

The UKZN Griot

...of Reality Tv and Burnout



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'The publish or perish syndrome has aided the corruption of genuine scholarship. There are numerous stories around publishing that if told would make Einstein or any of the scholars of old turn in their graves.' This was a further response of many received after my column: *Of Wheat and PUs*.

Where a few claimed solidarity in our common allergen, or offered some words of support, most of my correspondents external to UKZN sent me mini-essays, examples from their own institutions, and one connected me to a staff-authored website where similar issues are being debated. As in *X-Files*, 'We are not alone'. But the cry everywhere is: 'I hope that with the right kind of intervention, the pressure to publish quickly can be lessened and scholars would pursue good scholarship instead of seeking to publish just to keep the job.' These comments were made by a UKZN PhD graduate now in the consultancy business.

A Professor from an upcountry university offered the following tutorial: 'The more highly rated researchers often have h-factors on the ISI/Scopus that exceed 20 or 25, whereas top humanities scholars are sometimes not even found in such indexes, because they write (in) books.'

This scholar's counter-argument to the managers 'is to look at the NRF ratings'.

'It is not a perfect system, but clearly, if someone is a B, with a relatively low h-factor, his/her peers surely appreciate the substance of their contribution more than someone with a C and an h-factor of 15 or whatever.'

As a journals' editor I am increasingly wading through this kind of jargon, h-factors, impact factors, download indices, citation matrices and all those acronyms and associated spreadsheets that like uncontrolled viruses have taken over our academic lives in the vain ideological pursuit of public accountability. Pursuing "good scholarship" in many South African universities is coming under stress as we tread the production conveyer belt of fast-and-dirty publication and having to cope with injuriously elevated enrolment targets at the very moment that unanticipated staff and tutor cuts kick in, modules are cancelled, and staff:student ratios reduce the possibility of our offering good education, let alone "good scholarship".

Many certification-driven students (and their parents) appear to be quite happy with this state of affairs. These students gravitate towards the allegedly easy options, in some cases their lecturers are complicit in this flight from excellence, as they seek the lowest common denominator. Everybody except the “good scholars” are happy. The intellectual illiterates are then accepted into graduate studies and we all hope for the best despite the ominous signs of global academic meltdown.

Academics are spending more and more time putting out fires, dealing with bewildered students (i.e. the ones expecting good scholarship), while at UKZN our so-called cluster leaders have been largely deprived of administrative support, operating budgets and management authority. University-wide operating systems are creaking at the seams as even a year after “reconfiguration” many of these systems have yet to catch up with the new structures and the policies that enabled them.

One hour at the coalface is all I ask of our top executive. Become a lecturer, administrator or student for just a day; go undercover if necessary, just like in the Reality TV show *Undercover Boss*. These shows offer new genres and insights for anthropological research – getting down and dirty in Indian textile factories, being trumped by Trump and voted off the set by the survivors. Learn about how the shop floor really works and then you too can experience the daily stresses that characterise it.

As someone said after a meeting with top management, cluster leaders have “responsibility without power” rather than “power without responsibility”. Go figure.

If we don’t get our stress levels under control we’re all going to end up as subjects in *Spa of Embarrassing Illnesses*, *The Fat Doctor* or similar. This will be our claim to “good scholarship” as we hyper-individuate, hyper-ventilate and re-interpellate ourselves from being “good scholars” to experimental subjects/celebrities stripped of any modesty by voyeuristic cameras, or at best, as participant observers, we are pricked and prodded, cut and suctioned, exposed and bared for all the world to see. The difference between “acting” in these shows and being a social actor in the realm of academentia is that we can pick up our pay cheques and/or prizes at the door as we leave the studio and go home possibly feeling better than when we came in.

Not only does the world now know what the problem was but also that there is a solution. Not so in academia, where we just go round and round in circles. Once the fat has been suctioned off, we then cut into the muscle, and once that’s gone, we’re left with skeletons.

Only the forensic anthropologists will be left with something to study. But, will any forensic anthropologists still be employed?

As I was writing this column, a call for papers for *The Para-Academic Handbook: A Toolkit for making-learning-creating-acting* arrived in my inbox, to be published by HammerOn Press. Not a moment too soon. The new saviour is the para-academic. Para-academics critically reflect on how the idea of a university as a site for knowledge production, discussion and learning, has become distorted by neo-liberal market forces.

In South Africa, this is paradoxically legitimised by the term “transformation”.

Para-academics create alternative, open access, learning-thinking-making-acting spaces. They don’t worry about career paths. They take the prefix para- to illustrate how they work alongside, beside, next to, and rub up against the all too proper location of the Academy, making the work of Higher Education a little more irregular, a little more perverse, a little more improper.

Para-academics just continue to do what they've always done: write, research, learn, think, and facilitate that process for others. At many South African universities, however, SAPSE (or whatever it is called now) rules. How else can the budget be balanced?

Para-academics do not need to churn out endless "outputs". They work towards making ideas rather than quantifiable "products". The only problem with para-academics, as one post doc remarked, 'is that there is no job security and often they slip into the fractures of a neoliberal capitalist university model that does not offer tenure. Thus these para-academics live a very tenuous existence'.

Anyone for para-gliding with para-professors doing para-academics off the MTB Tower on a busy day? We can meet up at the unemployment insurance office downtown.

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