



May the real professor please stand up?

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26 October 2022

The Zambia Qualifications Authority has confronted an issue that many countries avoid. The Authority has issued a directive that honorary degrees must be listed as awards and honours because honorary degrees are not qualifications. In addition, the Zambia Qualifications Authority has instructed that “h.c” (for honoris causa) must be appended next to the Dr (Doctor) title whenever a Dr is used, if it is an honorary doctorate.

South Africa should insist on this too. Actually, people who have not written a doctoral thesis should not be allowed to use Dr even when awarded honorary doctorates. In addition, such individuals even when they are in universities must not supervise or examine a doctoral study. Those that attempted doctoral studies and could not complete, should not even be considered for honorary doctoral degrees.

There can be some exceptions but the process should be rigorous such as in the Rhodes University’s award process for a senior doctorate. There must be some form of assessment to determine whether there is enough to permit that someone is awarded an honorary doctorate. The committees that make such recommendations should be populated by people who understand what a doctorate is.

There is another important conversation to be had in order to find a truthful answer to the question of what a real professor is. Ordinarily, a professorship is the highest academic rank at a university (or college in the context of United States and Canada). Professors are accomplished academics and experts in their research areas in addition to lecturing and postgraduate supervision. Professors normally have a doctoral degree as a terminal degree and have made significant contribution to knowledge or science. Professors profess on something. Professors publish.

Indeed, a professorship is not a qualification. It is a recognition for one’s contribution towards professing knowledge in a particular discipline. In the academic sphere, the entry level of professorship is associate professor. Then there is a (full) professor. There can also be a research professor. There are also distinguished professors.

Then there are honorary professors, adjunct professors and professors of practice. Adjunct professors are not required to conduct research,

publish papers or attend staff meetings. They should also not be allowed to supervise or examine doctoral studies. The same can be said about professors of practice. These are senior professionals who have demonstrated excellence in a particular field or in leading. They must have achieved international reputation in the respective field.

We are clarifying what these different titles mean because there is a new disturbing trend in some of the South African universities that are dishing out dubious professorships. It is inquisitive that among the universities that have been handing questionable professorships is Unisa, Wits and Stellenbosch. Ironically, the latter two institutions' standards of quality are often overrated and for them to be caught up in professorial shenanigans raises more questions than answers. Our shared concern is that if left un-attended, the new trends in professorship in South Africa would cause this noble profession to lose its meaning.

Each and every university has a set and approved criteria for academic promotion to Senior Lecturer or Professor. Among others, such a criterion includes a certain number of quality research outputs such as scientific publications and successful supervision of postgraduate studies. Inasmuch as universities are autonomous, the requirements for professorship need to be harmonised at the national level in order to maintain proper peer recognition and respect. There may be a need to relook at the policies that govern the awarding of professorships in the various universities in South Africa.

A quick search of Google Scholar bears testimony that some of the so-called Professors do not have a single scientific contribution in peer reviewed publications. This is an insult to the real Professors who have earned their ropes through a meaningful contribution to the knowledge industry. For some universities to lower promotion requirements to accommodate some of the dubious Professors can only be explained within the context of the corporatisation of higher education.

From a Public Relations (PR) point of view, it boosts the image of the university if it formalises its association with celebrities and public figures. It is within this context that much of the questionable professorships have been propagated by the business schools. Branding is critical for business schools, who are largely known for generating the much needed third stream income through consulting and donations; and lesser known for scholarly excellence.

It is this deterioration of professorial standards that has produced so many pseudo-professors who cannot sustain a simple academic discourse and when ideationally challenged, they resort to either administrative dictatorship or legal intervention – a development that is tantamount to a wanton violation of academic freedom. Thus, they have

not internalised the reality of ideational spaces as a fulcrum of critical enquiry and exchange of ideas as opposed to conformity.

Let it be known that we do not have anything personal against the new crop of professors or the universities that give professorships without due regard of what it means to profess. We are disturbed by the trend we are observing, and we feel we should start a conversation around this. We might be missing something.

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