



On becoming and being an A-rated researcher: Conversations with South African A-rated scholars in education

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Abstract

One of the mandates of the National Research Foundation (NRF) is to benchmark research quality through its rating system, through which individuals who exemplify the highest standards of research are recognised by an extensive network of South African and international peer reviewers. There are five rating categories established in the rating system, A-rating being the ultimate rating signifying being internationally leading scholars in their field. In this reflective paper, three A-rated scholars in education, through a webinar conversation, spoke about their personal journey on becoming A-rated. Their conversation highlighted several affordances and challenges along their journey, whilst also cautioning emerging scholars on some of the pitfalls that they may encounter or should avoid. We argue, in this paper, that the journey to becoming exemplary researchers is entangled among the intra-actions of the research community, the context, the research focus, and the individual.

Keywords: A-rated scholars, NRF rating system, distinguished researchers, intra-actions, politics of rating

Introduction

Celebrating 20 years of existence, the National Research Foundation (NRF) published “THE HIDDEN FORCE: The contribution of science to society” (2022), in which President Nelson Mandela’s central message on research to the nation in 1996 was referenced.

Speaking at the opening of the Academy of Science of South Africa in 1996, President Mandela noted the challenges faced by the South African scientific community. . . ‘South Africa’s need for rapid expansion of its scientific and technological skills is immense. It is inhibited by the disastrous restriction which apartheid imposed on the level of scientific and technological education; and by an image of science tarnished in the eyes of the majority by associations with the past. On your shoulders rests the challenge of giving science a face that inspires our youth to seek out science, engineering and technology.’ (p 13)

At this time, the NRF had just been conceived of at the national level under the National Research Foundation Act of 1998, with the purpose of supporting, promoting, and recognising research and scholars in South Africa. At an organisational level, the South African Education Research Association (SAERA) emerged in 2013 out of a desire to harness the historically disparate research associations that existed in the country with a similar mandate of supporting, promoting, disseminating, and developing research and research capacities in the broad field of education. One of the mandates of the NRF was to benchmark research quality through its rating system, through which individuals who exemplify the highest standards of research are recognised by an extensive network of South African and international peer reviewers. Through this system of recognition, 4583 rated researchers in South Africa have been recognised, 240 of whom are in the broad field of Education.¹ The rating system has five categories representing various levels of recognition, with A-rated researchers being the most distinguished. Currently, 131 scholars are A-rated of whom four are in the focus area of Education (cf. NRF spreadsheet of rated researchers published on their website in 2023). How one becomes an A-rated scholar is the focus of this paper; we identify the opportunities for growth, the challenges experienced, and the creation of opportunities for the development of early career researchers who, following Mandela, aspire to “[give] science a face that inspires our youth to seek out science.”

In a webinar conversation, held June 19, 2021, and hosted by SAERA, A-rated scholars in education spoke about the journey they undertook to become A-rated and about the opportunities, affordances, entanglements, and activities related to research capacity building that enabled them to reach the highest level of research.

SAERA, as a research association, promotes educational research, disseminates it, and acts as a development forum for early career researchers (ECRs). Through its members, the research agendas of the nation are supported, promoted, and sustained and the development of ECRs is assured. In this paper, we focus on the role of A-rated researchers in promoting SAERA’s

1 NRF spreadsheet of rated researchers, 2023

key objectives. We argue that the journey to becoming exemplary researchers is entangled among the intra-actions of the research community, the context, the research focus, and the individual, along with finances and research spaces such as collaborations, universities, and research associations like SAERA. We draw on Barad's (2003) notion of entanglement and intra-action to exemplify the journey travelled by researchers in aspiring to become good researchers and also agentic in both research and research capacity development.

The NRF rating system for research recognition

The NRF is tasked with encouraging and supporting research and innovation across a range of disciplines. The NRF also administers a rating system applicable to researchers who are affiliated with universities in South Africa. The primary aim of the NRF rating system is to cultivate a scientifically competitive environment on a global scale in South Africa. Researchers are assessed through a peer review system and given a rating according to their research production, reach, impact, and scholarly contribution to their respective fields. According to the NRF website,² the rating system typically assigns researchers to one of five categories—A, B, C, P, or Y.³ Within categories A, B, and C, there are sub-categories. The ratings are based exclusively on the research outputs and the level of their global reach. The determination of which category or sub-category a researcher is awarded depends on the quality and impact of such research outputs over the previous eight years, as determined by national and international peers appointed by NRF. For the purposes of this paper, those categorized as A1 researchers are recognized by all reviewers as being internationally leading scholars in their field given the high quality and wide impact, beyond a narrow field of specialisation, of their recent research outputs, while those categorised as A2 are recognised internationally by the majority of reviewers as leading scholars in their field for the high quality and impact (either wide or confined) of their recent research outputs.

While the rating categories or sub-categories are descriptively clear and the review process is organised logically, there is contestation about, and critique of, such a rating system. Some (Maistry, 2019; Wingfield & Vaughan, 2017) have argued that the rating system is another of the neoliberal influences on higher education, both in relation to demanding accountability of academics and surveillance of them. Additionally, marketability and financial derivatives are linked to global and national rankings of higher education institutions. The peer review processes need significant critique. Fedderke's (2013) criticism included poor reliability, a lack of fairness and of predictive ability, and inefficiency. Furthermore, this process forces researchers to follow reviews slavishly and offers limited opportunity for contestation and retort.

Despite these objections and critiques, Brussow (2016) maintained that the NRF rating system demonstrates that academics and researchers, including ECRs, have shown outstanding academic performance, have contributed substantially to science, and are

2 <https://www.nrf.ac.za/rating/#:~:text=NRF ratings are allocated based,in high impact journals Foutlets.>

3 For details about the NRF rating categories and sub-categories, refer to <https://uct.ac.za/research-support-hub/accreditation-evaluation-nrf-ratings/nrf-rating-categories>

recognised as international leaders in their respective fields in advancing humanity's body of knowledge or securing a brighter future for all South Africans in line with the agenda of research associations like SAERA.

Much of the literature on rating systems is about procedural issues related to review processes and rating incentives. For example, Coldwell (2019) argued that the NRF rating and, indeed, ratings in other countries, are all insufficiently scientific and that anyway such a scientifically determined system is unattainable given errors of objectivity, the interpretation of key concepts used (such as, for example, international acclaim) in the rating system and the concentrated focus on individualism in South Africa as opposed to countries in the Global North whose academics focus on collectivism. Questions about the scientific value embedded in individualised research outputs have also been raised in rating systems. Drawing on Kuhn's notion that science does not develop through the accumulation of individual discoveries and inventions but through changes in the values and beliefs of scientists, Callaghan (2018: p. 2) cited Alvesson and Gabriel who claimed that the "standardisation of research and publications constrains the imagination and creativity of scholars and restricts the social relevance of their work." Callaghan (2018) argued that such standardisation results in the proliferation of non-innovative research publications that do not contribute ultimately to paradigm shifts in knowledge production.

Another key issue related to research publication and associated rating systems is the need for human capital in academia. Maluleka and Nkwe (2020) illuminated the concerns relating to the shortage of human resources in the knowledge production and research sector and raised the question about how to develop the next generation of prolific researchers. In the South African context, a strong focus has been placed on developing ECRs to take up key research positions in academia that are held, largely, by retiring academics. In raising this issue of the next generation of ECRs, Maluleka and Nkwe's study suggested that while prolific scholars publish their works in international journals, ECRs struggle to get published during their early career. Being mentored by prolific scholars, they argued, would be one way of developing their capabilities and enabling them to become the next generation of productive, highly rated scholars. Breetzke and Hedding (2020) alluded to the challenges of representation of prolific researchers in South Africa, indicating that most A-rated researchers are white males but that an increasing number of Black Africans are becoming rated by the NRF. Both Maluleka and Nkwe (2020) and Breetzke and Hedding (2020) referred to the influence of transformational agendas related to developing the next generation of productive scholars through a sustained focus on ECR development.

Theoretical framings

Noting the complexities associated with research, university context, and rating systems, we drew on Barad's (2003) notion of entanglement and intra-action to make sense of, and draw inspiration from, A-rated scholars and their respective journeys to becoming recognised for their intellectual contribution to knowledge on a global level. The complexities, as evidenced through the conversation of three A-rated scholars, among others, are informed by the

situatedness of individuals, the intellectual communities and spaces they inhabit and how they interact, the politics of knowledge, and the rating system. Barad's (2003) concept of entanglement extends beyond physical connections between and among separate entities in emphasising the absence of true independence or self-contained existence. Instead, for her, everything is closely interconnected and interdependent, whether at the quantum level or in our daily lives. This interconnectedness shapes the identities and characteristics of entities through their relationships with others, thus challenging traditional notions of individuality and agency. Agency, in this view, emerges from intricate relationships within intra-actions, thus highlighting the pervasive influence of the surrounding environment and interactions. When applied to the context of networks of engagement, Barad's (2003) perspective underscores the notion that agency is not a standalone entity. Rather, it emerges from the intricate relationships within intra-actions. Located in the concept of intra-action, agency is not seen as an inherent quality possessed by an individual or a human that can be exercised. Instead, it is perceived as a dynamic interplay of forces, as described by Barad (2007, p. 141), in which "all designated entities are continually engaged in exchanges and diffractions, mutually influencing and operating inseparably."

From the perspective of entanglement, a profound shift in our perception of reality emerges, encouraging us to embrace fully the interconnected nature of all things. It emphasises that existence is a collective endeavour in which boundaries become fluid and distinctions between oneself and others become blurred. To achieve the status of a distinguished researcher, one must wholeheartedly embrace entanglement through intra-action. Intra-action, a term and concept introduced by Haraway in 1992 and intra-actively developed by Barad (according to Murrin, 2022), involves recognising that research does not exist in isolation but thrives within a dynamic network of ideas, individuals, spaces, and influences. Intra-actions dissolve borders and linear timelines, allowing simultaneous thinking and fostering comprehensive understanding. Distinguished researchers understand that knowledge is co-constructed within dynamic networks of ideas, individuals, and influences. Recognising the entangled nature of research and process, they contribute to innovative and impactful discoveries in our interconnected world.

Methodology

During the COVID-19 restrictions on social gatherings, the activities of SAERA continued on various digital platforms. Monthly webinars were facilitated by Special Interest Groups and the executive of SAERA. One such webinar, convened by the President of SAERA, was a conversation held on June 9, 2021 among three of the four A-rated scientists in the field of Education. The fourth A-rated scientist delivered a public lecture under the banner of SAERA's Nelson Mandela Legacy Lecture. The title of the conversation webinar was "How to build a scholarly profile in educational research." The conversationalists were Professor Jonathan Jansen (chair of the webinar), Professor Melanie Walker, and Professor Crain Soudien. For this paper, we used the recording of this webinar from which we picked up key issues of research and capacity development to accentuate the key moments, processes, and

collaborations involved in building a scholarly profile.⁴ During the webinar, the chair commented that the conversation should be written up. We all reviewed the webinar recording independently and made our own notes that we then shared with each other. At a subsequent meeting we discussed the notes and determined the themes collectively. We then chose three themes to align this paper to the intent of the 10th anniversary special issue of the *Journal of Education* with its focus on SAERA. We have quoted long extracts from this conversation to accentuate the entanglements and intra-actions inherent in becoming an A-rated researcher. We illuminate, through these entanglements and intra-actions between and among their affordances and collaborations along their journey, what it takes to build a scholarly profile

Affirmation and the politics of knowledge in ratings

Achieving an A-rated status for a South African scholar means different things to different scholars. Personal recognition and reward are but two aspects of affirmation that inspire motivation to sustain the trajectory. Beyond this affirmation lie deeper things that include the vitality of these South African scholars in the global intellectual environment along with the recognition of their peers around the world who recognise that South African scholars have something substantive to contribute despite having been in intellectual isolation from the world during apartheid, as Jansen emphasises and to which Mandela referred in his speech at the Academy of Science of South Africa. Hence, being rated is a big thing, not just for the individual but also because it recognises this country as a contributor to the global intellect, thus disrupting the tarnished image of science in South Africa to which Mandela referred.

Walker said that it was personally rewarding and welcoming, not just for her, but much more for the group that is made up entirely of ECRs with her being the only senior researcher. She went on to elaborate that being rated is good for the group and its profile because it opens up possibilities for them in terms of thinking that if she can do it, so can they.

Soudien concurred on the personal affirmation which he said ought to be doing this in different ways, in many of the contexts in which we work, to affirm people repeatedly. Of course, politics surround this kind of affirmation and question the metrics used in these indices since this bears on the way in which universities get rated. There is a political question here that we all need to think about—the politics of knowledge. The key thing about this acknowledgement is the opportunity it affords and underpins for us to assert the absolute vitality of the South African intellectual environment and to say that we have something about which to speak back to the global environment and acknowledge the real importance of South African scholars thinking about the world. We do not need to think that our work is derivative of other people's work. Our own sociologies provide enough provocation for us to be able to say significant things about the condition of people everywhere in the world.

4 The recording of the webinar is on the SAERA YouTube channel and is available at <https://youtu.be/9dVEeMATqNw?si=1oKtztj5616er9Y-J>.

Jonathan Jansen underscored the point that our work does not have to be seen to be derivative of other people's work. The meaning or value of A-rating is that our peers in other parts of the world think that we have something to say, not that we are being derivative. Very often South African researchers and academics do not have a good sense of themselves, in part because of our historical isolation during apartheid, and in part because of our intellectual isolation from major currents of thinking in the world. The ratings, or the worth or weighting of your scholarship depends on people outside the country. For Jansen, this is the way we should measure ourselves whether we are playing soccer or doing research. It does matter how our colleagues in other parts of the world, in Brazil, or in Canada, for example, think about our work.

Ratings do have affordances that are generative intellectually both individually and collectively. ECRs are associated with rated scholars in various constellations of support, growth, exposure, and learning. In Walker's case, the profile of her group of ECRs benefits from the rating recognition that she receives and is, therefore, generative both in terms of capacity development and in building belief in the possibilities of aspiring to such standards of achievement. In Crain's view, the affordances are in the knowledge domain. Noting fervently the politics of knowledge, to which we return in the next section, he celebrates the fact that he (and others) are recognised for the intellectual contribution to the global intellect; peers in other parts of the world think that they have something to say. Hence, through the affordances of A-rating, researchers derive substantial gains personally, collectively, and intellectually. These affordances, be it from the individual A-rated scholar in the knowledge domain or in the peer recognition system, come about through the intra-actions of associations and of spaces that one occupies.

Generous and generative spaces for growing as a scholar

The journey to becoming A-rated is punctuated by, among other factors, the local politics and the conditions of possibilities. Jansen defined the generous and generative spaces that one occupies as "the company [one] keep[s]." Their entanglement in the generative spaces they occupy, their influence, and their generosity in relation to the affordances of their positionality in institutions, in research associations, and in knowledge domains, provide substantive and fertile ground for possibilities, capacity development in the self and in others, and substantive knowledge contribution. All this is intra-actively related, and the sum total is significant in shaping individuals in the academic sphere but also in shaping academia into a vibrant ecosystem in which the pursuit of knowledge has no boundaries.

Walker, whose focus area is in human development in higher education, asserts that it is not what she does but how she got to being A-rating that matters.

So I think of myself as a slight outlier, in terms of the field of education, and often feel closer to development studies. But I've been working with Amartya Sen and other capabilitarians (scholars working in the field of capability theory) now for around 20 years and I found them generative and productive. And then that's also

what we do as a group. The early career researchers [are] also doing PhD work and postdoctoral work and writing books, [so are] drawing on these ideas and others. So that's what I do. And we look at access, we look at participation, we look at going out of higher education, we look at inequalities of different kinds and so on. So, what we do is partly driven by interest and partly driven also by funding opportunities. I think I'm very fortunate, because I've been thinking about the conditions of possibility of what's needed to help [someone] move along this path. And I think I'm very lucky to have had the SARChI Chair or to hold the SARChI Chair, because that does provide stability of funding over a long period of time. And I think that's quite important. So, in terms of how you get to where you are, you have to think quite hard about the context, the country that you're in, the institution that you're in, which may be more or less helpful, and the field you work in. I think issues of gender do still play out in the academy.

So, I think context matters in terms of getting where you are. And for me, I spent 15 years working in the UK. And I have to say that that was very formative for me. It's a highly neoliberalised system, which is very, very problematic in terms of the way the whole thing works, but what it does do is make you realize that you are accountable for the way that you spend your time. Simply producing a publication a year is not going to get you very far. I mean, I worked in two elite institutions, Sheffield and Nottingham, and they were challenging contexts and very interesting contexts with wonderful colleagues.

When I was promoted, Ron Barnette asked me, "What's distinctive about your contribution to scholarship?" but I [had] never thought [about] that. That for me was a strategically important moment because I had to think about what holds together what I am doing as I go forward. And then I think the other thing that's really important for anybody's trajectory is the commitment that you bring to it. So yes, it requires a lot of hard work. If you want to go down this path and I'm not necessarily convinced that this is something that everybody might want to do [and] give up a lot on the way in order to do it, it's a lot of hard work, it's long working hours, it's sort of challenging and pushing at creativity, originality and so on all through as you proceed. But I think if you're not committed, if you don't have a real commitment and interest in what you do, it seems to me pointless.

Crain said,

I am more interested in the way in which we learn, our minds and the social context we are in. How do we learn these conceits that we are better than others? How do we learn superiority and how do we learn inferiority? I am learning about the relationship between biology and psychology.

Becoming an A-rated scholar is not straight forward. It's a lot to do with the fact that I had immense opportunities. I had more opportunities of being in the company of leading scholars in education, particularly in sociology in the world, including peers

in South Africa. It has been an extraordinary thing thinking of myself as not simply a South African, [but] a person who has responsibilities and interconnections and commitment elsewhere. I had to fight consistently against being sucked into pettiness of the local, pettiness of the small circles in which we might find ourselves in our departments, being dragged down by the mediocrity of those environments and having those environments determine our futures. I should be able to imagine myself into a much bigger cosmos in which I could take both responsibility and accept the generosity of other people.

Jansen added

I wasted my time publishing in wrong journals and commenting on every media interview and just making wrong choices for a number of years and then [went] straight into university administration. But I wish I had made better decisions.

The entanglement (Barad, 2003) on becoming an A-rated scholar is complex and cannot be attributed to any one singular attribute. The intra-actions in a research ecology are complex. Its (ecology) constituents include, among others, time, accessibility, opportunity, company, peers, funding, place, the self, the constituent, and choices. Becoming a distinguished researcher revolves around embracing entanglement through intra-action across the intellectual spaces that we occupy.

Things not to do: Lessons learnt along the journey

Journeys are experiential. Our thoughts, feelings, emotions, incidents, assertions, stops, and continuities bring different perspectives to becoming, in this context, an A-rated scholar. The entanglements associated with being an academic and in academic communities can also be detrimental to such becoming.

Soudien said,

Some of the negative things are jealousy, envy, sense of inferiority, [and] being preoccupied with small politics; small mindedness is a constant accompaniment that is hard to shrug off, because the academic world is so competitive. The competition brings out the worst in all of us—clubs, cliques, factions that you see in [the] political world thrive too easily in our own academic communities. The ideal of a university is openness, and hospitality. [It is an] incredibly difficult thing to see that. The negativity is not seeing these realities that percolate around us in ways that are our undoing in the end. Move beyond that stuff as quickly as you can.

Walker added,

Competition and judgement are fuelled by the individualised rating system. In the UK it's about the research assessment exercise. Rating is not done on an individual, it is done at a departmental level. In a way an academic career is not for the thin-skinned.

[It involves] being judged, publishing in good journals, [and] facing rejections along your career. We should not see this as a judgement on a person. There is a tendency to underrate oneself, not realizing and appreciating what you are and what you can do and constantly being surprised at not having a clear narrative line or thread which you could pull through all the work that you do. You need a bigger story, like social justice or social identity which can be constructed post hoc, to tell about your work and be able to weave to hold together in a way that make sense to you and others. One needs to do this early in [one's] career. The negative is not realising these things, not having support, and not having mentoring.

The detrimental entanglements, these scholars argue, should be realised and shrugged off as quickly as possible so as to open new possibilities with entanglements that are generative. Think beyond the local, establish the bigger narrative to which one should contribute and see judgements as enabling. These are difficult to untangle, but necessary in pursuits of greater distinctiveness and to be able to say things that have a significance for the condition of people everywhere in the world.

Discussion

Biographical research approaches have, over the last three decades, permeated the knowledge production terrain (Dhunpath, 2000; Le Grange, et al., 2020), creating spaces between the methodological nationalism in the social sciences (Ruokonen-Engler, et al., 2016) and ethnographic studies as alternative ways of knowing. In this respect, the biographic trajectories of the A-rated researchers have illuminated their entangled and intra-active lives through their geographies, connections, relationships, and emotions recounted in their research profiles. These entanglements and intra-actions with the humans and more than humans have illuminated the complexities associated with becoming and being prolific scholars and have contributed ultimately to their A-rating status.

The NRF rating system has existed for almost 30 years and this suggests that its purpose to encourage and support research and innovation is being met. The increasing number of distinguished scholars who have been rated and the funding affordance to support and develop the country's academics and scholars through its rating incentives bears testimony to its value in a transforming and developing country. Despite the contestations and critiques of the rating and incentive system of the NRF, a growing number of distinguished academics and scholars are leaders in global intellectual spaces. Since other countries fund universities rather than individuals, Wingfield and Vaughan (2017) have considered this incentive system of recognition for researchers with a proven record of scientific excellence to be a unique approach among global rating systems since it rewards individual researchers rather than their institutions or particular projects. Irrespective of who receives the rewards, the contribution to global intellectual discourse is noted through this particular incentive system.

In contemporary academia, the emphasis on competition mirrors broader societal trends in various other contexts. As Carson et al. (2013) have asserted, the frequently invoked notion

of publish or perish encapsulates the intense pressures with which academics grapple. Walker observed that in the academic sphere, competition is commonplace, manifesting as an unrelenting pursuit of publication in prestigious journals and the acquisition of research funding that necessitates perpetual evaluation of, and comparison with, peers, and is a rigorous assessment process that engenders a sense of judgment. Carson et al. (2013) concurred with this viewpoint, noting that in scientifically advanced nations, scholars are incentivised to engage in competitive endeavours, with the primary objective of establishing their expertise in their respective fields. This relentless competition, they contend, is driven by the pursuit of career advancement and increased income, and it is a characteristic feature of contemporary academia.

Such a hyper-competitive environment in academia can be seen to be a consequence of neoliberal transformations in higher education. This dominant competitive ethos underscores a significant shift in the academic landscape as scholars vie for recognition and professional progression. While this competitive paradigm is an influential element, it is important to explore the nuances of the individualised rating systems prevalent in academia, a facet highlighted by Walker, who acknowledged the challenges associated with individualised rating systems in academia, in her emphasising the pressures placed on scholars to excel consistently. Numerous countries employ individualised rating systems that evaluate academics based on their scholarly achievements, including publications and research impact. In this context, Walker's observations show the intricate interplay between competition, judgment, and knowledge production emerging out of these intra-actions. The highly competitive milieu to which she alludes necessitates that academics continually demonstrate their academic expertise that is measured by metrics such as research output, journal publications, and impact scores. The Research Assessment Exercise in the United Kingdom exemplifies this evaluative approach at the departmental level. While this illuminates the direct scrutiny faced by individual academics, it does not entirely negate the implications for their self-esteem. Walker astutely underscored the necessity for resilience in academia, highlighting the demanding nature of an academic career. Rejection, critique, and the unpredictable trajectory of research and publication are constants in the academic realm. She urges recognition that setbacks and refusals are integral components of the academic journey and cautions against interpreting them as personal judgments.

Being A-rated brings personal affirmation, not just for oneself but for the collaborative group with which one engages. The affirmation of being distinguished and seen to be among the contributors to global intellect acts as both the drive to continue on this path of influence and to become aspiring intellects. Burt (2005) explored the concept of structural holes in the discourse of social capital and emphasised the significance of brokerage (bridging gaps between disconnected groups that are part of the structural holes) for individuals seeking innovative ideas or diverse perspectives. Distinguished researchers can leverage networking to become brokers who connect otherwise isolated communities in academia. The A-rated researchers are the brokers in the intra-actions in the various intellectual and supportive spaces that they occupy, and draw on their dynamic network of ideas, individuals, spaces, and spheres of influence. Noting the historical intellectual isolation from major currents of

thinking, the A-rated researchers and those located in other rating categories have the potential to use their social and intellectual capital to broker connections between the ECRs and the research and intellectual arenas within which they can develop and grow as distinguished scholars.

Said, a Palestinian-American scholar, coined the term amateur intellectual and its emergence was strongly influenced by his commitment to social justice (Mir, 2015). Said (1994) noted that an intellectual as a professional works for a living and becomes marketable by not straying outside defined paradigms or limits and subscribes to a cult of expertise that is limited to a narrow area of knowledge that is devoid of interdisciplinary exploration. An amateur intellectual, he explained, is one who desires to be moved not by profit or reward but by unquenchable interest in the larger picture, making connections across lines and barriers, and in caring for ideas despite the restrictions of a profession. Said advocated for the role of an amateur intellectual rather than submitting to the pressures of professionalism and institutionalised expertise. In the context of A-rated scholars, the amateur intellectual offers valuable insights that resonate with their experiences of crossing disciplinary boundaries. Said's notion of an amateur intellectual underscores several common themes, including interdisciplinary engagement, being a participant in public engagement, and approaching knowledge for its intrinsic gain (Mir, 2015). A strong resonance between Said's phenomenon of the amateur intellectual and A-rated researchers is manifested by interdisciplinary engagement, whereby A-rated scholars, to enrich their scholarship, are known for their ability to connect with different fields of study, understanding that insights can be gleaned from a myriad of disciplines. Said (1994) also engaged with many domains from music to politics and history that enabled him to have a fresh perspective on complex issues. For both A-rated scholars and Said's amateur intellectuals, using interdisciplinary knowledge and methodology while maintaining a clear line of narrative fosters a holistic understanding of the world, leading to quality, and to comprehensive and nuanced solutions.

Conclusion

The journey to becoming an A-rated scholar is complex and multifaceted, involving many opportunities and challenges. Embracing connections and intra-actions, as outlined by Barad's theoretical framework, is crucial for achieving scholarly excellence. Despite criticism, the NRF rating system has played a vital role in recognising and supporting distinguished South African researchers on a global scale. We have highlighted in this paper the importance of supportive environments, mentorship, and interdisciplinary collaboration in scholars' development that align with Said's concept of the amateur intellectual. A-rated scholars emphasise the need to overcome challenges like competition and self-doubt, foregrounding resilience and commitment. Ultimately, becoming an A-rated scholar involves contributing to the global academic discourse, advancing scholarship, and inspiring future generations of researchers. Ultimately, the A-rated scholars do give science a face, not just for young people, but for all researchers, emerging and established.

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