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Superdiversity, social justice and knowledge production: Creating agency among university students

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Superdiversity presents a new set of considerations beyond those of diversity for the integration of difference. The proliferation of social, cultural, economic and political factors shaping populations requires a renewed approach to social justice for individuals and communities who are different. The South African higher education sector and its student population have undergone a drastic identity shift from a relatively normative group since the introduction of free education for lower-income groups. The University of the Free State (UFS) is a microcosm of this diversity. Analysis of the student population over the past two decades reveals patterns aptly described as superdiversity because of the multilayered identities of the growing student body from varied backgrounds. Applying a socially just pedagogical approach to a superdiverse student population exposes both limitations and possibilities for more equitable and just societies.

Contribution: Enrolment data from theology students at the University of the Free State provide valuable insights into the future of theology and related disciplines.

Keywords: superdiversity; socially just pedagogy; Faculty of Theology and Religion; social justice; critical community; knowledge production; institutions of Higher Education.

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) continue to be shaped by normative traditions, course content and staff dynamics marked by uneven power relations rooted in colonial privilege and attachments, as well as by unequal structures and systems. Such institutions, including universities, also propagate, foster, and at times formulate ethics and societal norms. As largely public and government-subsidised institutions, universities are, at the very least, influenced by national interests and norms. The difficulty with such a closely entwined relationship between universities and governments is that difference, strangeness and unconventionality can give rise to tensions that result in exclusion, marginalisation and isolation. Without disregarding the complexity of the lecture room, the longstanding traditions of the classical university or the significant institutional influence of higher education (HE), it remains important to heed Kumashiro's (2004, cited in Bettez 2011:76) warning that teaching is never entirely neutral. Kumashiro (2004:15, cited in Betz 2011) further argues that 'it is never possible to say that a given practice is always fully and unproblematically anti-oppressive'.

The increasing fluidity of human movement across the globe intensifies ongoing crises in knowledge production and raises questions about the effectiveness of universities as agents of change, responsible for providing scientifically grounded knowledge to support the flourishing of all people within a sustainable environment. Such mobility directly affects universities by reshaping the demographic composition of both students and staff. Immigration, involving both adults and children, also draws attention to the intersection of education and employment – two fundamental human rights – linked to the well-being of populations.

Student populations, institutional structures, curricula and pedagogies in HE are increasingly shaped by growing mobility and diversification – key dynamics that influence knowledge production. The University of the Free State (UFS) reflects this complexity, as population movement is now far less restricted than it was prior to democracy in South Africa. Data from the faculty illustrate how student mobility contributes to shaping societal identity. Enrolment figures indicate that the faculty, which for many years under apartheid was dominated by a single religious denomination, has undergone a gradual, yet significant shift towards multidenominationalism and, to a lesser extent, multireligious representation.

This transformation has also entailed the emergence of a multiracial and multilingual student body. Additional diversity is further shaped by cultural, economic, educational and geographical factors.

It must be noted that the data provided by the university were gathered from application forms by prospective students. The data were collated from statistic provided and had no additional information because of the nature of the questions on the application form. It is imperative to note that the data are taken in study as a potential trend to be identified. With these limitations and restrictions, the data are used in the research in conjunction with a socially just pedagogy. The outcome of the research and the recommendations take into account the limitations of the data.

Although South Africa and its HE landscape were already diversified prior to 1948, the introduction of separate development and subsequent legislation (the *Separate Development Act*) in 1948 (South African History Online [SAHO] 2014) confined diversification largely to informal interaction. After 1948, racial segregation further restricted diversity within HEIs and the education sector more broadly. The post-apartheid era, ushered in by the democratic dispensation of 1994, removed the official, legal and constitutional barriers of separate development. Since then, the HE landscape has emerged as a space of freedom, fragility and fraternity. It is within this superdiverse context – shaped by race, language, geography, religion, culture and economics – that this investigation of theology and diverse student population is situated.

Communities and societies are exposed to more diverse cultures, societal norms, religious beliefs and political ideologies as a result of increased mobility within and between communities, driven by advanced technology, wars, economic isolation, religious conflicts and oppressive governance. Within this expanding trajectory of interaction between fluid communities and the vulnerability of knowledge production arises the question of education's role in fostering sustainable, viable and ethical communities for a common humanity. Addressing this question requires the reinterpretation of diversity that takes into account the multiple factors influencing traditional divisions of population groups, which have typically been confined to ethnicity and place of origin.

The particular emphasis investigates the interaction between 'social just pedagogies[1] and social justice' for students from diverse backgrounds, paying particular attention to their multilayered identities and their situatedness within normative spaces of knowledge production. Socially just pedagogies prioritise the lecturer–student relationship, fostering dynamic, more balanced and equitable interaction between the two knowledge producers, in contrast to the traditional hierarchical structure. Rather than adopting a linear flow of information, socially just pedagogies adopt a more fluid and open approach to knowledge. The flow of knowledge is not restricted to a one-way process; rather, a reciprocal exchange encourages creative and imaginative interaction among knowledge, teachers and students. This dynamic process enhances students' agency and recognises them as co-creators alongside lecturers. Furthermore, traditional forms of knowledge, such as those found in books and other literature, become living entities open to reinterpretation and critical reflection. Teaching and learning are collaborative endeavours that foster mutual development and advancement (Kumashiro 2004).

A growing corpus of literature highlights the centrality of community, particularly the building of critical communities. Critical communities act as interlocutors by identifying points of connection, providing a nexus for intersections, and sustaining truthful dialogical communication. Bettez (2011) rightly argues that although there is increasing scientific evidence of the significant role community plays in education, the notion of community is often reduced to that of a 'safe space'. Instead, Bettez (2011) advocates for critical community, which underpins a conducive environment among students and teachers that fosters interdependence.

Within the context of migration, communitarianism has become a salient feature of HE, shaped by the rapid entry of individuals into public spaces where personal and public norms intersect in conditions of immediacy. Community dynamics shift markedly when regional and national boundaries are contested and established norms are questioned. The notion of community has faced mounting scrutiny since the technological revolution, a trend further intensified by the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

It is for this reason that social justice pedagogies in HEIs position students, teaching staff and the lecture space and other teaching aids as contributors to epistemology and the development of agency. 'Normative pedagogies', especially those that engage meaningfully with social justice, 'remain important criteria for knowledge production' and the cultivation of graduate attributes within HE. However, power-centred teaching methods that favour certain groups must be critically assessed, particularly in the light of the growing and unavoidable migration of human populations. The aim is not to abandon normative pedagogies, but to question the forms of normativity and essentialism that have long defined colonial, monocultural, human-exclusive and top-down approaches to knowledge production (Klaasen 2023).

I propose 'a social just pedagogy of teaching … that critically engages with, and challenges, the privileged normative position' of classicism (Klaasen 2023). Such a pedagogy recentres learning and teaching within the lecture room, incorporating non-human and 'participatory knowledge

1.This and social justice pedagogies are used interchangeably by different scholars and falls within the broad pedagogy of teaching for social justice.

production' alongside students and lecturers. 'The hierarchical structure of the university will also be examined as an instrument of traditional, classical knowledge production systems'. The central question I address is how teaching at HEIs can foster the agency of students from diverse backgrounds in faculties of theology and religion in a shared educational system (Klaasen 2023). My position is based on the recognition that student diversity is multilayered and multifaceted, and can no longer be reduced to two or three categories, with one usually being dominant.

To capture this complexity, I employ the concept of *superdiversit*y to illuminate the changing nature of the student body since the advent of democracy in South Africa. Race remains a defining issue, given the legacy of apartheid and the deep roots of segregation within South African society. Yet without diminishing this racial reality, *superdiversity* broadens the analytical lens to encompass multiple and intersecting dimensions of difference, including social, political, geographical, linguistic, cultural and religious diversity.

Context

Prompted by rising enrolment in an interdisciplinary ethics course, a team of scholars from diverse disciplines at universities in Sweden and South Africa undertook a joint investigation of this phenomenon. Although the study did not focus exclusively on migration, but rather on diversity within ethics modules, my particular interest centred on the differences, tensions and paradoxes among students, as well as their worldviews, lived realities and cultures.

Sweden and South Africa both share a formerly liberal approach to migration. Neither country has been spared the tensions, paradoxes and diversity that are sometimes expressed through violent and brutal outbursts. Xenophobic attacks and violent protests against foreign workers are frequent occurrences in South Africa. In Sweden, so-called gang wars and religiously motivated uprisings are often attributed to migration.

My contributions to two edited publications in 2020 (Klaasen 2020) and 2021 (Klaasen 2021) examined the emerging concept of socially just pedagogy as a scholarly response to the disconnect between universities and socio-political realities. This work engaged with themes such as the fluidity of being human within evolving formations and the retreat to normativity, which constructs what South African language expert and historian Hoffmeyer (1993) has described as 'barbed wire' – a metaphor for how differences are used to establish permanent boundaries.

Within my own discipline (Klaasen 2023), I have been particularly interested in how education and educational institutions equip students with critical tools – through epistemologies and pedagogies – to engage with socio-political contexts. Since 2020, I have been experimenting with socially just methods of teaching.

A study conducted by researchers from Norway, Sweden and New Zealand found that individualism and neoliberalism negatively affect marginalised groups within education, with competitiveness valued more highly than equity-based goals. The study further concluded that socially just pedagogies encompass several dimensions: the recognition of knowledge as situated within personal and cultural settings; the integration of diverse perspectives and values throughout the curriculum; and diverse forms of enactment, including social justice as a goal (teleological) and as the actions and embodied practices of the teacher (agency). Building on these insights, I aim to extend my previous approach to socially just pedagogy by situating it within the context of superdiversity and its implications for education (Schenker et al. 2019).

Superdiversity and higher education

Diversity is arguably the highest value across sectors including business, media, HE and politics. Factors such as migration, conflict, poverty and technological advancement contribute to the rapid and relatively uncomplicated movement of both people and non-living entities across fixed boundaries. As Brennan (2022) observes:

> Organizations and their leaders frequently affirm their value in public and claim that diversity is their strength. Some companies and many universities require managerial applicants to espouse a pro-diversity ideology to be considered for employment. As of May 2022, nearly all the public companies on the Fortune 500 list have diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) statements and initiatives on their corporate social responsibilities' webpages. (p. 433)

Diversity is commonly understood as variation within particular groups, such as race, ethnicity, gender, language or culture. While diversity is often invoked as a means of promoting justice, the assumption that a group must mirror the demographic composition of its wider society to avoid injustice is problematic. In contexts marked by rapid and complex forms of difference, some demographic groups remain disadvantaged while others continue to be privileged (Brennan 2022). Vertovec (2007) adds a further layer of complexity by emphasising the scale and multiplicity of divergent phenomena within groups or communities. Although he recognises that such phenomena are not necessarily new – though some have gained prominence more recently within certain disciplines – he argues that the extent of both the singular subject and its diversification must be taken seriously, together with the impact this has on policy, benefits, values and identity.

Superdiversity is not simply a greater degree of diversity or an extension of existing phenomena. For instance, a group does not become superdiverse by adding just one different person, phenomenon or experience. Rather, superdiversity arises when a particular geographical area, space, community or society redefines its identity through the layered introduction of characteristics so extensive that the original group is fundamentally altered in

its complexity. This process involves the inclusion of more varied groups, additional languages, a wider range of cultures and greater diversity in places of origin and economic status.

It is reasonable to propose that Vertovec's (2007) concept of superdiversity emerged in response to the limited framing of communities and societies primarily through ethnicity, which led to a restricted understanding of diversity. In the early discourse of ethnicity studies, superdiversity offers a distinct perspective to broader fields such as sociology, anthropology and religious studies. According to Vertovec (2007), although the ethnicity of resettled individuals remains relevant in discussions of diversity, the extensive range of additional variables, characteristics and phenomena presents a strong case for reconsidering what has traditionally been termed diversity. As Vertovec (2007) explains:

> Such additional variables include differential immigration statuses and their concomitant entitlements and restrictions of rights, divergent labour market experiences, discrete gender and age profiles, patterns of spatial distribution, and mixed local area responses by service providers and residents. Rarely are these factors described side by side. The interplay of these factors is what is meant here. (p. 1025)

Diversity based on racial identities or ethnicity is often regarded as an insufficient foundation. Racial identity is merely one aspect within a broader and more complex range of factors that intersect within shared social orders, legal frameworks, rights, policies and procedures. Restricting diversity to ethnicity or race not only creates a misleading representation of communities, but also distorts the distribution of rights and benefits for those resettled within existing dominant and powerful centres.

For this reason, diversity must be critically examined, and the introduction of superdiversity provides a more accurate and dynamic portrayal of evolving communities and societies. South Africa, for example, is a case where race is linked to language differentiation, yet the movement of people, together with the number of official languages, is three times greater than the number of race classifications. This, along with the rapid rise in migrants from other African countries, calls for a thorough debate on diversity, human movement and HE.

The Faculty of Theology and Religion at the UFS exemplifies a form of diversity that extends beyond the generic definition of variation on a common phenomenon. During the apartheid era, prior to the first democratic dispensation, the student and staff population was almost exclusively from one race, one language and one religious denomination (the Dutch Reformed Church [DRC]), with only a small minority representing other racial groups. Despite a steady decline in enrolment, a decade after the advent of democracy, the DRC still constituted nearly two-thirds of the student body. From 1994 onwards, however, a gradual shift towards greater diversity began. This transformation was marked by the appointment of the first black staff members in 1997 and the first female staff member in 2007. The student population similarly diversified, with increasing numbers of black students, and in 2013, the DRC and the university reached an agreement to admit a broader spectrum of theology students (Letsosa 2020).

By 2016, the student population had undergone a significant shift, reflecting increasing diversity. Beyond race, factors such as ethnicity, language, geographical origins, denomination, class, culture and educational background all contributed to variation within the Faculty of Theology and Religion. By 2024, these dynamics had transformed the student profile into something previously unimaginable, surpassing classical notions of diversity and more accurately characterised as *superdiversity*. The trajectory moved the student population beyond the dominance of a single normative group and beyond limited demographic inclusion. The traditional focus on race has been reshaped by a wide range of intersecting determinants, including language, culture, geography, denomination, faith, gender, educational background and economic conditions.

Whereas changes to curricula, staff and enrolment criteria may address issues of justice within the established framework of diversity in the South African socio-political and educational landscape, the recent multiplicity of phenomena shaping community formation and shifting group dynamics calls for a more expansive and innovative approach to education. The accelerating pace of change in communities, including academic communities, together with the complexities of social dynamics, calls for pedagogies and approaches to teaching, learning, and research that take seriously the multilayered, complex and interactionist nature of students. Education, therefore, cannot be reduced to the mere acquisition of knowledge, as implied by classical modes of knowledge production. Rather, it is an interactive and relational process that responds to ever-evolving environments and to the ways in which these environments shape, and are shaped by, both living and non-living beings.

In the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the UFS, changes in staff composition, student enrolment, the faculty's name (the Faculty of Theology), the adoption of decolonial curricula and the development of innovative pedagogies were symptomatic of the accelerated pace of change. The faculty's efforts were commendable and contributed significantly to its survival in a climate where theology and religion have increasingly been reduced to a sub-discipline within the humanities, arts and social sciences. This contribution seeks to enhance and foster a greater emphasis on social justice by taking seriously the superdiverse nature of student enrolment and recognising the centrality of students in knowledge production and social justice. The adoption of socially just pedagogies as an approach to knowledge production and to addressing injustice and inequality, together with an explicit recognition of superdiversity among the student population, makes a significant contribution to scholarship on education, pedagogy and justice.

Socially just pedagogy and theology education

Considering the caution that no approach to scholarship, and particularly no teaching pedagogy, is ever completely neutral, the rapid pace at which communities, societies and nations become heteronomous through globalisation, advanced technology and multiple forms of relationships among humans, as well as between humans and the wider cosmos, has accelerated the evolution of knowledge production in HE. Interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches are now being challenged by work-integrated learning, community-engaged scholarship and praxis-theory approaches. Traditional desktop-based and empirical scientific research and teaching are questioned for their normative, essentialist and top-down models of knowledge production. Socially just pedagogies respond to these critiques by recognising the limitations of fragmented and one-directional flows of knowledge, while continuing to acknowledge the caution that teaching pedagogies and knowledge production are never entirely neutral.

It is also worth noting that while social justice is teleological, *socially just pedagogy* refers to 'equitable learning conditions for academic success' (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2016:4). This distinction indicates that social justice is an outcome; within teaching and learning, it involves the transformation of students, lecturers, curricula and scholarship through critical reflection and interaction. It requires questioning and generating knowledge in ways that open up new opportunities for learning, as well as fostering the development and transformation of both students and lecturers. In contrast, socially just pedagogy constitutes a methodology that establishes spaces for relational and reciprocal engagement between students and lecturers within academic contexts. Teaching philosophy, objectives, goals, study materials and power relations are all grounded in principles of equality and equity. At its core, socially just pedagogy is concerned with social justice. Its authenticity depends on the extent to which it cultivates an equitable teaching and learning environment, rooted in social justice, to ensure the most holistic and meaningful academic experience. The methodology is inherently just and inclusive, from the compilation of study guides and prescribed literature, to the design of the room, university structures, policies, processes, assessments and evaluations.

In an earlier attempt to develop a socially just pedagogy, I identified five key aspects: (1) enabling equal and equitable access to education through justice-driven methods; (2) recognising that knowledge is not limited to abstraction, but that praxis fosters creative interaction between different forms of knowledge; (3) establishing student–lecturer interaction that values both as integral to knowledge production; (4) positioning students' contexts and narratives at the centre of the lecture space, where they serve as part of the interpretive lens; and (5) knowledge production is embodied and formative (Klaasen 2020).

In my most recent reflection, *community* has emerged as another phenomenon to be integrated into my developing framework of social justice pedagogy. The concept of *superdiversity*, in contrast to diversity, challenges the limited understanding of community that often prevails in teaching and learning. While the idea of community as living human relationships within teaching and learning (Sapon-Shevin & SooHoo 2020) has already been disrupted by technological innovations introduced during COVID-19, as well as by the presence of non-living entities such as lecture halls and study spaces, superdiversity pushes further by questioning perceptions of community shaped by narrow social and political variables. Superdiversity calls into question inclusionary visions of community that rely on only one or a few additions to established norms. Socially just pedagogy is a starting point for a teaching approach that challenges both normativity and the power dynamics that play out within traditional teaching pedagogies where the professor is the professional and only transmitter of knowledge. Power dynamics also plays within the diversity of students. For example, English as the medium of instruction and the neglect of indigenous languages such as Afrikaans, Sesotho, Xhosa, and Zulu as part of the many official languages within South Africa. The school system where students were educated as well as access to technology places students within a hierarchy that is related to power dynamics. While superdiversity and socially just pedagogy question the power dynamics and the dynamics of spaces, this is not the focus of the current research, which is acknowledged as a limitation in both the methodology and the focussed research phenomenon.

By way of example, the student body of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the UFS, once composed almost exclusively of students from a single race, language and religious denomination, can no longer be regarded as a unified community defined by such limited criteria. At present, the student population exhibits considerable diversity in terms of racial groups, languages, geographical backgrounds, social classes, cultures and religions. No homogeneous group dominates in any form. This progression reshapes the very notion of community and has significant implications for processes and structures of social justice.

While my own interest and perspective on community is shaped by the tension between Western individualism, collectivism and African communitarianism, I find the notion of *critical community* (Bettez 2011) within education both plausible and highly significant in contexts of superdiversity. Bettez (2011) explains that critical community entails:

> Taking a critical lens requires us to acknowledge that in any situation there are multiple socially constructed realities, historical contexts, and lived experiences that are continually impacted by issues of power that played out through complex interplays of structure and agency. Given this conception, in critical community building there must be, at a minimum, an attempt to question dominant norm and a goal to further one another's critical thinking, particularly around issues of power, oppression, and privilege. (p. 79)

Critical community, therefore, is characterised by fostering a welcoming and collaborating environment where students and staff are recognised as interdependent variables in solidarity for the pursuit of justice.

Socially just pedagogies and superdiversity, although two independent variables, contribute to education including theology and religion education by critically engaging both the potential tensions and educational integrity. Both superdiversity and socially just pedagogies challenge the traditional knowledge transmission and the hierarchy that are normative within institutions of higher education. The position of the student and the expanding diversity of the students link superdiversity with socially just pedagogy so that the approach to education is bottom-up and broader than the traditional lecturer and student relationship, which is generally a hierarchical one.

Superdiversity and agency

The student enrolment trajectory in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the UFS clearly reflects the rapid transformation of its student population. Since its inception, the faculty was dominated by a relatively homogeneous group, consisting primarily of white students from the DRC who shared a single language and racial identity. By the early 2000s, however, this began to change, with a steady decline in this demographic. In 2004,[2] the number of such students had fallen to 160, representing 58.82% of the student population. Over the following two decades, this proportion decreased further to only 7.04%. Similarly, the number of students with Afrikaans as their preferred language declined from 158 to 40.

This dramatic shift in the student population raises significant scholarly and pedagogical challenges for classical theology and established approaches to teaching and learning. During the same period, a significant change in gender balance occurred, with the male student population dropping from 84.56% to 46.4%, signalling a major transformation in the composition of the student body.

Students' places of origin have also changed over time. In 2013, 42.22% of students were from the Free State – the province in which the faculty and university are located – whereas by 2024, this figure had declined to 20.09%. This trend indicates a movement away from the country's centre and points to broader socio-economic developments, including the growth of rural populations and the shifting origins of educational institutions, as reflected in the enrolment data.

The history of South African higher education landscape is aligned with the broader history of South Africa. Both are shaped by policies of separate development and racially segregated residential areas. For example, black students were largely relocated to rural and severely under-resourced areas known as 'Homelands' or 'Bantustans'. While the dominant language of Afrikaans (spoken almost exclusively as a preferred language by white Afrikaners) declined from 158 students in 2004 to 51 in 2024, the number of languages represented increased in both variety and volume. These languages not only correspond to the cultures present within the faculty but also reflect the broader demographic changes.

The statistics clearly indicate a substantial change in the student population over a 20-year period, from a homogeneous group with a common language, race and denominational affiliation – with few exceptions – to one characterised by significant diversity. The move towards different races, languages and doctrinal beliefs became more complex with the addition of geographical, gender, cultural, educational and economic factors. Within South African HE, access to universities has been as much an economic factor as an educational standard. The change in the student population within the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the UFS was influenced by the introduction of free education in 2016. This change of approach to university education led to the establishment of the National Student Fund, which primarily supported previously disadvantaged people by enabling access to universities through free education.

However, the student population cannot simply be described as diverse because numerous additional factors complicate the picture beyond race alone. Vertovec's (2007) critique of diversity highlights its limitations, particularly the disadvantages of discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion that arise when the complexity of shifting social dynamics is overlooked. Policies and laws frequently fail to capture the deeper factors shaping communities and the lived realities they experience. In this regard, superdiversity – understood as a concept rather than a fully developed theory – encourages a more critical perspective on the phenomena influencing evolving communities. It opens theoretical space for exploring various social dynamics, including patterns and trajectories of 'separation', 'inequality and prejudice', and related issues (Vertovec 2007:1045–1047).

Socially just pedagogies recognise students and educational aids such as the new technologies, lecture rooms, module material, learning processes and structures, the design of learning spaces, technology and lecturers – as integral components of a complex and interconnected process of knowledge production. Within this approach, students assume the role of co-creators of knowledge 'behind the lecture space', 'in the lecture space', and 'beyond the lecture space'. This implies that students play a central role in the planning, delivery and societal impact of lectures. 'Behind the lecture space' refers to planning, setting objectives, assessment, literature and all activities that occur before the lecture itself. 'In the lecture space' refers to the activities, modalities and utilisation of the space. 'Beyond the lecture space' encompasses the use of both formative and abstract tools, information, skills and values that maximise societal

2.The data used can be accessed from the University of the Free State student enrolment unit. Click here https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1etwrhufzkjecHxQAJzLGfSPjzapTJZI2/edit?usp=drive_link&ouid=101058453038714860612&rtpof=true&sd=true.

impact. Together, these three facets of socially just pedagogies connect the social justice nature of the pedagogy with the goal of education as social justice.

Students thus become far more than passive recipients of knowledge. In classical models of knowledge production, the expert or professional lecturer is positioned as the sole transmitter of knowledge. By contrast, socially just pedagogies adopt innovative approaches that create space for students to act as active participants, contributing valuable insights through diverse narratives, lived experiences and perspectives. Elsewhere, I argue that a reciprocal relationship – formed within an interactionist movement between students, lecturers and non-human entities – contributes to a more transformative environment for HE, teaching and learning, and its role players (Klaasen 2020). Within this dynamic and dialogical movement, students emerge as agents capable of contributing to more equal and equitable forms of justice within evolving communities and societies.

The lived realities of the student population, combined with the rapid intensification of key factors such as race, language and religious affiliation, alongside other elements influencing social dynamics, require critical reflection in the development of relevant policies and frameworks. As Vertovec (2007) observed in his analysis of the disjuncture between immigration policies and actual lived realities, a similar gap is evident in HE. Policies within South African universities have not kept pace with the swift and profound changes reshaping the educational landscape. Clowes, Shefer and Ngabaza (2017:1) point out that the two most significant opportunities to address inequalities and injustice in HE – the Department of Education's White Paper of 1997, the Sourdine Report; and the Department of Higher education and Training (DHET) article of 2010 – have not resolved the problem, with inequalities in education remaining a major issue. Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) argue that, despite the efforts of post-apartheid policies, HE remains an 'endemic problem'.

The #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements represent two significant turning points in the history of South African HE. The former emerged as a mass reaction against exclusionary practices that denied academically deserving students' access on the basis of inequitable financial models, while the latter constituted a collective call for the decolonisation of education. According to Clowes et al. (2017), these movements arose in response to the failure of post-apartheid policies to adequately address the structural shortcomings of the education landscape. Since then, HE has undergone considerable transformation, evident both in student enrolment and within academia. When policies take into account the superdiversity of the student population, institutional structures, social arrangements, financial models and educational practices are more likely to cultivate citizens who actively contribute to communities and societies grounded in a shared humanity, with common responsibilities towards justice and equality. Policies grounded in real-life realities are also more likely to adopt a bottom-up approach because of their authenticity. Vertovec (2007) asserts that although multicultural policies in Britain made significant contributions in responding to the influx of migrants from Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana and the West Indies during the 1950s to 1970s, these same policies and aims have continued to be applied despite the subsequent expansion of migration from a wider range of countries.

Socially just pedagogies are grounded in critical communities where students, lecturers and non-living entities such as technology and the lecture room engage in a mutually enriching process of learning. This process is nurtured within a creative, fragile and flexible space that enables critical reflection. In such pedagogies, students' knowledge is valued and recognised within institutions of learning. Through this interactionist movement, both lecturers and students engage in cycles of learning and unlearning. Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016) caution against the devaluation of students' knowledge:

> What is important for socially just pedagogies is how perceived attributes of people or practices are valued (recognised) or devalued (misrecognised). This will impact ways in which students and academics are able to participate in the pedagogical process … These forms of inequality include: degrading students' prior knowledges, colonisation of settler groups where the values and attributes of certain other groups are backgrounded and rendered invisible in the curriculum. (p. 113)

They further conclude that:

> Socially just pedagogies would consider ways of addressing these impediments to equal participation. Affirmative approaches would involve revaluing devalued categories such as indigenous knowledges or devalued social categories such as race, ability or class-this may, however, reify groups of people along a single axis, such as women or blacks, thus reducing the lived complexity of situations. A more transformative social just pedagogy would alert students to the possibility of destabilising institutionalised cultural patterns through deconstructing binary categories. (pp. 113–114)

Conclusion

Diversity has come under scrutiny because of its limited contribution towards fostering more equitable and equal societies, especially in contexts where migration has drastically altered demographic patterns and social dynamics. Religious education within educational institutions is increasingly shaped by the fluidity of student populations, shifting from relatively homogeneous to highly heterogeneous communities. The case of the student population in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the UFS demonstrates the superdiverse character of contemporary student enrolment. Applying a socially just pedagogy to such a multilayered student population holds the promise of more equal and equitable knowledge production, as well as the formation of just communities in which differences are not assimilated but rather incorporated into a social justice system that promotes justice for all, grounded in a shared humanity and common goal.

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CRediT authorship contribution

John S. Klaasen: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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