

# **Editorial: Crises, Contestations, Contemplations and Futures in Higher Education**

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## **Introduction**

The theme of this special edition once again derives from the Annual Teaching and Learning Conference hosted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2017.

For ten years (2007 - 2016), the conference has engaged a cauldron of issues that emerged in Higher Education, South Africa. During that decade, the academy charted a path of what it deemed to be relevant concerns around curriculum transformation and innovation, African perspectives and paradigms, reconstruction, internationalisation, policy analyses, research and teaching excellence, and professional development, all of which were suggestive of deep engagement with issues that mattered to higher education. The student uprisings (#RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall) disturbed the reverie that had lulled the academy's senses to student concerns and aspirations. In fact, higher education students made explicit the ways in which the academy was complicit in the reproduction of inequalities and the marginalisation of local values and contexts. The outcome of academia's lethargy to action and its propensity to 'talk' rather than 'act' to enable relevant and appropriate transformation, has had devastating consequences, culminating in violent uprisings in South Africa. Simultaneously, though, it has also created new opportunities and improved access to higher education for those marginalised by race and class.

These uprisings have resonance with other student rebellions documented in history. For instance, one of the paradoxical features of the

Paris student movement of May 1968, which brought the French economy to a standstill, was its effect on civil society rather than on universities. When contrasted to South Africa, French civil society were philosophically and theoretically active before the student movement began, and was instrumental in influencing the minds and interests of the higher education students. The notions imparted to students were aligned to post-war idealisations of Europe which embraced Marxist/Communist conceptualisations, existentialist themes of renewal through authenticity via art, fiction, literature, critique of fiction and literature, and strong public opinion regarding French policies and politics. By the time French students moved towards the crisis of 1968, civil society had imbued them with the intellectual tools to challenge the status quo.

After May 1968, the reverse occurred: it was the students' activist posturing that shifted the provincial atmosphere of cultural France and public opinion towards structuralism, psychoanalysis, liberalism and American counter-cultural movements. Powerful motifs of French psychoanalysis underpinned by the *oeuvres* of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche emerged. Interestingly, the latter, regarded as staples of French thought in the 1960s, did not appear in the pages of university journals in the post-protest era. Instead, these radical thinkers featured in the realm of public opinion, appearing in fringe magazines, graffiti, music, cinematic themes of young new directors, and theatre. It would be a while before Marxist, Freudian and Nietzschean thoughts were incorporated into university curricula and systems. Curriculum change in France was driven by students, not academia.

Are there some parallels to be drawn from the French experience which can be applied to the student protest movements (2015 - 2017) of South Africa? It may be too soon to say. Nevertheless, we recall that the movement began with grievances regarding colonial symbols and structures followed by discontent with the financial debt that students were accumulating in a climate of increasing poverty and hardship, and polarisation between rich and poor - naked classism – evident in the chasm between the most vulnerable in society and the rich élite. Thereafter, the movement shifted its attention to the origins of higher education institutions, and condemned the academy for being intrinsically tainted by its colonial origins.

The students' critique went beyond the relevance of universities: they raised concerns about employability, Africa's peripheral status in the knowledge economy and the relevance of the universities to their users. Is a university in its current configuration necessary? How do universities on the

continent reflect its African heritage and character? How can the university prepare students for successful careers in the creative arts, in music production, in acting or branding oneself? These questions have destabilised the notion of the university for a generation who are the first to type with thumbs, to have access to information without the mediation of the ‘professor’ and to challenge the censorship and silences exerted by the university. This is a generation which insists on the right to know and the right to act immediately on what they know, but are overwhelmed by what they find out and by the un-readiness of society to support their ideas and actions.

This anthology of *Alternation* captures in part, the massive shift in public opinion brought about by the efforts, intentional and unintentional, of university scholars, which is markedly different to the outcomes in France. In South Africa, the academy is being shaped by student concerns while civil society’s discourse is at odds with student activism and its leftist leanings.

The title of this anthology, ‘Crises, contestations, contemplations and futures in higher education’, is utopian in nature, in that it reflects an ideal sequence, with hope as the outcome of student dissatisfactions. We begin by presenting a review of the four phenomena captured in the title.

First, *crisis*, in classical Greek, is not a disaster; it is a turning point (Greek, *krinein* = to decide) imbued with possibilities of danger or hope, and for which decision-making is critical. A crisis is a high point in that it reflects the view that the issue at hand is unusual business, and occurs when there is a failure of sorts. A crisis is often explained as an episode between two periods of normalcy but, in some instances, it might be an unusually prolonged phase, especially in situations of inequality, discontent and contested worldviews, as seems to be the case of higher education institutions in the country. After all, it was Freud who said that there were three ‘impossible professions’- leading, healing and teaching (Freud 1925). Is governing, therapy and pedagogy not simply the name for a never-ending crisis, or a position that has to brace itself for disappointment in spite of the interim gains it might have acquired thus far? As we see it, crises do reflect impractical desires. What has happened at South African universities (and perhaps in French, German, Italian and American ones too), was an unusual event of unimaginable proportions – to phrase it differently, an unexpected and vicious tsunami.

Second, *contestation* is a form of confrontation, a type of productive *agon*, that stops short of war and is expected to improve ideas and create a greater engagement between opposing sides and their understanding of each other.

It is seen, at the very least, as a practical kind of criticism. Contestation includes the possibility of agreeing to disagree. However, what occurred in South African universities is not contestation. Contestation here is a polite euphemism for a revolutionary violence, in effect, a declaration of war on the establishment.

Third, *contemplation* is a concept largely associated with the philosophy of Plato, who contended that it is an act of deep reflection in search of the truth. Contemplation embodies actions like examining, inspecting, observing, reflecting and scrutinising, as well as introspection on that which is not known. From Plato's perspective, it is between knowing (focussing on) the subject (the academy), and probing that which is not known, that truth becomes revealed.

Finally, *futures*. The university, envisioned by Alexander von Humboldt and others at the dawn of 19<sup>th</sup> Century as a space that inspires innovation, social experimentation, new forms of reflection and the production of knowledge, with the purpose of creating a better future for all those who live on the planet, has not achieved these satisfactorily. The divisions between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' have widened, the planet is threatened, there is wide-scale suffering, disparities and dejection. We have not been able to spread hope and optimism for those whose lives are ravaged by poverty, marginalisation and oppression. The feelings of hopelessness appear to be more prevalent in those under 35 years of age; the future, they fear, is already compromised. Paradoxically, those in universities who boldly theorised revolution, were unable to engage with the prickly realities of student protests. After May 1968, the word 'revolution' has had far less appeal and greater vagueness than it had had before then. It has even less appeal in our sphere of the world today. We should ask ourselves when reflecting on past revolts, whether they were simply a co-optation and creation of an ultra-liberalism, or a more pervasive set of possibilities than the collective idea of revolution, so influential in the early 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Therefore, we should ask, what if anything, has the student movement, the indolence of the university and the shifts in public opinions told us about the (im)possibility of (im)possibilities in SA and elsewhere? Despite our reservations, the articles in this anthology offer some suggestions for an optimistic future. A brief synopsis of each article is presented hereunder.

## **Curriculum Decolonisation**

Raju, a keynote speaker at the conference to which this special issue is related,

made a number of presentations that generated debate among leading mathematics scholars and curriculum revisionists. Despite harsh reviews that disparaged and rejected the arguments made by Raju, we, the editors, felt that a high-status discipline like mathematics is useful to shatter the myths that some disciplines fall outside the decolonisation project. It is also useful as an exemplar of contestation and contemplation, and perhaps signals a hidden crisis that needs reckoning. We are convinced that there are sufficient grounds to support what many consider as subversive scholarship. The history of mathematics is contested; some of its historical origins have been erased, and as Raju argues, misinterpreted. Raju disputes the universality of mathematics. He contends that *normal* (traditional) mathematics, like science, accepts *both* deductive and empirical proofs. Colonial education replaced normal with formal mathematics; the unique feature of the latter is not the use of reasoning but *exclusion of the empirical*. Raju asserts that the coloniser did not critically compare normal and formal mathematics, and continues to obstruct comparative moves through the control of the means of knowledge production.

Raju's arguments are not without substantiation. He describes two decolonised math courses being taught: decolonised (string) geometry in school, and decolonised calculus in the university. He asserts that decolonised geometry, indigenous to Africa and India, is superior to the geometry currently taught in terms of conceptual clarity (points, angle, distance), ease of learning, and practical applications. Decolonised calculus teaches it as normal math, the way it originated in India as a numerical technique to solve differential equations, together with non-Archimedean arithmetic (instead of 'real' numbers) and zeroism (instead of limits) used to sum infinite series. He claims that the Europeans stole calculus from India, and falsely attributed it to Newton and Leibniz, who failed to understand how to sum infinite series. He concludes by stating that decolonised calculus is easy, requires almost no background, and results in better science. It enables students to solve more complex problems not covered in usual calculus courses. However, it excludes the ability to slip politically convenient dogmas into science through the metaphysics of formal math, and is, therefore, resisted by the coloniser in contemporary times.

The second article on decolonisation by Moosa investigates one of the foundations of the higher education structure. She argues that the relationship between quality assurance policies and decolonisation priorities has not been considered. Using a qualitative approach, she explores the possibilities of the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) to decolonise the

curriculum. Moosa argues that the HEQSF is aligned to a neo-liberal world view which militates against different ways of thinking and 'de-linking' from traditional perspectives. She emphasises re-examination of the notion of a qualifications framework and suggests that relevant alternatives to facilitate the decolonisation of the curriculum are required. She is of the view that since no alternative exists to replace the HEQSF, the possibility for change based on prescriptions in a decolonial context is questionable. Moosa concludes by raising challenges for decolonising the South African higher education system.

## **Higher Education Mentoring**

Dhunpath *et al.* in *Towards a Model of Mentoring in South African Higher Education*, address the critical issue of the diminishing or aging professoriate. They argue that there have been several responses to the imperative to increase the number of senior staff at universities. One such response is the Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework (SSAUF). Dhunpath *et al.* note that the framework is silent about the potential of mentorship programmes to socialise emerging academics into the culture of the academy, and to navigate the intricacies regarding effective university teaching. Acknowledging the complexity inherent in the practice of mentoring and its attendant power relations, the proposed model is a departure from the individualistic performance management approach typically associated with the dominant master-apprenticeship model. Instead, the authors offer a non-hierarchical, co-constructed menu of possibilities based on negotiated reflection, arising out of the specific, situated contexts of mentor and mentee.

## **Curriculum Contemplations**

In keeping with the theme of contemplation, Rudman explores the identity language nexus in the higher education arena. Amidst the turmoil and controversy which characterize much of the public debate on social concerns in South Africa, the issue of apartheid-type perceptions of identity continue to dictate the nature and outcome of social interactions in higher education spaces. Student feedback on a first-year English Language Studies module at a South African institution of higher education suggests that through the mediation of 'hermeneutic conversations' (as described by Gadamer), there is potential to both address and overcome ideologically-based obstacles to

transformation. The concept of conversation forms the core of Gadamer's explanation of the quest for understanding, and hermeneutics as establishing 'agreement', where there was none or where it had been disturbed in some way. Students were prompted to enter into conversations aimed at encouraging understanding between those from diverse backgrounds. In addition, the course aimed to prompt 'inner conversations' regarding everyday understanding of the world and that which is assumed as 'truth'. Conversations of the hermeneutic kind, we can agree, has the potential to heal the divide emanating from a troubled political history of separation.

### **Modes of Instruction**

In dealing with the futures of disciplinary approaches, Lewis and Lemmer report on the implementation of creative training for embodied performance courses (physical theatre and voice studies for actors). They focused on the potential of a multimodal approach to challenge and re-imagine actor-training through performance platforms which incorporated embodied-learning/ performance/space(s). Using a reflective research design at the Tshwane University of Technology, student practices were identified through lecturers' observations and reflections on the teaching and assessment of acting-training Bachelor of Technology students. The authors' documentation and reflections serve a number of purposes: validation of multimodal (re)conceptualisations, support for performance creativity and enablement of autonomy of learning and co-creation of new knowledge of creative students.

In their reflection on science teaching during student unrest at a South African University, Tekane, Louw and Potgieter reported their concerns about the loss of teaching time due to protest action. In order to ensure that the year was not lost, they changed the mode of instruction at short notice from contact to online teaching. Using a phenomenographic approach to generate data on lecturers' experiences during so-called 'pecha kucha' events (very short PowerPoint presentations), the authors' insights into the incorporation of blended learning, demonstrate the possibilities for rescuing programmes and saving time. Its success suggests the possibility of using the approach even in times of stability.

### **Plagiarism in Higher Education**

A direct consequence of the effortless access to information via multiple tech-

nological platforms in our very fast developing digital universe, is the problem of plagiarism which continues to vex higher education institutions worldwide, despite a proliferation of the digital tools to mitigate the problem, and the related systematic development of processes and procedures to not only deal with it, but also educate about it, and prevent it. Matsebatlela and Kuhudzai, in a study of plagiarism at a South African university, claim that students have poor understandings of plagiarism and the various ways in which it finds expression. Using quantitative analytical tools, the study investigated undergraduate health sciences students' perceptions, attitudes to and awareness of plagiarism. A significant percentage of the students' responses revealed statistically significant differences in attitudes to plagiarism and awareness across all levels of study. The paper advocates for clearly written plagiarism policies that are communicated to both students and their lecturers, particularly the consequences of plagiarism transgressions. Research (East 2006) acknowledges that what is deemed immoral in western contexts may be acceptable in others. Matsebatlela and Kuhudzai suggest that an earnest quest for alternative forms of assessment – that make reduced demands on lower levels of cognition such as memory and recall, could ignite students' imagination, making the prosaic ideas of others less appealing and, simultaneously, elevating the quality of their own ideas derived from their own lived experiences.

## **Students' Lived Experiences and Curriculum**

Reflecting on the experiences of rural science students in higher education, Madondo bemoans the dis-connect between curricula and students' lived experiences. The students' ways of being at home is the source of increasing discontent with their marginalization and perceptions of the continuing élitist and exclusive nature of the institutions in which they are enrolled for study. Madondo contends that student's cultural knowledge is neither understood nor valued in university teaching and learning. He argues against 'absenting the experiences of these students in higher education'. Using Margaret Archer's social realism as a theoretical framework to access students' prior experiences, he recommends its inclusion in the science curriculum, asserting that curriculum design demands astute leadership to elevate marginalised epistemologies and identities which are constitutive of emancipatory knowledge.



## **Curriculum Contestations**

Curriculum in contemporary higher education operates as a site of struggle in which competing discourses abound – about what it should be, how it should be conducted, who should be recruited for it, and who should engage in it (see Parkes 2013). Navigating a contested site requires deep theorising of the challenge in higher education – a task that cannot be entrusted to technocrats with managerial impulses. The problem of inappropriate leadership approaches is especially pronounced in disciplines related to the performing arts in higher education. Devroop, a leader in an arts-based discipline, examines certain fragilities within the university systems and calls for transformational leadership to respond to the complexities inherent in curricula which have shed their conventional borders. The appropriately titled ‘Shifting sands of music leadership: searching for disciplinary space in a research-led university’, is a personal reflective account. Located within an auto-ethnographic context, he highlights the experiences and challenges of an academic leader in the arts, specifically, the music discipline. The data he presents, affords insight into complex problems between leadership, management and more especially, the academic leadership of the discipline. Envisioning a different role for curriculum leadership within the contemporary university, he contends that it is imperative for the music discipline to engage with new media challenges in order to ensure its contemporary relevance.

## **Intersectional Identities**

Moving from the auto-ethnographic account in Devroop’s piece that draws on identity in leadership and management, Mkhize and Pillay affirm the importance of individual identities and epistemologies in the exploration of black female post-graduate science students’ experiences and understandings of intersectional identities. They argue that Black women face oppression in various fields but that black women in the science, technology, mathematics and engineering fields face even more scrutiny. Underpinned by the theory of intersectionality, the authors focus on ten black female postgraduate science students. They deconstruct their experiences and understandings of their intersectional identities, and explain the impact on their professional career trajectories. They argue that the participants were by-products of three sites: schooling, socialization and the discipline science, prompting the authors to

question whether transformation is occurring in higher education in South Africa, or if classism is the new 'racism'. The study revealed that at a university in South Africa, black, female postgraduate science students appear unaware and dismissive of their intersectional identities, and ignorant of the impact those identities have on their career trajectories.

## **Concluding Observations**

Do the articles in this volume serve as a barometer to indicate the level of seriousness of the academy to confront the challenges posited by the recent crises and contestations in higher education? It would seem that students' voices are being inscribed into higher education discourses, signalling that universities can no longer pursue 'business as usual' goals, especially as they relate to the curriculum, pedagogy and governance. There appears to be an acknowledgement in this compendium of articles that there are few universal principles on intellectual work, and need to shed idealised and received notions of 'the university' as we know it. As we contemplate the future of higher education, we have a perfect opportunity to consider alternative intellectual traditions and knowledge systems. As scholars explore indigenous modes of knowledge exploration that are experiential rather than abstract, communal and cooperative rather than individual and competitive, and produced in the context of relevant application rather than through esoteric indulgences, the notion of decolonised pedagogies and epistemologies is gaining currency.

We endorse the work of scholars validating and providing evidence that higher education, which is:

... devoid of philosophical reasoning, not based on any sound scholarly work, does 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 (Mbembe in Blaine 2009: webpage).

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