported that their mentorship sessions mainly focused on delivering outputs, something that they felt

added pressure on them. It therefore needs to be noted that the pressure of productivity remains immense among PDRFs, especially within contemporary universities.

While some participants had a clear understanding of the policy frameworks and guidelines outlining their responsibilities and their relationship with their hosts, it was evident that these policies are often ambiguous, allowing hosts to exploit loopholes and discouraging PDRFs from voicing concerns. In this regard, seven participants (70 per cent) voiced concerns about unequal power dynamics, especially as wielded by hosts. This forced them to make some decisions while foregoing pursuing certain matters that they feel curtail their freedom, such as challenging the capping of page fees, conference funding and making additional income from other employment opportunities outside their PDRF obligations.

In this context, Bentley, et al. (2008) assert that post-apartheid universities cannot absolve themselves of responsibility for the challenges limiting academic freedom, as they remain entangled in the grips of corporatisation and managerialism. Higgins (2014) adds that this shift has diverted universities from their core obligation to serve the public good.

Academic Hierarchies, Power, Identity and Stereotypes – Implications for Academic Freedom, Transformation and Democratisation

All 10 participants highlighted how their position as PDRFs remains unclear, as they are neither students nor staff in terms of their position within the university. The positioning of PDRFs within the institution, as faculty members holding a PhD earned through supervised, yet independent research yet still expected to follow an "academic apprenticeship" career development path, reflects a limitation of academic freedom and a source of structural injustice. This thus highlights the problematic nature of PDRFs' responsibilities being unclear in some instances, especially when they have to add some academic tasks such as teaching and supervision as part of their efforts to build their careers. In this regard, eight respondents indicated a lack of a clear identity as staff members – they do not get all staff privileges, even when they are identified under the postgraduate student label. According to the CHE (2022), PDRFs are neither staff nor students. This position, coupled with an unclear demarcation of responsibilities, leaves PDRFs prone to exploitation as some hosts, through deliberate means or a lack of adequate information, tend to fuel exploitation. Participants thus reported having to do several tasks without receiving remuneration, as hosts feel that the guidelines highlight such obligations as part of the PDRF responsibilities. In some instances, even when hosts express a willingness to compensate PDRFs for their work, they may feel constrained by regulations that

prohibit additional income, fearing violations of the SARS Binding Class Ruling (CHE, 2022, 8).

When it comes to stereotyping, participants revealed that stereotypes are usually felt at the beginning, as hosts and other university members often do not trust the competencies of a newly recruited PDRF. There is a myth that PDRFs are inexperienced and thus not adequately prepared to handle academic responsibilities independently. This was found to be one of the unfortunate stereotypes, considering that many PDRFs are usually experienced academics, with some having more years of experience than those already in the academic structures. The CHE (2022) comes close to confirming this when they indicate that all PDRFs have PhD degrees, while only 48 per cent of academic staff across South African universities have PhD degrees. The research also revealed claims by universities that the PDRF position exists as a transitionary phase to bridge the gap between doctoral qualifications and employment, something that scholars like Kerr (2022) have dismissed. He has, for instance, questioned the existence of such a gap in the first place. Failure to entrust PDRFs with responsibilities can also be seen as an unfair mechanism through which they are unjustly treated, with their freedom equally being affected by such practices. In many instances where the PDRFs have to partner with other "senior" academics or hosts, in reality, they are the ones who have the expertise either in teaching, research or supervision. Examples of unclear practices and responsibilities include curtailment of additional employment, usually to not more than 12 hours a week, a regulation that has never received adequate scrutiny to effect transformation. The same applies to the PDRF remuneration itself; non-remunerated teaching and supervision camouflaged as "activities for gaining experience" is a predominant practice. These aforementioned aspects saw eight respondents (80 per cent) expressing concerns about the inadequate stipends they receive amid additional responsibilities. This was despite their acknowledging that their participation in the academic and research initiatives is well intended.

With PDRFs being placed in situations where their valuable contributions are only recognised through outputs that are quantitatively measured, while other forms of work remain on the margins, it is clear that the university space where the PDRFs work requires transformation for enhancing its democratisation. It is only then that PDRFs can manage career growth and meaningful contribution to the academic and research programme within a post-colonial university. To achieve this, it is important to adopt the view of Turunen, et al. (2014), which advocates confronting the values of corporatisation and the associated managerialism to mediate the ills and disruptions that they have brought within a post-colonial university setting. It can also be argued that their lack of a clear identity, while being sidelined to take on key responsibilities within the academic structure, tends to reproduce academic hierarchies and

unfavourable power relations that are tilted against the PDRFs. The growing impatience with the pace of transformation in universities, especially when it comes to a lack of integration of PDRFs into the academic space, represents one of the key failures of post-apartheid South African universities.

It is equally essential to recognise that the cohort of PDRFs, whose freedoms are constrained by their precarious positions, represents a crucial group for advancing institutional, societal, and national objectives. Yet, they often face exploitation, marginalisation and underuse. While these three variables were not combined during questioning, six of the participants (60 per cent) noted that they feel the programme is marginalising them, especially when it comes to their identities being confined to neither staff nor students. This situation aligns with the arguments of Mamdani (2018) and other decolonial scholars such as Hlatshwayo (2025), who call for a critical examination of post-colonial university practices, emphasising how historical legacies may continue to perpetuate injustices that hinder democratisation and transformation. Hlatshwayo's (2025) views even resonate more closely with arguments in this article, particularly where he expresses deep concern with how universities continue to exploit PDRFs under roles he relates as "ice boys" and "ice girls", drawing from persons who are normally sent around in clubs, taverns and party scenes. His categorisation of PDRFs, though one must be cautious to generalise, is commonly linked to how, in many instances, their hosts and institutions tend to firmly focus on their outputs while neglecting their needs, especially in terms of stipends earned, recognition and integration into the university structures.

Exploring Post-Apartheid Universities and the Question of Academic Freedom and Democratisation Through Mamdani's Ideas

There is no doubt that post-apartheid universities are still grappling with transformation and democratisation following years of segregationist higher education policies. It is therefore important to understand the challenges related to the transformation and democratisation of this important space beyond the binaries, especially considering the demographic transformation that has taken place in universities where there is a recognisable number of Black bureaucrats. While one would have expected university spaces to benefit from the demographic transformation, it has been clear that the deeply entrenched legacies could not just be wished away so easily. It is this deeply entrenched nature and resistance of the colonial legacy that decolonial scholars like Moyo (2020) have lamented as forming part of post-apartheid imperialism. In this regard, instead of universities engaging in meaningful transformation, they have fallen into the trap of creating illusory moments and practices that curtail freedom.

It can be argued that practices that curtail freedom within the post-apartheid period can no longer be largely attributed to the state machinery but are rather deeply entrenched within various layers of universities, from non-managers to senior managers. Since these are members of the decision-making bodies, such as the faculty boards and senate, policies have failed to reflect what ordinary university academics could relate to as embodying meaningful transformation. In addition to the institutional practices and policies being stuck to, such as the "traditionalistic" tendencies of the bureaucrats, the global influence of neoliberalism, which has pushed universities to define competitiveness in global standards, has worsened the challenge, as corporatisation and managerialism have also deepened their roots.

It can therefore be argued that opportunities that should form part of an important step towards mediating some managerialist ideals that have come to impact the freedom of academics have been lost, especially those in precarious positions such as PDRFs. Mamdani's concept of unfreedom thus emerges as an essential lens as it provides insights into some of the overt and covert unjust practices featured within contemporary universities in the name of connecting with international partners to foster global competitiveness. This has not only resulted in universities losing their main obligation to the public good, but they have equally become estranged from their ordinary members, particularly emerging scholars such as PRDFs – many of whom languish under precarious work conditions where they have experienced casualised labour. The PDRFs are among the academics in this category, and this experience has had negative effects not only on the transformative and democratisation potential of universities but their freedoms as emerging academics, especially considering that they occupy temporary, precarious positions within the academic structure.

Post-apartheid universities continue to confront challenges related to transformation and democratisation; a struggle rooted in the long history of segregationist higher education policies. Understanding these challenges is crucial, especially in relation to how universities tend to formulate policies using frameworks that appear to lack inclusivity and participation of those affected, reminiscent of how the colonial legislation was created under what we can call principles of "for the people but without the people." While one might appreciate some milestones made towards the transformation and democratisation of post-apartheid universities in South Africa, the persistent legacies of colonialism cannot be easily dismissed. Scholars like Moyo (2020) have criticised the resilience of these colonial legacies, arguing that they contribute to a form of post-apartheid imperialism. Consequently, while universities are within their right to balance extending freedoms to members and their interests, as Ndereyimana (2021) noted, universities often create superficial moments and practices that limit freedom instead of fostering meaningful transformation. Of importance when it comes to curtailment of

freedoms are the policies that universities, through their senate, have crafted out of poor non-consultation with PDRFs – crafted institutional policies that are out of touch with realities and diverse groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Looking at the effects of an unclear identity on the recognition and integration of PDRFs at universities where they are being hosted, the study advocates urgent reconsideration of how PDRFs are treated within the academic ecosystem, especially concerning their academic freedom.

- It further calls for collaborative efforts from universities, research institutions, and funding agencies to establish policies that promote equitable power dynamics and transparent expectations.

- There is a need for systemic changes to ensure academic freedom for PDRFs and all university stakeholders. These could target the frameworks institutions use to create policies regulating the PDRFs.

CONCLUSION

Academic freedom is emerging as an important aspect of the post-colonial university system in South Africa and Africa, as is the case globally. Despite academic freedom attracting multiple meanings and drawing widespread debates regarding the form that is required in a post-apartheid South African university, there are concerns that it remains elusive. The article has thus shown that universities still need to embrace a decolonial stance, especially when it comes to policies and practices that seem to covertly curtail academic freedoms, especially for academics in the lower tier of the university academic structure, such as PDRFs. The situation of this cohort is exacerbated by their position, in which they are neither staff nor students, something that results in their marginalisation while compromising their recognition and ultimate integration into the university's academic and research practices. A realist conception of features that influence academic freedom in contemporary university spaces where PDRFs are involved includes academic hierarchies, remuneration arrangements, institutional policies, and university power dynamics. A special form of transformation of university spaces is emerging, driven by PDRFs whose experiences of precarity and exclusion have motivated them to draw from their self-agency to liberate themselves through diverse strategies.

Using cases of PDRFs, the article has established that what has compromised academic freedom in post-apartheid South African universities are issues arising from within the

universities as opposed to external factors arising from state interference. It is therefore essential to adopt Mamdani's decolonial lens to carefully reflect on the internal dynamics within universities, especially concerning the experiences of PDRFs. This reflection is necessary as a foundation towards addressing some of the disruptions caused by actions of university bureaucrats who have adopted values of corporatisation and managerialism, with limited mediation to manage some practices that could curtail academic freedoms, while compromising the university's obligation to fulfil the societal common good. The article thus draws a broader conclusion on the need for an inclusive critical engagement that seeks to revisit some university policies and practices to find ways of enhancing transformation and democratisation of the post-apartheid university space.

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