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"Sustainability is based on the faith we have towards the work that we are doing": The conditions of academic citizenry in South Africa and India

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Draft paper for the Africa Knows! Conference; panel

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"Sustainability is based on the faith we have towards the work that we are doing": The conditions of academic citizenry in South Africa and India

Abstract

This paper reflects on a collaborative study which explored academic citizenry in the post-colonial contexts of South Africa and India. We conducted a mixed-method study of academics' experiences of agency, positioning and participation within universities, to comprehend the conditions of possibility for their shaping of the trans/formation of higher education. While participants' narratives revealed heterogeneous experiences and understandings, from passivity to ignorance and activism, what was disconcerting was what emerged about the larger conditions of their formation as citizens within boundaries and borderlands of the academy. Imaginaries to effect change seemed dormant or suppressed in India, and battle fatigued in South Africa. As authors, we discuss how this project made visible the intractable problematics of our 'work' within Higher Education Studies, Women's Studies and Academic Development, and the related im-possibility for decolonising the hidden meso-curriculum.

Keywords:

Academic citizenship, social justice, participation, conditions, hidden curriculum

Introduction

South Africa (SA) and India are two contexts characterised by strong constitutional commitments to democracy and social justice in a bid to address their historic socio-economic conditions, which morphed from colonialism into various forms of oppression. Both have seen decades of bold policy interventions, affirmation action and anti-discrimination legislation, and interactional 'soft' programmes to address the legacies of exclusion which operate at institutional level in higher education (HE). This has predominantly occurred through 'mainstreaming gender' initiatives driven by Women's Studies (WS) Centres in India; and in SA, through various 'transformation' initiatives, including practitioner-focused academic development (AD) and scholarly approaches collectively grouped under Higher Education Studies (HES). The last 5 years has seen a reckoning with each country's nation-building approaches, political divisiveness and fraught intergenerational dynamics, posing valid questions about what has changed within contemporary HE. These years have dovetailed with the groundswell discourse of decolonising the university and, at the macro-level, the commencement of the international framework which HE is meant to drive – the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Underpinning our study was the question: in what ways is the institution of HE in these countries fit for the purposes of such social change? And we looked to the experiences of those *within* for insights.

That study forms the backdrop to this reflective text. As three academics from different parts of the world (South Africa, India, Nigeria) studying 2 national contexts through 6 institutions, we found that we not only learnt from the participants of our study, but also from the background project processes and each other. We begin by briefly describing the project motivations, design, processes and findings, before turning to our critique inwards, at the impact of our work in HES, WS, and AD on the hidden meso-curriculum of HE.

The project: 'Transformation towards sustainability in HE: Interactional dynamics in gender and intersectionality'

Intermittent discussions have occurred between intellectuals and policy-makers about HE and social justice across the two contexts. Each country faces different past and present challenges, and have taken different approaches over different periods of time. Less comparative than purposive, we were interested in what academic citizenry in these two contexts revealed for how to "strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of

gender equality and empowerment” (SDG Target 5C) if indeed those marginalised, misrecognised and disempowered are to succeed not only in their education, but to be positioned for “full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life” (SDG Target 5.5). However, our previous research (such as Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2019, 2020; Belluigi, 2012, 2013; Dhawan, 2010, 2011, 2017; Idahosa & Vincent, 2014; Idahosa, 2019; Vincent et al., 2017), built on that of many others, made us cognisant that both contexts cherry-picked specific social inequalities to target, leaving many fundamentals unaddressed.

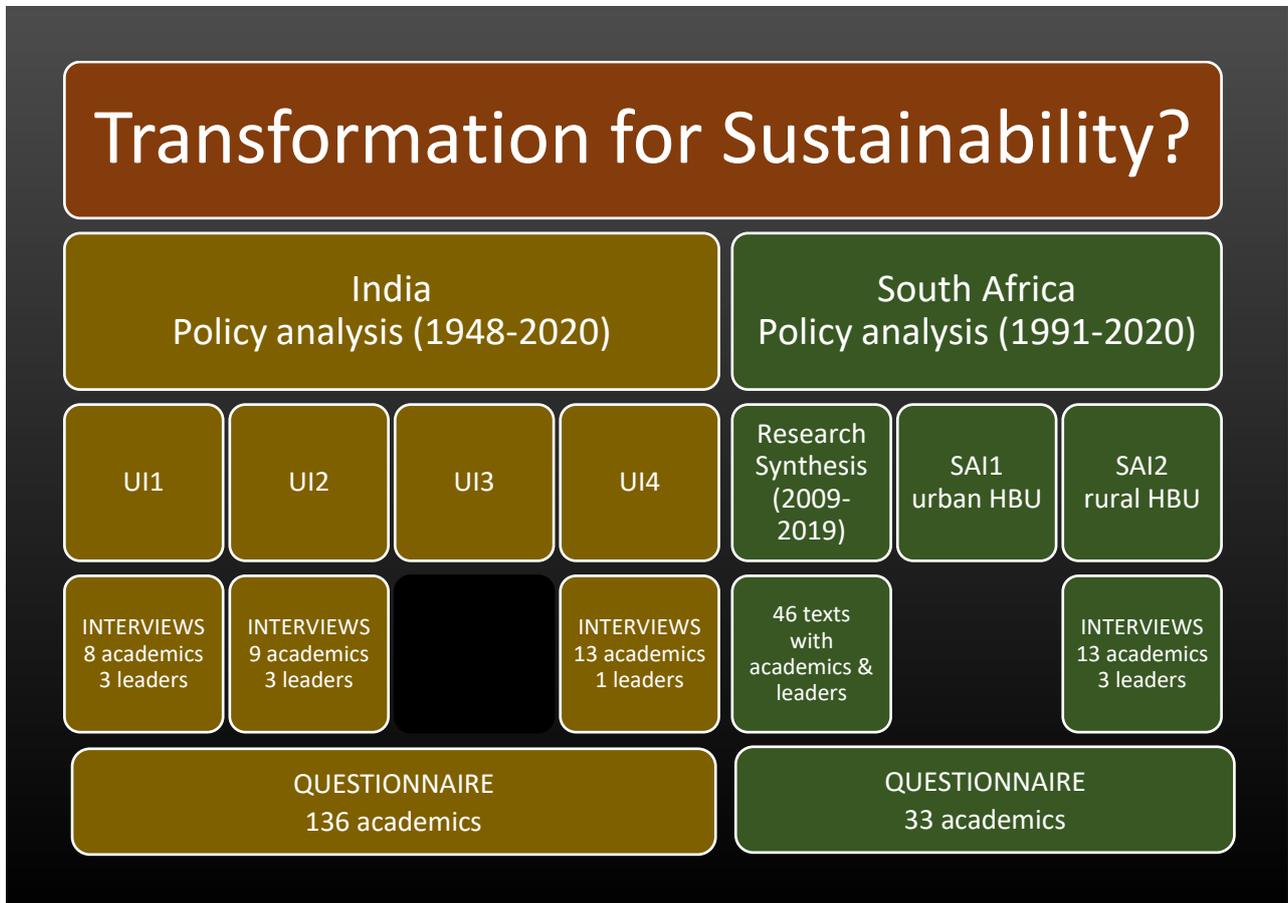


Figure 1 Overview of the project’s data collection and generation

Figure 1 maps the sources for this mixed methods project, which included a policy analysis of the periods of concerted macro-level interventions to address societal ills through formal educational institutions in Indian HE (from 1948-2020) and SA HE (from 1991-2012). In India, we invited (1) questionnaire responses at 4 institutions, and (2) conducted semi-structured interviews at 3 institutions. As SA has HES as an active area of scholarship, we undertook (1) a synthesis of HES published between 2009-2019 which included (a) academics or leaders as participants, and (b) their experiences of ‘transformation’¹; and for current insights (2) invited questionnaire responses at 2 of the 26 public institutions, and (2) conducted semi-structured interviews at SAI2.

You will notice institutional gaps in our study. During 2019 both countries’ HEIs were beset by violent disruptions and infrastructural breakdowns, coincided with our planned visits which we rescheduled and adapted until the budget ran dry. Delays and insurmountable barriers to accessing participants were imposed by 3 SA institutional ethics committees, an emerging pattern which does not bode well for academic freedom nor institutional

¹ While there are variations in the interpretation of this discourse nationally (Dina Zoe Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2019; Soudien et al., 2008), in the context of this study we refer to transformation broadly as the process of changing, restructuring, and re-examining current internal (endogenous) and external (exogenous) factors, structures, cultures and practices to ensure social justice, equality and equity, in HE functions and ecology.

accountability. Indicated in the low response rates in that context, was insiders' disillusionment with HES. Responses from participants and leadership within India could not have been more different.

Qualitative data was analysed for statistical signification using Chi square test and test of proportions; descriptive statistics for Likert scale responses and smaller sets; and concordance calculations. Qualitative data was analysed using a shared code book aligned with research objectives, and then re-coded for what arose from the data. Each author fed their work package into a large report which we share, with ongoing analysis informed by our different interpretative lenses and conceptual frameworks.

Relevant findings: India

With an extensive public HE sector of over 800 institutions, we purposively selected an old and large university of high national ranking (UI1), an institute of technology of national importance (UI2), a previously old college upgraded to university status (UI3) and an institution of eminence (UI4).

1. Questionnaire responses

The 136 questionnaire responses are combined as there were not statistically significant differences between institutions. We provide colouration where it emerges, however it is important to keep in mind that the majority of those who elected to respond were Hindu (82,4%), male (66.2%) and middle class (69%), with an under-representation of those categorised as Other Backward Class (OBC) and Muslims.

Participants were asked to indicate which dominant values were shared or held exclusively by themselves or the institution. Ideally, institutional and individuals' values should not be at extreme odds. Few values were shared (Figure 2). Dominant institutional values were 'endorsing hierarchy', and 'individual accolades, awards, career advancement, wealth, status'. Exclusively-held individual values were 'being responsive to colleague's challenges' and 'critical voices and perspectives'. Publishing and teaching in local languages and with local/ regional knowledge systems, were perceived to be valued individually but not institutionally.

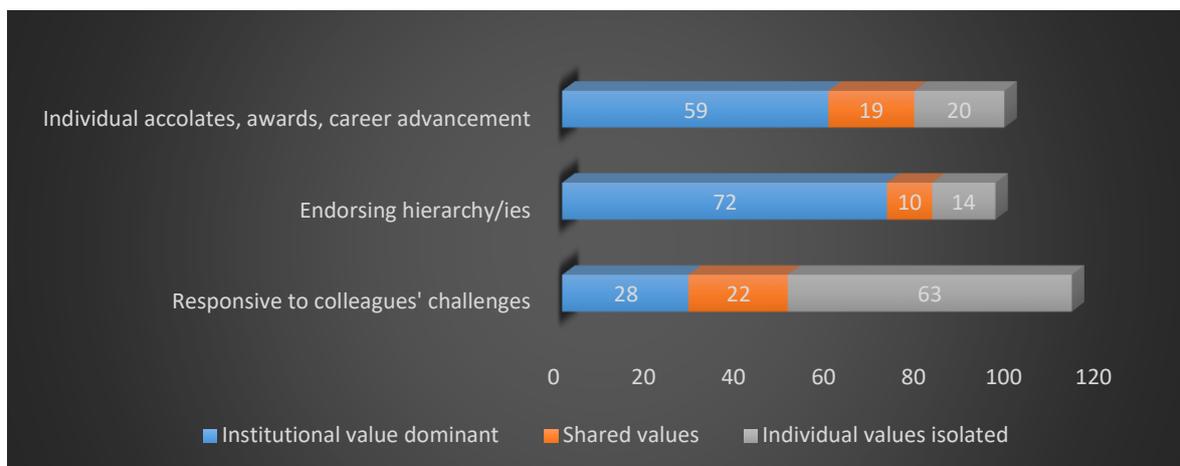


Figure 2 The strongest indications of exclusively held dominant values in the Indian institutions

Two thirds of the participants experienced negative costs such mis-alignment, which included 'internal conflict with one's self', 'difficulties in getting access/permissions administratively' and 'hindering of career progression', and 'anxiety and related mental ill-effects'.

Substantial differences in 'being' and 'belonging' in academic functions (Figure 3), emerged in relation to academic position and social location. In teaching, research and collegial relations, gendered impacts emerged. Of the 86% who indicated they could 'be' when teaching, this included 91% male and 77% female respondents. In research (78.5%), 84% were male and 70% female. Those who indicated more favourable collegial relations (76.5%) were males (81%) compared to females (67%). When engaging with stakeholders outside of the university, differences emerged in relation to discipline, gender and caste. There was a higher accord with Health Sciences (75%), compared to Natural Science (45%); 66% male respondents compared to 42% female; and 75% for those who identified as Scheduled Tribes (ST) down to little over half of the General category. The least accord was with administration

(45%), favourable only to those in leadership positions (86%) and half of the senior academics (53%), which over a third of early career academics and those with rural upbringing found alienating. Differences emerged in terms of caste, with only a third of OBC finding accord with administration compared to half of the other categories.

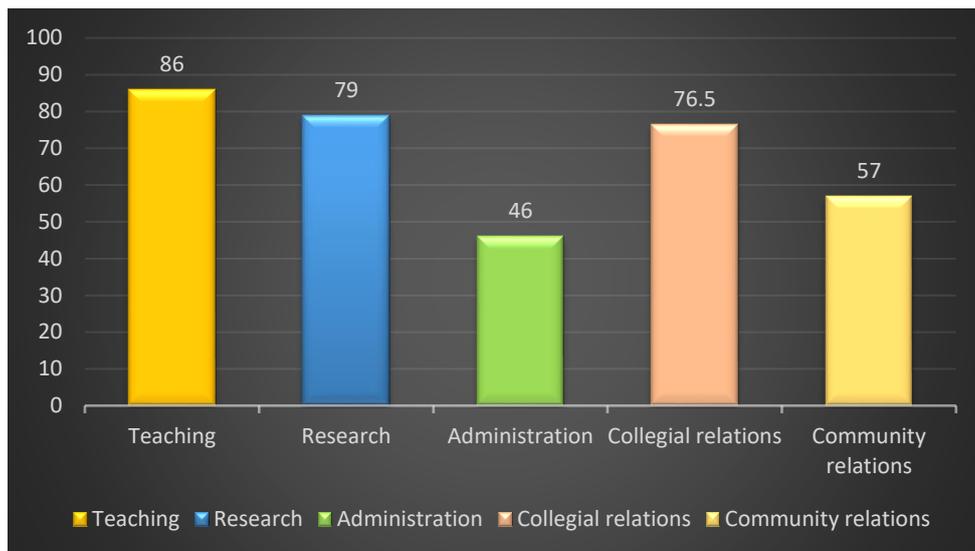


Figure 3 India-based participants' percentages of accord between what they wish to 'be' when enacting academic functions

Figure 4 represents the combined responses to 12 questions about participation in decision-making. Inclusion in decision-making was highest for teaching (68%) and research (61%) which were also the spaces where respondents indicated most comfort in being and belonging (Figure 3). However, inclusiveness was comparatively lower in terms of decisions about academic staffing in teaching and research, with closer analysis implying that staff background and identity is important in this regard.

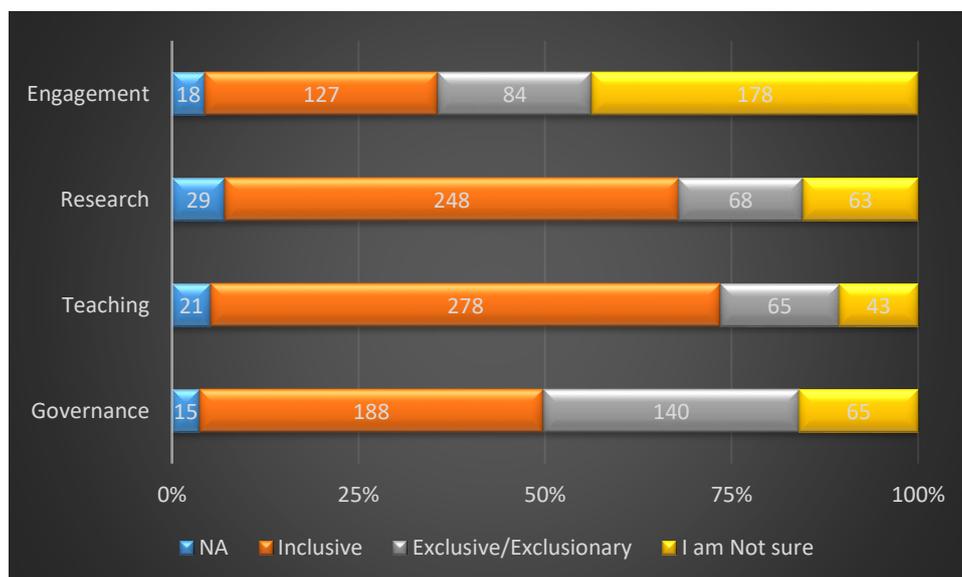


Figure 4 The conditions for democratic participation in decision-making across the Indian universities

Over a third indicated that participation in university governance, administrative responsibilities and the management of staff matters were exclusionary (what we grouped under 'governance' in Figure 4), which seems to corroborate with the findings of the lack of being when enacting administrative responsibilities. Perceptions of inclusion varied by age, discipline and caste: none of those under 60 years found such decision-making inclusive; other than Life Sciences (71%), all other disciplines inclusivity percentages were below 50%; inclusivity was highest for SC (59%) with the least being OBC (27%).

Participants were most unsure about decisions in community-academic relations. A disconcerting trend emerges when comparing responses of identification and belonging to responses about decision-making conditions, on this

issue. An inversion to the experience of 'being' above: the highest representation of inclusion in decision-making about community engagement was those of the General category (2/5 compared to 1/5 SC and OBC) and not one of the ST respondents; however, the vast majority of ST (3/4) respondents felt affirmation of 'being' themselves in relation to those communities. One of the insights of the project was that there was not a well-developed lexicon of community engagement in the Indian institutions, albeit that interview respondents indicated that it was indeed practiced in many parts of the institution, as 'activism' and 'extension activities'.

2. Interview responses

Despite similar rhetoric in mission and vision statements, institutional nuances emerged in the narratives and underpinning discourses of participants' interviews, which included 14 female and 13 male academics, 6 male and 1 female senior leaders, and 2 female WS academics.

We found that participants within UI1 placed the locus of their agency for transformational change almost entirely on the teaching-and-learning of the student population. The conditions of participation for staff did not support transformative change. Within UI2, participants' narratives revealed that the purpose of the institution and the principles of in-group were not aligned with transformative change. Individual agency for such change was disabled across the academic functions. Academic experiences of leadership and the narratives of those in leadership positions indicated both denial of such alienating conditions and the oppression of transformative energies. In UI4, a lack of a shared ethos for inclusive academic citizenry emerged. Agency for transformational change seemed possible, but most positioned it as out of reach. There were increasing tensions observed and experienced within interactional dynamics at the institution, which had adopted a compliant, strategic, but ultimately conservative approach to the handling of gender and caste within the institution was characterised as playing the game for rankings and awards. Clear indications of frustration and damage had emerged, including cases of mental ill-health and suicide.

Relevant findings: SA

1. Literature synthesis

We were surprised, when conducting the literature synthesis, that only forty-six (46) texts met our criteria, given the often self-proclaimed interest of HES scholars in the country. Most studies located the individual as the starting point for transformation. Academics particularly highlighted administrative and institutional responsibility as pivotal in ensuring the recruitment, retention, inclusion and support of marginalized groups in senior positions. Four studies, however, noted the importance of taking multidimensional, multicultural approaches to acknowledging change as multifaceted and multi-perspectival.

Academics' identified endogenous factors extending from the functions of teaching, research and community engagement to meso-level institutional structures, cultures and practices. Included were ethical and moral commitments to change; changing mindsets; ensuring participation, diversity, quality, equity, equality and inclusion; and improving management and administration. Studies on leadership highlighted the exogenous factors of deliverables and resources; alignment between government policies and institutional realities; national discourses and social movements of social justice, humanistic values, decolonisation and capacity building; and global concerns of internationalization, digitalisation, marketization and rankings.

In the studies, both academics and leaders indicated they had agency but it was impacted by resistance and challenges, including the student to staff transition, upward mobility, academic inbreeding, and institutional resistance; racialised and gendered conflicts, including paternalism, exclusion, and body-centered attacks. Reported costs of enacting agency ranged from feeling uncomfortable, silenced, fatigued, invisible, unwanted, being tolerated and systematically misrecognized, with the SA HEIs characterised as alienating and toxic.

2. Questionnaire responses

To generate current insights, we purposively selected institutions 'previously disadvantaged' during the apartheid and colonial regimes. Called 'historically black universities' (HBU) they served the populations not racialized as white during apartheid and colonial times, with reputations for political activism. Concerned with the country's modernity/coloniality human geography (an issue rarely considered in SA HES, unlike Timmis et al., 2019), we chose SAI1 in an

urban context, which served Coloured, Indian and Black students during apartheid; and SAI2 in a rural, previously-termed 'homeland area' that served Black students during apartheid. These legacies were reflected in our questionnaire respondents, where over 2/3rds of SAI represented the range of racial categories which were not White, and 2/3rds of SAI2 respondents identified as Black. The majority of both identified as heterosexual, Christian, married; split in their upbringings between middle class or what we called 'below working class'; with a little more than half women.

Too small (33) for definitive assertions, we highlight notable patterns. In SAI2, most values were not shared except 'publishing in English' (7/17). Dominant exclusive institutional values were 'endorsing hierarchies' (13/17), a value which only respondent, a senior leader shared. Another was the 'pursuit of global excellence' (8/17). Dominantly held by academics, to the exclusion of the institution, were 'responsiveness to colleagues' challenges' (8) and 'cooperation with others' (8). Larger indications of shared values were reported in SAI1, such as 'common good' (7) and 'cooperation with others' (6). However, the largest numbers exclusively institutional dominant values were 'endorsing hierarchies' (12); 'serving local communities' (11); both 'research with' and 'publishing in local/ regional languages' (9); and 'teaching with local knowledge systems' (8). Seemingly the top-down impetus for decolonisation as Africanisation was not shared by these respondents. Differences in 'being and belonging' indicated higher indications of alienation with SAI2 too. Common to both was that largest indications of alienation from 'what you wish to be' were in administration, with teaching the most positive. Common to both institutions (and indeed countries), positive responses to inclusiveness for decision-making related to teaching (particularly teaching strategies) and research (particularly research content) were highest. Exclusionary conditions were most extreme when it came to governance, followed by administration and academic staff matters in both institutions. SAI2 indicated more negative responses than positive ones to when it came to inclusion within community engagement decisions and opportunities, of interest due to its rural location.

We asked about the costs of participation. From SAI2, the most common were 'internal conflict with one's sense of self' (7), 'difficulties in getting access/ permissions administratively' (7/17) and 'hindering of career progression' (6). In SAI1, they were 'internal conflict with one's sense of self' (9), 'difficulties in getting access/ permissions administratively' (7), hindering of career progression (7), anxiety and related mental ill-effects (6) and isolation (6). Only 2 reported 'no negative effects' in SAI2; of the 5 in SAI1, all were male and grew up as middle class.

3. Interview responses

Additional qualitative insights were invited from SAI2, of which our respondents self-identified as Black (9), white (4), male (8) and female (5). Participant narratives revealed divergent views on the extent of agency, as able to effect a particular structure or set of relations; or as making a contribution, calling for change and generally being able to critique the system as a critical aspect of academic freedom.

Inclusive of junior and senior academics, those of the former view saw agency limited to teaching, curriculum (when 'in-line with the HE bodies in terms of the norms and standards', as one described) and research. They saw little to no agency in relation to university structures and management decisions. However, a coloration between participants' positions (administrative and social categories) and their perception of agency emerged. A minority described strategic intersections between them which were generative within the historically Black context, but not without fears of long term consequences and drawbacks. Most junior academics felt agency in their teaching and research; those without doctorates felt less in their research; Black, female and young academics described even less agency to challenge oppressive structures, cultures and practices. *Gender* emerged as the cross-cutting theme. Participants highlighted the continued under-representation of women in leadership; challenges to promotion; sexual and other forms of harassment, including gender-based violence. While we expected that the factors would reflect the national and institutional legacies, what emerged was that the intersection of the academic's *administrative position* with their location and identification with race, class, gender, sexuality and nationality influenced both agency and participation. The relationship between *nationality*, race, class, age, and administrative position revealed that those without SA citizenship were excluded from participating in the transformation process, impacting their agency and access to resources. This raises questions about the sustainability of current pan-Africanist decolonisation efforts.

When it came to the costs of being an agent of change, the 'feeling of unbelonging' is a notable fracture in the narratives of participants who felt marginalised by their social location and administrative positions. Others saw being an activist or change-agent as affecting their standing in the university and sabotaging in their career. Social media featured as a tool to discredit and damage reputations, through sometimes explicit and physical threats, leading some to opt-out of leadership roles and engaging the fight for change, to protect the personal and professional lives of themselves and their families.

Reflections on the Intractable problematics of our 'work' within

Participants' narratives and responses pointed to their experiences and awareness of their agency and meso-conditions. In this section, we too reflect on what this project revealed of the intractable problematics of our 'work' within Higher Education Studies (HES), Women's Studies (WS), and Academic Development (AD).

In terms of the geopolitics of knowledge production, it was important we pursue a global South deliberation on participation in HE. Discourse and evaluation in the HE policy landscape is often uncritical of external levers, that do not centre the concerns of the marginalized nor the interests of the majority world. We wished not to pursue nor replicate those power impositions; but to engage critically with the SDGs as a macro-framework operating in the sectors' background.

Self-congratulatory notions of SA HE scholarship were dampened during the literature synthesis, as it raised questions about the participatory nature of such scholarship. The perceptions of academic and leaders on the issue of transformation was most often not referred to nor discussed; with considerations of 'sustainability' absent. This is possibly indicative of a blinkered, exceptionalist, national focus that bodes badly for geopolitical consciousness in the near future.

Common across our fields are questions about the marginalisation of these areas of scholarship within the academy, the politics of academic citizenship, and related precariousness. As 'studies', each emerged in response to addressing intractable problems within each context, and remain at the mercy of peaks and troughs of saliency and political expediency. This affects such 'studies' positioning as mainstream/ marginal, academic/ service, and in turn the sustainability of enquiry/ centres/ educational programmes/ careers and the accumulation or erasure of their institutional memories. Academic and practitioner work within and outside of the institution are thereby impacted, as is one's powers and protections to access resourcing and to critique.

Common too is the paradox of the WS/ AD/ HES agent. Both representative of the university and representative of organized resistance to it, a clear mis-fit is created between the intellectual-ethico-political project and its institutionalisation. This is evident in the current tensions in the purpose of WS centres, where the marginalisation of teaching and research over 'extension activities' delegitimizes WS and its agents; and where internalising the supposed (in)significance of such activism, that work's validity for driving the SDGs is doubly misrecognised. At times, we have been complicit, too tactful or disempowered to rescue a spectacle being made of 'mainstreaming' women or 'decolonising the curriculum' or 'transforming institutional cultures', and thereby have profited from ghettoising injustices to be 'dealt with' and diverting attention from rights and responsibilities at the meso-level.

The study affirmed our faith, as the title from a respondent suggests, in the work we are doing. We have been re-awakened to the ethical dangers of a singular focus and interpretative lens for scholarship, but also for practice and policy. Choices, in what to focus on at a particular point in time, should serve as warnings for what will become problematic in the future. For instance, "women's problems" have come to stand in place of gender and emancipation central to radical feminism, a weak focus that pathologises women as if deficit and autonomous, ignores the male and masculinist system, and creates perverse incentives in policy where the success of Hindu upper caste women can as a substitute for justice for all women, rendering unimportant the dearth of women from SCs/ ST or Muslim backgrounds, for instance. Similarly, in SA, ethnicity (including nationality), class and human geography have been given less attention, with perverse incentives emerging from single item affirmative action equity employment policies. Even if one issue is chosen in a time bound way as more important or salient at that time because it is the most extreme (Gillborn, 2015), the study reaffirmed for us the importance of complicating 'gender', 'race', 'caste', 'academic' et cetera as analytical-political categories and our belief in the relevance of intersectional

feminist approaches for transforming HEIs for sustainability. Our study shows how the role of intersectionality becomes important in the making of marginalities within the academy, given that both gender marginalities and privileges are linked to caste, class, ethnic, regional, ability and language locations in India (Chadha & Achuthan, 2017) and to race, class, ways of being and knowledges in SA (D. Z. Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2020; Grace Eseosa Idahosa, 2019).

Conclusion: The im-possibility of the SDGS in decolonising the hidden meso-curriculum

In our lives, as people and academics, our searching for ways to drive change have taken many routes, often messy and staggered. In ethos, the SDGS offer an international framework to bring balance to the living world, a move which requires nation-states to commit to agreed-upon recognised targets of imbalance towards a common good. We wonder if this may align with radical structural change for and in dialogue with human and non-human animals. Holding that question in our minds, this study looked at HE's fitness-for-purpose, by considering whether what those within experience reflects the social change that is required for the SDGs not to remain top-down.

Tensions between individual agency and constraining structures from the top where echoed throughout this project. Hierarchical, exclusionary cultures were experienced across both contexts, particularly by change-agents, with indications that these may become exacerbated by glocal tensions. Participants found hope for social change in student-, research- and community-facing spaces, away from the meso-curriculum of the inter- and intra-departmental relations, administration, leadership and interactional dynamics. This is the politics of participation in the academy, constraining whom has more rights and power. Those who experienced favourable conditions in decision-making positions and governance were those older, of 'previously advantaged' social categories, who were still structurally advantaged. The costs of belonging were considerable, with damage to the mental health, collegial relations, and professional risk of those who engendering change.

Responses to issues of plurality and indigeneity in knowledge systems, languages and ways of being were most complicated to ascertain, with indications that top down pressures did not often align with those of academics. Glimpses of hope emerged when looking closely at academics who identified as ST, Black and from rural upbringings, who had been previously marginalised in their countries legal, educational and social structures. Responses from their categories were most positive about being the types of academics they wished to be when interacting with non-academic communities. The SDGs, in ethos, would aim to address environmental, social, economic, educational, political injustices of marginalised communities. However, *critical hope* for such horizontal accord may be prudent, because these very same participants were least positive about their inclusion within institutional decision-making about such interactions. So while in the short term one may build on such spaces and those currently functioning for academics' agency (teaching, research), indications are that the institution itself is no way a "strong institution for peace and justice" (SDG 16) with which to "address gender inequality" (SDG 5).

Most disconcerting was that the conditions were not conducive for bringing into being emancipatory imaginaries for *within* HE, nor deliberation about larger referents. A concern is that the gestures alluding to change and the SDGs within institutions and their metrics nationally (Hickel, 2020), may be yet another move in the interest of the rich and powerful to maintain that which is the very opposite of 'sustainable development'. When twinned with global rankings, as is increasingly and cynically happening, 'impact' becomes another gamification alongside internationalisation, competition at the cost of the local knowledges, languages, heritages and peoples – much as the metaphor of 'decolonising the curriculum' may operate to erase the radical disruption of decolonisation (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012). So while we recognise that SDGs may be pragmatic, strategically useful referents, for those concerned about decolonisation, we argue that it and our institutions are not nearly radical enough.

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