

Panel proposal – SAERA 2021

**Title – A Social-Justice Informed Approach to Epistemic Access in Higher Education:
Theoretical frameworks, Policy (Mis)Alignment and Student Agency**

Sub-theme – Higher Education

**Panel Chair – Prof Emmet Woldegiorgis, Director, Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher
Education Studies (AMCHES), UJ**

Panel abstract

With the increasing demand for higher education, particularly in the context of the 4th Industrial Revolution and the decolonization movement, student participation, access, retention, and success, have become critical areas of concern in both government and academia in South Africa. With the provision of free higher education for students in need of financial support in South Africa, the question of formal access has been significantly addressed; however, it is the question of epistemic access within a framework of epistemic justice that continues to pose challenges.

From this angle, the panel recaptures Wally Morrow's (1994) distinction between formal and epistemological access in higher education to focus on the institutional culture of the university, the policy environment and students' agency. 'Epistemological access', a term coined by Morrow (1994: 40), refers to "learning how to become a successful participant in the academic practice" of a tertiary institution. It requires an understanding of how the institution operates or 'thinks' by the students, and the use of their own initiative and individual responsibility - student agency, to enable them to gain entry into the rules of the

trade in academic practice and the practice of searching for and working with knowledge.

As a contribution to grappling with the phenomenon of student epistemic access, this panel sets out to explore the experiences of successful university undergraduate students with a very specific background profile, i.e., students who suffered a considerable degree of marginalisation by virtue of originating from poor families and communities, and who graduated from relatively underprivileged schools in rural and township areas. Specifically, the panel seeks to answer the following key questions:

- How, and to what extent, do students with the above profile negotiate their epistemic access and success within a diverse and rapidly changing university environment?
- What individual, institutional, or collective resources (cultural and/or material) do they resort to in the process?
- And how do institutions mediate this process?

The three papers are based on a current study being undertaken within the AMCHES involving cases studies of six universities in South Africa. Together, the three papers of which the panel is comprised, attempt to answer the above questions, using a variety of data sources, namely, interviews, documents, statistical trends, and patterns, as well as a comprehensive literature review.

Paper one

Epistemic access and success of marginalised students in South African universities:

A literature review

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Abstract

This paper critically reviews the literature in the scholarship of 'student access' and 'success' in South African higher education. The purpose is to present insights from existing literature in terms of the 'dynamic interplay' between students' agency and the quality of institutional mediation, to enhance our understanding of epistemic access and success of historically disadvantaged students. Of primary importance is to understand the range of resources, past and present, that students use to negotiate their success on the one hand, and the social and institutional dynamics they have to mediate in their academic journeys, on the other. The paper calls for a decolonial analytical framework rooted in epistemic justice that accounts for the contextual peculiarities of student agency and experience in SA.

Paper two

Between Epistemic Access and Decoloniality: Policy Intent and practice in South African higher education

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Abstract

To be admitted as a student at a university is what is termed 'formal access'. It implies the physical entry into the university system. It is a process driven by policy, e.g., where entry requirements or criteria are met, or some other agency other than the 'self', taking into consideration issues of entitlement, equity, and equality of opportunity. National quantitative data on higher education will be analysed for the trends of access, including epistemic access to understand patterns of participation, patterns of disciplinary participation, based on the

variables of race, gender, and class. Epistemic access, narrowly defined, as academic success will also be tracked. This is followed by a more detailed quantitative analysis of three differing institutions, a research-intensive university, a comprehensive university, and a university of technology to analyse how national trends replicate themselves in institutions with different missions and purpose. Finally, policy understanding and recommendations will be provided to enhance the application of epistemic access, within a decolonial higher education setting in tertiary institutions in South Africa.

Paper three

Epistemic access and student agency: A qualitative dimension

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Abstract

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2010) in South Africa argue that “current quantitative approaches to understanding throughput in terms of systemic inefficiencies rarely address questions about the multiple ways in which the academic experience affects student performance and retention.” By privileging the survey paradigm, institutional studies have not gone far enough and have added little to our understanding of the roots of the throughput rate and problems impeding academic success of historically marginalized students. Moreover, the deficit approach characterizing much scholarship on students with disadvantaged backgrounds excludes insights from such students that do succeed. This paper draws on case studies at several South African universities, highlighting key issues and trends related to epistemic access of undergraduate students with disadvantaged backgrounds. It seeks to examine how students with this profile negotiate their epistemic

access within a diverse and rapidly changing university environment. The paper draws on two qualitative data sources, namely, interviews and documents. Data suggests that disadvantaged students' success depends on a combination of factors: financial and material security/comfort; quality of teaching and learning coupled with development support; and students' ability to draw on social/cultural capital of their families, communities, peers for emotional and material well-being. This has implications for policy and university management responses: how to balance/target which areas to focus on given depressed economic climate and COVID-19 contexts.