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Honorary Degrees and Professorships and the Inappropriate Use of Academic Titles

Abstract

Academic titles carry special meanings to people in academic environments. They signify academic achievement and authority, as well as academic roles and/or ranks. The use of academic titles among people in academia serves the purpose of demonstrating their mutual recognition and respect for one another's academic achievements, for the roles they play, and for their ranks in the academic hierarchy or career ladder. The practice of conferring honorary degrees and professorships, and the consequent insistence to use academic titles by some among the conferees of such honorary degrees and professorships, has raised questions about the sanctity of the academic titles. The general consensus seems to be that academic titles are sacrosanct and should be protected and saved from those who are appropriating them by virtue of having been conferred honorary degrees or honorary professorships. The *Good Practice Guide on Honorary Degrees and Professorships* compiled by the Council on Higher Education is a valuable intervention to this effect. This piece of *Briefly Speaking* reflects on some of the international and national controversies around honorary degrees and professorships, and argues that the good practice guide will be an essential resource to use in addressing these controversies. It considers why honorary titles are so often problematic by suggesting that they are part of a wider 'growing obsession with titles' which is evident not only in the abuse of honorary titles, but also in the many examples of fraudulent claims of earned titles in South Africa. This piece of *Briefly Speaking* suggests that the problem of obsession with titles is also evident within the academy itself where earned titles are increasingly used as a means of maintaining organisational hierarchies that are at odds with egalitarianism, which many universities ostensibly profess as one of their values.

Keywords: academic titles, good practice guide, honorary degree, honorary professorship, *honoris causa*, public university

Introduction

Section 65C of Higher Education Act No 101 of 1997, as amended, states that a public university may, without examination, confer honorary degrees of master or doctor in any school or faculty on those persons that the public university

may deem worthy of such recognition. The section also counsels that an honorary degree is not an academic qualification and does not entitle the holder to the benefits conferred by an academic qualification, including registering to practice in a profession. Furthermore, section 54(7) prohibits private higher education institutions from conferring honorary degrees unless they are registered universities. Currently no private higher education institution is registered as a university.

In South Africa, as in many parts of the world, the appointment of professors is an exclusive preserve of individual universities. The same applies to the appointment of honorary professors. Accordingly, the Higher Education Act is silent on the appointment of professors and honorary professors.

There is confusion regarding the statuses of the honorary degrees and professorships *vis-à-vis* academically earned degrees and professorships. One area where the confusion reigns is in the use of academic titles. There are people conferred with honorary doctorate degrees who insist on using the 'doctor' (Dr) title. Similarly, there are people appointed as honorary professors who insist on being referred to as professors. The appropriation of academic titles by recipients of honorary degrees and professorships is against universal traditions in higher education. This *Briefly Speaking* looks at the awards of honorary degrees and professorships in South Africa and reflects on some of the concerns raised about them in the literature, mostly in relation to the use of academic titles. It considers the *Good Practice Guide on Honorary Degrees and Professorships* compiled by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and reflects on why this guide is of critical importance.

Academic titles in context

Academic titles are integral part of the rich traditions of higher education, universally. They are defined as designations conferred on people to signify status of achievement after having obtained a qualification, or to signify the academic roles that people play in a higher education institution, as well as ranks within those roles. An example of the latter is the academic title 'professor' which is a senior rank in teaching and/or research roles that academics play within a university (Shamos, 2002). Academic titles signify scholarly authority and recognition of achievements within academia. They are used among academics and researchers as a form of demonstrating mutual respect and recognition of one another's academic achievements and authority (Verna and Loo, 2009). Studies have found that the academic titles may also instil in students some levels of confidence and trust in academics or researchers who hold such titles. They make students believe that the academics or researchers with academic titles possess the requisite knowledge and authority to teach in a university, and to guide students in their academic endeavours. Similarly, studies have found that academic titles assist with motivating students and making them to aspire to work hard so that they may obtain similarly titles in future (Ellis and Travis, 2007).

Globally, it is a common practice that during university congregations, *honoris causa* or honorary degrees are conferred on individuals

who are recognised to have made remarkable contributions to society, culture, or specific knowledge domains or practice areas. These degrees are conferred without the conferees having registered and studied for, and fulfilled the conventional requirements of the degrees in question. The term '*honoris causa*', which means 'for the sake of honour', conveys the message that they are degrees that serve to recognise exceptional merits and achievements, rather than to mark the successful completion of formal learning programmes offered by a university. The *honoris causa* degrees are conferred mostly at doctoral level.

The first recorded instance of the award of an honorary doctoral degree was that conferred by the University of Oxford on Lionel Woodville in the 1470s (Buxton and Strickland, 1935). By the late 1500s, it had become common for universities in the United Kingdom (UK) to confer honorary doctorates on visiting royalty and nobility. This then became more common across Europe and included awards to papal and imperial figures (Dhondt, 2013). In the United States of America (USA), honorary doctorates and other honorary awards only emerged in the 1800s and not without condemnation by several organisations, such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The awarding of honorary degrees in the USA greatly declined in the early 20th century when they were largely frowned upon (Lady, 1967). Although many USA colleges have begun to confer honorary degrees in more recent years, several highly reputed universities such as Cornell, Stanford, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology are still against the practice (Tamrat, 2022).

Universities world-wide are also increasingly appointing prominent people as honorary professors. These are people recognised by universities for their significant contributions to specific field fields of study and/or research, often outside of traditional academic roles. They are typically awarded this title 'honorary professor' to acknowledge their expertise and potential to enhance the university's reputation and scholarship. Honorary professors are not salaried employees of a university. However, they may be granted certain privileges, such as access to university facilities, like libraries, and potentially even university email addresses. Increasingly, though, universities are appointing business executives who are good resources to assist the universities to attract companies for student placements or internships. They are also increasingly appointing influential politicians, philanthropists, and other prominent people whose association with an institution can have positive spin offs in one way or another. Therefore, honorary professors are increasingly becoming non-academic appointments and institutions are putting down rules that stipulate that they cannot use the title 'professor'. Nevertheless, they are permitted to use the qualified title 'Honorary Professor in …' (see the rules of University of Exeter, as an example: https://www.exeter.ac.uk/staff/employment/honorary/privileges/).

Controversies

Honorary doctorates and other honorary degrees have been mired in controversy since their inception (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2020). Protests against awardees and demands for the retraction of such awards are not uncommon. When the University of Oxford declined to award an honorary doctorate to former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, despite its tradition of conferring such *honoris causa* awards to any prime minister who was an Oxford alumnus, the conservative media reported this as an unacceptable 'snub by snobs' (Moore, 2015). The awarding of an honorary doctorate to the former US President, George Bush, by his alma mater, Yale University, in 2001, was met by a combination of general protests and student and staff boycotts. In 2008, the University of Edinburgh rescinded the honorary doctorate that it had conferred on former Zimbabwean President, Robert Mugabe, in 1984 (Vaznis, 2007). More recently, numerous honorary degrees awarded to comedian and convicted paedophile, Bill Cosby, have been rescinded. And in 2022, the School of Art Institute of Chicago rescinded an honorary doctorate awarded to Kanye West. The story of controversial awarding and retraction of honorary degrees is thus well known.

Probably the most common controversy is where recipients of honorary doctorates use the title outside of the university that conferred it as if it were a title achieved through the traditional means of making a 'significant and original academic contribution at the frontiers of a discipline or field' (CHE, 2013). The honorary title is a recognition of some kind of achievement by the recipient and is not an earned academic title. The general protocol, stated explicitly in most institutional honorary award policies, is that such titles may only be used in communication with the awarding institution. In cases where they are referenced outside of the awarding institution, it is expected that they should be clearly designated as *honoris causa* or similar terms, to indicate that they were awarded and not earned.

Another common controversy is the use of honorary degree awards to curry favour and to attract funding favours for an institution. While traditionally awarded to academics, there has been a shift towards honouring non-academic figures, particularly politicians and public officials, raising concerns about potential conflicts of interest (Mudzakkir, Bustami, Ikomatussuniah, and Maler, 2021). Osipian (2010) showed how Russian politicians, for example, have used influence to obtain both honorary doctorates and formal academic doctorates in order to accrue status. Similarly, Adamu (2023) and Tamrat (2022) both report on the use of honorary degrees in Ethiopia to secure support from 'politicians and wealthy people' and to reinforce ethnic class systems.

Another, more recent controversy is the awarding of honorary doctorates to celebrities, who have arguably not contributed significantly to scientific and artistic advancement, peace and social justice, or environmental sustainability – the three areas for which most recipients are recognised.

South Africa sadly has experience of all three of these controversies. For example, in April 2024, the former Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, indicated that he was aware that an

'international bible university' was awarding honorary doctorates to a range of celebrities. As an unregistered college, the said international bible university did not have the authority to award either earned or honorary degrees. The minister stated at the time that the Department of Higher Education and Training had a legal responsibility to protect the integrity of South African qualifications and that of the South African post school education and training system.

Haffejee (2022) reported how a chief executive officer of a parastatal entity based in Johannesburg, demanded that his staff refer to him as doctor despite not having an earned doctoral degree and instead holding an honorary degree, once again from the unregistered international bible university. Mahlatsi (2024) points to 'South Africa's growing obsession with titles' as a key part of the problem. She suggests that a disproportionate value is placed on titles as status symbols and that this in part explains such controversies.

The Good Practice Guide

The CHE has compiled a guide to assist South African higher education institutions in adhering to good practice. The guide presents the criteria for awarding honorary degrees and professorships. It was put together in response to concerns about inconsistent practices and demonstrable and potential misuse of honorary academic titles. The guide makes clear that only public universities may confer honorary degrees (as per Section 65C of the Higher Education Act). It though points out that private higher education institutions are not permitted to confer honorary degrees and professorships unless they are registered as universities. The guide reports general agreement in the sector that 'only institutions with accredited doctoral programmes should offer honorary degrees'.

The guide states that honorary degrees are intended to 'recognise exceptional contributions of individuals to knowledge, the university or society in general, and academic scholarship or research' though recipients need not meet 'normal academic requirements'. In order to address many of the worldwide abuse of such awards to curry favour, the guidelines state that they should not be awarded to university staff, students or council members or serving politicians (with limited exceptions). Importantly no financial contributions should be attached to such awards.

The guide specifies that honorary titles are not to be widely used. They should only be used in communication with the awarding institution, and reference to the award belongs in an 'Awards and Honours' section of the recipient's resume or CV, and should clearly avoid interpretation of the award as pertaining to the recipient's education history and qualifications.

Concerns about the use of titles

The concerns about the misuse of honorary titles reflects broader issues around how academic titles function as status markers both within and outside academic settings. The good practice guide reveals an underlying tension: honorary degrees are meant to recognise exceptional contributions, yet their potential misuse threatens academic credibility. The strict guidelines about when and

where recipients can use titles like 'Dr' or 'Professor' suggest a protection of status boundaries within academia.

The good practice guide raises concerns about 'variations, inconsistencies, and lack of clarity' in institutional practices, suggesting that what qualifies someone for professorship may differ significantly between universities. The entire good practice guide can be read as an attempt to address this slippage by establishing clearer boundaries around who can use academic titles and in which contexts. The concern appears to be that, without such guidance, the meaning and value of these titles—particularly 'professor'—could be further eroded through inconsistent application and potential misuse. This reflects a tension between the traditional understanding of professorship (based on scholarly achievement evaluated by peers) and newer pathways to the title that prioritise other forms of institutional position, contribution or institutional needs.

The guide mentions various titles including Distinguished Professor, Extraordinary Professor, Visiting Professor, Professor Emeritus, Professor of Practice, and Adjunct Professor. This proliferation potentially dilutes what it means to be a 'professor.' Even within the university, this term has significantly shifted in use and therefore meaning. For example, the guide notes that in some institutions non-staff members receive professorial titles through 'non-tenured or temporary contract teaching,' creating another category of professors with potentially differing qualifications.

The good practice guide also specifically notes that some universities may confer the title 'Professor' on individuals who assume senior leadership positions (like Vice-Chancellors) even when the title 'Professor' is not conferred on the grounds of academic achievements or distinction. This creates two pathways to the same title and arguably reflects a more widespread trend towards managerialism, whereby executive management have increasingly centralised control in the academy. The use of the title 'professor' by those who are not professing or have not met the criteria for such a title can mask the extent to which the stewardship of the academic project is no longer vested primarily with an academic professorship in senate (MeKonnon *et al*., 2018; Rowlands, 2019).

The term 'Professor' even when earned, was previously only associated with someone who was 'professing' at the time the title was in use (that is teaching and researching at the frontiers of a field). When a professor resigns or retires, they are expected to revert to 'Doctor' as their title, or, in the case where they did not have an earned doctorate, to other titles such as Mr or Ms. The title 'Professor Emeritus' is traditionally used to indicate that, by virtue of a professor's specific contributions to a field, they are the exception who are given the right to continue to use the title when no longer in the employ of the university that conferred the title upon them.

Academic credentials provide cultural capital, that is, formal titles carry prestige and perceived authority in many contexts. This is often undeserved in that the areas in which titleholder professes may have little relevance to the context in which the title is being used. Individuals with earned academic titles are often assumed to have

expertise on issues beyond their area of specialisation. Academics with the earned titles of 'Doctor' or 'Professor' who insist on the use of these titles do so to establish this cultural capital, even though this has been found to reinsert hierarchies that silence the voices lower down in the hierarchy; this is at odds with the egalitarian structure many universities espouse (Roberts, 2018). Given that the use of titles is already problematic even among those with earned titles, who might use it to demand status and keep less titled individuals in check, it is perhaps unsurprising that the use of honorary titles is so problematic.

Another issue raised in the literature on honorary degrees is that of credential inflation. As more and more people obtain advanced degrees, the cultural capital accrued to such titles diminishes. There is thus an increased concern about distinguishing between earned and honorary titles. Related to this is status anxiety whereby institutions might feel the need to protect the exclusivity of their credentialling power. While this can be understood as simply the higher education system protecting the value of its 'product', which might be diluted if a great many people have unearned honorary versions, it is more fundamentally problematic in regard to public trust. When honorary titles are misused, it can erode trust in academic institutions and qualifications generally. Universities are increasingly seen to be training centres marketing qualifications, rather than spaces offering a higher education by nurturing critical citizens and contributing to the common good (Ashwin, 2020, Connell, 2022). At the same time, there is an increase in science scepticism and anti-intellectualism (Shore and Wright, 2024, Giroux, 2025), which undermines the potential role of the university in society. In this context, a proliferation of people calling themselves 'Doctor' or 'Professor' when they have not earned these titles can contribute to a growing sense that higher education is not a particularly meaningful social structure.

Conclusion

Although universities are at liberty to confer honorary degrees and professorship, it is important to do so while safeguarding the integrity and sanctity of earned degrees and professorship. Failure to do so will cause irreparable harm to what universities exist for. The good practice guide compiled by the CHE emphasises on transparency, rigorous selection processes, and clear guidelines for the use of academic titles. This reflects an attempt to maintain meaningful distinctions in an environment where academic titles still carry significant social value. Particularly interesting is how the guidelines attempt to balance recognising exceptional non-academic contributions while simultaneously maintaining the academy's authority over who can claim these prestigious titles.

The proliferation of controversies and misuse of honorary titles make the compilation of the good practice a critical intervention. The guidelines importantly warn institutions that the purpose of honorary awards are to recognise notable contributions and not to manipulate recipients to the institution's advantage. This piece of *Briefly Speaking* has also argued that the misuse of academic titles may also be triggered by situation in which the academic titles are used to reinforce social stratification and ensure subservience of

those without them (even within the academy). It is possible that the misuse of academic titles by recipients of honorary degrees and professorship is linked to this notion that an academic title confers a higher status within a social stratification structure in society.

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