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How to Spot a Poorly Trained Academic: 33 Telltale Signs

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How to Spot a Poorly Trained Academic: 33 Telltale Signs

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1. Introduction

The landscape of academia is shaped by individuals who dedicate their lives to the pursuit of knowledge, the mentoring of students, and the advancement of society. However, the presence of poorly trained academics can undermine these goals, stifling progress and diluting the quality of education and research. This opinion piece outlines the signs of a poorly trained academic, delving into systemic gaps in training and professional development. It also proposes solutions to address these issues and foster excellence in academia.

2. Signs of a Poorly Trained Academic

Poor training is usually not the fault of the trainee, but of a culture or system of training that exists before the training time. In this section (from Section 2.1 to 2.33), I have highlighted **33 signs** that may suggest that an academic is poorly trained.

2.1. Inability to Engage in Philosophical Debates

A poorly trained academic often lacks the capacity or confidence to engage in deep philosophical debates. Academia thrives on the exchange of ideas, and the ability to defend, question, or build upon philosophical arguments is crucial. This inability reflects a lack of foundational training in critical thinking and a neglect of the importance of interdisciplinary perspectives.

2.2. Playing a Judge instead of a Coach

In the world of boxing, the role of a coach is pivotal. A coach's job is not to judge but to guide the boxer towards improving their technique, endurance, and strategy. The same principle applies to education. Academics should adopt a coaching mindset, working alongside students to help them develop their skills and knowledge. The goal is to foster growth and learning, rather than merely assigning low grades as a measure of failure. An academic who takes pride in scoring students zero is likely to have been poorly trained, and misses the opportunity to uplift and educate. Education thrives when the focus is on helping students succeed, not simply evaluating their shortcomings.

2.3. Lack of Products in Domains Where Products Are Possible

Academics in fields where tangible outputs, such as software, patents, or innovative tools, are feasible should strive to produce them. A lack of such products often signals a gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. This shortcoming highlights poor training or a disconnection from the real-world implications of their work.

2.4. Poor Academic Writing

Clear and impactful writing is the hallmark of a good academic. Poorly trained academics often struggle with articulating their ideas, leading to papers riddled with jargon, grammatical errors, and poorly structured arguments. This inability not only diminishes the impact of their research but also hinders their ability to secure funding, collaborate effectively, or engage with broader audiences.

2.5. Willingness to Compromise Standards

Compromising academic standards to achieve expedient results reflects a deep flaw in training and ethics. A well-trained academic understands that integrity and rigor are non-negotiable. Cutting corners—whether in research, teaching, or assessments—erodes the credibility of academia as a whole.

2.6. Entertaining Politics in Academic Work

When academics focus excessively on institutional or departmental politics, their scholarly contributions suffer. Poorly trained academics often engage in

politicking to secure positions, funding, or influence, neglecting the primary goals of research and teaching.

2.7. Lack of Confidence to Speak Off the Curve

Academics who cannot confidently present or discuss ideas without pre-prepared materials display a lack of mastery in their field. This hesitancy reflects insufficient depth of knowledge and an overreliance on rote learning rather than genuine understanding.

2.8. Avoidance of Public Lectures

Public lectures are an integral part of academic life, providing a platform to share knowledge and engage with the public. A poorly trained academic avoids such opportunities, either due to fear of scrutiny or a lack of passion for their field.

2.9. Lack of Depth: Black is Black, White is White, No Grey

Academics who see the world in rigid binaries lack the depth to navigate the complexities of their field. A mature academic understands that most issues lie in the grey areas, requiring careful evaluation and a willingness to consider multiple perspectives.

2.10. Lack of Mentoring Skills

A poorly trained academic views mentoring as an exercise in asserting their authority rather than nurturing creativity and independent thought in their

students. Effective mentoring involves fostering an environment where students feel empowered to challenge existing knowledge and innovate.

2.11. Entertaining Shallow Societal Divisions

Academics who indulge in reinforcing societal divisions based on race, tribe, or religion undermine the universal ethos of education and knowledge creation. True scholarship transcends such divisions, promoting inclusivity and unity while addressing social issues with nuance and objectivity.

2.12. Poor Quality of Work: Figures, Equations, Tables

The presentation of research is as critical as the content itself. Academics who produce subpar visuals—blurry images, poorly labeled tables, or misleading graphs—demonstrate a lack of attention to detail and pride in their work.

2.13. No Exposure to Tools of the Trade

A well-trained academic is proficient in the tools of their trade, such as LaTeX for producing professional documents in science and engineering, or AutoCAD in architecture. A lack of familiarity with the tools in the field of an academic indicates inadequate training and an inability to adopt practices that enhance productivity and precision.

2.14. Feeling the Pressure of Numbers

Academics obsessed with publishing as many papers as possible—often at the expense of quality—highlight a systemic flaw in academic training. A

well-trained academic focuses on impactful work rather than metrics, understanding that quality outweighs quantity in the long run.

2.15. No Expertise: Papers All Over the Place

A poorly trained academic often lacks a coherent research focus, producing papers scattered across unrelated topics. This scattershot approach reflects a lack of depth and expertise in any single domain.

2.16. Seeking Validation in the Wrong Places

While acknowledging that a good recognition is a mark of excellence, academics who prioritise validation from unqualified sources—such as social media popularity, paid awards from predatory awarding organisations that ask for membership fees, or political connections—demonstrate insecurity and poor training. True academics seek validation through rigorous peer review, scholarly impact, and meaningful contributions to their field. Chasing external approval distracts from the core mission of advancing knowledge and building expertise.

2.17. Lack of Passion in Science or Craft

Academics who lack passion for their discipline see their work as a chore rather than a calling. This lack of enthusiasm often results in mediocre outputs, uninspired teaching, and a failure to inspire others. Training should instill a deep sense of curiosity and commitment to one's field, which serves as the foundation for sustained success and impact.

2.18. No Window into the Real-world: No Consulting or Advisory Roles

A poorly trained academic remains isolated within the confines of academia, failing to engage with industry, government, or societal stakeholders. Such academics miss opportunities to apply their knowledge in real-world scenarios, gain new insights, or influence policy. Consulting and advisory roles are critical for bridging the gap between research and practice, ensuring the relevance of academic work.

2.19. No Creativity, Hence Little or No Output

Creativity is the lifeblood of academic work. A poorly trained academic, lacking in originality and problem-solving skills, produces little of value. Whether in research, teaching, or innovation, creativity drives progress. Without it, academic output becomes stagnant, repetitive, and unremarkable.

2.20. No Domain Language for Optimal Communication

An academic who cannot communicate effectively using the terminology and concepts specific to their domain demonstrates a fundamental weakness. Poor training often leaves them struggling to engage with peers, students, or practitioners in their field. Mastery of domain-specific language is essential for clarity, collaboration, and credibility.

2.21. No Insistence on Quality of Work from Postgraduate Students

A poorly trained academic fails to set high standards for their postgraduate students, accepting mediocre work without pushing them to excel. This lack of rigor results in subpar theses, diluted research contributions, and poorly prepared graduates. A strong mentor demands excellence, instills discipline, and ensures their students are equipped to contribute meaningfully to academia and society.

2.22. Cutting Corners

Academics who habitually cut corners in their work—be it in research, teaching, or administration—compromise the integrity of their profession. Poor training often leads to this mindset, prioritising shortcuts over the thoroughness required to achieve meaningful outcomes. Cutting corners not only diminishes the quality of their output but also sets a damaging example for colleagues and students alike.

2.23. Never Enjoying the Quest for Knowledge

An academic who does not find joy in learning reflects a fundamental failure in their training. The pursuit of knowledge is the essence of academia, and a genuine academic thrives on curiosity and discovery. Without this passion, their work becomes mechanical, uninspired, and detached from the broader mission of advancing understanding.

2.24. Trading Collegiality for Competition

Poorly trained academics often view their peers as rivals rather than collaborators, fostering a toxic environment of competition over collegiality. This mindset undermines the cooperative spirit necessary for groundbreaking research and holistic institutional growth. Proper training should emphasize the value of partnerships, teamwork, and mutual respect in achieving shared goals.

2.25. Marking Students Down: It was Harder in Our Time!

Academics who penalize students for excelling out of envy or insecurity reflect a lack of confidence and professionalism. Instead of nurturing talent and celebrating excellence, they see high-performing students as threats. Proper training instills the humility and dedication required to mentor students, recognizing their success as a testament to effective teaching.

2.26. Doesn't Enjoy Reading or Writing

Academics who avoid reading or writing demonstrate a significant disconnect from the essence of their profession. Reading keeps scholars informed about advancements in their field, while writing allows them to contribute their insights. A lack of enthusiasm for these activities points to inadequate training or a deeper disinterest in academia itself.

2.27. Doesn't Enjoy Writing as an Art

Writing is more than just a medium for communication; it is an academic's craft. Poorly trained academics who treat writing as a chore rather than an art often produce uninspiring, unclear, and formulaic work. Strong training emphasizes the importance of engaging, well-structured writing that captivates and informs readers.

2.28. Doesn't Enjoy a Healthy Debate

A reluctance to engage in healthy debates signals a lack of confidence or preparedness in one's field. Poorly trained academics may shy away from challenging discussions for fear of being exposed. True academics welcome debates as opportunities to test ideas, gain new perspectives, and refine their understanding.

2.29. Confuses Sentiments with Facts

Academics who let personal feelings override objective analysis undermine the rigor of their work. Proper training emphasizes the need to separate emotion from evidence, ensuring that conclusions are based on sound reasoning and empirical data. Failing to do so diminishes the credibility of their research and teaching.

2.30. Brings Religion into Academic Discourse

Introducing religious biases into academic discourse erodes the objectivity required in scholarly work. Poorly trained academics may struggle to maintain the necessary separation between personal beliefs and professional responsi-

bilities, compromising the integrity of their contributions. Training should reinforce the value of impartiality and inclusivity in academic settings.

2.31. Doesn't Favour Diversity: Race, Religion, etc.

Academics who resist diversity in their field limit the breadth and richness of perspectives necessary for innovation and growth. A poorly trained academic may harbor biases that prevent them from embracing individuals of different races, religions, or backgrounds. Effective training instills an appreciation for diversity as a strength that enriches the academic community.

2.32. Doesn't Worry About the Curriculum or Employability of Their Students

An academic who disregards the relevance of the curriculum or the employability of their students fails in their fundamental duty to prepare learners for the real world. Poor training often leads to a focus on outdated or impractical content, leaving students ill-equipped to meet industry or societal demands. Academics must ensure that their teaching is both forward-thinking and applicable.

2.33. Doesn't Prioritize Excellence

Settling for mediocrity is a defining trait of a poorly trained academic. Excellence should be the cornerstone of all academic pursuits, from research to teaching and community engagement. Failing to prioritize quality in their work reflects a lack of discipline, ambition, and proper mentorship during their own academic training.

3. Addressing the Gaps in Academic Training

The signs of a poorly trained academic outlined here are not just individual shortcomings but symptoms of broader systemic issues in academic training and culture. Addressing these gaps requires a multifaceted approach. First, academic institutions must prioritize the development of holistic training programmes that emphasize critical thinking, ethical standards, creativity, and practical application alongside rigorous subject expertise.

Secondly, professional development opportunities should be made widely available and incentivised, helping academics stay updated with tools, techniques, and emerging trends in their fields. Workshops on academic writing, research presentation, and pedagogical methods can significantly enhance quality.

Lastly, fostering a culture of collegiality, inclusivity, and intellectual curiosity is essential. By addressing these issues systematically, we can create a cadre of academics who are not only well-trained but also deeply committed to excellence, innovation, and the betterment of society.

4. Disclaimer

The points raised in this article may not be agreed on by all readers, it should be noted that these are the views of the author, and his alone. The author hopes these pointers help academics that want to improve, especially the earlier career academics. The author also hope this article brings forward the

discussions around the quality of education for the future, and to rejuvenate the passion of academics.

5. Feedback and Workshop

The author is available to workshop these issues with [young] academics that are interested in improving their standing in the profession to aid growth. To engage the author in this regard, or to raise suggestions or critique of the points in this article, please send an email to: abejide@gritlabafrika.org.

6. How to Cite This Article

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About the Author

Professor Abejide Ade-Ibijola is a leading AI researcher and innovator with over 17 years of experience, known for his impactful contributions to academia and society. He has published more than 90 research articles, with more than 1,400 citations, and his work spans rule-based AI, serious games, and applied AI solutions, earning him a C2 rating from the National Research Foundation of South Africa. His groundbreaking innovations, including



AI-enhanced games and mobile applications, have received international recognition and prestigious awards like the Africa Tech Innovation of the Year. Beyond research, Abejide has secured/contributed over \$20 million in funding to drive societal impact projects, including GRIT Lab Africa, which mentors young Africans in programming and resilience. He also founded Machines with Minds, an incubation hub supporting African innovators in developing AI-driven solutions for local challenges, fostering tech entrepreneurship and contributing to economic development across the continent.



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