TRANSFORMING THE PROFESSORIATE IN AFRICA: CONTRIBUTIONS/CONSIDERATIONS FROM FUTURE PROFESSORS FELLOWS OF THE FUTURE PROFESSORS PROGRAMME

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Since 2015, South African universities have been confronted with several significant challenges. These include the #fallist movements' demands for "free higher education and students" subsequent call for the decolonisation of the university curricula and advocating for economic and social equity (Waghid and Meda 2023). The subsequent global COVID-19 pandemic's disruption of teaching and learning practices brought into the spotlight and underscored deep-rooted educational inequalities (Ontong and Waghid 2020). It also raised concerns among (higher) education institutions about the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on assessment practices and unethical research conduct (Christou 2023; Slimi 2023). When management in South African universities could not respond to students' demands for free

decolonised higher education, the latter reacted violently by burning university infrastructure. As was the case with the onset of the pandemic, the government offered guidelines to universities concerning remote multimodal teaching and learning. This was despite the challenges for students around access to the internet in remote communities and limited access to the devices they needed to engage in any form of online learning.

Universities are expected to provide safe spaces for students by enabling and preparing them for changing contexts as socially responsible and critical global citizens. Ongoing nationwide student protests further underscore the deep-seated unrest within academic communities and further expose the inadequacy of all stakeholders in their attempts to address the root cause of students' concerns. All of these challenges point to the urgent demand for those in a socially just university environment to radically rethink how universities should be responding to present and future higher education crises (Waghid, Waghid, and Waghid 2023).

While universities have implemented practical guidelines for the use of AI in learning and teaching, whether these measures are necessary or a priority for cultivating critical and autonomous students remains to be seen. However, in both the student movement and the pandemic, the government took a retrogressive stance towards these crises (Ontong and Waghid 2020; 2021), an approach which expected universities to develop their own pragmatic ways of addressing their deep-rooted systemic challenges. These challenges could be said to have developed through the government's following Western/European education policies, which were unsuited to an African context. Although universities may have had little influence or control over these external occurrences and social shifts, an examination of their various efforts to adjust and adapt to them provides some insight into the industry-wide need for change and flexibility. Inadequate responses to these challenges by universities, which are ostensibly at the forefront of research and innovation, may undermine both their credibility and influence in solving societal concerns. The perpetual knee-jerk reactions to these recent crises in higher education cast doubt on the ability of universities to lead societal changes, further diminishing their credibility and status as pioneers of research and innovation.

Any disruption of the status quo concerning how universities operate has serious implications for research and teaching. During crises such as the #feesmustfall movement and COVID-19, academics were precipitately expected to implement remote teaching and learning and rapidly adapt to new technologies and modes of engagement (Ontong and Waghid 2021). Such, at the time, unforeseeable crises in higher education also had implications for the financial sustainability of universities as the South African government, due to fiscal constraints, substantially reduced grant funding. We argue that the impact of the neoliberal free market system on South African universities is the foundational phenomenon exacerbating these

problems. Under a neoliberal system, universities are seen as market-driven service providers, with students as consumers and education as a commodity. This has had, and continues to have, an impact on how universities operate, especially in countries such as South Africa, which is still reeling from the deep-rooted systematic racism and discrimination at the core of apartheid operations, whether in government activities or any other sector, such as that of higher education. In the higher education sector, complex but necessary processes guide how teaching and learning, research, and community engagements are facilitated. These processes include how academics progress through the ranks in the course of their academic careers.

Obtaining a doctoral degree after years of study is only the beginning of one's academic journey. A doctorate on its own is neither an assurance nor sufficient to secure a professorship. To advance to the professoriate level at a South African university, academics are expected to engage in a multitude of roles and responsibilities, which include research and publishing, networking, teaching, committee service, community participation, and leadership responsibilities. Novice and emerging researchers may find it challenging to fulfil all of these criteria, but this process is not one to be treated as a checkbox exercise. The need for an academic leader to be dedicated to encouraging true intellectual development, to training the next generation of professionals, and advancing impactful research for the good of society would be undermined if these needs were reduced to simple checklists. In addition, adapting to a higher education environment rife with volatility is not a simple endeavour for young aspiring academics. Still, one could say that the discomfort accompanying these conditions is a necessary one for the reshaping of aspiring academics in preparation for entry into the future professoriate, and it provides a robust opportunity for growth. This transformation process requires the (un)learning and (re)learning of new practices to be able to reimagine the future of (higher) education.

It is in response to such transformation challenges that, since 2020, the Department of Higher Education and Training has initiated its flagship programme, the Future Professors Programme (FPP). This is a two-year national and collaborative initiative and is one of six national collaborative initiatives in the process of being implemented, whose purpose is the transformation of the higher education landscape in South Africa. This is to be achieved by addressing current inequality in the representation of senior ranks of academia at the associate and full professor levels. Drawing on its transdisciplinary networks, the aim of the FPP is to build capacity in the higher education system in South Africa by preparing mid-career academics from various disciplines for entering the professoriate. The specific aim of this highly competitive programme, which selects between 20 and 30 fellows from 26 public universities in the country, is to support these talented academics by nurturing existing, and

establishing new, networks through internationalisation, advancing excellence in teaching and research, building on these existing capacities through a structured advisor and mentorship programme, and promoting and encouraging the pursuit of collaborative and innovative projects (University of Johannesburg 2024).

This Special Issue focuses on the perspectives of FPP fellows' creative practices designed to fulfil the need to transform the existing university curricula which have been implemented in various disciplines by the professoriate It looks at articles whose foci include: the role interdisciplinarity can play concerning the need to cultivate social justice and social transformation, what these academics understand of the significance of digital transformation as well as Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in their practices whose purpose is the production of critically engaged and highly competitive students as citizens of society, and how their existing university practices can be more aligned with Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS).

Portia Sifolo, in her article, investigates the transformative potential of entrepreneurial sustainability in the tourist sector using a transformative action research methodology. Sifolo emphasises the critical role that higher education institutions play, or could play, in promoting change through education and collaborative research across disciplines. She discusses her personal experiences and insights gained from international engagements in Finland, Namibia, and Kenya, and demonstrates the ways in which these experiences have shaped her understanding of sustainable entrepreneurship. She advocates for a transformative paradigm shift to enhance sustainable entrepreneurship in tourism, emphasising the integration of indigenous and Western knowledge to catalyse resilience and positive change in business practices.

Samantha Govender, Thilen Kyarkanaye, and Casey Eslick in their article on Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology Students, examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the online learning experiences of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology students. Their study highlights the mixed effectiveness and educational value of online learning, noting in particular its shortcomings in developing clinical skills and social competencies in comparison to the more effective development of these using traditional face-to-face methods. Their study points out the advantages of online learning, such as flexibility and access to materials, while also acknowledging significant challenges such as technical issues and the loss to learning experiences brought about by reduced interaction with lecturers and peers. They call for academic leadership to enhance online learning environments through improved technology, pedagogy, and support.

Witness Maluleke, in his study, investigates the adoption and application of Blackboard

Learn in the Bachelor of Arts programs in Criminology and Psychology at a Historically Disadvantaged Institution. His study reveals a significant reliance of lecturers on traditional contact teaching methods and identifies the challenges posed by the effective integration of Blackboard Learn into teaching strategies. Despite these challenges, the potential for Blackboard Learn can enhance teaching and learning by bridging natural and human sciences through technology is recognised. He recommends including regular training for lecturers in the use of this platform for them to fully leverage its capabilities for educational improvement. He sees this approach as a way to address educational, technical, and social transformations in teaching methodologies, especially in the context of South Africa's Future Professors Programme.

In his other article Witness Maluleke, advocates a move away from disciplinary silos towards the establishment of the link between criminology and forensic studies to enhance and strengthen both the South African Criminal Justice System (CJS) and the curriculum frameworks of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), while integrating theory and practice. He argues combining forensic criminology features could transform the South African CJS and HEIs offerings. He highlights that limited prioritisations, the slow registration process to a "Scientific Board", and the advancement of this discipline all negatively affect immediate responses to achieve Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) for students. Overall, he emphasises the need for the Qualifications Board to expedite the registration of forensic criminology as a profession that consists of professional qualifications and is guided by ethical and disciplinary rules.

Bongekile Mvuyana's article looks at social change and transformation as a developmental agenda in South African higher education. The study explores how institutions of higher learning can be transformed through the fostering of future professors with a developmental agenda. She argues that the South African National Development Plan (NDP), 2030 advocates lifelong learning, continuous professional development, and knowledge production, and innovation being the focal point in the process of building the capabilities of individuals and society. She sees the aforementioned NDP recommendations as providing a guideline for the future of higher education in the country. The article highlights that achieving universal human development can be realised by respecting human rights, promoting equality, and empowering people to pursue opportunities and the choices they value in higher education. Thus, she argues for prioritising a structured interaction between lecturers and students within the context of transformative change and social justice in higher education. However, this can only be achieved through preparing the future professor with a developmental agenda to assist in shaping higher education by designing a curriculum that responds to the specific learning

needs and education desires of the current cohort of students.

In their article "Innovative approaches through hybrid CoPs used towards developing primary school in-service teachers' TPACK", Lebogang Mahlo, Zayd Waghid and Agnes Chigona look at certain innovative ways teachers in three Western Cape public primary schools employed to build hybrid CoPs while, in the process of doing this, these teachers were gaining technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge (TPACK) from one another. The authors used a qualitative research approach to gather data from document analysis, as well as from responses from 15 participant educators who completed open-ended survey questionnaires, and participated in interviews and observations. The study found that the participant teachers were forming, and had established, informal hybrid CoPs using such innovative approaches as joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire, and that teachers gained TPACK knowledge from one another throughout this process. Within these hybrid CoPs, teachers were acquiring valuable knowledge from their peers pertaining to TPACK and this played a vital role in enhancing their teaching practice.

In their article, Saheed Sabiu and Christiana Aruwa provide an in-depth discussion of digital transformation (DT) in biological sciences. The authors described how digitalisation of the biosciences has birthed emerging concepts like "digital biology", "engineered biology" and "bio-revolution" and involves computer-centered biosciences. The authors argue that, although biological sciences have been slow in their uptake of digital technologies, selected biological science disciplines have recently been digitally transformed through data analytics. They show how the concept can be further explored in advancing teaching, learning and research. The authors emphasise that the use of appropriately suited technologies and DT consultants by bioscience institution-based D&L teams are key to fast-tracking DT process engagement, as well as playing a crucial role in its holistic adoption and implementation in the biological sciences. They advocate for these implementations and adoptions to be driven by the future professoriate.

An article authored by Kirti Menon entitled, "Humanising academic staff development in higher education," focuses on locating academics within the broader racialised contexts and history of South Africa. The author highlights the importance of acknowledging that academics enter universities with histories and experiences that influence their work. Recognition of this by the higher education sector is central to the success of the transformation project. This article draws on notions of social justice to inform transformation, with a particular focus on the empowerment of academics through academic staff development programmes. It argues that, predicated on Sen's "capability" approach, academic development in the context of South Africa cannot afford to ignore the fractured history of the country.

In his submission, Thanyani Madzivhandila (2024) notes that IKS remains an important source of information amongst local communities in many parts of world and points out that most of the modern scientific interventions available to those living in rural poor settings in developing countries, including those countries severely affected by climate change, are usually considered foreign and are most often disregarded by community users. He further emphasises that most rural settlers continue to rely on IKS for their daily activities and livelihoods, and as such, IKS should form an integral part of, if not a major player in, the fight against the impact of climate change, particularly in areas where cultural value systems are operational. The article also upholds the view that it is crucial to demystify the Western "common sense" view that only scientific interventions have the power to resolve issues of climate change adaptation. He calls for the need to involve local indigenous communities in developing climate change-related solutions and to take advantage of their wealth of indigenous knowledge on climate and related phenomena.

The disruptive impact of the advent of COVID-19 on the South African tertiary education system was the focus of the reflective and exploratory study by Sabelo Hadebe, Aurelia Williams, Portia Sifolo, Martie Bradley, Muneer Abduroaf. The authors, who were representatives of four institutions and different disciplines in the Future Professors Programme (FPP) Phase 2, Cohort 1, highlighted their COVID-19-associated challenges and opportunities for teaching, learning, and research in higher education. The study identified overlapping experiences (challenges and opportunities) in the four institutions and noted that the impact of the pandemic on research was as devastating as it was on teaching and learning, with unique scenarios applicable to the respective disciplines/institutions. However, one of the highlights of the article is the positive impact of the intermittent FPP training sessions during the pandemic. This was a scenario which, in comparison to their peers, placed the study participants in the unique position of being able to reimagine and reshape teaching, learning and research practices in the advent of future pandemics. The authors conclude that, while the COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges to academic activities, it offered profound opportunities which they consider may inform positive transformative changes in the South African higher education sector. Due to its being limited by the number of institutions, participants and disciplines, they considered that the article called for a more robust study whose scope should extend beyond a specific cohort of future professors to be able to draw a more general and logical conclusion that would reflect the view of the broader population of South African university academics.

FUNDING

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