Decolonising higher education in the Global South: A Student–staff partnership approach to equitable co-created pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Decolonising higher education in the Global South requires addressing entrenched colonial epistemologies, hierarchical structures, and Eurocentric curricula that limit equitable participation and critical engagement. This article examines how student–staff partnerships can serve as a practical mechanism for advancing socially just and contextually relevant pedagogy within a preclinical medical curriculum at a South African research-intensive university. Using reflective engagement with a partnership initiative, the methodology involved collaborative workshops and iterative dialogue between three students and one staff member to explore perceptions of power, experiences of engagement and exclusion in lecture-based teaching, and the co-creation of inclusive pedagogical practices. Findings demonstrate that partnership facilitates the redistribution of pedagogical authority, amplifies student voice, and transforms teaching and learning from hierarchical and prescriptive processes into collaborative, co-constructed experiences. Key insights include enhanced student agency, negotiation of authority between students and staff, and the development of co-created guidelines for inclusive teaching that are responsive to local contexts and diverse epistemologies. By situating student–staff partnership as a vehicle for decolonial praxis, this work contributes both conceptual and practical guidance for higher education institutions seeking to embed equity, dialogue, and co-creation into curriculum and pedagogy. It illustrates that participatory approaches can disrupt hierarchical norms, foster

critical reflexivity, and generate contextually grounded learning environments, providing a replicable model for advancing socially just and inclusive higher education across the Global South.

Keywords: Student staff partnership, decolonial pedagogy, academic induction, Global South higher education, participatory curriculum, socially-just pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions across the Global South continue to operate within structures shaped by colonial histories and enduring epistemic hierarchies. Colonial universities were historically established to reproduce systems of knowledge that privileged Western epistemologies while marginalising local intellectual traditions and contextual forms of scholarship. Although many universities have undergone significant political transformation since the end of formal colonial rule, the deeper epistemic structures organising academic life often remain intact. These structures shape what knowledge is considered legitimate, whose voices are recognised as authoritative, and how teaching and learning are organised within the academy.

Scholars of decolonial education argue that coloniality persists not only through curriculum content but also through institutional practices that structure knowledge production and participation within universities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). In African higher education contexts, calls for transformation have intensified in recent years, particularly following student movements that highlighted the continued dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems and institutional cultures (Mbembe 2016). These debates emphasise that meaningful transformation requires examining not only what is taught, but also the processes through which both students and academic staff are introduced to academic communities and socialised into disciplinary practices.

One such process is academic induction. Academic staff induction programmes represent a key entry point through which universities introduce new academics to the expectations, norms, values, and pedagogical practices that govern academic life. Within professional programmes such as medicine, induction is designed to orient academic staff to institutional policies, disciplinary expectations, teaching responsibilities, and the professional cultures that shape educational practice. In doing so, induction plays a critical role in shaping how academics understand teaching, learning, and their role within the academic community.

Beyond conveying logistical information, induction functions as a process of institutional socialisation. Through induction, new academics learn how knowledge is organised within the discipline, how authority operates within academic spaces, and what forms of teaching,

learning, and engagement are valued. These early encounters influence not only how academics understand institutional expectations but also how they subsequently shape students' experiences of teaching and learning.

Despite its importance, academic induction is frequently delivered through structured and institutionally controlled formats. In many universities, induction consists primarily of presentations delivered by faculty or administrative staff outlining policies, expectations of professionalism, and institutional procedures. While such approaches efficiently communicate institutional requirements, they often position new academics as recipients of institutional knowledge rather than as active participants in shaping institutional culture and pedagogical practice.

This model of induction can reinforce hierarchical relationships by framing academic expertise as something possessed by institutional authorities and transmitted to new academics. Such approaches may overlook the contextual knowledge held by students and experienced educators, limiting opportunities for reciprocal learning during induction. As a result, new academics may inherit implicit assumptions about teaching, learning, authority, and curriculum without critically engaging with how these are experienced by the diverse student communities they teach.

These limitations are especially pronounced within medical education, where teaching occurs within highly structured and traditionally hierarchical environments. New academics must navigate complex institutional expectations while simultaneously supporting students entering demanding academic and professional programmes. When induction mirrors these hierarchical dynamics, it may reinforce existing power relations and transmissive models of teaching rather than fostering critically reflective and contextually responsive educational practice. Furthermore, conventional induction rarely creates opportunities for new academics to engage directly with students' lived experiences of the curriculum or to critically reflect on how knowledge and authority operate within educational contexts.

Reconsidering academic induction therefore requires moving beyond models that position new academics as passive recipients of institutional knowledge. Increasingly, higher education scholarship emphasises the value of participatory approaches that recognise students as contributors to educational practice. Within this context, student–staff partnership (SSP) has emerged as a framework for fostering more collaborative forms of teaching and learning.

Student–staff partnerships conceptualise students and educators as collaborators in the design and development of educational practices rather than as occupants of fixed hierarchical roles. Within this model, students may contribute to curriculum development, pedagogical

innovation, and the evaluation of learning environments. By engaging students in meaningful decision-making processes, partnership initiatives seek to create more dialogic and inclusive educational spaces (Cook-Sather, Bovill, Felten 2014).

Partnership approaches challenge traditional assumptions about where expertise resides within the university. While educators bring disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical experience, students contribute insight into learning processes and the challenges associated with navigating academic environments. Recognising these complementary forms of expertise enables more responsive and contextually relevant educational design.

Within the context of academic staff induction, SSPs offer a compelling approach for reimagining how new academics are introduced to institutional teaching and learning cultures. Students who have recently navigated the curriculum hold valuable experiential knowledge of the uncertainties, hidden curriculum, and pedagogical practices that shape learning. Engaging students as partners in academic staff induction enables new academics to better understand the realities of the learning environment, identify gaps between intended and experienced curricula, and develop more contextually responsive teaching practices from the outset of their academic careers.

Partnership approaches also align with broader calls for transformation within higher education in the Global South. By recognising students as legitimate contributors to pedagogical design, SSP initiatives challenge inherited hierarchies that locate academic authority exclusively within institutional structures (Le Grange 2016). Such approaches create opportunities for more inclusive and critically engaged forms of academic practice while contributing to institutional transformation.

Against this backdrop, there is increasing interest in how participatory pedagogical models can reshape foundational practices within higher education. Academic staff induction represents a particularly important site for such transformation, as it shapes how new academics understand institutional culture, pedagogical practice, and their relationships with students and colleagues.

This article addresses the following research questions:

- How can student–staff partnerships contribute to reimagining academic staff induction within a Global South medical education context?
- What principles emerge from a student–staff partnership approach that can inform decolonial academic staff induction?

This article examines how student–staff partnership can reimagine academic staff induction within a Global South medical education context through collaborative pedagogical design. Drawing on a partnership initiative involving three students and one educator within a medical programme, this article reflects on the co-development of an academic staff induction resource and co-created pedagogical guidelines and considers how partnership-based approaches can contribute to more inclusive, critically engaged, and contextually responsive academic staff induction. In doing so, the study contributes to the growing body of scholarship emerging from the National Academic Teaching Excellence Programme (NATHEP), which seeks to reimagine academic induction and staff development within South African higher education. By foregrounding collaboration between students and educators, the study contributes to ongoing conversations on transformation, participation, academic staff development, and pedagogical innovation in higher education.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE

The project of decolonising higher education in the Global South is rooted in a sustained critique of the enduring structures of coloniality that continue to shape knowledge production, validation, and dissemination. Central to this critique is the notion of the coloniality of knowledge, which refers to the persistence of Eurocentric epistemologies as universal, neutral, and superior, despite the formal end of colonial rule (Mignolo 2007). Mignolo's concept of "delinking" calls for a rupture from these dominant epistemic frameworks, advocating instead for pluriversality, an ecology of knowledges that recognises diverse ways of knowing and being.

Mbembe (2015) similarly critiques the dominance of Western epistemic traditions in African universities, arguing that these institutions often function as "local instantiations of the dominant Eurocentric canon". For Mbembe, decolonisation is not merely about inclusion but about fundamentally rethinking the architecture of knowledge itself, including the archive, the curriculum, and institutional cultures. This aligns with Ndlovu-Gatsheni's emphasis on epistemic freedom, which foregrounds the need to dismantle epistemic hierarchies that marginalise African and other Global South knowledges.

Epistemic injustice, a concept advanced by scholars such as Santos (2014), further deepens this critique by highlighting how certain knowledge systems are systematically excluded or devalued. Santos' notion of "epistemicide" underscores the historical destruction and ongoing marginalisation of indigenous and non-Western knowledge systems. In the South African context, Heleta (2023) argues that higher education remains entrenched in neoliberal

and Eurocentric paradigms, resulting in the continued alienation of students whose lived realities are not reflected in the curriculum. This resonates with student movements where students report feeling "alienated, marginalised and invisible" and have called for more inclusive and contextually relevant forms of knowledge.

Curriculum transformation is therefore a key site of intervention in decolonial projects. Tuhiwai Smith (2012) emphasises the importance of decolonising methodologies that centre indigenous epistemologies and challenge Western research paradigms. In higher education, this involves rethinking not only what is taught but how knowledge is produced and legitimised. Naidoo et al (2020) highlight the tensions inherent in this process, noting that while there are calls for decolonial change, institutional practices often remain resistant, resulting in situations where "you have to change, the curriculum stays the same." This underscores the complexity of achieving curricular justice within entrenched institutional frameworks.

The SAJHE special issue situates these debates within a broader crisis of identity and legitimacy in South African higher education, thirty-two years into democracy. While structural reforms have been implemented, they are often insufficient in addressing deeper epistemic inequalities. The emphasis on decolonial praxis in this issue signals a shift from critique to action, calling for transformative approaches that integrate diverse knowledge systems while maintaining epistemic reciprocity and plurality.

Thus, decolonising higher education in the Global South requires a multi-layered approach that addresses coloniality at the levels of knowledge, pedagogy, and institutional culture. It demands not only the inclusion of marginalised voices but also a reconfiguration of the epistemic foundations of higher education itself.

Academic induction plays a critical role in shaping how new academics understand their roles, responsibilities, and identities within higher education institutions. Traditionally, induction programmes have focused on orienting staff to institutional policies, teaching practices, and administrative procedures. However, scholarship increasingly highlights the need to reconceptualise induction as a form of critical professional development that engages with broader socio-political and epistemic contexts.

Behari-Leak (2024) argues for contextualised and critical induction practices that move beyond technical training to address the complexities of teaching and learning in the Global South. The NATHEP project, foregrounds the importance of understanding induction as situated within historical and structural inequalities. This perspective challenges the notion of induction as a neutral or apolitical process, instead positioning it as a site where dominant norms and values are reproduced or contested.

One key concept in this regard is the hidden curriculum, which refers to the implicit norms, values, and expectations that are communicated through institutional practices. Traditional induction programmes often fail to make these implicit dimensions visible, thereby perpetuating exclusionary practices. For example, new academics may be expected to conform to Eurocentric pedagogical norms without critical reflection on their relevance or inclusivity. Leibowitz (2014) critiques the field of academic development for its lack of clarity and reflexivity, questioning what is meant by "development" and whose interests it serves.

Institutional socialisation is another important dimension of academic induction. This process involves the ways in which new academics are integrated into the culture and practices of the institution. While socialisation can provide support and guidance, it can also reinforce existing power structures and norms. In neoliberal university contexts induction may prioritise performance metrics and measurable outputs, reducing complex pedagogical work to quantifiable indicators. This can limit opportunities for critical engagement and transformative practice.

Critiques of traditional induction approaches therefore emphasise their tendency to reproduce dominant epistemologies and institutional cultures. Heleta (2023) notes that without a deliberate focus on decolonisation, induction programmes risk perpetuating Eurocentric knowledge systems and marginalising alternative perspectives. Similarly, the abstract for this study highlights how academic induction and student engagement practices often "perpetuate hierarchical, Eurocentric models that marginalize student voices".

In response, there is growing advocacy for reimagining induction as a collaborative, reflective, and contextually responsive process. This includes incorporating critical pedagogy, engaging with issues of power and privilege, and fostering epistemic plurality. The SAJHE special issue calls for induction practices that challenge coloniality, move beyond Western models, and position induction as a driver of decolonial institutional transformation.

Ultimately, academic induction should not be understood merely as a process of assimilation but as an opportunity for critical engagement and transformation. By addressing the hidden curriculum and rethinking institutional socialisation, induction can contribute to more inclusive and socially just educational environments.

Student–staff partnerships (SSPs) have emerged as a significant pedagogical approach in higher education, offering a framework for reconfiguring traditional hierarchies and fostering collaborative learning environments. Scholars such as Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten conceptualise SSPs as practices that involve students and staff working together as co-creators

of teaching and learning, rather than as passive recipients and authoritative experts, respectively.

Cook-Sather et al (2014) define SSPs as collaborative, reciprocal processes through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute to and benefit from the educational experience. Bovill (2020) extends this by emphasising co-creation in curriculum design, where students actively participate in shaping course content, assessment, and pedagogical approaches. Felten (2017) highlights the importance of partnership principles such as respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility.

In the context of the Global South, SSPs offer a particularly valuable approach for addressing the legacies of coloniality and epistemic injustice. The abstract for this study positions SSPs as a mechanism for "reimagining academic induction and promoting participatory, socially just pedagogical practices". By centring collaboration and shared decision-making, SSPs challenge hierarchical models of knowledge production and create space for diverse perspectives.

One of the key contributions of SSPs is their capacity to enable shared decision-making. This involves students and staff jointly participating in decisions related to curriculum, assessment, and teaching practices. Such processes disrupt traditional power dynamics and promote a more democratic educational environment. The study's findings indicate that SSPs facilitate negotiation processes and co-construction of curriculum and assessment, thereby enhancing the relevance and inclusivity of educational practices.

SSPs also support collaborative curriculum development, which aligns with decolonial calls for curriculum transformation. By involving students in the design and evaluation of curricula, SSPs ensure that educational content reflects diverse experiences and knowledge systems. This is particularly important in contexts where curricula have historically been dominated by Eurocentric perspectives. The emphasis on co-creation workshops in the study demonstrates how collaborative processes can generate contextually grounded and culturally responsive pedagogies.

Another significant outcome of SSPs is the enhancement of student agency. Participation in partnership processes empowers students to take ownership of their learning and to contribute meaningfully to institutional change. The study reports that students involved in SSPs experience greater inclusion, motivation, and a sense of ownership, while staff benefit from integrating student perspectives into their teaching practices. This mutual benefit underscores the transformative potential of SSPs for both students and educators.

Importantly, SSPs also engage with issues of power and privilege, which are central to decolonial praxis. By creating spaces for dialogue and reflexivity, partnerships can address epistemic inequalities and promote epistemic reciprocity. The study highlights how SSPs "interrogate and negotiate power asymmetries," aligning with broader decolonial principles such as pluriversality and social justice.

However, the implementation of SSPs is not without challenges. Institutional constraints, entrenched hierarchies, and resource limitations can hinder the development of genuine partnerships. Nevertheless, the literature suggests that even within these constraints, SSPs can serve as sites of "productive disruption," catalysing change and opening possibilities for more inclusive and equitable higher education systems.

Thus student–staff partnerships represent a powerful approach for advancing co-created pedagogy and supporting decolonial transformation in higher education. By enabling shared decision-making, collaborative curriculum development, and enhanced student agency, SSPs contribute to the reimagining of academic induction and pedagogical practices in the Global South.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is situated at the intersection of three complementary bodies of scholarship: decolonial theory in higher education, student–staff partnership pedagogy, and participatory approaches to teaching and learning. Together, these perspectives provide a conceptual lens through which academic induction can be understood not merely as an institutional orientation process, but as a pedagogical site in which knowledge, authority, and participation are negotiated. Within this framework, student–staff partnership is conceptualised as a form of decolonial academic induction praxis that enables a shift from hierarchical models of knowledge transmission towards more collaborative and dialogical forms of learning.

Decolonial scholarship has drawn sustained attention to the ways in which contemporary universities remain shaped by the historical and epistemic legacies of colonialism. Modern knowledge institutions continue to privilege Eurocentric epistemologies while marginalising alternative ways of knowing emerging from historically colonised contexts (Mignolo 2011). In the Global South, this dynamic is reflected in curricula, pedagogical practices, and institutional cultures that reproduce asymmetries of authority between educators and students. Calls to decolonise higher education therefore extend beyond curriculum reform to a broader reconfiguration of pedagogical relationships and the structures through which knowledge is produced and legitimised (Mbembe 2016).

Academic induction represents a particularly important site within this process. Induction practices typically function as mechanisms of institutional socialisation, introducing new academic staff to the norms, expectations, values, and pedagogical cultures of the university. While often framed as supportive transitions into academic life, these processes may also reinforce implicit hierarchies by positioning new academics primarily as recipients of established institutional knowledge and practice. From a decolonial perspective, such models risk reproducing the epistemic hierarchies that transformation agendas seek to disrupt. Reimagining academic staff induction therefore requires approaches that create space for critical dialogue, mutual recognition, and participatory engagement in the construction of academic knowledge and practice.

Student–staff partnership literature provides a pedagogical framework through which these goals may be pursued. Partnership approaches conceptualise students and educators as collaborators in teaching and learning, emphasising reciprocity, shared responsibility, and respect for diverse forms of expertise. Research demonstrates that students possess unique insights into their learning experiences and can contribute meaningfully to curriculum design, pedagogical innovation, educational governance, and the induction of academic staff into contextually responsive teaching practices (Cook-Sather et al 2014). Within such models, authority is not removed from educators but reconfigured through collaborative processes that recognise both pedagogical expertise and student experience as legitimate sources of knowledge.

Central to partnership pedagogy is the concept of co-creation. Co-creation refers to processes through which students and staff jointly design learning activities, assessment strategies, curriculum initiatives, and educational resources. Rather than functioning as passive recipients of knowledge, students become active participants in shaping educational practices and institutional culture. This approach aligns with participatory pedagogical traditions that emphasise dialogue, reflexivity, and collective inquiry as foundations for meaningful learning. Such orientations draw on critical educational traditions that view learning as relational and transformative, requiring engagement with questions of power, identity, and social context (Freire 1970).

Within a decolonial framework, student–staff partnerships can be understood as enabling forms of epistemic reciprocity. Epistemic reciprocity recognises that knowledge is produced through dialogue among multiple participants rather than transmitted unilaterally from expert to novice. By valuing student perspectives, lived experiences, and contextual knowledge, partnership approaches challenge dominant assumptions about expertise while opening space

for more pluralistic and inclusive forms of knowledge production. For academic staff, this creates opportunities to learn from students' experiences of the curriculum, hidden curriculum, and institutional culture, enabling induction to become a reciprocal rather than unidirectional process. This orientation resonates with decolonial calls for pluriversality, which emphasise the coexistence of diverse epistemic traditions within academic spaces (Santos 2014).

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives inform the conceptual model underpinning this study. The framework positions academic staff induction as a critical pedagogical space in which institutional norms, knowledge hierarchies, and student–staff relationships are negotiated. Decolonial theory provides the analytical lens for interrogating the historical and epistemic structures shaping higher education in the Global South. Student–staff partnership pedagogy offers the relational mechanism through which these structures may be challenged by redistributing authority and enabling collaborative knowledge production. Participatory pedagogies further support this process by emphasising dialogue, reflexivity, and collective inquiry as foundations for transformative learning. Together, these approaches conceptualise academic staff induction not as a process of institutional assimilation, but as a collaborative practice through which students and educators co-construct more equitable and contextually responsive pedagogical environments. This framework guides the study's exploration of how partnership-based initiatives may contribute to reimagining academic staff induction as a form of decolonial pedagogical praxis within Global South universities.

THE CONTEXT

This study is situated at the University of Cape Town (UCT), a historically advantaged, research-intensive institution within a South African higher education sector shaped by ongoing transformation imperatives. Despite nearly three decades of democracy, universities continue to contend with the enduring legacies of colonialism and apartheid, which shape institutional cultures, epistemological frameworks, and access to knowledge. The sector remains marked by tensions around identity, relevance, and legitimacy, with Eurocentric knowledge systems continuing to dominate despite formal commitments to transformation.

At UCT, calls for institutional change were intensified by student-led movements such as *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall*, which foregrounded issues of epistemic exclusion, structural inequality, and the need for socially just and contextually relevant education. In response, the university has undertaken processes of curriculum reform and pedagogical reflection. Within this broader transformation agenda, academic development, academic staff

induction, and student induction have emerged as critical sites for interrogating how knowledge is taught, legitimised, and experienced within the university.

The study is located within the preclinical phase of the UCT Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBChB) programme, which integrates foundational biomedical sciences with early clinical skills training. Teaching during this phase is predominantly structured and content-intensive, relying on lectures, small group tutorials, and digital platforms to accommodate large student cohorts and extensive curricular demands. While these approaches support efficient knowledge delivery, they are often underpinned by transmission-based pedagogies that position knowledge as fixed and unidirectional. Such models reinforce hierarchical relationships between lecturers and students and limit opportunities for dialogue, reflexivity, and critical engagement. From a decolonial perspective, this raise concerns that preclinical teaching may reproduce dominant epistemologies without sufficiently interrogating whose knowledge is prioritised or how it relates to local health realities. There is therefore increasing recognition of the need for more participatory and dialogic approaches within the preclinical curriculum.

Within this institutional context, the Student Curriculum Lekgotla (SCL) in the Faculty of Health Sciences functions as a formal mechanism for student participation in curriculum governance. The term *lekgotla*, denoting a forum for collective dialogue, reflects an intention to foster inclusive engagement and shared decision-making. The SCL provides a structured platform through which students engage with academic staff and faculty leadership on curriculum design, delivery, and evaluation. Through this forum, students articulate their experiences, identify gaps, and propose changes, aligning with broader shifts in higher education that recognise students as active participants in knowledge production. In this study, the SCL serves as a foundational structure for enabling student voice and mediating engagement between students and staff. However, its impact remains shaped by institutional constraints, including bureaucratic processes and entrenched academic norms that may limit the translation of student input into substantive curricular change.

The student–staff partnership (SSP) initiative examined in this study emerged through participation in the online short course *Designing for Social Justice Partnership* (DSJP): *Co-creating across difference*, a collaborative programme involving the following three participating institutions - Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), University of Western Cape (UWC) and UCT (Leni, Reddy, Cupido and others 2025). The course explicitly engages with inequality in higher education by advancing participatory and socially just approaches to teaching and learning. Central to the course is the principle of co-creation,

through which students and staff collaboratively design, implement, and evaluate educational practices. Participants engage critically with questions of power, privilege, and positionality while developing strategies to foster inclusive learning environments. Within this context, co-creation is positioned as a means of addressing structural inequities through shared responsibility and the amplification of marginalised voices. The principles underpinning the DSJP course closely align with the aims of the National Academic Teaching Excellence Programme (NATHEP), which advocates for reimagining academic induction and staff development through socially just, contextually responsive, and transformative pedagogical approaches.

The DSJP course provided both a conceptual and practical foundation for the SSP initiative developed within the MBChB programme. It enabled the translation of co-creation principles into practice within existing institutional structures, particularly through the SCL. In doing so, it acted as a catalyst for rethinking academic practices and advancing more participatory, dialogic, and socially responsive approaches to curriculum design. These processes ultimately informed the co-creation of an academic staff induction resource, illustrating how student–staff partnerships can contribute to reimagining academic staff induction as a collaborative and contextually responsive.

METHODOLOGY

This article presents a practice-based, reflexive account of a student–staff partnership (SSP) initiative undertaken within the preclinical MBChB programme at the University of Cape Town. Rather than reporting on a discrete empirical study, the article documents and critically examines a collaborative process through which the authors worked together to reimagine academic induction. The aim is to articulate a transferable model of partnership practice that can inform similar efforts in Global South higher education contexts.

The approach is grounded in participatory and interpretivist traditions, which understand knowledge as co-constructed through social interaction, dialogue, and reflection (Creswell 2013). Within this paradigm, the authors draw on their direct involvement in the partnership process, treating their experiences as sites of critical inquiry rather than as subjective or anecdotal accounts. This positioning reflects a reflexive, insider-oriented methodology in which the boundaries between researcher and participant are intentionally blurred (Berger 2015). The focus is not on producing detached observations, but on generating situated understandings of how partnership is enacted, negotiated, and sustained within a specific institutional context.

The SSP initiative developed through a series of structured and iterative engagements between students and staff within the preclinical MBChB programme. These engagements were not conceived as formal data collection activities, but as embedded practices of collaboration through which participants collectively examined and reshaped academic induction. The process unfolded across three overlapping phases.

The first phase involved the collective articulation of experience. Students and staff engaged in facilitated discussions to surface their experiences of academic induction, including how institutional expectations were communicated, how inclusion and exclusion were experienced, and where gaps or tensions were perceived. These discussions created a shared space in which participants could reflect on their positioning within the academic environment and begin to identify areas for change.

The second phase centred on dialogic negotiation and co-creation. Building on these initial reflections, participants worked collaboratively to identify priorities for improving academic induction and to co-develop approaches to addressing them. This phase involved sustained engagement around questions of authority, participation, and responsibility. Students and staff negotiated how decisions were made, whose perspectives were prioritised, and how expertise was recognised within the partnership. Co-creation in this context was not a symbolic exercise but a substantive process through which participants actively shaped pedagogical practices (Cook-Sather et al 2014).

The third phase involved iterative reflection and refinement. The partnership was characterised by cycles of reflection in which participants revisited earlier discussions, evaluated emerging ideas, and refined their approaches to academic induction. These reflections were both individual and collective, allowing participants to interrogate their assumptions, respond to feedback, and adapt their practices over time.

Engagement across these phases was sustained through workshops, small-group discussions, and ongoing informal collaboration embedded within the curriculum context. These interactions formed the basis of the authors' subsequent analysis, providing a rich account of how partnership processes unfolded in practice.

The development of this article involved a structured process of collective reflection among the authors following their participation in the SSP initiative. Rather than separating "data collection" and "analysis," the authors approached analysis as an ongoing, dialogic process. They engaged in a series of analytical discussions to revisit their experiences, compare perspectives, and identify recurring patterns and points of tension within the partnership.

Particular attention was given to how authority was negotiated, how participation was enabled or constrained, and how co-creation functioned within existing institutional structures.

Through this process, key themes were identified inductively from the authors' shared reflections. These themes were not predetermined but emerged through iterative dialogue and critical engagement. The conceptual framework of SSP as decolonial academic induction praxis informed the interpretation and organisation of these insights, enabling connections to be drawn between lived experience and broader theoretical concerns.

Although the article does not follow a conventional empirical design, several strategies were employed to support analytical rigour and credibility. The authors' sustained engagement in the partnership process provided depth of insight and contextual sensitivity. The collaborative nature of the analysis enabled multiple perspectives to be brought into dialogue, strengthening the interpretation of shared experiences. Reflexivity was maintained throughout, with the authors critically examining their positionality and its influence on both the partnership process and its representation in this article (Berger 2015).

Ethical considerations were integral to both the partnership process and its documentation. Participation in discussions and collaborative activities was voluntary and grounded in mutual respect. Contributors were engaged as collaborators rather than subjects, reflecting the principles of student–staff partnership. Particular care was taken to ensure that student voices were meaningfully included and that existing power differentials were actively negotiated rather than reproduced.

This methodological approach enables an in-depth exploration of SSPs as a relational and contextually embedded practice. By foregrounding participation, dialogue, and reflexivity, the article captures how students and staff negotiate roles, redistribute authority, and co-construct pedagogical processes within academic induction. Importantly, the approach also positions partnership not only as the focus of inquiry but as the method through which knowledge is produced.

In articulating this process, the article offers a transferable model for institutions seeking to embed co-creation within academic induction. It demonstrates how structured yet flexible partnership processes can generate meaningful pedagogical change while remaining responsive to context. More broadly, it contributes to ongoing discussions on decolonial approaches to higher education by illustrating how reflexive, participatory practices can challenge hierarchical norms and support more inclusive and equitable forms of teaching and learning.

FINDINGS

The findings reflect insights emerging from a student–staff partnership (SSP) process within the preclinical MBChB programme, through which students and staff engaged in sustained dialogue, co-creation, and iterative reflection on academic staff induction. Rather than producing discrete outputs alone, the process surfaced a set of interrelated dynamics concerning power, participation, authority, and pedagogical practice that informed the development of an academic staff induction resource. Across these engagements, it became evident that academic staff induction is not simply a technical orientation to institutional structures and teaching responsibilities, but a relational and political process through which roles, expectations, and forms of legitimacy are negotiated.

A central insight was that existing curricular structures continue to concentrate academic authority in ways that shape how students understand their position within the learning environment. Lecture-based teaching, while effective for delivering large volumes of biomedical knowledge, reinforces a model in which knowledge is transmitted rather than co-constructed. Within this structure, students are positioned primarily as recipients, and their capacity to influence pedagogical processes is limited. Even where formal mechanisms for feedback exist, these are often experienced as peripheral rather than constitutive of curriculum design. As a result, students may engage with the curriculum without a clear sense of agency, navigating expectations that are only partially articulated.

This dynamic was particularly evident in experiences of lecture-based learning. Students described how engagement within lectures is mediated by unspoken academic norms, including how to prioritise content, interpret complex material, and align learning with assessment demands. These expectations are rarely made explicit, creating uneven conditions for participation. Students who are able to access informal networks or prior knowledge are better positioned to navigate the curriculum, while others experience uncertainty and exclusion. In this sense, the lecture format does not simply deliver content; it reproduces a hidden curriculum that privileges certain forms of knowing and participation.

The SSP process created a space in which these dynamics could be surfaced and critically examined. Through dialogue, students articulated how these structures shaped their experiences of inclusion, confidence, and engagement, while staff reflected on the assumptions embedded within their teaching practices. This exchange revealed that what is often perceived as "obvious" or "standard" within teaching is not experienced as such by students. Making these assumptions visible became a critical step in rethinking academic staff induction, shifting

it from a process focused primarily on institutional orientation to one that prepares new academics to engage with students' lived experiences, disciplinary expectations, and the hidden curriculum.

However, the process also made clear that redistributing authority within educational spaces is not a straightforward or automatic outcome of partnership. The presence of entrenched hierarchies means that power is always unevenly held, and without deliberate attention, partnership risks reproducing the very dynamics it seeks to challenge. A key finding, therefore, was that meaningful student–staff partnership requires the intentional cultivation of psychological safety, mutual respect, and relational accountability.

Creating such conditions involved an ongoing commitment to empathy and reflexivity on the part of both students and staff. Students were required to engage not only as advocates for their own experiences but as collaborators capable of recognising the constraints under which staff operate, including curricular demands and institutional expectations. Similarly, staff were required to move beyond defensive or authoritative positions and engage openly with critique, uncertainty, and shared decision-making. This mutual effort disrupted adversarial dynamics in which students and staff might otherwise be positioned in opposition, replacing them with a more relational and negotiated form of engagement.

Within this space, authority was not removed but reconfigured. Rather than being located solely within institutional roles, authority became something that was collectively negotiated and contextually enacted. At different moments, students and staff assumed different forms of leadership depending on their expertise, experience, and proximity to the issue at hand. This fluid redistribution of responsibility required trust, transparency, and a shared commitment to the process. It also required time—time to understand the problem from multiple perspectives, recognise how each party was affected, and identify what each brought in terms of motivation, knowledge, and capacity to contribute to change.

This process of negotiating authority aligns with models of partnership that conceptualise engagement as a continuum rather than a fixed state, in which movement towards more equitable collaboration requires sustained effort and reflection. Importantly, the SSP did not eliminate hierarchy but created a space in which it could be examined, challenged, and, where possible, reworked. This distinction was critical in maintaining both realism and integrity within the partnership and informed the principles underpinning the academic staff induction resource.

Through these engagements, a shared understanding of academic staff induction began to emerge – one that positioned induction not as a one-directional introduction to institutional

expectations, but as a co-constructed process through which new academics are introduced to the realities of teaching and learning in partnership with students. This shift was reflected in the development of co-created pedagogical guidelines and an academic staff induction resource that sought to make implicit expectations explicit, support engagement with lecture-based teaching, and encourage reflective, contextually responsive educational practice (see Appendix A).

The co-created guidelines emphasised clarity, transparency, and intentionality in teaching. This included explicitly articulating the purpose of lectures and tutorials, linking learning activities to assessment expectations, and providing structured guidance on how students engage with complex material. They also encouraged new academics to view students as partners in educational practice by recognising student perspectives as a legitimate source of pedagogical insight. At the same time, the process highlighted the importance of fostering student ownership of learning, encouraging active engagement rather than passive reception.

Importantly, the value of these outputs lay not only in their content but also in the process through which they were produced. The act of co-creation itself functioned as a form of pedagogical transformation, enabling both students and staff to experience alternative ways of engaging with knowledge, authority, and learning. For the academic staff member, this process provided an opportunity to reflect on implicit assumptions about teaching and to consider how induction could better prepare new educators to work within diverse and contextually complex learning environments.

Taken together, these findings suggest that student–staff partnership has the potential to meaningfully reshape academic staff induction by creating spaces for dialogue, reflexivity, and shared responsibility. Rather than viewing induction as a process through which institutional knowledge is transmitted to new academics, the findings support a model in which induction becomes collaborative, contextually responsive, and informed by student experience. However, this potential is contingent on the extent to which partnerships are able to engage with, rather than bypass, the complexities of power, hierarchy, and institutional constraint. The findings therefore point not only to the possibilities of SSPs, but also to the conditions required for them to function as genuinely transformative practices within academic staff induction and higher education more broadly.

RETHINKING ACADEMIC INDUCTION

This study demonstrates that academic staff induction, as traditionally configured within higher education, functions primarily as a process of assimilation into institutional norms. Within the

preclinical MBChB context, this is reflected in lecture-dominated pedagogies and implicit academic expectations that position knowledge as fixed and authority as residing within institutional structures. New academics are introduced not only to disciplinary content and institutional procedures but also to often unspoken assumptions regarding teaching, student engagement, and academic success. In this sense, academic staff induction operates less as an inclusive entry point and more as a mechanism through which epistemic and pedagogical hierarchies are reproduced.

The introduction of student–staff partnership (SSP) reorients this model by transforming academic staff induction into a collaborative and dialogic process. Rather than positioning new academics solely as recipients of institutional knowledge, SSPs recognise students as legitimate contributors to the induction process through their experiential understanding of the curriculum, learning environment, and hidden curriculum. Academic staff induction therefore becomes a relational space in which expectations, pedagogical practices, and forms of participation are co-constructed. Through structured dialogue and iterative reflection, SSPs make visible aspects of the hidden curriculum that are often overlooked within conventional induction processes, enabling both students and staff to interrogate assumptions about what constitutes legitimate knowledge, how it is accessed, and how engagement is structured within the academic environment. This aligns with dialogic conceptions of education that position learning as a participatory process grounded in mutual recognition and exchange (Freire, 1970).

Crucially, this transformation is not achieved simply through the introduction of participatory structures. The findings indicate that rethinking academic staff induction requires a fundamental shift in how relationships between students and educators are understood and enacted. Within SSPs, induction is not only redesigned in terms of content and delivery but reconceptualised as a reciprocal process in which students and staff collectively develop a shared understanding of teaching, learning, institutional culture, and the conditions that shape educational practice. This reciprocal orientation creates opportunities for more inclusive, contextually responsive, and reflective approaches to academic staff induction, but only where sufficient space exists for dialogue, trust, and reflexivity to emerge. In this way, the study contributes to ongoing discussions within the National Academic Teaching Excellence Programme (NATHEP) regarding the need to reimagine academic staff induction as a transformative rather than purely administrative process.

STUDENT–STAFF PARTNERSHIPS AS DECOLONIAL PRAXIS

The findings position student–staff partnerships not merely as pedagogical innovations, but as forms of decolonial praxis that engage directly with questions of epistemic authority, legitimacy, and participation. Decolonial theory calls for a disruption of dominant knowledge systems and the recognition of multiple ways of knowing, particularly those historically marginalised within academic institutions (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Within the SSP process, this is enacted through the recognition of student experience as a legitimate and necessary source of insight into how teaching, learning, and the curriculum are encountered in practice. These insights informed the development of an academic staff induction resource that foregrounds student perspectives as an important component of preparing new academics for teaching within a diverse and contextually complex learning environment.

Rather than treating student perspectives as supplementary, SSPs reposition them as integral to pedagogical design, institutional reflection, and academic staff induction. This reconfiguration challenges the assumption that expertise resides solely within academic staff, instead recognising that students hold critical knowledge about the lived realities of learning. In doing so, SSPs enable a form of epistemic reciprocity in which knowledge is produced through dialogue rather than transmitted unidirectionally. This does not diminish disciplinary expertise but situates it within a more pluralistic and relational framework that is responsive to context and experience.

At the same time, the study highlights that the redistribution of pedagogical authority is neither complete nor uncomplicated. Institutional hierarchies remain present, shaping who speaks, who is heard, and whose contributions are taken up. A key contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that meaningful partnership depends on the active negotiation of these power dynamics rather than their denial. Within the SSP process, authority becomes fluid and context-dependent, shifting between students and staff according to expertise, experience, and the demands of specific situations. This dynamic redistribution requires a willingness on both sides to engage with uncertainty, relinquish fixed roles, and assume responsibility in different ways at different times. For academic staff induction, this suggests that effective induction should not simply transmit institutional expectations but should create opportunities for reciprocal engagement with the diverse forms of expertise that exist within academic communities.

Central to this process is the cultivation of psychological safety and relational trust. The findings indicate that, without intentional efforts to create environments characterised by

respect, openness, and mutual accountability, partnership risks reproducing adversarial dynamics in which students and staff are positioned in opposition. Instead, SSPs require a shared commitment to understanding how each party experiences educational practice, what motivates their engagement, and what constraints shape their participation. This involves sustained dialogue, honesty, and recognition that both students and staff bring different forms of labour, risk, and responsibility to the partnership. In this sense, decolonial praxis is enacted not only through structural change but also through relational practice, where power is continuously negotiated and reconfigured. Such an approach offers a practical framework for academic staff induction that moves beyond institutional orientation towards the cultivation of collaborative, contextually responsive, and socially just teaching practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL SOUTH UNIVERSITIES

The implications of these findings extend beyond the immediate context of the MBChB programme, offering insights into how higher education institutions in the Global South might reimagine academic staff induction as a site of pedagogical transformation rather than administrative orientation. Rather than functioning solely as an introduction to institutional policies and procedures, academic staff induction can provide an important opportunity to cultivate contextually responsive, socially just, and relational approaches to teaching from the outset of an academic career.

Firstly, the study highlights the potential of participatory approaches to strengthen academic staff induction through the meaningful inclusion of student perspectives. By engaging students as collaborators in the design of induction resources and pedagogical guidance, institutions can better prepare new academics to understand the realities of the learning environment, the hidden curriculum, and the diverse experiences of the students they teach. This moves induction beyond the transmission of institutional expectations towards a more reciprocal process of professional learning.

Secondly, the findings suggest that decolonising academic staff induction does not necessarily require wholesale structural reform but can be advanced through targeted, relational interventions that reshape how teaching and learning are understood. The SSP model demonstrates that meaningful change can emerge through processes that foreground dialogue, reflexivity, and co-creation, allowing institutions to work within existing structures while challenging hierarchical assumptions about knowledge, authority, and expertise. This is particularly significant in resource-constrained Global South contexts, where large-scale

institutional reform may be difficult to implement, but sustained partnership initiatives can produce meaningful and lasting pedagogical change.

Thirdly, the study underscores the importance of institutional responsiveness. Universities across the Global South continue to navigate tensions between commitments to transformation and the persistence of colonial epistemic structures and hierarchical institutional cultures. Student–staff partnerships provide a practical mechanism through which these tensions can be critically examined rather than simply acknowledged. By embedding partnership within academic staff induction and broader institutional processes, universities can foster more contextually grounded, responsive, and inclusive approaches to teaching, learning, and academic development. In doing so, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship emerging from the National Academic Teaching Excellence Programme (NATHEP), which seeks to reimagine academic induction and staff development within South African higher education.

Finally, the study highlights the importance of cultural transformation within higher education. Beyond the development of induction resources or pedagogical guidelines, SSPs foster shifts in how students and staff relate to one another, creating conditions for greater empathy, accountability, and shared responsibility. These relational shifts are essential for sustaining pedagogical change because they challenge the assumptions and practices that underpin hierarchical academic cultures. In this sense, SSPs do not simply strengthen academic staff induction; they model a broader pedagogical ethic grounded in collaboration, reflexivity, epistemic reciprocity, and mutual recognition.

Taken together, the findings advance a central argument: student–staff partnerships hold transformative potential not because they introduce participation as a pedagogical technique, but because they reconfigure the relationships through which knowledge, authority, and learning are organised. When implemented intentionally and supported by conditions of trust, institutional commitment, and psychological safety, SSPs provide a practical pathway for reimagining academic staff induction as a collaborative, contextually responsive, and decolonial practice within higher education institutions across the Global South.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTISE

The findings of this study suggest that student–staff partnerships (SSPs) should not be implemented as isolated initiatives but embedded within institutional approaches to academic

staff induction, academic development, and curriculum renewal. For SSPs to meaningfully reconfigure academic staff induction, universities must move beyond symbolic inclusion and establish enabling conditions that support co-creation as a legitimate, recognised, and resourced form of academic practice.

At an institutional level, this begins with recognising academic staff induction as more than an administrative onboarding process. Induction programmes should include structured opportunities for new academics to engage with student perspectives on teaching, learning, and the hidden curriculum, ensuring that induction is informed not only by institutional expectations but also by the lived realities of the students they will teach. Universities should establish formal structures through which students and staff engage in ongoing dialogue around curriculum design, teaching practice, and academic development. These structures should be embedded within institutional governance rather than positioned as peripheral initiatives, ensuring that student contributions meaningfully inform decision-making.

Equally important is the provision of institutional support in the form of time, resources, and facilitation. Effective SSPs require dedicated opportunities for sustained engagement and reflection. Participation by academic staff should be recognised within workload allocation, induction programmes, and professional development frameworks, while students should be supported through training, mentorship, and appropriate recognition of their contributions. Without institutional investment, partnership risks remaining dependent on individual enthusiasm rather than becoming embedded within organisational culture.

At the level of pedagogical practice, the findings suggest that co-creation should be incorporated into the design of academic staff induction itself. Induction programmes should be reconceptualised as collaborative processes through which new academics gain insight into students' experiences of learning, clarify expectations around teaching and assessment, and identify potential barriers to engagement. This includes making implicit academic norms explicit, supporting reflective teaching practice, and using co-created pedagogical guidelines and induction resources as practical tools for developing more inclusive and transparent educational environments.

Crucially, institutions must also attend to the relational conditions that enable partnership to flourish. The study demonstrates that psychological safety, mutual respect, and reflexivity are foundational to meaningful SSPs. Creating these conditions requires intentional facilitation of dialogue and a shared commitment among students and staff to engage with honesty, empathy, and accountability. It also requires recognising the different forms of expertise,

responsibility, and institutional constraints that shape participation, allowing authority and leadership to be negotiated rather than assumed.

Finally, institutions should approach academic staff induction as an iterative and contextually responsive process rather than a fixed institutional event. Mechanisms for ongoing reflection, evaluation, and adaptation should be embedded within induction programmes so that they continue to evolve alongside changing institutional priorities and student needs. Although developed within a South African medical programme, the principles underpinning this partnership approach including dialogue, co-creation, reflexivity, and epistemic reciprocity may be transferable to other disciplines and higher education institutions seeking to develop more inclusive, decolonial, and contextually responsive approaches to academic staff induction across the Global South.

CONCLUSION

Academic staff induction, too often reduced to procedural orientation and institutional onboarding, can be reimagined as a generative site of pedagogical transformation through student–staff partnerships (SSPs). This study has shown that when students are engaged as collaborators rather than positioned solely as recipients of education, academic staff induction shifts from compliance with institutional norms to a collaborative process in which teaching, learning, expectations, and pedagogical practice are critically negotiated. In this reconfiguration, the hidden curriculum is no longer silently reproduced but brought into view, interrogated, and addressed through dialogue between students and educators.

In this sense, SSPs operate as a form of decolonial praxis. They disrupt the presumed stability of pedagogical authority by recognising student experience as an important source of pedagogical knowledge and by re-situating expertise within relational, rather than exclusively hierarchical, terms. Yet this redistribution of authority is neither automatic nor uncomplicated. It requires the deliberate cultivation of psychological safety, trust, and reflexive accountability—conditions under which students and staff can engage honestly with power, difference, and responsibility. Without these conditions, partnership risks becoming symbolic, reproducing the very hierarchies it seeks to challenge.

Reimagining academic staff induction through SSPs therefore offers more than an alternative model of induction; it provides a practical approach to fostering more contextually responsive, inclusive, and socially just teaching practices within higher education. Rather than viewing induction as a process through which new academics are socialised into existing institutional norms, this study demonstrates its potential to become a collaborative space in

which institutional cultures, pedagogical assumptions, and relationships between students and educators are critically examined and co-constructed. Although developed within a South African medical education context, the principles of dialogue, co-creation, reflexivity, and epistemic reciprocity offer a transferable framework for reimagining academic staff induction across higher education institutions in the Global South. In doing so, this study contributes to the growing scholarship on decolonial academic staff development by demonstrating how student–staff partnerships can support more equitable, participatory, and contextually grounded approaches to academic induction.

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APPENDIX A

Summary of the Co-created Academic Staff Induction Resource

The student–staff partnership (SSP) process resulted in the co-development of an academic staff induction resource designed to support new educators within the preclinical MBChB programme. The resource was developed collaboratively by three students and one academic staff member through iterative dialogue and reflection, with the aim of making implicit expectations explicit and promoting more inclusive, contextually responsive teaching practices.

Theme	Guiding Principle	Example of Application
Making the hidden curriculum explicit	Clearly communicate expectations that are often assumed rather than articulated.	Explain how students should approach lecture preparation, independent study, and assessment expectations.
Transparent teaching	Make the purpose of teaching activities explicit.	Clearly state learning outcomes, explain how lectures align with tutorials and assessments, and indicate the expected level of understanding.
Student partnership	Recognise students as legitimate contributors to educational practice.	Incorporate student feedback into curriculum review and encourage ongoing dialogue between students and educators.
Inclusive learning environments	Foster teaching practices that acknowledge diverse educational backgrounds and learning experiences.	Use accessible explanations, clarify disciplinary terminology, and encourage multiple opportunities for student participation.
Reflective practice	Encourage continual reflection on teaching and learning.	Prompt new academics to reflect on their teaching approaches and consider how student experiences can inform future curriculum development.
Psychological safety	Create learning environments characterised by respect, openness, and mutual accountability.	Encourage constructive dialogue, welcome questions, and create opportunities for students to provide feedback without fear of negative consequences.

The resource was intended to complement existing institutional academic staff induction processes rather than replace them. It provides practical guidance for new educators by integrating student perspectives into discussions of teaching, learning, communication, and curriculum engagement. Although developed within a South African undergraduate medical programme, the principles underpinning the resource dialogue, co-creation, transparency, and epistemic reciprocity may be adapted to other higher education contexts seeking to strengthen academic staff induction through student–staff partnership.