

The SARCHI Chair in Higher Education and  
Human Development Research Programme

presents:

A sustainable  
future for  
African higher  
education post-  
pandemic:

Signifying well-being  
and capabilities for all



2022 HEHD

Early-Career Researcher Colloquium

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# About the theme

Higher education in Africa operates in increasingly unstable, unpredictable, and competitive environments. Inequalities and exclusions, financial challenges, new forms of knowledge, skills and competence, research capacity building, collaborations and networking are some of the major drivers that have made changes and continuous reinvention inevitable for higher education to remain relevant, competitive and sustainable. The COVID-19 pandemic is the latest unsettling force that higher education has experienced in several decades. The unfolding of the pandemic have stretched universities to breakpoint levels of these challenges because even before the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education was already experiencing sustainability challenges. In a way, the pandemic has exacerbated the inequality and challenges that existed before. In this colloquium organized by the postdoctoral researchers in Higher Education and Human Development Research Group, we aim to reflect on the past and present of higher education to make a case for a sustainable future for African higher education. Following George Ayittey's phrase, "African solutions to African problems," the colloquium will offer a discussion on a sustainable future for African universities by including presentations from different scholars around the continent. The colloquium will provide a valuable opportunity for scholars and individuals interested in expanding and generating a critical conversation on the future of higher education.

## Colloquium Programme

09h00 – 09h05: Welcome: Prof Melanie Walker

09h05 – 10h00: Keynote address: Dr Emmanuel Ojo

10h00 – 10h30: Discussant response: Dr Mikateko Mathebula

10h30 – 10h45: Tea break

12h15 – 13h00: Lunch break

14h30 – 14h45: Tea break

**10h45 – 12h15: Panel One:**

***Africanisation of higher education***

Chair: Moffat Machiwenyika

***Dr Monique Kwachou:***

Re-centring the African in theory and in process:  
Collaborations for contextually-suited knowledge production

***Dr Carmen Martinez-Vargas:***

Capabilities negotiations in the Pan-African and post-pandemic university:  
Perspectives from student activists

**Plenary discussion & Q&A:**

Edward Mboyonga

**13h00 – 14h30: Panel Two:**

***The pandemic and African higher education***

Chair: Kurauone Masungu

***Dr Bertha Kibona:***

Higher education research and knowledge production within the Covid-19 pandemic: Evidence from South Africa

***Dr Tiffany Banda:***

Higher education experiences during Covid-19: The case of disadvantaged students at a university in Malawi

**Plenary discussion & Q&A:**

Andrew Nkhoma

**14h45 – 16h15: Panel Three:**

***A sustainable post-pandemic future for African higher education***

Chair: Chimwemwe Phiri

***Dr Ntimi Mtawa:***

Covid-19 and higher education access: Achieving social justice or entrenching inequalities?

***Dr Fenella Somerville:***

Graduate skills and post-pandemic labour market opportunities: The corporate effect

**Plenary discussion & Q&A:**

Dr Patience Mukwambo

**16h15 – 16h30: Closing remarks**

Prof Melanie Walker

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# Keynote Address



**By Dr Emmanuel Ojo**  
(University of the Witwatersrand,  
South Africa)

**Discussant response:**  
Dr Mikateko Mathebula

Dr Emmanuel Ojo is the Acting Deputy Head of School (Postgraduate Studies) at the University of the Witwatersrand's School of Education and the Chair for Transformation, Internationalization, and Partnerships in the Faculty of Humanities of the same university.

Between July and August 2019, he served as an International Visiting Fellow at the Department of Education, University of Oxford, England. He is the Principal Investigator (PI) of a global research project involving twenty-five universities across five continents investigating the impact of the pandemic on global higher education.

He undertakes research in higher education, sustainability, and interdisciplinary research. He served as editor of the Journal of Higher Education in Africa (JHEA) and the Journal of Human Behaviour in the Social Environment (JHBSE) previously.

## Keynote Title

*Global Higher Education in and beyond the era of pandemics:  
Insights from a global research study*

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# PLENARY SESSION I

## *Africanisation of higher education*

Chair: Moffat Machiwenyika / Discussant: Edward Mboyonga

### *Re-centring the African in theory and in process: Collaborations for contextually-suited knowledge production*

- Dr Monique Kwachou

With regards to the research of African issues and African contexts, mainstream research theory and practice has been found wanting by Afrocentric scholars who emphasize the need for re-centring African thought and experiences in the examination of African subjects.

My recent study entitled *Cameroonian women's empowerment through higher education: An African-feminist and Capability Approach* empirically affirmed the inadequacy of existing frameworks to capture the multifaceted nature of Cameroonian women's (dis)empowerment for example and the benefits of collaboration in theoretical and methodological practices to effect both the centering of African thought and assuage the disempowering African participants.

Stemming from this study, this presentation makes a case for the potential for similar collaborative ventures to effect better and more contextually-suited knowledge production. In it, I outline the process of developing a joint African-feminist Capability Approach through the merging of Capability Approach and African-feminist perspectives. I also detail how I achieved methodological collaboration by engaging the study's subjects in a participatory-analysis workshop and delineate the benefits thereof.

Subsequently, I propose other potential methodological and theoretical collaborations which could be undertaken to enable a contemporary "Africanizing" of research in and of African higher education. In the end, this presentation demonstrates how such partnering of different theoretical frameworks, and the engagement of participants in both the collection and analysis of data can foster better and more contextually-suited knowledge production.

**Dr. Monique Kwachou** is a Cameroonian writer, youth worker, and researcher of gender studies and education for development. She has over 8 years of professional experience working with higher education institutions and civil society organizations. Monique's research generally prioritizes African feminisms, critical pedagogy and Capabilitarian analysis for the engendering and overall improvement of education. She is currently engaged as a postdoctoral research fellow with the Higher Education and Human Development Research Group, of the University of the Free State South Africa.

### *Capabilities negotiations in the Pan-African and post-pandemic university: Perspectives from student activists*

- Dr Carmen Martinez-Vargas et. al

In this presentation, we reflect on the process and outcomes of identifying and negotiating capabilities that are valued by diverse student activist groups in relation to their ideal university project; a Pan-African and decolonial university. Having worked with 13 activist students at one South African university since November 2021, through a Participatory Action Research project to explore what a 'sustainable university community' might look like for them, the paper reflects on preliminary findings.

We start by discussing negotiations between the student activists' worldviews, often aligned, and the challenging university milieu in which these worldviews are inspired, conceptualised and often, structurally suppressed. We then present what they understand and perceive as the central unfreedoms maintained and perpetuated by their university, such as challenges around institutional funding and management and more generally factors that play out at the structural, ethical, and individual levels. Finally, we describe their identified internal capabilities as capabilities that these students have reason to value generally; then relate these with their combined capabilities, as the combination of internal capabilities with the social and political context where these students are situated. These combined capabilities include those such as 'Learning, education and knowledge capabilities'; 'Activism, Advocacy and Leadership Capabilities' and 'Employability and work capabilities'.

We conclude by presenting the Ubuntu-Supporting Institutional Capability list to highlight institutional capabilities that need to be enhanced and promoted by the institution to move towards a Pan-African, decolonial university in the future. If promoted and adopted, such a list could be instrumental in repositioning resources, practices, and systems in ways that align with a more just post-pandemic university.

**Dr Carmen Martinez-Vargas** is a Higher Education and Human Development Research Group fellow with several years' experience working with participatory approaches (participatory methods, methodologies and research processes) within the Global North and Global South. Her PhD project and subsequent research have problematized intersections of decolonization and social justice in the context of human development.

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# PLENARY SESSION II

## *The pandemic and African higher education*

Chair: Kurauone Masungu / Discussant: Andrew Nkhoma

### *Higher education research and knowledge production within the Covid-19 pandemic: Evidence from South Africa*

- Dr Bertha Kibona

This paper explores the experiences of researchers within the Covid-19 pandemic and how they responded to the changing research and knowledge production landscape. The study was informed by primary and secondary data collected and analysed from a range of sources. The primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with researchers based in South Africa, and secondary data was collected through a systematic review of the apposite literature. The data was analysed using a combination of content and thematic analysis methods.

The findings from the study indicate that the Covid-19 pandemic has compounded existing challenges facing the African continent. South Africa has, however, leveraged some of its resources to mitigate some of the challenges. Researchers have responded to different calls to address funding challenges, and developed and adopted alternative, innovative research and data collection practices while forging various forms of partnerships and collaborations to manage the constraints to human interaction. The study also highlights some critical challenges that the pandemic has imposed on research, including skewed gender inequality and challenges linked to research funding and productivity.

While interventions have been put in place to address the teaching and learning challenges caused by Covid-19, the university's research function has, in the main, been mainly left to individual researchers' initiatives. Arguably, historical inequalities have been further entrenched, with possible reversal of the transformation mandate of the research enterprise.

### *Student learning experiences during covid-19: case of a university in Malawi*

- Dr Tiffany Banda

In 2020, the world experienced the unexpected as the Covid-19 pandemic ravished countries across the globe. This led to major disruptions in people's day to day lives. Within the education sector, schools and other institutions of learning were forced to shut down. One way of regaining some semblance of normality involved teaching and learning taking on a different format as institutions migrated to online teaching. Alongside this transition came major adjustments that both institutional staff and students had to make. While the transition from face-to-face learning to online was argued to have been an uphill struggle, the situation varied from country to country and region to region, with most countries especially in the Global North, to a large extent, transitioning with reasonable ease.

The transition to online learning in response to COVID-19 offered an opportunity to clarify aspects that influence the use of digital technology in teaching and learning as well as to explore the overall student learning experience. Exploring Malawi's experience as a country in the Global South and one of the poorest countries in the world provided some perspective on how countries in the developing world and, in particular, students coped with this major disruption. Concepts from Maslow's Humanistic Learning Theory and Capabilities Approach have been used as theoretical lenses in the study.

Using a qualitative approach, data was collected through interviews with both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Data was analysed thematically, and findings presented based on themes emerging from the analysis that were categorised as pre-lockdown, lockdown and post-lockdown experiences. Findings revealed the interconnectedness between the various aspects of student life that affect their learning experiences. It also highlighted how disruption only bring to the fore underlying issues from where learning experiences would either be looked at as positive or negative.

**Dr. Bertha Kibona** is a postdoctoral researcher with the Higher Education and Human Development Research Group. With a background and training in finance and investment analysis, she has developed an interest and passion for the value of investing in university education from the Tanzanian context. Her research interests include, among other things, the significant opportunities of universities generated through the ways in which universities train and produce graduates to become contributors to their development as well as that of their families and communities.

**Dr Tiffany Banda** is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of the Free State. She holds a PhD from the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa. Her research was entitled *Exploring lived experiences of academically successful low socioeconomic background students in Malawi's higher education*. A recipient of the Cambridge Trust award that saw her pursue her MPhil degree at the University of Cambridge, UK. Her research interest areas include Social justice; Human Rights; Access and Equity in Higher; Education and Development and Education for Sustainable Development.

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# PLENARY SESSION III

## *A sustainable post-pandemic future for African higher education*

**Chair:** Chimwemwe Phiri / **Discussant:** Dr Patience Mukwambo

### **COVID-19 and higher education access: achieving social justice or entrenching inequalities?**

**- Dr Ntimi Mtawa**

One of the challenges that higher education in Africa and particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) continues to grapple with post-independence is the question of access. While adopting digital technologies and pedagogies is regarded as one of the mechanisms to enhance access to higher education during Covid-19, it also widens the inequality gap between universities and individuals who have adequate access to information and communication technology (ICT), connectivity and know-how at the institutional and household levels and those with limited and constrained access to ICT.

This paper interrogates how shifts to online and remote learning and teaching have enhanced students' access and staff support, but also how such technologies potentially entrench inequalities in access and success. A review of government and universities' policies and reports regarding access to higher education within the Covid-19 pandemic was conducted.

The paper extrapolates the extent to which Covid-19 has and is worsening the already existing limited access to higher education and the related social justice issues. The analysis captures three main manifestations of social injustices linked to Covid-19 response measures linked to access to higher education institutions.

It concludes by making suggestions for possible mitigating effects to enhance access to and success through universities on the continent.

### **Graduate skills and post-pandemic labour market opportunities: The corporate effect**

**- Dr Fenella Somerville**

The purpose of higher education in serving economic ends is promoted by global neoliberal market values that have infiltrated university structures and processes. The effects are evident in the commodification of higher education and corporatisation of institutional governance. In this increasingly market-orientated environment, the skills discourse has become a core driver of higher education policy and an institutional imperative.

In sub-Saharan Africa, universities are tasked with producing skilled graduates to enable the region to compete globally in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Graduate skills that meet the needs of industry are also seen as the way forward in addressing national issues of poverty and unemployment.

This paper draws on the qualitative data from a mixed-methods study on the capabilities for employability of media graduates from private higher education institutions in South Africa. The study found that notwithstanding graduates' skills, employment success was largely mediated by the type and status of the institution, hence reproducing education and social inequalities. It also found that capabilities for corporate connection and identity formation are valued by institutions and employers. These opportunities differ between elite institutions, where they are an explicit pedagogical strategy, and low-fee institutions, where they underpin marketing strategies.

Using the case of one corporate institution, this paper argues that beyond institutional reputation, the pedagogical alignment of industry-related skill development and graduate identity is important in enhancing more equitable labour market opportunities. This becomes all the more necessary in the wake of the devastating social and economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Dr Ntimi N Mtawa** is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow and a higher education and development researcher. Mtawa's research and academic expertise cover among other things, areas such as higher education and development, knowledge production, community engagement, pedagogies, human development, social justice, common good, higher education governance, education and citizenship, and public sector reform and management. He is currently working on several major research projects in African higher education. Mtawa has published widely in international peer reviewed journals and he is an author a book titled: *Human Development and Community Engagement through Service-Learning: The Capability Approach and Public Good in Education*.

**Dr Fenella Somerville** has an M.Ed specialising in Inclusive Education (cum laude) from the University of the Witwatersrand, and a PhD in Development Studies from the University of the Free State. She is an educator with experience in specialized education, as well as teaching and academic management in South African high schools and higher education. Her research interests are in higher education that is inclusive and contributes to addressing issues of transformation and social justice.

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