

Editorial: Higher Education in an Era of Reconstruction, Internationalisation, Competition & Cooperation

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The question ‘what is the university for’, is as old as the institution itself and has fuelled many a philosophical debate – without resolve. In recent times however, there is an increasing and somewhat disconcerting consensus that higher education is essentially a driver of national and international development, generating a slew of discourses around notions of reconstruction, internationalisation, competition and cooperation. The internationalisation of higher education discourse, in particular, has crept into the agendas of both developed and developing countries even though access and equity in local contexts remain unresolved and the criteria for both access and equity are contested. Aspirations for a ‘world class’ university are being driven by several forces: demands for more flexibility for hyper-mobile skilled workers in a globalised world; an imperative to generate revenues which are inspiring econometric models of governance; a need to expand capacity through international linkages or simply a need to look modern which are propelling vigorous forms of internationalisation. The papers in this compendium touch on these issues, with each paper located within a macro or a micro perspective.

In this volume, Kenneth King reviews South-South cooperation in the internationalisation of African higher education, using the case of China as his lenses. He attempts to disentangle the history of university partnerships associated with China’s involvement with African universities. In reviewing China-Africa university partnerships, he pays attention to some of the history of this modality, while examining two more recent manifestations, the Confucius Institute partnerships between China and Africa and the

20+20 partnership between twenty African institutions of higher education and twenty counterparts in Mainland China. He explores the relationship between the actors in the partnership and, whether there is any substance to the claim that ‘China and Africa will learn from and draw upon each other’s experience in governance and development, strengthen exchange and cooperation in education, science, culture and health’.

King contends that the notion of partnership is a notoriously slippery one, as it conjures up ideas of symmetry, and yet, all too often, partners may not be financially symmetrical. For instance, aid donors began some years ago to rename themselves ‘development partners’ but the recipients are seldom called by this same name. Equally, even within the same nation, such as South Africa, there can be what we may call partnerships-for-development between stronger and weaker universities or technical colleges, and it is clear that one of the purposes of the partnership is to boost the weaker partner through association with an institutionally stronger one. On the other hand, when universities are developing partnership relations with foreign institutions, much attention is given to ensuring that the relationship is with an ‘internationally’ reputable university or college.

The push for internationalisation raises a number of questions for governments and higher education institutions, notably, whether this re-configuration is a betrayal of national agendas or a necessary condition to elevate the quality of higher education? Whether international access is being widened at the expense of access and equity for local students? Whether, in a context of pervasive globalisation, the push towards internationalisation is inevitable and irrepressible? Whether internationalisation offers opportunities to envision new paradigms, curricula, research and teaching and learning approaches? The answer to the question, therefore, of what universities are for, is not self-evident, despite the apparent consensus that the university is a lever of the knowledge-based economy. Indeed, the notion of the knowledge-based economy is in itself perilous, for as Geoffrey Boulton (University of Edinburgh) posits, it assumes a ‘knowable future and a static societal or economic frame’. He argues that to expect universities to serve as instruments to rescue ailing economies from recession, places on them obligations for which they are ill-equipped, instead of allowing them to produce ‘useful knowledge’, for an unpredictable future.

The notion of under-preparedness has enjoyed renewed prominence

in the recent past. Higher Education no longer enjoys the luxury of ascribing its underperformance entirely to the underperformance of the schooling sector and the under-preparedness of students. There is also acknowledgement that the prospect of any radical change in general education is unlikely to yield any significant improvement in the foreseeable future. Hence, the ‘articulation gap’ between the school and Higher Education is likely to persist unless Higher Education through its own volition and decisive action reconciles the gap between the education systems.

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) characterises under-preparedness as manifesting itself in a several ways, ‘from struggling in the formal curriculum to difficulty with adjusting to independent study and a university environment’ (CHE 54). An enduring feature of under-preparedness is that ‘what the students know and can do – attainments that were good enough to gain them entry to higher education – does not match the expectations of the institution’ (CHE 54). Acknowledging this disjuncture, Ahmed Bawa argues that the higher education participation rate in South Africa has been stagnant over the last 20 years and this has resulted in a substantial gap between graduate supply and demand. In his paper appropriately titled ‘Righting an Inverted Pyramid: Managing a Perfect Storm’, Bawa contends that the pressure for massification is a response to external socio-political and economic imperatives, which compound the structural inefficiencies of post-school education and, paradoxically, militates against massification in Higher Education. In responding to this dilemma, Bawa offers a model for re-configuring post-school education in KwaZulu-Natal, which will respond to the structural constraints and inefficiencies. He proposes a model comprising a federation of at least 60 existing campuses spread throughout the province. A necessary condition for the model to work is that it will have to be highly differentiated and strongly articulated, to meet the needs of increasing numbers of school leavers seeking access to higher education. Bawa’s speculative model demonstrates that there are indeed viable ways to re-think the construction of the post-school education and training system to respond to the material conditions that prevail in KwaZulu-Natal.

There is a realisation amongst members of the Higher Education community that it can no longer defend the perpetuation of a system that is structurally designed to fail the majority of students. It is becoming increasingly clear that academics will have to bear some responsibility for

the under-performance of the academy in relation to teaching competence and curriculum choices. The discursive shift has inspired academics to take control of those conditions that are within their capacity to change. The next set of seven research papers report on an array of efforts made to support students in Higher Education at bachelors, masters and doctoral level of study, though not all have achieved the outcomes they desired.

Katie Bryant and Kathleen Diga contribute to research capacity building activities that specifically target researchers located at universities in the global South. They argue that although research capacity building activities, usually funded by development agencies in the global North, place some focus on the activity of writing for publication (particularly because of African researchers' low rates of publication in academic journals), such activities do not necessarily take into account theories and research coming from the field of writing studies. The authors reflect on learnings deriving from this writer/writing coach relationship support programme and use them to propose a preliminary model. They recommend that this model could be used to inform the construction of writing support programmes being designed, implemented, and facilitated at African universities to address African researchers' challenges with publication. At the core of this model is a writing coach who has two attributes: First, an empirical understanding of the writers' specific contextual challenges with publishing; and second, three theoretical understandings of writing informed by writing studies research: writing as process, writing as social, and writing as rhetorical.

Similarly, various specialist disciplines face challenges of enabling epistemological access as they have traditionally been perceived by students to be 'difficult', largely because students do not fully grasp the underlying disciplinary concepts and are unable to transfer knowledge from one context to another. Such is the case with Managerial Accounting and Financial Management (MAF). Reflecting on students' experiences of learning in a structured Writing Intensive Tutorial (WIT) programme, Bargate and Maistry report on the success of an approach that used informal exploratory writing. The authors argue that informal writing is low stakes, ungraded and encourages critical thinking and learning of concepts rather than grammatical correctness. The participants in this study were MAF students who voluntarily participated in an 18 week WIT programme. The study was informed social constructivism and conducted within a qualitative interpretative framework.

Using Interactive Qualitative Analysis (Northcutt & McCoy 2004) as a data analysis tool, several key affinities (themes) were revealed. These affinities include an increase in personal confidence, improved study and examination techniques and the interactive tutorial environment. Students felt that their study techniques had improved as they adopted a deeper approach to learning. The structure of the tutorials was enjoyed by all students. They were able to interact with each other to develop a contextualised understanding of MAF concepts. These findings have implications not only for Higher Education accounting pedagogy but for high stakes gatekeeper courses and modules that set students up for failure, not least because of peculiar conceptions of teaching methods and pedagogical orientations.

The complexity of the challenges facing higher education pedagogy in Africa are evident in a number of recurring problems relating to: how to recruit and retain students graduating from an inadequate schooling system, how to provide a curriculum that supplements content knowledge gaps and allows for successful completion rates, finding ways to encourage active participation and deep learning in large groups within the context of large student-lecture ratios. Undoubtedly, an unsatisfactory learning experience in the first year of study is a leading cause of student attrition in higher education. There is, consequently, a greater burden to provide meaningful learning arrangements that bypass the traditional lecture mode which does not support learning barriers endemic to heterogeneous societies. In their paper, Seth Hakizimana and Andreas Jürgens explore the experiences of first-year Biology students who attended a peer teaching and learning module. Inspired by Paulo Freire's dialogical approach, they set up a complex multi-layered peer support system where students learned from and taught each other. The findings indicate impressive pedagogical benefits with decreased competition among students, more cooperation, and increases in motivation, self-confidence and self-esteem levels. This study demonstrates the benefits of an academic support programme that is context sensitive, in line with contemporary social learning tendencies and accommodates contextual peculiarities.

Context sensitivity is insufficient in some instances as the next article illustrates. Exploring reasons for the high level violence in South Africa in a psychology module and the provisioning of psychosocial support in another, Anthony Collins discovered that many of his students had personally experienced violence and the content of the modules he was teaching them

awakened traumatic memories. His paper, ‘Teaching sensitive topics ...’ recounts the unexpected realisation of the scale and extent of post-traumatic stress disorder amongst those taking these modules and the distress, confusion and dilemmas that he as the lecturer experienced. Violence and victimhood, teaching and lay therapy, curriculum and transformative learning are engaged with in a deep and reflexive manner. Collins does not offer solutions; instead he provides a conceptual rethinking of the content and the ways in which pedagogy can be therapeutic and transformative. Transformative learning Collins argues, in which students were continuously challenged to rise above and move beyond trauma, is fundamental to situations involving the overlap of theoretical and experiential realities This article is a reminder that even in Higher Education, there are personal aspects that lecturers may not know about students and when tough issues emerge in the lecture room, they have to be dealt with intellectually and sensitively.

The sharp distinctions between pedagogical approaches used in schools and in higher education are being blurred, the result of shifts towards student centeredness, innovation in teaching and inclusivity. In higher education, in particular, the onus of student success is expected to be jointly shared by students and lecturers, resulting in the appropriation by higher education of frameworks, learning theories and teaching strategies from general education. The article by Lokesh Maharaj, Noor Davids and Bheki Khoza is an analysis about their experimentation with transformative learning and team teaching approaches inspired by national frameworks which advocate learner-centeredness. The article outlines their reflections about student complaints and their resilience when teaching was destabilised. Undoubtedly, dabbling with teaching approaches that students are unfamiliar with requires patience, intelligent design and critical reflection and this paper is instructive and unapologetic about the messiness and complexities associated with transformative pedagogies.

Transforming pedagogy and increasing epistemological access by changing the language of instruction is another core issue that is not easily achieved. The area of language of instruction is a minefield of politicisation, ideology, colonisation, hegemony and power. The dominating positions on the language debate can be summed up as one side supporting internationalisation and globalisation, advocating for a language of instruction that will ensure that students can stake a claim in a global world. On the other side are

the supporters of instruction in the language spoken by learners at home so that learning is accessible, meaningful and successful. With eleven official languages and with most teachers credentialed in English, the task of moving to home language instruction is an onerous one. Linda van Laren and Busisiwe Goba tackle ‘volatile’ issues associated with the language of instruction practices. Using a self-study approach these mathematics teacher educators explore the language practices of four higher education institutions in the preparation of teachers who will have to teach basic mathematics in the foundation phase. They take a principled stance that ‘starting with ourselves’ may be the most appropriate way to deal with language volatility and leave no doubt that linguistic genocide cannot be supported. The Van Laren and Goba article highlights that though there is a desire to provide pre-service teacher educators with the competencies to teach in the language spoken at home, the dearth of financial and human resources, speedy translation services, and teaching to multilingual groups can scupper attempts to offer home-based language instruction. Van Laren and Goba are, nevertheless, optimistic that the wisdom gained from their experiences provides a foundation for facing the challenges that are endemic to transformative work.

The arena of masters level study throws up a different set of hurdles that have to be negotiated not only for personal success and achievement, but also to increase institutional throughput rates. Generally, two types of programmes are available: full thesis under the supervision of an academic or coursework followed by a mini dissertation. Myra Taylor and Prithashni Naidu discuss the endeavours undertaken to improve completion rates of those who chose the coursework and dissertation option. The concerns of the authors were in respect of the non-completion of the dissertation by students enrolled in the Masters in Public Health degree. Their response was to fathom the exact nature of the support student required which were administrative issues and lack of academic writing skills. Sorting out the administrative problems was painless and while academic support was provided, the outcomes were dismal as completion rates remained low. The contribution this paper makes is not so much about what they did as much as it is about what they discovered about why their endeavours failed. The material condition of students’ lives is an important factor for success and most of those who did not complete the dissertation were constrained by personal problems. The challenge for Higher Education is how can personal peculiari-

ties of postgraduate students be accommodated in an academic setting?

Continuing in the area of postgraduate studies, the Govender and Dhunpath article continues a conversation they began in 2011 concerning the cohort model of doctoral supervision. The stakes at doctoral level transcend issues of completion rates and epistemological access; the concern is directed towards originality, intellectual growth, academic prowess and wisdom, the aspects that emerge in the post-proposal development period. The authors argue that it is in this period that students need to experience conflicting sets of critique, contested views on research, and advice that challenges the worldviews of student and the appointed supervisor. The conflict, which emerges from the differing viewpoints of the cohort peers and supervisors (who often critique each other) and the appointed supervisor, is a necessary tension for developing intellectual maturity and to prepare doctoral students for the world of research. Dhunpath and Govender suggest that doctoral education is characterised by pedagogies of conflict and disharmony.

The next two papers can be conceptualised as being beyond pedagogical issues in higher education. Access and success in Higher Education can often not be predicted from scholarship emerging in the West and applied in developing contexts. Both these papers make apparent the variable conditions and materiality of living in Africa that suggest widening the lenses of academia. Higher Education is undoubtedly a luxury that many on the continent cannot afford. Support through initiatives like scholarships, which are merit-based and financial aid for those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are available and in many instances, found to be inadequate. The paper by Suna Kassier and Frederick Veldman, 'Food security status and academic performance ...' lays bare the statistics that draw together the numbers that suggest that most of the students who receive financial aid underperformed academically. One of the main findings was that more than half of those receiving financial aid were food insecure. The recommendation of the authors is nutrition intervention programmes, and if one takes into consideration the gamut of challenges that students from poverty backgrounds face, a Living Skills programme could be considered as well.

Community engagement is a buzzword in Higher Education. There are expectations that the work in Higher Education is not only about knowledge; it is also about how that knowledge inspires a commitment to uplift society in general and vulnerable communities in particular. An

altruistic character is valued as much as disciplinary expertise. There are many models of community engagement and in the conceptual paper by Julia Preece, ‘Service learning and community engagement ...’ she counsels against efforts that do not bring about productive changes in communities. Tracing the ideological roots of community service, community engagement and service learning, Preece reveals the complexities and complications related to changing conceptions of these three notions, the gap between theory and practice, and the negative consequences that arise when service learning drives community engagement. The contribution this paper makes is by offering a new concept of engagement, namely, ‘adaptive engagement’.

The final two papers are juxtapositions about the value of teaching in Higher Education. There is a general assumption that teaching and research, two of the primary role functions of Higher Education, are oppositional entities and that universities favour and reward research while teaching has a subordinate status with little or no reward. Salochana Hassan’s paper, ‘Perceptions of academics ...’ argues that the sense of teaching as a calling has made academic staff vulnerable victims of exploitation and manipulation. Deploying a critical lens, Hassan makes a compelling argument that academics are responsible not only for their subordination but also for their emancipation from the stranglehold of oppressive practices. The flip side of the argument, that teaching is as valued as research is proposed by Reshma Subbaye and Renuka Vithal in their article, ‘Valuing teaching in university ...’. Using one institution’s statistics, the authors provide evidence that not only is teaching rewarded, it is one of the ways in which upward career mobility can be achieved. Offering a gendered analysis, the statistics reveal that more women attain associate professorships through teaching excellence, men achieve through research excellence. The paper is instructive about the ways in which teaching is supported through various initiatives and unlike Hassan’s paper highlights the active role an institution can take to place teaching on the same footing as research. The Subbaye and Vithal study shares the pre-emptive measures that mitigate the suggestions of critical actions from academic staff advocated by Hassan.

We would like to believe that the principle of ‘useful knowledge’ has under-girded papers in this volume. The conference has attempted to promote a conception of ‘useful knowledge’ which is informed by an evidence-led scholarship of teaching & learning. However, the editors of this special issue

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have resisted the inclination to subjugate their conception of the scholarship of teaching and learning to instrumentalist agendas. However, we are acutely aware that in the context of high attrition and dismal success rates, higher education does not have the luxury of ‘navel gazing’ as a scholarly indulgence. Our scholarship of teaching & learning should, in the first instance, help us better understand how to interrupt the syndrome of chronic dropout and unsustainable success rates, while elevating the quality of graduates. The papers in this volume signal the centrality of the student in our scholarly agendas. Hence, while issues of access & equity, language of instruction, university quality, accreditation, rankings & ratings, career mobility, community engagement and internationalisation of higher education continue to grow as crucial areas of enquiry, the focus on relevant pedagogies, methodologies and technologies in the context of pervasive diversity, complexity and uncertainty remain the cornerstones of our core business. In acknowledging the gravity of our responsibility, we take seriously the warning of Achille Mbembe, who highlights the futility of academic enquiry which is ‘devoid of philosophical reasoning... [which is not] based on any sound scholarly work [and which] do not lead to new forms of civic or political activism... nor do they contribute to the emergence of new forms of creativity in the arts or in the field of literature, cinema, music or architecture’.

References

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