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**Title** Calling for change: South African higher education since 1994 and student protests

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### **Calling for Change: South African higher education since 1994 and student protests**

Since the first democratic election in 1994, enormous efforts have been made to make the South African higher education system serve all South Africans equally. At the same time, the role of higher education in producing the 'knowledge workers' necessary to compete in a globalized economy has also been acknowledged.

Since the early 1990s the system has almost doubled in size. Other changes have included a round of institutional mergers and incorporations in order to eradicate the old fractures of the apartheid system, the introduction of a National Qualifications Framework which pushed curriculum development to the fore because of its use of the construct of the learning outcome as an organizing principle and a new output-based funding formula for public universities.

From 2007 onwards, a series of cohort analyses (see, for example, Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007) focused attention on the poor performance of the system overall and, particularly, on the way black working class students bore the brunt of low success, throughput and graduation rates regardless of the university at which they were registered or programme for which they had enrolled.

The focus on the poor performance of the system resulting from these cohort analyses has brought about intensified attempts to 'manage' teaching and learning as well as efforts to enhance the status of teaching amongst academic staff. Much of this increased effort has been constructed within the need for greater efficiency within the system and the need for taxpayers to receive value for their money.

In 2015 and 2016 a series of student protests rocked South African higher education forcing many campuses to shut down. These protests, under the hashtag #Feesmustfall, centred on a call for free higher education in the face of rising tuition fees and the inability of poor black students to pay. Some protest groups, however, included demands to 'decolonise' the universities and, more specifically, the curriculum in their calls for action. Protest action often included students' testimonies describing the profound sense of alienation they felt in the universities regardless of whether or not they were succeeding in their studies.

Much has been written about what the 'decolonisation' of the curriculum could mean with le Grange (2016:3, drawing on Chilisa, 2012) arguing that it includes the invocation 'of histories, worldviews and indigenous knowledge systems to theorise and imagine alternative possibilities – in this case the curriculum'.

In this context, the 'invocation of . . . indigenous knowledge systems' must also encompass ways of learning and, thus, of teaching since the curriculum encompasses the 'how' of teaching and

learning as well as the 'what' of content. Little has been said, however, about dominant pedagogies and, where protesters have shifted their gaze towards pedagogy, this has often involved only a call for the use of the indigenous African languages as languages of teaching and learning.

In the meantime, attempts to improve the poor performance in the system have continued in the form of large scale national initiatives. To a large extent, these have ignored the profoundly painful experiences described by protesters, drawing instead on discourses of efficiency. Teaching Development Grants offered by the Department of Higher Education and Training, for example, require the identification of performance targets and tracking against them. The construct of 'best practice' is then drawn on unproblematically as a basis for projects aimed at increasing success rates.

This paper draws on a piece of research commissioned by the South African Council on Higher Education involving an analysis of the impact of the first cycle of institutional audits on teaching and learning (authors, 2012). This research showed that the first cycle had resulted in elaboration of structures intended to improve teaching and learning with, for example, the introduction of teaching and learning policies and the establishment of teaching and learning committees and centres. Alongside this structural elaboration was the placement of key agents, in the form of Deputy Vice Chancellor, Dean and Director positions, intended to 'drive' teaching and learning at institutional levels. In spite of all this, both the structures and the agents could be seen to draw on a set of ideas, dominant in other parts of the world, which could not account for the fact that it was black students who were bearing the brunt of poor performance in the system without constructing them as deficient.

This paper builds on this original work in the context of the recent protests in order to posit a continuum of theoretical positions ranging from what is termed 'the model of the decontextualized learner' to the 'model of the student as a social being' arguing that it is only theories towards the 'social being' end of the continuum that will account for black students' lack of success and, more specifically, for the experiences of alienation and despair voiced so eloquently by protesters. The paper then asks what this means for pedagogy and, importantly, for efforts to enhance teaching and learning. In doing so, the paper critiques the 'Scholarship of Teaching and Learning' which has developed in South Africa and the reliance on dominant models of understanding teaching and learning often 'imported' from the north and west. The alternative it proposes does not dismiss all theories and research conducted elsewhere but calls for profoundly contextualized understandings and critiques of what is often cited as 'best practice' across the world. In doing this, the paper 'talks back' to attempts to enhance teaching and learning in South African higher education arguing that it is only by acknowledging the profoundly social, cultural and political nature of teaching and learning that the needs of the country and of students themselves as learners will be met.