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HONORARY OR EARNED: THE POLITICS OF DOCTORAL TITLES IN SOUTH AFRICA'S HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates the expanding practice of awarding honorary doctorates through unregulated or unaccredited institutions in South Africa, and considers the consequences this trend poses for academic integrity and public confidence in higher education. Drawing on a qualitative document analysis of public records, media coverage, institutional statements, and guidelines issued by regulatory bodies between 2019 and 2025, the study traces clear patterns of title misuse, institutional ambiguity, and persistent regulatory blind spots. The analysis shows that several entities operating without registration from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) have continued to issue honorary doctorates to well-known public figures. In many cases, recipients have subsequently adopted the title "Dr" in professional or social settings, blurring the line between ceremonial recognition and earned academic achievement. This pattern contributes to a gradual erosion of trust in formal doctoral qualifications, particularly when the public is unable to distinguish between symbolic honours and credentials obtained through rigorous academic processes. The findings further suggest that weak enforcement mechanisms, limited public awareness about the nature of honorary degrees, and the financial or reputational motives of organisations presenting these awards all reinforce the problem. The article argues for a more coherent regulatory response, improved public communication, and the introduction of transparent national standards governing the award and use of honorary titles.

Strengthening these areas is essential for protecting the credibility of South Africa's higher education system and preserving the integrity of legitimate doctoral scholarship.

KEYWORDS: academic legitimacy; degree mills; honorary doctorate; higher education regulation; South Africa.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Across many African societies, and indeed globally, honorary doctorates have long served as a symbolic means for universities to acknowledge individuals who make significant contributions through philanthropy, activism, leadership, or public service. These honours offer recognition without the intensive academic journey of research, coursework, and thesis defence required for an earned doctoral degree. In principle, honorary degrees are intended to celebrate societal contributions rather than scholarly output. However, in South Africa in recent years, this tradition has become entangled with controversy. Unregulated or unaccredited institutions have surfaced, claiming authority to confer doctoral-level honours. These practices have sparked doubts about legitimacy and raised troubling questions about how the public perceives the difference between earned doctorates and honorary ones. The emergence of such institutions threatens the clear distinction between academic doctorates and ceremonial titles. In 2024 the Trinity International Bible University (TIBU) was publicly declared by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) to be unregistered. As such, it is not authorized to award any qualifications, including honorary doctorates (DHET, 2024). Nevertheless, TIBU awarded honorary doctorates to several well-known public figures, including celebrities and public personalities, who then made public use of the "Doctor" title (IOL, 2024; TimesLive, 2024). In one notable case, the University of South Africa (Unisa) publicly denied ever awarding a doctorate to Walter Magaya, despite his claims to hold an honorary PhD from that university. (Unisa, 2025)

Such developments reveal a deeper problem: increasing misrepresentation of honorary doctorates as equivalent to earned doctorates. This misrepresentation is not merely a matter of semantics. In many communities, the title "Doctor" carries weight, it is associated with expertise, authority, and academic achievement. When individuals awarded honorary degrees, particularly from unaccredited institutions, adopt the "Dr" prefix in public settings, they risk creating confusion. Many members of the public may be unable to distinguish whether the title reflects years of postgraduate study or is simply a ceremonial honour.

The research problem this article engages with is therefore twofold. First, it seeks to examine how unregistered and unaccredited institutions in South Africa are able to confer doctoral-level honorary titles. Second, it investigates how recipients of these titles represent themselves publicly and the extent to which they frame their honorary degrees as equivalent to earned academic doctorates. Underlying these issues is a regulatory environment that appears fractured or insufficiently enforced. Existing guidelines governing honorary degrees are not always clear, and enforcement seems reactive rather than proactive. As pointed out by the Council on Higher Education (CHE), variation and inconsistency in institutional policy, as well as the absence of clear national regulation, create opportunities for misuse (CHE, 2024) The objectives of this article are to document the nature and scale of honorary doctorate conferments by unaccredited institutions in South Africa, to examine how recipients publicly present these titles, and to analyse the regulatory and institutional conditions that permit these practices. The article also aims to explore the broader consequences for academic legitimacy and public trust in the higher education system. Given that doctoral degrees represent the highest level of academic qualification, signifying rigorous training, original research, and scholarly contribution, their value depends on the clarity and credibility of the process by which they are awarded. If the distinction between earned and honorary doctorates becomes blurred, the integrity of academic credentials and the public's trust in them may suffer.

This study is particularly significant because it addresses not only individual cases but systemic vulnerabilities in the higher education ecosystem. The misuse of honorary doctorates by unregulated bodies can undermine the symbolic capital associated with the "doctor" title, diminish public trust in legitimate academic qualifications, and contribute to a broader devaluation of scholarly achievement. In a country where many people see a PhD as not just an academic milestone but a sign of intellectual and social capital, this vulnerability carries serious consequences. The research questions guiding this study are the following:

1. What kinds of institutions in South Africa are conferring honorary doctorates without proper accreditation or registration?
2. How are honorary titles being misrepresented by recipients, and what forms does this misrepresentation take?
3. What regulatory or policy weaknesses allow such practices to occur?
4. What are the broader implications for academic legitimacy and public perception of higher education in South Africa?

By investigating these questions, this article seeks to shed light on a growing problem that strikes at the heart of academic legitimacy and public trust. It will offer a foundation for policy debate, public awareness, and possible reform in the way honorary credentials are regulated and perceived in South Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on honorary doctorates and their ethical positioning within higher education remains strikingly underdeveloped in the African context, even though debates around academic legitimacy, credential misuse, and the rise of fraudulent institutions have become more prominent in public discourse. In global literature, attention has centered on the proliferation of "degree mills," defined as unaccredited bodies that manufacture or sell academic credentials with minimal or no intellectual requirements. Although much of this discourse originates from North America and Europe, it has become increasingly relevant in Africa, where unregulated institutions have begun exploiting gaps in national quality assurance systems. Recent South African reporting draws on earlier work by Contreras and Gollin, who described degree mills as organizations that mimic legitimate academic entities while bypassing academic standards to generate marketable credentials (IOL, 2025). The researchers acknowledges the relevance of this foundational definition because it illuminates how fraudulent institutions rely on public ignorance, lax regulation, and the symbolic prestige of academic titles to sustain their operations. Globally, research demonstrates that degree mills distort the meaning of academic qualifications and threaten the integrity of valid degrees by creating parallel markets of unearned credentials. Investigative reporting from the United States and the United Kingdom has highlighted how these organizations use sophisticated branding, pseudo-accreditation agencies, and aggressive marketing campaigns to attract international students and public figures (BBC Investigations, 2021; U.S. Federal Trade Commission, 2022). While not focused specifically on Africa, these studies provide insight into the motivations and methods of fraudulent institutions, many of which rely on digital infrastructures that allow them to reach global audiences. The researchers views these insights as useful because they contextualize the South African phenomenon within a broader, transnational pattern of academic credential fraud.

In the South African context, the literature takes a different form, emerging primarily from public statements, media reports, regulatory announcements, and professional associations rather than peer-reviewed academic publications. A key source of concern has been the

involvement of high-profile individuals, particularly celebrities, who receive honorary doctorates from bodies not registered with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). The South African Association of PhDs (SAAPhDs) issued a formal statement in 2024 warning that a pattern had emerged: unaccredited institutions were conferring honorary doctorates as a way to enhance their visibility, attract donors, and position themselves as legitimate despite lacking DHET registration (SAAPhDs, 2024). The researchers considers this intervention important because it reflects a form of scholarly advocacy aimed at alerting the public to the misuse of honorary titles. Media investigations have reinforced these concerns by documenting specific cases in which individuals publicly claimed to hold doctoral titles that were later revealed to originate from unaccredited entities. A widely reported example involved the Trinity International Bible University (TIBU), which awarded honorary doctorates to several South African entertainers, television personalities, and public figures despite lacking recognition as a higher education institution in South Africa. The DHET released a public statement clarifying that TIBU was not registered and therefore had no authority to grant any academic qualification, whether honorary or earned (DHET, 2024). Subsequent investigations by IOL (2024) and TimesLive (2024) confirmed that some recipients continued to use the title "Dr" in public despite the university's lack of accreditation. The researchers interprets these findings as evidence that misrepresentation is not merely incidental; rather, it is embedded within the strategic incentives of both the awarding institution and the recipients, who may benefit from enhanced public prestige.

The University of South Africa (Unisa), one of the largest universities on the continent, has publicly refuted claims by individuals asserting that they received honorary doctorates from the institution. In a 2025 media release, Unisa denied awarding any degree to Walter Magaya, a public figure who had publicly referred to himself as a doctor (Unisa, 2025). Such denials highlight the reputational risks faced by legitimate universities when high-profile individuals misuse academic titles. From the researchers's perspective, this dynamic underscores a critical gap in regulatory clarity: while legitimate universities follow strict criteria for awarding honorary degrees, unaccredited bodies exploit the lack of public knowledge about registration and accreditation systems. The Council on Higher Education (CHE), South Africa's primary quality assurance body, has expressed concerns about inconsistent criteria and governance processes in honorary degree practices, even among legitimate institutions. In a public statement issued in 2024, the CHE warned that the misuse of honorary titles, especially by individuals seeking political or commercial advantage, posed a threat to public

trust in the higher education system (CHE, 2024). The CHE also noted that political actors have increasingly sought honorary titles as symbols of legitimacy, raising ethical questions about whether universities may feel pressured to award them in exchange for political goodwill or institutional funding. The researchers evaluates this insight as significant because it expands the conversation beyond fraudulent institutions to include the ethical responsibilities of accredited universities.

Another contributing factor identified in recent literature is the absence of widespread public understanding of the distinction between honorary and earned doctorates. South African news outlets have reported multiple cases where the public expressed confusion or frustration after learning that honorary doctorates do not confer the same academic standing or professional privileges as earned doctorates (Sowetan Live, 2024). This confusion is amplified when recipients deliberately use the title "Doctor" without clarifying that it is honorary. The researchers views this as a serious problem because it suggests that public perception is easily manipulated by individuals seeking symbolic capital without academic merit. There is an emerging discussion in public commentary around the concept of symbolic capital, drawn from sociological analyses of academic titles. Academic titles, especially doctoral ones, carry a set of cultural associations linked to expertise, authority, and intellectual capacity. When honorary doctorates are used as substitutes for earned academic achievement, the distinction between symbolic capital and scholarly legitimacy becomes blurred. Although this concept is more frequently addressed in general sociological literature, South African journalists and regulatory bodies have begun applying it to discussions of honorary doctorates (IOL, 2024; TimesLive, 2024). The researchers argues that this conceptual lens is crucial for understanding why individuals may be motivated to publicly adopt the "Dr" title even when they lack academic training.

A related gap in the literature involves the institutional incentives driving unaccredited bodies to award honorary doctorates. The DHET's 2024 statement indicated that fraudulent institutions often rely on sensationalism and celebrity affiliation to attract attention. By associating themselves with famous personalities, these institutions gain legitimacy in the eyes of the public, even if that legitimacy is entirely manufactured (DHET, 2024). The researchers views this incentive structure as central to understanding the rise of unregulated degree-granting bodies in South Africa. The awarding of honorary titles becomes a marketing strategy rather than an academic recognition. This phenomenon is not unique to South Africa.

Several African countries have experienced similar issues, although they remain under documented in academic literature. Nigerian media reported cases in recent years where unregistered seminaries and “Bible universities” awarded honorary doctorates to politicians and pastors, leading to confusion about the legitimacy of credentials (Premium Times, 2023). In Kenya, regulatory authorities have investigated entities granting honorary PhDs that falsely resembled those awarded by public universities (Daily Nation, 2022). The researchers finds these examples instructive because they demonstrate that the South African case forms part of a broader continental pattern, yet academic research has not fully captured the scope or implications of this development.

A critical gap in scholarly literature concerns the relationship between honorary degrees and public perceptions of legitimacy. While public commentary frequently emphasizes the confusion surrounding honorary doctorates, academic studies have not systematically explored how citizens interpret these titles or the effect of misrepresentation on trust in higher education. This absence is noteworthy, given that academic legitimacy depends partly on public confidence. The researchers identifies this as a substantial research opportunity, particularly within African contexts where political, religious, and cultural authorities often carry significant influence, and where academic titles may be intertwined with leadership credibility. Another gap involves the ethical responsibilities of public figures who receive honorary doctorates. Some universities explicitly request that recipients refrain from using the “Dr” title, yet compliance appears inconsistent. There is no academic consensus on how honorary degree holders should ethically position themselves in public discourse. In the absence of formal guidelines or ethical codes that govern post-award conduct, recipients may exploit the ambiguity for personal branding, political capital, or commercial gain. From the researchers’s standpoint, this raises questions about accountability: should ethical responsibility lie with the individual recipient, the awarding institution, or the regulatory framework?

The literature also highlights how digital media environments amplify the challenges associated with honorary doctorates. Social media platforms allow recipients to publicize their honorary titles instantly and widely. Many of the cases reported in South Africa first gained visibility on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, where public figures posted images of graduation gowns, certificates, and ceremonial events. These posts often lacked clarity about whether the degree was honorary or earned. TimesLive (2024) reports

that viral posts contributed to widespread public confusion, especially when media houses failed to verify the credentials before publishing celebratory features. The researchers views this digital amplification as a contemporary factor that distinguishes the current wave of honorary doctorate misuse from earlier periods. Another noteworthy trend is the commercialization of honorary doctorates, which transforms academic recognition into a commodity. According to multiple reports, some unregistered institutions charge "administrative fees" or "ceremonial charges" for honorary doctorate conferments, which may run into several thousand rand (IOL, 2024). While these institutions typically frame the charges as logistical costs, they effectively function as payments for academic recognition. The researchers asserts that this commercialization presents one of the gravest threats to academic credibility because it positions academic titles as purchasable goods rather than achievements rooted in scholarly labour.

Interestingly, the researchers also observes that the literature reveals very little about the motivations of individuals who accept honorary doctorates from unaccredited institutions. Public commentary often assumes vanity or fame as primary drivers, yet there is room to explore more nuanced explanations. For instance, recipients may be unaware of accreditation processes, may misinterpret the legitimacy of institutions with religious affiliations, or may rely on advisers who fail to conduct due diligence. This remains speculative, however, because no empirical studies have investigated the psychological or socio-economic motivations behind such acceptance. A final dimension missing in the literature concerns the long-term reputational consequences for institutions and individuals involved in the conferral and acceptance of fraudulent honorary doctorates. While media reports highlight immediate controversy, the long-term effects on the credibility of universities, the professional opportunities of recipients, and public trust are not systematically analyzed. The researchers argues that this omission represents a significant gap, especially considering the cumulative impact of repeated incidents over time.

Across these multiple areas of inquiry, a consistent pattern emerges: public commentary and regulatory interventions dominate the discourse, while scholarly research remains limited. This article therefore positions itself as one of the first to systematically document and analyse the phenomenon of honorary doctorate misuse in South Africa, its regulatory context, and its broader implications for academic legitimacy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on the concept of social legitimacy as developed in institutional theory. According to institutional theorists, legitimacy is derived from conforming to socially accepted norms, rules, and standards (Suchman, 1995). In the context of higher education, legitimate credentials are those issued by institutions recognized by regulatory authorities, obtained through rigorous processes. When unregulated institutions confer degrees, they challenge normative definitions of legitimacy. Another relevant theoretical perspective is symbolic capital, as framed by Bourdieu (1986). Doctoral degrees confer symbolic capital, status, recognition, and prestige, which can translate into social, economic, or political advantage. Honorary doctorates awarded by unregulated institutions siphon off that symbolic capital without investment in the scholarly process, thereby diluting the value of earned doctorates. These perspectives help explain why unregulated institutions might exploit honorary degree conferments, and why recipients may use the title "Doctor." They also highlight the social consequences when normative credentials are devalued through misuse.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative document analysis research design. Data were collected from publicly available documents, including media reports between 2019 and 2025, official statements from higher education institutions, regulatory body publications, and press releases from professional associations such as SAAPhDs. A purposive sampling approach was used: only documents relating to honorary doctorates awarded by unregistered or unaccredited entities in South Africa were selected. No human subjects were involved; thus ethical clearance was not required. Analysis involved coding documents for recurring themes, such as the name and registration status of institutions, characteristics of honorary degree conferments, public use of titles by recipients, institutional denial of awards, and regulatory responses.

RESULTS

The systematic analysis of recent public records, media investigations, and regulatory statements reveals a pattern of institutional misrepresentation, celebrity misuse of the "Doctor" title, inconsistent regulation, and growing public confusion. Four interrelated findings stand out.

Unregistered or Unaccredited Bodies Conferring Doctoral-level Honours

The first major finding concerns the proliferation of institutions lacking legitimate status under South African higher-education law that nonetheless confer honorary doctorates. A prominent example is Trinity International Bible University (TIBU), which has repeatedly been exposed by authorities as not registered with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and therefore unauthorized to award any qualifications, honorary or otherwise (DHET, 2024; SAnews, 2024; IOL, 2024). In a 2024 media statement, the DHET attributed to TIBU several honorary doctorates awarded to high-profile South Africans, including entertainers and public figures — delivered despite its lack of accreditation (DHET, 2024). This declaration was followed by threats of legal action should the institution continue its operations without registration (SAnews, 2024; TimesLive, 2024). Notably, TIBU is not an isolated case. In 2025, authorities shut down a separate entity in KwaZulu-Natal, the Mhlabuhlangene School of African Medicine (also referred to as "Ladysmith College"), after discovering it was operating illegally and issuing unaccredited PhDs priced at R18 500 (Newcastillian, 2025). The closure was part of a broader enforcement operation involving the DHET, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), the Council on Higher Education (CHE), police (SAPS), and local authorities, with a criminal case opened for operating without registration (Newcastillian, 2025). These examples illustrate a persistent pattern: bodies operating outside the regulatory framework are offering doctoral-level honours. They are able to do so because of limited enforcement, public unawareness, and the absence of accessible, up-to-date official registries that the general public can easily consult. The researchers interprets this as a serious threat to the integrity of the post-school education system, as it undermines the legally mandated gatekeeping role of regulatory institutions.

Public Use and Misrepresentation of the "Doctor" Title by Recipients

A second significant result is that many recipients of these honorary doctorates present themselves publicly as "Dr" without clarifying that the title is honorary, or that the awarding institution is unaccredited. In several high-visibility cases, individuals shared social media posts and media interviews announcing their new "doctorates" and used the "Dr" prefix. For instance, actor Sello Maake kaNcube posted celebratory photos of receiving an honorary doctorate from TIBU, declaring "It's now Dr Sello Maake kaNcube" (IOL, 2024; TimesLive, 2024; SAnews, 2024). Other recipients reportedly include gospel musician Winnie Mashaba, actress Elizabeth Serunye, business figures, and activists, indicating that TIBU actively conferred such titles across a spectrum of public personalities (IOL, 2024). In November

2025, Mary de Haas drew national attention when she appeared before a parliamentary Ad Hoc Committee investigating alleged corruption and political interference in the criminal justice system. During her testimony, she was introduced with the honorific "Dr" and "Professor," implying that she held a doctoral degree (Parliament of South Africa, 2025; Cape Times, 2025). However, the actual academic status attached to her name quickly became contested. The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) clarified that while de Haas is affiliated with the university, her role is limited to that of an honorary research fellow, she is not employed as a professor, and does not hold a PhD (UKZN, 2025; TimesLive, 2025). During committee questioning, de Haas reportedly acknowledged that her "doctorate" was honorary, and that her highest earned qualification was a master's degree (MK Party, 2025; Daily News Opinion, 2025). The way her honorary doctorate was initially presented, effectively as if it were an earned doctorate, underscores the broader problem examined in this article: the conflation of honorary and academic doctorates in public and professional discourse. The misrepresentation in her case had immediate institutional and reputational consequences. Members of the Ad Hoc Committee characterized her testimony as "unreliable" and "hearsay," partially citing their scepticism about her academic credentials (Cape Argus, 2025). UKZN's swift public distancing from de Haas reflects the reputational risk legitimate institutions face when honorary titles are portrayed misleadingly (UKZN, 2025; Cape Times, 2025). This episode highlights how honorary doctorates can be, intentionally or unintentionally, employed to signal expertise, legitimacy, or authority, even in highly sensitive political-legal contexts. It demonstrates that, in practice, the public often fails to distinguish between honorary and earned doctorates, thereby granting individuals status and authority that may not rest on scholarly or academic achievement. From the researchers's perspective, the de Haas case serves as a vivid illustration of the urgency of clarifying the difference between honorary and earned doctorates, enforcing ethical standards around public use of titles, and educating the public about how academic credentials should be represented. In another high-profile incident, the University of South Africa (Unisa) publicly denied ever awarding a doctorate to Walter Magaya, a figure claiming multiple doctoral titles for use in a legal proceeding abroad (TimesLive, 2025; Unisa, 2025). Unisa described the claims as fraudulent and warned that any certificate Magaya produced as an honorary PhD was not genuine, expressing concern over reputational damage and reserving the right to take legal action (Unisa, 2025). These cases underscore a broader trend: honorary doctorates from unaccredited institutions are being treated, by recipients and often by the public, as equivalent to earned academic doctorates. The researchers argues that this misrepresentation is not

accidental but deliberate, rooted in the symbolic and social advantage conferred by the "Dr" title. For the recipients, the title may serve as social capital or prestige; for the awarding entities, celebrity endorsement increases legitimacy in the eyes of potential supporters or clients.

Regulatory Responses: Reactive, Inconsistent, and Weak

The third key finding concerns the regulatory environment. While both the DHET and CHE have publicly condemned the awarding of honorary degrees by unregistered institutions, their responses have been largely reactive and sporadic, lacking evidence of systematic enforcement or preventive measures (DHET, 2024; CHE, 2024; SAnews, 2025). In 2024 the CHE issued a "Good Practice Guide on Honorary Degrees and Professorships," advising accredited universities to be cautious especially when the candidate is a public or political figure (CHE, 2024). The Guide recommends thorough background checks and warns against granting honorary titles for commercial or political gain (CHE, 2024). While this is a constructive step, its applicability is limited: it applies only to institutions already recognized by CHE and does not directly address the unaccredited entities masquerading as universities. In the case of TIBU, although the DHET threatened "comprehensive and decisive action," public records to date show no evidence of criminal prosecution, deregistration, or closure (SAnews, 2024; TimesLive, 2024). The fact that TIBU continued to publicize conferments even after warnings indicates that regulatory threats have had limited deterrent effect. Similarly, although the Mhlabuhlangene School of African Medicine was shut down in 2025 (Newcastillian, 2025), this appears to be part of a piecemeal crackdown rather than a coordinated, sector-wide enforcement strategy. The researchers notes that the reactive nature of these interventions suggests that many unregistered institutions may operate for years before media or regulators intervene, often only after a scandal involving a public figure. Moreover, there is limited evidence of public education campaigns aimed at helping prospective students or the general public verify the accreditation status of institutions. While regulators occasionally publish lists of recognized institutions, these are not always widely publicized or easy for laypersons to access. As a result, public ignorance remains a major enabling condition for fraudulent practices.

Public Confusion and Erosion of Academic Legitimacy

The fourth finding concerns public confusion and the broader erosion of academic legitimacy. Because recipients of honorary doctorates from unaccredited institutions use the

"Dr" title without context, many people, including potential employers, community members, and fans, are unable to distinguish between earned doctoral credentials and honorary titles. As a result, the social value and symbolic capital associated with the "doctor" title is diluted. In the case of unionist Zwelinzima Vavi, a recipient of an honorary doctorate from TIBU, the revelation that the awarding institution was bogus led to public disillusionment. Vavi told the press that "all these years I thought I was a doctor … but all of that fell flat … I was duped" (Sowetan Live, 2024). This example illustrates not only personal disillusionment but also a broader sense of betrayal among public audiences who had respected the title as meaningful. Media commentators have described the phenomenon as damaging to South Africa's academic reputation. An opinion piece in 2024 asserted that "dodgy, fake degrees make SA look bad," calling the misuse of honorary doctorates "no laughing matter" and warning that repeated incidents erode public confidence in the higher education system (Sowetan Live, 2024). From the researchers's viewpoint, this confusion represents more than individual embarrassment. It signals a structural threat to academic legitimacy: when titles can be easily bought or acquired without academic work, the credibility and symbolic capital of legitimate degrees diminish for all holders. This undermines the foundational social trust that enables universities to serve as credible institutions of knowledge production and validation.

Commercialization of Honorary Titles and the Market for Fake Doctorates

A further result emerging from the data is the commercialization of honorary doctorates. Investigative reporting revealed that some institutions charge fees for conferment of doctoral-level honours, effectively turning academic credentials into commodities. In the case of the Mhlabuhlangene School of African Medicine (Ladysmith College), the so-called PhD in "Healing Science and Facilitation" was offered at a price of R18 500 (Newcastillian, 2025). Although the institution has since been shut down, the incident demonstrates how unscrupulous entities treat honorary doctorates as revenue-generating products rather than tokens of recognition. From the researchers's perspective, this commodification is perhaps the most serious challenge to academic integrity: it transforms the doctorate from a mark of intellectual labour to a purchasable status. This commercial motive is mirrored in the strategies of institutions like TIBU, which appear to use celebrity conferments as marketing tools to attract donors, followers, or clients (DHET, 2024; IOL, 2024). In effect, the status of "Doctor" is leveraged as a branding device, for both the individual and the institution, rather than as recognition of scholarly accomplishment.

Emotional and Psychological Impact on Recipients

The documented reactions of some individuals who accepted honorary doctorates from unaccredited institutions indicate emotional and psychological repercussions. In the case of Vavi, the public revelation that his doctorate was "fake" led him to feel cheated and humiliated (Sowetan Live, 2024). What had once been a source of pride and social recognition became a symbol of disgrace. While media sources do not provide extensive follow-up on long-term consequences, such as the effect on recipients' credibility, social capital, or professional opportunities, these personal testimonies reflect genuine human cost. The researchers senses that, beyond legal and reputational risk, there is a dimension of personal dignity and trust, individuals may feel betrayed by institutions they believed had honoured them, and by the public that once respected those titles.

Institutional Risk for Legitimate Universities and the Higher Education Sector

Finally, the cases reviewed illustrate that misuse of honorary degrees by unaccredited institutions, and public misrepresentation by recipients, also poses reputational risk to legitimate universities and the higher education sector overall. In the Magaya case, the University of South Africa publicly distanced itself from the claims, warning of damage to its brand and indicating its intention to take legal steps (Unisa, 2025). By doing so, Unisa signalled that false claims of affiliation or conferment are treated as serious infractions. However, the need for public rebuttals suggests that legitimate institutions may find themselves compelled to respond to misinformation, distracting them from their educational mission and undermining public trust in their accreditation and certification processes. Moreover, because legitimate honorary degrees are based on rigorous internal policy, often requiring strong justification, conflict-of-interest assessments, and no financial consideration, the misuse by unaccredited bodies highlights the ethical responsibilities of universities. The researchers suggests that legitimate universities may face pressure to reinforce transparency and public communication about honorary degrees, ensuring that recipients and the public understand what those degrees mean (and do not mean).

Synthesis: What the Results Reveal

Taken together, these findings paint a troubling yet clarifying picture of the current landscape of honorary doctorates in South Africa. The data reveal not only that fraudulent institutions are operating publicly, but also that their strategies, celebrity endorsements, commodification of titles, and use of celebrity-driven marketing, are effective in generating the appearance of

legitimacy. In doing so, they exploit public trust, institutional gaps, and the aspirational value of academic titles. From the researchers's vantage point, the phenomenon represents a structural challenge to academic legitimacy. The classical idea of a doctoral degree, grounded in years of study, original research, peer review, and institutional oversight, is being undermined by a market that prioritises visibility, status, and profit. The misuse of honorary doctorates therefore is not merely a matter of symbolic confusion or opportunism. It reflects a deeper commodification of academic credentials, one that risks eroding the intellectual, ethical, and social foundations of higher education. The cases documented also highlight the insufficiency of reactive regulation and the need for more proactive, systemic measures. Reliance on media exposure and individual institutional statements leaves large gaps: many unaccredited entities may continue to confer bogus degrees undetected, particularly when recipients are less high-profile or operate in private sectors. Simultaneously, the emotional and reputational consequences for both recipients and legitimate universities demonstrate that this issue is not only institutional or systemic, it is deeply personal, affecting individuals' sense of legitimacy, identity, and public standing. Finally, these results underscore the urgent need for public education. If citizens, employers, and communities lack awareness of the difference between earned and honorary titles, or of how to verify accreditation, the symbolic power of "Doctor" will remain vulnerable to exploitation. The researchers argues that without concerted effort to raise awareness, promote transparency, and strengthen regulatory enforcement, the problem is likely to grow.

Researchers's Perspective and Reflection

From the vantage point of a scholar committed to preserving the integrity of higher education, the above findings are deeply concerning. The researchers does not contend that honorary doctorates are inherently problematic; in fact, when awarded by legitimate, accredited institutions, honorary degrees can serve an important symbolic function, to recognise societal contributions, celebrate public service, and strengthen ties between academia and society. Indeed, legitimate honorary doctorates have a place in academic tradition and may play a positive role in public engagement and institutional outreach. However, what is being observed in South Africa is not that tradition. Rather, it is a distortion, a commodified version of academic recognition that exploits regulatory gaps and public ignorance for profit and prestige. In this light, honorary doctorates from unaccredited bodies represent a form of symbolic fraud, one with tangible consequences for individuals, institutions, and the credibility of higher education at large. The researchers therefore calls

for a shift in how policymakers, regulators, and academic institutions approach honorary doctorates:

First, there is an urgent need for comprehensive, publicly accessible registries of legitimate higher-education institutions, regularly updated and communicated in accessible formats.

Second, regulators should move beyond reactive interventions toward proactive monitoring, public education campaigns, and routine audits.

Third, legitimate universities should adopt transparent policies for honorary awards, including guidelines on whether recipients may use the "Dr" title publicly, whether they must clarify that the degree is honorary, and whether there should be consent from the institution for public use of the title.

Finally, the researchers suggests that future work should examine the long-term consequences of these misuses: how they affect public trust in academic credentials, whether employers or institutions begin to doubt legitimate degrees, and how individuals who have misrepresented credentials navigate their reputations. Without such research, the current wave of honorary-degree misuse may continue to erode the symbolic capital of doctoral titles in South Africa, and by extension, the value of legitimate scholarship itself.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the growing misuse of honorary doctorates in South Africa poses a substantive threat to the credibility and functioning of the higher education system. At the centre of this problem is the way unregistered institutions exploit gaps in policy, oversight, and public awareness. The researchers interprets this trend as a structural challenge rather than a series of isolated incidents. Each case involving a fraudulent institution or misrepresented honorary doctorate contributes to a broader erosion of the value attached to academic titles. This is evident in the public confusion that emerges when individuals presented as "Dr" are later discovered to have received honorary degrees from entities operating outside legal frameworks (Sowetan Live, 2024; IOL, 2024). One of the most striking features of the results is how these honorary titles are publicly deployed. Recipients often present themselves as academics or experts, yet the legitimacy of their credentials is rarely questioned by their audiences. The researchers argues that this blurring of boundaries between earned and honorary titles undermines the symbolic capital that doctoral degrees typically represent. The symbolic capital of a PhD rests on the assumption that the holder has completed an intensive process of independent inquiry under formal institutional supervision. When honorary doctorates, particularly those from unregulated entities, are portrayed as

equivalent to earned academic doctorates, the public begins to question the institution of the doctorate itself (CHE, 2024). This threatens the credibility not only of individual holders of legitimate PhDs but also of the universities that confer them.

The data also highlight inconsistencies in regulatory enforcement. Although the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has stated unequivocally that unregistered private bodies may not issue degrees of any kind, enforcement remains limited (DHET, 2024). The Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) have similarly issued warnings, but these warnings alone have not prevented unregistered institutions from continuing to operate (SAnews, 2025). The researchers concludes that the regulatory system functions reactively: action is taken only after a scandal reaches the media or a recipient publicly misuses a title, as in the case involving Trinity International Bible University (TimesLive, 2024; EWN, 2024). This reactive approach has serious implications. When enforcement is driven by public complaints or media attention rather than systematic oversight, many institutions may remain undetected for long periods. The Ladysmith College case, which came to light only after authorities conducted a joint inspection, illustrates how such institutions can operate for years before decisive action is taken (Newcastillian, 2025). This reflects a structural weakness in monitoring mechanisms. The researchers notes that the absence of a publicly visible, regularly updated registry of legitimate institutions contributes to this problem, as ordinary citizens have limited means of verifying institutional status.

In addition to regulatory gaps, the findings also reflect a concerning trend regarding the commodification of academic status. The researchers interprets the commercialisation of honorary degrees as a symptom of broader pressures in the higher education sector, where prestige and visibility increasingly operate as currencies. Unaccredited institutions appear to recognise the commercial value of associating themselves with well-known public figures. The conferral of honorary doctorates on celebrities serves not as recognition of academic or civic contribution but as marketing, a way to attract prospective students, donors, or sponsors (IOL, 2024). This practice contradicts the long-standing academic understanding that honorary doctorates should be awarded sparingly, transparently, and only in recognition of outstanding contributions to society, scholarship, or public life. The CHE's 2024 Good Practice Guide explicitly warns universities to exercise caution when considering honorary awards, particularly for politically exposed persons or individuals whose public profile may introduce reputational risk (CHE, 2024). Yet unregistered institutions operate outside these

ethical guidelines altogether. They are immune to reputational sanctions because, unlike accredited universities, they do not depend on academic standing to survive. The researchers argues that this distinction creates a dual system: one governed by formal academic ethics, and another operating in a commercialised, unregulated shadow sector.

Another dimension emerging from the results is the emotional and psychological impact on recipients, particularly those who believed the awarding institution to be legitimate. The example of Zwelinzima Vavi, who expressed humiliation upon discovering that his honorary doctorate came from an unregistered institution, demonstrates that individuals may also be victims rather than intentional perpetrators of misrepresentation (Sowetan Live, 2024). The researchers notes that such cases raise complex ethical questions about accountability. While recipients bear some responsibility for verifying the legitimacy of institutions, the existence of sophisticated fraudulent entities creates an environment where individuals are easily misled. The psychological burden of public embarrassment or reputational damage can be significant, especially for public figures whose authority is partly grounded in perceived expertise. At the societal level, the misuse of honorary titles has broader implications for the public's relationship with higher education. South Africa's universities operate within a context of long-standing concerns about quality assurance, resource inequality, and access. When fake or unregulated institutions succeed in awarding doctoral titles without scrutiny, they contribute to a narrative that the higher-education sector is porous or unreliable. The researchers argues that this erodes public trust not only in academic credentials but also in the regulatory institutions responsible for safeguarding them. False or misleading claims of affiliation with reputable institutions, such as the case involving the University of South Africa and Walter Magaya (Unisa, 2025; TimesLive, 2025), intensify this mistrust.

Moreover, the misuse of honorary degrees intersects with broader socio-political dynamics in South Africa and across Africa. Honorary degrees have historically carried symbolic weight in societies where academic achievement is tied to social mobility and national pride. When these degrees become tools for celebrity enhancement or institutional marketing, their symbolic significance is diluted. The researchers views this as part of a wider trend in which social prestige becomes decoupled from actual academic labour. This shift has implications for the meaning of intellectual authority in public discourse. When individuals appear to gain scholarly status without producing knowledge, the value placed on genuine research, scholarship, and peer review declines. The results also illustrate a need for greater public

education. Many citizens do not understand the difference between an earned doctorate and an honorary one, nor are they aware that honorary titles should not confer the same academic privileges as research-based degrees (SAAPhDs, 2024). Without accessible public information, people tend to assume that anyone using the prefix “Dr” has completed a formal doctoral programme. The researchers argues that regulators and universities should invest in sustained public communication campaigns, explaining the nature and purpose of honorary degrees and clarifying the legal and ethical frameworks governing them.

In synthesising these insights, the researchers concludes that the misuse of honorary doctorates in South Africa reflects both systemic weaknesses and shifting cultural dynamics. The regulatory framework has not fully adapted to the changing landscape of credential inflation, digital visibility, and commercialised prestige. Meanwhile, public fascination with titles creates fertile ground for exploitation. The unregulated sector thrives in this environment by offering status in exchange for publicity or payment, while recipients enjoy temporary prestige even if the long-term consequences are damaging. The researchers therefore argues for a multifaceted response. Stronger regulatory enforcement is essential, but enforcement alone cannot resolve the deeper cultural and economic factors driving this trend. Public education is equally necessary, along with institutional transparency and a renewed commitment to academic ethics. Legitimate universities should also clarify policies on whether honorary doctorate recipients may use the title “Dr” in public settings, as inconsistent practices across institutions contribute to confusion.

Finally, the researchers suggests that future scholarship should explore the social psychology of academic titles in African contexts. Understanding why individuals place such high value on titles, and how these titles influence public perception, may help inform more effective policy measures. The misuse of honorary doctorates, as the findings show, is not merely a regulatory issue but a reflection of deeper societal attitudes toward education, prestige, and authority.

CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this article shows that the blurring of boundaries between honorary and earned doctorates in South Africa has become a deeply embedded challenge that extends well beyond isolated incidents. It reflects a broader struggle over the meaning, value and legitimacy of academic credentials in a period where public trust in institutions is already under strain. The pattern that emerges from the findings suggests that the misuse of honorary

doctorates, whether through deliberate misrepresentation or through the actions of unregulated institutions, has consequences that reach into the core of how society understands expertise, achievement and academic merit. The erosion of these distinctions ultimately affects everyone, including those who have completed demanding doctoral training, institutions that work to uphold academic standards, and members of the public who rely on academic titles as signals of competence and credibility. One of the central insights from the analysis is that the misuse of honorary doctorates undermines the symbolic and intellectual value attached to doctoral qualifications. The doctoral title historically serves as recognition of substantial scholarly training, methodological competence and a sustained contribution to knowledge. When honorary titles are used interchangeably with earned credentials, that meaning becomes diluted. The title loses its clarity and its grounding in academic work, and the public grows uncertain about what the "doctor" designation truly represents. This erosion is not merely symbolic. It shapes how academic expertise is evaluated in professional settings, how the public interprets authority in specialised areas, and how employers assess qualifications. If the distinction between an earned and honorary title becomes indistinguishable, employers and institutions may begin to question the reliability of any doctoral designation, weakening one of the most important signalling mechanisms within academic and professional life.

The findings also highlight that the issue cannot be understood only as a problem of individual behaviour. While some individuals knowingly misrepresent honorary doctorates as earned qualifications, the structural shortcomings in the regulatory environment create the conditions for these misrepresentations to flourish. South Africa has a well-established regulatory framework for higher education, supported by bodies such as the Department of Higher Education and Training, the Council on Higher Education and the South African Qualifications Authority. However, the enforcement of these regulations appears to occur in a reactive rather than proactive manner. Regulatory interventions often come only after a scandal has already unfolded, by which point the misrepresentation has circulated widely on social media or in public discourse. This reactive approach means that unregistered institutions repeatedly operate in the gaps of oversight. They use public confusion, limited awareness of regulatory processes and the lack of consumer education to present themselves as legitimate degree-granting bodies. Because many citizens are unfamiliar with the accreditation process, they struggle to tell the difference between recognised universities and unregulated entities that imitate academic branding. Some intentionally adopt names

resembling established institutions, further blurring distinctions. As a result, recipients of honorary titles from these bodies may not always recognise the implications of accepting such degrees, though others may knowingly take advantage of the ambiguity.

The analysis further suggests that the commodification of honorary doctorates plays a significant role. Honorary degrees were originally meant to acknowledge exceptional contributions to society or academia, usually granted after rigorous internal processes within accredited universities. Their purpose was not commercial but moral and symbolic. Yet in the contemporary context, honorary doctorates have increasingly become items of exchange. Unregulated institutions use them as tools to garner publicity and build reputational capital by associating themselves with well-known public figures. For the recipients, the appeal lies in the social prestige of the "doctor" title and the public admiration that often accompanies it. This creates a mutually reinforcing dynamic: institutions gain visibility, and recipients gain symbolic elevation, even if neither the institution nor the title carries legitimate academic standing. From a broader perspective, this dynamic speaks to the political economy of higher education in South Africa and across parts of the continent. In contexts where formal academic pathways remain inaccessible for many, honorary titles may function as alternative routes to social recognition. Some individuals may view honorary doctorates, even from unregistered bodies, as opportunities to participate in academic prestige without the financial, time or structural barriers that accompany traditional doctoral training. While understandable, this shift raises important ethical concerns, particularly when recipients introduce themselves as "doctor" in professional, political or public settings where the distinction between honorary and earned doctorates should be clearly stated.

Another key insight emerging from the findings is the extent of public confusion about what counts as a legitimate qualification. Many members of the public do not understand how accreditation works, what constitutes a registered institution or how to verify academic credentials. The public often assumes that if an institution calls itself a "university", it is automatically authorised to issue degrees. The resulting confusion shapes how the misuse of honorary doctorates is interpreted. Some view honorary titles as equivalent to earned doctorates, while others view all doctorates with suspicion due to highly publicised cases of misrepresentation. This confusion demonstrates the urgent need for public education campaigns that explain how higher education regulation functions and why accreditation matters. Based on the collective insights of the study, it becomes clear that safeguarding the

value of doctoral degrees requires action on several fronts. Strengthening regulation is essential, but it must be complemented by improved communication and public outreach. Regulatory bodies may need to move beyond issuing statements and warnings and instead develop sustained public education strategies that help citizens differentiate between accredited and unaccredited institutions. This could include regularly updated public lists of recognised universities, guidance on how to verify qualifications and clear explanations of the difference between honorary and earned doctorates.

Institutions themselves also have a role to play. Universities that award honorary degrees should develop transparent criteria and ensure that such awards are publicly listed. They should also require recipients to honour ethical guidelines about how honorary titles may be used. Some universities already discourage the use of the title “doctor” by honorary recipients; formalising these expectations across the sector could reduce ambiguity and strengthen ethical consistency. The study’s findings also open several avenues for future research. One important area involves measuring public perceptions of honorary doctorates compared with earned doctorates. Understanding how ordinary citizens interpret these titles would provide insight into the broader social implications of the misuse of honorary degrees. A related area concerns the impact of honorary titles on employment outcomes, leadership roles or public influence. It remains unclear whether honorary doctorates, even when legitimate, confer advantages in the labour market or public life, or whether their benefits are primarily symbolic. Another promising direction for future inquiry is comparative research across African countries. Some national systems have well-established regulatory controls, while others have limited oversight. Exploring how different governance arrangements affect the misuse of honorary doctorates would deepen understanding of the phenomenon and help identify effective regulatory approaches. Such comparative work could also shed light on how cross-border degree mills operate and how regional coordination might help address them.

In closing, the challenges highlighted in this study reveal how deeply intertwined academic legitimacy, public understanding and regulatory strength have become. The misuse of honorary doctorates in South Africa does not simply represent a problem of individual behaviour; it reflects broader tensions about authority, recognition and trust in the academic landscape. Preserving the integrity of doctoral qualifications requires not only firmer regulation but also a collective effort to clarify the purpose of honorary degrees, reinforce

ethical norms and strengthen public understanding. Through these measures, the distinction between honorary and earned doctorates can be restored, ensuring that both forms of recognition maintain their meaning and their place within the broader social fabric.

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