

Young, gifted and black: Black early career academics' experiences in a South African university

**Authors:**

Mlamuli N. Hlatshwayo¹ 
Nkululeko G. Majazi² 

Affiliations:

¹Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

²Department of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Mlamuli Hlatshwayo,
mhlathshwayo@uj.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 20 June 2023

Accepted: 16 Nov. 2023

Published: 29 Feb. 2024

How to cite this article:

Hlatshwayo, M.N., & Majazi, N.G. (2024). Young, gifted and black: Black early career academics' experiences in a South African university. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur*, 22(0), a2365. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v22i0.2365>

Copyright:

© 2024. The Authors. Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Orientation: Higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Global South remain complex organisations that are facing a myriad of challenges. The sector, already reeling from the logics of the imperial, colonial or apartheid and more recently, neoliberal influences, continues to struggle to adequately respond to these challenges.

Research purpose: We used South Africa as a case study to explore and to theorise the challenges that black early career academics (ECAs) are facing as they seek to negotiate their being and belonging in a South African university.

Motivation for the study: To shine a spotlight on the complex experiences of black ECAs and how they navigate their being and belonging in a public university.

Research approach/design and method: We used a qualitative interpretivist case study to explore black ECAs' negotiation of entry and success in the university. Additionally, we relied on semi-structured interviews as the main data generation tool.

Main findings: We reveal how mentors/supervisors/line managers play a significant role in how black ECAs navigate and negotiate their entry, being and belonging in a neoliberal university. We also reveal an emergent tension between teaching and research, showing how black ECAs believe that teaching and learning is relegated to the margins at university.

Practical/managerial implications: Exploring black ECAs experiences in university has implications for the retention, success and transformation of the higher education sector in South Africa.

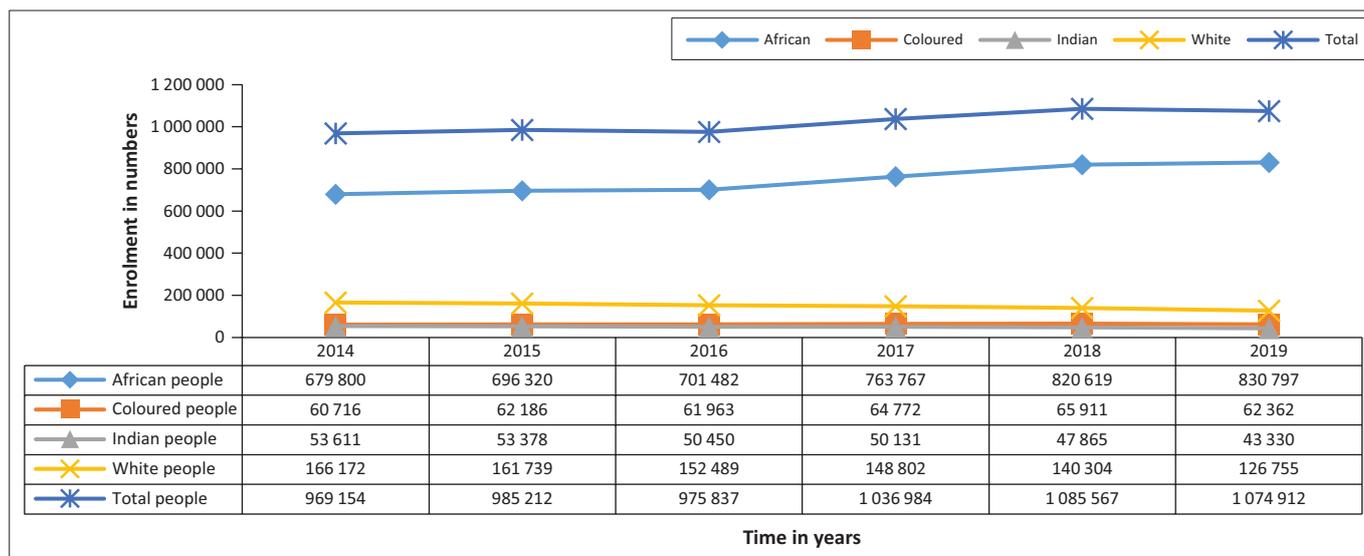
Contribution/value-add: Higher education in general and academic staff development in particular has an instrumental role to play in ensuring that black ECAs are well supported and mentored.

Keywords: early career academics; higher education; transformation; decolonisation; academic development.

Introduction

Universities in the Global South continue to struggle to respond to the ethical calls for higher education transformation and decolonisation (Gómez et al., 2013; Ndlovu, 2018; Quijano, 2007). These calls have largely focussed on the need to re-think the purposes of a university in the Global South, re-centring African and Global South epistemic traditions in curricula, re-considering or re-imagining teaching and learning as well as tackling the alienating and colonising institutional culture(s) in the academy. The universities, as complex organisational institutions, have remained unable to sufficiently deal with these with challenges.

In the South African context, we continue to experience what Cloete and Moja (2005) had historically called a 'demographic revolution' largely because of the increasing massification, student enrolments, the different funding mechanisms, the attractiveness of the higher education sector, and the growing number of students who still see and value higher education as a viable path to upward social mobility in a deeply unequal and racialised country (Author(s), in press; Mngomezulu & Ramrathan, 2015; Njilo, 2019). This is evident in how between 2014 and 2019, black African student enrolments in the country increased from 679 800 to about 830 797 by 2019



Source: VitalStats. (2021). *VitalStats public higher education 2019*. Council on Higher Education

FIGURE 1: Headcount enrolment by race, 2014–2019.

(VitalStats, 2021, pp. 2–3). Within the same reporting period, coloured student enrolment also slightly improved from 60 716 in 2014 to about 62 362 by 2019, and Indian student enrolment starting off at 53 611 in 2014, and ending with 43 330 in 2019, showing an enrolment decline of about 10 281 in the 5-year period. The demographic enrolment could also be read through a gender lens, with women students' enrolment sitting at 564 784 in 2014, and growing to about 640 333 in 2019. Male students appear to have a reduced enrolment and participation rates compared to women, with 404 365 male students enrolled in higher education in 2014, and 434 514 in 2019 (VitalStats, 2021, pp. 2–3). Figure 1 indicates these demographic trajectories in South African higher education between 2014 and 2019.

Although the numbers in Figure 1 do appear to show some increasing formal or physical access to higher education, the sector continues to lag behind in terms of epistemic transformation and tackling the archaic and colonial roots of the higher education system (Author, 2020; Badat, 2017; Heleta, 2016). The emergence of the #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, #OpenStellenboschCollective, Black Student Movements, and other student formations proved a crucial reminder that the sector is still a largely colonial or apartheid or neoliberal invention, with deep roots and ontological identity of the higher education system not reflecting the lived experiences of the African subalterns. It is based on the above contested and deeply fragmented terrain that black early career academics (ECAs) emerge in the South African academy.

In this paper, we attempt to shine a spotlight on the complex ways that black ECAs navigate their being and belonging in a South African higher education institution (HEI). We especially focus on the role that line managers or supervisors or mentors play in helping black ECAs navigate their roles and responsibilities in university. We also reveal the complex relationship between teaching and learning, and research, with black ECAs increasingly feeling that publications are

more valued and appreciated in higher education at the expense of teaching.

Conceptualising early career academics

There is no widespread consensus in the literature on what constitutes an 'early career academic' (see Sutherland & Taylor, 2011), with Lewin (2019) conceding that no universal definition of the term exists in the field. For Garbett and Tynan (2010), an ECA refers to the first 5 years after an academic has completed their PhD. It should be recognised that this definition is largely limited and exclusionary as in the South African context there are ECAs who have completed their Masters degrees, and are still in the process of completing their doctoral qualifications (see e.g. Msiza et al., 2021). We agree with Pithouse-Morgan et al.'s (2016) suggestion that our understanding of ECAs should focus more on an academic's ontological being and becoming after their employment and absorption into the academic profession, with the diverse forces and factors that shape them in the different institutions.

Hemmings et al. (2013) expand on this definition and suggest that ECAs are generally academics who are new to the sector and are currently undertaking doctoral education. For and to some extent Antoniadou (2020), ECAs are academics who have been working in the sector for the first 5 years of their career, with sessional, part-time or full-time working loads. Alternatively, Price et al. (2015) propose that ECAs should focus on the characteristics and personalities of those academics who have limited experience in academia, and are thus in need of some form of induction or training or support.

In this article, we took ECAs to refer to those academics who are in the first 5 years of their employment, already have their Masters' degree qualification at hand, are either currently completing their doctoral studies or have just

completed their doctorate in the past 5 years. This broad conception of what constitutes an ECA enabled us to seek, explore and theorise the broad and complex experiences that different kinds of black ECAs have in a South African university.

In her seminal paper, 'The reluctant academic: Early-career academics in a teaching-orientated university', Gale (2011) suggests that the ever-changing nature of the higher education system does affect ECAs who are entering the system. For Gale (2011), the neoliberal and corporate logic that HEIs have adopted and institutionalised in their operations, has resulted in the pressures on the academics to align their own identities together with the institutions in the hopes of navigating, negotiating and succeeding in the institution. This has sometimes resulted in a series of tensions between the academics and the institutions itself, with some academics opting to rely more firmly and strongly with the identity of their academic disciplines (see Harris, 2005; Henkel, 2000, p. 252), while others have fragmented their identities according to their primary functions and responsibilities, that is, teaching and learning, research, and community engagement (Blackmore & Blackwell, 2006).

Scholars suggest that ECAs tend to experience feelings of alienation, marginality and exclusion, with Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2016) suggesting that ECAs feel like they have been left to 'sink or swim' in the academy. This results in the social construction of precarity and employment insecurity for ECAs who tend not to stay too long in the academy, and often resign to join other sectors in the hopes of better employment conditions, social security, better rewards and benefits.

For Miller (2014), what complicates this employment precarity and lack of retention for ECAs is the attitude of senior academics who at times see and perceive the ECA phase as largely focussing on testing an academic's ability to 'survive' the 'harsh' terrains of the academy. This contributes to ECAs feeling inferior, insecure, demotivated and discouraged. This is similarly echoed by Hollywood et al. (2020) and Bosanquet et al. (2017) who describe ECAs workloads' as disturbingly problematic, leaving them feeling shattered, stressed, swamped and constantly under pressure to perform and to prove themselves as worthy, and that they belong in higher education.

Writing about the intersectional challenges that junior women academics face when navigating the higher education space, Winkler (2000) suggests that 'All junior faculty members should bear in mind that they are expected to hit the ground running and to keep running at top speed' (Winkler, 2000, p. 746). Winkler (2000) fails to recognise the various ways in which race, class and gender affect one's progress in the university, and that having access to the resources that could enable and facilitate marginalised women and ECAs to excel in the academy is important. For her, she sees, reads, and conceptualises the academy as largely a neutral and apolitical space, one that is not racist,

classist, sexist, gendered, patriarchal and unequal. Thus, her suggestion that women ECAs need to 'hit the road running' is misplaced at best and lacks the structural or systemic understanding at worst.

Hlengwa (2015) cautions us against what she sees as the implicit strategies and tactics that HEIs employ to frustrate and delay transformation when it comes to the employment of ECAs. She coins the term, 'safe bets' to theorise and argue that HEIs socially reproduce themselves and their academic staff when they choose to appoint ECAs who conform to and reinforce the hegemonic institutional culture(s) of the departments or disciplines. For Hlengwa and to some extent Booie et al. (2017a), the social production and reproduction of 'safe bets' phenomena in the academy is designed to achieve a number of objectives for the neoliberal or corporate university (Booie, 2015; Booie et al., 2017b). Firstly, it seeks to frustrate and delay real and material transformation. Secondly, it is meant to obfuscate that because of the real and tangible demographic changes in the university – curricula, social, political, economic, institutional or epistemic changes are not necessary. Thirdly, it implicitly collapses demographic changes with real transformation and decolonisation, thereby enabling the university to raise its profile, apply for grants or funding and project itself as 'transformed', 'Africanised' and 'decolonised'.

The recent emergent literature on ECAs has focussed on novice academics' resilience programmes and to what extent they are effective (Wyllie et al., 2020); the role of gender, ethnicity and geography in frustrating ECAs possibilities for attending national and international research conferences (Timperley et al., 2020); the complex social construction of ECA's identity development in higher education (Badiozaman, 2021); the intersectional effect that gender and parenthood have on the career of ECAs (Bonache et al., 2022); the role that international mobility plays in helping or hindering ECAs' career progress (Matanle & McIntosh, 2022), amongst others.

We now move to the methodological decisions for our article, and their rationale.

Methodological insights

In this article, we used a qualitative research methodology, underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm (Anderson, 2010; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We were primarily interested in exploring and theorising the experiences of black ECAs on how they negotiate their being and belonging at a research-intensive university in South Africa. Eight academics were purposively recruited and took part in the study, with all of them taking part in 45–60 min interviews with the authors (Braun et al., 2014; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The research site is a school of education in a research-intensive university in the KwaZulu-Natal province. The reasons for selecting this university and its school of education are mainly twofold. Firstly, the school of education was one of the most heavily impacted during the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall national protests in

2015 and 2016, and thus offered fascinating and rich insights into some of the complex narratives and experiences of black ECAs who work in the institution. Secondly, this school of education was attractive as a research site largely because of the strategic leadership of the then dean of the school who was deliberate in targeting talented, young black ECAs who were research productive and who could potentially drive the research and transformation agenda of the school. To give some insights into who research participants were – we had four women and four men. Their disciplinary backgrounds included Curriculum Studies, Early Childhood Development, Language and Arts Education, Mathematics Education, Life Orientation, Physical Education, and Education Leadership and Management. This diversity brought with it interesting insights and perspectives on how black ECAs' understand their complex challenges of access and success in a HEI.

We obtained ethical and gatekeeper permission at the university, with all research participants signing consent letters, and being informed of their rights in the study, both orally and in writing. Attempts have been made to hide and anonymize the identities of the research participants, with the use of nicknames, invented names or pseudonyms all being created to protect and to hide their real identities. This was also designed to give them a sense of protection, to free them to speak, share or narrate their experiences without the dangers of being traced or monitored on what they said.

We primarily analysed the data through a thematic coding scheme (see Peel, 2020). In line with Peel's (2020) suggested six stages of thematic coding and analysis for qualitative research, we drew on the following stages: (1) collecting; (2) engaging with the data; (3) coding; (4) generating the code categories; (5) conceptualising the themes; and (6) contextualising and representing the findings. This allowed us to have a deeper understanding and appreciation of the data, and allowed the themes that were created to be reflective of the research participants' views.

On support, mentoring and mothering

Support and mentoring have played a significant role for black ECAs in enabling them to navigate their being and belonging at university. These networks of belonging and support, often informal, 'un-regulated' and at times unstructured, have proved important for black ECAs struggling to cope with the pressures and demands of higher education, particularly the teaching and learning, and research aspects. For the participants Regina and Nosipho, these networks of support and mentoring ensured that they had adequate time to learn and be prepared to teach 'on the other side' of the academy. Thus, the fundamental shifts and transition from being students to now being academics were significantly made better by the level of support, and care that they received:

'I was very much supported when I first started out because I remember ... I had no prior experience of taking it all. The only teaching I knew was the teaching that I had obviously gotten from my lecturers. So I've never been on the other side. I've always been a student, so when I first started out as a lecturer...I had plenty of support, enormous support from my colleagues. A lot of the teaching load I didn't have to do. So I actually was asked or requested that I shadow a certain colleague of mine for about six months. So it'd be, imagine that's an entire semester and I'd have a very small teaching load every now and then, but I just observe at the manner in which she teaches, the manner in which she conducted classes, but also the administration of the classes.' (Black African woman, Life Orientation/Physical Education discipline, lecturer)

'I had a wonderful mentor, remember him, I will even mention his name, Dr XXX. He was the one who was employing us at that particular time and he was a very good mentor; he was for the people, for the students. So everything just revolved around ensuring that they get everything that they need; not that he would jeopardize the teaching part of things, no; but for him – students, the humanity part came first.' (Black African woman, Social Justice discipline, lecturer)

For Regina and Nosipho, the mentoring and support they obtained from their mentors and line managers helped them navigate the pressures and fears of teaching at university. While for Regina, the mentoring proved helpful in assisting her to navigate the 'other side' of what the postcolonial philosopher Spivak (2012) calls the 'teaching machine'. It is perhaps interesting how for Nosipho, it was her mentor's commitment to restoring the humanity, compassion and understanding that was essential for her growth and understanding of her responsibilities as a black ECA. Remmik et al. (2011) argue that these networks of support constitute what we could refer to as the 'communities of practice' in the university, in how they are crucial for the growth and development of black ECAs, and that without them, black ECAs could potentially struggle to navigate their belonging.

For Nonjabulo, another research participant, her support and mentoring reflected what she calls 'motherly' from her line manager, who took on the role of being like a caring mother and looked after her:

'It's cordial and she's also motherly. So each time. I have challenges. If I do have challenges, I can always go to her and she's always willing to help. So anytime I have any issues or in terms of my teaching, I can go to her and she is always willing to help. And also, in terms of my career and in terms of my professional development, she tries to be there, encouraging as always trying to find out what am I doing? Where I am? And trying to help me. As I said there's a paper that we are writing together. So she's always there. She's always trying to assist. And I know that I can always go to her as well, if I have any challenges. And I learned a lot from her.' (Black African woman, Language and Arts Education discipline, lecturer)

For Nonjabulo, her line manager has become her source of support who helps her with teaching and learning as well as navigating writing journal article(s) for publication. For her, the personal is existentially the political in how her line manager became the ever-caring mother who ensured that she had adequate support in her roles and responsibilities

both in her personal life and in her academic wellbeing. While this is commendable and demonstrates care and support, Magoqwana et al. (2019) caution us on the role played by black women academics who have become what they term 'Black nannies' in the academy, providing the social, emotional, psychological, spiritual and family support.

This burden and responsibility tend to fall largely on black women academics, who often must take on these 'unpaid' and often 'unrewarded' roles and responsibilities in the university. For Magoqwana et al. (2019), the demands of the neoliberal, corporate university and its hyper focus on performance management instruments, research productivity and grant raising force black women academics to resort to this 'invisible labour' of care work, similar with the black domestic workers who are often overworked, exploited, emotional and physically drained, and largely under-paid, and at times mis-recognised.

It should be noted that not all black ECAs felt supported, mentored or assisted when they made their entry into higher education. For some, like Dladla, who feels that he relied on his own personal experiences of teaching at high school and that those skills, attributes and values helped him navigate teaching and learning in higher education:

'Basically no one supported me, because when you remember when your transit from high school teaching level two a university teaching, is something different – yes, you might have an experience of teaching at a school level, but when it comes to the university, it's something different. So no, no one taught me how to teach at the university, except that I used my experience that I had by then to teach at the visit. So I learned by doing things so through my actions, that's where, I learned that's where I got my experience of how to teach at the university, but no one taught me how to do it.' (Black African man, Curriculum Studies discipline, senior lecturer)

Overall, mentoring and support continue to play a largely crucial role in helping black ECAs navigate and negotiate their belonging at a research-intensive university. For Regina, Nosipho and Nonjabulo, the support was pivotal in ensuring that they not only cope with the day-to-day responsibilities, but that they succeed at university. While scholars such as McKay and Monk (2017) refer to the ever-present tensions, challenges, workload and overwhelming commitments that confront ECAs because of the pressures of 'wackademia', that is, the changing or shifting goalposts and at times elusive finish line, and how the work never really ends for ECAs. It becomes clear in this paper that black ECAs greatly benefit from the community of practice and support they get from their mentors, supervisors, line managers and other colleagues.

The early career academics' tension between teaching and learning, and research

There was a growing sense among the black ECAs who took part in the study that the research-intensive university tends to favour research and publications over what they see as teaching and learning being taken for granted.

For these research participants, they use words like 'losing focus', 'overburden' and at times, 'stressed' to describe what they see as the *over-focus* and institutional concentration on research productivity while teaching and learning appear to be de-valued. Nosipho and Regina articulate this tension as:

'So that I think the university is more into [publications] than anything else. The teaching and learning, yes, it is there – but it is not the core of what the university is offering. So, I think the publication part comes before anything else, and then the teaching and learning, oh yes, 'okay, she can teach or he can teach, that's okay, you know, but how many articles have you published, what have you brought in, how much money have you bring for the university, – that, I feel is the key, that is important, everything else follows it.' (Black African woman, Social Justice discipline, lecturer)

'Once you are employed in XXX, then you have to do research and you have to publish that one it is compulsory....We are constantly encouraged to publish papers, to write more research projects, to present papers at conferences, to write chapters in books, but we focus very little on the teaching and learning. And I think that is the core business of the university, to find new creative ways to teach our students. But I feel that we are losing focus. We are focusing more on research than we are focusing on teaching and learning.' (Black African woman, Life Orientation/Physical Education discipline, lecturer)

For Regina and Nosipho, research and the publication of research articles take primary responsibility over teaching and learning at university, leading them to remark that that research is the 'core' of the university, over teaching and learning. Even though an ECA may be passionate about teaching strategies, experimenting with different pedagogies in the classroom, what appears to be institutionally valued and legitimated is the knowledge production through research subsidies. Regina comments that she feels that the university is 'losing focus' in its 'obsession' with publications, and that this results in the under-valuing and degradation of teaching.

It should be noted that higher education's focus on research, publication or accredited article is not a neutral, innocent, and apolitical institutional decision to pursue the needs of the knowledge economy (Blankley & Booyens, 2010; Smith, 2002; Vadra, 2017). Rather, it stems from corporate, neoliberal and colonising demands of publish or perish that are designed to drive through and bring research subsidies into the university coffers (Aprile et al., 2021; Frederick, 2020; Vurayai & Ndofirepi, 2020). This is echoed by one of the research participants, Mandla, who draws similar lines between the university, the operational neoliberal logics, and the obsessive demands for publications:

'The basis of the current near liberal system of how a university operates, um, of course research is important. We have to do research. We have to do cutting edge research and contribute knowledge and, um, uh, solving problems that are facing society. But I think that statement is made loosely by, certain members of the university because of different university for that matter. I want to base it to all the universities the reason why I say that, is when they say, research is at the heart of the university, some of the South African universities, they are desperate to produce more publications so that they can get subsidies from government. They can get more subsidies from government because we have a funding challenge in terms of higher

education.’ (Black African man, Early Childhood Development discipline, senior lecturer)

For Mandla, this corporate neoliberal logic which presents and positions research and publications through the lens of commodities that could be bought and sold at the marketplace of ideas, often does not value the quality of the research itself, but rather values the quantity and the volume of the numbers that are meant to bring in subsidies, grants and resources from the government. Put differently, academics have become what Mamdani (2007) calls the scholars at the marketplace. Vurayai and Ndofirepi (2020) argue that African ECAs are all too familiar with the publish or perish discourse, and this seeks to present a couple of challenges for us.

Early career academics must decide whether they want to sacrifice their recognition for relevance, or their relevance for recognition. This would mean that ECAs must decide whether they want to play the publication game, which would enable and facilitate them gaining recognition and promotion, including receiving rewards and acknowledgments. Not playing this game at a research-intensive university would relegate ECAs to irrelevance, and to become institutional pariahs who would be considered as ‘unproductive’ and at times ‘useless’ academics (Vurayai & Ndofirepi, 2020).

The research participants’ concern about the apparent tension between teaching and learning, and research in the academy is also reflected in the literature, with scholars such as Subbaye and Vithal (2017) arguing that the role of teaching in the university has historically being associated with women academics who tend to get left behind when it comes to academic promotions, with research largely becoming the ‘preserve’ of male academics. This, at least in the Bordieuan sense, produces the academic, social, intellectual or socio-political and epistemic reproduction of male academics who continue to get promoted in the system, with women academics being relegated to the lower levels and rankings of the university hierarchical system (Bourdieu, 1984). For black ECAs like Nosipho, who as women academics, are navigating the higher education and are struggling to write for publication, she reflects that the intersectional challenges of being a mother and wife prevent her from achieving her research aims and targets:

‘I am one of those people who are not publishing at this very moment, and it is very sad. It is very sad. But then again, I think the university, I am not saying I blame them in a way, but I also think that these values were not instilled in us at a lower level, you know from honours, maybe from honours – start working, But we don’t know those things, and we need people to support us and I can see, especially in education, the males’ job, they don’t sleep at night, they publish left, right and center. ... me, as a person who is coming from the Social Justice at the back of my mind, sometimes I just say; ‘it’s okay, you know what XXX, because he is a male. He is a male, he doesn’t have the responsibilities, you are a wife, you are a mother – you know, I think of all the roles you can think of, I even add roles that don’t exist; just for me to, you know, to feel sorry for myself. ... I am lacking, I am not gonna say we because I don’t know about others, but I am lacking publishing skills.’ (Black African woman, Social Justice discipline, lecturer)

Overall, there appears to be a tension for black ECAs who see teaching and learning being gradually underappreciated and not being valued and supported in the university compared to what is seen as the obsessive demands for publish or perish. For some women ECAs in the study, they value teaching and learning and feel that they are being left behind with the research aspects compared to their male counterparts in the departments.

Some brief discussions, and implications

In her *magnus opus*, ‘Space invaders: Race, gender and bodies out of place’, Puwar (2004) argues that black academics could be seen as space invaders and bodies out of place in constantly negotiating their being and belonging in the university. This is similarly shared by scholars such as Mahabeer et al. (2018) and Khunou et al. (2019) who have flagged for us, the complexities of being black, women and academic in a South African university. In another research, we have attempted to existentially theorise ourselves and our complex struggles in accessing, failing, coping and succeeding in the university (Authors, 2020). For black ECAs in this study, the role of mentors, colleagues and supervisors has been instrumental in helping them navigate their being and belonging at university.

This support could be referred to as the informal social capital networks and connections (Putnam, 2000), with black ECAs relying on colleagues and supervisors to learn the demands of teaching and learning, supervision and research. It should be noted that for black women ECAs, such as Regina, Nosipho and Nonjabulo – these connections are largely feminist and gendered in nature, as it helps them negotiate their access and success in the university. Although we are troubled by Magoqwana et al.’s (2019) epistemic and ontological cautioning on the emergence of the ‘Black nannies’ in the university – seeing in this paper through what one of the research participants describes her line manager as ‘motherly’ – these types of social and academic support are nonetheless useful and important in helping black ECAs to become academics.

The emergent tension between teaching and learning, and research is a real one. The rising neoliberal logics in South African higher education through various instruments such as performance management tools, ratings, rankings, quality assurance, publish or perish among others, have socially constructed and produced a discourse that suggests that research (and publications) is more valuable than teaching and learning, and community engagement. Mbembe (2016), Heleta (2016) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) have suggested that as part of rethinking, the public university in South Africa demands that we think counter-hegemonically against the neoliberal pressures and influences of the university itself. For black ECAs who are trapped in this struggle, they are therefore forced to embrace this publish or perish discourse, often against what they see as their love of teaching and learning.

In lieu of a conclusion

The higher education system in the Global South continues to grapple with a plethora of challenges in responding to the structural histories and legacies of slavery, colonialism, apartheid and neoliberal marketplace logics. Early career academics who are entering the system are still uncertain and unsure about their future in the academy (Aprile et al., 2021; Bosanquet et al., 2017; Bourabain, 2021). In this article, we explored and theorised the experiences of black ECAs on how they access and succeed in a South African university. We revealed the importance of mentors, supervisors and line managers in helping black ECAs navigate their entry and success in the academy.

We also discussed at length, the apparent tensions between teaching and learning, and research in the university, and how black women ECAs feel left behind as they tend to focus on teaching while their male counterparts continue to focus on research and publishing. Thus, based on the above discussions, we make the following recommendations:

- More systematic and formalised programmes are needed to support black ECAs in higher education beyond the informal networks and connections that the academics have formed for themselves. This will ensure that future black ECAs will enter more coherent programmes that will take into account their needs, and the level of support that they require.
- Performance management instruments in higher education still appear to skew heavily on the side of research and publications, with teaching and learning and community engagement still being de-valued. Higher education institutions need to make better efforts on funding, supporting and promoting teaching and learning, and community as a viable promotions path for those who are committed to it.
- Although peripheral in this paper, Magoqwana et al.'s (2019) idea of the 'Black nannies' and their invisible labour is still a powerful conceptual tool of thinking around the sustained and institutionalised marginality that black women academics in general and potentially black women ECAs continue to experience in the South African higher education. Future research could adopt the 'Black nannies' as a conceptual framework, and possibly evaluate the extent of this phenomena across the different HEIs in both the Global South and South Africa, and the interventions that are required to support black women ECAs.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

M.N.H. was responsible for the conceptualisation, methodology, discussions and data analysis. N.G.M. was

responsible for data generation, literature review, critical reading and reviewing the article.

Ethical considerations

The University of KwaZulu-Natal's ethics committee has approved this research project. The ethics number HSS/0240/09 was approved on the 21/07/2021.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

These data are publicly available on Google Drive, University of Johannesburg and University of KwaZulu-Natal's Cloud storage.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

- Anderson, C. (2010). Presenting and evaluating qualitative research. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 74(8), 141. <https://doi.org/10.5688/aj7408141>
- Antoniadou, M. (2020). Living the dream...but for how long? Being an early career academic in the context of excellence. In M. Antoniadou & M. Crowder, M. (Eds.), *Modern day challenges in academia: Time for a change*. Edward Elgar.
- Aprile, K.T., Ellem, P., & Lole, L. (2021). Publish, perish, or pursue? Early career academics' perspectives on demands for research productivity in regional universities. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 40(6), 1131–1145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1804334>
- Badat, S. (2017). *Trepidation, longing, and belonging: Liberating the curriculum at universities in South Africa*. University of Pretoria.
- Blackmore, P., & Blackwell, R. (2006). Strategic leadership in academic development. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(03), 373–387. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070600680893>
- Blankley, W.O., & Booyens, I. (2010). Building a knowledge economy in South Africa. *South African Journal of Science*, 106(11), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajs.v106i11/12.373>
- Bogdan, R.C., & Biklen, S.K. (1982). *Qualitative research methods for education*. Allyn & Bacon.
- Bonache, H., Carballo, V., Chas, A., & Delgado, N. (2022). Go the extra mile: a gender approach towards parenthood in early-career academics. *Journal of Gender Studies* 31(1), 125–135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2020.1836482>
- Booi, M. (2015). *Accelerated development programmes for Black academics: Interrupting or reproducing social and cultural dominance*. Master's thesis. Rhodes University. Retrieved from <http://vital.seals.ac>
- Booi, M., Vincent, L., & Liccardo, S. (2017a). Counting on demographic equity to transform institutional cultures at historically white South African universities? *Higher Education Research & Development*, 36(3), 498–510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1289155>
- Booi, M., Vincent, L., & Liccardo, S. (2017b). 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it': Challenges facing institutional transformation of historically white South African universities. *African Sociological Review/Revue Africaine de Sociologie*, 21(1), 2–19.
- Bosanquet, A., Mailey, A., Matthews, K.E., & Lodge, J.M. (2017). Redefining 'early career' in academia: A collective narrative approach. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 36(5), 890–902. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2016.1263934>
- Bourabain, D. (2021). Everyday sexism and racism in the ivory tower: The experiences of early career researchers on the intersection of gender and ethnicity in the academic workplace. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(1), 248–267. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12549>
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*: Harvard University Press.

- Cloete, N., & Moja, T. (2005). Transformation tensions in higher education: Equity, efficiency, and development. *Social Research*, 72(3), 693–722. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2005.0033>
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research*. Sage.
- Frederick, D.E. (2020). Scholarly communications, predatory publishers and publish or perish culture in the 2020s. *Library Hi Tech News*, 37(5), 1–12.
- Gale, H. (2011). The reluctant academic: Early-career academics in Hlatshwayo a teaching-orientated university. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 16(3), 215–227. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2011.596705>
- Garbett, D., & Tynan, B. (2010). A lifeline for emerging academics. In R.H. Cantwell & J.J. Scevak (Eds.), *An academic life: A handbook for new academics* (173–181). Acer Press.
- Gómez, L.F., Ríos-Osorio, L., & Eschenhagen, M.L. (2013). Agroecology publications and coloniality of knowledge. *Agronomy for sustainable development*, 33(2), 355–362. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13593-012-0109-6>
- Harris, S. (2005). Rethinking academic identities in neo-liberal times. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 10(4), 421–433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510500238986>
- Heleta, S. (2016). Decolonisation of higher education: Dismantling epistemic violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa. *Transformation in Higher Education*, 1(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v1i1.9>
- Hemmings, B., Hill, D., & Sharp, J.G. (2013). Critical interactions shaping early academic career development in two higher education institutions. *Issues in Educational Research*, 23(1), 35–51.
- Henkel, M. (2000). *Academic Identities and Policy Change in Higher Education (Higher Education Policy)*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Hlengwa, A. 2015. Employing safe bets: Reflections on attracting, developing and retaining the next generation of academics. In P. Tabensky & S. Matthews (Eds.), *Being at home: Race, institutional culture and transformation at South African higher education institutions*. University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Hollywood, A., McCarthy, D., Spencely, C., & Winstone, N. (2020). 'Overwhelmed at first': The experience of career development in early career academics. *Journal of further and higher education*, 44(7), 998–1012. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1636213>
- Khunou, G., Phaswana, E.D., Khoza-Shangase, K., & Canham, H. (2019). *Black academic voices: The South African Experience*. HSRC Press.
- Lewin, T. (2019). *Early career women academics: A case study of working lives in a gendered institution*. PhD (unpublished). Bloemfontein: University of Free State.
- Magoqwana, B., Maqabuka, Q., & Tshoedi, M. (2019). 'Forced to Care' at the Neoliberal University: Invisible labour as academic labour performed by black women academics in the South African University. *South African Review of Sociology*, 50(3–4), 6–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2020.1730947>
- Mahabeer, P., Nzimande, N., & Shoba, M. (2018). Academics of colour: Experiences of emerging Black women academics in Curriculum Studies at a university in South Africa. *Agenda*, 32(2), 28–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2018.1460139>
- Mamdani, M. (2007). *Scholars in the Marketplace: The dilemmas of neo-liberal reform at Makerere University 1989-2005*. CODESRIA.
- Matanle, P., & McIntosh, E. (2022). International mobility for early career academics: does it help or hinder career formation in Japanese studies? *Japan Forum*, 32(2), 152–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2020.1792534>
- Mbembe, A. (2016). Decolonizing the university: New directions. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 15(1), 29–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022215618513>
- McIntosh, M.J., & Morse, J.M. (2015). Situating and constructing diversity in semi-structured interviews. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research*, 2, 2333393615597674. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2333393615597674>
- McKay, L., & Monk, S. (2017). Early career academics learning the game in Whackademia. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 36(6), 1251–1263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1303460>
- Miller, F. (2014). *Knowledge Ecosystems of Early Career Academics: A Grounded Theory of Experiencing Information Use for Learning in Developmental Networks*. PhD (unpublished). Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology.
- Mngomezulu, S., & Ramrathan, L. (2015). Academic intervention experiences of 'at risk' students in a South African university. *Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the Arts and Humanities in Southern Africa*, 17, 116–141.
- Msiza, V., Mbatha, N., & Zondi, T. (2021). Mapping a model for peer assessment: Narratives of academics in a South African Teacher Education Institution. In L. Sosibo & E. Ivala (Eds.), *Creating effective teaching and learning spaces: Shaping futures and envisioning unity in diversity and transformation*. Vernon Press.
- Ndlovu, M. (2018). Coloniality of knowledge and the challenge of creating African futures. *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, 40(2), 95–112. <https://doi.org/10.5070/F7402040944>
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. (2018). *Epistemic freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and decolonization*. Routledge.
- Njilo, N. (2019). Chaos as Wits students protest over accommodation, debts. *Times Live*. Retrieved from <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2019-02-04-chaos-as-wits-students-protest-over-accommodation-debts/>
- Peel, K. (2020). A Beginner's Guide to Applied Educational Research using Thematic Analysis. *Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation*, 25(25), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.7275/r9r5-k983>
- Pithouse-Morgan, K., Naicker, I., Pillay, D., Masinga, L., & Hlao, T. (2016). 'Sink or swim?': Learning from stories of becoming academics within a transforming university terrain. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 30(1), 224–244. <https://doi.org/10.20853/30-1-561>
- Price, E., Coffey, B., & Nethery, A. (2015). An early career academic network: What worked and what didn't. *Journal of further and higher education*, 39(5), 680–698. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2014.971106>
- Putnam, R. (2000). Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 1(1), 65–78.
- Puwar, N. (2004). *Space invaders: Race, gender and bodies out of place*. Berg.
- Quijano, A. (2007). Coloniality and modernity/rationality. *Cultural studies*, 21(2–3), 168–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353>
- Remmik, M., Karm, M., Haamer, A., & Lepp, L. (2011). Early-career academics' learning in academic communities. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 16(3), 187–199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2011.596702>
- Smith, K. (2002). *What is the 'Knowledge Economy'? Knowledge intensity and distributed knowledge bases*. United Nations University.
- Spivak, G.C. (2012). *Outside in the teaching machine*. Routledge.
- Subbaye, R., & Vithal, R. (2017). Teaching criteria that matter in university academic promotions. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42(1), 37–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2015.1082533>
- Sutherland, K., & Taylor, L. (2011). The development of identity, agency and community in the early stages of the academic career. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 16(3), 183–186.
- Timperley, C., Sutherland, K.A., Wilson, M., and Hall, M. (2020). He moana pukepuke: navigating gender and ethnic inequality in early career academics' conference attendance. *Gender and Education* 32(1), 11-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2019.1633464>
- Vadra, R. (2017). Knowledge economy in BRICS: A case of South Africa. *Journal of the Knowledge Economy*, 8(4), 1229–1240. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13132-017-0512-y>
- VitalStats. (2021). *VitalStats Public Higher Education 2019*. Council on Higher Education.
- Vurayai, S., & Ndofirepi, A.P. (2020). 'Publish or perish': Implications for novice African University scholars in the neoliberal era. *African Identities*, 20(2), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2020.1813084>
- Winkler, J.A. (2000). Faculty reappointment, tenure, and promotion: Barriers for women. *The Professional Geographer*, 52(4), 737–750. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0033-0124.00262>
- Wyllie, A., Levett-Jones, T., DiGiacomo, M., & Davidson, P.M., (2020). An evaluation of early career academic nurses' perceptions of a support program designed to build career-resilience. *Nurse Education in Practice*, 48(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2020.102883>