Chapter 1

Transformation Reflections on Opportunities and Challenges in a Context of 4IR Developments and Post-Covid-19

Grace Khunou

Introduction

The current sociopolitical and economic context is made of growing inequality, political intolerance, corruption, fast-changing technologies, inequitable access to technological infrastructure, and, most importantly, the alarming retreat to thinking that discourages and punishes difference (Hlatswayo 2021; Khunou 2023; Ngwane & Tshoaedi 2021; Satgar 2019). With the South African population growing more than 8% since 2011 and growing unemployed (32.9%)[1], growing inequality (0.63) felt at multiple levels of the population and we have to be agile in our tranformation efforts. These structural changes are further influenced by international challenges marked by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the Ukraine-Russia war, and most recently the Israel-Hamas war. All these factors have a direct impact on the higher education sector and particularly on the transformation agenda. These macropolitical issues impact the university sector in terms of funding, facilitation of equitable access, what we teach, our research agenda and our ability to make lasting change.

Transformation endeavours in the South African higher education sector have a long history[2] transcending the

1 According to the labour force survey the first quarter of 2024 saw unemployment increase to 32.9%.

2 Students played a fundamental role in pushing back against apartheid separatist agendas inside universities via their multiple

implementation of democracy. However, institutionalised transformation efforts started post-1994 with the "Green Paper on Higher Education (1996), the Draft White Paper on Higher Education (April 1997) and eventually the White Paper on Higher Education (July 1997) and the National Plan (2001)" (Reddy 2004). In hindsight, it is now clear that whilst these policies were put in place to facilitate the institutionalisation of transformation, the requisite resources to do so were not provided. This lack was clearly unpacked in the #FeesMustFall movement of 2015 and 2016 where students laid bare the economic challenges in the higher education system, access issues, ongoing racism and sexism, and, most importantly, unshifting epistemic cultures.

Among other factors at the heart of these efforts to transform access was the history of exclusion suffered by Blacks in particular and the high regard they placed on education (Reddy 2004). Access has thus grown in the past few years; however, the other types of transformation (epistemic) are lagging behind. These include curriculum transformation and centring knowledge from the South with a particular emphasis on excavating the knowledges that were historically marginalised. The issue of African languages in teaching and learning also remains a challenge, with their stigmatisation remaining a stumbling block (Ndimande 2004).

Attempts to transform the higher education sector have taken various forms and approaches (Reddy 2004). Many of these early approaches drew from the post-colonial canon and have since been interrogated for their integrationist and reformist angles that make African epistemologies appear as appendages while Western knowledge retains its mainstream status. The second decade of the current millennium has witnessed a further interrogation of these post-colonial approaches and renewed demands for centring African knowledge in the curriculum. These demands have been accompanied by the understanding that a university founded on African philosophy would easily transform into an African university because its ways of doing

structures. The same is true of the activities of some progressive academic staff who organised with students and civil organisations to challenge exclusive apartheid practices (Reddy 2004).

things would automatically transcend the Western script. This has led to numerous developments in higher education, including curriculum change, culture and governance change, and an overarching shift of policies and systems including those that inform employment principles. This change discourse has been grounded on decolonisation and re-Africanisation notions that perceive change as a praxis.

Given this emphasis on theory and praxis, most recent work on transformation has focused on centring changes not only in meeting employment equity numbers but particularly on foregrounding substantive changes, which include how we theorise and do research. For example, the fallist movement illustrated in real life experience the convergences of the social, political, economic, and epistemological. As a result of this movement, transformation work fast-tracked moves away from focusing on employment equity and diversity as the significant markers of transformation to a more critical and nuanced move towards shifting our epistemological lenses and thus unravelling the multiple ways coloniality continues in post-independence in the African continent and the diaspora (Stevens 2019). The shifts prompted by the fallist movement has provoked us to think from a decolonisation, Africanisation, and Indigenisation perspective with the intent of creating changes with regard to curricula, institutional culture, ideas about science and arts, and, most importantly, "a recalibration of what constitutes the canon across most disciplines" (Stevens 2019: viii). This recalibration that Stevens is referring to provides the space to reimagine what it means to know from the African context and or whilst being Black in the world (Khunou et al. 2019, Musila 2019). Some chapters in this volume illustrate this by focusing their elucidations on a reimagined canon.

This rethinking work is taking place in a fast-changing world impacted by new challenges and continuities of old ones. Thus, this book is about transformation in the higher education sector with a particular focus on how the COVID-19 pandemic and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) impacted (or still impacts) the sector and how we think about and do transformation work as a result. With moves towards 4IR scholarship and doing

knowledge in the context of COVID-19, there has been debates suggesting that efforts to decolonise and Africanise have been eroded and/or stalled. This manuscript offers divergent thinking, suggesting that as change is inevitable, transformation work should also be agile and consider the following questions: What are our realities? What are the opportunities and challenges for decolonisation and Africanisation presented by shifts to 4IR? Has the COVID-19 pandemic opened opportunities for reimagining how we do knowledge and build the African University?

Decolonisation And The Higher Education Transformation Project

Although decolonial theorising started long before the #FeesMustFall movement of 2015/16 it was made popular in the South African imagination during this moment. Consequently, a lot of theorising on decoloniality emerges from the South African contexts after this moment. In a 2015 article titled "Decoloniality as the Future of Africa", Ndlovu-Gatsheni makes a case for why decoloniality is a significant theory for Africa's political and epistemological liberation. In making this case, he states that decoloniality is an important liberatory language of the future. Thus, in thinking about 4IR post the COVID-19 pandemic and the future of Africa and the South African higher education sector, decolonial thinking is necessary given the slow pace of transformation and the shifting education funding agendas brought on by centring 4IR discourses in the future of education. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, 2018) and Benyera (2021) put forward several ideas for why decolonisation is significant for the transformation project. Their ideas include unpacking why the current university in Africa is a 'colonial university'.

Even though the pluriversal idea of the university originated in Africa (Benyera 2021), the colonial university is a product of colonisation, whose intent is to create and recreate colonial systems of oppression. Ndlovu-Gatseni (2015) asserts that even though colonialism ended, colonial systems of oppression remain entrenched via coloniality. Coloniality is articulated economically (via the tentacles of capitalism), politically, socially,

epistemologically, and ontologically (Benyera 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 2018).

Consequently, central to arguments for decolonisation is the idea of epistemic freedom. Epistemic freedom, as articulated by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) in the introduction of his seminal book *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*, Africans must think, theorise, and write from where they are located. This freedom is the bedrock of our ability to transform our universities. Without epistemic freedom, we will continue to tinker on the margins.

Curriculum transformation is argued to be one way of articulating epistemic freedom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2016; Radebe 2023). However, since 1994, attempts to transform the curriculum have basically ornaments knowledge from Africa without truly centring these knowledges in solving our problems and future thinking. This is notwithstanding how these knowledges continue to play a role in informing health and healing (Canham 2023), building philosophies of ubuntu and relationality (Radebe 2023), and in many endeavours of life and development. Radebe (2023) then makes a case for thinking about curriculum transformation from a decolonial epistemic approach, which Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016) defines as privileging knowledges from Africa and the diaspora without throwing away unprejudiced knowledges from Euro-America.

Outline of the Book

The book is made up of nine chapters including this one. The chapters are divided into three sections as they focus on three themes which make up some of the current transformation discourses in the South African higher education system post-COVID-19. Chapters two, three, and four focus on gender and identity as important transformation questions. Chapters five and six look at how to think critically about 4IR and its place in the transformation landscape of universities in South Africa. Chapters seven, eight and nine provide us with a sense of pluriversal knowledge and how to think about these from an Indigenous Knowledge System perspective.

Chapters two, three, and four focus on gender, feminism, and the higher education transformation project. These three chapters offer a lens into how the transformation project is problematised by inequalities ranging from gender, identity, and histories of exclusion. Chapter two by Tau, titled "Can I call you Ma or Prof? Reflexivity, memory, and space in African feminist research", is a feminist reflexive piece drawing on lived experiences in the academy with a particular focus on the questions Black women deal with as they navigate the academy. Tau looks at how multiple ways of knowing and the complicated registers of engagement in the academy influence belonging. Her reflections are prompted by naming practices from home and within the academy – she challenges us to think about how do we merge the two without taking away from the achievements and self-positioning of especially Black women leaders in the higher education sector?

Similarly, chapter three, "The South Africa academy, intersectionality and attempts to erase Black women", deals with feminist reflections prompted by the heterogeneity of Blackness. Khunou addresses these issues through an intersectional lens, intending to illustrate how Black women who are 'foreign' and African experience the academy differently compared to Black South African women. The chapter further illustrates the significance of intersectionality for explaining African contexts.

In chapter four, "Converging worlds: Exploring gendered and pluriversal possibilities in South African universities", Chauke and Segalo reflect on how they came into the psychology profession. From this engagement, they are able to show us the importance of socially relevant curricula. Their discussion builds on a feminist foundation and centres on the experience of Black women and their personal experiences of the academy to illustrate how exclusion and alienation manifest in cases where curricula and institutional systems and policies are unchanging.

Chapters five and six problematises 4IR in the context of transformation, illustrating how shifts towards 4IR in the South African higher education sectors came about at a time when the expectation was on strengthening transformation efforts.

Again, these two chapters caution against thinking that might suggest that 4IR is neutral and will bring opportunities to Africa. Chapter five, "Unmasking the logic embedded in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) in pursuit of transformation in higher education", explores interesting elucidations on how to think about 4IR in the South African context post-COVID-19. In chapter five, Radebe brings into sharp focus the importance of thinking from a decolonial lens when engaging with 4IR in South Africa. She makes a case for maintaining focus on the logic underpinning 4IR as we critically engage with what is important for the South African higher education system.

Similarly, chapter six by Khunou and Pillay, "4IR and transformation: Ally or opponent? Reflections on the South African higher education system", unsettles the suggestion that 4IR is all positive. To make a case for the use of 4IR, chapter six shows potential pitfalls given the positionality of Africa not only in the 4IR but in the first three industrial revolutions and how this positionality makes participation in 4IR challenging. Having indicated the pitfalls, the chapter goes on to illustrate some opportunities in the teaching and learning space and offers further ideas on how to best leverage technologies coming out of 4IR to improve teaching, learning, and access.

Chapters seven, eight, and nine focus their discussion on the significance of pluriversality in the higher education system. They make a case for engaging with a canon that might not have been attractive and/or acceptable in the academy and centre Indigenous knowledge systems in the higher education sector.

For example, chapter seven by Kgope, "Why are we here? Challenging agents of revolutions through independent transformation", helps us think about the importance of knowledge production in the African context. Kgope draws on Mutwa's elucidations to inform our thinking on how technology in this era should be engaged with to retain *botho*. She uses the notion of ancestral algorithms to illustrate how Mutwa's thinking is relevant in helping us navigate some of the social changes we are dealing with currently.

Chapter eight, "A post-colonial influence of COVID-19 and 4IR on the eroded higher educational Indigenous knowledge - South African funeral rites case study", engages with COVID-19 as a lens to think about continuities in the erosion of African Indigenous knowledge. Baloyi illustrates how social change happens fast and slow. His discussions of how COVID-19 impacted mourning practices are done against the backdrop of already eroding African mourning practices. This chapter illustrates that the easy ways in which Africans adapt their traditions to accommodate social crises tend to have a detrimental effect on our ability to use Indigenous knowledge systems to engage with capitalist and colonial logic.

In chapter nine, "A transformative framework for the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems into the curriculum in South African higher education institutions: How do we centre historically marginalised knowers and knowledge?", Ngakane and Madlela provide us with a transformative framework for facilitating the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems into university curricula. Ngakane and Madlela provide a detailed reading of how Indigenous knowledge systems are integrated into the curricula in a number of universities within the African continent and abroad, and then provide a roadmap to indicate the best ways to do such an integration as they also illustrate challenges and theories to build from.

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