An autoethnographic enquiry as a novice academic in a higher education institution in South Africa

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Abstract. Currently, higher education institutions are facing multifaceted issues related to massification, curriculum decolonisation, and the integration of technology in teaching and learning. Therefore, through an autoethnographic approach, I document my experiences and academic identity development in relation to these three issues as a Black, female, novice academic in a South African university. The study highlights how structural and epistemic, gendered inequalities and dimensions are negotiated at the academic level, with emerging scholars required to navigate through these issues with minimal mentorship and guidance. The study also evidences that autoethnography can lend voices to the marginalised by encouraging professional development through continuous reflections. This study has significant implications for institutions to start recognising and addressing the several epistemic and structural inequalities that make it difficult for novices to navigate these spaces. Moreover, induction programmes should go beyond the typical format and start investing in sustainable mentorship programmes aimed at retaining and professionally developing emerging academics. Therefore, by situating these dynamics within a higher education context, this autoethnographic enquiry highlights the significant role that quality education, curriculum transformation, and technology play in our universities. The study recommends an inclusive curriculum design and the integration of digital tools to mitigate the impacts of massification, while also promoting collaborative learning.

Keywords: Massification; Curricular Decolonisation; Autoethnography; Technological Tools; South Africa

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, higher education institutions (HEIs) are facing a complex interplay of issues that affect not only their corporate-like model but also their students, academics, and broader communities. Nyagope (2023) posits that the consistent increase in student enrolment, or massification, has altered the dynamics of teaching and learning (T&L), making it challenging for personalised learning, although institutions can now accommodate more students in their programs. In the same breath, technology pedagogy has been on the rise since the COVID-19 pandemic, which has also introduced its myriad challenges, forcing institutions and academics to adapt their teaching practices and norms (Mehboob et al., 2019). The calls for curriculum decolonisation from 2015/16 have continued to spark debates on the need to abolish or minimise Western epistemological traditions in favour of Afrocentric

teachings suitable for our African people (Mokhaloane, 2025). This study is significant for three main reasons. First, through the autoethnographic lens, I seek to humanise the debates regarding decolonisation, digital pedagogy and massification and how these issues are internalised and inevitably affect professional growth. In particular, young academics are often left to their own devices with little mentoring and guidelines on how to overcome such challenges. Second, although women employed in HEIs are increasing, for me, HEIs are still associated with men, power and authority, whereby the female is seen as being weak and submissive. In fact, I believe that most women in leadership positions are trying to fit in with men rather than challenging the current status quo, and thus making room for more strong-minded women who push for an equal narrative and create a space for all. Interestingly, research by Burkinshaw and White (2017) reported that the younger generation is hardly interested in top leadership positions as they simply do not serve their interests. Furthermore, in what has been described as an endemically homosocial boys club in academia (Halsey, 1992), British universities have been found to host sophisticated forms of gender discrimination whereby certain social events were limited to male academics, thus providing more networking opportunities for men compared to women, and hence support (Fisher & Kinsey, 2014). Therefore, through reflective autoethnography, this study foregrounds the voices of the marginalised that are often overlooked. Third, this study focuses on shedding light on the everyday realities caused by policies that reshape teaching workloads and jeopardise academic and disciplinary integrity. And finally, this study has significant implications for institutions to start recognising and addressing the several epistemic and structural inequalities that make it difficult for novices to navigate these spaces. Moreover, induction programs should go beyond the typical format and start investing in sustainable mentorship programs aimed at retaining and professionally developing emerging academics.

Therefore, this study seeks to critically analyse these three contested issues within the context of South African HEIs. Particularly, two research questions are presented: (1) What are the systemic pressures that arise from massification, and how do these pressures affect both teaching practices and institutional policies?; and (2) How do issues such as digital literacy, resource disparities, and resistance to change among faculty and institutions impact the effective use of technology in pedagogy? Through an autoethnographic approach, I document my experiences and identity development in relation to being a Black, female, novice academic in a South African university.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Impact of Massification on Higher Education
Though a few pre-democracy quality assurance mechanisms and processes existed within the HE sector, the majority of these discriminated against those who were non-white, causing a large workforce to be uneducated and unskilled (Moses et al., 2017). However, the dawn of democracy 31 years ago has seen a drastic shift in the South African basic and higher education sectors with critical curriculum transformation. For the latter, it saw the amendment of the South African university structure in 2002 by the then Minister of Education, Prof Kader Asmal, which resulted in the classification of the HEI to address equity and developmental issues experienced in the country (Kuriakose & Swart, 2014). The 2015-16 #FeesMustFall movement, amongst other student protests, brought to attention the importance of the accessibility and affordability of HE. The massification of HE as a social justice has meant the inclusion of previously marginalised groups into mainstream HE; yet in the same vein, the marketisation of HE has fuelled the mass system (Giannakis &

Bullivant, 2016), which over-exerts the T&L resources and inevitably threatens the social justice agenda as massification may contribute towards the low quality of HE. Though the South African HE has played and continues to play a critical role in solving societal problems, the current massification of HE has raised doubts about the ability of these institutions to maintain quality and uphold high standards in these new circumstances (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010; Nyagope, 2023). The rapid increase in registered students has necessitated a shift in lecturers' roles from being teachers and delivering content-intensive lectures to facilitators. The use of tutors has also been pushed onto academics to facilitate learning in smaller groups (approximately 25), which has immense consequences because these tutors are employed on a contractual basis, often postgraduate students who were also not taught the concepts well due to large classes and limited resources (Msiza et al., 2020). In fact, employing postgraduates has long been recognised as a cost-effective measure and has often been regarded as a panacea for questions about the quality of teaching and learning in large classes. This has resulted in lecturers having to spend additional time moderating the content and marking provided by tutors, rather than dedicating their time to teaching, engaging in academic citizenship, and conducting research (Moodley, 2015).

The cost of HE is increasing, causing HEI to produce employable graduates who can add value to the industry (Jackson, 2010) and successfully complete their studies within the minimum timeframe (de Assis et al., 2022). HEIs are increasingly under pressure to respond to growing social and economic demands to produce work-ready graduates (Peach et al., 2016), despite experiencing unprecedented pressure, such as budget reductions (Naidu, 2024) and stakeholder expectations (VanceLee & Kelly, 2017). Moreover, employability has been treated as an accountability indicator for universities as it significantly influences the university's reputation and ratings, retention rates, and course demand (Pitan et al., 2019). In South Africa, HEIs are constantly expected to account for their graduates' (un)success, which raises questions about the role of HE. In fact, Mason (2010) argues that with universities being demanded to take full responsibility for the skill level of graduates and, subsequently, the economic productivity, it takes away focus on the key purpose of HEI, which is enhancing the standard of education. More than a decade later, this issue is even more pronounced with Tight (2023) arguing that higher education is now treated as "a means to an end rather than an end in itself". Several have also supported the argument that universities should not be treated as a panacea (Kalfa & Taksa, 2015), as employability is context-based and influenced by external factors, such as limited permanent employment and a volatile job market outside the HEI's control (Cheng et al., 2022).

Despite this conflict, the role of HE within the literature on employability is fast becoming the norm for HEIs and a key marketing strategy (Cheng et al., 2022). In this regard, diverse institutional approaches have been adopted regarding experiential learning, focusing on learning experiences that promote the development of employability capabilities. Particularly, in South Africa, youth unemployment is relatively high, with a 45.5% unemployment rate among the young population (15-34 years) in the first quarter of 2024 (StatsSA, 2024). Though several factors contribute to a person transitioning from unemployment to employment, the level and quality of education play a significant role in preparing graduates for the workforce. However, based on the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) for the 1st Quarter of 2024, only 9.8% of the employed youth were graduates (StatsSA, 2024). This has largely led to a mismatch between the skills required in the labour market and those possessed by graduates, which can compromise the country's economic development (Mseleku,

2022).

The above argument is exacerbated by the increased student-to-lecturer ratio, which has resulted in lecturers' inability to provide extensive, individualised feedback to students, thus affecting skill development and refinement. One of the most debated issues in HE research is how the rate of registered students in HEI is on the rise, yet unemployment in this group is at its all-time high (HSRC, 2023). The lack of work preparedness and poor development of soft skills in large classes raises questions about the quality of these graduates and the shortage of graduates with transferable soft skills that are essential in the current market. Thus, the 'blame game' between HEI and industry continues, focusing on who is responsible for graduates' lack of transferable skills. Scholars have argued that companies complain that these postgraduates are not ready for employment (Björck, 2020). In fact, Mourshed et al. (2014) postulate that young people do not acquire a sufficient portfolio of general skills during their studies. Therefore, the shift from academics being responsible for teaching, research, and citizenship has expanded to include being a facilitator, an administrator due to the increased number of students, and a technology expert, as a result of the call for integrating ICT into classes and offering support to students.

Several systematic pressures arise from massification, which have significantly influenced teaching practices and institutional policies. In fact, academics have been found to recycle exam questions (Sheard et al., 2013). This issue also affects postgraduate students, as some disciplines have been instructed to accept more students despite exceeding the Senate guidelines. In some other cases, ad-hoc supervisors have been hired to supervise honours students with a full-year research project, which has received backlash as some supervisors and lecturers are inadequately qualified (Sutherland, 2002). Linked to this is lecturers' recycling of teaching materials with no new information provided, which could be attributed to time constraints, thus neglecting student diversity due to massification. Additionally, the increased pass rate of matriculants (Khanyile, 2025) has led to more students applying to HEIs, resulting in institutions receiving overwhelming numbers of applicants, which has prompted them to change their admission criteria. For instance, by February 24, UKZN had 44 628 registered students, though the Minister of HE and Training ordered the institution to extend registration to accommodate those facing delays (Poku, 2025), despite common knowledge that once institutions exceed their approved Full-Time Equivalent Numbers, they risk penalties which could affect subsequent funding cycles. As HEIs are already experiencing budget cuts, it is clear that massification would cause an increase in tuition fees, thus making those in the missing-middle group unable to access HE.

2.2 Decolonisation of the South African curriculum
2.1 Impact of Massification on Higher Education

According to Le Grange (2016), South Africa's education model is predominantly based on colonial and Western epistemological traditions. This is evident in the higher education space, which has resulted in the inferior status of African knowledge and rationality. The continued repression of African knowledge is still visible more than 30 years after South Africa's first democratic election, as the majority of our institutions still discriminate against both class and race. In 2015, during my third year, students across the country began a movement that started the chain of revolutionising our universities. Although the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements are among the most significant displays of student activism, they are not the first time South Africa's youth have led and challenged systemic transformation

(Mokhaloane, 2025). The purpose of these movements was not, as argued by several media houses and communities, a show of entitlement or criminality, but a war on systemic racism that excluded the Black child and on the curriculum that we could not relate to. These movements were instrumental in raising relevant questions on the lack of curriculum Afrocentricity, as these universities are based in Africa and teach predominantly African students. Notably, I understand curriculum as going beyond modules and assessments by looking at the very institution in which these modules and programs are housed. In fact, curriculum involves the entire educational experience that shapes learning, thus transforming institutional practices, teaching methodologies, and putting the African student first.

Traditional knowledge systems and teaching paradigms can be reformed to embrace a more inclusive and diverse range of perspectives in several ways. First, though English is essentially the language of instruction in South African HEIs, institutions are actively encouraged to introduce another language into the space of scholarship, teaching and learning, and research in order to accommodate the diversity of the country, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds often struggle with the level of English required within higher levels (DHET, 2020). This perpetuates academic illiteracy, which bars those unfamiliar with the language from accessing academia, thus "positioning them permanently on the periphery of the academic community" (Tapp, 2015). The introduction of indigenous languages as a second language of instruction has been a contentious issue for the past 30 years. Despite the revised DHET policy and several scholars' discussions on decolonising HE in South Africa, English is still an international language, with the introduction of second languages onto our HEIs being seen as 'laying a trap' for non-English speakers, so as to exclude them from competing in the international and even national arena (see Madadzhe, 2019).

Secondly, to become more inclusive, African-centred histories and knowledge have now started to be included in some HEIs' programs. Here, the focus is on indigenous knowledge systems and including them in the curriculum beyond the mere inclusion of a few authors based in Africa. Queensland et al. (2007) argue that curriculum transformation first requires the reformation of colonial spaces of teaching before the module frameworks are decolonised. This requires academics and management to examine IKS in order to critically evaluate their teaching pedagogies, methodologies, and practices. Additionally, resisting a colonial curriculum involves transforming not just the formal and actual curriculum, but also a willingness to engage with the hidden, non-academic curriculum as it influences students' attitudes and behaviour during and after their studies. However, this becomes an ongoing crisis when academics may be unfamiliar with past injustices and are not ready to decolonise their own mind first, and then move forward to decolonise their curriculum (Du Plessis, 2021). When this happens, lecturers are unable to connect with the realities of their students, which is especially concerning as massification has brought increased student diversity within our institutions.

Although curricular transformation remains essential for creating learning environments centred around social justice, lecturers face various practical challenges in reconciling the emerging demands for curricular transformation with institutional constraints and historical legacies. Universities' inability to hasten to decolonise their curriculum hinders the promotion of IKS and the empowerment of marginalised communities. According to Spreen & Vally (2010), though the transformation agenda was aimed at addressing past injustices, transformative policies in South African universities have largely benefited a few middle-class Black people. In their review of

South Africa's HE past 2 decades, Lange (2017) challenged how these curriculum policies have still not allowed epistemic access. Furthermore, due to South Africa's adoption of neoliberal policies, public universities have now become state-aided universities, which has meant an increase in student fees and the outsourcing of workers (Le Grange, 2016). However, inasmuch as universities are responsible for transforming their institutions, the responsibility must also be extended to the staff and students to continue the movement and hold critical debates regarding this imbalance of power. Resistance to change and a reluctance to adapt to new curricula persist, hindering the introduction and adoption of innovative, Afrocentric pedagogical approaches. As previously mentioned, decolonising the curriculum extends beyond the learning materials, also encompassing students' and staff's behaviours and attitudes. For the former, the inclusion of African literature may be perceived as of low quality and not on the same level as Western literature. For the latter, it requires them to be open to unlearning and relearning new approaches to teaching and learning (T&L) and research. Currently, South African institutions have several modules, curricula, and policies regarding curriculum transformation. However, as an emergent academic who was actively involved in the 2015/16 protests as a student, I have not seen any noticeable difference, with some academics still adamant that there is no need for the curriculum to be decolonised.

2.3 Technology as a Pedagogical Tool

The use of AI among undergraduate and postgraduate students, particularly within the research pathway, has been studied in several fields, with no current consensus having been reached. For instance, Chauke et al. (2024, p. 50) found that the use of AI, specifically ChatGPT, has significantly improved the academic writing skills of postgraduates in historically disadvantaged universities in South Africa. Interestingly, when looking at the five dimensions of supervision (functional, enculturation, critical thinking, emancipation and relationship development), Dai et al. (2023; pp, 82) posit that the introduction of ChatGPT brings a shift of responsibilities in that postgraduate students are now moving from an apprentice position to more independent research due to these educational technologies. This is especially helpful because if the student is overly dependent on their supervisor, they will not be able to achieve one of the key purposes of postgraduate studies: self-sufficiency (Åkerlind & McAlpine, 2017; pp, 1689). Furthermore, as supported by UKZN's new policy on AI-generated content "generative AI can be used to organise notes, create study aids, and generate practice questions tailored to individual needs… and used to enhance, rather than replace, active learning and comprehension" (Policy on the use of generative artificial intelligence tools in academic work, 2024: 9). AI tools, such as Gemini, Copilot and DeepSeek, have demonstrated their ability in generating extensive responses to complex questions and simplifying assessment questions for better understanding.

Although earlier AI applications focused on individualised interactions between the student and the tool itself, we have witnessed a transition to newer AI tools that foster collaborative learning environments. This paradigm shift is largely aligned with the social constructivism theory in that students construct their own learning based on their experience, thus making them active participants in their knowledge production (Applefield et al. (2000). Although the social element is not present in AI, these tools can be able to facilitate peer education and provide on-demand access to educational resources. For instance, as there are over 50 articles uploaded onto my third-year module's Learn, I encourage my students to use AI tools such as QuillBot to speed-read an article that they did not prepare for the class discussion. In Bloom's Taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002), this activity would then fit within the first cognitive

skills as it would be vital for students to first master the fundamental cognitive processes before moving on to advanced stages where they can analyse, evaluate and create new knowledge. By incorporating generative AI into various modules, students can begin familiarising themselves with the basic tools to become proficient in advanced tools such as MS Teams and Colossyan, where they can use transcription for lectures or generate interactive images and videos from audio. This shift has also been linked to transformative learning, as students are actively encouraged to build on their existing knowledge by developing new insights (Mezirow, 1991). Here, AI tools have been argued to support transformative learning through considering how students' experiences have shaped their expectations, attitudes, perceptions and feelings about the world. For instance, through interactive simulations and natural language processing, students can become active, rather than passive, knowledge creators. In their study, Sanabria-Z and Olivo (2024) proposed a model for designing a learner-centred educational technological platform that integrates AI and participatory action research to address issues related to the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Specifically, AI was used to foster personalised learning, collaboration and creativity, which are integral in students' intellectual growth. According to Rasul et al. (2023), as students are different and have varying cognitive demands, generative AI offers an opportunity for personalised learning, thereby contributing to collaborative learning, as students have multiple AI tools at their disposal to facilitate their learning at their own pace.

Integrating AI dialogue systems in HE has been steadily increasing as these technologies assist in reducing redundant tasks, enabling researchers in data management and introducing innovative methods within teaching and learning (Zhai et al., 2024). Despite the benefits of AI, these tools have been found to have devastating ripple effects on hosting institutions, students and academics. The first limitation in digital tools in HE includes digital inequality and digital illiteracy. For students, the lack of access to digital technologies due to several socio-economic factors, such as household income, drastically affects the effective use of technology in pedagogy. On the other hand, academics and institutions may have access to various ICT, but lack the ability to utilise and understand these tools, and are thus unable to integrate them into teaching and learning (T&L) activities. A digital divide often exists in our universities, negatively impacting the technological pedagogy within teaching and learning (T&L), as academics experience a generational gap and technophobia (Tešić, 2016), which often restricts the level of ICT integration into the classroom. While students may be well accustomed to these technologies, the lack of connectivity and high data costs may hinder their ability to participate. For instance, Dudu Mkhwanazi, the CEO of Project Isizwe, argued that only 10% of South Africans have access to fixed and affordable internet, resulting in approximately 7.5 million low-income people paying 80 times more for internet (Mlaba, 2021). For lecturers who use the flipped classroom approach, most of the NSFAS-funded students may be able to have the hardware (laptops), but the lack of sufficient internet connection (UKZN provides 10GB of day and night data) is not enough for students to watch uploaded lecture videos online, meet with their group members and engage in other learning activities.

Secondly, and one of the key challenges, is the resistance to change among

academics, support staff and institutions. The 4IR has brought about immense changes in how we view the world; thus, this resistance is often due to the fear and assumption that AI and other digital tools will contribute to job displacement, thereby increasing the anxiety over job insecurity among staff members. In fact, the change brought by the introduction of digital technologies into HE has caused several mental illnesses among faculty members (Zheng et al., 2022). The added stress of learning new technologies and integrating them onto their modules and the increased workload causes extreme frustration and confusion, thus inevitably leading to resistance to the change (see, Mahbob et al., 2024). It is here that Blin and Munro (2008) look to the activity theory in that when new digital tools are introduced and do not result in the transformation of teaching methodologies, assessments and practice, then it means traditional T&L has not been disrupted, as the resistance to change would mean resistance to educational education. Other research has found that instances where academics utilise digital technologies are fairly infrequent, with the same technologies used to support teacher-centred activities rather than focused on student-centred development (Marcelo et al., 2015). Interestingly, my experience has shown that younger academics are more inclined to utilise digital tools, as we are still establishing ourselves in the academic space and attempting to develop individualised scholarly identities. In this, I believe that some academics would live in fear of job insecurity, as those proficient in technology would be able to mass-produce research outputs, thereby raising the question of quantity versus quality.

Moreover, research by Watermeyer et al. (2024) found that UK-based academics primarily avoided AI tools due to concerns that these technologies would compromise academic integrity and identity by reducing scholarly agency, as well as the possibility of deskilling caused by technological dependency. These challenges and limitations pose significant barriers in the use of technology in pedagogy as digital tools are perceived as an 'enemy of progress' thus neglecting that these tools can provide teachers with more time to personalise their teaching activities, create an efficient learning environment, reduce the administrative duties while simultaneously having the potential in reducing their workload (Al-Mughairi & Bhaskar, 2024). Therefore, the lack of techno-pedagogical skills by academics may result in slowing the shift from a teacher-centred approach to a student-centred approach, with lecturers being unable to 'move with the times' by introducing innovative educational styles to their students. Notably, the lack of legal protection and knowledge regarding intellectual property rights, data protection, and privacy has resulted in reduced livelihoods for academics adopting innovative technologies (Hamedinasab & Rahimi, 2025). Finally, based on the fear that digital technologies will influence and begin to replace graduate employability and preparedness skills, such as critical thinking and teamwork, some academics are hesitant to adopt these tools due to the reduced human element in AI models and technologies (Rasul et al., 2023). This will prevent students from acquiring authentic, real-life scenarios that would be shared during conversations with classmates, which is an essential component of constructivism; therefore, it will further disadvantage graduates in the global market.

2.4 Evolving Pedagogical Practices and Student-Centred Learning

In the 21st century, there has been a gradual shift from traditional, teacher-centred instruction to dynamic, student-centred pedagogies. The former is primarily dependent on didactic pedagogy whereby the lecturer is the expert and transmit the content with the expectation that students would "learn that content in its authorised or legitimate forms" (Pratt & Collins, 2006). Though this pedagogy is largely adopted in science modules, it has been criticised for being too rigid as the lecturer is the one

who commands and controls the class, thus limiting collaborative learning and engagement (Huba & Freed, 2000). On the other hand, the student-centred pedagogies encourage active participation and student autonomy. Here, the lecturer/teacher takes on the role of a facilitator, as the student is required to play a key role in their own learning (Kasim, 2014). As a line of communication is opened between the lecturer and students, students are able to build communication and critical thinking skills through sharing their experiences with the lecturer. This is vital as when the responsibility of learning shifts from the lecturer to the student, the student is able to understand the content of the module better as they will be able to research and self-reflect on their learning. As co-creators of their own knowledge, students can make learning more meaningful, which contrasts with the approach where students focus on note-taking rather than interacting with the class. However, this does not mean that self-directed learning, critical thinking and deeper engagement are impossible in traditional instruction, as students can be encouraged to engage with additional readings, watch multimedia and converse with classmates outside of the classroom.

3. Research design and methods

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, utilising autoethnography as the primary research method. Used across various disciplines such as higher education, geography and social work, and design (e.g., Asante & Abubakari, 2021; Munro, 2011), autoethnography is a relatively new form of research method whereby the author continuously offers their personal (auto) encounters and narratives to analyse (graphy) a cultural (ethno) phenomenon (Wall, 2006). According to Chang (2008), autoethnography is largely concerned with interrogating a researcher's feelings, thoughts, and behaviours in the way they are understood and interpreted by the broader society. Although this method has been criticised for not adding value to the research through self-reflection, issues with generalizability and credibility, and a higher level of bias (see Méndez, 2013), a steady number of studies have employed this methodology due to several benefits. For instance, Asante and Abubakari (2021) debunked raised issues of reliability by arguing that researchers' own experiences should be accepted as true, just as we normally do when research participants share their own experiences during a research study. For this study, autoethnography was selected, as my aim is to create experiences for readers that allow them to understand the context in which my study resides. As suggested by Bochner and Ellis (2016), my shared thoughts, emotions, and experiences would be at the centre of the narrative and thus evoke certain feelings. Therefore, this methodology is deemed appropriate, as it is based on my personal experiences navigating the systematic pressures of massification, the demands of curricular decolonisation, and the effective use of technology in teaching and learning, while identifying as a young, Black, and emerging female academic with only three years of formal experience within higher education. This retrospective account of my journey includes an authentic account of the struggles and successes I have encountered so far. There seems to be scant literature from novice scholars who share the successes and positive implementation of innovative strategies in the classroom, without considering massification, issues of the digital divide, and the need for continuously updating lecture materials.

4. Findings
4.1 Your application has been successful…

This email, although received approximately five months after my fellow scholarship recipients, gave me the courage to finally leave the toilet cuticle where I was busy having a self-pity party. For approximately two weeks, I have been sleeping in

computer LANs under the guise of 'working', in student halls, random acquaintances' dormitory rooms, and in any available room in the university ladies' dormitories. That morning, I had a big argument with my eldest sister: I was summoned to go back home. My sisters, with the help of my parents, have diligently paid for my undergraduate studies, and they can no longer financially support my honours studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), in the Discipline of Geography. With that email, three other scholarship award letters subsequently followed, but it was the Talent Excellence and Equity Acceleration Scholarship (TEEAS) that fuelled the learner in me. From that day in 2016, I knew my future was secure. This prestigious scholarship afforded me the opportunity to complete my honours, master's, and doctoral studies with a guaranteed placement immediately after graduation. I was overjoyed, and it marked the beginning of my young academic career.

Between my honours and master's studies, I had experiences with demonstrating, tutoring, and mentoring, which whetted my appetite for teaching, and I loved it. Unfortunately, my move to Hungary shortened this experience as the language barrier greatly limited my ability to teach content at the University of Szeged. As a demonstrator at UKZN, nobody prepared you for the responsibility of being in charge of students who are either your age or older than you. The threats, subtle sexual harassment meant taking it by the stride and 'toughening up' though module coordinators did try to speak to students regarding this. I believe this made me a better, yet stricter teacher, as years later in Europe, when teaching English as a first language, children and teenagers' remarks regarding skin colour would not even faze me. After completing my PhD and signing the contract with UKZN, I officially became a permanent lecturer at the age of 27. Apart from the UEIP courses, in which I admittedly only attended one module, as I felt overly overwhelmed, nobody prepared me for teaching in a university setting. I had been away from South Africa for over 4 years and was practically clueless as to what I was supposed to do apart from teaching.

Upon the start of a new academic year, I inherited an exit module and a core honours module where I was expected to be a course coordinator. With these inherited modules, I found myself back in my PhD routine: sleeping late and waking early just so I could prepare and navigate these new territories while also trying to add my own voice to the modules. The transition from student to lecturer gave me a rush: I have the power to influence the next generation of geographers. However, apprehension still made me dread the first 07:45 lecture, as colleagues had already warned me of the low quality, low attendance, and how I would be teaching third years who had spent the first two years of their degree learning from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. And though I showed a brave face, I had previously asked my good friend, who lectures in a different department, to come in so that I could have a familiar face to look at for encouragement and to provide pointers after class. This was particularly necessary, as the third-year module was taught by a colleague who had created and taught the module for years before passing away, while the honours student was previously coordinated by a full professor who had since become emeritus. As a novice academic, this was certainly too big shoes to fill, and for the first couple of weeks, I was certain someone was waiting to call me out for being an imposter because what was I doing standing in front of 98 students (technically 20 as attendance was always low) with no training whatsoever!

Although attendance for third years was very low, I am grateful for how engaging the students were, particularly since the module was a contentious topic in South Africa: rural issues and rural development. Teaching a diverse classroom did not faze me; I

thrived in it as I found the diversity was similar to what I had in my third year in 2015. However, as a module that requires students to continually engage with literature, my patience was tested more than once, as students would attend without any of them having prepared the readings I had sent. On one occasion, after several prior warnings, I simply unplugged my laptop, packed my things and left the lecture room without a word. It is important to note that I mostly teach like how my [favourite] lecturers used to teach: engaging, asking questions and thought-provoking and though I was used to such during my days of tutoring, I was unprepared for situations that called for me to become a pseudo parent where I had to control my first intuition to comfort a student as I knew how quickly you would be known as the 'weak' lecturer and I most definitely did not want that association. Navigating situations whereby students are missing out on class assignments due to traditional reasons, pregnancy complications, domestic violence, or witnessed traumatic events, was quite difficult for me, as it also meant reliving my own past traumas and having to still put up a strong face while at work.

To foster transformational learning, there are several teaching methodologies that have emerged as student-centred pedagogy. Work-integrated learning (WIL) is an experiential learning pedagogy that has different types (see Jackson and Collings, 2018). Within my discipline, it is primarily manifested in 3-hour practicals per week, per module or, if feasible, module fieldwork. In the Honours degree, only the remote sensing and geographic information science (GIS) modules have a week-long practical session, whilst all the other modules have weekly seminars with the students. With the exception of the year-long, 64-credit research module, our geography postgraduate students are not given an opportunity to engage with their module content outside of the institution. As a 2016 Honours student in the same institution, who had two field trips in 2 modules out of 5, and now as a postgraduate coordinator, where none of the modules have field trips, this calls for great concern, mainly since the need for experienced geography postgraduates has grown exponentially in the past decade. However, with the undergraduate numbers having more than tripled in the past five years within our discipline, staff members are stretched thin and hardly have time to edit their teaching material, let alone organise and coordinate field trips for 10-21 postgraduates. Therefore, the outdated and irrelevant curriculum in HE has resulted in the ill-preparation of graduates, as Tran (2015) reported.

Three years after that first day I walked into the classroom, and now, equipped with the UKZN Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education, I can safely say the institution can do better in preparing novice academics. For two years, I have had the same issue with the third year module: low attendance, high class number and low pass rate. As someone who was not interviewed for the job due to TEEAS contract, snide, discouraging comments from senior academics was disheartening. However, support from the academic leader and other colleagues in other disciplines and universities encouraged me to continue advocating for myself and develop my own teaching style. Though, several encounters with the SRC due to students submitting highly plagiarised work and failing assignments made me realise that nobody set me down and explained the different policies that exist within teaching and learning. For example, in my studies, a hint of plagiarism whether or not above a certain percentage simply meant zero. Similar warnings were implemented by the previous module coordinators yet when I, a young, female and Black academic continued with the same 'policy', it was suddenly unethical, yet the university policy does not stipulate an exact plagiarism percentage, unless determined by the module coordinator. The immense excitement I had of shaping the next generation of geographers slowly

diminished when I was advised to be nicer when marking, yet how do I give someone a mark when the exam booklet is returned with only one paragraph after 3 hours? Furthermore, the massification of students means an increased workload for academics, not only in the teaching methodologies but also in additional administrative duties that are often unfair when compared to colleagues with much smaller classes. The examination structure for all third-year modules within my discipline consists of three essays that students must complete within three hours and in three different booklets. That means I would essentially be marking 600, with institutional policies and guidelines, such as marks, being ready at least 5 days before the supplementary examination, taking into consideration the unequal workload academics experience and how this pressure increases the chances of human error. Thus, my teaching experience has been altered and transformed based on these underlying issues, which have meant learning to navigate being an academic who is not student-centred but learner-centred.

Finally, representation matters in the decolonisation of HE. This includes promoting course materials that students are more likely to relate to, as this has been argued to improve their confidence in their race, ethnicity and culture (Vandeyar, 2020). For instance, for my final year module, which focuses on rural issues and development, I chose to concentrate on the southern African region, particularly South Africa, as students are more likely to engage and relate their experiences to the learning material. The decolonising process is not limited to that, but more than 85% of the readings in class are from South African scholars, furthering the notion that African people are scholars and write work based on and for Africa, while inspiring students to view the art of scholarship as another career choice. Similar to the findings indicated by Laakso and Adu (2023), my decolonised teaching practices included using progressive terms, such as "rebellions," that do not necessarily demoralise the actions of social movements in fighting for their land, education, and other rights.

4.2 Publish or perish, publish and be damned, publish or be punished….

Unlike teaching, research came much earlier for me, as my MSc in Environmental Science was a paper-based thesis, with this paper being my first of many first-authored publications. However, similar to teaching, nobody really teaches you how to write. I was fortunate to have a postdoctoral student available to mentor and assist me with writing. I believe that learning to be a good researcher and a good supervisor, who provides timely feedback, was also a valuable experience. This assisted me immensely, as though my doctoral thesis had to be a full dissertation; in addition, we had to have three manuscripts accepted before we could submit our PhD. Unlike UKZN, where students are given a choice between a paper-based pathway and a full dissertation, in SZTE, a full dissertation plus three accepted manuscripts was compulsory, which was completely time-consuming. As a freshly minted MSc graduate, all my publications were rejected at least three times before finding a home. In fact, it was my Vietnamese colleague who taught me all about Scimago, journal ratings, academic mafia and everything in between. As most colleagues do not share their rejections to journals (and the reasons why), it was a personal journey of endurance, tears, and self-doubt. I am especially grateful to the editors and reviewers who would provide me with constructive feedback on how to improve my manuscripts before ultimately rejecting them, as I believe that softens the blow. Becoming part of the mental health researchers group, which was completely outside my PhD but within my research interests, enhanced my analytical and writing skills while also increasing my publications. Though my academic experience was diversified, as a PhD student and one of the youngest members of the group, nobody

advises you on teamwork, the sacrifices to make and the ethical dilemma that come with working in a group. Perhaps one of my proudest moments that I still practice to date, is not including authors who do not significantly contribute to a paper.

Again, unlike teaching and learning, there are multiple annual writing workshops at UKZN to improve our writing skills. Mostly funded by UCDP and facilitated by experienced professors, these workshops always offer me the opportunity to enhance my writing skills and explore new methods of writing or analysing data. Additionally, supervising workshops are also quite helpful and are largely my favourite workshops, as they are usually facilitated by senior professors with extensive experience. The attendees are also senior staff, which allows me to ask thought-provoking questions and scenarios that often make them nervous. For instance, at the last workshop I attended, I asked the group about main or co-supervisors who do not respond to students' work, ignore other supervisors yet believe they are entitled to be a co-author on a student's work. This typically lies at the crux of the matter for novice academics: some senior academics are entitled to being authors (and sometimes first authors) without contributing significantly to the research. Yet, as we are still new, we are expected to conduct all the research ourselves, yet we are told at the end that additional authors will be included in the paper due to 'favours'. Or worse, when my first honours student, who was lively and passionate about their project, was presenting their proposal, one Indian professor stood up, clapped and brazenly assumed that the student was supervised by our white, senior colleague due to the student's zeal and energy. Race is particularly mentioned here because, as a young, Black and female academic, the professor obviously could not fathom that I could supervise such an energetic and passionate student.

The method I use for supervision is similar to that used for teaching final-year students, in that it actively and continuously encourages active learning. I understand a supervisor to act as a guide, a mentor, a source of information, and a facilitator to students as they progress through their theses/dissertations. In this role, the supervisor also acts as a resource person who assists the postgraduate student in defining the program of study, formulating the research project, planning the direction the program will take, and securing the necessary financial support to pursue this program of study. As an emerging academic, I tend to supervise my students based on how I was not supervised, but rather based on what I believe is good supervision. I often hold my students to a high standard, whereas, above all else, I hold critical thinking to be the highest priority. This approach constantly and consistently requires me to encourage my students to question and improve their studies and research incessantly. Through the first honours student I supervised in 2023, this technique proved effective in guaranteeing successful research outputs, as we were able to submit to a Q2 journal. With approximately 35 peer-reviewed publications showcasing my multidisciplinary foci, I highly encourage my students to disseminate their research findings through academic spaces or otherwise. This is particularly important because I opt for the paper-based thesis for all my postgraduates, excluding honours students, as it (1) offers the students and supervisor(s) an opportunity to contribute to knowledge; (2) students gain an extremely vital skill in disseminating their research findings as I always explain to them that the first 90% of the project will take a lot of their time, but the rest of the 10% will take the most effort; (3) our research has the ability to influence policy and industry practices; and finally (3) which often works as encouraging my students is that publications will showcase your dedication and can be a source personal pride and accomplishment.

My relationship with my postgraduates differs from my undergraduate one: it is not

necessarily lenient, but rather more assertive, structured, and geared towards equipping them with a wide range of skills that they may miss if they focus solely on completing their graduate studies. Here, I emphasise the importance of constant communication as it is stressed that I will match whatever energy they give me. Effective, open communication and timely feedback are the two pillars I stand by in supervising students. Although I have only graduated two Master's students, this technique has helped me maintain a transparent relationship with my current two doctoral and four Master's students. Most importantly, and perhaps due to the challenges I experienced while being without funding and accommodation, I sincerely believe that when my students publish and I receive PUs, it is more worthwhile to me to pay it forward by helping another graduate student compared to attending a conference in an exotic environment. It is devastating that ten years after I experienced sleeping in the computer LAN, I found out my student was in the same situation at the beginning of the year. It is absolutely heartbreaking that the system has still not favoured disadvantaged students, yet these students publish three papers in Q1-Q2 journals during their studies.

In such cases, where multiple professional advisors advise against it, I encourage my students to apply for internships and internal university jobs, as I am aware of the social and financial backgrounds of a typical Black student who is now expected to already be working and supporting younger family members. In such cases, the emotional labour of being a supervisor is sometimes felt. Although I actively encourage my students to take mental health breaks, I find myself having to navigate between taking a break myself and helping a student reach their milestone of submitting a paper or thesis. However, these situations have been minimal, as I work at all hours. I do let my students know when I will be on break, and this is always respected. This is particularly important when I was going on maternity leave, as I had most reluctantly shared my personal number with my postgraduates because I did not want their dreams and work to be slowed down because of me. However, and something I am most grateful for, was that students showed respect and only texted me in emergencies, though I would also text them first to ask about their research.

5. Synthesis and Recommendations

The main challenges of massification in HEI include limited resources and an increased teaching load, which has a ripple effect for universities as their staff are unable to effectively balance teaching and other academic responsibilities. To balance the demands of massification with the need for personalised, student-centred learning, lecturers have started using technological tools to leverage self-paced learning. These tools may not be limited to the teaching methodologies employed, but can be combined and adapted to suit different learning objectives and outcomes. However, managing large classes is daunting, especially with emergent academics, as we are not trained for it. With most institutions encouraging their staff members to adopt blended learning to achieve student engagement, some UKZN Schools have requested that lecturers return fully to campus and conduct in-person classes. For those teaching approximately 400 students, who have no venue that can comfortably accommodate them, we are seeing low attendance, especially in the summer, disorganised classrooms, and a lack of communal feel in the classroom (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). In this, lecturers can motivate SI leaders and more demonstrators and tutors, which will allow small groups of students to connect with each other in a smaller space. Although there is a high turnover rate among these tutors, lecturers can opt to provide training to their assistants to ensure that quality practices are adhered to. Finally, lecturers who self-identify with their disciplines (Simula & Scott, 2021) may be less

inclined to change. In other words, these lecturers are resistant to attempts to decolonise their curriculum. I believe this is quite important, as when we unlearn from colonial epistemological traditions, we will open ourselves to learning and appreciating our own IKS and Afrocentric epistemological traditions. This is also extended to academics who need to learn how to integrate technology into their curricula, as it benefits not only students but also enables them to use digital tools to ease their teaching load, become better teachers, and ultimately increase job satisfaction.

For HEI, although the internationalisation and globalisation of higher education are vital, these need not be at the expense of decolonising the curriculum or compromising the quality of education. South Africa has 26 public universities and approximately 126 private institutions. Although some may argue (e.g., Staff writer, 2025) that the majority of these institutions should be closed, the demand for higher education is still increasing, with HEIs constantly under pressure to accept more students (Poku, 2025). Resource constraints, with enrolled numbers far exceeding student accommodation, and funding dilemmas, mean that HEIs need to start implementing strategies that will not only assist their business-like model but also ensure student and staff inclusivity. Universities need to organise continuous, mandated technology training workshops for all their academics to ensure that we are all proficient in intermediate digital tools. These tools are vital for conducting blended learning, the majority of modern teaching methodologies and developing lecturers' skills. And though Pillay (2020) argues that teaching large classes is not insurmountable, it offers challenges that even creative and innovative lecturers would not be able to achieve with institutional support. Professional pedagogical training initiatives, such as curriculum transformation, massification, and digitalisation, could then be evaluated using Kirkpatrick's model of evaluation, as piloted by Gumede et al. (2023).

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