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EDITORIAL

EQUITY, ACCESS AND SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN TIMES
OF DISRUPTION: CONTEMPORARY AND FUTURE IMAGINARIES

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Since democracy in 1994, equity, access to and success in higher education have constituted a triple cocktail of transformational imperatives in higher education. Equity was seen as the canvass on which narratives of confronting the legacies of the apartheid policies in education were to be written. While there have been notable increases in access, the other side of the coin which represents student success has not shown comparable improvement. (Robinson and Gahagan 2010). This has remained a challenge especially for students from poor socioeconomic backgrounds and also those enrolled in historically black universities in South Africa (Bazana and Mogotsi 2017). Themane and Mabasa (2022) argue that these issues of equity access and success have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the argument has also been raised by a number of articles for this issue. For good academic, political and administrative reasons, universities in the country have been focused on saving the academic year and took a collective though difficult decision of abandoning the tried and tested face-to-face modalities of university instruction and adopted online teaching and learning. The argument in this special edition is that while online teaching and learning helped save the academic year, it did not adequately address issues of social and cognitive justice and may have inadvertently resulted

in the further widening of social and cognitive justice in the universities. We believe that while both the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing transformational focus on decolonisation could be considered as major contemporary educational disruptions, which bring both opportunities and limitations, the gaze on decolonisation has largely dimmed or been abandoned, temporarily removing a key safeguard from the system which has substantial potential to enhance the prospects for greater social and cognitive justice in the sector. Two forms of access are generally recognized, namely, increased enrolments and enhanced epistemological impact. Success can be 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 (Allais 2017).

Two enduring themes run across the chapters of this book. The first is that while commendable progress has been recorded in terms of physical access measured by substantial increases in numbers of students from previously marginalised communities to universities, the evidence of success and epistemological access has been dismal (Leibowitz and Bozalek 2014; Letseka and Pitsoe 2014). Secondly, that the current COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the extent of systemic inequalities that continue to blight the higher education sector (Andrews 2021; Gillen et al. 2021).

This special issue deals with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education sectors in South Africa and especially examines a range of interventions put in place by academics in different universities to ameliorate the effects. The book thus provides important evidence, not only about how the higher education sectors responded to the pandemic, but more importantly regarding the growing evidence about what interventions work or not when entire systems are confronted by deep disruptions.

The first article by Maringe and Chiramba indicates that 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. 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.

The second article by Mendelowitz, Fouché, Reed, Andrews and Essa indicate how the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted face-to-face engaged and dialogic learning. They report on an intervention which sought to increase face to face encounters and dialogic learning in the new remote online teaching and learning environment. Their empirical investigation shows that such encounters could be enhanced through encouraging students to engage in “writing about reading”, reading each other’s writing and of “writing back” to one another on-line. Through

these interventions, the authors discover that there was a notable increase in confidence of students' voices and on enhanced understanding of module content.

In the same vein, Menon and Motala in the third article indicated how emergency remote teaching and learning has exacerbated social justice issues. Their argument is that many lessons can be learned from the abrupt turn to remote teaching and learning. They suggested that the future of higher education should focus on explicit equity driven approaches to promote pedagogical inclusion beyond physical and epistemic access.

Brodie, Joffe, Dukhan, Godsell, De Klerk, and Padayachee, in the fourth article have not only shown the negative side of the disruptive pandemic but also pointed to the taken-for-granted ways in doing, being, learning and teaching. In reflecting their experiences as academics, they come up with the idea that lectures are important but should not constitute the core teaching and learning.

Ndofirepi and Hungwe in the fifth article, argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has made higher education systems to reassess neoliberal tendencies in their universities. They advocated for the move away from western neoliberal tendencies which are most of the time guised in globalisation. Therefore, there is need to embrace locally relevant teaching and research.

Based on the Technical Vocational Education Training, Masina and Mawonedzo in the sixth article explored the impact of COVID-19 on the learning process. Their findings show that some subjects were affected more than the others. They recommended a shift from traditional instructional designs to contemporary methods that address the current contextual challenges.

In the seventh article, Moosa argues that although COVID-19 has brought about the emergence turn to online learning and asynchronous online discussion forums, she highlighted that we know less about how they facilitate epistemological access and enable collaborative peer learning interactions during periods of disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic. She found out that despite academic and technological challenges an online discussion forum enables epistemological access, interactive exchange of information and the formation of collaborative peer learning communities.

In the eighth article, Nyoni investigated the experiences of extended students. His main argument was that the abrupt shift to online teaching had huge implications on pedagogic access and educational success for students from disadvantaged academic and social backgrounds. So, the article seeks to explore how students in the extended curriculum programme have experienced online pedagogies and with what effects on their academic access and success during COVID-19. The findings have indicated inclusive pedagogies as key to exploring pedagogic access and success.

Dison and Padayachee in the ninth article argue that the abrupt shift from the traditional ways of assessment have exposed how crucial assessment is in the epistemological access for students. They argued that we should rethink assessment as a process not only as a product of learning. They emphasised on the dialogic feedback practices and developed students' capacities to reflect. Thus, they produced ways in which emergent assessment practices can be sustained beyond teaching and learning.

In article 10, Mashonganyika and Muyambo, argued that there is scarce literature on Zimbabwe higher education students' experiences of COVID-19 online-induced education. As a result, they explored this with focus on the final year undergraduate students who were studying Family Religious Studies. Based on the experiences explored, they concluded that amongst the various challenges, there were also opportunities and benefits of the COVID-19 induced education.

In article 11, Banda argues that although the online teaching and learning was introduced abruptly, it provided the opportunity to clarify aspects that influence the use of digital technology in teaching and learning as well as to explore the overall student learning experience. The findings highlighted how disruption only bring to the fore underlying issues from where learning experiences would either be looked at as positive or negatives.

Ndlovu, in article 12 highlighted the challenges faced by students with disabilities during COVID-19. She argued that there has not been clear focus on interventions for students with disabilities as to how they will be assisted to gain epistemological access and success during the pandemic. She therefore sought to contribute to debates of pedagogy, epistemic access, and inclusion of students with disabilities in the new normal.

In article 13, Adigun, Nzima, Maphalala and Ndwandwe, as Ndlovu in article 12 focused on the impact of COVID-19 on learners with disabilities. They argued that there is less teacher capacity to deal with those students during COVID-19. They therefore advocated for a paradigm shift in teacher preparation and training towards equity and epistemic justice for learners with disabilities.

Although the evidence emerges from small scale studies conducted in specific institutional contexts, it clearly pints to two encouraging prospects. The first is that the academy is actively research engaged despite the disruptions, especially focusing on how more success could be generated amongst students despite the challenges. Secondly, small in scale the evidence bases might be, they constitute collectively a sound basis for developing large scale interventions which have the potential to strengthen institutional resilience both in times of disruptions and beyond.

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