

EDITORIAL:

Envisioning Critical Futures for Higher Education

Guest Editors: Nalini Chitanand¹, Mncedisi Christian Maphalala², and Gita Mistri³

Received: 28 February 2025 | Revised: 01 March 2025 | Published: 02 March 2025

Editorial Note

Higher education is at a critical crossroad, urgently needing transformation to address dynamic global challenges and historical legacies. This Special Issue of the African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies (AJIMS) features research papers presented at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) Learning and Teaching Imbizo 2022 and two invited guest papers, all contributing to a progressive vision for the future of higher education. Under the theme *Envisioning Critical Futures for Higher Education*, the selected articles examine existing frameworks, pedagogical changes, and systemic obstacles while proposing innovative strategies for fostering a more inclusive, creative, and equitable academic environment. Central to this collection is a call for higher education institutions to reimagine, re-envision, and recreate new futures for higher education – ones that acknowledge both recent disruptions and deeper historical contexts. It is a call to rethink approaches to learning, teaching, and research in ways that promote inclusivity, equity, and transformation.

The featured articles focus on critical areas, including support for postgraduate study, critical pedagogy, gender equity, curriculum decolonisation, academic literacy, and student engagement, all essential in shaping the ongoing evolution and transformation of higher education. These contributions emerge at a critical juncture when technological disruptions, socioeconomic inequities, and epistemological contestations demand urgent attention from all higher education stakeholders. We commence by providing an overview of the five articles in this issue that were presented at the Imbizo, followed by the two invited guest contributions.

In the first article in this issue, **Khumalo and Dongwe** examine the challenges hindering postgraduate student progress in South African higher education and argue for a reconceptualised approach to research writing support. They address the disconnect between academic departments and writing centres. They propose a *Three-Legged Framework*—comprising postgraduate students, supervisors, and academic support staff—to highlight the importance of integrated support that enhances research, academic writing, and critical thinking skills through collaborative initiatives. Using an auto-ethnographic approach, the authors reflect on a writing initiative—an interdisciplinary collaboration between an academic and a writing centre practitioner—designed to create a supportive, inclusive learning environment. Drawing on the experiences of two staff members at their university, they highlight the transformative impact of structured, collective engagement on both students and faculty. Their findings advocate for expanding such initiatives across academic departments, institutionalising writing support programs, and shifting from isolated supervision models to intentional, collaborative support. By fostering epistemic access, social inclusion, and sustainable student progress, their work also seeks to influence postgraduate policies and streamline registration processes.

Ntombela, Mamabolo and Mokgalaka interrogate the contesting power dynamics within the student-lecturer relationship, aiming to dismantle the hierarchical structures through a critical pedagogy lens. They reposition students and lecturers as collaborative knowledge creators, fostering empowerment and equality. Their research explores the shifting dynamics of student-lecturer relationship, especially considering the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers' auto-ethnographic approach demonstrates critical pedagogy in practice, illustrating how

¹Independent Researcher (South Africa), nalinic.chitanand@gmail.com | <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3017-6405>

²University of South Africa (South Africa), emaphamc@unisa.ac.za | <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1078-1985>

³Durban University of Technology (South Africa), gitam@dut.ac.za | <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3924-1816>

educational systems can value diverse perspectives and experiences. Their findings reveal that effective education involves reciprocal learning, where lecturers learn from students' experiences and students assume teaching roles. The research also exposes significant digital access disparities between privileged and historically disadvantaged institutions, highlighting urgent equity concerns that require addressing. This study's focus on reflexivity and power redistribution offers a pathway beyond traditional hierarchical models toward more democratic knowledge co-construction.

Bobo's research focused on an early career academic's experience of embedding a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project within a General Education module at her university. COIL is utilised as a pedagogical tool that fosters global engagement and intercultural competence among students. Using Rolfe, Freshwater, and Jasper's (2001) reflective framework—structured around the questions, What? So what? Now what? — the author critically examines her first experience running a COIL project. Employing an interpretivist phenomenological approach and critical reflection as a methodology, the article highlights key lessons learned, including the importance of continuous professional development, capacity-building opportunities, and mentorship in supporting early career academics. Beyond professional growth, the article advocates for the integration of African scholarship and the centring of African experiences in curricula, particularly within internationalisation efforts. By reflecting on challenges and successes, this article offers insights for future implementations of global collaborative learning projects.

Mkhize and Reddy examine the perceived employability of University of Technology (UOT) graduates in South Africa, focusing on the gap between students' confidence in their skills and employers' concerns about their workplace readiness. While students view their personal attributes, networks, and institutional reputation positively, employers highlight a lack of critical soft skills. The article emphasises the need to integrate Work Integrated Learning (**WIL**) into curricula. WIL provides hands-on experience, mentorship, and practical skill development, bridging the gap between education and employment. The authors recommend prioritising soft skills training and expanding WIL opportunities to better prepare graduates for the evolving job market. As employer demands shift, higher education institutions must adapt to ensure graduates possess both technical and interpersonal competencies. This article underscores the urgency of curriculum reform to equip students for success in a rapidly changing workforce.

In her study, **Mngomezulu** focuses on how students and academics view the importance of engaging students in feedback discussions to give students a stronger voice in their own learning in higher education. The study argues against the traditional models that position students as passive receivers of feedback. Instead, they advocate for a conceptual shift toward viewing feedback as a collaborative tool through lecturer-student dialogues. Key findings reveal that both lecturers and students support student involvement in feedback dialogues, with some lecturers already engaging students in feedback discussions before conducting assessments. The author recommends that higher education institutions monitor feedback implementation and actively involve students in assessment and feedback processes to enhance learning outcomes.

The challenges of female academics in research productivity and career advancement within higher education institutions is the focus of the research by **Nkosi and Maphalala**. Through a systemic literature review of empirical studies over a ten-year period, the research critically analyses existing systemic barriers that create gender disparities in academic research productivity and advancement. The study addresses the role of universities in advancing women in higher education and the measures to advance gender equity in research and academia. Rather than incremental adjustments the research emphasises the need for transformative, systemic approaches to create more inclusive academic environments. The authors conclude the article by providing actionable pathways for higher education institutions to eliminate obstacles facing female academics and promote gender equity in research.

Munyaradzi and Hlatshwayo's research on decoloniality address a research gap by exploring senior academics' conceptual understanding and responses to calls for transforming and decolonising universities in South Africa, specifically within an Open Distance e-Learning (ODEL) institution. They argue that despite new frameworks for equity and transformation, epistemological models have largely remained unchanged. They caution against the decolonial project becoming mere rhetoric if it involves altering curriculum content only without interrogating the

values and beliefs of academics. Their qualitative study reveals that academics view curriculum decolonisation as confronting coloniality of the mind and challenging the unequal power relations between academics and students. Their findings highlight the importance of critically reassessing knowledge creation and making a deliberate transition toward an equitable, transformative and inclusive curriculum that aligns with the realities faced by students in the Global South. The authors draw attention to the challenges of the neoliberal and urge the rethinking of the public university toward its democratic aspirations. As they cogently argue, “academics have an ethical responsibility to be at the frontlines of rethinking thinking itself, and troubling our role in perpetuating institutional racism, oppression and marginality”.

This Special Issue represents a collaborative effort to envision a progressive future for higher education. Together, these contributions stimulate dialogue about the future of higher education, a future that must prioritise inclusivity, critical engagement, and responsiveness to the experiences of both students and academics. This Special Issue invites academics, researchers, and students to engage actively in this dialogue and to rethink and reshape the landscape of higher education. Our collective responsibility is to ensure that transformation is not only envisioned but actively pursued.

We as guest editors, Nalini Chitanand (Independent researcher, South Africa), Mncedisi Christian Maphalala (University of South Africa, South Africa), and Gita Mistri (Durban University of Technology, South Africa) are deeply grateful, to all our authors for their valuable contributions to this issue, to all our peer reviewers who graciously dedicated their time for the review process, to Ms Cebokazi Xozwa for her administrative support and to our editorial and production teams at AJIMS for their continued support through the process. We hope that the contributions in this issue will evoke critical conversations toward a truly transformative and socially just higher education and society that we seek.