

Towards a Problematisation Framework for the South African Research Landscape (Nthabiseng C. Nhlapo, Huibrecht M. van der Poll and John A. van der Poll)

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While the primary function of institutions of higher learning centres around teaching and learning activities, research culminating in the South African Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) accredited research output is gaining steady ground to becoming on par with tuition. Owing to the worldwide Covid-19 economic downturn, tuition-related subsidies to institutions of higher learning is diminishing. DHET is currently rewarding institutions in Rands and cents for accredited research output and institutions have, therefore, been placing more emphasis on research activities of, not only their academic staff, but also aspiring professional (generally known as administrative) staff members. Emphasis on research-related activities have led to the institution of research managers, research professors, and research chairs to guide research activities with respect to numerous policies, funding applications and annual reporting of research activities.

The challenge with accomplishing good research output is that unlike tuition, research is not largely "automated" in the sense that with tuition the drawing up of study material, scheduling and teaching classes, the setting of examination question papers, taking the exams, marking of the scripts, publishing the marks, and final graduation of the candidates all take place at predetermined times during the year or semester, with of course the assistance of support staff. Research, however, is not "automated" in this sense. Often researchers turn to their own research only after the tuition duties for the examination period has been concluded, just to find themselves having to backtrack with their research to a point where they could last remember what they were busy with.

Numerous other challenges with research emerge. Researchers are tempted to polony-slice their work to get more mileage out of their research; owing to time shortages, predatory or pseudo-predatory journal publishing houses and conferences have found innovative ways of entering the market, preying on researchers who may be desperate to publish their work. Journals are flooded with submissions leading to possible compromises in quality in favour of quantity.

In this work the researchers turn to aspects of problematisation through an inductive research approach, supported by a qualitative research choice of a literature review, blended with the experiences of the researchers to develop a problematisation framework of the above and many other challenges associated with the South African research landscape. The problematisation framework is structured around challenges with respect to postgraduate students, academics,

and research management at institutions. Further aspects in the framework include, amongst other, considerations of Africanisation; interpretation of institutional research policies; the role of the NRF as a mega South African funder; self-plagiarism aspects arising from students being encouraged (or required) to publish their work before submitting their dissertations or theses for examination; and the drive to publish in high-impact international journals versus supporting South African journals to gain an international standing.

Future work in this area is noted as the refinement of the framework among South African stakeholders, the development of a solution framework, and exercising parts of such solutions.

The full report will be available in December 2021.

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