

BEYOND THE GRANT

SPOTLIGHT ON NIHSS-FUNDED RESEARCH
BY PROFESSOR MLAMULI HLATSHWAYO



REIMAGINING ACADEMIC FUTURES THROUGH THE LENS OF PRECARITY

In South Africa's evolving higher education landscape, where talk of transformation is widespread, but implementation remains uneven, one critical body of research is shining a light on the invisible challenges faced by many scholars navigating the system.

At the centre of this timely and necessary work is Professor Mlamuli Hlatshwayo, based at Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies, University of Johannesburg; whose research interrogates the often-overlooked experiences of older early career academics, individuals who enter or return to academia in their 40s and 50s. Supported by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS), this work addresses urgent questions of equity, institutional recognition, and the structural exclusion baked into the university system.

Professor Hlatshwayo's work comprises two interrelated NIHSS-funded research projects:

1. "Too Late Yet Still Quite Early?": Investigating the Experiences of Older Early Career Academics in South African Higher Education.
2. "Precarity and Casualisation in South African Higher Education: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives"

Both projects examine the realities of a particular academic demographic: scholars who begin or resume academic careers later in life, often after non-linear life journeys including previous professions, family responsibilities, or financial barriers. While they bring valuable experience and maturity, they often face insecure contracts, limited access to mentorship, and a lack of institutional visibility or support.



Exposing the Gaps: South Africa's Academic "Pipeline"

In 2015, South Africa's Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) introduced the Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework (SSAUF). The policy was intended to increase the number and diversity of academic staff by providing structured pathways, from postgraduate study to postdoctoral fellowships, to permanent academic appointments.

This framework imagines academic growth as a linear pipeline, but Professor Hlatshwayo's research reveals that this "pipeline" is far from seamless. Many early career academics, particularly older ones, remain stuck in long cycles of short-term postdoctoral contracts, sometimes for as long as seven to ten years, with little opportunity for advancement or job security.

He describes these individuals as the **"ice boys and girls of the academy"**, a metaphor that speaks to the extractive and often exploitative nature of academic labour in which young or precarious scholars are kept at the margins while contributing significantly to teaching and research output.

// This metaphor highlights how the academy often benefits from the intellectual labour of postdocs, while failing to offer them the dignity of permanent roles or professional development. //

Understanding Precarity: A Structural and Ideological Crisis

Precarity, in this context, refers to a condition of chronic job insecurity, lack of benefits or protections, and the mental and emotional stress associated with living from one short-term contract to the next. It is a growing issue in academia worldwide, but Prof Hlatshwayo's work shows how it intersects with race, gender, age, and class in deeply structural ways in South Africa.

Older early career academics are frequently overlooked by hiring and development programmes that prioritise younger candidates seen as having "more years ahead."

This approach reinforces ageism, youth bias, and the myth of the "ideal academic" as someone who completes all qualifications and enters permanent employment by their early 30s.

"A truly decolonised and Africanised university," Prof Hlatshwayo argues, "must rethink how it hires, supports, and retains its knowledge workers, especially those who come from historically marginalised backgrounds and non-traditional career paths."



South Africa as a Global Thought Leader

While rooted in the South African context, this research has global implications. Across the world, early career researchers face precarious conditions, especially in postdoctoral roles. However, South Africa, with its comparatively well-resourced research funding ecosystem, has an opportunity to model context-sensitive solutions, developed from the ground up and grounded in lived experience.

Prof Hlatshwayo's engagements with institutions such as the University of Oxford and the University of the Western Cape, among others, affirm that academic insecurity is a shared global concern. His work suggests that South Africa can position itself as a global thought leader by proposing bold, equity-driven reforms.



“Without deliberate redress, we risk reinforcing the very inequalities we claim to transform.”

Capacity Building in Action

The project has also actively mentored emerging scholars across academic levels, showing what transformative academic leadership looks like in practice. The research team includes:

- Dr J. Munyaradzi (Postdoctoral Research Fellow)
- Mr. NVG Majozi (PhD Candidate)
- Ms. K. Mtshobile (Master’s Student)

These individuals have engaged in academic publishing, conference participation, co-supervision, and funding applications, building essential skills for future academic careers. This approach reflects the NIHSS’s commitment to not just funding research but also nurturing the next generation of scholars through intentional support.

Reforming the SSAUF: From Policy to Practice

At the heart of this research is a call to reform SSAUF and related frameworks to better reflect the realities of a changing academic workforce. Current policy documents do not adequately address career breaks, later-life re-entry, or re-skilling, effectively sidelining older scholars from meaningful participation in the academy.



His forthcoming book, “Precarity and Casualisation in South African Higher Education: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives”, promises to be a landmark publication that not only diagnoses systemic failures but proposes concrete, implementable solutions.

Why This Work Matters

Professor Hlatshwayo’s research powerfully illustrates that transformation is not just about representation, it is about changing systems, centering lived experience, and reclaiming dignity in academic labour.

Supported by the NIHSS, this project demonstrates how the Humanities and Social Sciences can be a vehicle for critical inquiry, institutional accountability, and social justice.

“It reminds us that real change begins with listening, with asking difficult questions, and with supporting those whose voices are too often left out of the narrative”, he concludes.



Read More & Engage

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