

BOOK REVIEW

***Reimagining South African higher education: Towards a student-centred learning and teaching future* by D. de Klerk, G. Krull, T. Maleswena & F. MacAlister (Eds.). (2024). Stellenbosch, SA: Sun Press**

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In the past decade, South African higher education institutions have experienced significant shifts. One such shift was the call for decolonised, free education by the *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall* movements. While a decolonised curriculum has not yet been fully realised, Ngubane and Makua (2021, p. 1) write about the need for learning and teaching approaches that are transformative and responsive “cognisant of social justice issues” pervasive in South African higher education. A critical gap remains in South African higher education learning environments in the development and application of comprehensive frameworks that adequately integrate principles of social justice. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of inclusivity, particularly in a post-apartheid context where educational systems were historically racialised and exclusionary, existing frameworks often lack the flexibility and adaptability necessary to meet the diverse needs of students and educators. This timely edited collection offers an opportunity to reflect and rethink current practices through a student-centred approach. *Reimagining South African Higher Education: Towards a Student-Centred Learning and Teaching Future* outlines both practical methodologies and theoretical insights relevant to the South African higher education context and broader international higher education frameworks.

The careful curation of the book chapters offers a seamless flow, making it easily accessible and enhances engagement with the content. Structured around core thematic areas – such as curriculum and learning design, context and care in education, student learning, and the development of both students and staff – the book provides an articulate framework that aids in understanding the complexities of concepts and its applicability in the sector. The flow of the chapters engages the reader on specific themes but still manages to maintain the interconnectedness of the topics within the broader context of South African higher education transformation. By doing this, the editors have managed to create a balance between the deep and meaningful theoretical reflections and practical applications. The focus on student-centred education, a particularly relevant theme in the South African context of entrenched inequalities, this book presents an approach that resonates with current global educational trends. The emphasis on participatory and humanising pedagogies challenges traditional

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educational hierarchies, encouraging an inclusive learning environment where students are viewed as active participants in their own education, rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Internationally, Cook-Sather and Matthews (2021) refer to this as a “pedagogical partnership” between the teacher and learner that integrates the principles of active student engagement, inclusive teaching, and democratic ways of knowing and being. The holistic approach of *Reimagining South African Higher Education* weaves together the key themes in ways that enable achieving such pedagogical partnerships by offering both depth and actionable insights. This becomes evident in the author narratives on “promoting quality and care frameworks towards change”, a humanising pedagogy based on values of justice, fairness and morality (p. 85), reminding us to be vigilant about enacting such practices.

The contributors’ engagement with lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic mindfully reflects on the impact of the global pandemic on educators and learners, and the changes made by educational institutions towards rethinking pedagogical methods. This volume skilfully captures that moment of reflection. Several chapters, particularly those embedded in the third thematic area, explore how a move to online education highlighted even further the need for flexibility, responsiveness, and collaboration in higher education. Further, like Hobden in Chapter 5, authors recognise the agency of students by reflecting on concepts such as “person-as-learner”, “political-agent-as-learner”, cultural wealth and community cultural wealth. These valuable insights provide helpful approaches that foster open discussions based on respect and understanding, where participatory approaches are enabling of students epistemic becoming. In integrating these reflections, the text draws a contemporary perspective that is relevant both to the recovery following the pandemic and to the sustained development of a transformed higher education system.

As a scholarly contribution, the authors have advanced the discourse on decolonisation in higher education. They do this by suggesting ways in which to reconceptualise curricula, urging for more inclusive, contextually grounded, and socially just educational practices. Across the various chapters which present deep engagement with the issues of inequality, colonial legacies, and social justice, the authors argue for practices and the development of educational frameworks that reflect the lived realities of students, especially those from historically marginalised communities. In addition, contributors advocate for embedding decolonial thought within the fabric of higher education, encouraging a critical examination of existing power structures and knowledge hierarchies. This commitment to decolonisation is evident in the exploration of how curriculum design can be reshaped to address societal issues, as demonstrated in discussions around ethics education and public service. Here, the authors propose that pedagogical structures must enable students to critically engage with the pervasive inequalities and injustices they encounter in society, reflecting a distinctly South African socio-political context while offering insights relevant to the broader Global South. Furthermore, the emphasis on creative and innovative pedagogical approaches illustrates the contributors’ commitment to pushing beyond traditional educational models. Examples such as the use of podcasting to promote student engagement

and the creation of collaborative learning spaces for postgraduate students highlight the need for educational systems to evolve in response to the diverse and complex needs of today's learners. These forward-thinking contributions not only enrich the decolonisation debate but also offer practical pathways for transforming teaching and learning practices, challenging conventional methods that no longer serve the dynamic realities of higher education today.

In conclusion, this book makes a valuable, timely contribution to the ongoing discourse on transformation of the higher education sector, not only in South Africa but across the continent and abroad. This is done through the promotion of student-centred pedagogies, consideration of the socio-political backdrop of educational practices, and contemplation on the insights gained from the COVID-19 pandemic. The book is an important resource for those who are committed to systemic change. In this regard, it interrogates current entrenched practices and offers a vision of an educational system that is more equal, collaborative, and responsive. The conceptions advanced in the chapters provide a strong foundation for addressing the pressing issues related to social justice. The insights presented in this volume serve as an important step towards realising the full potential of higher education in South Africa, offering both theoretical guidance and practical pathways for positive change.

References

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How to cite:

Cupido, X. (2024). Review of 'Reimagining South African higher education: Towards a student-centred learning and teaching future' by D. de Klerk, G. Krull, T. Maleswena & F. MacAlister (Eds.). *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 12(2), 193–195. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v12i2.5433.