



**BRAVE
SPACE**

Brave Spaces for Transformation in Academic Staff Development

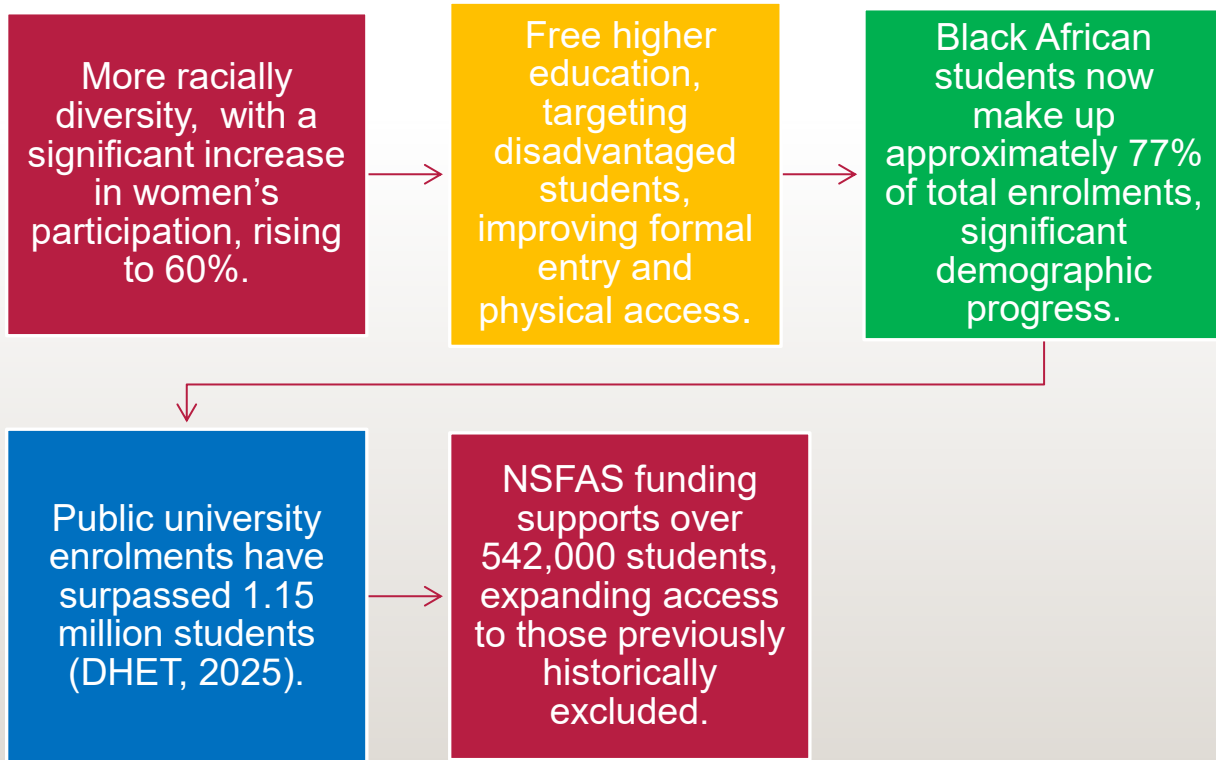
Inverting the Logic of Academic Development

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Major achievements – The Transformative Promise in South Africa



The Crisis We Face

“Higher education is a scary space with increasing pressure on the academic!” (FPP participant)

The disconnect: Institutional rhetoric exists at policy level, but at implementation level, lecturers remain unaware of changes they're supposed to enact.

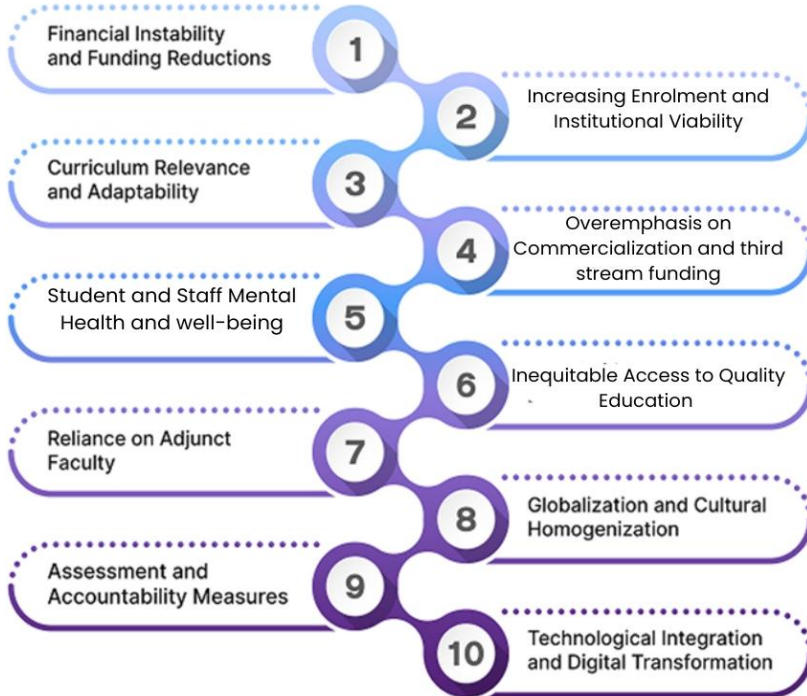
The result: Standardised workshops that ignore emotional, ideological, and contextual dimensions of academic work.

Why This Matters

Meaningful impact remains elusive when staff development is divorced from:

- Lived realities of academics
- Institutional contexts
- Biographical trajectories
- Emotive relationships to work

The Multifaceted Challenges Confronting Higher Education Today



<https://www.academikamerica.com/blog/global-pressures-on-higher-education-top-10-challenges-facing-institutions-today>

The Epistemological Inversion



Design-First Logic

- Programmes conceptualized before engagement
- Standardized interventions assumed
- Deficit model: academics as lacking
- Universalist design imposed
- Teaching to the test



Inquiry-First Logic

- Systematic investigation first
- Context-specific understanding
- Humanising approach: academics as knowers
- Co-creation of the curriculum- brave new spaces

Core Principle: Knowledge about academic practice resides with those in it. Programmes must emerge from systematic understanding of specific academics, disciplines, and institutional cultures.

Research Foundation

CHE Curriculum Transformation Study

Scope: All 26 public universities in South Africa

Method: Interviews with university staff, analysis of institutional audit reports

Focus: Gap between transformation rhetoric and classroom implementation

DHET Future Professors Programme

Aim: Transform professoriate demographics and pedagogy

Approach: Individual baseline surveys prioritizing deep listening

Insight: Revealed emotional, ideological, and contextual dimensions

What We Discovered

Academic work is profoundly:

- **Emotional** — fear of "being wrong or insensitive"
- **Ideological** — contested visions of transformation
- **Relational** — embedded in institutional hierarchies
- **Targets** – techno rationality and HE targets affects focus and creativity

Standardised workshops cannot touch this human dimension of change.

Theoretical Framework

Margaret Archer's Critical Realism

Analytical dualism examining interplay of structure, culture, and agency

Enables: Understanding how institutional structures and cultural discourses either enable or constrain academic agency

Joan Tronto's Ethics of Care

Views academics as relational beings, not autonomous rational actors

Emphasizes: Attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, and trust in staff development

Why These Frameworks Matter

Together, they reveal how **neoliberal university structures** (excessive workloads, precarious contracts, rapid turnover) fundamentally constrain academic work, yet conventional staff development ignores these structural realities.

The Neoliberal And Transformation Tension



"Universities operate within neoliberal frameworks prioritising efficiency, metrics, and competition."

Excessive Workloads

Academic staff buried under demands with no time for transformation

Precarious Contracts

Contracted staff far outweigh permanent positions

Rapid Turnover

Disrupting continuity, making transformation impossible

The Ignored Reality

Conventional staff development:

- Ignores structural constraints
- Pathologizes "resistant" academics
- Treats it as individual failing

Reflective Activity

3 MINUTES



Think about your experiences with academic staff development:

- What has been *assumed* about you and your colleagues in staff development programmes you've experienced?
- What aspects of your *lived reality* as an academic have been ignored or invisible in these programmes?
- What would make staff development feel like a *brave space* rather than a compliance exercise?

We'll hear from a few after the reflection time

Voices from the Field

What academics told us reveals the human dimension ignored by standardised approaches:

"At an institutional level, we make various decisions about curriculum transformation but at implementation level, lecturers are not always aware of changes they are supposed to implement or what is required,."

— University staff, CHE Study

"I was thrown into the deep end and am under pressure to teach, publish and lab work. There are insufficient resources available to me. My university is under-resourced and there is no one to turn to for advice or to talk to". - academic

The pattern: Academics confront racialised discourses and hierarchical structures in untransformed institutions even after completing staff development. The problem isn't their capacity. It's the structures.

What Are "Brave Spaces"?

Beyond "Safe Spaces"

Brave spaces acknowledge that transformation work with academics is **uncomfortable, risky, and vulnerable**.

They create conditions for authentic dialogue where academics can explore fears, examine identities, and engage with difficult concepts but this requires **trust** and the **ethics of care**.

ATTENTIVENESS

Deep listening to academics' lived realities

COMPETENCE

Building genuine capacity, not performing compliance

TRUST

Creating conditions for vulnerability and authentic engagement

RESPONSIBILITY

Collective ownership of transformation

RESPONSIVENESS

Adapting to specific contexts and needs

From Deficit to Praxis

Reject the Deficit Model

Stop pathologizing "resistant" academics. The problem isn't their capacity but rather the untransformed structures and cultures they navigate.

"Resistance" is often a rational response to impossible conditions.

Move from individualized blame to structural understanding.

Moving from models that position academics as problems to be fixed

Embrace Freirean Praxis

Integrate reflection and action. Learning must connect to concrete transformation work and not abstract principles divorced from practice.

Build Communities of Practice

Create mutual support networks, shared leadership capacity, and ongoing dialogue rather than once-off workshops.

Map Contexts First

Begin by understanding specific institutional, disciplinary, and biographical contexts for example, how race, class, gender, precarity, and epistemologies intersect.

A Listening-First Approach

EPISTEMOLOGICAL COMMITMENT

Knowledge about academic practice resides with those in it: survey and speak with academics before designing programmes

STRUCTURE & AGENCY (Archer)

Career stage, precarity, workload, institutional culture: how do structures enable or constrain agency?

CULTURAL CONTEXTS

Disciplinary epistemologies, institutional discourses and consideration of what cultural forces shape academic identities and practices?

ETHICS OF CARE (Tronto)

Attentiveness to lived experiences: how do race, class, gender, geography, biography intersect? What do academics need?

STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY

Marginalized positions offer crucial insights: whose voices are centered? Whose realities inform programme design?

THEN co-create contextually responsive programmes grounded in actual lived realities, not assumed deficits

Questions for Brave Dialogue



How can universities systematically gather baseline data on academics's lived realities before designing staff development? What ethical considerations arise?



How do neoliberal structures constrain transformation in your contexts? How can programmes address structural barriers rather than positioning transformation as individual responsibility ? Academic Curriculum and Institutional Curriculum?



How do we develop programmes based on humanizing pedagogies and the ethics of care?

The Stakes

what are other
words for
high-stake?



all-or-nothing, win-or-lose,
uncompromising, winner-take-all,
rigid, zero-sum, unyielding,
inflexible, unrelenting



Thesaurus.plus

WHY THIS MATTERS GLOBALLY

While focused on South African higher education, the findings resonate worldwide as universities face neoliberalism, decolonisation, diversity imperatives, and rapid technological change.

THE PROBLEM

Increasing pressures around inclusive curricula, epistemological diversity, social justice



EVERYWHERE

The question isn't whether transformation is needed, but how staff development can facilitate authentic change

Effective staff development cannot be imported or standardized: it must emerge from systematic understanding of specific academics, disciplines, and institutional cultures

From Compliance to Care

A rehumanising project for academic staff development that begins with listening, builds brave spaces, and centres collective agency

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