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ARTICLE

‘Whispered in corridors’: Intra-national politics and practices of knowledge production in South African Human Geography

Daniel Hammett^{1,2}  | Gijsbert Hoogendoorn²  | Mukovhe Masutha¹

¹University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

²University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, UK

Correspondence

Daniel Hammett, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK.

Email: d.hammett@sheffield.ac.uk

Abstract

Reflections on the state of Geography around the globe have noted multiple challenges and opportunities—including a call for the reconfiguring of the discipline as a critical space of care and praxis (Daya, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 47, 9, 2022). Such a call is indelibly connected to broader conversations on the politics of knowledge production and critical engagements with cultures of knowledge production. In order to realise the reconfiguring of the discipline, it is imperative to engage with the *multi-scalar politics and practices* of knowledge production, to look beyond global inequalities and critically examine the intra-national inequities and structural biases of knowledge production. Through a focus on South African Human Geography and detailed analysis of publication data and interviews with staff at universities across the country, we critically examine how the ‘haunting’ of apartheid legacies contributes to a double-peripheralisation of staff at historically disadvantaged institutions while critical conversations remain ‘whispered in corridors’. This more granular engagement with the politics and practices of knowledge production highlights the entwining of intra- and inter-national privilege which produces a mosaic of ‘cores’ and ‘peripheries’ in the uneven landscape of knowledge production that requires critical scholars to engage with on multiple scales in order to realise a more just and equitable knowledge economy.

KEYWORDS

health of the discipline, Human Geography, multiscalar politics, politics of knowledge production, South Africa

1 | INTRODUCTION

Reflections on the state of (human) Geography in various national contexts have noted multiple challenges and opportunities facing the discipline, including the influence of political contexts (Reyes Novaes & Araújo Lamego, 2022), tensions between critical and applied work (Qian & Zhang, 2022), disciplinary marginalisation within (inter)national

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higher education landscapes (Saguin et al., 2022) and continued Anglophone dominance (Hennayake, 2022). In the South African context, Daya's (2022) intervention calls for a reimagining and reconfiguring of the discipline as a critical space of care and praxis. In mobilising this call, Daya reflects on the situated aftermath at the University of Cape Town (UCT)—a historically advantaged institution (HAI¹)—of the Fallist movements² and efforts towards tangible transformation and material changes on the UCT campus. Welcoming these changes, Daya cautions that these are insufficient in reorienting academic praxis to develop theory from African contexts and realise deeper transformations to overcome the whiteness of South African Geography (Stanek, 2019).

Realising such systemic changes requires 'shifts in the everyday cultures and spaces of our academic practice as well as in our cultures of theory, activism and international engagement' (Daya, 2022, p. 4) informed by critical reflections on both the history and present of South African Human Geography. The evolution of the discipline in South Africa has already been subject to extensive reflection in the *South African Geographical Journal* (Ballard et al., 2016; Donaldson, 2020), *The Geography of South Africa* (Knight & Rogerson, 2019) and Visser et al.'s (2016) *The Origin and Growth of Geography as a Discipline at South African Universities*. Elsewhere, South African geographers have discussed challenges to decolonising geography curricula (Knight, 2018; Long et al., 2019), reflected on the policy relevance of geographical research (Oldfield & Patel, 2016), and evaluated the progress of transformation of Geography departments (Breetzke et al., 2020). Building on these contributions, we critically reflect on how intersections of apartheid and post-apartheid politics of knowledge production perpetuate intra-national inequalities and challenges for South African Human Geography. These lessons, we argue, resonate with the politics and practice of knowledge production globally wherein entrenched historical and contemporary hierarchies of privilege and power determine unequal landscapes of knowledge production at both global but (intra)national scales.

Highlighting the necessity to engage with the intra-national politics of knowledge production, we argue that the realisation of a praxis of care necessitates recognition of the distorted and unequal intra-national landscape of academic practice and opening up the difficult conversations that—as one of our participants described—are 'just whispered in corridors' (Thandi, 12 January 2023). Engaging with these inequalities and conversations, we argue the long shadow of apartheid informs the landscape of knowledge production in South African Human Geography. From this we articulate the need for multi-scalar engagements with the politics of knowledge production and importance of interrogating intra-national disparities in academic praxis alongside concerns with global inequalities and power imbalances in the knowledge economy encompassing inequalities in resourcing, reputation and hauntings by histories of privilege and prestige create a mosaic of 'cores' and 'peripheries' of knowledge production within many national academies. Substantiating discussions of the multi-scalar politics of knowledge production provides a platform for further critical interrogations of the intersections of power and prestige that underpin *and* perpetuate hegemonic agendas and approaches to knowledge and knowledge production in often exclusionary ways at global and national scales.

To mobilise our argument, we turn next to debates on the multi-scalar politics of knowledge production before considering the evolution of the South African higher education landscape as illustrative of this concern. Following a brief overview of the methods and data underpinning the paper, we develop a critical analysis of the uneven landscape and politics of knowledge production in South Africa as an ongoing legacy of apartheid policy. In developing this argument, we highlight the importance of what we term 'the insidious haunting of apartheid' within everyday encounters in the academy and the 'bind of the double-periphery' that entrenches and compounds a sense of isolation and marginalisation from both global and national circuits and practices of knowledge production. Drawing out these experiences as constituting a mosaic of intertwined 'cores' and 'peripheries', we highlight similar processes and concerns as permeating the landscapes of knowledge production in multiple national contexts. Finally, we turn to consider a more hopeful future and some specific changes that might support the move to a new and more sustainable praxis.

2 | MULTI-SCALAR POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Critiques of the politics—and political economy—of knowledge production, including Kwame Nkrumah's calls for African-centred perspectives and postcolonial knowledge production and Claude Ake's critiques of Western scholarship as a form of imperialism, have long focused on the privileging and dominance of Western knowledge and writing, and asymmetries in resources and privilege between researchers based in the Global North and Global South (Crawford et al., 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). Recent contributions to these debates have argued that the neoliberal turn has led to the marketisation, commercialisation and metricisation of universities, perpetuated extractive research practices, and privileged particular forms of knowledge production (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Nyamnjoh, 2020). These processes

are underpinned, Stanek (2019) argues, by four epistemicides³ which have resulted in what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) describes as being a ‘cognitive empire’ manifest in the continued Euro-American dominance of knowledge production and uneven division of labour and resources (Crawford et al., 2021). Integral to these debates are efforts to develop more ethical and responsible praxis and opportunities for diversity and transformation in knowledge production (Esson et al., 2017; Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010; Luckett & Blackie, 2022; Noxolo, 2017; Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020). Despite these endeavours, the ‘marginalising, sidelining, erasure and dismissal of “othered” people and epistemologies persist’ (Oswin, 2020, p. 9) at multiple scales. This turn to the *multi-scalar* politics of knowledge production builds on Jazeel’s (2017) call for geographers to critically interrogate cultures of academic knowledge production in order to decolonise knowledge.

The importance of these interrogations is recognised at several levels. As Jazeel and McFarlane (2010, p. 121) outline, the intersections of publications, citations, training, reviewing and resourcing create conditions that are differentially conducive to knowledge production at multiple scales. This call for attention to conditions of knowledge production at institutional and/or national levels requires us to consider how histories of privilege and power have concentrated resources at both global (Jazeel, 2017) and national scales, resulting in uneven (intra)national landscapes and geographies of knowledge production. Integral to concerns with the intra-national politics of knowledge production are themes that resonate with global debates—access to resources and research funding, the implications of the neo-liberalisation of knowledge production, concerns over theory production and data extraction, the privileging and marginalising of different voices, and the continued legacies of historical inequalities and injustices.

This understanding provides a stepping-off point from which to begin to critically explore how intra-national geographies of knowledge production in South African Human Geography are embedded in colonial and apartheid-era concentrations of wealth and power at HAIs, the ways in which these legacies (of resource, prestige, etc.) continue to frame the politics and inequalities of knowledge production (Luckett & Blackie, 2022; Patel, 2020), and how these resonate with other national contexts. Focusing on the various forms of inequalities *between* universities—in particular, between Human Geography clusters within South African universities—we offer a critical and more granular examination of inequalities and the colonial present (Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010) in knowledge production at the national scale. Thus, while common threads run through the history of the changing role of higher education across Africa from pre- to colonial and post-colonial times, it is vital to address the legacies of these experiences encountered in contextually specific ways. Nonetheless, the narrow focus and resourcing of colonial-era universities to promote and maintain colonial ideology and educate the ‘elite’ for colonial service set the foundations for the distorted post-colonial landscapes of higher education and knowledge production at a national scale (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2013). These conditions were then entrenched through post-independence interactions with the global higher education landscape (Poloma & Szelényi, 2019), the impacts of the economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s and resultant neoliberal policy turn and imposition of Structural Adjustment Policies that were manifest in the ‘privatization, cost-sharing, financial decentralization, rationalization, retrenchment of staff, and dilution of academic programs’ across African universities (Aina, 2010, p. 29). The subsequent turn to develop knowledge economies and demand for higher education to be more responsive to the needs of the market have driven increased research and publications while further deepening the differential resourcing and capacity of historically privileged universities and other higher education providers (Woldegiorgis, 2022; Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2013).

These inequalities and colonial presents are encountered not only in post-apartheid and post-colonial higher education landscapes but across the globe, evident in the persistence of intra-national inequalities in resources, prestige and power between ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ universities that underpin self-sustaining and distorted landscapes of knowledge production that continue to peripheralise—in multiple ways—scholars based out with groups of historically advantaged universities whether in South Africa, Uganda, Australia or the UK. In engaging the multi-scalar politics and practices of knowledge production we critically reflect on the implications for South African human geography of a distorted landscape of knowledge production—and the parallels of these experiences with other national contexts. South African Human Geography is dominated by a handful of departments—whose dominance becomes self-reinforcing through income generation (student fees, publication income, participation in [inter]national funding applications) and resultant networks and prestige. This, in turn, is encountered by many colleagues from historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) as an exclusionary clique of HAIs, resulting in a sense of double-peripheralisation (from both global and national circuits and practices of knowledge production). Just as a critical questioning of the global politics and practice of knowledge production ‘strip[s] bare any pretence to level playing fields’ (Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010, p. 110), so too does a questioning of the national politics and practice of knowledge production. This scalar shift highlights how the historic

(violent) concentration of resources occurred at both global and national scales, underpinning the perpetuation of disciplinary power and hegemony at multiple scales with deeply felt insidious effects.

3 | THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

Within the South African context the ongoing crisis of which Daya (2022) speaks reflects sector-wide challenges and ongoing existential uncertainty as to the purpose of post-apartheid higher education—a dilemma often understood as a choice between relevance (to local and national development priorities) and recognition (in the global knowledge economy through academic publishing and networking) (Jansen, 2017; Ssentongo, 2020; Swartz et al., 2019; Vurayai & Ndfirepi, 2020). These contemporary challenges mirror those of many other post-colonial states in the (re)purposing of colonially imposed university structures and processes (Mamdani, 2019; Mbembe, 2016; Woldegiorgis, 2022). The intersection of education and racial capitalism during apartheid bequeathed democratic South Africa a deeply iniquitous higher educational sector that was charged with supporting transformation and restorative justice as part of the democratic transition (Knight, 2018; Oldfield & Patel, 2016). However, the persistence of intersectional forms of inequity and discrimination have led Mpofo-Walsh (2021, p. 13) to argue that ‘apartheid did not end, it was privatised’.

Within the higher education sector, The Department of Education’s (1997) *White Paper on Education* signalled the intensification of marketisation and commodification, positioning students as investors and consumers and locating academic departments as sources of revenue generation, and despite rhetoric of diversity and equality, entrenching racial inequality (Pirtle, 2022; Sriprakash et al., 2020; Wiseman & Davidson, 2021). Austerity policies, failures to tackle perennial inequalities in access and outcomes, and increasing dependence on tuition fee and private sector-based revenue have further exacerbated these challenges (Garrod & Wildschut, 2021; Masutha & Naidoo, 2021; Swartz et al., 2019; van Schalkwyk, 2021). Growth in student numbers remains both a priority and a challenge, as the sector’s capacity for new entrants (240,000 places for January 2022) is massively outstripped by increasing numbers of students sitting their National Senior Certificate (school leaving) examinations (897,163 students in December 2021) (Monama, 2022; Zali, 2022).⁴ Meanwhile, inequalities in educational outcomes between elite schools and rural and township high schools perpetuate race- and class-based inequities in access to and completion rates from universities (Breetzke et al., 2020; Kelly-Laubscher et al., 2018), while the National Students’ Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) remains beset by high non-completion rates, crippling levels of student debt, and disproportionate numbers of NSFAS-funded low-income students enrolled at under-resourced HDIs (RSA NSFAS, 2018; Pillay, 2016—see also Table 1). This backdrop of historical inequalities and neo-liberal policy shift are integral to history and evolution of Human Geography in South Africa and contemporary research and teaching concerns (Donaldson, 2020; Hammett, 2012).

4 | THE LANDSCAPE OF SOUTH AFRICAN HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

Geography emerged as a discipline of study in South Africa in the early twentieth century, linked to the colonial project and influenced by conservative religious ideals, environmental determinism and notions of racial superiority (Ballard et al., 2016; Maharaj & Ramutsindela, 2021). It was only in the late 1970s that critical engagements with the impacts of apartheid policies on Black communities first emerged, alongside critiques of the relevance of ‘metropolitan’

TABLE 1 Indicative representation of NSFAS-funded working-class students across the three tiers of universities in 2018 (Source: RSA NSFAS, 2018).

Name of institution	Tier/category	Number of undergraduate students	% of NSFAS-funded undergraduate students
University of Witwatersrand	Historically White university	21,661	21
University of Cape Town	Historically White university	15,969	23
University of Zululand	Historically Black university	14,771	79
University of Venda	Historically Black university	11,970	64
University of Johannesburg	Merger university	42,415	23
Nelson Mandela University	Merger university	22,079	28

theories to the South African context (Beavon & Rogerson, 1981; Donaldson, 2020; Donaldson & Ferreira, 2020; Maharaj & Ramutsindela, 2021). However, the discipline remained mired in structural inequalities, dominated by white scholars, and expected to conform with national development agendas (Maharaj & Ramutsindela, 2021; Wellings & McCarthy, 1983).

The democratic transition saw South African Human Geography research turn ‘to more empirical and policy-oriented questions’ (Oldfield & Patel, 2016, p. 505) in support of national development and reconstruction. However, staff⁵ exodus to government and consultancy roles, limited theory development, and concentration of research-active staff at a few institutions have resulted in concerns that ‘[g]eography research overall in South Africa remains weak in terms of quantity, quality and impact’ (Knight, 2019, p. 34; also Hammett, 2012; Hoogendoorn, 2012; Maharaj & Ramutsindela, 2021), leading Knight (2019, p. 34). These concerns reflect the legacies of apartheid histories and the continued reproduction of inequalities in research productivity and reputational prestige, exacerbated by the slow pace of transformation and the concentration of PhD-holding staff and PhD candidates at HAIs (Bretzke et al., 2020; Daya, 2022; Knight & Rogerson, 2019; Ramutsindela, 2015). Building on Daya’s (2022) call for the need to challenge and dismantle institutional cultures of hierarchy and oppression, we refocus these same imperatives to the intra-national scale and critically explore the uneven national landscape and politics of knowledge production in Human Geography.

5 | METHODS NOTE

In discussing the condition of the (sub)discipline the question of ‘who counts’ is crucial. To inform our discussion we developed two datasets: the ‘core’ community of practice (i.e., human geographers based in South African Geography departments) and the ‘broader’ community of practice which extends to human geographers working in affiliated centres and non-Geography departments (e.g., business and management, tourism and hospitality) and internationally based human geographers with honorary associate posts at South African Geography departments. Using the Society of South African Geographers’ (SSAG) annual newsletters, departmental websites and newsletters, we identified 550 geographers who were employed or affiliated at a South African Geography department—and the years of their employment or affiliation—between 2010 and 2021. Removing physical geographers, GIS and technical appointments, and non-geographers identified a ‘broader’ community of practice of 185 scholars. The subsequent exclusion of those with honorary appointments or based in non-Geography departments resulted in a ‘core’ list of 150 academics and the years of their affiliations.

Using Scopus we identified relevant publication data for the period 2010–21.⁶ While Scopus provides the largest citation and abstract database of peer-reviewed academic literature, it does not capture non-indexed journals and other forms of research output which are a large part of knowledge production activities in South Africa. While recognising criticisms of the dominant political economy of publishing (see Ssentongo, 2020; Vurayai & Ndofirepi, 2020), Scopus-indexed outputs nonetheless provide useful—if partial—data. Publication data were downloaded and duplicate entries and atypical outputs (corrections, editor notes, etc.) removed, resulting in a broader database of 1906 publications and a core database of 857 publications. Open-source software, VOSViewer, was used to develop visual representations of author and citation analysis, including network representations (connections between authors and citational practices), density visualisations (depicting more and less prolific or influential authors and papers by citations or collaborations) and overlay visualisations (indicating changes over time).

We then contacted 20 Human Geography staff from a range of HAIs and HDIs to explore their perceptions of the landscape of knowledge production in South African Human Geography. Interviews were conducted remotely, typically lasting between 40 and 90 minutes, and explored questions relating to the politics and practices of knowledge production, perceptions of the everyday legacies of colonialism and apartheid on academic practice, and the drivers and outcomes of intra-national differences in knowledge production.⁷

6 | AN (INHERITED) UNEVEN LANDSCAPE AND POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

The landscape—and politics—of South African Human Geography knowledge production is highly unequal. While the dramatic increase in annual publication outputs between 2010 and 2021 (Table 2) suggests that knowledge production is going from strength to strength, entrenched intra-national inequalities in research productivity—including the

TABLE 2 Publication outputs per annum between 2010 and 2021 by South African human geographers.

Year	Papers published total	Published papers (wider CoP only—i.e., excluding Core CoP)	% of total papers	Published papers (core CoP only)	% total papers published
2010	88	56	63.6	32	36.4
2011	90	49	54.4	41	45.6
2012	135	75	55.6	60	44.4
2013	157	83	52.9	74	47.1
2014	171	92	53.8	79	46.2
2015	137	71	51.8	66	48.2
2016	177	96	54.2	81	45.8
2017	195	101	51.8	94	48.2
2018	189	99	52.4	90	47.6
2019	192	113	58.9	79	41.1
2020	175	91	52.0	84	48.0
2021*	192	115	59.9	77	40.1
Total	1898	1041	54.8	857	45.2

*Data were compiled in late 2021 so records for this year are incomplete, but remain indicative of trends.

self-sustaining prominence of a handful of HAIs as home to key spatially embedded clusters of knowledge production (Figure 1)—persist.

These HAI-based clusters are recognised as being based in ‘really, really good Human Geography departments [with] lots of interesting research’ (Rukia, 25 November 2022), that are home to larger numbers of academics and have more established national and international networks. Thus, the UCT-based clusters (Figure 1) reflect the historical privilege of the institution and consolidation of expertise on the intersection of human-environmental geographies, food security and urban geography. Other clusters indicate an initial spatially embedded community of knowledge production at the University of the Free State in the 2000s, which then dispersed as members moved to posts at other HAIs. Key sub-disciplinary clusters are evident (via citation networks—Figure 2) within the field of tourism geographies, environmental geographies, and development support and governance. These concentrations of knowledge production and collaboration are reflected in co-authorship patterns between HAI-based staff (Figures 3–5). These clusters evidence the self-sustaining nature of historical geographies of privilege in the higher education (HE) sector, reflecting the ability of HAIs to leverage financial and cultural capital to attract researchers, support a strong research culture and engage with global circuits of knowledge production and funding. While the specific policies that underpin these experiences in the South Africa context are explored below, such clustering of knowledge production and sustaining of geographies of privilege in knowledge production can be seen in multiple national contexts. Critical and systematic exploration of the drivers and outcomes of these processes are key in acknowledging and responding to both the multi-scalar politics of knowledge production and efforts to move towards a new, more equitable praxis at both national and global levels.

In the South African context, this increase in publication outputs is driven by national policies (the *Research Outputs Policy*—discussed later) and differentials in historic and contemporary resourcing between departments that strongly influence local, national and international inter-organisational collaboration, knowledge sharing and resource access (Ibert, 2007). As a result, ‘when it comes to knowledge production, there is still a vast difference between the white institutions [and the black institutions]’ (Sipho, 23 November 2022) as HAIs ‘seem to dominate’ (Ngcobo, 20 January 2023) while ‘previously disadvantaged universities are still not in the same queue’ (Sariyah, 21 November 2022). These differentials are vital and highlight how historic disparities continue to underpin contemporary inequalities between HAIs and HDIs in knowledge production as differentials in resources and prestige are sustained in an ongoing cyclical process of income generation via publications (as an output of knowledge production) and research grant income realised due to historical institutional reputation and access to global networks. Such processes are common across many national academies, highlighting the importance of critically engaging with both global and national drivers and outcomes of these self-sustaining inequalities. Underpinning these concerns are limitations of resources, time and connections, as well as linguistic barriers and the broader political economy of knowledge production and publishing. However, these limitations are not experienced equally across the South African Human Geography landscape. Inherited inequalities of knowledge

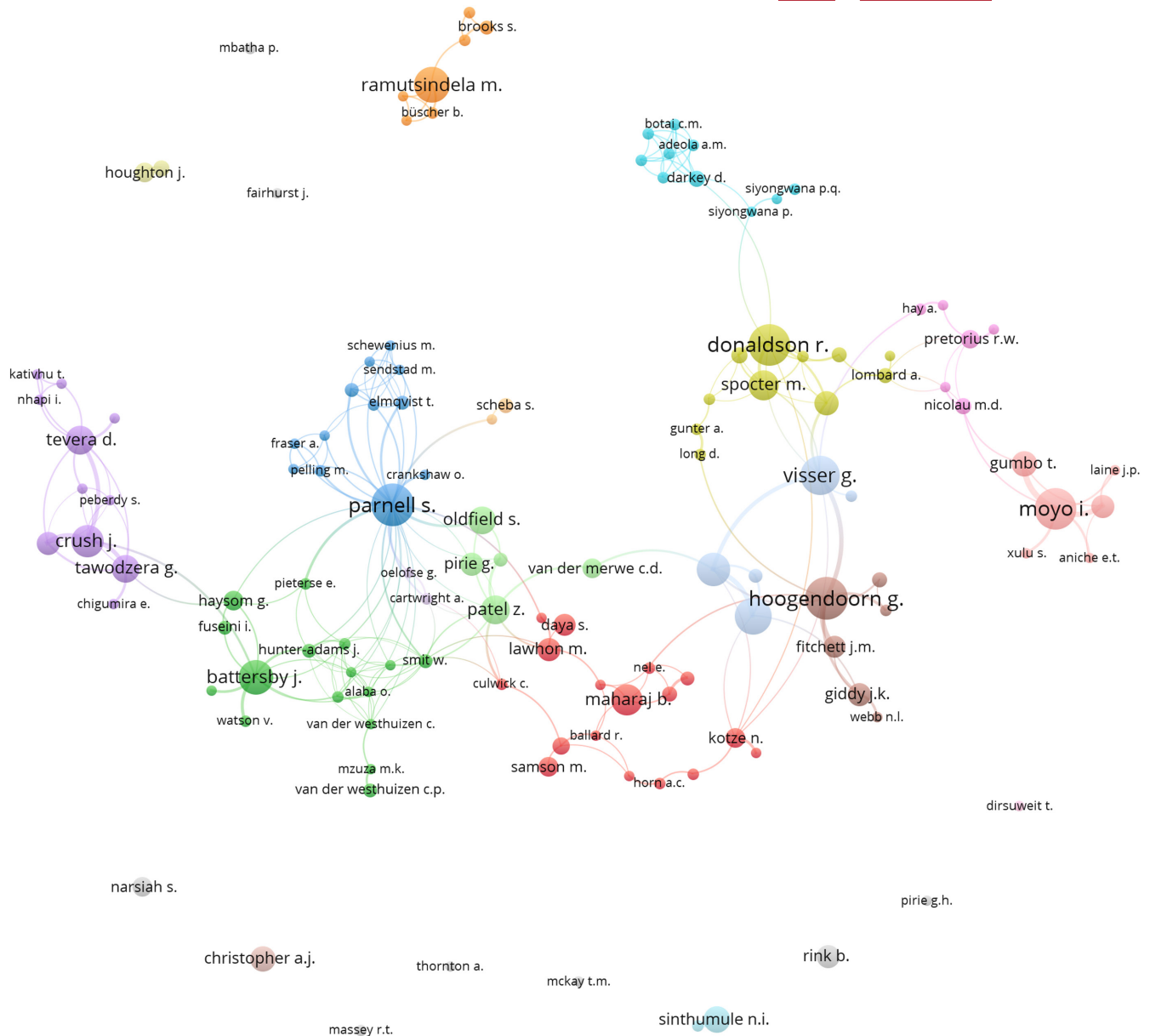


FIGURE 1 Co-authorship patterns amongst South African human geographers based in local Geography departments.

production intersect with these multi-scalar influences to produce the current knowledge production landscape. The reputation, history and resources of HAIs remain integral to their ability to leverage financial and reputational capital to attract international visitors and collaborators, engage with global circuits of the knowledge economy, participate in international funding applications, and support a critical mass of Human Geography academics and encourage greater publication outputs in ways that under-resourced and small departments struggle to match (see Swartz et al., 2019). As we explore below, these structural factors become self-reinforcing, entrenching and perpetuating intra-national divisions.

These processes are evident in the publication data. The number of publications per annum from 'core' South African human geographers more than doubled between 2010 (32) and 2020 (84) (Table 2), an increase matched by the outputs from the broader Human Geography community of practice (88 in 2010 to 175 in 2020). As a result, the proportion of papers from 'core' human geographers has remained relatively stable—typically 45–48%. However, the prominence and dominance of a few knowledge production clusters (Figure 1) indicates stark inequities in levels of academic publication outputs between departments. Crucially, two further key trends are apparent. First, the disproportionate prominence of a small number of human geographers who are no longer based in South African Geography departments. Second, the strategic mobilisation of international networks by a small number of HAIs to appoint overseas academics

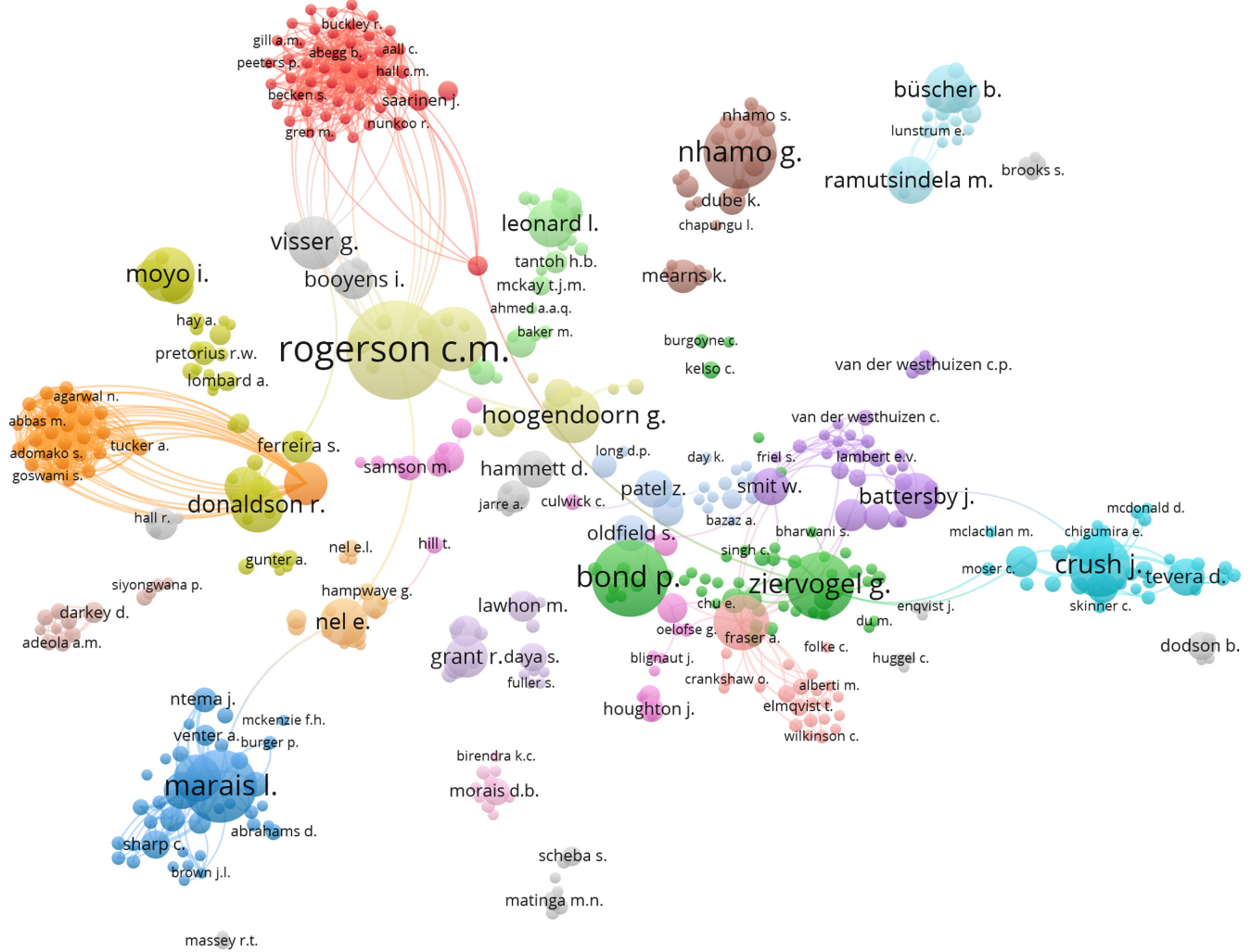


FIGURE 2 Citation patterns amongst the wider community of practice, mapped by author and limited to those who have published a minimum of two documents and have at least one citation (excluding standalones).

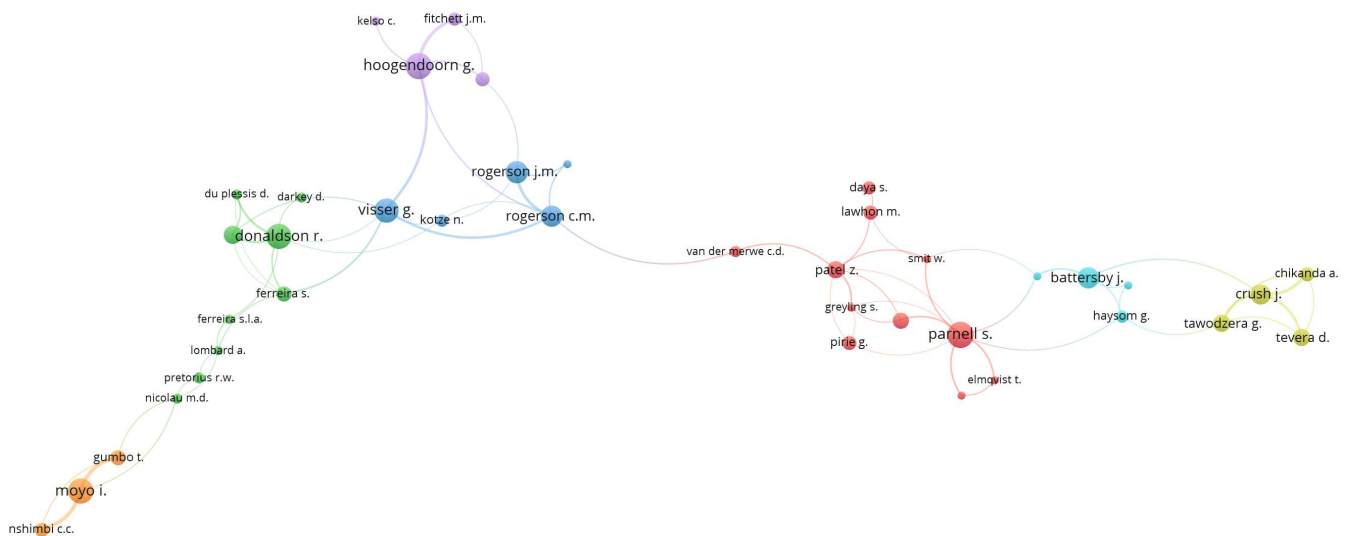


FIGURE 3 Sustained co-authorship patterns (minimum five papers) amongst South African human geographers based in local Geography departments.

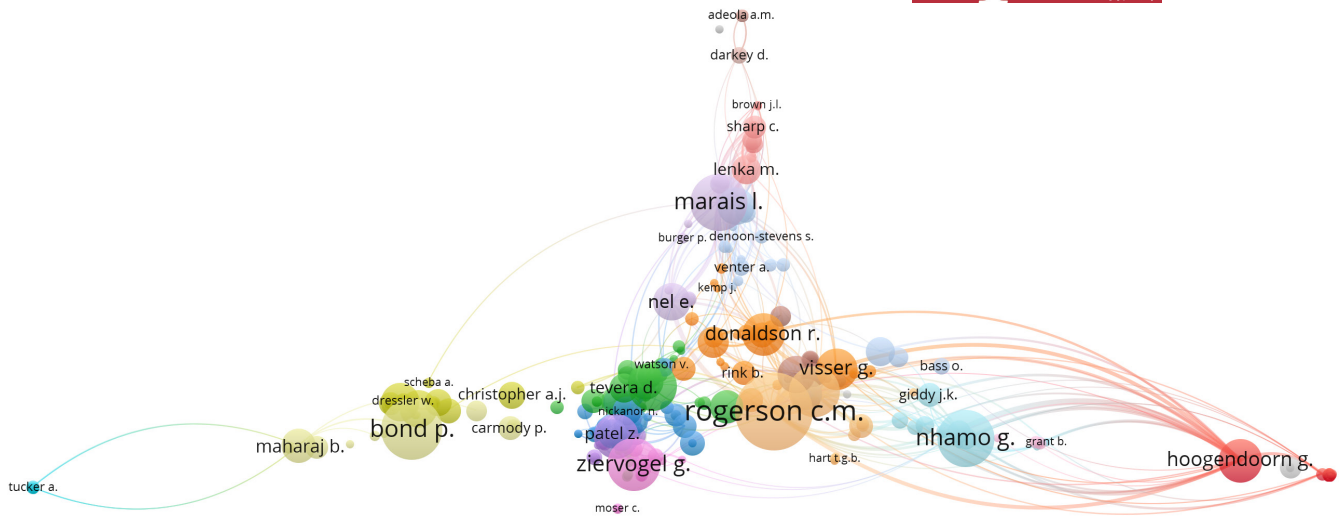


FIGURE 4 Co-authorship patterns amongst the broader community of practice mapped by author and limited to those who have published a minimum of two documents and have at least one citation (excluding standalones).

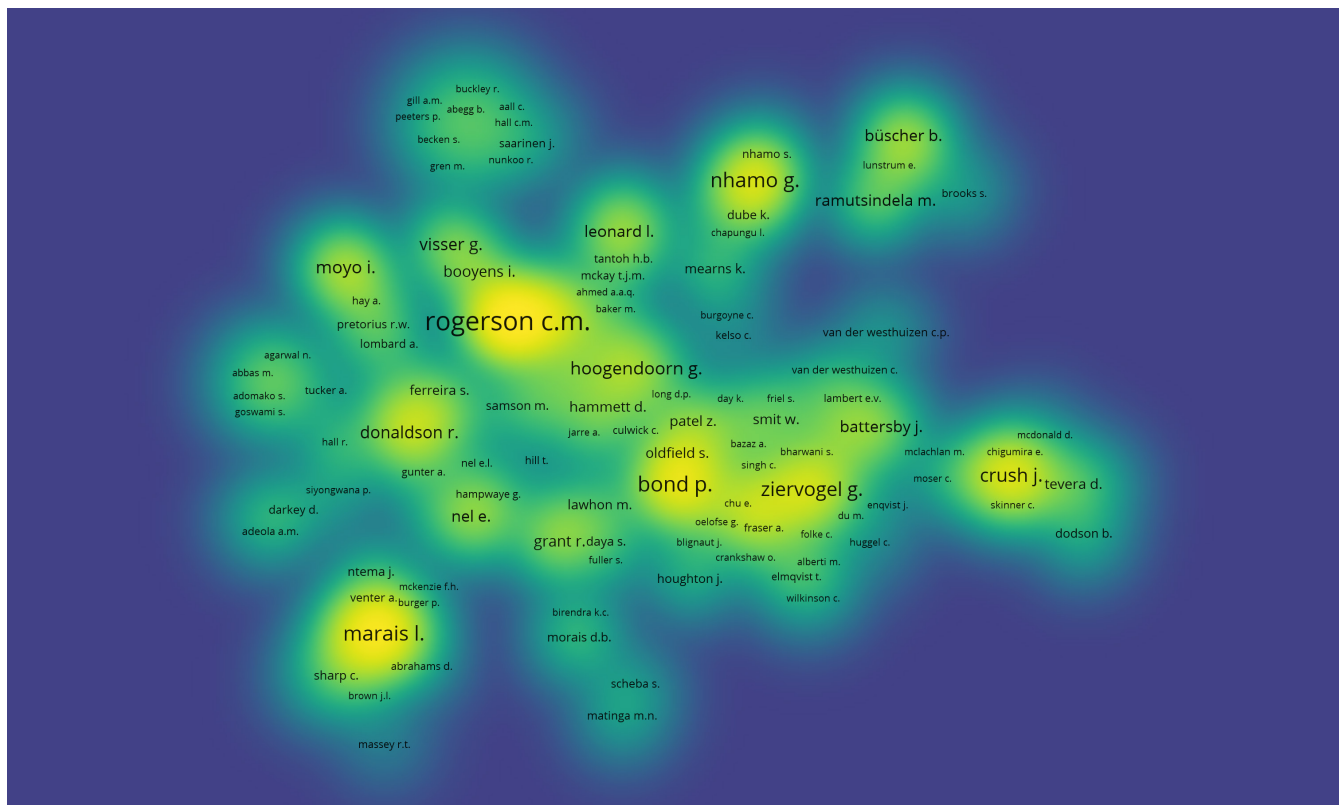


FIGURE 5 Density of co-authorship patterns amongst the broader community of practice mapped by author and limited to those who have published a minimum of two documents and have at least one citation (excluding standalones).

to honorary positions, consolidating reputational capital while boosting publication outputs—and therefore subsidy/incentive income (see later). These positions are disproportionately concentrated at HAIs—particularly at the University of Johannesburg, but also University of the Free State, Rhodes University, University of Witwatersrand, and University of Cape Town. The 15 honorary appointees identified contributed 68 sole authored and 199 co-authored publication outputs (of which 45 were with ‘core’ South African Human Geographer community of practice (CoP) members).

Their sole-authored works accounting for 4.1% of all outputs in the database, and co-authored works 10.9% (once co-authored works with ‘core’ South African human geographers were excluded, honorary appointees accounted for 12.6% of total publication outputs). Two concerns are paramount—first, the overall distortion to publication numbers by a handful of honorary appointments; second, the disproportionate concentration of these posts at University of Johannesburg and other HAIs, and the resultant enhanced flow of Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) subsidy payments to HAIs. Thus, historical privilege begets contemporary advantage, perpetuating intra-national inequalities in research productivity (Muthama & McKenna, 2020) and entrenching differences in inter/national profiles and research outputs. As Sariyah (21 November 2022) explained, ‘a lot of the institutions with higher outputs are the institutions that have a lot more international networking opportunity that are from the privileged past’. These processes, based on privileged legacies, perpetuate the stratification of Geography departments through the leveraging of prestige, status, resources and access to global networks, while HDIs remain restricted to a subordinate and peripheral status (Masutha & Naidoo, 2021; Swartz et al., 2019).

7 | SELF-PERPETUATING RESOURCE INEQUALITIES

These self-sustaining inequalities—rooted in the legacies of apartheid—are universal across the South African higher education sector, not only (human) Geography. The experience of these processes, as Thandi (12 January 2023) outlines, is a self-perpetuating cycle of opportunity and prestige for HAIs, while leaving ‘historically black institutions always on the backfoot ... the playing ground is not levelled’. The impacts of these experiences are felt particularly acutely by those who may be the only—or one of only a couple of—Human Geography staff member(s) in a department, resulting in increased teaching loads and reduced time for research. In turn, this results in systemic inequalities that are reflected in—and perpetuated through—differentials in publication outputs and resultant income generation.

The increase in publication outputs from South African human geographers sits against a growing ‘publish or perish’ culture across the sector (Sariyah, 21 November 2022) linked to annual performance appraisals (Donaldson & Ferreira, 2020), pressures to increase the global profile of South African universities, and South Africa’s transition towards a knowledge economy (see Ramutsindela, 2015; Ssentongo, 2020). To support these aims, investments were made by the Department for Higher Education and Training to support the South African Research Chair Initiative, the National Research Foundation’s (NRF) researcher rating scheme (whereby individual academics opt in to be rated based on international peer review of their research outputs and impact, with a research fund then provided based upon this rating), and to expand the *Research Outputs Policy* (DHET, 2021). These initiatives provide the primary research funding sources for most South African academics; however, the dramatic (90%) reduction in ratings payments means the *Research Outputs Policy*’s publication subsidy system is de facto the primary source of research funding for many South African scholars (although it should be noted that not all universities pass these funds onto academics, and where funds are provided to staff there is tremendous variation in the amounts offered).

The *Research Outputs Policy* was designed to ‘encourage research productivity by rewarding quality research outputs’ (DHET, 2021, p. 3) through subsidy payments to HEIs for each accredited research output unit (i.e., published journal article in an approved journal, book, peer-reviewed book chapter). While similar subsidy systems existed previously (in 1986, per unit subsidy payments to HEIs averaged R7190), the strategic increase in value of payments in the early 2000s (from R24,145 in 2003/4 to R71189 in 2004/5—in 2019/20 it was R121,871) signalled the prioritising of a particular form of academic knowledge production and led to a dramatic increase in publication units across the sector between 2005 (7230 units) and 2019 (21,019 units) (DHET, 2019, 2021; ASSA (Academy of Science of South Africa), 2019; on subsidy schemes elsewhere, see Jørgensen & Hanssen, 2018). However, critics argue that the scheme has led to a prioritising of quantity over quality of outputs (Breetzke & Hedding, 2020; Muthama & McKenna, 2020), rent-seeking behaviour by universities and academics⁸ (Muller, 2017; Tomaselli, 2018), and the use of honorary and visiting posts to boost publication numbers while incurring minimal costs (Muller, 2017). These pressures are certainly felt by many human geographers who experienced pressures to ‘publish, publish, publish’ (Thandi, 12 January 2023) to meet specified numbers of DHET-approved publication units each year as a means of revenue generation for institutions. While not unique to human geographers, these pressures were keenly felt with particular relation to the costs of fieldwork and challenges in securing alternative funding for field research. As a result, these pressures take on a particular imperative—especially for those in departments with a non-Human Geography head of department who were seen as often lacking an understanding of the centrality (and costs) of particular types of and methods used in Human Geography fieldwork (Sariyah, 21 November 2022).

Two key implications remain. First, that HAIs (with larger staff numbers and honorary appointments) dominate revenue generation via subsidy payments—thus providing the potential to reinvest these funds to support further knowledge production. The retention of all or some of the subsidy payments by HEIs—rather than the full amount being provided as research funds or honorariums to the individual academic—provides a key source of revenue to cover staff salaries, student bursaries, research support and other costs. For HDIs, the revenue generated in this way is often minimal but vital to the core functioning of the institution. For HAIs, subsidy income can be a much more significant revenue stream which may then be more readily deployed to further support continued research and publication activities. For instance, in 2022 the University of Johannesburg submitted 4555 publications worth 2817 units for DHET subsidy (of which 2753.4 units were approved), which would have provided in the region of R350 million to the institution (the university's 2020/21 income was R4.194 billion (UJ, 2021)). This compares to the University of Venda's 116.2 units and roughly R14 million revenue from publication subsidies (the university's overall revenue in 2020/21 was R1.7 billion).

Second, that increasing pressures to 'publish, publish, publish' aligned with limited alternative research funding streams risks academics prioritising subsidy generation via a 'salami-slicing' of findings and privileging of quantity over quality of publications. This 'business of knowledge production' (Adele, 25 November 2022) permeates the entire sector, and can be linked to particular performative and strategic forms of Human Geography knowledge production and paucity of theory development, as Adele (25 November 2022) outlined, 'South African human geographers are ... they're just comfortable with how they do Geography here ... [It] is philosophy and theory dead ... it's a painful truth'. Echoing previous debates on the strengths and limitations of Human Geography knowledge production in South Africa (Hammett, 2012; Knight, 2019), Adele's concerns highlight how the drive to generate income via publications reinforces specific patterns of resource capture and research activity while distorting the practices of knowledge production. The risk with this approach is that the strengths of South African Human Geography scholarship in terms of local policy relevance and development contributions are undermined (as they are not rewarded or recognised through the research outputs policy), while the turn to quantity over quality does little to support the development and advancement of (South) African theory. The outcomes of these approaches are integral to the spatially uneven politics of knowledge production within South Africa and entrenching of clusters of knowledge production linked to place-based clustering, proximity to policy makers, and differentials in resourcing, status and prestige. These processes result in intra-national 'cores' and 'peripheries' of knowledge production that differentially interact and intersect with the global 'core' and 'peripheries' of knowledge production. This intra-national Geography is rooted in the apartheid and post-apartheid inequalities in resources and reputation, the spatial clustering and proximity of universities and other research centres (including the Human Sciences Research Council, the African Centre for Cities [ACC] and the Gauteng Regional City Observatory) in major urban conglomerations (as evident in Figures 1–5), and everyday praxis. This clustering simultaneously contributes to the realisation of a critical mass of active researchers (Head & Ruthfurd, 2022) and the re-entrenching of institutional privilege—again, not a concern restricted solely to Human Geography but part of the broader socioeconomic-political context of the sector. These continued and self-perpetuating divisions manifest intra-national inequalities in knowledge production that intersect with the global scale: South Africa may be on the global 'periphery' of Human Geography knowledge production, but HAIs are at the intra-national 'core' of these processes and enjoy greater connections with and ability to access resources from the global 'core' (including through membership of organisations such as the World University Network—the only South African universities that are part of this group are the University of Cape Town and the University of Pretoria). Meanwhile, HDIs find themselves not only on the periphery at the global scale but also peripheralised at the national scale, ending up in a 'double periphery' as explored below.

Crucially, differing levels of resourcing have structural implications for knowledge production. Alongside the feelings of marginalisation within physical Geography and/or environmental science dominated departments, a crucial concern is the viability and sustainability of (teaching) workloads for human geographers at various HDIs where commonly there may only be two or three Human Geography staff (Zolani, 6 December 2022). In such situations, many academics faced a crucial challenge: how to do research and produce publications when faced with both very high teaching loads and limited opportunities for research-related discussions with colleagues. This concern formed part of a broader concern that inequalities in teaching loads were further entrenching hierarchies and inequalities in knowledge production between those caught in a cycle of teaching and administration compared with those staff who were in virtuous cycles of research income and outputs (Zama, 13 January 2023; Adele, 25 November 2022). Thus, as Ngcobo (20 January 2023) succinctly noted 'none of us have time to actually pursue research. We only do that in our own spare time', a sentiment echoed by Sariyah (21 November 2022): 'you don't have the time to do it. You know you've got to make the time—but if you're only two staff members dealing with 180 students plus ...'.

At the core of these differences are questions of resources, numbers of staff and teaching loads—concerns that permeate many disciplines and departments across the country. For Human Geography staff at several HDIs this was profoundly obvious: ‘the more productive writers are departments with large staff cohorts ... we have been two people dragging Human Geography for the last six years’ (Sariyah, 21 November 2022). These concerns reflect broader structural concerns with the higher education landscape—not only in South Africa, but replicated across the world through stark divisions between ‘research intensive’ and ‘teaching focused’ institutions in terms of staff numbers, teaching loads, research time and resources that underpin a highly uneven landscape of knowledge production, as well as differences in post-graduate student enrolment and proportions of PhD-holding staff. The unequal distribution of staff with PhDs between HDIs and HAIs (47.7% of academics in South Africa held PhDs in 2019, varying from over 60% at various HAIs to less than 20% at a range of HDIs; DHET, 2021) has notable implications for intra-national geographies of knowledge production, both in relation to disparities in post-graduate student numbers between HAIs and HDIs, and the competing time demands facing those completing their doctorates. The time required to complete a PhD is understood as time that cannot be spent writing publications—a situation that again contributes to the intra-national unevenness in outputs and subsidy income to support research activities (Adele, 25 November 2022). These concerns are not unique to (human) geographers, and the South African government has attempted to reduce this disparity and support the development and training of non-PhD-holding academic staff at HDIs through investments such as the NGAP programme (a six-year programme of support and funding to develop a new generation of academics). However, the intra-national inequalities encountered in everyday praxis jeopardise the long-term outcomes of these interventions. As Thandi (12 January 2023) explained, ‘it’s just a perpetuation of the cycle, because this contract has been me here for six years, I’m going to serve my six years, as soon as I’m done, I’m going [to apply for jobs at HAIs]’ (Thandi, 12 January 2023). These experiences of human geographers are far from unique but rather result from structural challenges facing the South African higher education sector and the ways in which intra-national inequalities are encountered in teaching loads, research time and support, and institutional effectiveness.

Compounding these concerns, we see in the publications data and interviews the importance of local and non-local network linkages (Ibert, 2007) and clear geographies of difference. At the local scale, connections within and between Geography departments within the same urban space are rooted in socially embedded processes and the opportunities afforded by geographical proximity (Ibert, 2007; Vallance, 2011). These largely support and entrench the continued prominence of HAIs clustered in major urban spaces, with limited evidence of intra-national collaborations beyond these spaces. Meanwhile international linkages and networks (research collaborations or honorary positions) are also predominantly coalesced around a subset of HAIs. Further contributing to these uneven geographies of knowledge production as prosaic factors including limited library and computing resources and internet connectivity (Sipho, 23 November 2022; Thandi, 12 January 2023), outdated, inadequate or absent online profiles for academics in many departments, as well as the spatially differentiated impacts of load shedding (planned electrical power cuts) that disproportionately affected rural and historically disadvantaged institutions. Crucially, these intra-national dynamics and inequalities are key to understanding the continued and ongoing multiscalar politics and practices of knowledge production. If the move to a more equitable praxis of care within the (sub)discipline is to be realised, these self-perpetuating intra-national inequalities must be engaged with and the continued legacies of colonialism and apartheid addressed—not only within Human Geography but as part of a reimagining of the higher education sector overall.

7.1 | The insidious everyday haunting of apartheid

the spectre of colonisation and apartheid will still haunt us. For as long as we are not dealing with it in the body of Human Geography.

(Adele, 25 November 2022)

The realisation of the praxis of care (Daya, 2022) requires a critical and open engagement with the ways in which everyday encounters within the academy remain riven with legacies of power inequalities and dis/advantage. It is not only at the global scale that ‘historical continuities between colonialism and globalisation perpetuate unequal global power relations in the present’ (Jazeel, 2016, p. 649). The ‘insidious effects’, to use Jazeel’s phrasing, of these asymmetries on production of knowledge at the (intra)national scale are linked to the everyday and structural perpetuation of power and resource disparities in knowledge production between HAIs and HDIs. Reflecting on the implications of these imbalances and the resultant siloing of resources at HAIs and gatekeeping within the discipline, scholars at several HDIs

expressed significant concerns with the current and future of the sub-discipline. Describing the sub-discipline as ‘going in the red zone. It’s not in a healthy space’ (Adele, 25 November 2022) or as ‘critical but stable’ (Thandi, 12 January 2023), concerns coalesced around a lack of theory development, limited progress in tackling barriers between HAIs and HDIs in everyday praxis, and struggles to attract new researchers into the discipline.

Integral to these challenges was a critical concern with failures of transformation in reimagining the praxis of Human Geography in South Africa (rather than linked to staff demographics in a particular department) in the face of a continued sense of marginalisation and exclusion (Ngcobo, 20 January 2023). Power dynamics, pre-existing networks, and the influence of established (white, male) professors are seen to reinforce a sense of exclusion and hierarchies: from Adele’s (25 November 2022) sense of isolation after public comments from a senior (white, male) professor to Sariyah’s (21 November 2022) experience of being invited to collaborate with a HAI department occurring only via a European university. Reviewing the publications data underlines the lack of intra-national collaboration between academics at HAIs and HDIs (Figures 3–5), while Zama explained how academics at HDIs were often ignored or belittled, ‘[HAI-based staff] tend to forget and not pay attention to what is going on in universities like Fort Hare or Venda or Walter Sisulu’ (Zama, 13 January 2023), or that networks of academics amongst HAIs continued to gatekeep within the profession. This concern was echoed by Thandi (12 January 2023) who explained how privileged networks acted as gatekeepers on various levels, ‘I joined the SSAG ... I attended a few of their meetings, but you get there and about 10 of the people who are from the white institutions who know each other say, okay, I’ll nominate whoever for the Senate. How is this a space where you’re trying to make room for other people when it’s just that people from these prestigious institutions who are nominating each other for posts’.

The everyday encounters with and realities of these divisions are, for many staff, bound up in failures to openly talk about and confront the underlying legacies of privilege and the ways in which these are manifest in (unintentional) exclusionary practices. As Siphon (23 November 2022) outlined, ‘we try our level best to be united and positive. But the discrimination, the marginalisation, is there even though it is subtle ... as a black geographer, you can feel the discrimination—it’s only that it is difficult in some cases to pinpoint and say “no, this is not acceptable”’. Similarly, Zama (13 January 2023) explained that ‘sadly, we are too caught up in our histories, the history of the establishment of the universities in South Africa, the divisions amongst ourselves have never really been dismantled. We’ve never really had the honest talk amongst ourselves as geographers because we don’t want to make people cry ... we are pretty much haunted by our histories’ (Zama, 13 January 2023). These encounters leave divisions and disquiet, a questioning of ‘how do we dismantle what divides us?’ (Zama, 13 January 2023).

Ultimately, these practices—of cold shoulders, belittling and hierarchies—mean that ‘these relationships [between HAI and HDI Departments] do not exist’, a situation ‘not helpful for the growth and longevity of especially African scholars in a very predominantly white, South African Human Geography ... it’s very difficult to have these [discussions] across the racial divide’ (Adele, 25 November 2022). Instead, the inequities of the politics of knowledge production are reinforced—with staff at HDIs feeling ostracised and excluded, ‘oftentimes pushed to the margins because very few people have collaborations, international and national collaborations’ (Zama, 13 January 2023) or brought onto projects in a tokenistic manner to meet ‘quota requirements’ rather than as academic equals (Zama, 13 January 2023). In keeping with Oswin’s (2020) concern that the marginalising or side-lining of ‘othered’ groups becomes a self-perpetuating source of harm and inequality, we see these dynamics played out within South African Human Geography such that hierarchies in the politics of knowledge production are self-reinforcing, meaning ‘we have a long way to go as a multiracial, Human Geography community of practice’ (Adele, 25 November 2022). The outcome, then, is a multi-scalar politics of knowledge of production in which staff at HDIs find themselves in the bind of the ‘double-periphery’: feeling pushed to the margins of the sub-discipline within a nation positioned in the margins of knowledge production at a global scale.

7.2 | The bind of the double-periphery

As Figures 2 and 6 illustrate, there is a stark polarisation within the broader and core Human Geography community of practice between those who are closely connected to (typically geographically proximate) collaborators who are commonly within each other’s citation’s networks, and those outside these networks. Typically, clusters of citations are rooted around HAIs and specific sub-disciplinary research specialisms, with those at HDIs subject to a ‘double peripherisation’, remaining confined to the periphery of networks of knowledge production at both national and global scales. To be clear, this is not to suggest that scholars at HDIs are incapable of producing research outputs to the same scale of

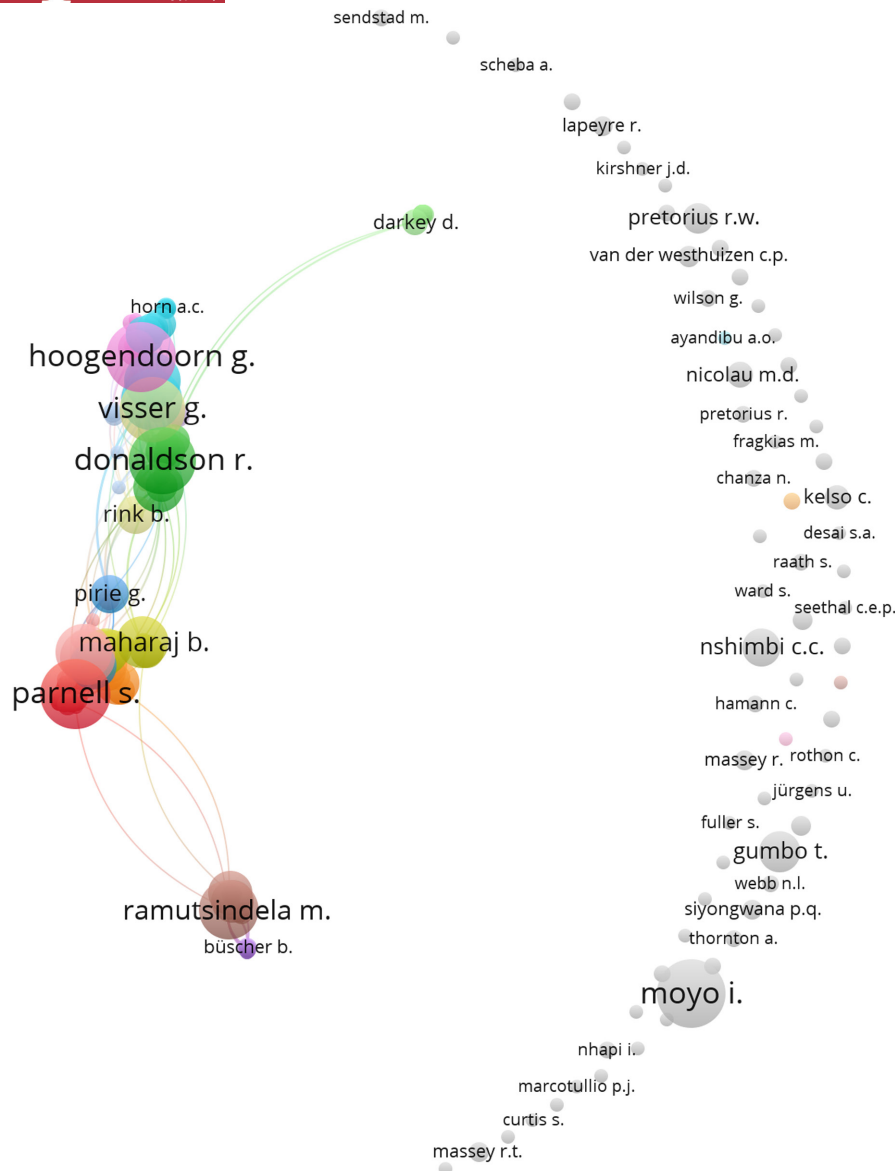


FIGURE 6 Citation patterns amongst South African-based human geographers working within Geography departments, mapped by author and limited to those who have published a minimum of two documents and have at least two citations (including standalones).

their peers at HAIs, but rather to point to the structural barriers (resource levels, teaching and administration loads) that remain and perpetuate silos of privilege and marginalisation.

Rather, this double-peripheralisation is experienced due to the haunting legacies of apartheid (to borrow the language used by one interviewee) that are encountered as everyday structural material and psychological inequalities and biases. For many staff at HDIs, this led to feelings of marginalisation and isolation, as represented in Adele's (25 November 2022) reflection on her career journey, 'I'm 11 years in academia ... it's been quite an isolated experience'. Undoubtedly this is partly a consequence of small numbers of Human Geography staff in many HDI departments—a situation that leads Rukia (25 November 2022) to lament that 'I wish I had a department where we had lots of fellow colleagues and we can bounce things off each other ... sometimes you just feel isolated'. The more concerning challenge for many was at the intra-national level, particularly for HDI-based academics who felt that the everyday practices and relationships between departments continued to be framed and 'haunted' by the legacies of apartheid: 'our relationships as universities in South Africa is pretty much damaged. I don't think it's something that people do consciously, it's just that the environment in which we were raised has not really helped us to conscientize ourselves of what we do to others' (Zama, 13 January 2023). Thus, particular practices and politics of knowledge production at the (intra)national scale result in this double peripheralisation and while the critical self-reflection within departments

that Daya (2022) calls for is undoubtedly important, this self-same reflection is needed at the meso/intra-national scale to ensure that aims of inclusivity and just outcomes are supported across the sector and not siloed into (historically advantaged) departments.

8 | MOVING (HOPEFULLY) TO THE FUTURE

South African Human Geography undoubtedly faces various challenges but, as Daya (2022) argues, from this space of crisis comes an opportunity to build a new praxis. To realise this ambition, however, there is a pressing need to consider the different *crises* and intra-national variations within and affecting the discipline. In part, these challenges arise from the size of departments in some institutions which means efficiencies of scale are limited (Head & Rutherford, 2022), but more fundamentally relate to the continued dominance of the field of study by a small number of departments at HAIs. Thus, while national-level publication figures seem to indicate a discipline that is flourishing, delving beyond the surface highlights a range of challenges and questions. First of these is the intra-national division between departments and dominance of certain institutions due to colonial pasts and a lack of intra-national solidarity and scholarship (Donaldson, 2020; Long et al., 2019). As this paper has demonstrated, HAIs benefit from their histories, reputations and networks in mobilising international—and national—networks of research associates or research fellows. The ability to attract and/or approach industry professionals who continue to publish in academic outlets, to mobilise (recent) post-graduate students to publish, and to approach and attract international scholars to take up non-salaried, honorary visiting posts provides another means of boosting publication numbers and subsidy income.

Consequently, the geography of knowledge production is unequally rendered with the entrenched privilege of larger institutional- or city-region-based communities of practice becoming self-perpetuating through securing and maintaining greater access to resources, expertise and opportunities in order to attract and retain a critical mass of scholars, support and facilitate access to and greater participation in global circulations of the knowledge economy, and enable personal and professional mobility. Accordingly, the work of these communities tends to be more networked and often more multi-disciplinary in nature, with greater potential to impact both policy impact and global academic debates. Contrasted to this dominance, the experience of those on the intra-national ‘periphery’ is marked by relative isolation in smaller departments, more limited access to resources including research funding and travel and networking opportunities, disproportionately greater administration and teaching loads, and a double marginalisation or peripheralisation on both the global and national scales. These differential conditions and experiences perpetuate inequalities, creating conditions of path dependency and the continuation of intra-national inequalities within the sector (Hautala & Jauhiainen, 2014), posing specific and important challenges for the future of the discipline. Thus, to realise Daya’s (2022) call for a new, emergent praxis requires a deeper engagement with how South Africa’s Human Geography is complicit in the continued entrenchment of intra-national inequalities within the discipline. Moreover, similar consideration of how inter- and intra-national inequalities and intersections of cores and peripheries in knowledge production at different scales are important in other national academies for a praxis of care to emerge not just in South African Human Geography but more widely.

In South Africa, how might these challenges be addressed? Does this need a generational change—where, as Thandi (12 January 2023) suggests, it is only when very senior colleagues retire that pathways open up for new entrants and ideas, and for Human Geography to become ‘disruptive in a productive and progressive and transformational way that moves us forward’ (Adele, 25 November 2022)? Given the potentially significant contributions to subsidy income and research outputs by overseas-based honorary/visiting fellows, should (and how might) HDIs be supported and enabled to develop the contacts, networks and strategic policies to attract and appoint visiting research fellows? How might Donaldson’s ideas for greater intra-nationalism in scholarship be realised and promote intra-national solidarity and support between HAIs and HDIs?

For academics at HDIs initial steps would include greater collaborations and inclusivity, both to overcome the limitations resulting from small staff numbers in (primarily HDI) departments and to realise a more equitable national politics of knowledge production that was grounded in a commitment to inclusivity—something which is seen as lacking at present (Sipho, 23 November 2022). Other priorities identified included stronger mentoring for early- and mid-career staff alongside skills-based training around publications and grant-writing (Lynn, 21 November 2022), the need for up-to-date and accessible online profiles of staff on institutional websites, and greater support for collaborations and networking amongst HDIs as well as between HDI and HAIs (Thandi, 12 January 2023). Oswin’s (2020) discussion of meritocracy is pertinent here—particularly when read alongside her damning critique of liberal hubris in the history of the discipline

in Canada (and beyond)—in recognising how a commitment to meritocracy in an inequitable context or one marked by historical injustices is simply an invitation to the perpetuation of inequality. As she argues, failures to address structural inequalities when focusing on meritocracy reinforces inequalities (behind a façade of equality etc.), thus ‘the multiple projects of oppression and exploitation that shaped the academy over earlier centuries are still very much with us today’ (Oswin, 2020, p. 14). Therefore, integral to efforts to develop a progressive praxis for the (sub)discipline, tricky conversations are needed to ‘shed light on what is missing, which is very necessary. The majority of the human geographers know what’s missing, but it’s just whispered in the corridors’ (Thandi, 12 January 2023).

However, this possibility of intra-national conversations and collaborations is hindered by resource inequalities, power hierarchies and existing divides between HAIs and HDIs. As Adele (25 November 2022) outlines, this is not simply about logistics or resources, but about changing mindsets and tackling hubris through ‘intra-departmental socialisation, and establishment of these cross-cultural, cross-racial, cross-disciplinary relationships’. Opening these conversations would include recognition of efforts towards, as well as challenges to, transformation of staff demographics, the development of Africa-centred knowledge and efforts to decolonise curricula. In this vein, multiple interviewees spoke of inheriting curricula that had not changed in a decade or more, or that were based on a single (Western) textbook, and the barriers (lack of mentoring, reluctance for collective conversations on decolonising curricula) faced in efforts to change content and make relevant to students’ everyday lives (Adele, 25 November 2022).

While efforts have been made to pursue intersectional aspects of transformation and promote Africa-centred and indigenous knowledge production (Ngcobo, 20 January 2023; Sariyah, 21 November 2022; Thandi, 12 January 2023), limitations to this were recognised as arising not only from reluctance of senior colleagues for such changes, but also from the everyday outcomes of South African government policies. These policies, from the 1997 *White Paper on Education* to the 2017 *Hechter Report on the Commission of Enquiry into Higher Education and Training*, have entrenched a neoliberal, marketised approach to higher education in South Africa, thereby cementing intra-national inequalities. Further compounding this situation, the impacts of policies on PhD funding (Ramutsindela, 2015) and the *Research Outputs Policy* have led to the prioritisation of particular types of knowledge production and publication, and exacerbated inequalities in resource flows between HAIs and HDIs as those institutions with lower teaching loads, resources to support post-doctoral researchers, and connections to global networks have capitalised upon this income stream to a far greater extent than those without these pre-existing resource and capital.

Ultimately, to realise a more ethical and sustainable praxis within South African Human Geography needs ‘a privileging of “community” over “organisation” as the locus of knowing’ (Vallance, 2011, p. 1099) and an enhancing of ‘practices for working together’ (Hautala & Jauhiainen, 2014) to foster greater transformation and inclusion. This is no easy endeavour, yet these dual tasks are our responsibility as academics in or connected to South Africa. Greater efforts are needed from the government, universities and individuals alike to foster inclusion and collaboration which work beyond and across the historical inequalities and their current manifestations. The government—via the Department for Higher Education and Training, the Department of Science and Technology, and the National Research Foundation—has a significant role to play in terms of fostering collaboration between institutions, encouraging researcher mobility, and overcoming intra-national inequalities. But so too do we, as individual scholars with various forms of privilege, we have a vital role in promoting inclusiveness, academic citizenship and responsibility for our own participation in the structures and communities of practice outlined above: whether this is through expanding networks of co-authors and collaborators, proactively engaging with intra-national knowledge exchange and network building, or exploring a more equitable and progressive role for research fellows beyond HAIs.

The history of colonialism and apartheid provides a particular backdrop to these challenges in South Africa. However, it is abundantly clear that similar issues with intra-national inequalities in knowledge production, including differing levels of economic, social and cultural capital between ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ universities, and the belittling and marginalising of colleagues at newer or historically disadvantaged institutions is rife in higher education across the globe. In the UK, the landscape of knowledge production remains framed by the (supposed) divide between the Russell Group Universities (a self-selected group of 24 research-intensive universities) and the other 140+ universities. The Russell Group dominate the awarding of doctorates, secure the majority of research grant and contract income, profit from historical legacies, reputation and esteem, benefit from both national and global prestige, and typically have lower teaching loads and greater support. In the USA, similar patterns are evident in the differentiation between elite universities and liberal arts colleges and other institutions of higher education. In many post-colonial higher education contexts the legacies of colonialism are prominent in the dominance of a small number of colonial-era universities whose prestige and resources dwarf those of other universities: Makerere University in Uganda, the University of Zimbabwe in Zimbabwe, and the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, and so on.

For instance, such an interrogation of the UK higher education landscape might incorporate critical reflection on the Russell Group/non-Russell Group divide, the differential impacts of changing higher education policies on fees, funding and admissions, as well as how uneven landscapes of knowledge production become self-perpetuating as a result of differential teaching loads, research support and other factors including visibility and profile of academics on university web pages, attendance at conferences, and so on. These inequalities are further exacerbated by the ‘haunting’ histories of privilege and esteem that assume the superiority of Russell Group institutions that have profound implications for the everyday practices of knowledge production (for instance, in the greater prestige accorded to invitations to speak at Russell Group universities over non-Russell Group universities by promotions panels). These attitudes perpetuate intra-national divisions and maintain artificially created divisions between ‘cores’ and ‘peripheries’ that are further nuanced and layered by the geographical dispersal, differential size, and international reputation and connections of Geography departments.

Adopting the multi-scalar approach and considering intra-national inequalities in (Human Geography) knowledge production in other national contexts builds on global debates around decolonising knowledge and the global knowledge economy. It allows for a more granular understanding of the different ways in which resources and power have been concentrated in ‘cores’ of knowledge production at multiple scales. Without reducing the importance of understanding the global colonial extraction of knowledge, an engagement with the meso-scale avoids risks of homogenising regions of the world in relation to knowledge production and instead facilitates consideration of a more complex mosaic of overlapping and intersecting ‘cores’ and ‘peripheries’ that are informed by multiple differences in resourcing, prestige, esteem and histories. This move allows us to go beyond a focus on global political economy of knowledge production and critically engage with how both global and national histories of colonialism and other forms of resource appropriation and concentration lead to continued and self-perpetuating inequalities that are often wedded to/entwined with institutional arrogance and biases that privilege HAIs and diminish HDIs (and those who work in these institutions). Such multi-scalar interrogations of the webs of knowledge production are vital to efforts to disrupt and challenge the politics and political economy of (Human Geography) knowledge production through a more nuanced and granular understanding of the multiple hierarchies of power and privilege, and from this to understand how progressive change must be realised through critical reflections and actions in relation to multiple scales of practice.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ORCID

Daniel Hammett  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9607-6901>

Gijsbert Hoogendoorn  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7969-7952>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The racial and ethnic segregation of South Africa’s university sector was entrenched during the apartheid era, and universities for the white population were differentiated into English (e.g., University of Cape Town, University of Witwatersrand) and Afrikaans medium (e.g., Stellenbosch University, Rand Afrikaans University (now University of Johannesburg)). These are referred to as ‘historically advantaged institutions’. While a small number of Black students were admitted to English-medium institutions, the University of Fort Hare was designated for Black students, with additional ‘Bush’ and ‘Homeland’ campuses established (albeit with lower funding and resources) after the 1959 Extension of University Education Act as part of an effort to restrict the (educational) aspirations of African middle classes (Davies, 1996). These ‘historically disadvantaged institutions’ include the University of Fort Hare, University of the Western Cape, and University of Venda.
- ² The student-led Fallist movements—Rhodes Must Fall, Fees Must Fall—spread across the South African higher education landscape in 2015. Connecting colonialism, capitalism and racism to contemporary structures and functioning of HE in South Africa, these movements demanded the democratisation and decolonisation of campuses and curricula (Patel, 2020; Stanek, 2019).
- ³ Drawing from the work of both Grosfoguel and De Sousa Santos, Stanek (2019) identifies the four epistemicides as the extermination of ways of knowing during the colonial endeavours of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, including the Catholic Monarchy’s conquest of Al-Andalus, the subsequent Conquest of the Americas, slavery and the slave trade, and the European ‘witch-hunts’.

- ⁴ Compounding these challenges, the erosion of South Africa's Further Education sector has reduced the availability of viable and attractive alternative post-school education options (see Rogan, 2018).
- ⁵ The term 'staff' refers to academic staff (also known as faculty in other regions of the world) and reflects the terminology used in the South African higher education context.
- ⁶ Data collection occurred in the later months of 2021, meaning the 2021 records are incomplete.
- ⁷ When presenting quotes we have removed information that might readily identify individuals and have used pseudonyms throughout.
- ⁸ These subsidy payments can constitute a significant revenue stream for HEIs and individual academics who may receive a proportion of these payments either via a research account or as an honorarium (for example, the University of Fort Hare passes on R20,000 per accredited unit; the University of Venda allocates 35% of subsidy payment into a personal research account and 15% as an honorarium (Muthama & McKenna, 2020)).

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