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Beyond empty signifiers: Reclaiming social justice as an academic pursuit in higher education

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the proliferation of terms such as "social justice" within higher education discourse, arguing that they often function as "empty signifiers", concepts stripped of their theoretical depth and transformative potential. The paper uses a narrative approach to explore how these buzzwords can obscure, rather than illuminate, the path to genuine educational transformation. The analysis is grounded in a tripartite theoretical framework, combining Ernesto Laclau's theory of empty signifiers, Nancy Fraser's model of social justice, and the capabilities approach advanced by Amartya Sen. I invoke Joan Tronto's political ethic of care as essential to operationalising transformation, as a democratic practice involving attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. I argue that a more robust and transformative decolonial praxis requires moving beyond superficial signifiers to a deeper engagement with epistemic justice informed by Southern epistemologies. The paper concludes that genuine transformation requires addressing the intersecting dimensions of maldistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation while centering the capabilities approach and an ethic of care in pedagogical practice.

Keywords: empty signifiers, epistemic justice, higher education, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), social justice, transformative pedagogy

Introduction

From 2009 to 2023, I had the privilege of serving as the Director of Teaching and Learning at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). In this role, I chaired the annual Teaching and Learning Conference, an experience that provided a unique vantage point from which to observe the evolving landscape of higher education discourse. It was a time of great intellectual ferment, with a flurry of concepts, buzz-words and typologies vying for our attention: "decolonisation," "social justice," "inequality," the "Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)," and their equivalents. As

an academic and a leader, I felt a professional and personal imperative to make sense of this cocktail of concepts, to understand how they might interrelate to enrich our understanding of higher education development.

As a journal editor, I vividly recall this as an era when academics felt a palpable pressure to incorporate these populist discourses into their research, journal articles and book publications. This snapshot, derived from an AI search, signals the proliferation of popular constructs: since the year 2000, approximately 125,000 academic articles have been published on social justice, 200,000 on inequality, 20,000 on decoloniality, 20,000 on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and 100,000 on student engagement. These numbers, while indicative of important scholarly attention to critical issues, also point to a potential problem: when concepts become ubiquitous, they risk losing their analytical precision and transformative power.

Noting my skepticism with "epistemic catch phrases", I was invited to present an address to the Teaching Advancement at University (TAU) Fellowship at their 2025 Winter School. Having served as a recent TAU Advisor, I was invited to specifically address the reductionist tendency in the academic lexicon: how concepts such as "social justice" are "dumbed down", how they are framed, how they popularised and what the consequences of their construction are in higher education. I drew my inspiration from the work of Bozalek and Liebowitz, particularly their 2012, chapter titled "An Evaluative Framework for a Socially just Institution). It is worth noting that both authors were pioneers of the TAU Fellowship and as a former TAU advisor, I felt the obligation to remind the Fellowship of the founding values and commitments of TAU; whether they continue to be honoured or whether they too have fallen prey to the crisis of conceptual reductionism.

I reminded the Fellowship of the populist term, the "Fourth Industrial Revolution" or "4IR," which has generated approximately 25,000 academic publications. It became seemingly inescapable part of our academic lexicon, often romanticised as inevitable and panacean solutions to complex educational and societal challenges. I argued that these solutions were/are devoid of nuanced and context-sensitive approaches to integrating deep empirical theory-driven analyses. But these constructs are replete, even in peer-reviewed academic publications

As Fataar (2018) has lucidly argued in his critique of education policy dispositifs in South Africa, "4IR[1]" often functions as what Ernesto Laclau (1996) would call an "empty signifier." Fataar (2018) suggests that the term is used so generically and vaguely, encompassing a wide array of technological advancements without a clear, unifying definition or demonstrable impact, that it has become a go-to phrase to sound impressive and futuristic while lacking concrete substance. This discourse, he warns, creates a socio-technical imaginary (Jasanoff, 2015) that prioritizes generic skills acquisition while sidelining deeper conceptual knowledge, leading to what he calls "knowledge blindness" that can undermine meaningful epistemic access for students in unequal educational contexts (Fataar, 2018).

The 4IR phenomenon exemplifies how concepts can be co-opted and commodified. As observed in contemporary higher education discourse, it was a sexy buzz word, an empty signifier (Fataar, 2018), that was popularised by the multi-national IT corporations to peddle their wares,

[1]"4IR" became the new populist phrase denoting the Forth Industrial Revolution.

and was embraced lovingly by academics and politicians as they aspired to look modern. My observation points to a broader pattern in academic discourse where complex ideas are reduced to marketable slogans, losing their critical edge in the process.

This paper argues that a similar fate has befallen many other concepts that dominate our contemporary educational discourse. Concepts such as decoloniality and social justice, which hold the promise of profound transformation, are often reduced to symbolic gestures: a curriculum change here, a language inclusion there, without addressing the deeper structural inequalities that continue to plague our institutions. This "dumbing-down" of complex ideas, as I will argue, generates what Jasanoff (2015) has termed a "socio-technical imaginary," a vision of the future that is often uncritical and devoid of nuanced, context-sensitive analyses.

The consequences of this reductionism extend beyond mere academic fashion. When transformative concepts are emptied of their meaning, institutions can engage in what might be called performative transformation, adopting the language of change without undertaking the difficult work of structural reform. This allows universities to maintain their legitimacy while preserving existing power relations, creating an illusion of progress that masks continued inequality.

Laclau, (2005: 67-128) discusses 'equivalential logic' and how signifiers unify heterogeneous demands resulting in 'semantic indeterminacy'. He argues that these terms lack fixed, consensual definitions. Social justice can encompass everything from wealth redistribution to identity recognition to environmental protection. Similarly, decoloniality ranges from literal political independence to epistemological critique to cultural restoration. This flexibility, one could argue following Laclau, is precisely what makes them effective politically but intellectually vacuous.

Drawing on Laclau's framework, one might further argue these signifiers work by creating chains of equivalence among disparate grievances. Different groups with incompatible goals rally around the same term, projecting their specific demands onto it without those demands being genuinely reconciled. Similarly, critics including Nancy Fraser (1995) (though she is more sympathetic), highlight the tendency for 'strategic vagueness' noting how constructs such as 'social justice' can paper-over fundamental conflicts between redistribution and recognition politics. One may extend this critique to argue that the definitional vagueness serves political mobilisation rather than analytical clarity. Likewise, the term decoloniality conflates distinct projects (political sovereignty, cultural authenticity, epistemological pluralism). It risks romanticising pre-colonial pasts or essentialising colonised identities and its theoretical vagueness makes it difficult to operationalize or evaluate empirically (see also, Spivak, 1993; Rawls, 1971; Anderson, 1999).

However, I am fully cognisant of the counter-considerations to my critique: that these concepts are contested rather than empty, that debates over their meaning reflect genuine political struggles, that the productive ambiguity defense suggests flexibility, which enables coalition-building across differences, or as Laclau argues: that semantic flexibility is not a weakness but a necessary feature of democratic politics that enables diverse groups to work

together (Laclau, 2005: 93-128). Some theorists distinguish between populist deployment and analytical content. For instance, Judith Butler, (1992: 15-16), argues that feminism's conceptual instability is productive: 'The minute that the category of women is invoked as describing the constituency for which feminism speaks, an internal debate invariably begins over what the descriptive content of that term will be'.

In summary, these defenses make my critique more complex and perhaps the issue is not emptiness but the problematic relationship between theoretical precision and political mobilisation, or as Sartori, (1970: 1033-1053) contends: that concepts precise enough for analytical rigor may be too narrow for mass mobilisation, while concepts broad enough to unite diverse groups may lack substantive content and that 'as we move from a higher to a lower level of abstraction…the number of defining properties diminishes' (1070:1041), or as Collier and Mahon (1993) argue: political movements require breadth; social science requires precision: these goals are inherently in conflict.

Mindful of these contradictions and complexities, I am reminded of Weber, (1949: 93) who distinguishes conceptual clarity from empirical description: 'The more sharply and precisely the ideal type has been constructed…the better it is able to perform its methodological functions'. In pursuing the latter aspiration, I will endeavor to move toward a more robust and transformative engagement with social justice in higher education. To do so, I will employ theoretical lenses that draw on multiple traditions of critical scholarship. First, I will utilize Laclau's (1996) theory of empty signifiers to analyze how key terms in our educational discourse have been stripped of their meaning. Second, I will turn to Fraser's (1997, 2005) tripartite model of social justice, which, with its attention to redistribution, recognition, and representation, provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing inequality. Third, I will incorporate the capabilities approach, as articulated by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011), to focus on what students are actually able to do and be.

Theoretical perspectives: Empty signifiers and the crisis of meaning in higher education

The contemporary university is a space saturated with language, where concepts are forged, debated, and disseminated. Yet, the very vibrancy of this intellectual environment can lead to a peculiar kind of semantic exhaustion. Certain terms, through overuse and under-examination, become detached from their theoretical moorings, transforming into what the post-Marxist political theorist Ernesto Laclau (1996) has termed "empty signifiers." Understanding this concept is crucial for analysing the current state of higher education discourse.

An empty signifier, in Laclau's (1996) theoretical framework, is a word or phrase that becomes so broad and all-encompassing that it loses its specific, differential meaning. It becomes a vessel, capable of holding a vast and often contradictory array of meanings, aspirations, and political projects. Its power lies not in its precision, but in its ambiguity, allowing it to unify diverse demands and identities under a single, resonant banner. Laclau (2005) argues that empty signifiers emerge in moments of political crisis when existing systems of meaning prove

inadequate to address social contradictions. They function as nodal points around which different groups can rally, even if they have fundamentally different understandings of what the signifier represents.

The process by which a signifier becomes "empty" involves what Laclau (1996: 43) calls 'equivalential logic'. Different demands and grievances become linked together under a common signifier, gradually erasing the specific differences between them. While this can be politically useful for building coalitions, it can also lead to the dilution of radical potential as the signifier becomes increasingly abstract and divorced from concrete practices of transformation. Nowhere is this phenomenon more apparent than in the discourse surrounding the "Fourth Industrial Revolution" (4IR). This term has achieved a remarkable level of ubiquity in academic and political circles, often presented as an inevitable and transformative force. The sheer volume of academic literature dedicated to it is telling, yet this proliferation has not been accompanied by a corresponding clarity of definition or a critical examination of its implications. Instead, 4IR has become a catch-all phrase for a disparate range of technological advancements, from artificial intelligence to blockchain to the Internet of Things.

The 4IR discourse exemplifies how empty signifiers operate in contemporary higher education. It allows different stakeholders: university administrators, government officials, technology companies, and academics, to project their own interests and visions onto a seemingly neutral technological concept. For administrators, 4IR represents modernisation and competitiveness; for government officials, it promises economic growth and development; for technology companies, it creates markets for their products; for academics, it offers research opportunities and funding possibilities. Yet beneath this apparent consensus lies a fundamental lack of clarity about what 4IR actually means and how it should shape educational practice.

Fataar's (2018) critique of the 4IR discourse in South African education policy reveals how this empty signifier functions to obscure rather than illuminate educational challenges. The focus on generic "21st-century skills" and technological literacy diverts attention from the deep epistemological and pedagogical questions that should be at the heart of educational transformation. As Fataar (2018) argues, this creates a form of "knowledge blindness" where the complexity of teaching and learning is reduced to the acquisition of technical competencies, undermining the kind of deep, conceptual engagement that is essential for meaningful education.

The same process of semantic emptying can be observed in relation to concepts that are central to the project of transformation in higher education, namely "social justice" and "decoloniality." The academic landscape is replete with these terms, yet their very ubiquity raises questions about their analytical precision and transformative potential. When a concept becomes a mandatory feature of every research paper, funding proposal, and institutional mission statement, it risks being reduced to a mere rhetorical flourish, a symbolic gesture rather than a substantive commitment.

The reductionist approaches to these concepts are numerous and well-documented in contemporary higher education literature. Social justice can be reduced to individual acts of

kindness, ignoring systemic barriers and structural inequalities (Ahmed, 2012; Fraser, 2013; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). It can be limited to demographic diversity in visible positions without addressing the underlying systems that create and maintain inequality (Ahmed, 2012; Berrey, 2015; Iverson, 2007). It can be conflated with legal equality, assuming that identical treatment under law automatically produces just outcomes while ignoring how seemingly neutral policies can perpetuate existing disadvantages (Anderson, 2010; Guinier, 2015; Young, 2011).

Similarly, decolonisation can be equated solely with removing colonial symbols, renaming buildings or taking down statues, without addressing deeper structural inequalities or epistemic hierarchies (Mbembe, 2016). It can involve replacing Eurocentrism with Afrocentrism without critique, simply inverting power dynamics rather than fostering genuine pluralism (Mignolo, 2011). It can be treated as a checklist of surface-level reforms, such as adding indigenous texts to syllabi, without transforming the underlying frameworks of knowledge production (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

These reductionist approaches share a common characteristic: they allow for the appearance of engagement with transformative concepts without the difficult and often uncomfortable work of genuine structural change. They enable what might be called 'performative transformation' (Butler, 1993:15), the adoption of progressive language and symbolic gestures that create an illusion of change while leaving fundamental power relations intact (Ahmed, 2012; Berg, et al., 2022).

The consequences of this reductionism are profound. It 'dumbs-down the imagination' (Giroux, 2020: 72), fostering a climate where superficial reforms are mistaken for transformative change. It allows institutions to adopt a checklist approach to transformation, measuring progress through easily quantifiable indicators rather than assessing whether fundamental structures of power and knowledge have been altered (Lorenz, 2022; Shahjahan, et al., 2022). Most importantly, it can lead to a form of cynicism where genuinely transformative concepts are dismissed as mere academic fashion, undermining the possibility of real change (Mountz, et al., 2020).

The proliferation of transformative language in higher education discourse may paradoxically serve to inhibit rather than promote genuine transformation. When concepts lose their analytical precision and critical edge, they become available for co-option by existing power structures (Brennan & Naidoo, 2023). The challenge, therefore, is not simply to critique the misuse of these concepts but to develop more robust theoretical frameworks that can resist such co-optation while maintaining their transformative potential (Stenberg & Maaranen, 2022).

A framework for transformative social justice in higher education

To move beyond the superficiality of empty signifiers, we require a more robust analytical toolkit. The reductionist approaches to social justice whether they focus solely on individual behavior, economic inequality, or cultural recognition can be elevated if they capture the multi-dimensional and interlocking nature of injustice. A comprehensive understanding recognises that injustice is not a monolithic phenomenon, but a complex tapestry woven from threads of maldistribution,

misrecognition, and misrepresentation. It is here that the work of political philosopher Nancy Fraser (1997, 2005) offers a powerful corrective.

Fraser's (1997) contribution to social justice theory represents a significant advancement beyond single-issue approaches that have dominated much of the academic discourse. Her framework emerged from a recognition that traditional Marxist analyses, focused primarily on economic redistribution, were insufficient to address the full range of injustices experienced by marginalised groups. Similarly, identity-based approaches that emphasised cultural recognition, often failed to address material inequalities. Fraser's (2005) innovation was to develop a framework that could address both dimensions while also incorporating a third, political dimension that had been largely overlooked in social justice theory.

Crucially, Fraser (1995, 2005) distinguishes between affirmative and transformative approaches to remedying injustice. Affirmative remedies aim to correct inequitable outcomes without disturbing the underlying frameworks that generate them, for example, increasing diversity through preferential hiring while leaving meritocratic structures intact. Transformative remedies, by contrast, seek to restructure the underlying generative frameworks themselves. In the South African higher education context, scholars have demonstrated how teaching and learning development initiatives have largely been implemented affirmatively, invoking the symbolic value of terms such as "social justice" and "transformation" while leaving fundamental power structures undisturbed (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2015; Bozalek, et al., 2014). This distinction illuminates why many well-intentioned interventions fail to produce substantive change: they operate at the level of symptoms rather than causes, allowing institutions to perform transformation while preserving the status quo.

Fraser (2005) proposes a three-dimensional framework for understanding and challenging inequality, centered on the concept of "parity of participation." She argues that justice requires creating conditions where all members of society can interact with one another as peers, participating fully in democratic deliberation and decision-making. Achieving this requires addressing three distinct, yet interrelated, forms of injustice:

Maldistribution refers to economic injustices rooted in the structure of the economy (Fraser, 1997). This includes not only direct forms of exploitation and marginalization but also the ways in which economic arrangements prevent individuals from participating as equals in social life. In the context of higher education, maldistribution manifests in multiple ways: unequal funding between institutions and programs, the rising cost of tuition that creates barriers to access, inadequate financial support for students from low-income backgrounds, and the casualisation of academic labor that undermines job security and working conditions (Bozzon, et al., 2023; Iwu, et al., 2022). These economic injustices are not merely individual hardships but systemic features that reproduce class inequalities across generations (Burke, 2022).

The capabilities approach, developed by Sen (1999) and further elaborated by Nussbaum (2011), provides important insights into how economic injustices operate in educational contexts. Sen's (1999) focus on "functionings" and "capabilities" shifts attention from formal access to substantive opportunities. It is not enough to provide equal access to higher education if students

lack the economic resources to take advantage of these opportunities. This includes not only direct costs: tuition and fees but also opportunity costs, such as the income foregone by attending university rather than working, and indirect costs especially transportation, housing, and materials (Cloete & Maassen, 2023; Wilson-Strydom, 2023).

Recent research in the South African context has highlighted how economic barriers continue to limit access to higher education despite formal policies of transformation (Walker, 2019). Students from poor backgrounds often face what researchers call "episodic poverty", periods of financial crisis that disrupt their studies even when they have formal access to financial aid (Lange & Loots, 2022). This creates a form of "revolving door" access where students enter university but are unable to complete their studies due to economic pressures (Basson & Loots, 2023; Ndimande & Ndimande, 2023).

Misrecognition encompasses cultural or symbolic injustices where certain groups are devalued, stereotyped, or rendered invisible (Fraser, 1997). This dimension of injustice operates through systems of cultural meaning that establish hierarchies of worth and belonging. In higher education, misrecognition manifests in curricula that marginalize non-Western knowledge systems, pedagogical practices that alienate students from diverse cultural backgrounds, assessment methods that privilege particular forms of cultural capital, and institutional cultures that fail to value and affirm the identities of all their members.

The concept of misrecognition draws attention to the ways in which educational institutions are not neutral spaces but are embedded in broader systems of cultural domination. The knowledge that is taught, the ways it is taught, and the criteria used to evaluate learning all reflect particular cultural perspectives that may be presented as universal but are actually rooted in specific historical and social contexts.

Bourdieu's (1986) analysis of cultural capital provides important insights into how misrecognition operates in educational settings. Students from dominant cultural backgrounds enter university with forms of cultural knowledge and dispositions that are valued and rewarded by the institution, while students from marginalised backgrounds may find their cultural resources devalued or ignored. This creates what appears to be a meritocratic system but actually reproduces existing cultural hierarchies.

In the South African context, misrecognition has particular historical resonance, given its apartheid history, which systematically devalued African languages, knowledge systems, and cultural practices (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). While formal apartheid has ended, many of its cultural effects persist in higher education institutions that continue to privilege English-medium instruction, Eurocentric curricula, and Western pedagogical approaches.

Misrepresentation constitutes the political dimension of injustice, concerning the denial of political voice and power (Fraser, 2005). This occurs when individuals or groups are excluded from the processes of decision-making that affect their lives. Fraser (2008) distinguishes between "ordinary-political misrepresentation," which occurs within established political systems, and "meta-political misrepresentation," which involves exclusion from the very constitution of political communities.

In the university context, misrepresentation can be seen in governance structures that lack meaningful student and staff representation, in decision-making processes that exclude affected communities, in the silencing of dissenting voices through formal and informal mechanisms, and in the failure to include marginalised communities in the co-creation of knowledge. This dimension of injustice is often overlooked in discussions of educational transformation, yet it is crucial for understanding how power operates in academic institutions.

The concept of misrepresentation draws attention to the fundamentally political nature of education. Decisions about what knowledge is taught, how it is taught, and who has access to it are not merely technical or pedagogical questions, but are deeply political choices that reflect and reproduce particular distributions of power. When these decisions are made without meaningful participation with affected communities, they constitute a form of political injustice that undermines the democratic potential of education. Recent student movements in South Africa, including the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall campaigns, can be understood as responses to all three dimensions of injustice but particularly to misrepresentation (Booysen, 2016). These movements challenged not only the economic barriers to higher education and the cultural dominance of colonial symbols and Eurocentric curricula but also the exclusion of students from meaningful participation in university governance and decision-making.

Fraser's (2005) framework provides a crucial analytical lens for moving beyond the simplistic, single-issue approaches that characterise much of the discourse on social justice. It allows us to see how economic, cultural, and political injustices are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. A student from a poor rural background, for example, may face not only the economic burden of tuition fees (maldistribution) but also the cultural alienation of a curriculum that does not reflect their lived experience (misrecognition) and a lack of voice in the institution's decision-making processes (misrepresentation). These different forms of injustice compound each other, creating what Fraser (1997) calls "bivalent" or "trivalent" forms of subordination that require complex, multi-dimensional responses.

Complementing Fraser's political and economic focus, the capabilities approach offers a normative framework for defining the ultimate goal of social justice: human flourishing. Developed by Sen (1999) and further elaborated by Nussbaum (2011), this approach shifts the focus from what resources people have access to and what they are actually able to do and be. It is not enough, in this view, to simply provide equal opportunities; we must also ensure that individuals have the real, substantive freedoms and capabilities to live lives they have reason to value.

Sen's (1999) capabilities approach emerged from his critique of utilitarian and resource-based approaches to development and social justice. Utilitarian approaches focus on maximizing overall welfare or happiness but can justify significant inequalities if they contribute to greater overall utility. Resource-based approaches focus on ensuring equal access to primary goods including income, education, and healthcare but fail to account for the fact that different individuals may need different resources to achieve similar levels of functioning.

The capabilities approach addresses these limitations by focusing on what Sen (1999) calls "functionings", what a person may value doing or being, and "capabilities": the real opportunities to achieve these functionings. Functionings include basic needs such as being adequately nourished and having shelter, but also more complex achievements such as being able to participate in political life, having self-respect, and being able to play. Capabilities represent the freedom to achieve these functionings, the real opportunities available to individuals to live the kinds of lives they have reason to value.

Nussbaum (2011) has developed a more specific list of central human capabilities that she argues should be supported by just institutions. These include life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; concern for other species; play; and control over one's environment. While this list has been criticised for being too specific and potentially culturally biased, it provides a useful framework for thinking about what a capabilities-based approach to higher education might involve.

In the context of higher education, the capabilities approach urges us to ask not just whether students have access to a university, but whether they have the capabilities to thrive there: to engage in critical thought, to form meaningful relationships, to participate in the life of the institution, and to convert their education into a life of purpose and meaning. This resonates with Fataar's (2018) concern about "knowledge blindness," highlighting that true "epistemic access" is not just about being present in the classroom but about having the capability to engage meaningfully with knowledge. The capabilities approach has been particularly influential in South African higher education research, where scholars including Walker (2019) and Wilson-Strydom (2015) have applied it to understanding student experiences and outcomes. Factors such as inadequate prior schooling, language barriers, financial stress, and social isolation can all undermine students' capabilities even when they have formal access to university.

Finally, the work of Liebowitz and Bozalek (2015) suggests that these frameworks can be powerfully combined with a political ethic of care, based on the work of Tronto (2013). An ethic of care introduces a crucial relational dimension, emphasizing our shared responsibilities and interdependencies. It pushes back against the hyper-individualistic and competitive ethos that often pervades academia, reminding us that teaching and learning are fundamentally relational practices. Tronto's (2013) ethic of care is explicitly political, challenging the traditional separation between public and private spheres that has marginalized care work and the values associated with it. She argues for a "caring democracy" that would reorganize social institutions around the recognition that all human beings are interdependent and vulnerable, requiring care throughout their lives.

In educational contexts, an ethic of care emphasises the importance of relationships, emotional well-being, and mutual responsibility. A pedagogy informed by an ethic of care is one that is attentive to the particular needs and vulnerabilities of students, that fosters a sense of belonging and mutual respect, and that recognises the emotional and affective dimensions of learning. This does not mean lowering academic standards or avoiding challenging material, but rather creating supportive environments where students can take intellectual risks and engage

with difficult questions. The integration of care ethics with social justice frameworks addresses one of the limitations of purely structural approaches to transformation. While it is essential to address systemic inequalities, transformation also requires attention to the micro-practices of teaching and learning, the quality of relationships between teachers and students, and the emotional dimensions of educational experience.

Together, these three frameworks, Fraser's (1997, 2005) tripartite model, the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011), and the ethic of care (Tronto, 2013) provide a dynamic framework for evaluating and advancing social justice in higher education. They allow us to move beyond the empty signifiers and to ask the hard questions: Who benefits from our current arrangements? Whose knowledge is valued? Who has the power to speak and be heard? What are the real capabilities that our students are developing to live flourishing lives? And how can we create caring, supportive environments that enable all students to thrive?

Practical implications and transformative strategies

The theoretical framework outlined in this paper has implications for how we approach transformation in higher education. Moving beyond empty signifiers requires not only conceptual clarity but also concrete strategies for implementing change. This section explores the practical implications of integrating Fraser's (1997, 2005) tripartite model of social justice, the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011), and decolonial theory (Mignolo, 2011; Omodan, 2024) in higher education contexts.

Curriculum transformation and epistemic diversity

An approach to curriculum transformation rooted in social justice goes beyond simply adding diverse authors to reading lists. It requires a fundamental examination of how knowledge is organised, what counts as legitimate scholarship, and whose perspectives are centered in academic discourse. This involves what might be called "epistemic reconstruction"; the process of rebuilding knowledge frameworks to include multiple ways of knowing (Santos, 2014).

In practice, this might involve developing interdisciplinary programs that bring together Western and non-Western knowledge systems in dialogue rather than hierarchy. For example, environmental studies programs might integrate indigenous ecological knowledge with Western scientific approaches, not as supplementary material but as equally valid ways of understanding human-environment relationships (Shava, 2016). Language policy represents another crucial site for transformation. The dominance of English in higher education creates barriers for students whose first language is not English while also privileging particular forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). A decolonial approach might involve developing multilingual pedagogies, beyond liberal rhetoric, that allow students to engage with complex concepts in their home languages while also developing academic literacy in English (Makalela, 2015). This requires moving beyond translation models toward more sophisticated approaches that recognise how different languages embody different ways of understanding the world.

Assessment and evaluation reform: Toward epistemic justice

Traditional assessment regimes function as gatekeeping mechanisms that normalize particular ways of knowing while delegitimising others. These systems embody what Inoue (2015) terms a "white racial habitus", the unmarked assumption that written, individual, time-constrained demonstration of decontextualized knowledge represents the universal standard of intellectual competence. This operates through seemingly neutral practices: privileging linear argumentation over recursive reasoning, valorising abstraction over contextual application, and assuming knowledge can be authentically demonstrated through individual performance divorced from collective sense-making (Fricker, 2007; Shay, 2008). The result positions Western epistemological frameworks as rigorous while Indigenous, relational, or practice-based knowledges are relegated to "alternative" status requiring special accommodation (Andreotti, 2011).

Genuine transformation requires dismantling the epistemological architecture that positions certain forms of knowledge demonstration as inherently superior (Inoue, 2015). This involves interrogating assessment's political economy: how timed examinations privilege those with economic security and neurotypical processing; how individual assignments erase the fundamentally collective nature of knowledge production in many epistemologies; how standardised rubrics impose commensurability on incommensurable ways of knowing (Stobart, 2008). Assessment functions as a disciplinary technology that renders subjects visible, comparable, and governable while naturalising particular regimes of truth (Hames-García, 2011).

Transformative assessment must operate through what Inoue (2015) calls "antiracist writing assessment ecologies", systems that explicitly redistribute epistemic authority. This requires moving assessment from individual judgment to collective deliberation by co-creating evaluative criteria with students, thereby disrupting the professorial monopoly on determining what counts as knowledge (Bovill, et al., 2016). It necessitates embracing incommensurability: portfolio assessment allowing evidence across multiple modalities; oral examinations honouring dialogical knowledge transmission; community-based projects where validity derives from accountability to affected communities rather than abstraction from context (Boud & Soler, 2016; Shay, 2008).

This aligns with capabilities approaches that reconceptualise assessment not as measurement of predetermined outcomes but as expansion of students' freedoms to choose valuable ways of being and doing (Walker & Wilson-Strydom, 2017). Assessment becomes capability formation: developing students' capacity to navigate between epistemological systems, assert the validity of marginalised knowledges, and determine worthwhile achievement in their own contexts (Sen, 2009; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). Yet, genuine transformation may ultimately require not reforming assessment but rethinking its fundamental function, moving from verdict on student worth to collective inquiry into what knowledge practices serve collective flourishing (Stobart, 2008).

Faculty development and institutional culture

Implementing transformative approaches to higher education requires significant investment in faculty development. Many academics have been trained in traditional disciplinary approaches

and may lack the knowledge and skills needed to implement decolonial and social justice-oriented pedagogies. Professional development programs should provide opportunities for faculty to engage with alternative epistemologies, develop inclusive teaching practices, and reflect critically on their own positionality and assumptions (Leibowitz, 2017).

This also requires changes in institutional reward systems. If universities continue to prioritise publication in Western journals, individual research achievements, and traditional disciplinary boundaries, academics will have little incentive to engage in the collaborative, interdisciplinary, and community-engaged work that decolonial transformation requires. Promotion and tenure criteria should be revised to value diverse forms of scholarship, community engagement, and innovative teaching practices.

Research methodologies and knowledge production

Socially just approaches to research involve questioning traditional distinctions between researcher and researched, theory and practice, and academic and community knowledge (Smith, 2012). Participatory action research, community-based participatory research, and indigenous research methodologies offer alternative approaches that involve communities as partners in knowledge production rather than simply as subjects of study.

This requires developing new criteria for evaluating research quality that go beyond traditional measures notably, peer review and citation counts. Community impact, social relevance, and the extent to which research contributes to social justice might become important considerations in evaluating scholarly work (Santos, 2014). These practical implications demonstrate that moving beyond empty signifiers requires comprehensive transformation that touches every aspect of university life. It is not enough to change course content or add diversity training; transformation requires systemic change that addresses the deep structures of power and knowledge that shape higher education institutions.

Challenges and opportunities in implementation

While the framework presented in this paper offers a vision for transformation, implementing these ideas in practice faces significant challenges. Understanding these challenges is crucial for developing realistic strategies for change while also identifying opportunities for progress.

Institutional resistance and path dependency

Universities are complex institutions with deeply embedded cultures, structures, and practices that resist change. What organisational theorists call “path dependency” (Pierson, 2000), means that institutions tend to reproduce existing patterns even when these patterns are no longer optimal. Academics, who have built careers within existing disciplinary boundaries, may resist interdisciplinary approaches.

This resistance is not necessarily conscious or malicious, but often reflects genuine concerns about maintaining academic quality and institutional credibility. Researchers may be concerned that incorporating non-Western knowledge systems will compromise intellectual rigor, while

administrators may fear that decolonial approaches will make their institutions less competitive in global higher education markets (Marginson, 2016).

However, this resistance also creates opportunities for strategic intervention. Change agents within institutions can work to demonstrate that decolonial and social justice approaches actually enhance rather than compromise educational quality. Pilot programs, action research projects, and collaborative initiatives can provide evidence of the benefits of transformative approaches while building constituencies for change (Leibowitz, 2017).

Resource constraints and competing priorities

Resource scarcity in universities is not a neutral economic fact but reflects deliberate political choices about institutional priorities that systematically disadvantage transformative initiatives. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) document how the shift to "academic capitalism" restructures universities around revenue-generating activities, creating internal markets where social justice and decolonial work, which rarely attract external funding or tuition revenue, become structurally marginalised. This is not merely budget constraint but ideological sorting: institutions invest heavily in STEM facilities, business schools, and donor cultivation while positioning equity work as discretionary (Newfield, 2016). This creates a cynical institutional calculus: universities can claim commitment to transformation while systematically under-resourcing it, extracting labour from marginalised academics who cannot refuse without professional penalty (Ahmed, 2012; Matthew, 2016). The resource constraint is thus not external limitation but internal exploitation that ensures transformation remains perpetually incipient (Arday, 2022).

These resource constraints are real and must be acknowledged in any realistic transformation strategy (Tachine, et al., 2017). However, they also highlight the importance of systemic approaches that integrate transformation goals with core institutional functions rather than treating them as add-on activities (Bozalek, et al., 2014; Leibowitz, 2017; Sultana, 2019). When decolonial approaches are integrated into existing curriculum development, faculty development, and student support activities, they become more sustainable and less resource-intensive (Bozalek, et al., 2014; Le Grange, 2016; Stein, et al., 2020).

The myth of integration and neoliberal capture

The common response, that transformation should be "integrated" rather than "added on", obscures how neoliberal structures actively resist such integration. Chatterjee and Maira (2014) demonstrate that universities systematically defund critical programs (ethnic studies, women's studies, indigenous studies, the arts, etc.) precisely when these fields develop institutional presence, redirecting resources to more "marketable" disciplines. Moreover, what passes for "integration" often represents capture rather than transformation. Berrey (2015) shows how diversity becomes commodified and incorporated into branding and management practices that strip it of redistributive content. Similarly, Tuck and Yang (2012) argue that decolonisation becomes "domesticated" when integrated into existing institutional logics, transformed from structural transformation into individual cultural competence or curricular tinkering. La Paperson

(2017) terms this "the decolonial university": a fantasy that colonial institutions can self-reform through minor adjustments rather than requiring abolition and reconstruction. The resource constraint thus performs ideological work: it positions fundamental transformation as unrealistic while legitimating incremental reforms that leave power structures intact (Stein, et al., 2020).

Epistemological challenges and knowledge integration

One of the more complex challenges facing transformation is how to integrate different knowledge systems without falling into relativism or creating new hierarchies. How do we evaluate competing truth claims? How do we maintain intellectual rigor while being open to alternative ways of knowing? How do we avoid romanticising indigenous knowledge while also taking it seriously as a source of insight?

These epistemological challenges require careful navigation and ongoing dialogue. They cannot be resolved through simple formulas but require what might be called “epistemological humility”, a recognition that all knowledge systems have strengths and limitations and that productive dialogue requires mutual respect and genuine curiosity about different ways of understanding the world (Santos, 2014).

Measuring success and demonstrating impact

Traditional measures of educational success: graduation rates, employment outcomes, standardised test scores may not capture the full impact of decolonial and social justice approaches to education. How do we measure whether students have developed capabilities for human flourishing? How do we assess whether curricula have successfully integrated multiple epistemologies? How do we evaluate whether institutions have become more socially just?

Developing appropriate metrics for transformation requires moving beyond quantitative measures toward more holistic approaches that can capture qualitative changes in student experience, institutional culture, and community relationships (Walker, 2019). This might involve narrative assessments, participatory evaluation methods, and long-term tracking of graduate outcomes that go beyond employment and salary data.

The challenges facing decolonial transformation are significant, but they are not insurmountable. By understanding these challenges and working strategically to address them, institutions can make meaningful progress toward more just and inclusive forms of higher education. The key is to approach transformation as a long-term process that requires sustained commitment, strategic thinking, and collaborative action.

Concluding comments

This paper began with a personal reflection on the proliferation of buzzwords in higher education, a journey to make sense of the “cocktail of concepts” that defines our contemporary academic discourse. What started as an attempt to clarify my own thinking has evolved into a broader critique of the ways in which our language can both illuminate and obscure the path to a more just and equitable academy. The central argument of this paper has been that critical concepts

exemplified by “decoloniality” and “social justice” are in constant danger of being hollowed out, of becoming “empty signifiers” (Laclau, 1996); that allow for the performance of progress without the substance of transformation. The uncritical embrace of buzzwords, in particular, "4IR" (Fataar, 2018) distracts from structural work needed to dismantle colonialism's enduring legacies. When reduced to slogans, these concepts enable "performative transformation" that maintains power structures beneath progressive rhetoric.

The paper proposes a multi-dimensional theoretical framework to counter this trend. Laclau's (1996) theory reveals how overused concepts lose analytical precision. Fraser's (1997, 2005) tripartite model: redistribution, recognition, and representation addresses how economic, cultural, and political injustices intertwine, requiring complex responses. The capabilities approach of Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011) shifts focus from formal access to substantive opportunities, questioning whether students can truly thrive. Crucially, Tronto's (2013) political ethic of care provides the essential framework for operationalising these concepts within educational practice, shifting transformation from abstract principles to lived relationships that attend to power, interdependence, and mutual responsibility.

These frameworks enable critical questions: Who benefits? Whose knowledge is valued? Who has power to speak? What capabilities enable flourishing? How can we create caring environments for all? As Tronto's work demonstrates, caring is not an individual virtue but a democratic responsibility that challenges the competitive, individualistic structures of neoliberal academia. Social justice in the Global South must be understood as epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007). Integrating decoloniality, social justice, and Scholarship of Teaching and Learning creates opportunities for transformation: decoloniality provides the critical lens, social justice the normative purpose, and SoTL the methodological tools. Implementation requires comprehensive transformation addressing deep power structures, not merely policy changes but cultural transformation.

Challenges include institutional resistance, resource constraints, and complex epistemological questions, yet these create opportunities for innovation and alternative structures. Higher education stands at a crossroads: continue with buzzwords, or embrace transformative change through critical self-reflection, complex theoretical engagement, and respect for Global South intellectual traditions. The path forward demands "delinking" from colonial power structures (Mignolo, 2011) while building alternative frameworks, creating inclusive, dialogical approaches recognising multiple epistemologies' validity (Santos, 2014). Transformation requires sustained commitment, vigilance against empty signifiers, and generous engagement with different perspectives.

The quest for genuinely transformative higher education committed to cultivating capabilities, promoting justice, and creating equitable societies requires a university to address contemporary challenges while honouring diverse intellectual traditions. This calls for re-investing words with meaning and actions with purpose, building a decolonized and socially just academy responsive to community needs. As Mignolo (2011:44) states, ‘knowledge is never neutral: it is shaped by power, history, and culture’. Through initiatives such as the Teaching

Advancement at Universities (TAU) Fellowship, we can embed social justice values. The time for meaningful transformation is now.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process.

During the preparation of this article the author used (a) Claude AI, in order to identify sources for the theoretical orientation and (b) Manus AI to improve the readability of the article and for the language edit. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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