

Reconceptualising student engagement as relational becoming: Africanised pedagogies of recognition, agency, and success in Higher Education

Dr Noluvo Rangana

Faculty of Education, Nelson Mandela University

Sub-theme: Student Engagement, Agency, and Success

Paper presentation

Abstract

This paper engages the sub-theme of student engagement, agency, and success by interrogating how student engagement is currently understood and enacted in Higher Education. Despite widespread commitments to student-centred learning, engagement is still often measured through individualised indicators such as attendance, participation, and academic performance. This reflects a dominant assumption that engagement is an individual attribute located within students, rather than a pedagogical condition shaped through relational learning environments. The gap identified in this paper is that mainstream approaches to student success rarely account for the relational and epistemic conditions through which engagement is produced. As a result, students are frequently labelled as disengaged when pedagogical spaces fail to recognise them as legitimate knowledge contributors or to create conditions for epistemic belonging. This paper argues that student engagement is not an observable behaviour or individual attribute, but a relationally produced epistemic condition grounded in Africanised pedagogies of recognition and co-construction. Drawing on Africanisation and Indigenous Knowledge Systems, particularly Ubuntu, it reframes engagement as a process of relational becoming in which students develop agency through interdependence, dialogue, and recognition within learning communities. The paper further proposes that students are not only participants in learning, but co-creators of knowledge whose agency emerges through pedagogical practices that affirm voice, lived experience, and intellectual contribution. From this perspective, student success is redefined as a collective and relational achievement grounded in belonging, participation, and co-construction of meaning. The paper concludes that Africanised relational epistemologies offer a generative framework for rethinking student engagement. Its key contribution is a shift from deficit understandings of students towards the pedagogical and relational conditions that produce engagement, agency, and success as shared educational outcomes.

Keywords: Africanisation; student engagement; Ubuntu; epistemic agency