

# ACADEMIC PIPELINE OR ACADEMIC TREADMILL? POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWSHIPS AND THE CIRCULAR LOGIC OF “DEVELOPMENT”

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## ABSTRACT

South African higher education policy related to postdoctoral fellowships is informed by two related discourses: the discourse of the “academic pipeline” and the discourse of “human capital development”. Both of these are forward-looking concepts which imply that good things lie in future employment for postdocs, and/or increased competitiveness and employment for the nation. This article, which is part autoethnography and part higher education policy analysis, offers a critique of these discourses by narrating the author’s own transition from postgraduate psychology student to contract worker, postdoctoral fellow, unsuccessful permanent job applicant, and finally to accepting an offer of a permanent academic job outside South Africa. While seeing myself as one of these early-career academics in the “pipeline” which the policy documents purport to address, I discuss how research managers use discourses of career development and human capital development to mislead young academics about their academic employment prospects and silence their attempts to critique the system. The article proposes that the concept of the academic pipeline works to obscure how postdoctoral fellowships are part of the casualisation and de-professionalisation of academic work, through which disciplinary identity and accomplishments are being divorced from secure university employment.

**Keywords:** postdoctoral fellowships, human capital development, academic pipeline, managerialism, credential inflation, disappointment

## INTRODUCTION: POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWSHIPS, THE ACADEMIC PIPELINE AND HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY

Postdoctoral fellows are a relatively recent category of academics in South African universities. First introduced in about the late 1990s and quickly expanding thereafter<sup>1</sup>, postdoctoral fellowships typically offer PhD-qualified academics across all disciplines a relatively low stipend (relative to an employed permanent lecturer or senior lecturer) on a one-year, sometimes renewable basis, with an expectation that the fellow attach themselves to a senior academic “host”, and conduct and publish original academic research. Some postdocs are also expected to co-supervise their host’s or other postgraduate students, and/or teach undergraduate courses.

Despite having a PhD and being required to do these forms of core academic work,

however, postdoctoral fellowships are not jobs, and fellows are not employees of the university (see Simmonds and Bitzer 2018; Holley et al. 2018). Rather, at most universities they are categorised as postgraduate “students”, who earn non-taxable bursaries. The received wisdom about what postdoctoral fellowships are for is that they are “professional development” opportunities, that is, preparation for an academic or other career in the future (Simmonds and Bitzer 2018; Kerr 2022). However, it is more likely that this is a post-hoc justification for the fact that postdocs are not university employees (Kerr 2020b). Postdocs’ bursaries cannot be treated as salaries, or reimbursement for services rendered to the university, because postdocs do not pay income tax (*Mail & Guardian* 2008). Since postdocs cannot be acknowledged as workers, employees, or professionals, postdoctoral fellowships are instead described by universities as “apprenticeships”, “internships”, opportunities for “mentored training”, “experiential learning”, and similar language construing postdocs as essentially learners. This is despite the fact that less than half of those already in permanent academic employment have a PhD (Mouton 2018), and that universities and DHET make no distinctions between the publications and supervision work of postdocs and those of employed academics.

How is it that this system, which at face value seems incoherent, is able to continue largely unchallenged? South African higher education policy related to postdoctoral fellows is informed by the idea of the academic pipeline. This term refers to developmental processes by which a younger generation of capable academics is supposedly being trained to enter academia. For example, the 2014 White Paper on Post-School Education and Training claims that “Government intends to develop a plan to address the challenges of future staffing of South African universities without delay”. This includes

“... focused renewal and expansion of the academic profession, the improvement of the pipeline of academic staff, from postgraduate students to attracting young academics to academic careers; improving current academic staff qualifications and employing retired academics, both local and international, to mentor younger academics” (cited in Mouton 2018).

Although postdoctoral fellowships are not mentioned specifically in this list of mechanisms, elsewhere justifications and explanations for the postdoc system make mention of the same academic pipeline reasoning. Consider the following excerpt from the Framework document for the Innovation Postdoctoral Fellowship that currently gives me my income. This fellowship is sponsored jointly by the National Research Foundation (NRF) and the Department of Science and Technology (DST):

“The National Research Foundation is an agency mandated by an act of Parliament ... for the

implementation of human capital development initiatives, knowledge production and the provisioning of research infrastructure.

The National Research and Development Strategy of 2002 identified the need for a new generation of scientists to underpin the central thrust of innovation. The South African research and academic system is faced with a challenge of having an ageing productive scientific population. Strategic interventions are needed to reverse these trends in order to ensure correct positioning of the country for competing in the global research and innovation arena. In response to this need, the DST commits an annual investment for the DST-NRF Innovation and Free-standing Postdoctoral Fellows through a contractual agreement between the DST and the NRF, in order to promote research and research capacity development in all knowledge fields, including innovation and technology.” (NRF 2021, 3).

The Framework document also claims that these fellowships will “Enable young scientists and professionals to access world class strategic and applied research opportunities in a university environment and thereby strengthen their research profiles and consequently improve their prospects of permanent employment in the national system of innovation” (NRF 2021, 4). In these ways, postdoctoral fellowships are presented as being part of the academic pipeline.

The paragraphs from the NRF quoted above also touch on a related discourse – that of human capital development. Human capital development is a concept that comes to us from human capital theory. This claims that educating or skilling the labour force (investing in “human capital”) will make people more productive in their work, and will thus drive economic growth and job creation, and that this will lead to prosperity for individuals and economic growth for nations (Servage 2009). In this view, more education is always a good thing, because the more educated everyone becomes, the more this will lead to upward social mobility and prosperity. This logic also underlies efforts to expand or “massify” access to higher education in countries where university degrees were previously the privilege of only a small elite (Brown 2003).

Human capital theory reasoning is also evident in the Department of Science and Technology’s (2016) *Human capital development strategy for research, innovation and scholarship*. This document claims that

“Technological innovation is a key driver of socio-economic development and, to a large extent, the foundation of a nation’s international competitiveness. Science and technology, coupled to research and development, are key inputs into technological innovation, and there are unambiguous correlations between the scientific and technological capabilities of nations, and their national development and competitiveness [i.e., GDP]” (2016, 9).

According to the NRF, “Innovation” postdoctoral fellowships are thus one means by which this human capital development is supposedly occurring. Thus, postdoctoral fellowships are

presented as a means to two ends: firstly, they encourage scientific innovation, which, according to DST, will lead to socio-economic development for the country; and second, they are branded as opportunities for individual early career academics to prepare for a future academic career. This latter theme is also strongly prevalent on universities’ own individual websites (Kerr 2022).

## **THE FALSE PREMISES (AND PROMISES) OF HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY**

Superficially, these rationales for postdoctoral fellowships may seem to make sense. Surely, allocating money for “human capital development”, “research capacity development” and “innovation” is a good thing. We do want South African universities to have solid research capacity, and we do want a functional academic pipeline which can make the academic profession sustainable in the long run, so that as senior academics retire, they are replaced by a younger cohort of capable new ones.

However, there is a long tradition of critical work on human capital theory in the sociology of education which should give us cause to look at these optimistic promises with scepticism (Allais 2017; Balwanz and Ngcwangu 2016; Brown 2003, 2013; Collins 2011; Newfield 2010; Tomlinson and Watermeyer 2020). These critics have argued that human capital theory never gets around to specifying how exactly intervening in the supply side of the labour market generates more jobs, and that in fact it does not do so. Instead, rather than leading to (vague) “socio-economic development”, in many countries expanding access to higher education has simply led to a congested labour market, and increased the competition for a limited number of good jobs (Brown 2003, 2013; Collins 2011). Employers require ever higher qualifications for what is not necessarily better or harder work (Allais 2017). In this view, the real value of education qualifications in the labour market is not that they make people inherently more skilled or productive, but that they are credentials that work as a signalling device, which prospective employers use to flag those applicants presumed more capable from those presumed less capable. Hence, widening access to higher education produces the problem of “credential inflation” (Collins 2011): once everyone, or almost everyone, has a university degree, this no longer marks one out as more competitive than other job applicants, and so it becomes necessary to get ever higher qualifications in order to achieve the same level of professional accomplishment. In contexts of degree inflation, the promise that education, even postgraduate education, will “pay off” in future prosperity and employability starts to recede (Servage 2009). As Stephanie Allais (2017, 158) has argued, “This makes it very unclear to distinguish the ways in which university education is a public good, and the ways in which it is co-opted into public bads”.

## CASUALISATION AND PHD OVERSUPPLY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

There is a large global north literature on the casualisation and de-professionalisation of academic work (e.g., Kimber 2003; Gill 2014; May, Peetz, and Strachan 2013; Murgia and Poggio 2019; Malloy, Young, and Berdahl 2021; Rothengatter and Hil 2013; Ryan, Burgess, Connell and Groen 2016). While often not engaging with human capital theory or its critics directly (for an exception see Newfield 2010), this work has nevertheless already illustrated the problem of credential inflation inside the academic profession itself. At least in the wealthy English-speaking countries of the UK, the US, Canada, and Australia, the academic profession is now in crisis, as there are far more PhDs graduating annually than there are secure academic job openings to absorb them (Malloy et al. 2021). A recent report on precarious research careers by the OECD, in which South Africa was a participating country, also notes that a PhD in many countries no longer guarantees access to a good job; and that this is directly related to the increasing number of PhD-qualified people entering the academic job market (OECD 2021). PhD-qualified academics can now more realistically expect a series of poorly-reimbursed, short-term or ad-hoc teaching or research jobs that can no longer be seen as a stepping stone to more secure employment (May et al. 2013; Kelsky 2015).

Moreover, this PhD oversupply is due to a series of perverse incentives largely built into the university system itself (Malloy et al. 2021; Phil 2015). Universities, departments and individual academics receive various rewards for successfully supervising PhDs, such as a higher place in university rankings, and also, in the US, departments depend heavily on PhD students' and adjuncts' inexpensive teaching labour. In South Africa, incentives come in the form of financial rewards that the Department of Higher Education and Training gives to universities on completion of a student's PhD, and evidence of successful PhD supervision is often a requirement when academics apply for promotion to associate professor.

The long-term consequences of this PhD oversupply for the academic profession were considered twenty years ago by an adjunct professor of history at a university in New York. Writing anonymously as the “Invisible Adjunct” (2003a, n.p.), she observed that,

“As I see it, the humanities ‘professions’ are failed, or at least failing, professions. ... There are not many other professions/guilds/associations/unions that would stand idly by and allow entry rates to so greatly outnumber actual positions, or that would allow – indeed encourage – the widespread use of cheap, contingent labor ... In most other professions requiring an advanced degree, the gatekeepers to the profession do make an effort to keep entrance rates in line with actual or projected available positions. ... And not because they are kinder, gentler souls than academics, and are thinking things like, ‘Gee, wouldn’t it be awful to encourage bright, idealistic young people to waste a good portion of their adult lives in a fruitless pursuit?’ But rather because they realize

that if they allow the market to be flooded with an oversupply of aspiring entrants, they will eventually hurt themselves because this situation will damage the profession as a whole.”

Thus, far from more and more higher education always being a good thing and leading to job creation, PhD increase is directly related to the decline of working conditions for academics in universities (OECD 2021).

## **INCOHERENCY IN THE POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWSHIP SYSTEM**

In the following sections, I will propose that this critique of human capital logic applies also to the postdoctoral fellow system in South Africa. If one scratches the surface, one can see the obvious flaw in the optimistic, forward-looking promises that postdoctoral fellowships are preparation for a future academic career and will help lead to employment for individuals and economic growth for the country. This flaw is that the postdoctoral fellow system does not in fact expand the number of actual permanent academic job vacancies that are available. Indeed, higher education funding for permanent posts has not increased to match the growth in student numbers over the last two decades (Swartz et al. 2019). Neither does the postdoc system speed up the process by which academics with PhDs get into secure jobs (unlike the nGAP program, for example, which specifically opens academic vacancies and recruit academics without PhDs into them with long-term job security in mind (DHET 2015)). On the contrary, the postdoc system takes large numbers of PhD-qualified academics and uses large amounts of taxpayer money to divert them into short-term, non-professional, relatively low-paid “fellowships” – which are not jobs, less still permanent ones. There is no program at any university that I know of by which postdocs are absorbed into the permanent academic staff after a certain number of years (for similar concerns see Simmonds and Bitzer 2018); and because of their student status, postdocs are ineligible for promotion and other career advancement mechanisms. In this way, postdoctoral fellowships are an example of a system which is informed by human capital theory while simultaneously negating its very premises. Offering postdoctoral fellowships does not lead to more employment; it simply leads to more postdocs. In this way, postdocs are trapped in the circular logic of “development” *ad infinitum*.

## **STARTED FROM THE BOTTOM AND WAS SOMEHOW ABLE TO GET LOWER**

The aim of this article is not only to point out incoherencies in the South African postdoctoral fellowship system at a structural level. It is also to open a conversation about the damaging personal and professional consequences it can have for those who get entangled in it, and about the paternalistic and disempowering modes of engagement we often get from university

managers, which prevent the postdoc system from being recognised as the scandal that it actually is. To that end, the next part of this article takes an autobiographical turn. It narrates how, wanting to pursue an academic career, I tried – ultimately unsuccessfully – to make the transition from being a postgraduate student to being an employed, professional academic in South Africa, and how eventually, after about four years of fixed-term contract work and another five years as a postdoc, I was offered a permanent academic job in another country.

Looking back now, I can see that my postgraduate education mis-prepared me in some fundamental ways for the realities of what an academic career would entail. To some extent I mean this ironically, or in the best possible way: I gained my academic training as a social psychologist with a supervisor and lecturers who, I now see, were exceptional in their academic rigour, criticality, and enthusiasm. My supervisor was very supportive, and encouraged me to see myself as having something worthwhile to contribute to the debates in my field even as an honours and masters student. He also encouraged his students to present at our discipline’s national conferences and to publish our thesis research. Our department ran an annual postgraduate research conference which was organised by the masters students. I was asked to teach lectures and seminars in different undergraduate and postgraduate modules in the department while I was a postgrad student. Though my PhD was not without difficulties, by the time I finished my thesis (which I did without a secure job), I had published two first-authored articles in good international journals, had presented at numerous conferences and seminars, and had served as course co-convenor for an undergraduate module in my discipline at another university. All in all, this postgraduate training probably achieved the pedagogical ideal that postgraduate supervision should encourage students to identify with their profession and/or their disciplinary community (Cornelissen and Van Wyk 2007; Msimanga 2017; Tsampiras 2017). It is uncomfortable to consider that being white may also have helped smooth my path through postgraduate study, however, when I compare this narrative with accounts by black women academics that describe quite a different journey (Maseti 2018; Zulu 2021).

Another factor which affirmed my internalised sense of academic identity as a student was that we were told several times by the head of our department how important it was for South Africa’s “development” that more people should get PhDs. Like the DST’s (2016) *Human capital development strategy*, he emphasised the correlation between a country’s PhDs per capita and its GDP per capita. I had no reason to question this: what a happy, affirming coincidence that my own enjoyment of academic work should also be good for the whole country!

Hence, what this otherwise excellent academic training did not do was focus its critical attention onto the structures of the higher education system itself. We just took these for

granted, as a mostly irrelevant background to the “real work” of psychology that we were doing. This meant that although I came out of my PhD with a solid disciplinary grounding, excellent research methods training, an internalised sense of myself as a member of the academic community, and positive indications that I had what it took to be an academic, I had almost no understanding of how dependent that sense of identification would be in future on structures and systems over which I, or indeed my supervisor and lecturers who had been so influential up to that point, would have essentially no control. In my department we did not talk about making the transition from being a postgrad to being an employed academic, about the academic job market, or about how to prepare strategically for job interviews. We did not talk about the likelihood of ending up in a series of temporary appointments and/or postdoctoral fellowships. It seemed to be taken for granted that one’s personal academic accomplishments in postgraduate years would smoothly translate into secure academic employment.

So when I graduated from my PhD, it was a proud moment which I believed showed I had earned my stripes as a scholar, and that I was about to embark on a new and exciting phase of my career. I wrote my supervisor a thank you card in which I said I felt ready to join the South African and international social science community. I clubbed together with my family to buy (as opposed to just renting) a red academic gown for my graduation ceremony, because I believed I would have reason to wear this at the graduations of my own future students. Most importantly, I believed that the university system would continue to be invested in my career progression as a working academic, just as it had seemed to care so much about my success as a postgraduate student.

But this turned out to be a deeply misguided expectation. Instead, for the next five years, that gown hung unused in my cupboard. I was unprepared for what came next: a sense of demotion from academic employee and PhD student to postdoc; repeated rejections from permanent academic job applications, including rejections from my own former department; and enraging encounters with university managers, who have tried to convince postdocs that, after all this, we must not have “narrow” ideas about a postdoc “leading to” an academic career and should consider moving out of academia to other fields. Until very late in the day, I had had no real understanding of how I was actually a participant in a bigger political economy of higher education that was basically indifferent to my personal career aspirations, and which seems to be structured in a way that incentivises PhD throughput while at the same time disincentivises universities from absorbing those PhDs into secure employment (Malloy et al. 2021; Kerr 2020a). It was only much later, as a postdoc researching the higher education system, that I began to have an understanding of how the academic pipeline actually works (or rather, doesn’t).

I have also realised the truth of one commentator’s observation on the Invisible Adjunct blog (2003b): “[g]raduate departments are remarkably good at appropriating the success of their students, while denying responsibility for the ‘failures’”. The universities have been very happy to reap the rewards of my success as a student and postdoc: they get money from the government, plus status and forms of reputational capital, when we complete our PhDs and when we publish our work under the university’s name in academic publications. But when it came to actually getting *a job*, trying to make the transition from student to employed academic was a lonely and individualising struggle. Out of a few dozen applications, I was shortlisted for nine academic jobs in South Africa and abroad which I was interviewed for but did not get. Certainly, some of my mentors wrote very supportive references. But preparing these applications and repeatedly doing interviews was a gruelling and disheartening process, and led to growing feelings of desperation, helplessness, bitterness and regret. I became unspeakably angry when I realised that success depended not only on the strength of my academic track record, but at least partly on having mastered skills of interviewing and self-presentation which I had never been taught. So, in reality, it turned out that the lofty ideal of being part of an academic or disciplinary “community” just devolved, like all employment searches, into a competition among increasingly desperate individuals for a limited number of secure jobs.

Alongside this string of job application “failures”, the promises about postdoctoral fellowships being preparation for an academic career began to appear increasingly nonsensical. For two years I was a postdoc in a SARCHI-funded research centre, led by a Director who hosted about 6 postdocs and two cohorts of a similar number of PhD students. The NRF website claims that SARCHI (the South African Research Chairs Initiative) will, among other things, “Increase the production of masters and doctoral graduates”, and “Create research career pathways for young and mid-career researchers, with a strong research, innovation and human capital development output trajectory” (NRF 2022.). Here are the familiar discourses of the academic pipeline and human capital development. In practise, however, it seemed clear that in our centre there were not going to be future job openings for most of the PhDs and postdocs who passed through there. The centre had already been running for several years, yet in that time apparently only two secure jobs had been created for former postdocs. Everyone else spent a few years in temporary, non-professional appointments before eventually leaving the centre or the university. As far as I could see, then, what this centre was helping to create was a crisis of job insecurity and underemployment for its postdocs. My own time as a postdoc in the centre was followed not with secure employment, but with a six-month contract at a university overseas, and then yet another postdoctoral fellowship at a different university (this one). In other words, the promise that a postdoctoral fellowship prepares one for a research or academic

career is something that universities actually have no mechanisms to concretise.

Another disillusioning thing about becoming a postdoc was encountering managerialism (Stewart 2007). When I was still a new and naïve postdoc, I believed that university managers and senior academics would be interested to hear how we were experiencing the system, and that they would want to know if there were places where we could see it was not working well, so that they could go about addressing these problems. But instead, what I have found repeatedly is that managers don't canvass the views of postdocs, but rather tell us what we must think about our own situation. For example, postdocs are told how grateful we should be for this career development opportunity, what an important contribution we make to the university, and that we are the “future of science”. We are told that the university is trying to “enhance the postdoctoral experience”. Then at other times postdocs have been berated for not producing enough journal articles, or invited to compete with each other for small monetary rewards given to only the most “productive” and “excellent” postdocs in the university. Occasionally managers do invite comment about what problems postdocs encounter, but one learns after a few years that many of these are perennial problems that are inherent to the structural position of postdoctoral fellows as neither staff nor students, and that senior managers have no real intention of addressing the root of these problems because it suits them to retain postdocs in this position rather than employing them.

Moreover, when postdocs ask managers about our prospects for actual academic employment in the university, the goalposts get shifted. When pressed, research managers in my university have openly admitted that very few postdocs will make it into permanent jobs and that there is a huge “misalignment” in the system. Instead, they tell us that we should not have “narrow” expectations about a PhD leading to academic work, that we must consider moving to “industry”, and most ironic of all, that we should attend career development workshops, which the university has spent a lot of money on, to provide us with tips on making the transition out of academia to other fields.

This disingenuousness from university managers has generated an almost volcanic rage in me. Yet how did we arrive at the point where roomfuls of PhD-qualified academics could be spoken to in these ways and have it generate so little critical response? The effects of managerialism in universities are of course not limited to postdocs, but the way managers interact with postdoctoral fellows has a particular silencing and disempowering effect. When the system is couched in the language of beneficence and gratitude – with university leaders positioned as helping postdocs by providing career development opportunities, and postdocs as grateful, junior recipients – then it is difficult to formulate a critical response, because being outspoken and critical about the system can make one look antagonistic and rude, and can

generate an antagonistic response in return. Postdocs also sometimes engage with managers in similar paternalistic terms, expressing gratitude for the “support” that senior managers offer and a “love” of science that makes a demand for better working conditions seem selfish or irrelevant.

Yet another disillusioning thing I experienced as a postdoc was getting entangled with two powerful but ultimately dangerous senior academic “mentors” – previous postdoctoral hosts of mine – who wielded opportunities and funding but became vindictive in the face of a challenge to their authority. The details of these sorry sagas are a story for another day, but suffice to say that I was dismissed by one postdoctoral host, and would have been dismissed by another if I had not resigned, because I openly questioned their leadership and decisions that directly affected me. These experiences showed me that, far from supporting, mentoring, promoting and protecting early career academics, there are senior academics in universities who simply want to use postdocs for their own questionable purposes, and if those purposes are resisted, they will not hesitate to mete out punishment. In such cases, having a “mentor” turns out to be more dangerous than not having one.

And so it was that my early enthusiasm about academic work as a postgraduate student has turned over the years to baffled bewilderment, then rage, then grief, and finally to a deep boredom and disengagement. There have been long periods in which it has been difficult to drum up the enthusiasm to keep going with my work. There did not seem to be any point once I realised that I had nothing to show, financially, professionally, or socially, for nearly ten years of work in universities, and that the institutions I was once so keen to be part of have actually been working against my interests. It has been devastating to cross paths with “research managers” and senior academics who seem to be more invested in getting promising young academics *out of* the higher education system than encouraging and promoting them within it.

Eventually, after nearly five years as a postdoc, and as I was on the brink of giving up and leaving university work altogether, I recently received my first offer of permanent academic work – at a university in Norway. This is the first time in ten years as a working academic that I am being treated as an actual professional. But it also shows that the logic of the “academic pipeline” in South Africa never worked out as (ostensibly) intended. I never made it from “student” to “professional” in that system, and even though I now have a secure job, whether I will want to stay and keep doing this work in the long term is currently far from clear.

## **CONSIDERING THE INADEQUACY OF PROPOSED SOLUTIONS**

This article has been about the forward-looking but ultimately misleading logic of “development” as it is used in the postdoctoral fellow system. Instead of the “academic

pipeline”, more accurate metaphors might be the “academic bottleneck”, the “academic treadmill”, or the “academic hamster wheel” – conveying how career development and human capital development discourses give the appearance of forward movement when in fact the same system that speaks these languages is keeping its people in short-term, dead-end positions. If academics are not offered professional employment, then they will not be professionals – no matter how many years they have spent having their human capital developed.

It is in this context of a non-existent, or at least highly dysfunctional, academic pipeline that the (in)adequacy of interventions like career development workshops, mentorship, and the various other panaceas that university research offices often propose as a salve for postdocs’ problems, must be considered. When they offer programs to postdocs to help us “navigate our career pathways”, or encourage us to write a personal career development plan (more development!), they are putting the onus for fixing a broken academic pipeline and a casualising academic sector, which universities themselves have helped to create, back onto people who did not create that crisis and have no institutional power to address it (see also Invisible Adjunct, 2003c). Indeed, as another academic blogger noted, higher education in the US operates by “burning out cohort after cohort of new PhD graduates and replenishing them from a cheap labour pool it continues to knowingly produce” (Phil 2015). Yet universities gaslight insecure academics by obscuring their own part in this system, and by personalising and individualising the crisis instead – making it up to individual postdocs to compete with each other, to hustle, and then, if they cannot find secure academic work, to “navigate the transition to a non-academic career”. Of course, insecure academics do need to be canny about their career prospects, and leaving higher education is certainly one of the options (Kelsky 2015). But there is a supreme irony in the way that my university has spent money hiring external consultants to run workshops for postdocs on transferable skills, personal branding, and strategizing a transition *out of academia* to industry and the private sector, while at the same time stating an intention to increase the number of postdocs the university hosts.

Another repeatedly-invoked solution for postdocs is “mentorship”. Certainly, having good mentors can be very valuable: mentors can be sounding boards for professional and academic problems, and can offer perspective and wisdom from their broader and longer experience. They can also offer their protégés access to many material and other resources which they personally control, for example, their own research funds, entrance to their disciplinary networks, or offers of short-term work (Martin 2009). But these benefits of mentorship are often more realistically forms of academic patronage (Martin 2009) – informal benefits (and risks) that flow from being connected to powerful, well-resourced individuals and networks. Such patronage obviously does not solve a dysfunctional or non-existent academic pipeline,

however; and eventually these informal relationships must come up against the formalised bureaucracy of job application committees and human resources procedures. Mentors who help to cultivate an academic or disciplinary identity in their proteges in the absence of secure employment prospects may be setting these new academics up for a crisis of disappointed expectations later. And the downside of patronage relationships like those between postdoctoral fellows and hosts – as opposed to professional employment structures – is that, because they are characterised by steep power asymmetries, when things do not work out in the dependent party’s favour, there are no structures in place to protect them from dismissal or other forms of victimisation (Morgan 2016; Rothengatter and Hil 2013).

### **WHAT IS TO BE DONE? CONCLUSIONS, CAVEATS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Thus, one learns that little about the alluring discourse of the academic pipeline is true in the postdoctoral fellow system, and that this metaphor is often a misnomer for a trend towards temporary employment, underemployment and non-employment. When the universities, government departments and NRF speak of “strengthening the academic pipeline” and “creating research career pathways”, they often do not mean *actually funding more academic job openings and speedily getting PhD-qualified academics into them*. Rather, “development” discourse obscures what could be described as a temporal unbundling of the academic profession. Rather than a career being something one builds over many years while in a permanent job, postdoctoral fellowships and other forms of fixed-term work require academics to cobble a career together across a series of short-term, often project-based appointments which modularise one’s work and undermine the ability to imagine or sustain long-term projects (Morgan 2016).

Looking back over the transitions described in this article, I can see that I have been engaged in a struggle or contest between different ideas of what an academic career should be like and who should decide this. My ideas and aspirations were cultivated in a strong disciplinary department (without managers), where it was assumed that critical thinking was the basis for good academic work. Yet I came out of that postgraduate training to discover that there is little place for critical thinking in manager-run universities. Indeed, the research managers with whom I have interacted have mostly been discouraging and dissuading me, both from succeeding in my academic career as I define it, and (with some exceptions) from taking an active part in debating the role and purpose of academics in universities more broadly. Perhaps this should not have been surprising: Stewart (2007, 132) recognised long ago that “in the modern, neoliberal era, the academic role seems invisible to the corporate manager’s eye”. The postdoctoral fellowship system fundamentally misrecognises what I am trying to do in my

career, because the forward-looking “development” language, which always promises that the beginning of a real career lies in the future, or somewhere *other than now*, is seemingly unable to recognise that I am already a scholar.

It is of course true that the experiences I have described here will not be applicable to all postdocs. No two academic careers are alike: people have different experiences of PhD training and supervision, not all postdocs want academic careers, some PhD graduates make it into permanent work relatively fast, the demand for PhDs varies among disciplines, and race, nationality and gender all shape people’s experiences and employment prospects. It is likely that, as a white person, employment equity imperatives have been part of the reason why my South African job applications were not more successful.

Despite its first-person perspective and angry tone, however, this article should not be dismissed as merely the idiosyncratic whine of someone who got rejected from a lot of jobs – like an editor who rejected a previous version of this article from another journal with the comment that “it reads like a complaint from a disgruntled individual who has failed to secure a position at a university”. This is simply more of the same gaslighting which is already endemic in interactions between postdocs and senior academics and managers – making postdocs worry that there is something deficient in us, when in fact there is something wrong with the system. There is already a large para-academic genre dubbed “quit lit” (McKenzie 2021), essays written mostly by young academics about giving up on academia, often after years of adjunct teaching and numerous unsuccessful permanent job applications. Many of these accounts are deeply personal and emotional – angry, disillusioned and grieving, sometimes relieved and liberated – but they are also the structural result of an indifferent and exploitative system which cultivates more academics than it intends to securely employ. In this context, “there is a fundamental difference between the expression of frustrated professional aspirations and the criticism of an exploitative system of labour. Yes, Quit Lit may contain a lot of the former; but it emerges predominantly from the latter” (Phil 2015, n.p.).

Also, the diversity of career paths among academics is part of the point. As postdoctoral fellowships and other forms of short-term work have proliferated, they have produced parallel and unequal academic career streams – what Kimber (2003) called the “tenured core” and the “tenuous periphery”. In this situation, there appears to be little clear correlation between academic qualifications, academic accomplishments and academic employment type. Some academics are in permanent jobs – with or without a PhD, including those in the nGap program (Hlengwa 2019); others have PhDs but are postdocs, that is, they are not in any job at all; and some are in a series of fixed-term contracts. Yet the South African higher education literature still mainly imagines an academic “career” in an institution-centric way – as something

involving permanent attachment to a particular university (Kerr 2021).

As for the question of “what is to be done”, my view (unlikely to be taken seriously by managers) is that postdoctoral fellowships should be phased out, and all the money that is spent on post-PhD “development” programs should be redirected and consolidated to open more actual academic job vacancies. Universities should also opt out of the international and local university rankings game, because playing this game prioritises generating outputs over investing in livelihoods, and incentivises universities to produce the most academic publications for the lowest possible cost. Yet thinking about how to reform the academic pipeline for postdocs also opens up much larger questions about the purpose and structure of the academic profession in a system which instrumentalises and disempowers academics (Janz 2015; Harley 2017), and wears them down by simple overwork. There is already a critical discussion happening about the perverse effects of rankings and research incentives (Maistry 2019; Muller 2017; Muthama and McKenna 2020), and this should expand to the problem of a casualised academic workforce. Another part of the problem is that because postdocs are not university employees, we do not participate in any decision-making or governance structures of the university, so we do not see at first-hand how the university is really run, and we lose opportunities to connect with employed academics.

Perhaps, for any of these – or other – reform suggestions to be pursued, we as academics and postdocs would need to get serious about organising. At the moment, South Africa has no unifying higher education union across the whole sector – unlike the University and College Union (UCU) in the United Kingdom, for example, which has been active for the last several years in organising strikes and industrial actions among British academics, including postdocs and postgraduate students. In South Africa, the difficulties in organising are likely to be even greater for postdocs, who are not academic employees and so do not have an obvious place even in the unions that do exist.

Sometimes, when I have done talks about the postdoc system with postgraduate students in the audience, they have asked dismayed and anxious questions along the lines of “What must I do now? Should I still do a PhD?” So to close, I wish to plead with supervisors, hosts, permanent academics and managers not to collude in misleading postgraduate students, even the most capable ones, about their prospects for a career in academia. The internet is already awash with accounts of disappointed, angry academics who were encouraged to identify with their profession, only to discover that the profession had no interest in them. Instead, in South Africa we should continue making space for critical discussions about the academic profession, including about when we no longer think pursuing a PhD is a wise career move.

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## NOTES

1. Interview with Prof Wieland Gevers, August 2020.

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