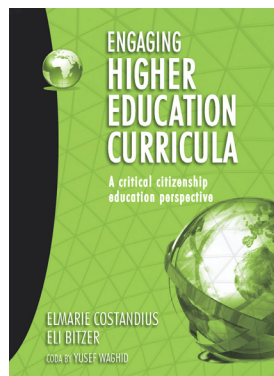


# Creating critical conversations on higher education curricula in South Africa

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Engaging higher education curricula



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This excellent publication, *Engaging Higher Education Curricula*, could not have come at a more opportune time. As South African tertiary institutions grapple with more than a year's worth of student protests, frequent campus closures and extreme measures to ensure that examinations continue, the conceptual understandings of higher education curricula are expanding. This publication sets the tone for critical conversations that need to be had within universities in the country now and in the years to come.

A key strength of the text is that it argues against the utilitarian view of higher education curricula that has permeated South African universities in the last two decades. Higher education has increasingly engaged in the discourse of tertiary qualifications as 'instruments' to be used for specific purposes or professions. As such, the implicit and expansive notion of a university education has fallen by the wayside. The text advocates for a broader view and also leaves room for deeper interrogation of the purposes of higher education curricula. This view reaches beyond performativity.

In conjunction with sensitising the reader to the utilitarian view of higher education curricula, the text also speaks to the presumptuous notion of viewing students as 'consumers'. The moment a narrow view of students as mere 'consumers' of higher education is taken, a ripple effect of harmful reductionist effects is activated. This text can be commended for taking on the notion of students as consumers as it engages critical issues around higher education curricula. It creates a space in which the notion of what it means to be a student can be actively explored.

Overall, the text admirably problematises the concept and adjacent constructs around higher education curricula. It points to identity issues. It dives deeply into the emotional aspects of curricula. It propagates the importance of disruptive learning spaces. It highlights the interactive dynamics between 'teacher' and 'student'. It locates the discussion about higher education curricula against the historical background of the country in which it is unfolding. It is also frank about the challenges in higher education curricula and indeed dedicates an entire chapter to these challenges. It also effectively identifies the tensions between localisation of curricula and the importance of internationalisation. Most importantly, it recognises the changing nature of knowledge systems in the world today.

The text forefronts the integral role of the 'student voice' in higher education curricula. As universities contemplate responses to the calls to decolonise the curricula, the student voice within these discussions will be imperative. The creation of inclusive curricula, that retain historical accountability, whilst at the same time forge new narratives, will be critical in the next few years at South African universities.

Two areas in which the text could perhaps have been fleshed out slightly more, relate to the views of the past and also the views on marginalisation. Firstly, while higher education curricula necessitate a recognition of the past, they also have to entrench a hopeful view of the future. As such, the text could perhaps have done more in terms of future perspectives for higher education curricula in South Africa. In a sense, when history remains the primary departure point for the ways in which curricula are developed and criticised, the possibilities for future curricula are inadvertently limited. Higher education curricula can be crucial vehicles for creating alternative futures – futures that are free from the vestibules of the past.

The example on art education in the book provides some perspective in this regard. It is heartening that the departure point for the chapter is the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and the Earth Charter Initiative. (It should be noted that the Millennium Development Goals have since been replaced by the Sustainable Development Goals, but it is recognised that this project most probably took place during a period when they were still in effect). It is equally encouraging that one of the identified themes from the project is 'hope for the future', which emerged from the participants in the study. This theme perhaps underlines the importance of higher education curricula that entreaty the future. If we want to overcome our history, what is it that we want? What is the future we want? It should not only be the past that we do not want. The emphasis on the history of South Africa is evident throughout the text. Perhaps the text could have included more on the future of South Africa.

Secondly, marginalisation is presented in the text as a fairly static concept. Even though marginalisation is seen as an ongoing process that is the result of our collective apartheid past, the text does seem to assume that 'marginalised groups' have remained the same over a period of more than 40 to 50 years. I would argue that marginalisation is a much more fluid notion and that it changes significantly over time. In the same way that the ways in which marginalisation are affected may change over time, so do the groups that are marginalised. Groups change and 'groupings' change. Corrective measures are implemented to address past injustices. In the very moments in which measures are taken, new groups are formed and new marginalisation may occur. Are the 'groups' that were marginalised at the dawn of our democracy, the same 'groups'? Have new 'groups' perhaps emerged? Who are the 'silent groups' that may be marginalised but for which marginalisation is not yet recognised? Marginalisation needs to be viewed as a sinuous, fluctuating phenomenon and acknowledged as such.

In conclusion, this book is a very important text in the higher education landscape in South Africa. It provides insightful perspectives on criticality and engagement in higher education curricula. It embraces the complexities and it elevates the debates in the field beyond the pragmatics.

