

Editorial

We are pleased to present the June 2023 issue of *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning (CriSTaL)*. In this issue, we bring together six thought-provoking papers that explore critical perspectives and different aspects of teaching and learning in higher education.

The first two papers in this issue deal with issues of inequality. The first alludes to the pandemic and the ways in which it has affected students' experiences, while the second looks at the inequalities faced by rural students in higher education as a result of the neglect and undervaluation of their experiences, skills and knowledge within the university environment. The next two papers focus on challenges to teaching and learning in the classroom, the first on learning-centred assessment practices and the second on teachers' reflections on the quality and modes of thinking in writing intensive courses. The final two papers are dedicated to research, with the first focusing on the attributes and dispositions that doctoral students should develop, and the second on the need to rethink reflexivity in the context of medical education research. Let us take a closer look at the key insights offered by each of these papers.

The first paper, entitled 'Problematising the South African higher education inequalities exposed during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Students' perspectives', by Corinne Knowles, Abongile James, Lebogang Khoza, Zikhona Mtwana, Milisa Roboji, and Matimu Shivambu, focuses on the experiences of students in a university in South Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors present their findings from a knowledge-making project in which they reflected on inequalities in the education sector based on their own university experiences. They argue that these inequalities have been exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic. Using a decolonial theoretical lens, the authors critique university decisions during the pandemic and argue for a reconnection with the concept of the university as a public good. The authors emphasise the need for universities to collaborate with students and develop strategies to deal with crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The paper also emphasises the importance of a smoother transition between school and university, particularly in terms of language skills and cultural practices. The authors discuss the alienating aspects of institutional culture in universities, including a Western bias, which affects the experiences of African students. They emphasise the need for diversity, inclusion, and cultural sensitivity within the university environment. The paper also highlights the importance of teacher training in addressing the complexities of multilingualism and providing effective guidance and mentoring to students.

In the second paper, 'Towards understanding the influence of rurality on students' access to and participation in higher education', by Hellen Agumba, Zach Simpson, and Amasa Ndofirepi, the authors explore the impact of rurality on students' access to and participation in higher education in South Africa. The study adopts an interpretive, qualitative approach, using document analysis, interviews, and focus groups to gather data and explore the experiences of students from rural backgrounds. The findings shed light on the inequalities faced by rural



students in higher education due to the neglect and undervaluation of their experiences, skills, and knowledge within the university environment. The authors argue for a deeper understanding of the historical, social, and spatial dimensions of rurality, drawing on Edward Soja's concept of spatial justice. By considering rurality in a broader context, including socio-economic, cultural, and educational variables, the study highlights the complex interplay of factors that contribute to spatial inequalities in educational outcomes. To address these challenges, the authors propose the creation of a 'third space' that emphasises the inclusion of rural students' spatial experiences in curriculum development and decision-making processes. By creating spaces for dialogue, listening and action, higher education institutions can promote social justice for rural students and their communities.

The third paper, 'Learning-centred assessment validation framework: A theoretical exploration', by Oluwaseun Ijiwade and Dennis Alonzo, explores the concept of validation in the context of learning-centred assessment practices. The authors argue that traditional approaches to validation lack a learning-centred perspective and fail to consider the context of classroom assessment. Emphasising the importance of using assessment to improve learning and teaching activities, the authors propose a practical alternative validation framework based on pragmatic principles and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. The learning-centred assessment framework outlined in the paper consists of five inferences: domain definition, evaluation, explanation, use, and ramification. These inferences guide the evaluation of assessment practices and help teachers gather evidence to support claims about the effectiveness and usefulness of their assessments. Ijiwade and Alonzo emphasise the need for ongoing evaluation and continuous improvement of assessment practices, as well as the involvement of teachers in the design and development of assessments. Implications of the framework include broadening the conceptualisation of validation to include the sociocultural context of assessment, integrating validation into teachers' assessment practices, and addressing the challenges teachers face in making effective use of assessment data. The authors argue that assessment validation should be embedded in everyday classroom practice and contribute to professional development. They emphasise the importance of assessing for learning and promoting a holistic understanding of pupils' progress and development. By considering the context, purpose, and impact of assessment, teachers can increase their assessment literacy and improve the effectiveness of their teaching and learning processes.

The fourth paper, 'Teacher-team reflections on the quality and modes of thinking in Writing Intensive courses in one university in South Africa, during the first year of the global COVID-19 pandemic', by Pamela Nichols, Avril Joffe, Roshini Pillay, and Bontle Tladi, discusses the challenges faced by Writing Intensive (WI) courses during the sudden shift to online learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden shift to online learning presented challenges for these courses, which depend on student engagement and timely feedback. The study focuses on three WI courses in different disciplines: the School of the Arts, Social Work, and Engineering. The research method involves teacher team reflections, following a method developed by John Bean and Barbara Walvoord, applying qualitative research. The findings suggest that there is a need to

develop critical thinking skills in these WI courses in order to meet their specific aims. The article argues that learning discrete thinking skills complements the Writing within the Disciplines (WID) approach, which emphasises situated argument and problem solving. The study identifies three salient modes of reasoning in the courses: analogical reasoning, empathetic reasoning, and inferential reasoning. These modes of reasoning can significantly enhance student learning and problem solving when explicitly taught. The paper suggests strategies for developing these modes of reasoning within and across WI courses. The development of volunteer writing groups and the use of letter responses to student drafts are suggested to encourage scholarly engagement and slow thinking. The focus on teacher-team reflection provides valuable insights for course revision and programme development, especially in the context of a crisis such as the pandemic.

In paper five, 'Doctor Who? Developing a translation device for exploring successful doctoral being and becoming', Sherran Clarence and Martina van Heerden focus on developing a translation device for exploring successful doctoral attributes and dispositions. They argue that while doctoral training emphasises research and thesis writing, the process of becoming a 'Dr' and the identity work and affective dimensions involved are often overlooked. The authors aim to identify and understand these aspects of researcher development. Using Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) and the concept of 'constellations', the authors examine two valued doctoral attributes as exemplars. They analyse published work in the field of doctoral studies to identify and make visible the complex and multifaceted processes involved in becoming independent, confident, resilient, and other successful dispositions. They highlight that these processes are ongoing, non-linear, and contextual. The paper also addresses the increasing diversity within doctoral cohorts. While diversity is commonly understood in terms of race, gender and disability, the authors emphasise that diversity extends to various aspects such as registration status, prior academic learning, language proficiency and personal circumstances. These diverse factors influence how candidates engage with their studies, supervisors, and peers, as well as their access to resources and opportunities for development. The authors argue that affective dispositions should be foregrounded in doctoral education to enable a broader range of candidates to succeed. In addition, the authors discuss disciplinary differences in defining successful attributes and behaviours. They note that while certain attributes, such as independence and resilience, are universally valued, their interpretation may vary across disciplines and fields. The authors call for further empirical research to recognise and promote different versions of doctoral success that are consistent with the goals of equity, diversity, inclusion, and transformation in higher education.

Finally, in paper six, entitled 'Reimagining reflexivity through a critical theoretical framework: Autoethnographic narratives on becoming a (de)colonised researcher', Danica Sims focuses on the need to rethink reflexivity in the context of medical education research. The paper argues that critical perspectives and methodologies are needed for honest, powerful, and equitable reflexivity in an increasingly globalised world. The author highlights the use of autoethnography as a compelling methodological approach to reflexivity. Autoethnography

involves examining oneself and interpersonal interactions within socio-cultural contexts through retrospective autobiographical narratives. In order to frame critical reflections on power inequalities at personal, contextual and epistemological levels, the paper draws on Southern Theory, decoloniality and intersectionality. The paper emphasises the collective responsibility for epistemically and socially just research, which requires challenging normative and hegemonic research and reflexivity practices. It calls for the development of ethical research that does not reproduce inequalities, but rather welcomes and strengthens diverse ways of knowing, doing and being. In terms of reporting research findings, the author acknowledges the need to be cautious and avoid perpetuating colonially constructed divisions such as the North/South binary. The term 'global South' is also critically examined for its potential to homogenise and undermine the diverse perspectives and knowledge of Southern researchers. The paper emphasises the importance of disseminating evidence from the margins and avoiding pressures to reproduce Northern theory and privilege Western lenses. The paper concludes by arguing that autoethnographic narratives can demonstrate reflexivity throughout the qualitative research process, at both personal and epistemological levels.

Overall, the papers presented in this issue of *CriSTaL* provide valuable insights into critical perspectives and different aspects of teaching and learning in higher education. They address the challenges and opportunities associated with assessment practices, teachers' reflections on writing-intensive courses, inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic, the impact of rurality on students' access to and participation in higher education, the attributes and dispositions of doctoral students, and the need to rethink reflexivity in research. By engaging with different theoretical frameworks and employing different research methodologies, these papers contribute to the advancement of critical studies in higher education.

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