Editorial

From conferencing to (un)conferencing:

methodological disruption of scholarly participation

In this special issue, the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) invites you to engage with the organisation's journey of restructuring in 2020 which became the catalyst for methodological disruption in 2021 through the (un)conference. The aim of the HELTASA 2021 (un)conference was to disrupt, expand, and include diverse forms and formats of conference participation. The substantive change from traditional conferencing to the HELTASA 2021 (un)conference is the subject of this edition, providing an exploration of how disruption can be mobilised towards sustainable organisational advancement in productive ways. This special issue explores the extent to which these aims were met as we reflected on the past, 'Sivela phi', considered our current ways of knowing, doing and being, 'Si phi', and looked towards an unknown future, 'Siya phi'.

This special issue offers a critical meta-reflection on (un)conferencing as a methodology to explore and theorise alternatives to traditional academic conventions. Using a decolonial lens, the prefix "un" serves as a decolonial gesture to undo, rethink and reimagine the academic conference to create opportunities for a wider range of voices, positionality, and perspectives to emerge. This is contextually responsive and relevant to the African higher education context where the (un)conference methodology challenges the traditional scholarly practices that reproduce colonial structures and hierarchies. Through disruption of conventional ways of knowing and being in higher education, the (un)conference is based on deep collaborative engagements that shift hierarchical power dynamics between expert and novice, knowledge and knower, presenters and participants. This special issue is an opportunity to gauge the extent to which alternative methodologies enable a different range of perspectives and participation to be generated. All seven articles argue for a methodological pivot that fosters the participation of a multitude of voices to enable deeper, dialogical, and collaborative approaches.

Each of the seven papers in this SI attend to varied levels of disruption namely structural, conceptual, methodological, cultural, contextual, reflexive, and iterative. The rich analysis and discussion offered by authors explore the different stages involved in conceptualising, planning, implementing and embodying the (un)conference. By encouraging progressive and alternate scholarly practices such as peer-participatory learning and action, dialogues, and creative

expressions, the (un)conference is an opportunity to see if similar methodologies can be used in other higher education settings such as seminars, classroom activities, symposia etc.

This issue features seven insightful contributions each presenting unique perspectives on the concept of (un)conferencing. Behari-Leak and Ganas through their contribution, 'Productive Disruption as a critical enabler for organisational change, set the scene for the conception', rationale and enactment of HELTASA's first (un)conference. Based on their HELTASA leadership roles in the restructuring process, they use duo-ethnography as a dialogically reflexive approach to generate and analyse the data. They put the concept productive disruption to work by harnessing the opportunities and capacity that emerged with an expanded HELTASA structure in 2021, to conceptualise and organise their first (un)conference. They argue that the (un)conferencing methodology through productive structural disruption can be a valuable catalyst for equitable participatory approaches for change.

'Two unlikely bedfellows: Towards a decolonial unconference methodology' has Gachago, Nlatshwayo, Nkoala, and Van Heerden, arguing for decolonial (un)conferencing by showcasing HELTASA's methodological disruption of traditional conference practices as well as unconferencing practices within literature. Through collective autoethnographic reflections, they recognise the tensions between unconferencing and decolonisation. They argue for inclusive, democratic and decolonial (un)conferencing spaces to afford valued regard to marginalised voices and bodies.

Through a narrative enquiry approach, de Klerk, Frade, Ramrung, and Fontaine-Rainen in a social realist view of 'Contextual disruption through (un)conferencing', focus on intentional contextual disruptions and their cascading influence on HE practitioners, collectives and organisational aims and purposes when addressed with responsive care. They report on HELTASA's challenge in including student voices. The authors who are also part of HELTASA's Student Learning Project Team claim that their disruptions as higher education HE practitioners have led to a more collective team effort in service of student learning journeys and successes. The authors provide a holistic set of recommendations for intentional and authentic engagements through contextual disruptions.

Pather, Govender, and Scholtz in 'Shifting mindsets from conference to (un)conference: A collaborative reflective perspective on conceptual disruption', take us through their contentious and discomforting yet robust journey. In consideration of conceptual disruption as a messy process for the self initially, they use a collective descriptive autoethnography methodology to analyse their narratives in relation to a conceptual disruption framework. They suggest that the displacement that follows conceptual disruption can be navigated by the individual and collective when a level of trust, openness, adaptability can be experienced by all members of the organising team.

Encouraging a participant driven and focussed approach in higher education practices, Govender, Jacobs, and Malebo's study promotes '(un)conferencing methodology as a cultural disrupter in higher education: enabling reflections on promoting inclusivity, diversity, and equitable

spaces'. Through an African reflection and critical thinking model, they argue that cultural disruption can play a transformative role in challenging the inherent power dynamics in higher education practices and established norms of knowledge and identity. They encourage cultural disruption through an (un)conferencing methodology to promote collective creativity when equitable spaces are intentionally designed to be inclusive of diverse perspectives.

Given HELTASA's own journey from being a national platform for academic development practitioners, Williams, Adams, Geduld-van Wyk and Muhuro in 'Holding a mirror up to academic development through the HELTASA (un)conferencing methodology', critically reflect on disrupting academic development practices. In challenging the taken for granted assumptions related to the academic development mandate, they recommend a reimagined approach at the practitioner, institutional, and national levels. Using critical pedagogy as an analytic framework, they foreground the value of collaboration, inclusivity, representation, networking, and co-creation promoted through an (un)conferencing methodology.

In 'Fostering an exploration of novel and innovative ways of (un)conferencing', Krull, Bobo, and Titus-Dawson's study showcases an evolving approach to unconferencing: reflections from piloting the HELTASAFEST22 scholarly festival. They draw attention to the constraining factors in being innovative and creative with academic scholarly engagements often based on the question of what is considered academic or scholarly and what is not. Through a reflection on the planning and organising of a variation of HELTASA's initial (un)conference, they call for contextually relevant and responsive consideration when undertaking the planning and organising of a scholarly event. They reflect that these considerations can cultivate spaces for creative, participatory, and scholarly higher education engagements.

Several significant themes emerge across all the contributions: the need to remain contextually relevant and responsive; the courage to challenge traditional power, social and participatory differentials; the promotion of inclusivity; and encouraging an equitable participatory culture in academic environments. Using critically reflective and reflexive methodologies, these papers proposed novel frameworks and approaches for reflecting, understanding, and organising traditional academic events underlined by the principles of equity, diversity, and social justice. These discussions have significance and implications for the way higher education practitioners (including students) can reflect on, conceive of, and enact scholarly engagements.

By embracing (un)conferencing as a methodological approach, institutions and organisations can create dialogical spaces conducive to the representation of more diverse academic communities and the creation of critical engagement for meaningful change. These conceptions, methods and frameworks offer an approach for rethinking other academic practices, interactions, relations beyond conferences and academic social and professional gatherings. As we conclude this editorial, we invite readers to consider how the principles and offerings of (un)conferencing might influence their scholarly, curricula, pedagogical and higher education practices towards new and alternate ways.

The emerging potential for (un)conferencing to reshape, restructure, reconceptualise higher education landscapes is largely untapped leaving room for a more insightful, inclusive, and meaningful socially just future for academic discourse, practices, and higher education at large. We invite you to engage with and explore the ideas, discourse, approaches, and practices reflexively shared by our HELTASA colleagues in this special issue. Experiment with (un)conferencing in your practice and professional contexts, challenge, question or affirm the status quo to contribute to the ongoing dialogue and showcasing what scholarly participation, dialogical engagement and pedagogical interaction should and could look like particularly within an increasingly complex higher education environment in the Global South.

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