Unconferencing methodology as a cultural disrupter in higher education: Enabling reflections on promoting inclusivity, diversity, and equitable spaces

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Abstract

In applying the collective mind to challenges in higher education, there is hope for innovative solutions. HELTASA's approach to adapting the unconference methodology during the annual learning and teaching (un)conference in 2021 demonstrated its vision to reflect on a re-imagined inclusive higher education using the questions: Sivela phi? (where do we come from?), Si phi? (where we are?), and Siya phi? (where are we going?). This paper reflects on how the unconferencing methodology was used as a cultural disrupter during the HELTASA's (un)conference. We identify with 'culture' as emphasising active meaning-making instead of unchanging, static ideas by homogenous groups. 'Culture' is dynamic, and it changes over time. In the context of unconferencing methodology, cultural disruption refers to a deliberate effort to challenge and disrupt traditional cultural norms and values to promote greater inclusivity, diversity, creativity and problem-solving. The unconference is intended to disrupt current thinking and practices in conferences and open higher education spaces for creative, critical dialogue and innovation. Cultural disruption plays a transformative role in deconstructing established norms of knowledge, identity, and practices within higher education. The unconference seeks to challenge the prevailing power dynamics inherent in higher education and mirrored in traditional conferences by adopting a participant-driven and focused approach. The unconference supports the notion of collective thinking or collaboration, which re-frames knowledge boundaries as dynamic inter-relationships with due weight given to reflective ways of knowing (Brown, 2015). This paper uses the Reflection and Critical Thinking Model by Mugumbate, et al. (2021) as a framework to explore and understand how cultural disruptions were implemented and experienced during the planning and execution of the (un)conference itself. This paper critically reflects on the HELTASA (un)conference Call, cultural representations, presentation types, and structure of the unconference to share possible cultural disruptions. This paper's reflections delve into the effectiveness of unconferencing in higher education as a potent tool for cultural disruption in relation to power dynamics, participation, individual and collective thinking, and the imperative of amplifying diverse voices. Unconferencing, through its disruption

of cultural norms and values, can promote greater innovation and creativity by enabling the incorporation of a wider range of perspectives and ideas. Additionally, unconferencing can create more inclusive and equitable spaces where traditionally marginalised voices are provided a platform to be heard and represented.

Keywords: collective thinking, cultural disruption, higher education, inclusivity, unconferencing methodology, participation, power dynamics

Introduction

'Innovation happens when minds come together to share ideas.'
(Ferriter & Provenzano, 2013: 19).

The commitment to evolving ideas is a cornerstone of academia, informing the varied learning, teaching, and assessment (LTA) spaces and the professional spaces where we collaborate, share, and learn. 21st-century LTA methodologies continue to evolve, affording us an ever-expanding arena of modalities to refine and impart our intellectual craftsmanship as LTA scholars (Hale & Bessette, 2016:9). In today's fast-changing world, few organisations (or institutions) operate in a stable environment, and most organisational (or institutional) managers are shifting towards a culture that is more flexible and in tune with changes in their context (Umele & Akwaeze, 2019), HELTASA is no exception. In 2021, HELTASA started preparing itself to respond to all challenges it could face in delivering on its mandate as a professionalisation entity committed to strengthening higher education (HE) practice, research, and policy in a fast-changing environment. One of its response mechanisms was to explore the (un)conferencing approach.

As part of its response to the rapid changes in the higher education landscape nationally and internationally, the then HELTASA President, Prof Kasturi Behari-Leak, engaged the members of the Coordinating Council in discussions on unconferencing in early 2021. These discussions occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic when higher education institutions swiftly transitioned to emergency remote learning and teaching. As stated in the call for proposals (HELTASA, 2021b), 'In 2020, the pandemic prompted us to think about how we could be resilient, responsive and relevant in a shifting higher education (HE) context'. Extensive discussions and debates unfolded as we embarked on challenging the cultural norms and socialisation embedded in traditional conferences. Through these conversations, we exposed the unconscious perpetuation of social reproductions and colonisation ideology and practices within higher education, realising our unwitting contribution to maintaining the status quo. A consensus emerged that a radical shift was overdue, with HELTASA poised to become change agents in higher education. The (un)conference format emerged as a critical vehicle for this transformation. The deliberations in 2021 culminated in the inaugural HELTASA (un)conference, dedicated to the theme of 'Doing Academia differently' (HELTASA, 2021c).

Follet (2006), quoted in Greenhill and Wiebrands (2008:3), indicates that unconference refers to

> self-organising forum for idea sharing, networking, learning, speaking, demonstrating, and generally interacting with [others] … based on the premise that in any professional gathering, the people in the audience – not just those selected to speak on stage – have interesting thoughts, insights and expertise to share. … Everyone who attends an unconference … is required to participate in some way: to present, to speak on a panel, to show off a project, or just to ask a lot of questions.

HELTASA's approach to adapting and shaping the unconference methodology, which culminated in the Annual HELTASA (un)conference in 2021, demonstrated its vision to reflect on a re-imagined inclusive higher education using the questions: Sivela phi (where do we come from?) Si phi (where we are?), and Siya phi (where are we going?). The (un)conference opened a world of possibilities and the development of 'innovative new formats' (Holaman, et al., 2021: 8). New formats included integrating alternative meeting formats, such as open space methodology, artistic demonstrations, fishbowl conversations, lightening presentations, World Café conversations, open mic sessions and so forth. The environment created through (un)conferencing encourages cultural disruption where participants are in a safe space to challenge conventional norms and offer alternative viewpoints.

Before discussing 'cultural disruption' within the context of the unconferencing methodology, it is important to explain how we view 'culture'. The concept has a long and chequered history with many connotations and meanings, which can be categorised into old and new ideas (Wright, 1998: 8). According to the old ideas, 'culture' is a small-scale, bounded entity organised economically, socially, and politically; it is unchanging, and sustained in a balanced or static equilibrium; it is a set of ideas or meanings shared by homogenous groups; it is an integrated system of consensual "essential meanings" which are self-produced. We identify with the newer ideas of 'culture' that move beyond the limitations of traditional, homogenous views and embrace more dynamic and interconnected views such as globalisation and hybridity, cultural diversity, and digital culture because they emphasise active meaning-making. In the words of Sackman, et al. (cited in Van Wyk, 2009: 336), '…culture is dynamic – it changes over time'. We link this idea of change and contestation to the unconferencing methodology.

Within the context of unconferencing methodology, cultural disruption refers to a measured attempt to contest and disrupt traditional cultural norms and values to encourage greater participation. This paper critically reflects on the 2021 HELTASA (un)conference call, cultural representations, presentation types, and structure to identify and/or share possible cultural disruptions. This paper's reflections delve into the effectiveness of unconferencing in higher education as a potent tool for cultural disruption in relation to power dynamics, participation, individual and collective thinking, and the imperative of amplifying diverse voices. Unconferencing, through its disruption of cultural norms and values, can promote greater

innovation and creativity by enabling the incorporation of a wider range of perspectives and ideas.

In this collaborative paper, the three authors critically reflect on our diverse experiences within the (un)conferencing realm, guided by the Reflection and Critical Model of Mugumbate, et al. (2021). Like Hegarty (2011: 581), we akin critical reflection to 'deliberate and mindful thinking about one's experiences and the self-evaluation of feelings, decisions, understandings and actions, which may lead to the development of professional learning for professional practice'. Therefore, critical reflection is a tool for fostering learning, personal development, and improvement because it encourages us to question our assumptions and challenge established norms.

Drawing inspiration from Mugumbate, et al.'s (2021) framework, which provides, amongst others, a structured approach to examining cultural dynamics and disruptions, we collaboratively explore, reflect, and analyse our experiences with the (un)conference. We focus on distinct aspects of the unconferencing phenomenon, such as power dynamics, participation, individual and collective thinking, and the imperative of amplifying diverse voices. By using Mugumbate, et al.'s (2021) framework, our reflections aim to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how the 2021 HELTASA (un)conference has impacted our perspectives and collectively contributed to a cultural shift in the context of knowledge exchange and collaborative learning.

The Reflection and Critical Model (RCM) by Mugumbate, et al. (2021) was adapted and used as a conceptual framework to reflect on the cultural disruption that occurred during the 2021 HELTASA (un)conference. The approach used in the RCM (Mugumbate, et al., 2021) differs from Western reflection approaches, which are often limited to mainly observable actions. This approach was selected as the conceptual framework for the paper because it moves beyond theories and literature and focuses on cultural, personal, community, and experiences in reflection. The RCM is an African approach to reflection, which is more suitable to the HELTASA global South context than the traditional Western approaches. Seven components (also referred to as stages of reflection) encompass the RCM. These include:

1) What are you reflecting on,
2) Trigger/prompt (for the reflection),
3) Cultural Interpretation,
4) Policy or Legal Interpretation,
5) Theoretical or Empirical interpretation,
6) Experiential Interpretation, and
7) Outcomes for Practice.

In Table 1 (see below), we elaborate on how we used the RCM to identify the cultural disruptions during the (un)conference.

Table 1: Components from The Reflection and Critical Model

Components from RCM	Reflections using the RCM
What are you reflecting on – what is the situation, occurrence or happening?	What were the activities leading up to the HELTASA (un)conference? What happened during the HELTASA (un)conference? Our data sources were the HELTASA shape-shifting document (2021a), HELTASA (un)conference Call (2021b), presentation types and cultural representations to identify possible cultural disruptions.
Prompt or Trigger – what prompted or triggered this reflection? Is this an unusual observation, situation, occurrence or happening? Is it part of your work procedure to reflect?	It was the first time that we were engaged in planning an (un)conference. We felt that it was important to reflect on our experiences and learnings and document these findings.
Cultural Interpretation – what is the interpretation of the culture of the people involved?	We adapted this component from the RCM and focused on the cultural *disruption* that occurred during the (un)conference. What does this tell us about cultural disruption in the unconference context? What is our new understanding of cultural disruption in the unconferencing context?
Policy or Legal Interpretation – what do relevant policies and legal instruments say?	We examined the HELTASA documents relating to the 2021 (un)conference
Theoretical or Empirical interpretation – what is the interpretation from local theories and literature?	The theories related to power dynamics, participation, individual and collective thinking, and the imperative of amplifying diverse voices are discussed as related to the cultural disruption that occurred during the (un)conference.
Experiential Interpretation – what is the interpretation based on your personal, community or professional experience?	During our weekly meetings, we reflected on the following: How were HELTASA conferences previously organised? What type of presentations were done? Who was given an opportunity to speak? Who were the keynote speakers? What were our experiences with conferences / learning communities (HELTASA /project teams/own universities/professional practice?
What does this mean for my practice? What was improved, changed, or suggested? What are the lessons?	How did the (un)conference impact on my practice? What are the outcomes for future conferences? What worked/didn't work and why? What broader issues need to be considered?

Adapted from Mugumbate, et al. (2021: 2) The Reflection and Critical Model (RCM)

As members of the HELTASA Project teams and academic development practitioners at HE institutions, the authors had previously participated in or organised traditional conferences. The RCM enabled the authors to use these conference experiences to critically reflect on the disruptive impact of (un)conferencing in challenging traditional norms, fostering inclusivity, and promoting innovative solutions. Through this lens and positionality (professional), the authors

explore and understand disruptions during the (un)conference. They reflect on the cultural disruptions embedded in the (un)conference's design, including the 2021 Call, cultural representations, presentation types, and overall structure of the 2021 HELTASA (un)conference. The focus was on how the (un)conference Call went beyond the usual podium and poster presentations and included other methodologies/approaches to deliberate on topics in higher education. Using the RCM as a framework for analysis, we highlight how unconferencing catalyses dismantling hegemonies of power in higher education, fostering collaborative thinking, and amplifying diverse voices.

Reframing power relations through inclusivity and participatory approaches

A neoliberal agenda has characterised higher education over the past four decades. Conferences have become 'a marketplace to "sell" ideas and meet performance indicators' (Oliver & Morris, 2022: 606). Knowledge has become a commodity, which has resulted in the loss of personal autonomy (Desierto & Maio, 2020). Academics are pressured to produce profitable research (Mahony & Weiner, 2017). These neoliberal tendencies often seep into traditional conferences in higher education, where economically privileged institutions are often favoured, and certain knowledge is foregrounded.

Foucault argues that power and knowledge are inextricably linked, and he coined the term power/knowledge to illustrate this (1978). According to Foucault (1988: 11-12), power is always present when people engage with each other:

> I mean that in human relations, whatever they are–whether it be a question of communicating verbally … or a question of a love relationship, an institutional or economic relationship– power is always present: I mean the relationships in which one wishes to direct the behaviour of another. These are the relationships that one can find at different levels, under different forms: these relationships of power are changeable relations, i.e. they can modify themselves. They are not given once and for all.

In traditional conferences, power is often vested in the presenter or panel member, whereas the (un)conferencing format offers higher education the opportunity to reframe power relations through inclusivity and equitable, participatory approaches. The HELTASA (un)conference challenged the conventional dynamics often prevalent in traditional conferences. Tools such as the Padlet and the chat option on the REMO interactive online platform provided the opportunity for participants to engage and participate actively in the various sessions.

Unconferencing is a participant-driven approach where attendees are encouraged to take an active role in shaping the programme and facilitating conversations. It also promotes 'interaction between attendees and the discussions which emerge when participants are given a space to engage on topics which interest them' (Murray & Carson, 2018: 2)

Figure 1: HELTASA 2021 Screenshot of Virtual set-up

The virtual setup for the HELTASA (un)conference depicted community life in South Africa (see Figure 1). It provided a very relaxed atmosphere where participants could 'sit' around the virtual campfire, round tables, in pairs or on reed mats. Cultural representations of 'sitting' on mats in a circular arrangement represent a sense of equality and not the traditional conference format where the attention is mainly on the speaker with the participants are often seated in straight rows facing the speaker. The African symbolism in the set-up represents unity and a sense of community, which served as a cultural disruptor. This created the atmosphere for active, equitable, inclusive participation. Participants could 'move' from one space to another and chat with those around them. This created the space for open dialogue where participants could critically reflect and discuss matters highlighted during the session before providing feedback to the larger group.

Voices

Traditional conferences are often hierarchical. The focus is on the speaker, excluding voices from the audience and marginalised groups based on gender, ethnicity, class, etc. This section reflects on how the unconference created a space to amplify diverse participant voices in higher education. In the context of an unconference, 'voices' refers to the diverse range of participants and their perspectives, experiences, and opinions. The term emphasises the idea that every attendee has a unique perspective and valuable contributions to make. The 2021 HELTASA (un)conference enabled diverse voices to be heard and ensured conversation equity by disrupting existing ways of conferencing by diversifying speaker panels and presentation formats. Speakers or provocateurs from various spaces within the higher education sector were invited to reflect on the questions: Sivela phi? (where do we come from?), Si phi? (where are we?), Siya phi? (where are we going?). This was done to disrupt what is regarded as legitimate knowledge and who can generate and produce knowledge. It generated reflexivity and a sense of agency in participants.

Multiple keynote provocateurs for each (un)conference session daily were invited to share and invite participation by posing questions which served as provocations that stimulated

conversations on factors that affect higher education, looking at the past, present and future in line with the (un)conference theme. Provocateurs are individuals specifically designated to stimulate and provoke discussion, challenging conventional thinking and encouraging participants to explore innovative ideas. These individuals are often chosen for their ability to incite thoughtful and engaging conversations, fostering a dynamic and intellectually stimulating environment. In a sense, this troubles the cultural acceptance and socialisation of who participants are and what they are meant to do when attending a conference. The provocations were led by voices in academic leadership, academics, activists, stakeholders, and students. In embracing the humanising approach of Ubuntu (Ngubane & Makua, 2021), safe and inclusive spaces for engagement were created through mini and collective harvesting (which refers to capturing the collective wisdom, key takeaways, and valuable contributions made by participants) of group discussions around virtual campfires and virtual platforms. These virtual spaces enabled reflections not only individually but as a community. The informal spatial arrangement lent itself to more organic dialogue and deep reflections, strengthening the collaborations and networking among the participants. The (un)conference allowed participants to share their experiences about the past, present and future in higher education. Its modality flattened the hierarchy, which often characterises conferences; there was an equitable engagement for all participants, and the discussions around the virtual table were participant driven. Through workshops, poetry, videos, and posters, presenters engaged participants in compelling dialogues about decoloniality, accessibility, ubuntu, transformative pedagogies and collective agency. The provocateurs shared concepts such as 'decolonial love' (Dei & Adhami, 2022: 81-95) (try to make sense of your place in the world, and this is compared to reality). In the context of the unconference, 'decolonial love' (Dei & Adhami, 2022: 81-95) encourages leaders to be more than tokens within their academic spaces but patriots for creating socially inclusive higher education institutions.

The keynote provocateurs were part of a panel, and this was a departure from previous HELTASA Conferences where we had keynote speakers. The provocateurs challenged participants and stirred them with inspiring words that served as a powerful reminder that with every setback comes an opportunity to come back stronger. Participants also used the event space to reconnect with colleagues, forge new connections, contribute enthusiastically to collective harvesting sessions, and openly share their insights, ideas, research, and first-hand experiences. From our reflections, all these are examples of how hierarchies were flattened. Unique spaces for scholarly engagement were also created. Artistic demonstrations, such as music, poetry and storytelling with a message linked to the (un)conference theme, were used as tools for scholarly engagement. This approach enabled creative ways of sharing experiences (especially during the pandemic) and including different perspectives and ideas.

The (un)conference created a space where participants could critique and reflect on their practices. The inclusion of multiple ways to present information at the (un)conference also brought forth discussions around language and African Indigenous Knowledge and the need to transform and be responsive to societal needs. The need for leaders to be responsive and provide guidance during a time of crisis was highlighted through the engagements. The issue of mental

health for both academics and students was highlighted by participants. Participants observed how it became difficult to 'switch off' to ensure no student was left behind. Various ways and selfcare tools were shared amongst participants. It was evident that the (un)conference was not only a platform to present completed research but also a safe space for all voices to share practices and to theorise and reimagine what the future of higher education should look like. While other institutions could respond quickly when the pandemic affected the sector, some institutions lagged. What emerged from the (un)conference was the importance of having an organisation like HELTASA where practitioners have a space to reflect and share experiences and resources. HELTASA was also viewed by participants as a space for continuous learning and reflecting on one's practice.

Completed research versus practice and theorising

Generally, conferences are platforms where completed research (systematic investigations where new knowledge is produced) or research in progress is presented. The level of practice is where practitioners apply knowledge, theory, and skills to real-world problems. The level of theorising focuses on developing frameworks within a field of study. The (un)conference created an opportunity where completed research and research-in-progress and the sharing of valued practices and spaces provided for theorising were encouraged and valued. The (un)conference enabled participants to submit proposals on academic development, student learning, professional learning, curriculum development and decolonisation. Participants were encouraged to include questions for further engagement by attendees. Different presentation formats, such as artistic demonstrations, provocations, oral presentations, and posters, allowed presenters to not only focus on sharing empirical data, which was systematically generated through an investigation. These various formats of sharing and presentation created spaces for scholarly engagement and ensured that the (un)conference was participant driven, creating a welcoming environment to reflect on the past, present, and future factors that affect the higher education sector. These methodologies enabled participants to reflect on their agency and how they can be responsive, resilient, and relevant.

An example of sharing practice and theorising revolved around assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic. This scholarly engagement did not only focus on completed research but also on sharing practices and thinking differently and creatively on assessment. The robust debate during the Assessment session at the (un)conference highlighted the impact of assessment on student learning, as argued by Boud and Falchikov (2007). This created an opportunity for participants to reflect and share challenges faced by students, such as access to devices, data, and electricity—the questions about how and who we assess and for what purpose kept emerging in the various conversations. Debates about assessment for learning versus assessment of learning kept emerging in the context of invigilated assessments online.

The (un)conference highlighted the technologies that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, the commodification of higher education, and how access for those without financial capital will remain elusive. These reflections highlighted the lack of change in the HE sector, which

is still trapped in neoliberalism, where students are seen as fee-paying clients, as Hlatshwayo (2022) argued. Through sharing experiences, participants could agree that to be responsive, resilient, and relevant in an unequal society, different ways of assessing and funding frameworks policy are needed to create an equitable, inclusive higher education environment.

Multimodal teaching and how the rapid transition to online teaching affected academics at different institutions were also shared at the (un)conference. There was a general feeling of unpreparedness for emergency remote teaching, and these reflections were shared by others (see Athiemoolam, 2022). Participants were allowed to share in a safe space how responsiveness varied at different institutions based on the availability of resources. The discussions on practices highlighted the importance of sharing resources amongst different institutions. The resources included practice frameworks used to respond to and support multimodal learning and teaching. The debates further underscored the need to rethink funding policies in South Africa to support students. The creation of a safe space to share enabled participants to discuss the observed inequalities amongst students across the higher education sector and how cultural expectations affected their learning when teaching occurred remotely.

The (un)conference demonstrated that theory, practice, and research are needed to advance South African/African higher education. The participants were able to highlight the importance of continuous learning, collaboration and sharing of resources. The debates that ensued during this (un)conference and the value added to knowledge and content creation will impact policy development, practice, and professional learning.

Individual and collective thinking

Today's complex and ever-changing higher education (HE) landscape requires collaborative practice and engagement for the multiple challenges HE practitioners are faced with and further emphasises the need for collaboration in academia. The traditional conference has mostly focused on individual contributions, but the dynamic, changing HE landscape requires conversations and engagements that focus more on collective thinking (Lingard, 2016). The unconference offers the space to do so and, in so doing, promote inclusivity.

Despite this increasing awareness, there is ongoing debate and uncertainty about the best method of engagement around critical HE conversations. Thistlethwaite (2012) argues that simply bringing different groups together to learn in the same setting, as with the traditional conference, might not accommodate diversity. Instead, engagement must be interactive, regardless of where it takes place. The unconference space could enhance such engagement (Boule, 2011). The unconference utilises and enhances the learning principles of Knowles, et al. (2014), where the participants are part of the planning process, and learning activities are task and problem-centred rather than content-orientated. The participant-driven unconference supports the philosophy of social learning and developing a community of practice (CoP). This collective learning approach is formed by people interacting and sharing a process through active participation. The unconference model offers a unique opportunity to create CoPs to actively learn from each other in a collaborative environment (Freeth, et al., 2005).

According to the HELTASA shape-shifting document (2021a: 12), one of the aims of the (un)conference is to bring participants together to enable them to be ready and responsive to HELTASA matters in appropriate ways, such as using reflexive practice and other methodologies. The HELTASA (un)conference call (2021b: 3) invited participants to join a collaborative journey of being change agents in HELTASA. It also encouraged participants to initiate and join scholarly conversations. Furthermore, participants were invited to contribute key questions for further engagement. The Call also allowed participants to engage with colleagues across the HE sector and share their thoughts and ideas about higher education learning and teaching. The first presentation type specified in the HELTASA (un)conference call (HELTASA, 2021b) is the oral paper, known in its traditional format, followed by facilitated conversations among presenters and the audience. All presenters would actively participate in a discussion and debate by asking questions and sharing their opinions on the themed topic from the presentation, while participants in the room also had an opportunity to offer input into the discussions. The second type is the poster presentation, offering an opportunity for informal conversations with a targeted group of interested viewers. Poster sessions could facilitate a rich exchange of ideas and networking opportunities. The third presentation type specified in the HELTASA (un)conference call (2021b) is provocations. It could be in the form of a critical dialogue or 'a seat at the table' discussion. Another presentation type is the open space methodology, where participants form small groups to engage in scholarly conversations in a relaxed and informal manner. Lastly, artistic demonstration refers to creative contributions in poetry, song, dance and/or visual presentations.

The data analysis confirms that 'innovation happens when minds come together to share ideas' (Ferriter & Provenzano, 2013: 19). The HELTASA (un)conference offers the opportunity to do so through its (un)conference call (2021b) presentation types and the HELTASA shape-shifting document (2021a).

Responsiveness

According to Suarez and Montes (2020), researchers have identified three broad approaches to organisational (or institutional) responsiveness to fast-changing environments. The first approach is where organisations (or institutions) stick to efficient routines when work is predictable. The second approach is rules-based to help speed up processes and decision-making and prioritise the use of resources in less predictable contexts. The third approach involves spontaneous, creative efforts to address opportunities presented by change. HELTASA followed the third approach. Traditional thinking suggests that responses to a challenge occur when individuals reach a shared agreement and create an action plan. The collective thinking model, which aligns with the third approach, suggests that some levels of coordinated action do not require this kind of rational planning. Isaacs (2008) uses the metaphor of a flock of birds suddenly taking flight from a tree. This is movement all at once, a wholeness and listening together that permits individual differentiation but is still highly interconnected. The (un)conferencing space and the changed methodology for planning the event allow this kind of responsiveness. The HELTASA

(un)conference was very different from planning previous conferences. It created opportunities for collective contemplation, shared reflection, collaborative workshops, lively debates, and ultimately reaching consensus on the envisioned format of the (un)conference.

HELTASA has acknowledged that

to be responsive, the organisation needs to increase its ability to respond timeously and promptly to events and occurrences as they unfold, especially in a crisis, but also as part of ongoing contribution to extending the scope and register of learning and teaching in the global South. (HELTASA, 2021a: 11)

The HELTASA shape-shifting document (2021a:11) states that:

To be responsive, the organisation needs to increase its ability to respond timeously and promptly to events and occurrences as they unfold, especially in a crisis, but also as part of ongoing contribution to extending the scope and register of teaching and learning in the global South. To achieve this, the steering arm of the organisation needs to be dedicated, committed and able to deliver on goals set each year and realise these goals as best they can. The R and R process has to reconceptualise the roles and responsibilities of each executive function so that each one's potential can be maximised. To achieve responsiveness, specific roles must be identified to serve the needs of members and the organisation. These roles must attract and recruit practitioners with commensurate skills and dispositions. Through these roles and portfolios, HELTASA can increase its collaborative potential across the sector through interdisciplinary and multivocal ways of responding to cues and signals arising from the ground.

The HELTASA (un)conference Theme (2021b: 2) was "Sivela phi? Si phi? Siya phi? - Being resilient, responsive and relevant in a shifting Higher Education (HE) context". As for responsiveness, HELTASA acknowledged feedback from previous conference participants, which highlighted, amongst others, disabled spaces for open discussion and dialogue on research, critical issues, and prevalent challenges related to scholarly work. Thus, in rethinking and reimagining the traditional conference, HELTASA shifted towards an (un)conference format, a participant-driven opportunity for intellectual engagement and expression while maintaining academic rigour. The HELTASA (un)conference call (2021b) included a blended approach of the traditional conference and unconventional interactions. These methodologies aim to create an open space to share, critically reflect, be creative, and develop innovative approaches to LTA through collaboration, scholarly conversations, and research. The Call emphasised a participant-driven opportunity to allow for engagement, teamwork development, the flexibility of schedule, and an emphasis on contributions from every participant. Regarding responsiveness, the presentation types could be in any scholarly areas of student learning, professional development, curriculum development, academic development, and/or decoloniality.

Previous HELTASA conferences always valued participant feedback and highlighted the value of connecting, networking, and sharing experiences, insights and innovative ideas with colleagues who engage in similar LTA practices. The exchange of ideas and bringing participants into contact with colleagues who have different ideas from their own are always emphasised as enlightening and empowering. Of further value are opportunities for discussion, engagement, and question-and-answer sessions. Over the years, another constant point of feedback has been that the conference space relates to an amazing transformation journey. In summary, the traditional HELTASA conferences provided ample opportunity for networking and professional connections (individual/ collective thinking) but in a structured format.

Though less structured, conferences such as the HELTASA (un)conference also foster collaboration and interaction throughout the event because participants are encouraged to engage in discussions, share experiences, and build connections in a more informal and relaxed environment. Traditional conferences tend to focus on specific themes, such as institutional priorities or themes or game changers. Unconferences, however, are known for their broad scope and diverse range of topics, such as those referred to in this paper. Participants can propose and lead sessions on any subject, leading to a more varied and flexible programme.

Lessons learnt and conclusion

The final stage of the reflection model of Mugumbate et al. (2021) prompts a reflection on the lessons learnt from the HELTASA (un)conference and what these lessons mean by reflecting on what changed or what was improved. The 2021 HELTASA (un)conference provided a unique platform to deliver an active LTA event that is participant focused. The opportunity for interprofessional/ interdisciplinary engagement and participation provided a dynamic lens into critical HE LTASA perspectives. The unstructured and uncertain element of the (un)conference is part of exciting opportunities that can challenge current HELTASA practices and lead to disruption. The following are the lessons learnt:

- *Power and Inclusivity:* Traditional conferences often reinforce hierarchical power dynamics, focusing on the presenter or panel members. The unconferencing approach disrupts these power relations by promoting inclusivity and active participation. One notable improvement was the shift towards a participant-driven approach, providing attendees with the agency to actively contribute to shaping the program and facilitating meaningful conversations. This lesson emphasises the importance of reframing power relations to create equitable engagement for all participants.

- *Amplifying Diverse Voices:* Conventional conferences often exclude voices from marginalised groups based on gender, ethnicity, and class. In contrast, the unconference creates a space to amplify diverse participant voices in higher education. A change lies in challenging dominant narratives by diversifying the speaker panels and the presentation formats. This inclusivity extends beyond token representation, inviting perspectives from various corners of the higher education sector. The unconference model fosters an

environment that actively works to dismantle barriers, ensuring that voices that may have been side-lined in traditional conferences take centre stage. This lesson underscores the significance of providing platforms that ensure equity in conversations and promote the inclusion of multiple perspectives and ideas.

- *Safe Spaces for Engagement:* The unconference format fosters safe and inclusive spaces for engagement, where participants can share their experiences, reflect on practices, and theorise about the future of higher education. A notable improvement lies in the emphasis on creating an environment that prioritises open dialogue and respects diverse experiences. The unconference model facilitates an atmosphere where participants are not only allowed but actively encouraged to critique and reflect on their practices. This departure from traditional conference norms signifies a positive shift toward more participatory and introspective engagement.

- *Practice, Research, and Theorising:* The unconference approach recognises the value of integrating completed research, practices, and theorising. While traditional conferences often focus on sharing completed studies or research in progress, the unconference model acknowledges the importance of theoretical frameworks and provides a platform for practitioners to share their experiences and insights into effective practices. This shift encourages a more holistic perspective, enabling participants to reflect on their agency, respond to challenges, and envision innovative approaches that blend theoretical understanding with real-world application.

- *Collaboration and Continuous Learning:* The unconference underscores the importance of collaboration, continuous learning, and resource sharing within the higher education sector. It provides a platform for practitioners to collaborate, share experiences, and reflect on their practices. The discussions and debates that emerge during the unconference have the potential to inform policy development, influence practice, and drive professional learning. This lesson highlights the value of ongoing collaboration, learning, and the exchange of resources to foster a responsive and relevant higher education environment.

The lessons learned from the cultural disruption facilitated by the (un)conferencing methodology emphasise the significance of reframing power relations, amplifying diverse voices, creating safe spaces for engagement, integrating practice and theory, and promoting collaboration and continuous learning. These lessons foster innovation, inclusivity, and critical thinking in higher education spaces.

The 2021 HELTASA (un)conference led to cultural disruption because it prioritised open dialogue and discussion among participants. This led to the exploration of unconventional ideas, the questioning of established norms, and the challenging of traditional ways of thinking. The (un)conference encouraged collaboration and cross-pollination of ideas. By facilitating interactions between participants who might not typically engage with one another, (un)conferences can disrupt silos and promote a more holistic and interconnected cultural

mindset. Because alternative ways of sharing knowledge and information offered by the unconference can disrupt traditional approaches and foster a culture of continuous learning and adaptation by challenging the status quo and embracing new methods and technologies, unconferences can contribute to cultural disruption and the advancement of alternative ideas and practices.

Finally, the (un)conference hosted by HELTASA in 2021 demonstrated the organisation's commitment to reimagining higher education by adopting the unconferencing approach. By disrupting traditional cultural norms and values, the (un)conference created an inclusive and participatory space that challenged power dynamics, amplified diverse voices, and fostered innovation and creativity. The virtual set-up and interactive tools provided active engagement and dialogue opportunities among participants, enabling a sense of community, and breaking down hierarchical structures. Voices from different spaces within higher education were heard, and discussions encompassed various topics, including decolonisation, mental health, student engagement, and assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The (un)conference facilitated the sharing of research, practices, and theorising, creating a platform for continuous learning, collaboration, and developing inclusive and responsive higher education environments. By embracing collective thinking and collaboration, the (un)conference paved the way for advancing the field of higher education and informed policy development, practice, and professional learning. Overall, the (un)conference exemplified the potential of unconferencing as a powerful tool for cultural disruption and transformation in higher education. By disrupting cultural norms and values, unconferencing can help foster greater creativity and innovation by bringing together a wider range of perspectives and ideas. It can also help create more inclusive, diverse, and equitable spaces where marginalised voices are heard and valued.

We end our paper with a praise poem written by Eunice Champion, a member of the 2021 HELTASA (un)conference team, which was recited at the end of the 2021 (un)conference.

THE UMBILICAL CORD HAS BEEN CUT!

Hoyina! Hoyina! Hoyina!

Go home educated communities. The (un)conference is over;

Go home. Higher education, what brought us together, is done.

This is said by Kasturi Behari Leak and Rieta Ganas

They are leading a group of HELTASA,

To work towards the HE transformation

All project team leaders and members were sweating

The old Executive and Executive Administrator rolled their sleeves

Men and women who are thirsty for transformation in higher education

XL Millennium became busy; Pomegranate became involved; Blackboard sponsored!

To all of you, we say THANK YOU!

You worked hard behind the scenes until a baby was conceived

Then, the midwives and the charge nurses arrived with gifts on the 6th of December

To ensure that the conceived baby is born healthy

The participants brought proposals; some brought posters, some critical dialogues, and others workshops

To the panels: Provocateur VCs, student activists, stakeholders, decolonisation reflexive praxis; we say well done!

The hosts, moderators, facilitators;

We say we knew that you will not disappoint.

To you, we say: salute transformers!

The umbilical cord has been cut, ladies.

The umbilical cord has been cut, gentlemen.

The umbilical cord has been cut, and the child is born!

The child cried their first cry; the sign of health!

The child is named successful (un)conferencing 2021

The child is not ours; it belongs to the HE village!

As they say, "It takes a village to raise a child".

Hear us out, communities, when we give you the wealth!

The wealth that Nelson Mandela views as the powerful weapon we can use to change the world.

We praise you, Mandela, and lift your clan name, Dalibunga!

Listen to us, HE community. We are telling you:

We invited you to break the silos in HE

We called you to respond to the three questions: Sivela phi, Si phi, Siya phi?

To change the HE narratives to be relevant, responsive and resilient,

From Sivelaphi, we are from the segregated HE

The Bantu Education was like the bone of a dried fried chicken with no gravy

Yet, we were expected to be grateful as if we had been done a favour.

From Si phi – the fight is not done.

The fight against the legacy left by the apartheid and colonial regime.

The legacy of HE sectors deeply entrenched social inequities

The fight against the legacy of inequalities relating to learning and teaching, access and success

But together, we will dismantle the pieces of this necklace that tie us to the past,

ONE by ONE!

Siyaphi - Where to now African academics where to now?

Go back home and adopt the anti-fragility stance

Go back home to respond to the internal and external colonisation

Go back home to push against extraversion towards the endogenous scholarship

Go back home and do what you must and not what you please

Go back home to think about what and how you will (UN)

Leave academic community; the (un)conference is over!

Leave HE; what we gathered for here is done.

Leave to feed the child, to grow until they are as big as an elephant
Go home; the ONLINE SPACE eventually responded
And said, "YOU CAN DO THIS
Through me;
With humanity".
Champion Eunice, 2021

Author Biographies

Rosaline Govender holds a Doctorate in Education from UKZN and has been immersed in the field of academic development since 2011 at the Durban University of Technology (DUT). Her extensive expertise in academic development extends across student, staff, and curriculum enhancement. At the institutional level, she has contributed as a member of various task teams and forums, including General Education, Siyaphumelela, the Philosophy of Education, Institutional Forum, Gender Forum, and Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee. Within the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA), she plays key roles as a member of the Coordinating Council and the Professional Learning Project Team leader. Additionally, she co-convenes the International Learning and Teaching Collaboration between the DUT and Dr. SNS Rajalakshmi College of Arts and Science (India). Dr. Govender spearheaded the coordination of the Learning, Teaching, and Assessment Module within the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education programme at DUT. Her research endeavours encompass diverse areas such as student success, staff development, teaching pedagogies, academic development, and gender studies.

Anthea H M Jacobs is a graduate of Stellenbosch University (SU), holding both a Master's and PhD in Education Policy Studies. With a rich background in education spanning the basic, further, and higher education (HE) sectors, she brings a wealth of experience to her role as an Academic Developer at the SU Centre for Teaching and Learning. The core focus of her job is the professional development of academics, which gives her the opportunity to live out one of her passions, which is empowering and building the capacity of others. Anthea's research interests encompass a broad spectrum of topics including HE TLA, professional development, and transformative pedagogies. In her current role, Anthea leverages her extensive expertise to drive meaningful change and innovation, striving to create an environment where TLA are not just processes but transformative experiences that shape the future of education.

Ntsoaki Malebo is a PhD graduate with experience in Higher Education and Leadership Development and a NRF grant holder. She leads units responsible for academic staff and student development including the disability unit at the Central University of Technology, Free State. She leads the Academic Development Leadership Scholarly group within HELTASA. She actively participates in academic programme reviews internally and at peer institutions on a national and

international scale. She also coordinates the Erasmus plus funded iKudu project focusing Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) to internationalise curriculum, collaborating with South African and European universities. Throughout her career, she has held several senior positions, including Research Manager, Head of Department (HoD), and Assistant Dean of Teaching and Learning. As HoD, she mentored younger academics, including those under the new Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP). She has presented her work at local and international conferences and published in peer-reviewed journals.

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