

Emancipatory Imaginations

Advancing Critical University Studies

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Nelson Mandela University, South Africa

1. The discursive fields that produce and frame the meaning of higher education transformation globally and locally seem to have discharged its social justice content and intent. These meanings are not only enslaved by a neoliberal social imaginary, they also actively contribute to the reproduction of the current university system and its discriminatory and exclusionary discourses and practices. Moreover, they steer what we come to accept as the *purpose of the university*; and how the pursuit of such purpose is pragmatically expressed.
2. Stein (2018, p.1)¹ argues that at present the possible futures of university have been ‘significantly narrowed’ and that the options on offer ‘also appear increasingly unsustainable and unethical’. Such options, which undercut the radical transformation of universities, are encoded within higher education policy and practice, and programmed within the philosophies, orientations and praxes of agencies such as government departments, research councils, university associations, foundations and statutory councils responsible for funding, oversight and quality assurance. This is the case in South Africa, and elsewhere. In other words, the system is locked into discursive fields that produce particular meanings of the principles of transformation: *simulating* change on the one hand, and *justifying* and *legitimising* systemically-anchored discriminatory outcomes on the other.
3. Deeply linked to the ways in which we ‘see’ universities, the production of imaginaries are associated with the policy, ‘epistemological and ontological frames within which most imaginaries and institutions of higher education are embedded’ (*ibid*). That is, the discursive fields – constituted by ways of meaning making and narration; as well as discourses, practices and action - are perhaps unescapable because they are omnipresent. Thus, we struggle to imagine differently. Or, our range of imagined options is narrow (Barnett 2013)².
4. This Winter School will invite scholars and practitioners from Ghana, the UK, India, Kenya, Ireland, South Africa, Uganda and other countries, with an interest in the critical study of higher education, to come together to challenge and ‘denaturalize the dominant higher education imaginary’ (Stein 2018, p.1). Key to the ‘ideas’ of the Winter School is the prospect of ‘other’ ways to study universities that are meaningfully different from the various strands of conventional higher education studies; and to explore a flexible configuration of a Critical University Studies programme that is capable of thinking plural forms of emancipatory higher education imaginations and futures.

André Keet (NMU) and Dina Zoe Belluigi (QUB) – 17 May 2019

¹ Stein, S. (2018). Beyond higher education as we know it: Gesturing towards decolonial horizons of possibility. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-018-9622-7>

² Barnett, R. (2013). *Imagining the University*. Routledge.