DISRUPTIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: MITIGATING ISSUES OF ACCESS AND SUCCESS IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

F. Maringe
Leadership and Policy Studies
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7992-9079

O. Chiramba
Faculty of Education
University of Johannesburg
Johannesburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4668-8536

ABSTRACT

Disruptions create both new opportunities and challenges in higher education. In settled times, education systems plod along with an assumed and uncritical acceptance of normalcy of the status-quo. When the status quo is disrupted, suddenly the patched-up cracks reveal the depth and magnitude of the simmering problems of the sector in graphic ways.

Access and success are arguably the two most poignant indicators of the performance of higher education systems. In post-colonial societies such as South Africa, access is used to estimate progress in broadening participation in higher education, particularly to young people from previously disadvantaged communities. Access has two broad meanings: increased enrolments and enhanced epistemological impact. Success, on the other hand is measured variously but mainly through graduation and progression rates across different socio-economic higher education students groups and also on the quality of their performances.

In this article we provide a theoretical discussion of the notions of disruptions and their impact in higher education; examine the questions of access and success in higher education; and conclude that the chasm lying between access by participation and access by success requires substantial transformation of a knowledge system that is alien to the cultural context of the country; rebalancing and recalibrating the broader ideological environment that privileges liberalism while paying token attention to social justice and inclusion beyond mere symbolism; and a persistent refocusing on emancipatory pedagogies, designed to liberate rather than subjugate graduates into pigeon holed choices in the labour market which are designed to serve the needs of owners of capital as the primary motive of employment.

We conclude by identifying critical factors that appear to lead to a failure by universities to bridge the gap between access by participation and access by success or epistemological access.

Most of these tend to be structurally embedded in the fabric of higher education institutions and the sector and include, a persistent coloniality of the sector, disjuncture between the intended ideological framework guiding national development and the operating economic models and institutional inertia to move beyond the canonical bases of higher education based on western epistemes.

Keywords: access in higher education, COVID-19 pandemic, disruptions, higher education, success in higher education, teaching and learning, transformation

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Education systems perform best in times of stability, yet, under conditions of stability, they often tend to reproduce and entrench inequalities and inefficiencies which largely become part of what is expected and assumed to be normal (Giroux 2020). As such, despite its desirability, stability does not provide the optimum environment required to drive change and transformation. When education systems are confronted by substantial disruptions, the inequalities and inefficiencies of the system become glaringly obvious and become the stimulus education needs to transform itself (OECD 2005). As the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic unraveled, so too did the unequal educational opportunities faced by students from different socio-economic backgrounds magnify themselves soliciting both immediate and long-term change and transformation in the sectors.

In this article we provide a critical discussion of the conceptual basis for understanding the impact of disruptions in higher education; examine the notion of change and transformation, and especially show how there is conceptual paralysis in South Africa's higher education sectors regarding these concepts; briefly discuss the notions of access and success, especially as these constitute perhaps the best indicators of the performance of a system bulking under the burden of disruptions. We also discuss the notions of coloniality, as it constitutes the basis for understanding why post-colonial education systems fail to transform despite the intention to do so. We then end the chapter with a synopsis of the chapters which have been selected for this special issue.

When the pandemic broke out, three standard responses replicated across the world. These included social distancing, frequent sanitization, and the wearing of masks. Along these measures, there were widespread travel bans and the closure of businesses and other social and economic enterprises, confining people to their homes in order to limit the spread of the virus. Universities and other education institutions in many countries across the world were closed. However, an important decision made around the education systems of the world was to continue with teaching and learning despite the closure of the universities in what has come to be known as remote teaching and learning (RTL), an educational and pedagogical modality

which continues to be fairly alien to many face to face universities.

THE SCIENTIFIC BASIS OF THE DECISION TO CONTINUE WITH TEACHING AND LEARNING DESPITE THE PANDEMIC

The decision to continue with teaching and learning was based on principled and scientific evidence. Firstly, is the notion of cognitive erosion (Hanushek and Rivkin (2012). Cognitive erosion is the decline in learner's intellectual capability as a result of sustained withdrawal of sustained teaching and learning. This erosion is known to have greater impact amongst learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds at all levels of schooling including universities. Generally, the longer the disruption, the higher the cognitive erosion. UNICEF (2021) estimates that a yearlong disruption in learning results in two years of cognitive erosion. In other words, a third-year university student whose learning is disrupted for one year will have the cognitive capacity of a first-year student. When the disruption ends, the student requires two further years of reteaching to bring them to the same level they were before the start of the disruption. This has implications for delayed graduation, delayed participation in economically productive lives as employees, retarded national economic development, and the choking of the system's students' pipeline, causing further inefficiencies in the system which could take many years to rectify (Carlsson et al. 2015). It is estimated that when schools and universities closed around the world on account of the pandemic, more than 1.6 billion learners were affected, and that the long-term effects of the cognitive losses, though not fully measured, are expected to be profound in the coming decades (UNICEF 2021).

Secondly, and related to cognitive erosion, is the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). The theory explains how thought processes in young children and adults can be drastically altered if the conditions of life change drastically and suddenly. The theory has been used to explain changes in motivation and the preponderance of irrational behavior amongst people whose life conditions are suddenly changed. Cognitive dissonance has been associated with reduced motivation, implying that many learners and teachers might have experienced reduced motivation to continue learning thereby further compromising their cognitive capacities. In low-income homes, suddenly children and adults had to spend the whole day crammed in the limited spaces of their small houses and shelters. Incidences of child abuse, gender-based violence and other forms of malfunctioning lives were reported to have increased substantially especially during times of the hard lockdowns (Loiseau et al. 2021). The normal routines of life changed drastically and have also been associated with increased mental health unwellness among school and university students, including increased substance abuse among these young people and adults alike (Panchal et al. 2020).

Thirdly, disruptions are also known to negatively affect the quality of assessment and degree outcomes (OECD 2020). Many students are said to have gone off the learning grid completely, while more suffered the impact of unsuitable home-learning environments especially those from low-income families (Maringe et al. 2021). Equally, research hypothesizes that disruptions have the potential to influence students' long-term outcomes especially in curbing their educational aspirations and in extreme cases, their dropout rate (OECD 2020).

Having considered these and other important evidence, including pragmatic factors such as the complications associated with dealing with the pipeline of students in clogged up systems, universities, with support from government and the Department for Higher Education and Training (DHET) made the wise decision to continue with teaching and learning despite the COVID-19 induced closures of the institutions. Universities thus turned to a rarely used pedagogical practice of remote online teaching and learning. Although online teaching and learning was the standard methodological practice adopted by the universities, it is important to note that some institutions utilized broader blended teaching and learning approaches which included a variety of traditional distance learning approaches, such as radio, print, TV, telephone, amongst others, to reach the now dispersed students learning in the dis/comfort of their homes, depending of course on one's socio-economic status.

THE EARLY CHALLENGES WITH ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Five critical challenges were experienced at universities on the back of the decision to adopt the online teaching and learning modality.

The first was that not all students could afford to purchase smart technologies such as smartphones and laptops on which the online teaching and learning would be delivered. Universities were faced with no choice other than to buy these technological devices for all students who needed them, stretching their budgets back by several million rands. This was the first wake-up call to universities regarding the extent of deprivation and student poverty in higher education.

The second was the question of Wi-Fi band width to support online teaching and learning in some of the remotest corners of the country. Although universities negotiated with technology providers to provide free Wi-Fi access to students who wished to use university teaching and learning management platforms for their lessons and tutorials, students from remote rural areas of the country often missed out on account of weak signals. The question of the digital divide in the country provided a substantial barrier to effective learning especially amongst students residing in low-income households in townships and rural areas of the

country. Universities not only help to normalize the educational environment for all students, rich and poor, they also conceal the poverty which afflicts a large proportion of students from disadvantaged communities. However, as students now had to turn to remote teaching and learning, the question of the disparities in learning environments amongst them reared its ugly head across the universities.

The third, closely related to the second above, was cognitive dissonance created in many low income households, due to issues of limited space, the sheer numbers of people in the household, noise levels both in the homes and in the communities, the frequent loadshedding which tends to affect high density locales and rural areas more than it does the affluent suburban areas, amongst other challenges, would have had the net combined impact of reducing the quality and effectiveness of learning for many affected students (Reimers and Schleicher 2020, 2).

The fourth, which in essence is a consequence of the above three challenges was the phenomenon of disengaging either partially or totally from learning by some students during the times of university closures. Partial disengagement manifests in reduced motivation, non-submission of assessments, nonattendance in online teaching episodes, amongst others while total disengagement manifests in dropping out of the educational cycle altogether. Although at the time of writing, we do not have official figures representing these occurrences, the OECD (2020) estimates that a quarter (25%) of all learners affected by the closure of schools during the pandemic may have been affected this way worldwide. The consequences of disengagement, whether partial or total, have far reaching short term and long-term consequences on the learners, their families, and communities, on the social fabric of society and the overall economic performance of countries (Reimers and Schleicher 2020).

Finally, the fifth challenge, which affected both staff and students was the adjustment to a new teaching and learning modality. Distance teaching and learning has generally been frowned upon as an inferior pedagogical approach, rightly or wrongly, with many universities preferring the tried and tested face-to-face modality which offers opportunities for the highly valued social constructivist learning, where according to Berger and Luckman (1991), our understanding and beliefs about the world are social inventions, constructed through language and learned through interaction with others. Online teaching and learning thus removed the agency of the university to facilitate social constructivism and many in the academy did not know how else to transact university education without face-to-face teaching and learning. It must have taken time to unlearn and relearn the new online pedagogies and along the way, mistakes are bound to have happened. This would have had a negative impact on the quality and effectiveness of learning by students, who themselves were also struggling with the

transition to the new modality. Poorly educated citizens are a liability more than they are an asset to the nation and in the long term, the impact of this substantial learning deficit will be full revealed especially in terms of economic impact, delayed and future earnings and career aspirations (Hanushek and Woessmann 2020).

The closure of schools and universities on account of the COVID-19 pandemic was thus accompanied by a sustained effort to ensure the continuity of teaching and learning. The decision was backed by hard evidence on the impact of stopping teaching and learning altogether. The cessation of teaching and learning has both short-term impacts on the learners, on the economy, on the social and political fabric of society, on the general wellness of society and on pragmatic issues regarding the complexities associated with a clogged-up system of education. On the other hand, the decision to continue teaching and learning on online platforms exposed the deep inequalities that were lying nascent in the system and had numerous practical and pedagogical challenges including structural societal issues that would serve to exacerbate the inequalities and educational opportunities across the socio-economic divides.

This article will now move to a critical review of the literature to create a good basis for understanding a variety of conceptual ideas around the notions of access and success in higher education in the context of the pandemic. It will end with a synopsis of a strong selection of critical interventions designed to ameliorate the impact of the pandemic in universities in South Africa.

CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION

Access and success in higher education

Having inherited a highly unequal and segregated higher education system from the apartheid regime, which promoted racially motivated access to higher education, a key ambition of the new democratic government in 1994 was to create a higher education system which provided equal opportunities to all regardless of race, colour, ethnicity and socio-economic background. In particular, access had to be increased for previously disadvantaged groups such as Black people. Effectively, universities were required to create more space for students from Black communities while government was tasked with the responsibility to ensure that these new entrants to universities would be funded in order to guarantee their access to universities. The table 1 below shows the prodemocracy and post democracy student representation in universities in South Africa.

Table 1: Students access to universities pre and post democracy in South Africa

% Student representation in universities in pre and post democracy South Africa				
	1970	**1994**	**2019**	**% Drop or increase**
Whites	90.9	41.4	14.6	76.3% drop
Blacks	5.7	46.7	75	69.3% increase
Indians	2.3	6.9	5	2.7% increase
Coloureds	1.2	5.1	5.3	4.1% increase

Black students access has increased by almost 70 per cent since 1970 and by 30 per cent since 1994. Almost three quarters of all students in universities in 2019 were Black compared to 47 per cent and 5.7 per cent in 1994 and 1970, respectively.

White students access in public universities deserves some comment. Since 1970, there has been a 77 per cent drop in white student participation in public universities. Since 1994, the drop has been about 27 per cent. The question is, where are the white students studying today. Many of them are absorbed in the private higher education sector, which effectively controls enrolment by ability to pay; others go to study overseas especially in the USA, Canada, UK, Australia, and New Zealand (Field, Musset, and Álvarez-Galván 2014).

The other 2 racial groups for Coloureds and Indians have witnessed very marginal increases since 1970 and less still since 1994.

Overall, we can say that the objective of increasing access to higher education for previously marginalised racial groups in South Africa has been achieved.

Beyond this participatory access, is a more fundamental type of access, which we can argue provides rather depressing reading in South Africa. It is one thing to open the doors to universities and to increase physical participation. It is another to ensure that those participating experience epistemological access. The table below illustrates graduation rates by population group from 2015 to 2018. In addition to low graduation rates, overall, there are disparities among different population groups with Whites showing a higher rate than that achieved by Blacks.

Table 2: Graduation rates by population group from 2015 to 2018 in South Africa

Race	2015	2016	2017	2018
Black	18%	19%	19%	20%
Coloured	19%	21%	20%	21%
Indian	19%	21%	22%	23%
White	24%	25%	25%	26%
Unknown	23%	24%	21%	21%
Overall	19%	21%	20%	21%

Source: CHE 2019

The notion of epistemological access was highlighted by the late Waly Morrow who bemoaned the poor record of success, persistence, and progression of the new entrants to universities in the post 94 period. Using two standard indicators of graduation rates and drop-out rates, it is clear that the notion of epistemological access has not been given sufficient attention in South Africa. According to Morrow (2009), epistemological access in the context pf higher education encapsulates the processes of negotiating access to disciplinary knowledge including access to the ways of knowing within the disciplines. Assessments and examinations are thus effectively means used to estimate the quantity and quality of epistemological access students may have gained through their courses of study, thus despite participating in education, learners need to gain epistemological access. Students who demonstrate this epistemological access, eventually pass their examinations and graduate. Therefore, graduation rates can be used as a fairly accurate proxy of the quantity and quality of epistemological access.

South Africa is known as having one of the lowest graduation rates in the world. At about 35 per cent, it means that almost 65 per cent of all students who enroll into a university degree programme fail to qualify, or, for a wide range of reasons, do not complete the degree programme in the designated period. The majority of those who fail to qualify or fail to complete their studies in the designated time are Black students (Stats SA 2019). There are variations between institutions and also across various levels of study. However, the former all Black institutions which host the largest proportions of the poor students tend to fare least well in terms of graduation rates.

Equally, dropout rates are also alarming in South Africa, ranging between 40 per cent and 60 per cent with variations across the institutions and across levels of study. However, former all Black universities fare least well on this variable too (Stats SA 2019).

Research on access and success in higher education has identified the following factors which increase participation in higher education: traditional messages, communicated both formally and informally, about the value of higher education and how it links strongly to the so called good life, are persistently and consistently rehearsed in homes, in workplaces, the media, and in schools and serve to raise learners aspirations and intentions to go to university; government's support through explicit policies for funding poor students' university tuition fees through bursaries and grants have served to attract more learners from previously disadvantaged communities to universities; university marketing campaigns and funded places for high performing students from disadvantaged communities have attracted large numbers of students to universities; some universities have set up pre university courses to prepare students before begin formal classes and others provide ongoing support to improve academic skills of learners to cope with the exacting demands of academic work; many universities have also set up

academic advising services which provide a wide range of support to students to promote success and wellbeing on campus; almost all universities provide free mental and wellness services to students who need them amongst many others programmes of support. However, despite these interventions, it does not look as if the problem of poor epistemic access can be resolved any time soon.

WHY DO THINGS SEEM TO BE GETTING WORSE DESPITE THE ABUNDANT RESOURCES AND INTENTION TO TRANSFORM?

There has been a tendency to throw money and resources at problems which have not really solved much in the South African context. There appears to be three significant reasons why desired transformation does not seem to materialize in the higher education in South Africa.

Throwing money at the wrong problems

The first is throwing money at the wrong problem. According to the OECD (2020) data, South Africa spends an above-average share of its wealth on the public funding of education than other OECD and comparator countries in the region. In 2016, the public funding of education across all levels amounted to 4.1 per cent of South Africa's GDP, higher than the OECD average of 3.1 per cent. Despite this vast spending on education, South Africa has not been able to close the gap between the majority of its schools in severely deprived rural and township settings and those in the rich affluent suburbs which serve largely white minority sectors of the population. Fleisch, Shindler, and Perry (2012) describes South Africa as operating two systems of education; one for the rich citizens, which is generously resourced, enjoys the benefits of small class sizes, have highly qualified and experienced teachers and produces almost 80 per cent of the children who eventually progress to universities. The other is the larger of the two, which is poorly resourced, has unstable and transient teaching staff, has large classes and poorly trained staff and which contribute 20 per cent of the children who proceed to universities. Some of these schools, especially in far flung remote areas experience perennial textbook shortages, have no running water, no electricity and still have pit latrines into which young children are frequently reported to fall and to die. The Mail and Guardian (John 2012) described the issue of textbook shortage as chronic in South Africa, a typical example of the department's failure to monitor schoolbook deliveries across the country. The books are there somewhere, but someone, who presumably has been paid, is not delivering the books to schools. John (2012) concluded that the national department has not taken its monitoring role seriously and has allowed poor and possibly illegal practices to become entrenched in the system, with the long-term erosion of the ability of the system to get materials to the 26000 sites where they are

needed.

In the higher education sector, that the dropout rate and graduation rates are persistently lower than those of comparator countries on the continent with substantially smaller budget and certainly, in comparison to all OECD nations, is an indictment of scandalous proportions for the burgeoning nation. The gains of improved participation are systematically negated by the failure of the universities and the education sectors more broadly to deliver epistemological access.

SECTOR WIDE CONCEPTUAL PARALYSIS

The second problem is what Badat (2021) has termed a conceptual paralysis of gigantic proportions through which the education sectors do not have shared meanings and understandings about core conceptual ideas through which progress and development could be engineered. For example, transformation in South Africa is a term that is loosely applied to any change or reform designed to mitigate the effects of apartheid policies of the past in education. While change can be both largescale and small scale, transformation is never a small-scale matter. Providing support to nontraditional students in higher education could qualify as change or reform, but unless the change is designed to support new educational directions, it cannot be transformation. Unlike change and reform, transformation is underpinned by ideological shifts in thinking and practice. You cannot transform the lives of poor people in universities, until you change the factors which shape their condition as poor people. No amount of food parcels will transform their lives, no number of extra lessons and extra tuition will alter their condition of being poor people. Transformation is as much an ideological thing as it is an epistemological process. In South Africa, the overwhelming ideology is neo-liberalism, which favours the progress of the rich and powerful and by implication preserves the status of the poor and underprivileged. We suggest that the conceptual paralysis be resolved through attending to a need for clear definition of transformational concepts without conflating them with ordinary change management ideas. The tendency to conflate meanings and to use the terms interchangeably has contributed to the numerous incomplete transformational projects in the country. It does not make much sense for example, to teach students how to access curricula and knowledge which have little relevance to their contextual conditions. Transformation cannot be achieved piecemeal; it has to be holistic. It is futile to change the how, without changing the what and why at the same time, yet the record of transformation in South Africa is littered with many such examples.

INCOMPLETE CONCEPTUALISATION OF TRANSFORMATION

There are two ways in which the idea of transformation tends to be used in South Africa. The first is a taken for granted understanding, where it is assumed that everyone knows what the term means and understands why it is necessary. Understanding why it is necessary in South Africa is not difficult to muster, especially given the need to dismantle the edifices of the legacy of colonialism and the evil apartheid system. The need for a more equal and just society in the post-apartheid dispensation is an accepted rationale for transformation in South Africa. The second is, as we have seen in the previous section, a conflation of the idea with other similar concepts such as development, change, innovation, and reform. While all these terms share in common the idea of altering a given status quo, they tend to differ in magnitude, purpose and most significantly, in the extent of their intended impact.

Development is the intended outcome of everything else in this cluster of concepts. It denotes growth, improvement and advancement in the human and material conditions which shape the lives, opportunities, and livelihoods of people. When for example, a country invest in literacy programmes for its adult population, it is hoped that more people will, for example, gain access to knowledge to enhance the quality of their lives and to make more informed lifestyle choices and through increased abilities to read and write, become informed consumers and utilisers in an increasingly technological, market driven and interconnected world (Reyes 2021). Major theories of development include, the theory of modernization, which effectively means becoming more and more like the western world, with an increasing tendency towards the deletion and marginalization of local and indigenous identities (Tipps 1976); the theory of dependency (Prebisch 1950) which effectively combines neo-Marxist thinking with Keynesian economic theory through which development could be achieved by creating demand in domestic markets and so increasing the earning potential of citizens. The model can be applied externally to create demand in overseas markets for goods which are manufactured in more industrialised nations, effectively creating the perfect conditions for dependency; a world systems theory of development (Walerstein 1987) in which the world is conceptualized as having a central core of countries which exert the greatest influence on the rest of the world which in turn comprise a series of peripheries whose development is measured on the extent to which they move closer to the center. The major problem of this theory is that it sees development as strengthening the center while simultaneously weakening the peripheries; the theory of globalization (Ampuja 2015), which fundamentally rests on assumptions of greater integration especially of the spheres of economic transactions and communication. The major challenge with this theory is that the richer nations benefit the most from these relations while the poorer nations continue to withstand the worst of poverty and deprivation. Universities of

the less developed world are caught up in the intricate web of conceptualisations of development which seem not to serve their specific needs.

Change, on the other hand, is encapsulated in a series of alterations carefully manipulated by organisations or state organs to effect development. Change is thus a means to development and is not development unto itself. Two broad theories are widely recognized as key change strategies and have been adapted variously by scholars and practitioners of change across the world. The first is Philip Kotter's model of change based on eight interconnected steps starting with recognition of a need to change, creating a sense of urgency, building a guiding coalition, forming a strategic vision, enlisting a volunteer army, enabling action by removing barriers, generating short term wins, sustaining acceleration, and instituting change (Kotter 1996). The major concerns with Kotter's theory is that missing any single step in the change process may completely kill the effort to change the order of things. Secondly, the process is quite time consuming and may cause anxiety through slow delivery of benefits (Ross 2002). A less elaborate but equally effective model is Kurt Lewin's three step change model., which involves unfreezing (creating a perception of the need for change), changing (altering the status quo) and refreezing (solidifying the new change as the new norm). In practice, these three stages are multilayered involving many sub strategies to secure their effect in the process of change. A huge challenge in these models is that they do not place a significant focus on the context of change and thus tend to be adopted as fireproof strategies for effecting change in all circumstances.

Reform is best understood from its roots in the period of reformation, when the church differed on a number of practices and beliefs, such as the need to marry, living within the communities, enacting the sign of cross in prayer, the place of Mary in the church, among others arising largely from the broader criticism that the mother catholic church had become overly materialistic and had drifted away from its central role of evangelisation (Wallmann 1987). They however share core beliefs in one God, comprising of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, use similar versions of the bible as the basis of their belief, and believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus as the cornerstone of the new covenant of the Lord's plan of salvation of humanity. Reform thus represents what could be seen as minor tinkering on the edges while carefully preserving the core. It can be argued that much that has been achieved in South Africa after 1994 passes as reform rather than as transformation. The core elements of apartheid and colonial education, such as its dependency on the western canon, its stronger relevance to the needs of a minority middle class, its continuing rejection of the poor, the majority of who either fail or drop out before completion, persist in South Africa's higher education system, despite the many reforms that have been undertaken.

At the very minimum, the notion of transformation has five fundamental pillars: a widely accepted rationale for transformation (in this case, the need to shift away from a divisive, divided and racially engineered higher education); the identification of key symbolic features of the needed transformation; a shift to a new ideological standpoint; constructing a new epistemological environment; and a strong leadership and management framework for leading the needed transformation. We have argued elsewhere that while the first two pillars are securely in place in South Africa's transformation terrain, the epistemological, ideological and leadership dimensions have been left unattended. Transformation does not happen piecemeal. All its dimensions need to be mobilised into action at the same time, lest as we have noticed, we only achieve miniscule changes without any transformation at all.

When we seek to transform access, the question has to be, access to what, in the first instance. We have not asked that question in South Africa and have only created symbols of greater access to a system which rejects the same people we are hoping would benefit from the transformation. By allowing more students to learn the western canon, our efforts have sadly been negated, as this is obviously according to Fanon, changing the complexion of the academy without changing its epistemological and ideological bases and worse still with a highly compromised leadership at multiple levels of government, institutions and programmes which sees the problem but has no sufficient grasp of its causes and who are happy to tinker with the symbolisms of transformation, rather than with the transformation of its epistemological and ideological underpinnings.

And along came the pandemic and once more, the problems of transformation were reawakened. Our achievements on the symbolic dimensions have overwhelmed us to think we are doing well. Yet the new charges in higher education are systematically being rejected right in our faces. It was within this context that a wide range of academics were invited to tell their stories of access and success in higher education through their theorizing and empirical investigations.

CONCLUSION

Although the symbolic part of transformation is noticeable especially in terms of students getting access to higher education, there remain challenges in terms students successfully completing their degrees. As table 2 has indicated, there are disparities between the performance of different population groups, with the graduation rate for White students higher than that for Black students. This situation has been even worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic which caused the abrupt turn to remote teaching and learning resulting in widening the gap between those from the low socioeconomic backgrounds and those from affluent backgrounds.

The articles of the current issue have focused on access and success in higher education and how it has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we are aware that they might be limited to a certain extent as they tend to utilise small samples, case studies, and some are institution based while others focus on disciplines and single subject areas.

Broader challenges caused by issues of structural inequalities maybe weighing heavily against efforts to transform. Such structural issues include the very coloniality of higher education as a whole, which presents itself as a beacon of transformation, while remaining locked in the canonical epistemes of the west; the persistence of racial and class based inequalities operating obscurely in informal yet robust ways; an economic model based on private capital imperatives struggling to achieve broad social justice goals; the prevalence of poverty manifested in various ways amongst the majority local citizens aside of affluence which defines the lives of a minority mainly white citizens; and the ill-fated prospects of an academy trained and nurtured over long periods in western values and knowledge systems carrying the responsibility to transform the sector.

Much remains to be done to transform a participation-based model of access to one that ensures success of those who engage with higher education in the post-colonial era. Equally, there is need for higher education to invest a lot more, in the post-covid era, on building the capacity of higher education to be both a force for positive disruption and a champion of disruption proof education.

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