

# Equitable Research Assessment Driving Research Impact in the Global South: A Perspective from South Africa

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## Abstract

This conceptual essay critically explores how the concepts of transformation and equity in research assessment can drive scholarly communication and social impact in the global South. This is because, over the years, scholarly communication has dramatically changed due to technological developments, open access and funder mandates. However, research assessment systems in South Africa and the global South have not kept up with the changes in scholarly communication. Hence, higher education assessment systems are under scrutiny as they are viewed to be driving scholarship away from its fundamental purpose, which is to recognise and reward scholarship that addresses the questions that matter most to society. Many scholars have noted how the scholarly communication process is now less linear and complex than ever before; however, how scholarship is assessed still embraces traditional systems, which exclude and further expose marginalised groups to epistemic injustice. So, this study, informed by critical theory, explores the transformative power of equitable research assessment in driving research impact in South Africa. The essay draws from the literature and researchers' experience in this area, which has focused on the development of a holistic framework for assessing research impact in a research-intensive institution in South Africa. The study recommends that higher education institutions should interrogate their policies and structures that inform assessment systems to ensure these are aligned with institutional and national values in support of the societal impact of research. Also, there is a need for a concerted effort and action from institutional and national leaders to reform performance and research assessment systems and practices, so they are equitable and socially just. Similarly, they need to centre research assessment processes in the decolonisation agenda, as it directly links to the curriculum and scholarly communication.

**Keywords:** research impact, social impact, scholarly communication, global South, South Africa

## **Introduction**

In recent decades, there has been a growing demand from policymakers and society for universities to contribute to addressing societal challenges as a result of the dramatic changes in the context in which universities operate (Ari et al., 2020; League of European Research Universities, 2017; Bornmann, 2013). Universities in South Africa and abroad have experienced shrinking budgets, which has resulted in increased competition between researchers to access the limited research funding. Universities are now more than ever expected to maximise the public benefits arising from publicly funded research. Hence, attention has been turned towards mechanisms for assessing and incentivising the public benefits of research (Mfengu & Raju, 2024; Molas-Gallart, 2015). The prioritisation of research impact, beyond scholarly contribution, influences how research is planned, funded, conducted, assessed and reported (Doyle, 2018). However, the impact of research has been less prioritised in South Africa despite many calls for transformation and decolonisation emerging from the global South. Research impact is a complex and rapidly growing field of inquiry. The Australian Research Council (2024) views research impact as the contribution that research makes beyond contributions to academia, contributions to the economy, society, culture, health, the environment and quality of life. Likewise, Greenhalgh et al. (2016) state that research impact occurs when research generates benefits (health, economic, cultural and more) on top of building an academic knowledge base. These authors differentiate between scholarly impact, which is the influence that the research has on knowledge advances, economic and societal impact, which captures the diverse ways in which research-related knowledge and skills benefit society (individuals, organisations and nations) (Penfield et al., 2014; Vitae, 2017). Assessing and demonstrating non-academic research impact for publicly funded research has become a key aspect of research policy (Oancea, 2013) and in improving the economic and social efficiency of allocating public research resources (Mfengu and Raju, 2024). Moreover, impact assessment of research expenditure has been elevated on the policy agenda through three inter-related economic imperatives: scarcity of resources to increase a move toward productivity (intensifying the demand for innovative research solutions that improve research outcomes with the same or less public expenditure); and efficacious, effective and cost-effective research outcomes (to avoid unproductive expenditure) (Deeming et al., 2017). Equally, the impact of research is an important concern in higher education as well as a key component of universities' societal and economic role (Terama et al., 2016). Impact assessment can inform strategic planning by both funding bodies and research institutions (Greenhalgh et al., 2016).

Although the societal impact landscape is an emerging area and underdeveloped in the global South, global trends to document and measure the benefits of research for society are increasing the pressure on researchers and institutions.

Scholarly communication seeks to make research publicly available, yet scholarly communication activities (primarily focused on academic publishing) tend to be directed toward promotion, academic appointment (tenure) and funding allocation (Mfengu & Raju, 2024; Given, Kelly & Willson, 2015). This focus on academic publishing is not inclusive of the many activities that are involved in scholarly communication. Medvecky (2018) argues that science communicators get to decide both which knowledge is shared (by choosing which topic is communicated) and who gets access to this knowledge (by choosing which audience it is presented to). The author adds that these decisions of science communicators have important implications for epistemic justice<sup>1</sup>: how knowledge is distributed fairly and equitably. The implications of these decisions extend beyond just assessing research, as they significantly influence the career progression opportunities for researchers. Thus, it is important to view scholarly communication and research assessment as being related, as they inform each other.

The changing scholarly communication landscape has resulted in a growing interest from funders to assess the impact of research, and funders are mandating researchers to demonstrate the impact of their research. Sound research impact assessment procedures have the potential to encourage ethical and quality research (Moher et al., 2019). From the global South context, equity in research assessment is critical. Equity is a concept that is sometimes used synonymously with equality. It is an approach that ensures everyone has access to the same opportunities and recognises that advantages and barriers exist for some, especially global South researchers as compared to global North. Equity begins by acknowledging that people may have experienced unequal starting points and making a commitment to correcting and addressing these disparities. Equality treats every individual in the same way, while equity attempts to address potential inequalities between individuals. And so, research assessment cannot be transformed without recognising the diverse scholarly communication activities and ensuring that equity is central in research assessment to advance inclusivity and diversity. Assessment is often used to promote learning, but the mechanisms of how assessment relates to epistemology – knowledge and knowing – have been scarcely studied and theorised (Nieminen & Lahdenperä, 2021). While these authors are writing from a teaching and learning perspective, the same can be argued for research assessment or evaluation.

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<sup>1</sup> Epistemic justice focuses on fairness and equity in knowledge production, dissemination and utilisation to empower marginalised people. Epistemic injustice was coined by Miranda Fricker in 1999, it comprises unfair treatment in knowledge-related and communicative practices in which the voices, experiences and problems of marginalised individuals, communities and societies are not being taken seriously (Cummings et al., 2023).

Little has been published on how research assessment in South Africa relates to knowledge production and how research assessment can advance the impact of research and address societal issues.

## **Research problem and objective**

Research evaluation and assessment systems utilised in higher education institutions (HEIs) have been under scrutiny because they are viewed as driving scholarship away from its fundamental purpose (Mfengu & Raju, 2024). To reiterate, that is, to recognise and reward scholarship that addresses the questions that matter most to society. To take this further, scholarship emerging from the African continent should address questions and issues of local relevance on top of contributing to the body of knowledge. Research evaluation systems have, for too long, focused on academic impact at the expense of research that has societal benefits. Moreover, evaluation systems have, for too long, emphasised quantitative measures at the expense of research that cannot be quantified (Mfengu & Raju, 2024). Quantitative measures and other factors (institutional and research culture, behaviour and norms) drive researchers to focus on knowledge contribution (publications and citations) to advance in their careers, as these are well recognised and rewarded. Thus, this results in inequitable recognition and rewards for researchers who focus on societal impact, which is more complicated and long-term, might have greater benefits on policy, practice and the real world. Many scholars have argued that the realisation of societal impact hinges on recognising and rewarding scholarship that is impactful beyond academic impact. With the global South experiencing unique developmental challenges, research emanating from HEIs and research councils in the region has a critical role to play in addressing some of the inequalities in the region. As scholarly communication has been significantly transformed over the years, research assessment systems also need to be transformed to align with these changes and be more context-sensitive. Scholars such as Masaka (2019) and Zeleza (2009) have argued that the discourse on transformation and decolonisation in Africa is premised on the need to dismantle and reverse the injustices brought about by the colonial system of domination. Fundamentally, this has revolved around the education curriculum and how it could be used to dismantle the deleterious structures of injustice across various spheres of human existence that it has helped to shape, as well as to exacerbate (Masaka, 2019; Heleta, 2016). However, few studies, if any, have explored decolonisation in the context of research assessment, especially from a South African context and being cognisant of the local realities. Therefore, the problem this study investigates is the epistemic injustices in current research assessment systems. Hence, the objective of this study is to explore the transformative power of equitable research assessment systems in driving research impact with a focus on South Africa.

To explore the study's objective using critical theory, three critical questions will guide the discussion:

- a. What role do current research assessment systems play in driving societal impact?
- b. What inequalities does the current system exert on marginalised researchers?
- c. How can equitable research assessment systems drive the impact of research beyond the academy?

## **Conceptual approach**

In exploring the transformative power of equitable research assessment systems in driving research impact in the global South, this essay adopts critical theory to advocate for change in how HEIs drive research impact in Africa and the global South. Critical theory emerged from social and philosophical works. The term 'critical theory' was coined in 1937 by Horkheimer (1972) in his essay "Traditional and Critical Theory". It seeks human emancipation from colonialism, which still lingers in current research assessment systems utilised by universities in South Africa. Pyati (2007) describes critical theory as a normative social theory concerned with progressive social transformation and change. It interrogates power dynamics and politics in society for the emancipation of the oppressed. Thus, acknowledging power differentials inherent in social structures, which critical theorists seek to transform such structures to be more just and fair (Arneson & Bowle, 2009). The theory calls for an action reform agenda and, in this context, reforms on how researchers are assessed to advance the impact of research. Critical theory is crucial in a transformative agenda as it provides a lens to interrogate the oppressive power of the current research assessment systems. It allows researchers to draw on personal experiences and narratives that can challenge the hegemonic power, which is central to critical theory. Felt (2022, para. 3) noted that critical theory "is a shared commitment to looking at the world in new ways and pushing ourselves to think more deeply about it to reshape it in a more just form". Therefore, critical theory allows us to understand power – how power in this context shapes researchers' choices concerning scholarly communication activities, where and how they choose to disseminate their scholarship and what informs those decisions and actions. Felt (2022, para. 2) states, "if evaluation theory is who we are, then critical theory is a framework for asking questions about how we relate to power, how it shapes our work and how our work shapes it in return". Therefore, critical theory and research assessment are related and allow for a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, many studies have called for epistemic justice, diversity and inclusivity concerning scholarly communication, recognising the interconnectedness of scholarly communication and socioeconomic shifts. While the study is limited to South Africa, the insights learnt from this study can be applied to other similar contexts beyond Africa.

## **Literature review and discussion**

The next sections present relevant literature with a focus on the transformation agenda, current research assessment practices and a discussion on the reform in research assessment processes and practices (informed by critical theory).

### ***Research impact and impact assessment***

Research evaluation and research assessment are sometimes used synonymously, but this study differentiates between the two. Research evaluation is a systematic process whereby institutions, organisations, funders or governments put together standards on assessing the value or degree of achievement of research to gain insight into prior or existing initiatives, to enable reflection and to assist in the identification of future change. The prime objective is to support and strengthen the quality of research (European Science Foundation, 2012, p.3). Research evaluation traditionally is the most widely used tool for the allocation of funding by many funders, and hence it is important to interrogate. Research assessment includes the evaluation of research quality and measurements of research inputs, outputs and impacts and embraces both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, including the application of bibliometric indicators and peer review (Moed, 2007). However, it is necessary to look holistically at the research process and how impact arises, as well as the assessment of impact. According to the European Science Foundation (2012, p.3), research impact assessment performs a dual task: demonstrating the value of research and increasing the value of research through a more effective way of financing research for it to have an impact. Research impact assessment provides a richer picture by looking at the research process instead of focusing only on research products. In 2021, the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa developed an NRF Framework to Advance the Societal and Knowledge Impact of Research. The framework conceptualises impact assessment with a focus on identifying and communicating impact rather than comparing, evaluating or measuring impact (South African National Research Foundation, 2021, p.7). This is different from what universities are planning to do (as many are still grappling with assessing impact in South Africa), which is to assess research impact at an individual and institutional level; the NRF Framework's primary goal, on the other hand, is to identify and communicate impact at a national level instead of assessing it. Hence, this is still a gap in South Africa, and many universities are still developing impact frameworks like the University of Cape Town, South Africa. For the first time in 2024, the NRF of South Africa introduced a Societal Impact Award (South African National Research Foundation, 2024) in recognition of research with an impact that has resulted in improvement in the quality of people's lives. This marks good progress towards recognising research impact but also highlights the inequitable recognition of research that has a societal impact compared to academic impact, as many researchers with socially impactful research will be competing for a single annual national award.



Taking this into consideration, the move to societal impact or impact beyond academia requires appropriate indicators of impact that can capture the nuances thereof that are often missed by traditional measures. As traditional indicators of impact, which are numerical (metrics), and many of which are descriptive or qualitative, tend to be limited to quantitative data, while research impact indicators should be all-encompassing, including more robust measures of both academic and societal impact. The Canadian Academy of Health Sciences (2009, p.22) highlights that there is no single indicator of impact of research that is sufficient to demonstrate impact for any organisation or individual; any single indicator can be dismissed as being partial, imperfect and likely to distort. Hence, a need to use these indicators with caution and to complement them with qualitative indicators.

Earlier studies noted that humanities scholars still felt pressured to use metrics, despite their unease when doing so and the fact that the indicators do not necessarily reflect humanities scholars' notion of quality (Hammarfelt & Haddow, 2018, p.930). This is not just unique to humanities scholars, but global South researchers feel similar pressures as they try to compete in the global space. In 2018, the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) compiled a guide for peer review based on the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) principles which eliminated the use of journal impact factor (JIF) and required consideration of a broad range of measures that affect the assessment of an applicant's research achievement. Appropriately, the NHMRC measures included both quantitative and qualitative measures, such as the scientific value of publications and their influence on current discourse, policy or practice (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018). Thelwall et al. (2013, p.2) noted the limitations of bibliometrics and that the societal impact of research may not be well addressed by metrics but by a range of alternative methods (such as altmetrics, peer review, interviews, case studies) that have been developed to assess societal impact.

### ***Universities transformative agenda***

Equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility (EDIA), also known as the transformation agenda, are critical agendas as they relate to universities' transformation strategies, which support the participation of under-represented or under-served individuals in the knowledge economy. A shift in current research assessment practices towards open and responsible research assessment (RRA)<sup>2</sup> approaches have the potential to create equal opportunities for diverse individuals.

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<sup>2</sup> Responsible research assessment (RRA) is an umbrella term for approaches to assessment that incentivise, reflect and reward the plural characteristics of high-quality research, in support of diverse and inclusive research cultures (Curry et al., 2020, p.7).

While many universities and research institutions have diversity and equity statements to ensure equitable access for all staff and researchers, these statements often do not translate to research assessment practices. Moreover, “the academic research environment is characterised by the under-representation of women, persistence of a masculine culture and the model of an excellent scientist reflects an outdated male lifecycle, restricting recognition of work done outside academia” (Kraemer-Mbula, 2020, p.89). Therefore, universities and institutions need to critically examine the biases that exist within current research assessment systems and knowledge cultures relating to gender, race, disability, language, sexual orientation and other marginalised communities. Hatch and Curry (2020, p.2) add that progress toward gender and race equality has been made in recent years, but the pace of change remains unacceptably slow. This is also the case for South African universities despite having transformation-related policies in place. Similarly, DORA, as part of its principles to help universities and research institutions improve their research assessment policies and practices, argues for the need to prioritise equity and transparency of research assessment processes (DORA, 2020).

Also, as rightfully put by Hatch and Curry (2020, p.2) the use of proxy measures (such as h index, citations, JIF and more) still preserves biases against scholars who still feel the force of historical and geographical exclusion from the research community. Equally, gender has been identified as a critical factor in research impact assessment; the COVID-19 pandemic has further affected womxn researchers and there has been a call for research assessments to factor this (COVID-19 is amplifying ..., 2021). This is not only true for the pandemic but also generally highlights gender inequality in higher education knowledge systems that needs to be factored into research assessments as the unequal demand on womxn in society was in existence in pre-pandemic times and will persist post-pandemic as well. The pandemic's impact will be felt for years to come, which means it will also affect subsequent research assessments; funders need to consider how they can equitably account for the harm caused to research and careers in the 2020 period (“COVID-19 is amplifying ...”, 2021). The Humane Metrics Initiative (HuMetricsHSS) takes the approach that if metrics are not shaped by core values, then these values will be distorted by metrics (HuMetricsHSS, 2020). In 2016 HuMetricsHSS committed to five values in pursuing a values-based approach to transforming the culture of higher education and their values, including: equity, openness, collegiality, quality and community (HuMetricsHSS, 2020). Hence, research assessment practices and processes in HEIs need to be informed by institutional values of equity and inclusivity, especially in support of locally relevant, socially impactful research.



### ***Research assessment systems and research impact***

Research assessment systems have the potential to drive societal impact. Therefore, it is fundamental that research assessment systems positively influence researchers to effectively drive societal impact. Driving the societal impact of local research is crucial to addressing local issues such as inequality, unemployment and poverty, to mention a few that burden the African continent and global South. It is worth noting that researchers in HEIs in South Africa are doing research that has societal value. However, demonstrating and assessing impact beyond academia is still in its early stages in South Africa and much of the African continent. Thus, in a study at the University of Cape Town (South Africa), academics and researchers found it hard to think about how societal impact can be best assessed (Mfengu, 2022). It should be acknowledged that as a country, South Africa is still in the early stages of assessing impact, especially societal impact and thus still developing approaches for assessing research impact. While this is true, conceptualising equitable assessment frameworks requires concerted effort and action from institutional and national leaders. In research assessment reform, Hatch and Curry (2020, p.1) reason that “systemic change requires a fundamental shift in policies, processes and power structures, as well as in deeply held norms and values”.

A study at the University of Cape Town indicated the need for having approaches that can assess science engagement, collaborations (nationally, internationally and with corporations), mentorship of colleagues and students, as well as the impact on curriculum, explicitly the decolonisation<sup>3</sup> of the curriculum as this is a priority for the institutions and South Africa (Mfengu, 2022). Maldonado-Torres (2007, p.243) argues that coloniality is preserved in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense and in the self-image of people. Hence, research assessment needs to recognise the various contributions that researchers’ and academics’ work may have. Implying an appropriate approach for assessing research impact would need to factor in the different research activities, outputs and outcomes and perform longitudinal studies or assessments that use both qualitative and quantitative approaches, such as the case study approach, without sacrificing local context. This is because case studies can go deeper than metric indicators. A case study approach can allow both researchers and beneficiaries to share their impact stories. Therefore, a case study approach is a more meaningful approach because it can combine multiple sources of data to provide a complete view of the societal impact of research.

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<sup>3</sup> Decolonisation speaks to the process of recognising and decentering of western dominance in knowledge production and other areas. Coloniality is defined as the ‘long-standing patterns of power that emerged because of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p.243)

Moreover, others cautioned that impact assessment systems need to have the researchers at the core of the design for them to be meaningful, not just to assessors but also to researchers; that is, allowing researchers to present why their research is valuable (Mfengu, 2022). Additionally, senior academics and researchers could advocate for recognition of diverse outputs from research, which will allow early career researchers (ECRs) to emulate them without the fear of being punished. This approach would represent a positive step forward and significantly contribute to promoting and enhancing the societal impact of research. This is in line with work by Mfengu (2024), which highlighted that South African universities need to rethink how they evaluate research because social impact counts too.

### ***Inequalities in research assessment systems***

The earlier sections alluded to the critical role that research impact assessment plays in shaping the societal impact of research emanating from HEIs. However, despite this role, inequalities persist in research assessment systems and further exclude marginalised groups. Therefore, it is critical to explore injustices and oppressive power in current research assessment systems and how these shape scholarly communication choices of marginalised researchers or individuals from the global South. The epistemic injustices that are involved in publishing and scholarly communication are, by association, perpetuated in research assessment as the approaches are still focusing on quantitative measures and traditional measures. Therefore, it is important to call for epistemic justice in research impact assessment practices as well as in scholarly communication.

It is publicly known that academics and researchers globally are dissatisfied with current metrics as these measures do not capture the ‘full story’ of the impact, and not all impacts from research can be quantified (Mfengu & Raju, 2024). These biases (gender, geographic location, language and others) have also been highlighted earlier. Moreover, the metrics are known to be rigid, and they are used arbitrarily to assess researchers across disciplines. While the academic community agrees that metrics have an important role to play in research impact assessment, recent studies globally and from South Africa indicate that they need to be complemented by qualitative indicators of research impact (Mfengu, 2022; DORA, 2021; Reale et al., 2017; Penfield et al., 2014; De Jong et al., 2011; Donovan, 2011). These inequalities affect a lot of academics and researchers, but for those in creative disciplines where performance is important, qualitative measures can capture the nuances that metrics are not able to, which is more important in assessing research impact from the art and creative discipline because the kind of criteria one looks at in performance would be at an artistic level, which is very subjective, making it both problematic and interesting (Mfengu, 2022).

A common critique from academics and researchers is that the limitations of quantitative indicators tend to fuel the ‘publish or perish’ principles, where researchers tend to aim for quantity instead of quality research. Bibliometrics tends to have a systematic bias against individuals in or from the global South, biases against younger researchers or those who have not been researching for long (Mfengu, 2022). Hence, bibliometrics is not a good indicator for smaller disciplines or niche areas, as the realities are different from the global North and may impose geographic biases, as researchers are critiqued or excluded because they are writing from a particular position.

Therefore, evaluators and research managers must take a holistic view when assessing impact by not only focusing on research outputs but also on research contributions. This is particularly crucial for disciplines where other outputs like vaccines, performances, and other products and outputs are more beneficial than journal articles. Similarly, impact assessments need a holistic look at the person’s career and what they have done and an actual interrogation of the importance of their contributions, which needs a bit of digging under the surface. In the same accord, limitations are also posed by funder assessment criteria, which are limited to bibliometrics with very little space for the use of altmetrics and narratives to showcase the impact of their research. This is notwithstanding the challenges with qualitative measures, hence the need to adopt a complementary (quantitative and qualitative indicators) approach, as either alone has its limitations.

### ***Research assessment reform***

Many open access advocates have argued that research is a public good that should be accessible for public benefit hence, advocacy for diamond open access is driven by the global South due to its social justice imperatives. However, most research is still hidden behind paywalls, and researchers still advance in their careers, thus, there is little to no incentive for researchers to adopt open access and open science, as they are not adequately recognised and rewarded compared to traditional outputs (journal articles, books, etc.). This is also seen in research assessment systems where there is little to no reward or recognition for open access and societal impact, making it less attractive for researchers to engage in. Therefore, it should be a core component of research impact assessment systems and supported by fostering an environment that encourages societal impact while ensuring it is equitably recognised and rewarded.

While metrics and quantitative indicators provide data and evidence to support decision-making, some of the “most precious qualities of academic culture resist simple quantification, and individual indicators can struggle to do justice to the richness and plurality of research” (Wilsdon et al., 2015, p.iii).

As highlighted earlier, quantitative indicators provide a good source of evidence for tracking research outputs, but alone, they are not enough; they need to be supplemented. Thus, metrics have evoked mixed emotions from the research community, which has resulted in various declarations such as the 2012 DORA, the Metric Tide, and the Leiden Manifesto for research metrics (Hicks et al., 2015). Wilsdon et al. (2015, p.xi) assert that higher education leaders ought to develop a clear statement of principles on their approach to research assessment, including the role of quantitative indicators. While these declarations are a decade old, the research community in the global South is still focused on academic impact and metrics. These declarations highlight the importance of prioritising equity and transparency, as well as adopting a holistic view of research assessment on how researchers' contributions are viewed. Equity and transparency are some of the key challenges with the use of metrics for assessing research impact. This is because quantitative indicators are extracted from Western bibliometric databases that are biased towards the global South and thus further exacerbate epistemic injustices embedded in the assessment systems. Thus, a call for reform in how research is assessed in HEIs, and related contexts is necessary to drive locally relevant and impactful research. This would usher a shift away from the 'rat race' of metrics and towards adopting a holistic view in research assessment processes as well as valuing and nurturing talent (Schmidt, Curry & Hatch, 2021). Similarly, these declarations and RRA principles have been significant as they provide a needed shift from describing the problems within research assessment towards designing and implementing solutions (Curry et al., 2020).

The issue of systemic biases has been at the core of metric-based research assessment systems. Moreover, a set of indicators can determine or hinder career progression if institutions in the global South continue to misapply the limited set of criteria that they use for allocating funding, promotion and tenure processes. Therefore, the time is now for reform in research assessment, so research assessments are more context-sensitive and equitable (Mfengu, 2022). This will no doubt drive research impact beyond the academy, but it will also encourage alignment between policy and practice related to research impact assessment. This approach not only has the potential to centre the societal impact of research but also has the potential to embrace agency and context in research assessments. Research assessments tend to be misaligned with institutional policies, values and missions for many global South institutions and aligning them will encourage researchers to contribute to social challenges affecting their immediate communities.

### ***Equitable research assessment***

Epistemic justice in research assessment is accentuated by the increasing awareness that a rich tapestry of perspectives enriches the robustness and relevance of research beyond academia. Traditional biases in academic publishing, which have historically privileged certain geographies, languages, and epistemologies, must be addressed (Dadze-Arthur & Mangai, 2024) if universities are to fully serve their global and diverse stakeholder base. ECRs and young academics, post-apartheid, must contend with performance systems that privilege the global north and socially white perspectives and knowledge in a black-majority region (Modiri, 2020, p.171). These authors argue that the overrepresentation of whites and power tends to wield over the production and dissemination of knowledge and discourse in the academy. Therefore, it is important to turn the tide and resist the commodification of emancipatory knowledge and its penetration by assessing researchers in ways that are decolonial and socially just.

Mamdani argued that historically, white HEIs in South Africa had intellectual freedom but lacked social accountability (Adebajo, 2020, p.21). This raises the question of how universities can maintain autonomy when they are being funded to be “productive”. Highlighting the need to reconceptualise productivity and excellence in line with social justice principles. While we are post-apartheid and have started the decolonisation project that began years ago, coloniality still exists in a lot of academia and scholarly communications; consequently, a call for a transformative approach to research assessment. Research impact assessment needs to be viewed holistically, not only focusing on research outputs but also research contribution and therefore, indicators used should be able to ‘measure’ change because of one’s research contribution. This calls for a realignment of research assessment with the purpose of research and the transformative agenda of universities. Modiri (2020, pp.158-59) further argues that the problem transpires when the Eurocentrism of university institutional structures, academic research, curricula and pedagogy migrate from the margin and the underground to the hegemonic centre. This is what happens when universities institutionalise unstable and contested political histories, subjectivities and locations into curricula and research (Modiri, 2020) and, by extension, Western research assessment practices.

### ***Conclusion and recommendations***

This study examined the epistemic injustices in current research assessment systems. It explored the transformative power of equitable research performance systems in driving research impact in South Africa and the global South by extrapolation. The study outlined the challenges with the current assessment processes, which are focused on academic impact and quantitative measures.

Therefore, resulting in inequitable recognition and rewards for researchers who focus on research impact, which is more complicated and long-term and might have greater benefits on policy, practice and the real world, which is necessary to contribute to addressing social challenges. Moreover, societal impact hinges on recognising and rewarding scholarship that is impactful beyond academic impact, as researchers' behaviour is influenced by what is rewarded. With the global South experiencing unique developmental challenges, research emanating from HEIs and research councils in the region has a critical role to play in addressing some of the inequalities in society. Hence, research assessment systems need to be transformed in line with changes in scholarly communication, as research outputs and impacts are now more diverse, but assessment systems have remained westernised and metric-based. Thus, the study recommends the following:

- a. HEIs need to interrogate the policies and structures that inform current research assessment systems to ensure these are aligned with institutional and national values in support of the societal impact of research,
- b. Concerted effort and action from institutional and national leaders are key to reforming performance and research assessment systems and practices to be more equitable and socially just, and
- c. Centering research assessment processes in the decolonisation agenda, as it is directly linked to the curriculum and scholarly communication.

While we recognise that South African HEIs are in the early stages of research reform, a fundamental shift in policies, processes and power structures is crucial to drive research assessment reform. Research assessment reform requires a whole system change and buy-in from researchers and support staff. It also requires a different way of thinking from what is currently in practice for a meaningful change to be realised and to drive research impact. This is because scholarly communication, research, and research assessment are still deeply ingrained in coloniality and dominant powers, which need to be dismantled to build inclusive and equitable research assessment systems.

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