

Achieving Quantitative Literacy: An Urgent Challenge For Higher Education

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Rethinking and researching transformation in higher education: A meta-study of South African trends



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Transformation is often loosely defined. We argue that the reason for this is its inherent complexity. Paradoxically, its lack of definition is an asset, which provides an opportunity to rethink and research transformation in higher education, rather than an urgent problem to be solved. In this article, the possibilities for researching and rethinking transformation are based on an exploration of transformation in higher education and the policy directives that influenced its development in South Africa. A meta-study was used to determine the national publishing trends in the *South African Journal of Higher Education* and the way transformation in higher education is situated in some of the articles in this journal. The population of the study comprised 1080 articles published between 2005 and 2015 in the *South African Journal of Higher Education*. These were analysed to determine the broad national publishing trends. Thereafter, an in-depth analysis was conducted on 30 of these articles to determine the approach to transformation in higher education and the context in which it was discussed. Based on the findings of the analysis, we recommend future directions for rethinking and researching transformation in higher education.

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Transform

Transformation is often described as a complex, open-ended concept (Venter & Tolmie 2012:1) and even dismissed as 'so vague and indistinct that it is basically an unusable term' (Venter 2015:175). The etymology of the word is derived from the Old French or Late Latin *transformation* (noun). Its root is the Latin verb *transformare*. The prefix *trans* meaning 'across', 'beyond', 'above', or 'bridging' is combined with *formare* meaning 'to form'. In the 1900s, the concept of transformation was used to mean 'undergoing a change in form'. To transform is thus to cause or undergo a change in form, nature, or appearance. Transformation can refer to processes of change in physics (a change of one element into another), mathematics (conversion of one figure into another of a similar value), linguistics (conversion of one syntactic form into another), biology (alteration of a cell), personality (change in character or appearance) and politics (ideologically driven change). The Greek term for transformation, *metaschematizomai*, emphasises a change in form, but includes the idea of 'remodelling, modification, and restructuring'. The noun 'transformation' is indeed complex and open-ended, but its core meaning is 'to undergo and/or cause a change of form'.

The concept 'transform' is essentially about change and evolution. It cannot be associated with rigidity because it implies constant remodelling, modification and restructuring of some sort. This adaptation could be an internal or an external process (Malabou 2008:5). When something is transformed, it could imply that it received (and internalised) its form from an outside force. However, to transform means that form is given to something external. But, crossing or bridging form through change and evolution could also be the result of the annihilation of form, that is, the destruction of form (Malabou 2008:5). Malabou (2012) writes that

[i]n[o] one thinks spontaneously about a plastic art of destruction. Yet destruction too is formative. A smashed-up face is still a face, a stump a limb, a traumatized psyche remains a psyche. Destruction has its own sculpting tools. (p. 4)

This destruction that makes crossing or bridging form possible could be seen as "... a threatening detour that opens up another pathway, one that is unexpected, unpredictable, dark" (Malabou 2012:6). The concept 'transform', therefore, with its inherent ability to take form, give form and annihilate form presents infinite possibilities for crossing or bridging form (Malabou 2012:10). Seen in this way, the concept 'transform' is therefore not the result of external forces but is, in fact, programmed by the concept (transform) itself. In other words, the fuzziness of 'transform' reflects



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