Editorial

An Introduction to the Special Issue on Trust in Higher Education

This September 2025 special issue of *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning (CriSTaL)* brings together a collection of thought-provoking papers on the theme of trust. These contributions originated from the Higher Education Close-Up (HECU) 11 conference, a peer-reviewed biennial international gathering. HECU 11 was hosted by Rhodes University in Makhanda, South Africa, from 3-5 July 2024. The conference's ethos is to look up close at issues that are important to all who work and study in higher education, and this special issue does exactly that.

The HECU 11 conference's theme, "Trust," resonated deeply with a community of scholars grappling with the complex relationships that define our sector. Trust, as the conference organisers articulated, is a cornerstone of higher education, essential for collaboration, cooperation, and the very functioning of our institutions. It operates on multiple levels: from students trusting institutions to provide a quality education, to academics trusting students to engage with integrity, to researchers upholding ethical standards, and to the public trusting universities to serve society.

Yet, as the conference theme also highlighted, we are living in a world where trust is increasingly fragile. Misinformation, surveillance, and a culture of mistrust often overshadow the ideals of open communication and academic freedom. As the authors in this issue have done, the HECU 11 conference encouraged participants to reflect on our understandings of what higher education is for, how we relate to our students, community, and each other, and how we build knowledge that contributes to the public good. The conference website at https://sites.google.com/ru.ac.za/hecu11/home features recordings, photos, and a series of "Think Pieces" (republished as part of this special issue) that further explore these ideas. The papers in this special issue draw on and expand upon the themes and conversations initiated in the think pieces.

Siphokazi Magadla's think piece, "Trust as a condition for 'radical entanglement'", approaches the concept of trust by linking the personal experiences of students to international events. She uses examples like coups in Africa and the war in Gaza to demonstrate how global issues can "radically redefine" students' lives. Magadla's contribution frames the classroom as a space where "the personal is the international" and advocates for a pedagogical approach that makes this connection explicit. Magadla's work highlights the importance of the university as a place that is not detached from global realities and that the experiences of students are not separate from the world around them. She suggests that trust can be a key condition for navigating this "radical entanglement" and fostering more relevant educational experiences.

Sarah Elaine Eaton's think piece, "Trust as a foundation for ethics and integrity in educational contexts", views trust from three key perspectives: student conduct, faculty conduct, and institutional trust. She argues that academic integrity is broader than just student conduct and that trust is often framed as an obligation on the student's part. Her contribution highlights that a trustworthy ecosystem is one where students and staff can thrive and knowledge flourishes. Eaton argues that academics must model the behaviour they want students to follow, and that the relationship between students and staff is not one of "good guys and cheaters" but a shared responsibility. She emphasises that human rights, equity, and dignity are fundamental to academic and research integrity, concluding that trust is not a goal to be achieved, but a daily practice of living, leading, and learning.

Mikateko Mathebula's piece, "Building, repairing and maintaining trust in research relationships: towards an ethics of trust", focuses on the role of trust within research collaborations in higher education. She draws lessons from her experiences in various participatory research projects to outline the values and principles necessary for building, repairing, and maintaining trust. Her contribution is to propose an "ethics of trust" in research, emphasising the importance of vulnerability, reciprocity, humility, and time. She argues that researchers do not subject themselves to the same levels of vulnerability as their participants, which can hinder the narrative capabilities of the participants and compromise the integrity and impact of the data collected. Mathebula also notes that rushing projects can compromise trust and that participatory research can inadvertently reproduce the very epistemic injustices it is meant to rectify. Her work provides a framework for how researchers can build more trusting and ethical relationships with their participants.

Collectively, the contributions in this special issue argue that trust is not a simple, inherent given, but a complex, multifaceted, and often fragile construct that operates on multiple levels— from individual relationships to institutional and systemic dynamics. The first five papers examine trust within teaching and learning relationships and environments of specific academic programmes or courses. The next four papers address institutional, managerial, and system-wide dimensions of trust in higher education and the relationship between universities and surrounding communities.

Together, the papers and poem concluding the special issue, explore several dimensions of trust:

Trust in Pedagogical Relationships: Corinne Knowles explores how "conscientisation" and "connection" can build trust in a classroom setting. Her paper highlights how the neoliberal emphasis on individualism and competition can threaten these trusting relationships, especially in the context of high-stakes assessments. The paper ultimately shows how a conscious effort to build rapport and critical awareness can create a more trustworthy and transformative learning environment. Similarly, Martina van Heerden examines "feedback trust," arguing it is essential for effective learning. She offers a "four Cs" framework

(connection, communication, care, and comments) as essential elements for building, maintaining, and repairing trust in the feedback dialogue.

Trust in Knowledge and Resources: Aletta Hautemo and Sylvia Ithindi show that students' trust in Open Educational Resources (OER) is not automatic; it must be built by demonstrating the credibility and reliability of the resources. Similarly, Dalene Joubert and Albert Strever challenge a blind trust in traditional knowledge and new technologies like Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), proposing a "pedagogy of distrust" that fosters healthy scepticism and critical evaluation. Additionally, Pedro Tabensky, Lindsay Kelland, and Anna Christen argue that widespread commercialisation and financial precarity in South African universities create structural and ideological constraints that foster distrust between teachers and students. Drawing on a student-led course, they explore the meaning and power of trust and provide recommendations for building meaningful pedagogical relationships in academic settings despite these challenges.

Systemic and Institutional Trust: On a broader scale, trust is seen as a key component of institutional functioning. For example, Lindsay Kelland's conceptual paper challenges the common assumption that trust in education is inherently positive. She argues that an "excessive" or uncritical promotion of trust can have negative effects on learning environments. By exploring this "ambiguity of trust," the paper highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of its role in higher education, suggesting that it must be carefully considered rather than simply pursued as a universal good. Similarly, Thandi Lewin and Diane Parker's paper on "systemic trust" demonstrates how pre-existing relationships enabled rapid, flexible policymaking across South African universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, Diana Hornby and Margie Maistry extend this idea to the community, arguing that trust is a foundational element for building meaningful and transformative partnerships between a university and its local community.

Navigating a Loss of Trust: The loss of trust has significant consequences, both for individuals and the institution. For example, Judith Reynolds introduces the concept of "moral injury" to describe what happens when staff lose trust in themselves and their institutions due to witnessing or being complicit in morally compromising situations. This goes beyond simple burnout, as it requires confronting the systemic issues that create these moral dilemmas in the first place. The special issue concludes with a poem by Curwyn Mapaling, Nadia Mukadam and Hashali Hamukuaya, "We Have Trust Issues", that articulates a collective sense of a loss of trust among students and staff, highlighting a profound sense of institutional betrayal that stems from the historical legacy of oppression and ongoing systemic challenges. It serves as a stark reminder that the failure to build and maintain trust has deep, emotional, and social consequences.

The contributions in this special issue strongly suggest that trust is not an inherent quality but something that must be actively built, earned, and maintained. Martina Van Heerden, for instance, notes that while some initial trust may be tied to a person's role (e.g., a lecturer), it can strengthen or weaken over time based on experience and actions. Corinne Knowles' paper and Pedro Tabensky, Lindsay Kelland and Anna Christen's contribution also highlight that trust must be intentionally fostered to overcome systemic constraints and neoliberal pressures that can erode it. Lindsay Kelland's article, however, offers a caution, arguing that an uncritical or "excessive" trust can be ambiguous and even counterproductive.

Overall, the three think pieces, nine papers, and poem shared in this special issue offer us a multifaceted and critical examination of the role of trust in higher education. We hope these papers will inspire you to reflect on your own experiences and to engage in the crucial work of cultivating a more trustworthy and ethical ecosystem for all members of the academic community.

This special issue would not have been possible without collaborative effort and coordination. A special thanks to colleagues who provided feedback to emerging scholars on the early drafts of their papers, to all the reviewers who dedicated their time to provide detailed and constructive feedback, those who shared inputs on revised papers and to the managing editor of CriSTaL, Daniela Gachago, and proofreaders. The rigorous process, hard work and dedication that have led to the publication of this special issue serve as a reminder of our shared commitment and trust in the value of sharing critical scholarship.

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