



International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research
Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 79-93, January 2026
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.25.1.4>
Received Sept 15, 2025; Revised Nov 10, 2025; Accepted Dec 9, 2025

The Journey of Becoming: An Integrative Qualitative Analysis of Postdoctoral Fellows' Lived Experiences in South African Universities

Theresia Joakim Kanyopa*  and Matseliso Mokhele-Makgalwa 
University of the Free State
Bloemfontein, South Africa

Abstract. This conceptual study explored the multifaceted experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities, focusing on the personal, professional, and institutional dimensions that shape their academic paths. Despite the growing importance of postdoctoral training in strengthening the higher education research landscape, the body of knowledge indicates that many postdoctoral fellows encounter challenges that hinder their professional development. This study sought to explore the lived experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities and to understand how they make meaning of their roles, identities, and aspirations within the dynamic and often transitional space of academia. The review was conducted using a comprehensive selection of scientific databases, including Scopus, Google Scholar, ERIC, and JSTOR. Integrative qualitative analysis was adopted as the research design to review 10 studies published between 2014 and 2024 on diverse issues regarding postdoctoral fellows lived experiences and fellowship programs in South African universities. Drawing on invitational education theory as the guiding theoretical framework, the study conceptualized postdoctoral development as a process of a transformative journey that is influenced by supportive, relational, and contextually grounded academic environments. Through a conceptualization of existing literature, this paper reports on how institutional practices, mentorship, and scholarly engagement either support or constrain the growth of postdoctoral researchers. The findings highlight the need for more intentional inviting structures that nurture academic identity, career progression, and inclusive scholarly communities. The study contributes to the discourse on academic development by positioning the postdoctoral journey as complex, deeply personal, and shaped by a constellation of institutional, relational, and systemic factors.

Keywords: academic identity; career progression; inclusive scholarly communities; journey of becoming; lived experiences; mentorship; postdoctoral fellows

*Corresponding author: Theresia Joakim Kanyopa; KanyopaTJ@ufs.ac.za

1. Introduction

The postdoctoral fellowship plays a pivotal role in the academic pipeline, serving as a transitional phase between the completion of doctoral studies and the pursuit of permanent academic or research positions. Literature shows that this phase is often marked by both opportunities and challenges that hinder postdoctoral fellows' professional development and academic identities (Lembani et al., 2016; Moyo & Perumal, 2019). In the South African context, postdoctoral fellows' roles hold particular significance amid national efforts to build a more inclusive, equitable, and research-driven higher education system (Lehlogonolo et al., 2024). Despite their importance, the lived experiences of postdoctoral fellows remain largely underexplored and poorly understood. These positions are often marked by precarious employment, ambiguous career trajectories, and limited institutional support (Hlatshwayo, 2024a; Mkhize, 2023). This study, therefore, presents the notion of *journey of becoming* to capture the complex and evolving process of the postdoctoral academic journey.

The body of literature affirms that despite the growing reliance on postdoctoral fellows for research productivity and academic labor, South African universities often lack coherent structures to support their professional development and meaningful integration into academic life (Hlatshwayo, 2024b; Newlin et al., 2019). According to research, many postdoctoral fellows face challenges such as precarious funding, limited mentorship, ambiguous career pathways, and exclusion from institutional decision-making (Kahn & Oghenetega, 2021; Quach et al., 2023). According to Holley et al. (2018) and Phaswana-Mafuya (2023), these conditions negatively impact their sense of belonging and well-being and pose broader implications for academic transformation and the retention of emerging scholars. Mahome and Mphahlele (2025) also showed that, although postdoctoral fellows occupy a strategically important position in the academic system, they often operate in marginalized and under-supported environments.

This study explores the personal, professional, and institutional dimensions of the postdoctoral experience to shed light on the complex and often invisible journey of becoming an academic within South African universities. The study was prompted by the scarce findings in empirical and conceptual studies in South Africa that critically examine the lived experiences of postdoctoral fellows, particularly from a developmental and personal perspective. This gap limits the ability of higher education institutions to design responsive policies and practices that foster postdoctoral fellows' academic identity formation and long-term professional growth. There is, therefore, a pressing need to explore and theorize the lived realities of postdoctoral fellows to inform more inclusive and supportive institutional systems.

While postdoctoral fellowships are increasingly recognized as a vital bridge to academic careers, fellows often occupy a liminal space as neither quite students nor fully integrated academic staff (Errabo, 2025; Sun et al., 2023). This ambiguous position contributes to their lack of visibility in institutional policies and practices. Framed within an interpretive paradigm and informed by facilitative learning theory, this research provides a conceptual and comprehensive qualitative

analysis of the lived experiences of postdoctoral fellows across South African universities. It aims to highlight the developmental, relational, and institutional aspects of the postdoctoral journey, emphasizing its importance as a key stage in the formation of academic identity and professional growth. We believe that the outcomes of this study have the potential to enhance the quality of postdoctoral fellows' research outputs. In essence, findings from this study may help to promote an environment where emerging scholars are supported emotionally and physically.

2. Literature Review

Postdoctoral research fellowships are widely recognized as pivotal phases in the professional development of early-career academics. Globally, the structure and purpose of these roles are shaped by national academic and labor-market dynamics, resulting in varying expectations, responsibilities, and support mechanisms (Errabo, 2025; Prozesky & van Schalkwyk, 2024). International studies consistently highlight the structural precarity of postdoctoral positions, including limited job security, undefined roles, and restricted career progression, which collectively position fellows in a marginal and often invisible space within the academy (Ndebele & Legg-Jack, 2022).

In the South African context, these structural challenges intersect with systemic factors such as historical inequities, transformation imperatives, and scarce permanent academic positions (Kerr, 2022a; Sun et al., 2023). Scholars have documented persistent obstacles, including inconsistent mentorship, exclusion from governance structures, and limited professional development opportunities (Jach, 2024; Kanyopa et al., 2024). These constraints are compounded by psychosocial stressors, such as isolation, identity uncertainty, and marginalization within institutional cultures (Mahome & Mphahlele, 2025; Mkhize, 2023). The literature indicates that such conditions not only affect immediate work performance but also shape long-term academic identity formation, influencing how postdoctoral fellows perceive their place in higher education and their professional identities (Walker, 2020).

In essence, this study corresponds to critical emancipation research (CER), which underscores how structural instability affects agency, autonomy, and professional confidence, highlighting the tension between institutional dependency, empowerment, and individual career aspirations (Kanyopa, 2022; Ndebele & Legg-Jack, 2022). This study also views social identity theory (SIT) as crucial in providing insights into how postdoctoral fellows will navigate their journey of becoming through effective recognition and a high sense of belonging within academic grounds. Meanwhile, discussions on South African education transformation interrogate the capacity of universities to create inclusive, equitable environments that support early-career researchers, suggesting that without a welcoming learning environment, redressing inequities in academia will potentially remain unsuccessful (Kerr, 2022b; Sun et al., 2023).

Furthermore, drawing from international literature, postdoctoral programs are viewed as research training, which is a short-term contract position mainly

focused on developing the research skills of recent doctoral graduates (Niang et al., 2021). In the South African context, postdoctoral programs are seen as research training that emphasizes both scholarly independence within the intersections of systemic inequities, race, and institutional culture, which uniquely shape fellows' experiences. For instance, limited access to funding, exclusion from mentorship networks, and hierarchical governance structures hinder both scholarly contribution and career development (Jach, 2024; Kanyopa et al., 2024). These insights highlight the need for institutional practices that intentionally cultivate inclusivity, mentorship, and professional recognition, aligning with the principles of invitational education theory, which underpins this study. This theoretical lens foregrounds the importance of creating supportive, empathetic, and affirming environments that nurture both academic competence and professional identity formation.

In synthesizing global and South African scholarship, the literature reveals both common and context-specific challenges. This implies that factors such as precarity and psychosocial strain are universal. In addition, the South African context amplifies inequities related to its historical background and previous education systemic factors. By integrating invitational education theoretical perspectives, this study recognizes the crucial roles of institutional responsiveness, collaborative learning structures, and professional development opportunities in transforming postdoctoral fellowships from precarious transitional phases into empowering, identity-shaping experiences.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an invitational education theory perspective, which emphasizes creating a safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environment. This theory is relevant to the aim of the study, which is to explore the multifaceted experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities, focusing on the personal, professional, and institutional dimensions that shape their academic paths. According to Haigh (2017) and Kanyopa (2018), invitational education theory intends to create a learning environment where everyone feels welcomed, comfortable, and free to share and discuss new ideas.

Additionally, Evans (2019) mentioned that invitational education theory emphasizes the need for a collaborative learning approach that promotes a mutual relationship between the mentor and mentee. Thus, this theoretical framework guided this study to conceptualize the lived experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities and report on the impacts of inclusive institutional practices and supportive processes on postdoctoral fellows' academic success, personal growth, and self-actualization.

4. Methodology

This conceptual study employed a qualitative research approach within the interpretive paradigm. A desktop research design was used to analyze existing literature that responded to the experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities. The analysis was guided by integrative qualitative analysis (IQA), which allows for the identification of recurring patterns and conceptual

insights relevant to postdoctoral fellows' professional development, identity formation, and institutional engagement. Holdsworth and McCabe (2018) affirmed that "IQA is an independent data analysis method that aims to identify, describe and explain the relevant concepts on a topic to derive conclusions about the issue under consideration" (p. 7). An IQA desktop design was employed in this study because it allows for a systematic and flexible exploration of complex educational phenomena through stakeholder perspectives, which aligns more effectively with the interpretive and exploratory nature of the study.

4.1 Data Collection Process

Through IQA, this study managed to collect and analyze data concurrently and interactively. Through the five phases outlined below, we interactively moved back and forth as we reviewed existing studies on the experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities.

4.1.1 Phase 1: Identify the research aim and objective

To start, IQA requires researchers to be concise, clear, and focused with their research aim and objectives (Kanyopa et al., 2024). Additionally, we ensured that the aim and objective were clear and focused on the multifaceted experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities. This study aimed to explore the multifaceted experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities, focusing on the personal, professional, and institutional dimensions that shape their academic paths. The research objective that guided this study in achieving that aim was to explore the lived experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities.

4.1.2 Phase 2: Search and identify data sources

Under this phase, we thoroughly identified and selected data sources by using electronic databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, ERIC, and JSTOR. The search specifically sought to identify qualitative studies published between 2014 and 2024 on the issue of the lived experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities. In essence, the search for sources was guided by the eight keywords "lived experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities". Consequently, we focused on sources not older than 10 years to ensure that the data presented are contemporary and relevant and that the findings and discussion reflect current trends and practices of the researched issue.

4.1.3 Phase 3: Read and re-read the data sources

Under this phase, an intensive literature review was conducted by reading and re-reading the existing literature on the experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities. We carefully read the backgrounds, contexts, and methodologies of the various sources in the scientific databases to identify and select relevant sources that will positively impact the current study's findings. Consequently, by reading and re-reading the existing body of literature, we managed to identify similarities and differences between the sources. This guided us in deeply exploring the researched issue and developing relevant common patterns from the selected sources.

4.1.4 Phase 4: Apply inclusion and exclusion criteria

The thorough review of existing literature was guided by inclusion and exclusion criteria, which were carefully considered. This helped us to stay on track while avoiding duplication of the studies reviewed. The abstracts, introductions, and backgrounds of the selected studies were read carefully to identify their relevance to the aim of the study. Kanyopa et al. (2024) revealed that the phase on the inclusion and exclusion criteria is crucial because it helps the researcher to include relevant literature and exclude irrelevant ones. Thus, in this study, the inclusion criteria included the time limitation of publications (2014–2024) of qualitative studies conducted in the South African context. Inclusion criteria also ensured that the focus of the selected sources was on the issue of the lived experience of postdoctoral fellows. This implies that this study excluded all sources where the methodology and context were not relevant to the study. Table 1 summarizes the 10 studies that were selected and reviewed in this IQA desktop study.

Table 1: Summary of the reviewed studies

Title	Author(s)	Key concepts
Challenges and opportunities for new faculty in South African higher education	Sehoole and Ojo (2015)	Research skills, career instability, future academics, postdoctoral research fellows, gender, South African higher education
South Africa as a PhD hub in Africa	Cloete et al. (2015)	Transforming higher education institutions, demographic challenges
Global perspectives on the postdoctoral scholar experience	Holley et al. (2018)	Postdoctoral fellowship contribution, transforming higher education landscape, research skills development, future academics, career instability
Towards enacting social justice in HE: A case of postdoctoral research fellows	Moyo and Perumal (2019)	Postdoctoral fellowship contribution, career advancement, professional development, research skills development
Origins and destinations known: A tracer study of international African doctoral graduates from South Africa's universities	Kahn and Oghenetega (2021)	Higher level skills development, employment opportunity, transforming higher education institutions, emerging researcher
Career development or career delay? Postdoctoral fellowships and the de-professionalizing of academic work in South African universities	Kerr (2022a)	Academic profession, postdoctoral fellowship, de-professionalization, professional development, power dynamics
A national professional development program fills mentoring gaps for postdoctoral researchers	Sun et al. (2023)	Professional readiness, research skills development, professional development, career transition
Factors affecting African postdoctoral researcher capacity development within 'learn-by-doing international research partnerships': Findings from the	Quach et al. (2023)	Transforming higher education institutions, postdoctoral fellowship contribution, career advancement, professional

'Partnership for Increasing the Impact of Vector Control (PIIVeC)'		development, research skills development
You're brought in as a workhorse, and there's no real security here! Postdocs, precarity, and the neoliberal university in South Africa	Hlatshwayo (2024a)	Postdocs, higher education neoliberal crisis, transformation in higher education landscape, academic progression
The profile of postdoctoral research fellows in South Africa: Trends over the past two decades	Prozesky and van Schalkwyk (2024)	Postdoctoral research fellows, resilience, hierarchical positions, higher education sector, demographic challenges

4.1.5 Phase 5: Critical appraisal

This phase guides the researcher thoroughly and interactively to evaluate the value, trustworthiness, and relevance of the selected studies. This phase helped us in deciding on the themes that present the results of the study. Moreover, findings of this IQA study are informed by prolonged engagement and triangulation of the sources reviewed to hence its' credibility. This implies that the findings of this study were carefully examined and judged by the relevance, reliability, and validity of all the reviewed sources.

5. Findings

This section presents the findings from the IQA conducted in this study on the lived experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities. The presentation and discussion of the findings are guided by a major theme with sub-themes that emerged from the integrative review analysis of the selected literature.

5.1 Theme: Multifaceted Experiences of Postdoctoral Fellows in South African Universities

Findings from this theme stipulate both negative and positive lived experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities.

5.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Negative lived experience of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities

In essence, the lived experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities have been grounded in both human factors, such as personal opinions and perceptions, as well as systematic operations. Sehoole and Ojo (2015) and Phaswana-Mafuya (2023) highlighted that postdoctoral fellows' daily lives involve dealing with not only personal issues but also systemic issues such as permits, labor laws, and immigration. The following sub-sections discuss some of the negative experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities.

a) Psychosocial challenges

This study found that many postdoctoral fellows in South African universities are experiencing feelings of alienation, being overwhelmed, and disenfranchisement. This is because, upon their arrival at their host South African university, postdoctoral fellows are confronted with numerous new experiences, such as imported values, norms, and research ethics as well as a new research context

(Prozesky & van Schalkwyk, 2024). Moreover, postdoctoral fellows are experiencing negative emotional responses that are influenced by individuals in multicultural contexts, which are mentioned to be the source of postdoctoral fellows' anxiety, loneliness, and depression (Quach et al., 2023). Additionally, many postdoctoral fellows experience a liminal identity, feeling neither like students nor staff. This in-betweenness affects their sense of belonging and integration into institutional life. Consequently, it has been reported that those who find spaces of inclusion and intellectual community report more meaningful academic engagement (Sehoole & Ojo, 2015; Niang et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the review revealed some external social factors, such as the difference between the culture of their origin and that of the host country, language proficiency, gender identities, and self-esteem, all factors that cause postdoctoral fellows to experience psychosocial challenges in South African universities. This finding is also supported by Kerr (2022a), who explained that psychosocial challenges such as adjustment to the new cultural environment while facing scholastic differences in language problems and racial tension always leave postdoctoral fellows defeated in South African universities. Psychosocial challenges were found to cause discord among postdoctoral fellows and local populations. As research by Jach (2024) and Niang et al. (2021) showed, psychosocial adaptation increases acculturative stress and psychological negative impacts on postdoctoral fellows.

b) Precarious employment

One of the most negative experiences for postdoctoral fellows in South African universities is the precarious nature of their employment. The lifestyle of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities is like navigating uncertainty and precarity. This implies that most postdoctoral fellows frequently face employment insecurity and limited opportunities for career advancement (Kerr, 2022b; Quach et al., 2023). This study also affirms that postdoctoral fellows are often contract-based with limited job security, leaving them uncertain about their future.

This study also found that there is a feeling of uncertainty among postdoctoral fellows about their future, with contracts renewed annually and little clarity about pathways to permanent positions. This is evidenced in Hlatshwayo (2024b), who mentioned that postdoctoral fellows occupy a unique position in university systems, unlike that of academic employees, even those on fixed-term contracts.

This challenge arises with the fact that postdoctoral fellows in South African universities are officially registered as postgraduate students and not employees in their host universities. Furthermore, this study affirms that postdoctoral fellows in South African universities find it difficult to transition into permanent academic positions due to limited job openings and unclear career pathways. This is particularly true in disciplines with high competition or where universities prioritize external recruitment. Thus, the lack of structured career development support to postdoctoral fellows in South African universities compounds this issue.

c) Financial insecurity

The IQA revealed that some South African universities offer stipends instead of formal salaries, a practice that has significant implications for postdoctoral fellows' professional and personal well-being. Since stipends are typically classified as non-salaried funding, postdoctoral fellows are excluded from key employee benefits such as medical aid, pension contributions, and unemployment insurance (Cloete et al., 2015; Hlatshwayo, 2024a). The findings also indicate that this exclusion not only creates financial insecurity and limited access to social protection but also reinforces the perception of postdoctoral fellows as temporary members of the academic community rather than integral contributors to research and teaching. Consequently, Ndebele and Legg-Jack (2022) alluded to the notion that many fellows experience challenges in long-term financial planning, healthcare access, and career stability, which can lead to high attrition rates and discourage talented researchers from pursuing extended academic careers within South African universities.

d) Mentorship and supervisory challenges

This study has identified some of the challenges associated with mentorship and supervision programs that are experienced by postdoctoral fellows in South African universities. The review has revealed issues such as academic hierarchies, higher expectations, and poor strategies in balancing research production and career development as main challenges that negatively impact postdoctoral fellows' overall well-being, career progress, and satisfaction. The findings also affirm inconsistency in the mentorship of postdoctoral fellows with their mentors/supervisors who are either unavailable or overly controlling. Delays in feedback regarding their progress and research approvals were also found as other challenges for their mentorship and supervision that hinder their productivity and morale in South African universities.

Other institutional inefficiencies, such as academic structures and power dynamics, were also found to negatively impact the postdoctoral fellows' experience. Postdoctoral fellows encounter resistance and a lack of effective academic support from their supervisors due to power dynamics and academic structures. Poor mentorship and institutional support structures were also found by Ndebele and Legg-Jack (2022) and Quach et al. (2023) as other negative experiences among postdoctoral fellows in South African universities. The absence of effective mentorship programs plays a pivotal role in destroying the postdoctoral lived experience as it contributes to high rates of dissatisfaction and failure among fellows. Research by Niang et al. (2021) reported that postdoctoral fellows with limited access to supportive supervisors and research environments tend to report low levels of satisfaction and development.

Nevertheless, the findings of this study suggest that existing prestige in mentorship programs often creates inequalities for postdoctoral fellows in accessing resources and job opportunities. More importantly, over-reliance on one mentor, who also has a lot of teaching and administrative responsibilities, was also mentioned as a critical factor that negatively shapes the lived experiences of postdoctoral fellows, often resulting in poor outcomes and limited career advancement. This study affirms that mentorship and supervisory challenges

limit postdoctoral exposure to diverse academic perspectives and expertise. Also, the issue of power dynamics between mentors and mentees in South African universities creates an environment in which postdoctoral fellows are experiencing a lack of support for their career progression.

In addition, this study found that poor communication between supervisors and postdoctoral fellows in South African universities is another challenge that often leads to misunderstanding, lack of clarity, and frustration for postdoctoral fellows. This not only hinders postdoctoral fellows' career progress but also influences poor mentorship training. This, in turn, exacerbates all other existing negative experiences, including the struggle to thrive, leading to unfulfilled potential and failed academic progression.

5.1.2 Sub-theme 2: Positive lived experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities

Despite the negative lived experiences discussed above, this study found that postdoctoral fellows find ways to navigate through all these challenges. The literature shows that postdoctoral fellows also experience positive and empowering experiences that contribute to their career and professional growth. Furthermore, this study affirms that at the end of their contracts, postdoctoral fellows always find their destinations, including permanent academic positions and senior researcher positions in higher education institutions. The findings also reveal that postdoctoral fellows in South African universities not only benefit from funding opportunities but also become well known in both international and national academic networks and research grounds. Therefore, the next subsections address the positive lived experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities.

a) Personal fulfilment and academic confidence

This study revealed that despite the institutional pressures, postdoctoral fellowship programs are fulfilling, as most fellows are achieving their personal goals and growth through these programs. In addition, postdoctoral fellows develop the ability to engage themselves in numerous projects, such as the publishing of articles and books, which promotes their personal satisfaction and professional identities. In essence, Prozesky and van Schalkwyk (2024) mentioned that postdoctoral fellowship programs build the confidence and independence of fellows for their future academic roles.

b) Funding opportunities and financial support

Most South African universities have made strides in increasing the income of their postdoctoral fellows. Although there is limited access to benefits such as medical care, it was mentioned by Lehlogonolo et al. (2024) that most postdoctoral fellows' projects are likely to be sponsored by either government agencies or the private sector. Research by Hlatshwayo (2024a) and Mkhize (2023) indicates that some South African universities offer well-structured postdoctoral programs with generous funding packages from the National Research Foundation (NRF) and the South African National Roads Agency Limited (SANRAL). The funding sponsorship includes research allowances, travel grants, and other opportunities for skills development (Jach, 2024; Kerr, 2022b). These benefits enable

postdoctoral fellows to focus on their research without the burden of additional employment.

c) Access to broad academic networks

The review revealed that postdoctoral fellowship programs are positioned to expand fellows' academic and professional networks. According to Sun et al. (2023), postdoctoral positions often provide fellows with access to senior academics and mentors who can guide them through the academic publishing process, peer-review systems, and grant applications. Participation in international and national conferences, as well as research collaboration, leads to a broader academic horizon. Meanwhile, Prozesky and van Schalkwyk (2024) stated that through diverse academic events such as conferences, workshops, and seminars, postdoctoral fellows are connecting with other postdoctoral fellows and researchers from different parts of the world. This study also affirmed that South African universities help their postdoctoral fellows to become visible by providing them with opportunities to present at conferences, which boosts the academic reputation of the institutions.

d) Career development and research skills enhancement

It was found that postdoctoral fellows in South African universities view their fellowship programs as steppingstones to full-time academic careers. The body of literature reports that after the fellowship programs, postdoctoral fellows develop the ability to apply for funding independently, since the South African universities equipped them with valuable skills in proposal writing and academic writing. Moreover, this study found that postdoctoral fellows' CVs and profiles become more competitive because of their publications, teaching experiences, and grant writing experiences, which enhance their employability. In addition, Mahome and Mphahlele (2025) stipulated that postdoctoral fellows in South African universities benefit from the institutional workshops, trainings, and programs in academic writing, publishing, and project management.

6. Discussion

This study shed light on the multifaceted lived experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities, revealing both the challenges and opportunities inherent in their academic trajectories. Interpreted through the lens of invitational education theory, which advocates for environments that promote respect, trust, optimism, and care, the discussion underscores the tension between the institutional structures that constrain postdoctoral fellows' experiences and the institutional practices that enable their growth. The analysis in this study revealed feelings of alienation, cultural dissonance, and emotional strain as the fellows adjusted to new academic and sociocultural environments. These findings are corroborated by Prozesky and van Schalkwyk (2024) and Quach et al. (2023), who found that the psychosocial well-being of postdoctoral fellows is often compromised by inadequate institutional support and unclear role expectations.

The current study extends these observations by showing how such challenges are exacerbated by limited invitational practices within host institutions, where inclusivity and affirmation are inconsistently applied. As Kerr (2022a) asserted,

cultural and linguistic barriers, intertwined with racial dynamics, magnify the psychosocial distress experienced by international postdoctoral fellows. Within the invitational framework, this reflects a failure to create intentionally welcoming academic spaces that nurture belonging and engagement. Additionally, employment precarity represents another major theme aligned with existing literature.

Consistent with Hlatshwayo (2024b), postdoctoral fellows have reported being treated as students rather than employees, thus excluding them from employment benefits such as medical aid and pension. The precarious nature of their contracts, often renewed annually without long-term security, echoes findings by Sun et al. (2023), who described postdoctoral work as a liminal phase marked by uncertainty and instability. This study, however, extends the discourse by situating employment precarity within the institutions that fail to affirm the professional identity of postdoctoral fellows, inadvertently perpetuating disinviting environments that undermine motivation, trust, and institutional loyalty.

Similarly, the study revealed that mentorship and supervisory relationships often reflect entrenched institutional hierarchies and power dynamics. The literature review performed in this study revealed limited access to resources, inconsistent feedback, and over-reliance on a single mentor. These findings are consistent with those of Ndebele and Legg-Jack (2022) and Niang et al. (2021). Moreover, this study found that the dominance of hierarchical mentoring relationships limits opportunities for reciprocal learning and empowerment. Hence, guided by invitational education theory perspectives, this study highlighted these insights to reinforce the call for more collaborative mentorship models that balance guidance with autonomy and support. The study maintains that effective mentorship should embody intentionality, care, and equality.

Despite these constraints, the review in this study also revealed the agency and resilience of postdoctoral fellows, aligning with Prozesky and van Schalkwyk (2024), who noted that many fellows ultimately find their experiences rewarding. The literature in this study revealed that fellows find personal fulfilment through opportunities to publish, engage in research collaboration, and strengthen their academic identities. Furthermore, access through agencies such as the NRF and SANRAL further enables them to focus on scholarly productivity, resonating with Hlatshwayo (2024a) and Jach (2024). Within the invitational education framework, these achievements exemplify how affirming institutional gestures, such as providing resources and professional development opportunities, can transform potentially disinviting contexts into spaces of empowerment.

Furthermore, this study supports Mahome and Mphahlele's (2025) assertion that postdoctoral programs serve as vital career development platforms. Postdoctoral fellows acquire essential academic competencies in grant writing, publishing, and project management that enhance employability and professional confidence. These findings suggest that when institutions adopt invitational education principles, they can cultivate environments that not only mitigate psychosocial

and structural challenges but also promote personal growth, inclusion, and scholarly excellence. In summary, the discussion demonstrates that postdoctoral fellows' experiences in South African universities are shaped by a complex interplay of institutional practices, mentorship dynamics, and individual agency. By integrating the current findings with prior research and grounding them within the invitational education framework, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how supportive academic cultures can transform postdoctoral fellowships from precarious transitions into empowering professional pathways.

7. Conclusion

Conclusively, this study highlighted the *journey of becoming* by conceptualizing the lived experiences of postdoctoral fellows in South African universities, postulating that their experiences are often marked by precarity and psychosocial strain. The findings affirm that the postdoctoral journey is complex, deeply personal, and shaped by a constellation of institutional, relational, and systemic factors. Viewed through the lens of invitational education theory, it becomes evident that creating supportive, empathetic, and intentionally inclusive academic environments is essential for fostering the holistic development of postdoctoral fellows. More importantly, this study states that postdoctoral fellows' experiences are not merely transitional but profoundly formative, shaping their long-term academic identities, careers, and sense of belonging within the higher education sector.

8. Recommendations

To provide an equal, safe, and inclusive postdoctoral fellowship program, this study recommends that:

1. It is crucial for South African universities to develop clear and inclusive policies that recognize postdoctoral fellows as integral members of the academic community, ensuring equitable access to benefits and professional development opportunities.
2. South African universities should adopt a collaborative mentorship model that involves multiple mentors and peer-support networks. Such an approach can reduce over-reliance on a single supervisor, enhance academic guidance, and promote a more invitational and empowering research culture.

9. Acknowledgement

The authors extend their sincere gratitude to the scholars whose work was synthesised in this study. Their valuable contributions, intellectual openness, and scholarly generosity greatly informed and enriched this conceptual review.

10. References

- Cloete, N., Sheppard, C., & Bailey, T. (2015). South Africa as a PhD hub in Africa. In N. Cloete, P. Maassen, & T. Bailey (Eds.), *Knowledge production and contradictory functions in African higher education* (pp. 75–108). African Minds.
- Errabo, D. D. (2025). Learning within the Japanese community: A lived experience of a postdoctoral fellow in science education. *Qualitative Research Journal* [ahead of print]. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-12-2024-0313>

- Evans, M. (2019). Transforming a rural elementary school through invitational education practices. *Journal of Invitational Theory and Practice*, 25, 25–36. <https://doi.org/10.26522/jitp.v25i.3468>
- Haigh, M. (2017). Invitational education: Theory, research and practice. In M. Haigh, D. Cotton, & T. Hall (Eds.), *Pedagogic research in geography higher education* (pp. 39–49). Routledge.
- Hlatshwayo, M. (2024a). Women postdocs in a neoliberal higher education in South Africa. *Southern African Review of Education*, 29(2). <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/388624855>
- Hlatshwayo, M. N. (2024b). You're brought in as a workhorse and there's no real security here! Postdocs, precarity and the neoliberal university in South Africa. *Psychology in Society*, 66(2), 26–44. <https://doi.org/10.17159/pins2024vol66iss2a6331>
- Holdsworth, K., & McCabe, M. (2018). The impact of dementia on relationships, intimacy, and sexuality in later life couples: An integrative qualitative analysis of existing literature. *Clinical Gerontologist*, 41(1), 3–19. <https://doi.org/1080/07317115.2017.1380102>
- Holley, K., Kuzhabekova, A., Osbaldiston, N., Cannizzo, F., Mauri, C., Simmonds, S., Teelken, C., & van der Weijden, I. (2018). Global perspectives on the postdoctoral scholar experience. In A. Jaeger, & A. J. Dinin (Eds.), *The postdoc landscape: The invisible scholars* (pp. 203–226). Academic Press.
- Jach, E. A. (2024). "I don't want to spend the rest of my life feeling alone": Postdoctoral scholars' experiences of (dis)connection. *Education Sciences*, 14(4), Article 382. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14040382>
- Kahn, M., & Oghenetega, J. (2021). Origins and destinations known: A tracer study of international African doctoral graduates from South Africa's universities. *Industry and Higher Education*, 35(5), 559–569. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950422221989645>
- Kanyopa, T. J. (2018). *Learners transitioning from township to ex-Model C schools: An invitational education perspective* (Master's dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Edgewood).
- Kanyopa, T. J. (2022). *Understanding and enhancing learner integration in a selected ex-Model C school* (Doctoral dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Edgewood).
- Kanyopa, T. J., Mokhele-Makgalwa, M., & Khanare, F. P. (2024). Conceptualizing academic mentoring in South African universities: Interactive qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science*, 13(10), 137–144. <https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v13i10.3691>
- Kerr, P. (2022a). Career development or career delay? Postdoctoral fellowships and the de-professionalizing of academic work in South African universities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 43(4), 550–565. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2022.2045902>
- Kerr, P. (2022b). Academic pipeline or academic treadmill? Postdoctoral fellowships and the circular logic of "development". *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 36(3), 72–90. <https://doi.org/10.20853/36-3-5080>
- Lehlogonolo, P. A., Lubinga, S. N., & Masiya, T. (2024). Navigating Management Challenges of Postgraduate Funding Perspectives of NRF-TWAS Doctoral Programme Managers in South Africa. *Administratio Publica*, 32(4), 86–107. <https://doi.org/10.61967/adminpub.2024.32.4.5>
- Lembani, M., Teddy, G., Molosiwa, D., & Hwabamungu, B. (2016). Post-doctoral research fellowship as a health policy and systems research capacity development intervention: a case of the CHESAI initiative. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 14(1), 1–13. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12961-016-0159-3>
- Niang, A., Khoury, E., Brunelle, N., & Goyette, M. (2021). Can you tell me more about your postdoctoral experience? A personal narrative review of the postdoctoral position

- in the social sciences. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 12(2), 247–261. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-07-2020-0050>
- Mahome, M. M., & Mphahlele, L. K. (2025). Advancing the career prospects of postdoctoral research fellows: An organisational justice perspective. *International Journal of Educational Development in Africa*, 10(Supplementary Issue), Article 17536. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2312-3540/17536>
- Mkhize, Z. (2023). Is it transformation or reform? The lived experiences of African women doctoral students in STEM disciplines in South African universities. *Higher Education*, 86(3), 637–659. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00918-5>
- Moyo, Z., & Perumal, J. (2019). Towards Enacting Social Justice in HE:: A Case of Postdoctoral Research Fellows. *International Journal of African Higher Education*, 6(1), 77-96. <https://doi.org/10.6017/ijahe.v6i1.10975>
- Ndebele, C., & Legg-Jack, D. W. (2022). The impact of mentoring in the development of pre-service teachers from a university in South Africa. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 21(3), 88–105. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.21.3.6>
- Newlin, M., Munienge, M., & Jabulani, S. (2019). Emerging researchers in emerging universities: Lived experiences (understanding challenges faced). *PONTE International Journal of Science and Research*, 75(7). <https://doi.org/10.21506/j.ponte.2019.02.18>
- Niang, A., Khoury, E., Brunelle, N., & Goyette, M. (2021). Can you tell me more about your postdoctoral experience? A personal narrative review of the postdoctoral position in the social sciences. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 12(2), 247–261. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-07-2020-0050>
- Nuis, W., Segers, M., & Beausaert, S. (2023). Conceptualizing mentoring in higher education: A systematic literature review. *Educational Research Review*, 41(2023), Article 100565. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2023.100565>
- Phaswana-Mafuya, R. N. (2023). *Research mentorship: A developmental and transformational tool in shaping and sustaining African women's career progression in academia*. UJ Press.
- Prozesky, H., & van Schalkwyk, F. (2024). The profile of postdoctoral research fellows in South Africa: Trends over the past two decades. *South African Journal of Science*, 120(1/2), Article 15898. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2024/15898>
- Quach, J. A., Valea, I., Bates, I., & Pulford, J. (2023). Factors affecting African postdoctoral researcher capacity development within 'learn-by-doing international research partnerships': Findings from the 'Partnership for Increasing the Impact of Vector Control (PIIVeC)'. *BMJ Global Health*, 8(9), e012626. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2023-012626>
- Schoole, C., & Ojo, E. O. (2015). Challenges and opportunities for new faculty in South African higher education. In M. Yudkevich, P. G. Altbach, & L. E. Rumbley (Eds.), *Young faculty in the twenty-first century: International perspectives* (pp. 253–283). Suny Press.
- Sun, T., Drane, D., McGee, R., Campa III, H., Goldberg, B. B., & Hokanson, S. C. (2023). A national professional development program fills mentoring gaps for postdoctoral researchers. *PLoS One*, 18(6), e0275767. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0275767>
- Walker, R. (2020). *Exploring mentorship: A qualitative phenomenological approach to understanding mentor leadership development experiences* (Doctoral dissertation, The Chicago School of Professional Psychology).