The North-South research gap: Challenges and lessons learnt

An invited guest editorial

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For academics, their professional lives revolve around research and research outputs. Academics are under immense pressure to do research and publish, and so publishing forms the core of their professional identities. This occurred because academic reward structures place a high value on research productivity (Gonzalez, Wilson & Purvis, 2022, p. 1), and with it academics can literally "trade" (Mills et al., 2023, p. 2) their publications for promotion, for tenure, to attract research funding and to acquire other material benefits (Naz, et al., 2022 Vurayai & Ndofirepi, 2022). A high research output volume also elevates a university's status, because universities' "local and international ranking and quality are measured by research output" (Alehegn & Diale, 2021, p. 29). As a result, academics are under pressure to publish in high-ranking and high-impact journals: to 'publish or perish'.

This situation is even worse for academics of the global South, particularly those from Africa. Preconceived and biased notions about global South academics and about the worthiness of global South issues as research topics, make it difficult to become published scholars in journals which are predominantly located in the global North, and particularly in the West. While it can be argued that some papers from academics in the global South are of a questionable standard, the same can also be said about some research papers from the global North. In addition, Olukoju (2004) blamed the decline in the quality of research from the global South on "the unfair practices academics are subjected to". Measures imposed by certain agents and by the scientific community of the global North are also used covertly to discriminate against academics from the global South. Consequently, academics from the global South generate only 2.6% of the world's scientific research output, representing an overtly unequal research output gap between the global South and the rest of the world (Amutuhaire, 2022).

This gap exists not because African scholars produce inferior work, but because of 'epistemic coloniality' (Andrason & van den Brink, 2023) that glorifies, humanises, centres and universalises that has been developed in the global North, exporting it all over the world. Meanwhile, knowledge systems from the global South are erased, dehumanised, or their importance is downplayed (Andrason & van den Brink, 2023). This type of epistemic coloniality makes it difficult for African academics to publish, thereby increasing global South epistemes to the periphery. As the number of academic publications and journals keeps growing, many African researchers find themselves marginalised, navigating a global knowledge system dominated by journals from the global North.

One serious barrier for the access to the higher-ranked journals (Zait, 2023) of the global South is language. Since high impact journals are generally published in English, extra pressure is placed on academics from non-English dominant backgrounds. Another obstacle is that journals outside of Africa are less inclined to accept articles focused on African issues and discussions, which decreases the likelihood of these works being published (Vurayai & Ndofirepi, 2022). Furthermore, Amuthuhaire (2022, p. 283) pointed out "an unequal resource distribution between the North and the South research institutions", while Vurayai & Ndofirepi (2022) highlighted "technical and financial difficulties facing the publishing industry in Africa". Here, issues of poorly equipped libraries, high article processing charges (APCs), limited funding and limited access to English language support, affect academics' potential both to do research and also publish. Journals of the global South that are accessible for academics to publish in, still struggle to get financial support, leaving them uncompetitive compared with journals from outside Africa.

Although collaborations have been formed between academics from the global North and South under the promise of "connection and agreement, connectedness and equality" (Coetzee in Roy, 2023, p. 1237), the global South experiences these collaborators as "being extractive and unequal, centring Northern conceptions of what quality scholarship looks like" (Musila, 2019, p. 288). In these collaborations, academics from the global South are often relegated to supplying manual labour or raw materials (such as data and data collection), which scholars from the global North then utilise to develop theories (Andrason & van den Brink, 2023). These collaborations frequently adhere to the Northern ideas of what constitutes quality scholarship. Furthermore, infrastructure and resources for knowledge production, such as research funding, research time, mobility, libraries, academic journals, and book publishers, are predominantly biased in favour of Northern academics (Musila, 2019). Several scholars also pointed to the exorbitant article processing fees charged by some open-access journals, unnecessary delays, editorial gatekeeping, and the risks of being discriminated against as an African scholar (Mills et al., 2023), which makes access difficult for global South academics seeking to publish.

The marginalisation of global South academics is further being exacerbated by local universities who frantically chase after 'esteemed' academics from the global North and entice them to come and do research in the South. During this recruitment process, global South universities use their own funds, incentivise these predominantly white male academics, and allow them to export that research and publish it in global North journals (Andrason & van den Brink, 2023). Of course, such actions not only signal a disregard for the capabilities and expertise of local African academics, but it also promotes gender inequality. Garnett and Mahomed (2012, p.82) attested to this when they observed that the "difficulties of publishing may be further compounded when the researchers are female…".

For the nations of the global South, their challenges in academic research stem from their histories of racial inequality under colonial or minority rule. On 27 April 2024, South Africa celebrated 30 years of democracy. Archbishop Desmond Tutu described post-apartheid South Africa as the "rainbow nation", referring to four racial categories, namely

Black, Coloured, White, and Indian. Archbishop Tutu also advocated the Ubuntu theology *"I am human because I belong, I participate, I share"* which can be achieved only through multi-racial reconciliation.

With the transition to a new democracy, numerous policies were put in place to address the inequalities of the past. Since 1994, transformation has been on the agenda of the higher education system in South Africa. The growth in student numbers led to a diversified mass university space where students from different backgrounds, races, classes, and languages have to negotiate and navigate to experience a sense of belonging (Mpisi, Groenewald & Barnett, 2020; Groenewald, 2023). Since 2015, student protests have taken place almost annually, highlighting the slow pace of a "deep transformation around knowledge, pedagogy, and institutional culture" (Keet, 2020). Born in the post-apartheid era, South African students are "born-frees" and in many cases the first generation to attend higher education. Despite this change, our born-frees still struggle with poverty and identity issues. In his book, *Breaking a rainbow, building a nation: The politics behind #MustFall movements*, Rekgotsofetse Chikane (2018) challenged the narration of a rainbow nation in the midst of inequalities in the country. Le Roux and Groenewald (2021) in IIER 31(3), noted that a key factor in providing a holistic experience of inclusivity for all students is dismantling barriers of difference, with the goal of collaboratively creating transformation. Students' protests have called for free education, which spurred initiatives for a decolonised curriculum that recognises African history, traditions, and theory. In initial teacher education, inclusive and social justice education became central, focusing on humanising and transformative pedagogy to assist students to teach in multi-cultural classrooms.

In IIER 32(4), Barnett and Botes (2022, p. 1290) observed that students' lesson plans incorporated elements of transformative pedagogy, such as "open dialogue, critical awareness, and autonomy". Pre-service teachers were able to design lessons that allowed learners to critically examine their current beliefs and values, fostering a significant shift in their lifestyle and personal behaviour.

De Klerk and Palmer (2020), in IIER 30(3), explained that to achieve transformative social justice teaching, in-service teachers must consistently assume "roles such as intellectual coaches, mediators, and transformative actors" to develop as autonomous individuals. For in-service teachers to be more effective in their educational environments, engaging in transformative social justice teaching requires them to make use of their own power as informed and critical individuals in efforts to create a more just society (2020, p. 836).

In the context of a country with 12 official languages, South African teachers also face the challenge of accommodating linguistic diversity in classrooms. Maphala and Mpofu (2020), as noted in IIER 30(3), recommended that tutoring programs adopt a more multilingual, structured, and collaborative approach. They highlighted the benefits of incorporating the practices of code mixing and code switching, as well as utilising multiple languages, to enrich both teaching and learning experiences. Code mixing is when someone incorporates a word or phrase from one language into another. Code switching,

however, involves alternating between languages while maintaining the structural and grammatical rules of each language.

In contrast, Maluleka (2023) noted in IIER 33(4) that there is a pressing need to reassess language policy in South African schools. Currently, the simultaneous teaching of learners' home language and English first additional language (EFAL) may impede learners' ability to achieve proficiency in their first language before commencing with a second language. Furthermore, the bilingual program faces challenges due to insufficient teacher training for effective education of bilingual children.

Even mathematics teaching depends on language proficiency. Moleko and Mosimege (2020), as reported in IIER 30(4), underscored the critical role of teaching mathematical vocabulary, which is essential for learners to comprehend and solve word problems proficiently. They also highlighted the importance of utilising learners' home languages to foster a deeper understanding of mathematical concepts.

Finally, when mapping inclusive education from 1980 to 2019, Methlagl (2022) in IIER 32(1) found that research addressing inclusive education from a "queer perspective, bullying, stigmatisation, digital education, and emerging technologies in inclusive settings" is marginal and should be intensified in future studies. Juan, Harvey and Hannan (2021) recommended that new educational policies in South Africa should explicitly aim for social justice to ensure all students are supported in the changing educational system, and that marginalised and vulnerable students are not further left behind.

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