Reimagining Learning and Teaching Futures: The REconceptualising LeArning and TEaching (RELATE) Project

Introduction

The higher education (HE) system in South Africa faces interrelated challenges of socio-economic development, the contextual relevance of knowledge production and dissemination, rapid advances in technology, the continuing need for systematic, societal and economic transformation, and the increasing fragility of the planetary ecosystem due to environmental degradation.

The third industrial revolution had already precipitated a marked shift by some higher education institutions (HEIs) towards technology-enhanced online and blended forms of education provisioning and the advent of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) has accelerated this, including through rapid advances in technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, blockchain, the internet of things and big data analytics. This is driving a more comprehensive approach to responding to both the opportunities and the challenges posed by technological advances across the system. The COVID-19 Pandemic accelerated the shift towards online and blended learning.

However, having made the changes and in many cases provided the resources, the sector experienced many benefits as well as disadvantages to the shifts in provisioning of higher education. Existing inequality fault lines in society generally, and in higher education specifically, have been brought to the fore. The need for further and more equitable development, availability and use of high quality blended, online and distance, technology-enabled learning and teaching approaches across the sector has been highlighted.

Higher education institutions are unlikely to revert fully to traditional and/or former ways of providing for learning and teaching once the crisis is over. Important advances have been made, and important lessons have been learned. New futures for learning, teaching and assessment are being envisaged.

These need to be researched and documented to draw together a consolidated knowledge base that can inform equitable policy and practice going forward.

Importantly, for the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the implications of the rapidly evolving learning, teaching and assessment environment for both external and internal quality assurance (QA) needs to be understood.

The CHE, in its new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF), already includes the shift towards technology-assisted learning and teaching, and more flexible learning pathways at a macro level of external quality assurance (EQA). In line with its mandate as the Quality Council (QC) for higher education, and its functions of quality promotion, research and advice, and quality assurance, the CHE needs to lead the development of a deeper and more meaningful understanding of learning and teaching in a dynamically changing external environment, as well as to promote quality in the academic project through the development of standards and good practice within the framework of the QAF.

The nature of the REconceptualising LeArning and TEaching (RELATE) Project

The **RE**conceptualising **LeA**rning and **TE**aching (RELATE) Project is an umbrella project that is being implemented by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in collaboration with the higher education sector to understand and to contribute to sector responsiveness to some of the challenges and developments outlined above.

The RELATE Project has the broad purpose of reimagining learning and teaching futures in higher education, post-pandemic, post-disaster and post-disruption, and to develop some of the quality assurance artefacts that are required for these futures.

The RELATE Project takes cognisance of the rapidly evolving learning, teaching and assessment environment, and the wide-scale shift to online and blended learning modalities as a result of contextual changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Third and Fourth Industrial Revolutions and other significant systemic change. It will seek to understand the affordances and risks relating to learning and teaching that these major contextual shifts have resulted in, including the quality issues associated with these.

The RELATE Project is a meta-project consisting of a number of sub-projects focussed on specific aspects.

The RELATE Project is a research and development project, seeking to draw on research already concluded and on new research in order to understand the implications of these changes for pedagogic responsiveness, curriculum responsiveness, resource responsiveness and capacity development responsiveness, and how the higher education steering

mechanisms of planning, funding and quality assurance can be deployed to enable such responsiveness.

The RELATE Project is embedded in the CHE's implementation of the new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF), and its findings will inform how learning and teaching is being reconceptualised and reconfigured, and how the reconceptualised approach can be promoted and monitored through the QAF, in ways that address the social justice imperatives in higher education and in the country.

The scope of the REconceptualising LeArning and TEaching (RELATE) Project

The primary focus will be on learning and teaching as part of the broader academic project as outlined in the QAF and includes aspects such as curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, work integrated learning (WIL), student support, quality of learning materials, training of academic staff members, IQA and the mediation of student learning. Learning and teaching will therefore be at the centre of the project, examined as through the complex interplay between students, teachers/lecturers and the curriculum.

The scope may diagrammatically be represented as follows, and the associations and interactions between the elements will be important.
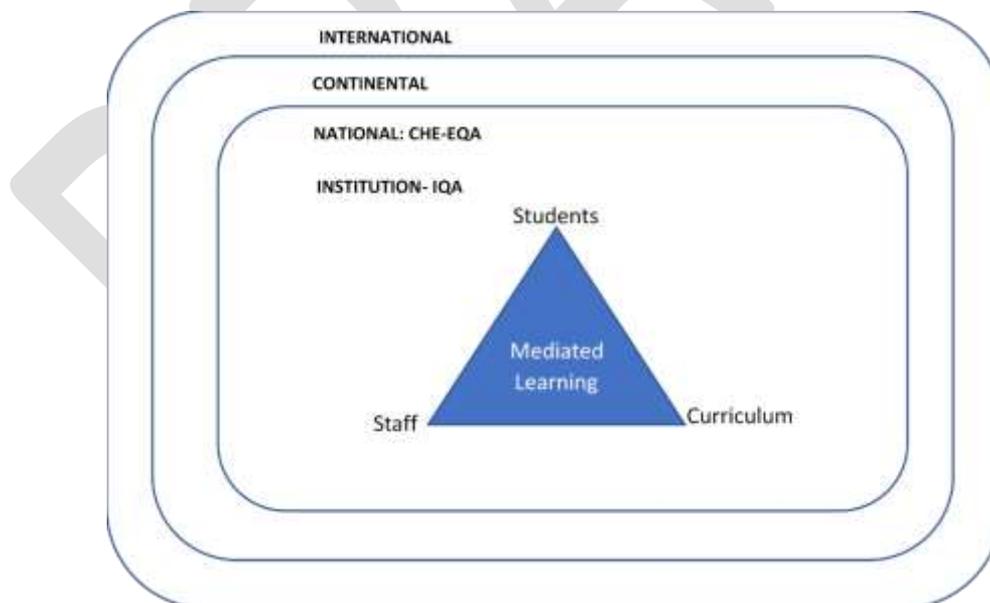
Since the trends and shifts currently being experienced in South Africa are the same internationally and, on the continent, it will be important to draw on the research and projects completed and underway in this area, including through a comprehensive literature review.

Thus, whilst the main focus of the project will be on the engagement between the inner two blocks in the diagram, i.e., within the institutions and between the institutions and the CHE, the development aspects of the project must take into account the international and continental developments.

The primary focus will be on the management of the quality of the mediation of learning and teaching by the HEIs in the digital era, include the quality of the online learning experience for the student in relation to the interaction with the lecturer, with fellow students and with the curriculum within the particular mode of provisioning and context. The choices made about the way in which contact and online modes of delivery are blended to make a coherent student learning experience, may vary between institutions, faculties, departments, programmes and even modules, and typically depend on the nature of the knowledge, skills and values in the discipline, the student profile in terms of access and readiness, as well as the readiness of the academics in the field, and the availability of educational resources in a field.

The overarching questions that the RELATE Project will explore include the following:

- How have students and lecturers experienced the significant changes in the learning, teaching and assessment environment, and what lessons can be drawn from their experiences?
- What have been the consequences of the shifts on equity and quality of education provision?
- What are the new realities that are likely to continue post-crisis and post-pandemic?
- What policies, frameworks, guidelines documents, processes etc need to be revised, developed and/or implemented in order to be enabling of new learning and teaching realities/futures, whilst also ensuring equity and quality of provision?

Modalities

The meta-project will be managed by the CHE and specific sub-projects within it will be funded by the CHE and by other interested partners.

The intellectual leadership at the meta-project level will be provided by an expert peer group of academics selected from the higher education sector.

Specific sub-projects will be implemented by individuals or groups that partner with the CHE to undertake the sub-projects.

The meta-project approach enables the project to draw from an eclectic range of theoretical and methodological frameworks in the sub-projects.

The sequencing of the sub-projects projects will take into account how they need to feed into each other, with the development-focussed projects to be initiated later in the timeline so that they can benefit from the research that has been conducted.

Project sub-components

The project is designed to be evolutionary in nature. Projects already underway will be pulled into the meta-project. Further components will be identified and implemented as the need for them becomes apparent. It is thus a meta-project consisting of a growing number of coherent sub-projects, all which work together to enable the overall achievement of the objectives set for the project. The table below lists the sub-projects that are identified thus far to be part of the meta-project, with further ones to be added as they are conceptualised:

	Title of Sub-project	Nature of Sub-project	Status
RESEARCH	Emergency remote learning and teaching / multimodal learning and teaching/ online learning and teaching / blended learning and teaching: A Literature Review	The review will collate, review and report international and national studies on these areas, and in the South African context, include studies undertaken by SA higher education institutions and not formally published. The review is intended to support other components of the meta-project as they are undertaken.	The literature review is still to be undertaken.
	Student Access to and Use of Learning Materials (SAULM) Survey	The survey was designed to establish how students were accessing and using learning materials generally, and specifically in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was conducted by the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of the Free State (UFS) and was funded by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).	The survey is complete and a report has been produced. The survey report and its findings can feed into the overall report for the meta-project. The raw survey data is available and can be further analysed to get a deeper understanding of students' perceptions.
	Staff Experience of, and Perspectives on Teaching and Learning and its Future (SEP-TLF) survey	The survey below focuses on two main perspectives: i) Staff experiences during the pandemic (including a focus on wellbeing, support and training they are receiving, resilience and adaptability, access to resources, and successes and challenges they are experiencing regarding their own work, as well as with their students); and ii) The future of teaching and learning (including reflections on the longer-term impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning practices, including quality, and what training and support would need to accompany any changes). Beyond lecturers' experiences, the survey further aims to ask academic leaders, particularly head of departments, to reflect on their experiences, their staff's	The survey is underway and is active online and open to respondents to complete the survey from 1 June to 30 June.

		experiences, and how the institution could best support them as we head towards a 'new normal.' The survey is being conducted by the CLT at UFS, and is a partnership project between the CHE and Universities South Africa (USAf).	
	Re-Imagining Higher Education Post-COVID 19 Pandemic Project	The CHE has commissioned a project in which different future scenarios that are put forward by researchers are analysed, and their feasibility and probability assessed qualitatively. It is expected that from such an analysis, a clearer picture would emerge of the more probable future higher education landscape in the country and provide information to inform planning.	This project is well underway, and is being managed by the CHE's Research, Monitoring and Advice Directorate. The output of the project is envisaged to be a discussion document that would present the different scenarios and the evaluation thereof, as well as recommendations to the various authorities and stakeholders.
	Meta-analysis of learning and teaching during the 2020 and 2021 academic years.	In 2020, the DHET requested universities to submit multimodal teaching and learning plans for the 2020 academic year and monitored the implementation of the plans through fortnightly and weekly monitoring reports. In 2021, the CHE and the DHET have partnered to develop Learning, Teaching and Assessment Plan templates and the associated Monitoring Report templates. Universities and private higher education institutions were requested to submit learning, teaching and assessment plans, and the implementation of these will be monitored through the year. The plans and the monitoring reports provide a rich source of data that can be analysed to provide insights into learning, teaching and assessment approaches adopted in a crisis environment.	A methodical analysis of the information is still to be undertaken.
	Student success in COVID times	Preliminary (unaudited and incomplete) undergraduate student success data points to improved student success at many institutions during the COVID-19 impacted 2020 academic year. This project will accurately document 2020 student success trends across the university system and explore the reasons for the documented trends, including if/how inequality impacted on student success.	This sub-project is still to be initiated.
	Postgraduate teaching and learning during COVID-19	This sub-project will investigate the responsive postgraduate learning and teaching models have been adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic. What lessons have been learned, that have added value, and that can be sustained into the future?	This sub-project is still to be initiated.

DEVELOPMENT	Development of standards, guidelines and criteria (SGCs) for learning, teaching and assessment; online and blended learning; work-integrated learning; programme and curriculum development, articulation and other learning and teaching related standards.	The QAF requires that research-informed and evidence-based SGCs be developed for a range of functional areas in higher education, to serve as instruments to inform practice in those areas, and to enable effective internal and external quality assurance for those areas. These SGCs will be developed by communities of practice. This sub-project will oversee the development of these standards.	This sub-project is still to be initiated.
	Learning, teaching and assessment capacity development.	The equitable implementation of the QAF in the higher education sector is dependent on the capacitation of individuals and institutions to adopt new, innovative learning, teaching and assessment practices that have come to fore. Courses and materials will be developed to in a range of areas to enable capacitation.	This sub-project is still to be initiated.

Outputs

It is anticipated that the RELATE Project will have tangible outputs and outcomes including the following:

- Individual sub-project reports and a number of meta-project reports.
- Knowledge generation and knowledge dissemination through conference presentations, journal articles and other academic fora and publications, including CHE publications and CHE- organised fora.
- Policy recommendations that are enabling of the new learning and teaching possibilities.
- Identification of the capacity development needs that should be addressed in order for the sector to equitably take advantage of the new learning and teaching possibilities, and the development and implementation of capacity development programmes to address such needs.
- Standards, guidelines and criteria for online and blended learning and teaching that can inform practice, and quality assurance mechanisms, including internal quality assurance and external quality assurance mechanisms.