

# The UKZN Griot ...of Allergies and PUs



*By Keyan G Tomaselli\**

Us wheat allergic have a hard time of it. When my condition was first diagnosed in 2000 I ordered a wheat free meal from SAA. This resulted in a protracted set of telephonic communications that went something like this:

Airchefs: 'So, you're allergic to wheat?'

Keyan: 'Yes, wheat, pasta, flour, pastry, bread, etc.'

Airchefs: Silence ... 'Ok, but can you eat chicken?'

Keyan: 'Yes, even if the chicken has been eating wheat.'

Airchefs: 'OK, I see, does this mean that you can eat fish also?'

This bizarre exchange reminds me of some of postdoctoral students' dealings with UKZN research offices.

Research Officer to new post doc student: 'So, you've been here for six months?'

Post-doc: 'Yes, but for the first three months I wasn't paid. My supervisor had to support me, and getting "captured" on the system and settled in was a nightmare. The first three months were wasted because of bureaucratic inefficiency.'

Research officer: 'So, have you got any publications yet?'

Post-doc: 'Well, it takes a while to publish in a peer-reviewed journal, even when one is getting paid and not having to chase the bureaucracy and begging one's supervisor for food, rent and transport money.'

Research officer: 'Is that a no?'

Post-doc: 'Yes. Yes, it's a no.'

This kind of dissonant discussion has typified the experience of some post docs at UKZN. Even us veterans are having to justify why it takes so long to get published. Strategic research fund managers want almost immediate publication. The Airchefs nutritionist who called me 12 years ago had no idea about allergens, and at UKZN the research officer (the hypothetical one who is a character in this story) thinks we are all journalists with monthly deadlines who can churn out peer-reviewed articles in short time.

Getting published in top journals can take years. OK, I know that the sciences can churn them out, a mathematical formula here, a report on a chemistry experiment there, but in the Humanities, being the “soul of the university”, as we’re constantly reminded, a two pager reporting on some lab procedure is not part of the genre. Being the “soul” takes a lot of reading, writing, thinking, researching and debate. Articles can take one to 30 years to germinate, while others can possibly be done in a few months.

The refereeing process in the Humanities can take up to six months, and often longer. The longer it takes the more scientific a Humanities or Social Sciences journal imagines itself to be. The three to five-hour turnaround on *Nature* or *Science* is for the Humanities an impossibility. If and when accepted, often after extensive revisions, the article is then slotted by the publisher into a production schedule that can take another year or two. The actual printed/online copy might appear yet another year or two later.

‘So, have you got a publication yet?’

Everyone everywhere but outer Mongolia has PUs (a most unfortunate acronym) to meet. The international ISI-indexed journal I edit, *Critical Arts*, in trying to keep up with pressures for publication, exploded from two issues annually in 2005 to six in 2013. Still, research officers, HR divisions, insatiable deans and other bureaucrats are not satisfied. More, faster, ‘are you published yet?’ is the incessant refrain. As editor, I get the impression that everybody’s now writing but that few are actually reading. Reading takes time, it gets in the way of writing, it ruins our PUs. (But reading improves our teaching, our knowledge and our research.) The result is entropy: more and more rubbish, a recycling mill, products rather than processes. Half-cooked articles are now submitted to journals so that their authors can claim “submission” to meet their KPAs. So, getting published is just one step in a process where some authors now just dump anything in the (e-)mail and tell their HR division that they have “submitted”, knowing full well that their submissions are not ready.

‘Are you published yet?’

The writing up and publication – which transgresses any idea of “financial”, “academic” or “tax” year – is actually the quickest part of doing research. So, what we are doing – like rats in a maze - is publishing by rote rather than thinking and making a difference. My suggestion is that we institute a compulsory programme for research office staffers in which we explain the

meaning of “intellectual year”. This kind of year cannot be managed like a factory manages its annualised output.

I once met a British working class lad at a semiotics conference in Germany. He explained that he really did not want like the rest of his family to work in a soulless factory, with its mind-numbing production lines and designated toilet breaks. So he got himself educated and then appointed at a university. ‘Just in time,’ he observed forlornly, ‘when the university had itself become a factory.’

When post docs who have just arrived and taken on challenges of getting settled are asked: ‘Are you published yet’, I think of my exchange with the Airchefs nutritionist. We’re not speaking the same language even if it is English.

-----

\* Keyan G Tomaselli is Director of The Centre for Communication, Media and Society. For the first three months of every year he runs an interest-free micro loansharking enterprise for post docs who fail to get paid.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author’s own.