

Editorial

The last decade or so of higher education research in South Africa specifically has been greatly impacted by two events in particular. Firstly, the #FeesMustFall / #RhodesMustFall movements, which sought to critique and dismantle many of the still-prevalent colonial influences and assumptions that negatively impact most 'non-traditional' students' experiences in higher education, and secondly, the COVID-19 pandemic which not only 'forced' technology into the classroom (especially for those who had not incorporated it before) but which also highlighted systemic inequalities that many students still experience. Underlying both of these events are calls for a more inclusive, safe, and socially-just higher education experience for all students. The impact of these two events remains prevalent, as the papers in CriSTaL's first issue of 2026 speak to the overlapping aspects of inclusivity, belonging, and success.

In recent years, we have seen AI emerging as a new 'event' that is impacting higher education. As such, this issue has been divided into two sections. The first is a collection of nine articles and two book reviews that focus on learning and teaching related matters more broadly, while the second is a special section on multilingualism and AI in higher education, consisting of six articles (with its own separate editorial).

We start the general section with Ben de Souza's paper on 'From policing conformity to nurturing difference: Neurodiversity in postgraduate research supervision' which re-evaluates traditional postgraduate research supervision through the lens of neurodiversity, arguing that 'traditional' supervision expectations often marginalise students who think and work differently from their often, neurotypical supervisors. The paper calls for a more care-full and inclusive approach to supervision that considers that there may be more than one way of doing things.

The theme of 'care' is intertwined with issues of belonging and success in a number of papers in this issue. In paper three, 'Ethics of care and reflective practice in South African higher education: Lessons from COVID-19 and beyond' Jessica Cockburn, Kelly Bernard, Joana Carlos Bezerra, Kathleen Grace Smart, Alexandra Collett, Olwethu Dhlomo, Rebecca Farquharson, Michelle Rumbidzai Maziofa, Kwanele Siyengo, and Papama Yose, evaluate the effects of an online 'Reflection and Support Group' initiative that was offered to students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Five years later, they found that the initiative positively impacted students' mental health, academic success, and reflective thinking skills. This paper shows the impact of Emergency Remote Teaching initiatives long-after the end of the emergency and highlights the lasting influence of the pandemic.

For many students, the pandemic added an unforeseen hurdle to their academic journeys in higher education. However, even without the unforeseen challenge of a pandemic, success is not always a straightforward concept in higher education, as can be seen in 'Success as a relational and structurally mediated process: A narrative inquiry of a Black African student in South Africa' by Mot'selisis Peete and Busayo Ige. This article challenges the idea of 'student success' as an individual endeavour. Instead, the study highlights that success may be relational,



cultural, and highly unequal, especially in the South African context. Similarly, in paper five 'A New Materialist approach to exploring minoritised undergraduate students experience of university systems and processes', Kate Dudley, Ben Johnson, and Sarah Parkes examine how minoritised students navigate their experiences at a UK university. Drawing on New Materialism, the study shows how students' sense of belonging may be affected through relational, material, spatial, and institutional aspects of higher education. These papers show how across different contexts, belonging and success are navigated by students from cultural minority groups in higher education.

The theme of belonging is continued in Taryn Bernard's paper 'Alternative geographies of belonging: Student agency and place-making at a Historically White University', which brings 'spatial belonging' to the forefront. This paper examines the experiences of Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) students at Stellenbosch University. Using participant-generated photographs, the paper examines how students move through the spaces of the university-town, which are often racialised, and how they negotiate these spaces. Belonging is shown to be 'a precarious, mobile, and affective' practice.

Writing centres play a key role in students' success and belonging in higher education, but they often remain on the margins of the institutional. This dual reality of writing centres is reflected in two papers that focus on the writing centre. Firstly, in 'I do have a place here': The writing centre as a site of belonging and epistemic justice in a South African university' Lutendo Nendauni examines how the writing centre can contribute to students' sense of belonging. As the paper shows, engaging in consultations at the writing centre may increase students' confidence and sense of belonging, and may lead to epistemic affirmation. Secondly, in 'Commitment in navigating constraints and enablers in integrating the writing centre as an institutional structure', Atrimecia Hass, Laura Dison, and Ilse Fouché examine what may constrain or enable the integration of writing centres within a university. The study argues for stronger support, structurally, institutionally, culturally, and departmentally, in order to better and sustainable integrate writing centres in universities. These two papers point to the inherent paradox of writing centres: Though they are safe spaces that can foster student belonging, writing centres themselves often have to fight to belong in institutions.

Our last two papers look at bringing change into the classroom and research. In 'Reimagining teacher education through eco-pedagogy: Transitioning curriculum silos towards situated, justice-oriented learning' Deidre Geduld, Ezekiel Majola, and Heloise Sathorar examine how to transform teacher education in South Africa. Their outlined framework extends the 4B model (Bridging, Becoming, Belonging, and Being) by incorporating aspects of eco-pedagogy for a more socially just approach to teacher education. Finally, in 'The constructivist consensus revisited: Towards theoretical integrity in educational research', Rubby Dhunpath critiques how constructivism has become overused and watered down as a theoretical framework, and that what is called 'constructivism' may often in fact be otherwise. The paper presents alternative frameworks that may offer stronger methodological alignment.

What the articles in the general section point to is how academic have been responding to the calls for a more inclusive, socially-just pedagogy. By highlighting the experiences of often-marginalised student voices, the papers in this issue show a commitment to making higher education a space that is accessible and 'safe' for all students.

We end the general section with two book reviews: one by Edward Domboka of *Pedagogic Innovation Beyond Disruption* (2024) by Laura Dison, Maria Prozesky, Ana Ferreira, Anthony Essien and Theresa Giorza, and on by Sioux McKenna of *Beyond Skills: A Capability Conception of Vocational Education* (2026) by Leesa Wheelahan and Gavin Moodie.

We hope you enjoy the thought-provoking collection of articles in this issue!

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