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Time to (Re-)think-Feel 'Quality' in Higher Education Learning and Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes (re-)thinking-feeling the current Western-centric metrics-driven measurement of 'quality' in learning and teaching in higher education. We argue that ensuring 'quality' in learning and teaching is an undeniable imperative, as it not only cultivates possibilities for students to think critically and engage imaginatively in an ever-shifting global environment. The challenge is not only the *measurement* but the confusion between *what is measured* and *what is experienced* and the *neoliberal marketisation regime* of higher education (HE) that has transformed institutional priorities, connecting 'quality' and the performance metrics that underpin it. Conversations with five academics who participated in this study within the UK context, reveal a consensus that applying a standardised, 'one-size-fits-all' measurement of 'quality' in learning and teaching in higher education is fraught with difficulties. Each discipline must embrace tailored, contextually appropriate, and discipline-specific approaches to conceptualising and evaluating 'quality'. We argue that Ubuntu ethico-onto-epistemological philosophy and praxis, decoloniality and posthumanism can help us think about 'quality' differently, enabling ways to resist colonial paradigms and neoliberal logic and their impact.

1 | Introduction

The pursuit of quality in learning and teaching has been on the agenda for a long time (Martens and Prosser 1998; Biggs 2001; Vaclavik et al. 2022). This is a truism not only in the UK context, which is the focus of this article, but in all higher education institutions across the globe. In contemporary society, higher education institutions (HEIs) are under enormous pressure to maintain and enhance the quality of learning and teaching (Kundu 2017). The conventional understanding of 'quality' often revolves around measurable outcomes, standardised assessments, and individualistic achievements (Feistauer and Richter 2017; Wood and Su 2017). Arguably, recent trends in education, including the expansion and diversification of student demographics, call for alternative approaches to the measurement of 'quality' in learning and teaching in higher education. This challenges us to radically re-conceptualise the ontological and epistemic foundations that inform our praxis (Gabi et al. 2023). We consider that the current conceptualisation of quality is Eurocentric and, therefore, limited in scope. As a result, the need to decolonise quality and embrace other voices that have been marginalised is imperative. In this article, we propose Ubuntu, an indigenous philosophy of Southern Africa, as the lens that can be used to rethink 'quality' in learning and teaching in higher education. Ubuntu-oriented pedagogy embraces interdependence, interconnectedness, responsibility, relationality, co-creation, mattering, listening to, and affirming others with the help of processes that create 'trust, fairness, shared understanding and dignity and harmony in relationships' (Nussbaum 2003, 9). As the higher education landscape continues to evolve in response to societal changes and technological advancements, the conversation surrounding quality in

learning and teaching remains dynamic and relevant. Arguably, Ubuntu philosophy, assemblage, posthumanism and decolonial theory offer new insights into how we understand 'quality' in learning and teaching contexts, transcending conventional notions around standardised measures and human centricity. We contest regimes of truth in higher education learning and teaching to promote more inclusive and sustaining knowledge and research practices. We problematise notions of 'quality' as we combine ideas from extant literature and findings from our post-qualitative study conducted within two faculties in a UK HEI involving eliciting the views of experienced academics on their interpretation of quality and approaches to enhancing 'quality' in learning and teaching. Problematising 'quality', 'forces us into an encounter where something new emerges, new thinking, new possibilities, new understanding' (Thompson 2019, 46) as we use the following research questions to orientate our study:

1. What are the higher education academics' experiences and perspectives on quality in learning and teaching?
2. What challenges, tensions and opportunities do higher education academics encounter in enhancing the quality of learning and teaching, and how do they navigate these while capitalising on the opportunities?
3. How do higher education academics' positionality and learning and teaching philosophies influence their practice and align with or divest from higher education quality assurance measurements?
4. Are there any innovative pedagogical practices that these academics utilise to achieve quality learning and teaching, and how do they evidence their impact on student engagement, achievement and educational quality?
5. How can Ubuntu's ethico-onto-epistemological philosophy and praxis, decoloniality and posthumanism help us think about 'quality' differently?

2 | Context

> The chances that tomorrow will be like yesterday are always overwhelming.
>
> (Arendt 1993, 170)

Quality in UK higher education learning and teaching context is complex and multifaceted. In the past, quality was considered integral to university-level learning, research, and academic professional response-abilities. Since the 1990s, higher education institutions have been required to demonstrate the 'quality' of their activities through institutional leadership and express it in comparable measures (Harvey and Askling 1965). As a key indicator of 'quality' higher education, the government emphasised value for money and fitness for purpose (Harvey and Green 1993). Consequently, once viewed as an implicit, self-evident property of higher education, 'quality' became a mechanism of accountability and compliance that appeared disconnected from the essence of higher education. In return, for greater autonomy, HEIs were expected to develop their institution-specific quality control and assurance systems that demonstrate accountability for using public funds (Harvey and Askling 1965; Askling 1997). This is in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 which emphasises the need to provide good quality education.

The current operating logic of HEIs is a data-driven measurement of 'quality' that necessitates the production and consumption of data as the self-governing process of the institutional apparatus. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), a national scheme run by the Office for Students (OfS), is a metrics-driven, data-centric measurement of teaching 'quality'. However, it must be acknowledged that the OfS is committed to addressing the existing inequalities in higher education. For instance, one of the TEF metrics focuses on attainment and widening participation, this seeks to address the ethnicity gaps within the higher education system. While TEF is an important tool used to encourage universities in the UK to improve and deliver good quality education, it also faces criticism from other scholars. For instance, it has been considered a defective mechanism that manifests as a false conception of 'epistemic good' as it is viewed as encouraging the development of a 'serious epistemic vice for pedagogical practices (Forstenzer 2019; Crockford 2020; Deem and Baird 2020). Kidd (2019) argues that TEF is an 'epistemic insensibility' that reduces the learning experience to a transaction where academics are obliged to offer certain experiences that lead to a narrow view of student satisfaction. This is often elicited through 'student voice' surveys, which function as a regime of truth and promote practices that dictate what 'quality' in learning and teaching *is* and *should* be. The benefit of ensuring 'quality' in learning and teaching is undeniable. However, the challenge is not only the 'measurement' but the confusion between *what is measured* and *what is experienced*. Therefore, academic resistance to the current measurement of 'quality' in UK higher education pertains to a view that it uses a technology of control and monitoring of academic work that engenders what Ball (2003, 221) calls 'terrors of performativity' which leads to a potential 'splitting' between the teacher's own judgements about 'good practice' and students 'needs' and the rigours of performance'. Highlighting the logic of TEF, Deem and Baird (2020) observe that TEF has metamorphosed into a pivotal governing apparatus. They argue that it functions as a 'metric tide' that manifests in institutional centrally set targets that disincentivise academics from implementing what works on their programme. Arguably, these centrally driven targets and metrics often impose a one-size-fits-all approach and quantifiable outcomes that disregard the diverse needs of students and disciplinary expectations.

For a long time, hegemonic Western-centric, linear, positivistic, classist and individualistic paradigms have dominated the concept of 'quality' and how it is evaluated and measured within the learning and teaching context in HE (Houston and Paewai 2013). These paradigms tend to privilege outcomes-focused metrics over the process. Therefore, the measurement of 'quality' learning and teaching 'illuminates and defines certain objects and obscures and hides others for governance purposes' (Grek et al. 2009, 5), which, in the process, perpetuates a monolithic articulation of what 'quality' is and should be. We argue that considering nonlinear approaches may shift Western-centric attention from an over-reliance on positivistic and quantitative measurement or evaluation of 'quality' that fails to adequately embrace the complexities of teaching (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

2010). Forgasz and McDonough (2017, 55) urge us to consider the sometimes 'inseparable, intermingling notions of embodied teaching, embodied learning and the embodied dynamic of the pedagogical relationship between learning and teaching as it is lived through the bodies of teachers and learners'. Such pedagogical encounters in learning and teaching invoke relationality and acknowledgement that 'existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist in their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating' (Barad 2007, ix). Turning to non-anthropocentric alternatives might help develop capacities for thinking differently by attending to the unmeasurable, onto-epistemic and practical aspects of 'quality'. We are interested in how the dialogue about 'quality' in learning and teaching might shift if it embodied non-anthropocentric thinking that:

> relocates inquiry "down on the ground" where knowledge is made, negotiated, circulated; and where nature and conditions of the particular "ground", the situations and circumstances of specific knowers, their interdependence and their negotiations have claims to critical epistemic scrutiny equivalent to those of allegedly isolated, discrete propositional knowledge claims. In its approach to knowledge, it works with affinities and analogies from location to location, imaginatively and interpretively discerned.
>
> (Code 2006, 5)

Such thinking foregrounds the material-discursive entanglements latent in a classroom space as a 'gray zone of material engagement' where 'brains, bodies, and things conflate, mutually catalysing and constituting one another' (Malafouris 2013, 5). It creates opportunities to re(con)figure the classroom in ways that emphasise relational entanglements and resist dominant metrics-based measurement that currently constitute what 'quality' in learning and teaching *is* and *should be*.

3 | Methodological Positioning

We take a post-qualitative methodological pluralism to (re-)think-feel 'quality' where we consider learning and teaching to be conceived as constituting both human and more-than-human materialities. As observed by Ceder (2016, 62), 'education is a field with a history of seeing individuals as separate subjects and things as separate objects due to its humanist heritage', which privileges humans over other things that exist. In this orientation, we draw inspiration from Snaza et al. (2016, xxii) to challenge anthropocentric ways of knowing and doing, not feigning that 'while humans are engaged in learning and teaching, all other things are mere background' and not part of the discourses of 'quality'. We consider material effects and social relations as co-constituted in a complex and dynamic human and non-human assemblage where the purpose of education becomes not only one of 'learning' and 'teaching' but a creative gathering in which the human subject cannot be seen as separate from the objects of knowledge with which it is concerned (Bayne 2015, 456). Acknowledging this intra-relationality between humans and the other-than-humans, Callon and Law (1995) note that nothing exists as discrete or detached entities but rather everything is networked and relationally defined. Thinking with Moss, we view 'quality' as a permanent state of provisionality, where understandings and meanings are always open to new perspectives and interpretations producing new ontological insights, and forms of knowing and doing. We shift from the language of 'measurement' that 'ends in a statement of fact' to the language of evaluation and 'meaning-making' that 'produces a judgement of value' (Moss 2016, 11). As Dahlberg et al. (2013, ix), put it, meaning-making is:

> evaluation as a democratic process of interpretation, a process that involves making practice visible and thus subject to reflection, dialogue, and argumentation, leading to a judgement of value, contextualized and provisional because it is always subject to contestation.
>
> (cited in Moss 2016, 11)

To (re-)think-feel 'quality', we turn to posthumanism (Braidotti 2013), assemblage theory and the ethico-onto-epistemological philosophy and praxis of Ubuntu (inter-being) offering a new language to generate different thinking. These open possibilities to (re-)think through and beyond colonising forces of Western-centric hegemonic framing and 'measurement' of 'quality' in learning and teaching, in higher education. Posthuman ontology is post-individual, non-hierarchical and pluralistic, where 'quality' in teaching can be viewed as multifaceted, shaped by diverse perspectives, and no single point of view can be regarded as complete (Ferrando 2023). As such, (re-)thinking-feeling as an epistemological becoming, is an ongoing process of 'unhinging – perhaps a deranging – of expectation, order and, organisation' (Grosz 2001, 69) that enables us to think-feel 'quality' differently. We bring diverse forms of knowing into conversation with each other without necessarily assuming they must meet each other in full embrace. Instead, we recognise the shared aspirations of posthumanism, assemblage theory, and Ubuntu philosophy to contest anthropocentric thinking and the spectres of colonial logic that continue to haunt higher education. Thinking with DeLanda's (2002) anti-hierarchical ontological flatness, complex configurations of entanglements comprising nonhuman objects (e.g., desks, chairs, classroom spaces, colour, smell, computers) and humans, have agency and can be used to consider the fluidity, socio-materiality and conceptual relationality between them in meaning-making. Humphrey (2007) cogently describes such non-hierarchical resistance of seemingly stable dichotomies of, for example, human-nonhuman and subject-object as existing in folds, when viewed as porous and pliable, caressing a multitude of realities, it invites us to generate new forms of knowing, and evaluating (not measuring) less visible practices that contribute to notions of 'quality' in learning and teaching. As put forward by Gourlay (2021), cited in Gravett et al. (2021, 3):

> A posthuman perspective potentially allows for a more focused, and accurate, account of what actually goes on, in the day-to-day educational processes … it allows for the questioning of the fundamental assumptions underlying agency and the unfolding of epistemic practices in higher education, both digital and analogue … it allows for a move away from

> ideological assumptions and stereotypes, towards a up profoundly ethnographic, observing, noticing stance towards practice.

Ubuntu philosophy allows a (re-)thinking of 'quality' that appreciates embodied teaching and learning that disrupts how knowledge is created and circulated, promoting collective visioning and embodied knowing that 'joins body and mind in a physical and mental act of knowledge construction' (Nguyen and Larson 2015, 332). Ubuntu includes 'philosophical assumptions about the nature of social reality (ontology), ways of knowing (epistemology), and ethics and value systems (axiology)' (Chilisa 2012, 20). Therefore, Ubuntu cannot be reduced or flattened to either ontology, epistemology, or ethics; it encapsulates them all and, as such, asserts that 'to be' is 'to know' and 'to know' is 'to care'. Ubuntu as an ethico-onto-epistemology views the totality of human experiences and more-than-human as intra-connected, and inherently dialectical symbiotic unity between being–knowing–doing.

The view that thought happens in solitude, in our heads or in silence or dialogue with ourselves can no longer be viable (Bacevic 2023, online). Instead, in 'thinking-together', different thinking pathways open in parallel or iteration and in a mode that allows one to carve a new path. As such, knowledge is produced through a felt sense of being-in-the-world and a sense of connectedness and intra-dependence through the essence of lived experience within one's complete humanness, both body and mind, in perceiving, intra-acting, and engaging with the surrounding world. Thus, 'embodied learning involves being attentive to the body and its experiences as a way of knowing' (Freiler 2008, 40). This challenges individual ownership of knowledge while promoting collective knowledge and 'collective copyright' that dismantles the parochial hegemony of knowledge (Adeate 2023).

Ubuntu philosophy affords possibilities of a decolonial (re-)imagination that counters Western epistemic hegemony (Tavernaro-Haidarian 2018), and over-reliance on individualism and positivistic measurement of quality by recognising the interdependences within the educational ecosystem. Ubuntu consists of two words: the prefix 'ubu' and the stem 'ntu', evoking a dialectical relationship between being and becoming (Ramose 2002 in McDonald 2010). It troubles hegemonic perceptions of what it 'means' to be human by asserting that humanity is inextricably bound up in relational interactions (Ahiauzu 2011). Mbiti (1969, 106) eloquently captures the essence of Ubuntu, 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'. Ubuntu supports an understanding that a person is a person through others (*munhu munhu navanhu*). Hence, being human (*kuva munhu*) is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of other people (*vanhu*) and, on that basis, establishing respectful relations (Murove 2014; Chemhuru 2014; Hellier-Tinoco 2005).

4 | Anti-Method

(Re-)thinking as anti-method allows us to work with/in, against and beyond the constraints and possibilities of doing qualitative research such as 'interviewing' and 'interpretation'. As Hlabangane (2018, 665) puts it, the idea of 'method' 'invokes a battleground for competing knowledge systems with participants already variously positioned and ideas about what comprises credible knowledge and how to get (to) it already established'. Thinking with/in a post-qualitative inquiry and onto-epistemological orientations, interviews transcend their perceived conventional purpose as a mere non-neutral conduit for extracting academics' experiences. As a counter-colonial approach, we conducted semi-structured conversational interviews with five academic collaborators ('participants'), three of whom were from the School of Education and two from the Business School at the same UK HEI. As a fully engaged research encounter, conversations with our collaborators contributed to the productive formation of meaning, making the material contexts, multiple truths, realities and intersections accessible. They captured the material and embodied context in which our conversations occurred as part of various contextual factors such as research questions, materials, histories, shared understandings of institutional quality assurance processes, policies, environments, technologies, and the temporal context. Conversations ('interviews') helped us map the intra-actions, affects, and capacities produced within the human and more than human assemblage and how these inform understandings of what constitutes 'quality' in learning and teaching. As Cunliffe (2008, 130) puts it, meaning lies in living conversation, dialogue and utterances where everything said is in relationship to others, other people, other ideas, and other conversations (past, present and anticipated). This offers a point of departure for considering a shift from 'interview' to 'intra-view' 'as a productive re-understanding that foregrounds the embodied and emplaced nature of interaction' (Kuntz and Presnall 2012) disrupting taken-for-granted complex processes to open up multiple forms of knowing, being and doing.

These were diffractively composed conversations that reflected the 'living knowledges' within the two faculties, disciplines and programmes and helped us embrace multiple perspectives without seeking a transcendent position or arriving at universality. Five academic collaborators were drawn from two schools within the same university based on convenience and easy access to the researchers (Wellington 2000). Despite differences in their disciplinary areas, all our collaborators have at least three or more years experience of teaching in higher education. As researchers embodying the legacies of colonialism and ongoing coloniality, we recognise the power of naming rooted in conflicted colonial encounters and imperialist naming practices. Thus, all the names used in this article are collaborator-chosen pseudonyms recognising their agency in self-naming and their right to preserve anonymity. We sent out an open call for participants to all staff in the two schools which resulted in five academics expressing interest in taking part in our study. Three academics from the School of Education are Eve, a white British woman and science teacher with 13 years of teaching experience in higher education. Finn, a white British woman, has 10 years of teaching experience in HE. Prior to teaching in higher education, Finn was a youth worker, working in the health and social care sector with a particular interest in therapeutic work. Gemma is a white British woman with 10 years experience of teaching in higher education. The other two academics, Cathy and James, are from the Business School. Cathy is an international member of staff with more than 15 years of experience teaching in the United Kingdom and working with postgraduate students. On the other hand, James has more than 25 years

of work experience in the Business School and works with both undergraduate and postgraduate students, focusing on the development of small business start-up enterprise skills. While our study provides valuable insights from the five collaborators, it also recognises the limitations inherent in the small sample. We worked with only two schools that were easily accessible to us as researchers, and out of the potential participants, only five volunteers responded. The self-selecting nature of the collaborators means that the insights shared may not be representative of the broader multidisciplinary population across the university (Hepplestone and Chikwa 2014).

Our conversations (semi-structured 'intraviews') focused on key topic areas linked to our research questions. Each interview lasted approximately 45 min and was recorded. In line with ethical standards, all the collaborators were given full information about the study, enabling them to give informed consent before participating (Israel 2015). Each collaborator was provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the study's purpose, approach, involvement and dissemination strategies. We obtained informed consent for face-to-face conversations with audio and video recordings for remote conversations conducted via the university's Microsoft Teams platform. This meticulous approach ensures ethical standards, transparency and collaborator autonomy in the research process. Ethical approval for the study was obtained through our university's research ethics processes.

We are conscious of how White, able-bodied, Eurocentric, hetero-and cis-normative citational practices continue to perpetuate the silencing and marginalisation of other forms of knowing and living. Thus, we seek to liberate Ubuntu, our intellectual and existential lineage, from Eurocentric modernity that often manifests in the individual ownership of knowledge and its commodification. We cite authors in this article who share their knowledge and experience of Ubuntu/Hunhu, not as *owners* of this Southern African Philosophy but in recognition of our collective, ancestral intergenerational knowledge. Thus, thinking with hooks (2015), we *cite back* as a citational praxis that intentionally 'speaks back' against individual ownership of knowledge, extractivism, commodification and erasure.

5 | Post-Coding Analysis

As an imperative for post-qualitative methodology and anti-method that does not engage in conventional practices of 'coding' data, we draw on St. Pierre and Jackson's (2014) post-coding analysis to think analysis with theory. The process involves reading and re-reading our data diffractively with a posthumanism, decolonial, assemblage, Ubuntu lens, mapping patterns, which moves us to think and generate knowledge differently. Davies (2014, 734) notes that diffraction as a concept for thinking about analytic processes does not try to fix the analytic process so that it can be turned into a methodic set of steps to be followed. Rather, it opens the possibility of seeing how something different comes to matter. We were drawn to particular data 'glows' (MacLure 2013), troubled taken-for-granted practices, privileged practices and 'provoked new thoughts about "quality". Adhering to an anticolonial approach, we shared the initial findings and analysis with our collaborators as a nuanced way of diffractively "re-turning"' (Barad 2007) to the data (turning it over and over again), re-engaging, thinking-together to create new knowledge. Acknowledging that 'data is partial, incomplete, and is always in a process of a retelling and remembering' helped us avoid falling into 'the representational trap of trying to figure out what the interviewee really means' (Jackson and Mazzei 2012). This collaborative process and collective diffraction allowed us to stay attuned to new insights through this iterative re-engagement with the data. Working within HEIs' neoliberal orientation, we recognise the need to unlearn internalised norms and ideals perpetuated by a metrics-driven 'quality' measurement to allow openness to alternative forms of thinking and doing. Whilst we appreciate the value of retaining some facets of neoliberalism, for example, ensuring student success and satisfaction, equally important we argue for the need to harness the value of embracing alternative perspectives, the shared values of Ubuntu, decoloniality, posthumanism, assemblage theory. Such a shift in thinking and doing can be both discomforting and liberating. Excerpts of raw data also added analytic depth and richness to the discussion (Gabi et al. 2023). This reflects our commitment to sustainable research anchored in anticolonial and liberatory processes.

6 | Findings and Discussion

6.1 | Measuring the Unmeasurable

> What are we measuring when we try to measure the unmeasurable in education and are we not measuring? When have attempts been made to measure the unmeasurable in education, what metrics have been adopted in which contexts, and with what outcomes? ... Has a demand for measurement ever been a demand for subaltern voices?
>
> (Unterhalter 2017, 2)

The feltness of frustration permeated our conversations with the collaborators in this study who lamented how conforming to a metrics-driven measurement of quality in learning and teaching is stifling their capacity to nurture students' intellectual curiosity and lived knowing. There was an appreciation that not everything involved in learning and teaching can be quantified and measured. For instance, Finn reflected on the significance of relationship building with students as a critical, unmeasurable determinant of 'quality' in learning and teaching. She argues that students in her course value relationships with their tutors and do not use the term 'quality' in relation to their learning and teaching experiences. Instead, 'they talk about relationships, being seen, being cared for, being able to talk with us, and being supported'. Pedagogical encounters constituted in an ethic of care attend to being in relation to others where students feel 'being cared for' allow recognition of their humanity, interdependence and interconnectedness as always 'accentuated irrespective of how diverse, provocative and uncomfortable deliberations might turn out to be' (Waghid 2018, 91). Thus, crucial aspects, such as 'feeling seen' and recognised, can activate and sustain students' ontological learning (i.e., being invested and participating in a process that connects with their lives) and epistemic cognition skills that foster critical thought. This resonates with Gabi et al.'s (2023) view on the

need to reconceptualise the ontological and epistemic foundations that inform our praxis, inviting us to consider what learning and teaching might look like if we centre care *with* and *for* the other. Also, as Khúc asks, what if care was the first learning objective? What if the point of a classroom was to create care as a core part of learning? (Khúc in an interview with Seo 2024, online). And, we also ask, what if *care with and for* is a demand for subaltern voices?

Gemma also talked about the importance of investing in building relationships with students and creating an inclusive learning environment based on '... trust that is built over a long period of time, which is why I really like the idea of when you get a first year undergraduate group, you stay with them throughout their three years on the course'. She felt she did not get the opportunity to stay with her students for an extended period to allow time to build trusting relationships. Ghosh et al. (2001, 325) define trust as 'the degree to which a student is willing to rely on the institution to take appropriate steps that will benefit him or her and help him or her achieve his or her academic and career goals'. Similarly, in a study on student persistence in higher education, Gabi and Sharpe (2021) found that when students participate in a relationship of trust and security, it enhances their engagement, satisfaction, persistence, progression and outcomes.

Gemma further talked about the significance of the classroom atmosphere, stating, 'If the lights are too bright, the room is too cold, [...], then that's going to interrupt the quality of their experience.' Mott et al. (2012) note how lights can affect students differently in regulating emotion, mood and concentration. Snaza (2020, 8) invites us to consider the affective entanglements of human-nonhuman in the classroom, for example, 'lights, desks, windows, chairs, wooden panelling, particular carpets, and air conditioning systems...' and humans. Thus, attuning to the affective tonality, partial and provisional relations within the classroom may shift our attention to classrooms as not merely physical spaces where 'ideas are aired, shared, critiqued and debated' but also 'sites where affects emerge, circulate, and enter into conflict' and to think-feel the measurement of 'quality' in learning and teaching differently. This highlights the need to broaden what constitutes 'quality' learning and teaching and how it is evaluated.

James queried the view that the 'quality' of learning and teaching can be measured using surveys. Cathy also questioned the reliability of surveys, particularly the judgements about pedagogy made by students who are 'not experts in teaching' and 'not having the technical know-how to comment on the 'quality' of learning and teaching'. She also questioned the survey response rates and said that sometimes very few students complete, yet academics are asked to change their practice based on the views of a handful of students. For example, she said academics are told that 'three students said ..., therefore, based on the feedback of these three students, go change your teaching' (Cathy). Collaborators voiced concerns about how 'quality' is conceptualised, thereby calling for (re-)thinking 'quality' and how it is evaluated in the learning and teaching context. It is apparent how human-superiority and centric measurement of 'quality' invisibilises and fails to capture the human-nonhuman relations equally crucial to learning and teaching.

6.2 | Smooth and Striated Spaces

> Smooth spaces are not in themselves liberatory. But the struggle is changed or displaced in them, and life reconstitutes its stakes, confronts new obstacles, invents new spaces, switches adversaries. Never believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us.
>
> (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 500)

Our conversations with collaborators illuminate impediments to 'quality' in learning and teaching. They expressed how excessive workload and increased administrative responsibilities hinder their efforts to enhance 'quality' teaching. For example, Cathy mentioned how she hardly finds the time to prepare adequately for her teaching, given the excessive workload constraints and having to deal with many administrative tasks, which are time-consuming and exhausting. She explains how the workload:

> doesn't allow you to invest in the quality of your teaching, like revisiting your slides and doing more reading. If you look at your workload, you're given a couple of hours to prepare slides. You're not allowed as an academic to have a day to go and study journal after journal research to inform your teaching or to be out with other people to learn. 20 years ago, when I came to study, my lecturers were purely academics. They were not doing any admin work, but now they've transferred the admin work onto the academics. Academics had so much time to read. It's a very different task to read, think critically, prepare slides, and think creatively about activities you do in class with the students. We didn't set out to become administrators.

The burdensome workload borne by staff emerges as a prominent obstacle to nurturing 'quality' learning and teaching experiences. The increased workload might mean academics lose the ability to take time out to think and create the necessary conditions for curiosity and wonder, as institutional expectations can shape the norms for teaching, including individual practices and subjectivities. This strain echoes Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of striated spaces, where the structural constraints imposed by workload manifest as striations inhibiting the creativity and fluidity necessary to cultivate smooth spaces 'to go and study journal after journal research to inform your teaching or to be out with other people to learn' which offers space for reflection and reflexive educative points. The collaborators talked about how they must work longer hours to ensure they manage their work.

Institutional structural constraints were cited as one of the significant challenges for academics in their quest to enhance the 'quality' of learning and teaching. They highlighted how the centralisation of support systems across the university negatively impacts quality processes, as articulated by Cathy, who said, 'the biggest obstacle to quality of teaching is the centralisation of the support systems [...]. If you have a problem, you

now need to raise a ticket, and you wait forever for a problem to be solved'. It seems that the centralisation of the support systems, meant to ease the burden on academic staff, is impacting the efficiency of the delivery of support services. Perhaps there is a better way in which this centralisation can help enhance quality without making it burdensome for both academics and professional services colleagues who work hard trying to make the system work.

With the massification of higher education, class sizes are also generally too big. Due to financial constraints, HEIs cannot consistently recruit adequate staff to address the problem of large class sizes. For example, large class sizes made it difficult for Gemma to provide students with what she considered a conducive learning experience:

> Well, I think we need to return to smaller class sizes. Not so much last year, but certainly this year, my class sizes are huge. And I think that's down to staffing issues, lack of staff, or things like that. And that's another thing that actually significantly interrupts the student experiences when there are large class sizes.
>
> (Gemma)

If staff numbers are low, class sizes will likely be bigger, compromising the quality of teaching and student support (Hénard and Roseveare 2012). In addition to working with large class sizes, one of the challenges raised by the collaborators is the need to ensure student satisfaction and produce positive results for the University in the league tables. This highlights the fragility of neoliberalism and the impact of the commercialisation of education (Coates et al. 2021). This perception of education as a commodity and students as consumers makes it difficult to ensure the delivery of high-quality learning and teaching. Thus, how 'quality' is conceptualised and measured constitutes a significant challenge for academics who often feel pressured to adapt to the current system to ensure their students are satisfied, even if it means going against their teaching philosophy. Cathy mentioned how she often feels constrained to challenge students to work harder. Instead, she has to go the extra mile to support the students in achieving their desired results so that they can provide positive feedback in the student satisfaction surveys, which she feels compromises the true meaning of 'quality' in learning and teaching:

> The essence of quality is whether [students] change for the better, not whether they're entertained, not whether they feel that you've told them precisely how to write a 3000-word essay so they can get a 75% ... but something bigger than that.
>
> (Cathy)

Clark and Talbert (2023, xvi) highlight the challenges with grading in that when it is done, academics 'move on to something even less pleasant than grading itself: handling student reactions to grades. These run the full gamut of human emotion, often leading to fraught interactions with students who we otherwise love to work with. But we can hardly blame students for how they react. For many years, it has been drilled into them explicitly and implicitly that earning high grades is the purpose and end goal of education'. This tension perpetuates an epistemic fallacy that manifests in oversimplifying learning processes, inhibiting students' critical thinking and the capacity to value the co-creation and co-ownership of knowledge. Within such striation, there is a need to promote 'smooth' learning spaces that encourage students to 'contest knowledge and ideas proffered by lecturers and in so doing create their own stance toward knowledge(s)' (Savin-Baden 2008, 14). It seems academics are in a dilemma, although they are aware of the limitations of the system and have the pedagogical tools for creating smooth spaces, it is a challenge for them to operate outside the metric-driven system. Therefore, 'quality' in learning and teaching is threatened by neoliberal regimes that pressure academics to teach in particular ways that may not necessarily align with their learning and teaching philosophies and discipline-specific orientations. For example, across HEIs, the quantitative grading of students' qualitative essays is normalised. Similarly, academics' practice continues to be assessed using a model they consider limited in its capacity. They are resorting to working *within* and *pushing* beyond institutional constraints congruent with the *ideal* and *reality* of the learning and teaching regime.

6.3 | Epistemic Positionalities and Pedagogical Praxis

> A fugitive classroom must include space to let our darlings, in this case our outdated texts and pedagogies, die, and along with that, parts of ourselves that were nostalgic about how we taught familiar texts. In that grieving process, educators can make room for new texts, new critical interpretations, and pedagogies that make room for the stories that are waiting to be read.
>
> (Jones 2005, 4)

Academics' epistemic positionalities inform their pedagogical praxis and perceptions of what 'quality' is and should be. Thus, what they 'know, think, and believe directly affects classroom content and pedagogy' (Evans et al. 2012, 3). Conversations with collaborators show how they construct their subjectivities within the constraints delineated by a metric-driven provision informed by TEF expectations while simultaneously carving out the myriad possibilities it presents. There appears to be a mismatch between their epistemic positionalities and the existing 'quality' measurement model, pressuring them to 'fit in' rather than deploying their discipline-specific practices in fluid ways. James felt that a one-size-fits-all approach was inappropriate as disciplines are delivered differently. He problematises using a standard approach in measuring 'quality' in all disciplines. Arguably, each discipline could embrace a model that aligns with the disciplinary context considering the different pedagogical methodologies and external professional standards expectations as appropriate. As we have argued in this article, regardless of discipline, a values-based pedagogical enactment and practice that embraces relational ontologies has the potential to contribute to 'quality' learning and teaching processes. These are values that are instantiated in 'the ways in which we

present ourselves to each other, our reading of others' reactions to what we are saying, the cues we pick up, and the actions we take as a result (and sometimes get wrong, too!)—they are embedded and embodied in everything we do (Aspin 2002, 16).

Gemma's teaching philosophy is anchored in the modality of relational pedagogies and learning encounters conducive to participatory and dialogical intra and inter-actions, enabling her to set aspirational and inspirational cultural spaces based on positive psychology. She expressed how she values seeing students excited about their learning and being supported to see how the content connects with their future aspirations. For example, sharing various anecdotal narratives helped students appreciate the different careers that might interest them. It requires attentiveness to relational accountability, response-ability, and respect for individuality and collective needs. Similarly, James talks about ways in which his teaching philosophy promotes experiential learning:

> I think I've been a bit ahead of the curve when creating an environment shared with the students. I never meant to do this. It wasn't a deliberate strategy. It was simply the nature of experiential learning, giving students autonomy to make their own decisions.
>
> (James)

Experiential learning can be a potent catalyst for fostering 'quality' learning and teaching. With its capacity to create immersive transformative moments that shift attention from *outcomes-driven* learning and teaching to *embodied and affective experiences*, experiential learning can liberate students to derive meaning and purpose from their educational encounters, fostering a sense of ownership, autonomy and self-regulation. By engaging in experiential learning activities, students are not mere recipients of knowledge but actively participate in generating knowledge. This approach empowers students and cultivates critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity and comprehension (Ayob et al. 2011). Moreover, empowering students to make autonomous and collective decisions can instil a sense of response-ability, accountability and intellectual curiosity. In addition, experiential learning not only creates a shared environment but transforms academics into co-learners, where a 'deliberative negotiation of learning occurs, and recognition is given to the mutuality of the pedagogical encounter' (Hickey et al. 2022, 1) and the establishment of more democratic education, a crucial aspect of 'quality'. On the other hand, Cathy's teaching philosophy involves using the Socratic method and storytelling, which she considers helpful in validating students' experiences and opening them to different forms of knowing, imagination and connecting. As opposed to how the university measures 'quality', in her view: 'Quality should focus on the bigger picture: the changes students experience in their learning journey. I measure [quality] when a student messages me after a year and says I was in this setting, and I had to use that thing you taught me'.

The same views were echoed by Eve, who asserted that her teaching approach is dialogic and seeks to encourage students to think. She added that: 'being in it with the students, we are learning together because we both want the same outcome'. 'Being in it with students' and wanting 'the same outcome' can orient students to the value of co-learning and co-generating knowledge as a weave of thought, taking ownership, and being self-regulated. 'Learning together' is also about participating in an affective relationship that can foster mutual interdependence, academic adjustment and achievement (Frumos et al. 2024). It is, therefore, vital for the institution to capture both *processes* and *outcomes* of learning and teaching in the evaluation of 'quality'.

6.4 | Thinking-Feeling With Decoloniality

> De-coloniality is haunted by the remains of coloniality, and the marks of languaging and voicing on the imagination of liberations past. It is also haunted by the future possibilities of being otherwise, as in being different with difference.
>
> (Khoo and Vered 2020, 228)

Decolonising the curriculum was mentioned as one of the significant approaches to enhancing 'quality' and inclusive learning experience for all students. Gemma talked about the importance of embracing decolonisation as a praxis. She highlighted that:

> There is a need for those conversations around decolonising [...] to be raised high up on the agendas because we need to question what we're representing. Our student demographics [are] very diverse, and if I think of one of my level 4 personal tutor groups, I've got 19 South Asian women and one white, and I think it's important that everyone feels that they are not just included, but they are represented in multiple ways.

Gemma suggested inviting guest lecturers from ethnic minoritised groups to counter the lack of racial representation, recruit staff who can act as important role models, and use resources developed by authors from diverse backgrounds. Carmichael-Murphy and Gabi (2021) note how the lack of diverse representation perpetuates intellectual inferiority and contributes to the domination of ethnocentricity as the standard or norm. Representation helps students value their forms of knowing, sensing and relating. Whilst having racially minoritised academics in higher education might help bring diverse ideas, institutions will need to intentionally create the conditions for 'decolonising the mind' (wa Thiong'o 1986) to achieve psychological liberation for racially minoritised academics grappling with appropriated racial oppression which often manifests in appropriating the idea that racially minoritised people are intellectually inferior. This may go a long way in enhancing 'quality' in learning and teaching by countering the effects of appropriated racial oppression, such as self-othering and 'academic neocolonialism' (Alatas 2003). Eve reiterated the need to decolonise the curriculum as the way forward in terms of enhancing quality learning for all students, stating:

> I feel that this university and the whole university system is still institutionally racist and still has a huge hangover of its colonial past. And in that sense

> of decolonising the curriculum, quality would be inclusive in all respects, and as I say, you would have active learners.

The same view was echoed by Finn, who said:

> Students are still coming to us tentatively to raise issues around discrimination, oppression, both from within the university and outside the university. So, we've got a long way to go, but I think we have got much better at flagging it up, telling them it's ok to talk about this, educating them about it.

Apart from decolonising the curriculum, Cathy emphasised the importance of holding on to the professional values she believed to be critical for ensuring quality learning and teaching. For instance, she firmly believed in collaborating and learning from colleagues to enhance her practice. She also talked about the importance of reflecting on her practice and felt that this approach was an important catalyst for enhancing 'quality' in learning and teaching:

> I think you improve the quality of the learning through reflection. Anyone who teaches and just goes away and doesn't think about what they did in their class maybe needs some reimagining.

Academics are disgruntled about the Eurocentric model of 'quality', which overlooks unmeasurable aspects of learning and teaching. The technologies of neoliberal marketisation and commodification of higher education seem to have given way to an epochal shift, where students are transformed into *consumers* and academics into *producers* who deliver the *commodity* and meet the needs of students.

There was consensus on the need for an alternative approach to conceptualising and measuring 'quality' in learning and teaching. The academics reiterated that the current quality model is Eurocentric and metrics-driven, which means it is very 'individualistic' and 'focuses on efficiency', which is not a good indicator of the efficacy of everything involved in learning and teaching. This further energises arguments posed by Price et al. (2010), highlighting the complexities surrounding the temporal and relational dimension of for example, the feedback processes and how attempting to evaluate efficiency through reductive methodologies can only yield proxy measures, offering a narrow and incomplete view. Arguably, this opens the possibility of considering other non-Western voices that have been marginalised to develop a 'meaning-making process' that has the potential to 'produce a judgement of value' (Moss 2016) that is comprehensive, inclusive, and fit for purpose. Practical meaning-making processes and evaluation of 'quality' in learning and teaching can consider a plurality of ways of doing education and data sources, including what is working and what is not. Thinking-feeling with decoloniality as a praxis, an inclusive, action-oriented ongoing process, affords possibilities to (re-)think quality in ways that centre the affective entanglements of human-other-than-human fostering intra-inter-dependence. Contrary to the Eurocentric and metrics-driven approach, the Ubuntu philosophy, decoloniality, and posthumanism offer complementary ways of conceptualising quality in learning and teaching, embracing multiple pedagogical approaches that cultivate connection, responsibility, relationality and mattering, among other aspects (Nussbaum 2003). They hold out possibilities for learning to (un)learn, where unlearning becomes an openness to learning.

6.5 | An Untidy Ending

> Unlearning is not into learning outcomes; it's into learning incomes. It's into the incoming of the unforeseen, the truly monstrous, the advent of all those wholly others turning up at our doorsteps unexpectedly and demanding our hospitality … This is why thinking about unlearning can give you indigestion; why it can make you question yourself and what you are thinking and why you are even "doing" thinking.
>
> (Dunne 2016, 14)

As institutions are forced to be more 'accountable' for their quality assurance processes and effectiveness through performance metrics such as Graduate Outcomes (employment outcomes), degree outcomes, continuation and retention enacting inclusive and appropriate ways to evaluate the 'quality' of learning and teaching becomes crucial. As argued in this paper, the quest for 'quality' in learning and teaching in higher education necessitates intentional perpetual agitation towards practices and processes that perpetuate the (re)production of colonial legacies through a monolithic epistemic culture grounded in Western discursive hegemony. A (re-)thinking-feeling of what constitutes 'quality' in ways that incorporate the messy entanglements of things seems imperative. Centring relationality and ethics of care as a commitment to 'quality' immerses students in a human-other-than-human entangled thoughtscape, ensuring liberatory and trans-formative learning and teaching that binds together justice-equity-quality. As such, accountability and a commitment to creating spaces that promote values based pedagogies and ethics of care is imperative. Thus, learning and teaching as processes of co-creating and co-ownership of knowledge should encompass radical openness that engages materially embodied forms of knowing (Gravett and Kinchin 2020) to generate knowledge that speaks *with* and connects students' diverse living knowledges, histories and aspirations. This entails recognition of how context influences ecological subjectivity and knowledge generation. As noted by Barad (2007, 7):

> Justice, which entails acknowledgement, recognition, and loving attention, is not a state that can be achieved once and for all. There are no solutions. There is only the ongoing practice of being open and alive to each meeting, each intra-action, so that we might use our ability to respond, our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly.

As a (local, national, global) public good, higher education is intricately interwoven with broader *democratising aspirations* for an equitable and just society. Whilst this has been a part of the history of higher education, neoliberal, and neocolonial logics and the consolidation of its marketised hierarchy alongside the introduction of tuition fees has significantly eroded these democratising aspirations. The fragmentation of higher education seems driven by dominant market-oriented discourses, managerial audit and the control of teaching within the *consumer/producer* binary machine. In this consumption/entrepreneurial model, focus shifts away from learning and teaching processes to degree and graduate outcomes. It shapes the subjectivities of students whilst devaluing the democratic experiential learning processes that have the potential to develop students' sensibility of what it means to be a democratic citizen (Hernández and Castillo 2020). The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and National Student Survey (NSS) are aspects of the market-type machinery. They produce the *market data* on which choice within the 'education market' is made possible. These are fundamental to the neoliberal structuring of higher education and manifests in a flawed conceptualisation of 'quality' which evades the unmeasurable aspects of quality learning and teaching. Engel (2000, 3) accurately observes that, 'current-day discussions about the future of education are conducted almost entirely in the language of the free market: individual achievement, competition choice, economic growth and national security—with only occasional lip service being given to egalitarian and democratic goals'.

As such, (re-)thinking the current dominant discourses of 'quality' in learning and teaching might open possibilities to disentangle practice from colonial ways of doing education while embracing relational and process-oriented ontologies, epistemically just and culturally sustaining pedagogies. Thus, a democratising education envisions a graduate who can draw on their embodied metacognitive sensibilities to contribute to societal discourse with the courage to 'talk back' (hooks 2015) and 'write back' troubling problematic narratives perpetuating injustice. As such, it encourages students to think critically and engage imaginatively with/in and through creative pluriversal story-ing in various colonial impositions of epistemic erasure and ontological subjugation.

Embracing the merits of a metrics-driven evaluation and the unmeasurable aspects of quality in learning and teaching posits a (re-)thinking of quality that is not solely quantifiable but integrates matters of justice and equity into pedagogical practices and processes in ways that facilitate the development of a 'nomadic knowledge worker—that is, a creative, imaginative, and innovative person who can work with almost anybody, anytime, and anywhere' (Moravec 2013, 18). This repositions learning and teaching for a sustainable, liberated, and anticolonial future. As noted by Stetsenko (2019, 9) it is 'impossible to imagine a possible future unless we have located ourselves in the present and its history; however, the reverse is also true in that we cannot locate ourselves in the present and its history unless we imagine the future and commit to creating it'. Thinking with posthumanism and Ubuntu philosophy (a non-anthropocentric cosmology) allows recognition of the classroom as a vibrant assemblage of human-more-than-human communities to broaden our perceptions of what constitutes 'quality' in learning and teaching in higher education. This article invites us all, to co-think-feel 'quality' and engage in meaning-making and sense-making, 'taking account of the entangled materialisations of which we are part, including new configurations, new subjectivities, new possibilities' (Barad 2007, 69). Given that the current centrally driven metrics system does not capture the complexity of quality in teaching and learning in higher education, we propose a radical imagination of what 'quality' in higher education is and *should* look like. This must be underpinned by *evaluation* models that weave Ubuntu ethico-onto-epistemologies, posthumanism, and decoloniality in ways that recognise disciplinary variation within and across universities.

Author Contributions

Josephine Gabi: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, data curation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, validation, project administration, resources. **Gladson Chikwa:** investigation, formal analysis, writing – review and editing, data curation, validation, resources.

Ethics Statement

Specific ethical approval was not required for this scoping review. However, the researchers adhered to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Guidelines for Educational Research. Ethical approval for this study was granted by Manchester Metropolitan University's Research Ethics and Governance Committee, Faculty of Health and Education. The research was conducted in accordance with the university's ethical guidelines, ensuring the protection of participants' rights, dignity, and well-being throughout the study. All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement, and appropriate measures were taken to ensure confidentiality, anonymity, and data security in line with institutional and GDPR requirements.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data underpinning the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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