

Report on Workstream 2's seminar

Socially responsive curricula in health professions education

This seminar took place on 23 February 2024. Professor Susan van Schalkwyk, Professor Cecelia Jacobs and Dr Anthea Hansen, all from the Centre for the Health Professions Education in the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at Stellenbosch University, presented insights gained from the five-year Responsive Curriculum Project. A multi-institutional project, this has involved the collaboration of the Centre at SU, the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Sefako Makgathu University, the University of Cape Town, the University of the Western Cape and the University of the Witwatersrand.

Van Schalkwyk summarised the key purpose of the study by saying “The bottom line was that this study sought to advance the social justice agenda.” A fundamental premise was that “disease is managed in the content of a health care system, and addressing issues of inequity and injustice within local healthcare systems needs to become part of how future healthcare professionals are educated.”

Van Schalkwyk further explained - “In essence, we saw critical consciousness as a prerequisite for social justice. Critical pedagogies catalyse critical reflection and awareness of social inequalities and power relations through a curriculum that enables students to be and become agents of change.”

Social justice, as Van Schalk and her colleagues in the study understood it, is about transforming those practices and ideologies that lie at the root of oppression, exploitation and exclusion – whether economic, social or political in origin. Its purpose, then, is to create a more just world for everyone – and in the case of this project, to create a more equitably designed and operated South African health care system.

The researchers found that while there was a range of understandings and teaching practices amongst the 101 study respondents, driving transformation towards socially responsive curricula “requires a village”. In other words, curriculum renewal requires a collective endeavour. Furthermore, transformation of the curriculum requires disruption – by identifying, unpacking and replacing potentially oppressive discourses. “It is not easy work, colleagues,” concluded Van Schalkwyk.

Dr Hansen, whose doctoral studies focus on how MBChB students at SU felt the curriculum had influenced them to become socially responsive (if at all), highlighted the importance of gaining students’ perspectives in the process of curriculum design. “Students bring unique perspectives that we need to recognise and value. We need to tap into students’ lived experiences. They see the curriculum in action. We need to start seeing students not just as consumers of the curriculum, but as co-constructors of their learning”.

Hansen argued that in order to shift and transform to socially responsive curricula, issues of power need to be dealt with intentionally – “We need to disrupt issues of power, but disrupt with kindness so that together we can work towards examining our own privilege, bias, assumptions and our own ideas of the curriculum . . . and then to come together to dismantle systems that continue to perpetuate injustice in our educational space.”

The disruption of systems begins with us asking ourselves critical questions – What do we want our graduates to know, to be and to do in their lives beyond the academy? Debates on curriculum lie at the heart of developing the answers to these questions.