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A BOLD proposition: A participatory parity approach to radical flexibility in designing a postgraduate diploma

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Abstract

This article explores the implementation of radical flexibility and social justice principles in the Blended and Online Learning Design (BOLD) programme at the University of Cape Town. Drawing on Fraser's concept of participatory parity and Veletsianos and Houlden's concept of radical flexibility, we explore how programme and course design can challenge traditional educational structures to create more equitable learning opportunities. The BOLD programme reimagines access to and success in postgraduate education by designing in response to Fraser's economic, cultural, and political dimensions. The programme responds to the maldistribution of resources by creating opportunities for flexible financial commitments and centring the use of open educational resources. BOLD responds to misrecognition by foregrounding diverse representations of identity through "course buddies" and personalised learning pathways that allow for flexible pacing. Thirdly, the programme responds to matters of misrepresentation by leveraging policy changes, creating varied entry points, and intentionally designing opportunities for students to shape the programme. Implementing these changes required navigating institutional constraints and exploring the capacity of systems to change. While the programme team remains committed to radical flexibility, this article demonstrates the potential of an interim and principled pragmatic flexibility that centres student agency while working to enhance flexibility in existing systems. This design case study contributes to ongoing discussion about the purpose of higher education, questioning not just how to deliver education equitably, but what kind of educational future we want, and for whom.

Keywords: Online learning design; blended learning design, radical flexibility: social justice

Introduction

The South African higher education sector is increasingly turning its attention to enabling postgraduate access and success for a more diverse student cohort (SAIDI, 2024). The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has acknowledged the need to expand access to, and improve the quality of, postgraduate studies, highlighting the need to expand online and blended learning (DHET, 2013). In the context of an increasing demand for postgraduate learning opportunities (Namakula & Ndaba, 2024), it is incumbent on higher education institutions to address access, throughput, and quality in the postgraduate sector.

Factors impacting access to, and subsequently success in, the postgraduate sector include the high cost of study, the structure of degrees, the distance students are required to travel to classes, and family expectations (Botha, 2018). There are also challenges related to accessing quality postgraduate teaching practices, quality research supervision, and support structures such as capacity-building postgraduate workshops, and library services (Nwosu, Segotso, Enebe & Nyakuwanika, 2024). Furthermore, current inflexible degree structures and national financial aid requirements restrict access and limit

opportunities for continued learning beyond the first undergraduate degree. Increasing the flexibility of formal programmes through formally accredited (Pollard & Vincent, 2022) micro-credentials offered online in relatively compressed timeframes is one strategy to address these obstacles.

The University of Cape Town (UCT) has offered a Postgraduate Diploma in Education Technology (PGDip EdTech) for more than a decade. Since 2015, this programme has consisted of four courses, consisting of 30 credits each that ran in succession during a single academic year. Prior to the Covid pandemic, the courses were offered in a block release mode – compulsory in-person classes for one week, followed by independent study before submitting final assessments. In response to shifts in the field, we[1] applied for accreditation for a new programme – the Postgraduate Diploma in Blended and Online Learning Design (PGDip BOLD). The structure of this programme is radically different from the PGDip EdTech, in that it is fully online and consists of a suite of stackable, micro, 10-credit courses that students can take as short or credit-bearing options. Inspired by our students' needs, the changing higher education and learning design landscapes, and ideas such as radical flexibility, the design of the BOLD programme aimed to reimagine the shape of postgraduate education by initiating changes across economic, cultural, and political dimensions (Fraser, 2005), enabling access and redefining success.

We have taken up Veletsianos and Houlden's (2020) concept of *radical flexibility*, which challenges us to (re)consider what equitable education looks like. However, in the face of constraining structures within and beyond the institution, we were forced to consider whether it was possible to achieve radical flexibility in the short-term in our context. We turned then to the concept of *pragmatic* flexibility, which retains the aspirations of radical flexibility while allowing us to work iteratively and over time towards changing constraining conditions in pursuit of more radically flexible offerings. The objective of this study was, therefore, to explore how *pragmatic flexibility* shapes course design in the BOLD programme. This is a conceptual paper that draws on a learning design case to illustrate the value of radical flexibility as an aspirational goal for socially just learning design practices. Working with Fraser's (2005) participatory parity and dimensions of social justice, we unpack the design choices that seek to address maldistribution, misrecognition, misrepresentation and misframing in the programme and course design.

Flexibility in curriculum and course design in higher education

Flexibility in curriculum and course design has attracted significant attention in higher education, particularly as institutions strive to meet the diverse needs of students, adapt to changing societal demands, and navigate the complexities of various and sometimes competing educational goals (for example, Barua & Lockee, 2024).

Flexibility in a neoliberal context

Flexibility can be understood through multiple lenses, each highlighting different priorities and values. In relation to curriculum and course design, flexibility can refer to the adaptability of educational structures, processes, and content to accommodate diverse student needs, institutional goals, and broader societal changes.

However, in a sector grappling with neoliberal imperatives, flexibility is often associated with market-driven realities, such as the need for adaptability to economic demands, efficiency, and individualisation. Neoliberal perspectives on flexibility emphasise the role of education in producing human capital. In this approach, flexibility, adaptability, and responsiveness are linked to competitiveness – and responsiveness to market needs (Vartiainen, 2024), prioritising efficiency and individual autonomy in learning processes, such as control of pace, place, and mode (Jones & Walters, 2015). Flexibility is, thus, often operationalised through focusing on modular curricula, competency-based progression,

[1] This paper was written by staff based in the Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching at UCT. All cluster conveners and co-conveners, as at November 2024, are co-authors on this paper.

and technology-enhanced learning, which allow institutions to cater to diverse student populations while maintaining efficiency (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2021).

In South Africa, which continues to address the persistent shadows of apartheid-era policies, balancing expectations around producing excellent research, preparing students for employment, and addressing societal inequalities is particularly difficult (Swartz, Ivancheva, Czerniewicz & Morris, 2019). In light of our histories of exclusion, flexible education must go beyond neoliberal understandings of flexibility, and become, as Veletsianos and Houlden (2020, p. 850) write, "responsive to learner and societal needs" – not only through formats and modes, but also through timeframes that respond to the varying needs of non-traditional students, and through "locations", physical and digital, that maximise accessibility for students.

Micro-credentialing

One approach to modularising curricula for a diverse range of learning needs and processes is micro-credentialing. A relatively new concept in global higher education, and even more so in South Africa (Paterson & McDonald, 2024), micro-credentials are delivered in a relatively short and compressed timeframe, are usually offered online, and are usually formally accredited (Pollard & Vincent, 2022). Oliver (2019, p. 10), writing in Australia, defines a micro-credential as "a certification of assessed learning that is additional, alternate, complementary to or a component part of a formal qualification" or, more loosely, "a certification of assessed learning that is less than a formal qualification". Similarly, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) provisionally describes a micro-credential as "a small unit of learning that is credit-bearing, stand-alone, may be stackable, assessed, quality assured and certified for lifelong learning" (Paterson & McDonald, 2024, p. 16).

The affordances for flexibility that micro-credentialling brings challenges existing qualifications frameworks and established institutional policies and administrative processes. South Africa is in the process of establishing a micro-credential framework (CHE, 2023) on a national and institutional level, and SAQA has established a task team to examine the articulation of the National Qualifications Framework and micro-credentialling through the credit accumulation and transfer of micro-credential credits (Paterson & McDonald, 2024). Despite these developments, confidence in and recognition of micro-credentials is hampered by a lack of consensus about their structure and role among stakeholders, including educational institutions, employers, and potential students. This limits the uptake of this educational pathway and poses risks and challenges for learners wishing to transfer or translate credentials from one context to another (Chakroun & Keevy, 2018).

Radical flexibility

Flexibility is often defined within a functionalist paradigm that fails to address deeper structural issues (Maggi, 2019). Furthermore, critics argue that more neoliberal interpretations of flexibility perpetuate inequality by prioritising market demands over equitable access to education (Jones & Walters, 2015). In South Africa, the flexibility of online and blended learning has only been available to those who have access to the technology, data, and digital literacies needed to navigate this space (Czerniewicz et al., 2020).

In contrast, a social justice approach to flexibility foregrounds awareness of equity, inclusion, and empowerment. This approach prioritises the needs of marginalised groups, emphasising the importance of creating learning environments that are responsive to diverse student backgrounds, abilities, and experiences. For instance, Veletsianos and Houlden's (2020) concept of radical flexibility centres relationality, justice, and trust, advocating for systemic changes that create life-sustaining education for all. As Houlden and Velestianos (2020, p. 144) assert:

Understood this way, flexibility becomes a value proposition, one grounded in ostensibly more comprehensive measures of freedom, rather than merely a modality as conceptualized in early distance education literature.

This perspective views flexibility not merely as adaptability, but as a commitment to

dismantling structural barriers and fostering participation of diverse student populations. A key example of this is the use of flexible learning itineraries, which enable students to co-design their learning paths, promoting learner autonomy and personalisation (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2020).

Veletsianos and Houlden's radical flexibility offers an approach that transcends neoliberal approaches to flexibility by centring relationality, systemic change, and a commitment to equity. This approach moves beyond superficial adaptability, instead advocating for a fundamental transformation of educational structures and practices. Radical flexibility does not merely accommodate different learning needs; it aims to create a system that is just, inclusive, and empowering for all students (Veletsianos & Houlden, 2020), embedding justice and trust at the core of educational design.

Veletsianos and Houlden (2020) make it clear that radical flexibility must go beyond flexible logistics (pace, place, and mode), take into consideration what participants need and desire, and ultimately reimagine what the purpose of education should be (p. 852):

Radical flexibility […] means taking seriously the nature and purpose of learning itself at the fundamental level of human life, where human life is understood to be enmeshed relationally with all that goes on around, with, and through it. In other words, radical flexibility is a backdoor into thinking not just about how to deliver education equitably, but to ask what kind of education, what kind of university, do we want—which is in turn to ask, what kind of life, what kind of future do we want, and for whom?

Micro-credentialing and radical flexibility

Critiques of micro-credentialing argue that there is a lack of critical and reflective engagement, which has created a fear of micro-credentials perpetuating neoliberalism and positioning learning as a commodity and learners as consumers (Pollard & Vincent, 2022). Chakroun and Keevy (2018) warn, for example, that stacking a combination of micro-credentials towards a macro-credential (qualification) may not be conceptually sound, or "lead to [in]coherent qualifications" that are not formally recognised (p. 29) or transferrable beyond the institution or organisation offering it. Furthermore, the current literature fails to address the relationship between equity concerns and micro-credentialing; that is to say, considerations around who accesses these courses, how they do so, and whether the courses enable equitable learning outcomes (Selvaratnam & Sankey, 2021).

Pollard and Vincent (2022) suggest that micro-credentials can be inclusive and ethical if they are designed in line with the following three integral principles: being embedded in the curriculum; alignment with the university mission; and applied as part of a reflective pedagogy in which the subject is formed in discourse. It is in this context that Moodie and Wheelahan (2021) argue for a paradigm shift in how higher education approaches micro-credentialing, particularly in terms of the stacking of credentials. Oliver (2019) posits that micro-credentials must mirror courses in the target formal programme in terms of notional hours, assessments, and academic standards. Such stackable micro-credentials enable the acquisition of disciplinary styles of reasoning, thereby facilitating epistemological access to the target programme (Mayisela & Karassellos, in press; Jones, 2022).

This move from a narrow focus on skills training to developing wider disciplinary knowledge can be supported by course activities and assessment tasks that have real-world relevance. These activities should draw from and apply to learners' professional practices while recognising the importance of critical reflection, as Sargent, Rienties, Perryman, and Fitzgerald (2023) argue in their study on stackable micro-credentials in a postgraduate certificate in academic practice. This not only allows flexibility, but gives students a real sense of what to expect in the programme, affirming student agency and transparency.

In our work, we adopt this more socially just understanding of flexibility, co-creating learning opportunities with our participants that are as meaningful, responsive, and authentic as possible, while embedding criticality and creativity in everything we do. To operationalise

this, Fraser's participatory parity (2005) framework helped us think through *how* to move through pragmatic flexibility towards radical flexibility in programme and course design.

Socially just programme and course design

Fraser's (2005) understanding of social justice, based on the concept "participatory parity", provides a structured lens for exploring how to increase participation of students to create more equitable learning experiences within the complex system of higher education. Fraser defines participatory parity as the capacity to participate in society as "peers" (Fraser, 2005, p. 73). Participatory parity encompasses both an outcome where "all the relevant social actors … participate as peers in social life" and a process in which procedural standards are followed "in fair and open processes of deliberation" (Fraser, 2005, p. 87).

Fraser (2005) argues that economic maldistribution (lack of access to resources), cultural misrecognition (lack of recognition of cultural attributes), and political misrepresentation and misframing (lack of voice/agency) perpetuate barriers that exclude marginalised learners from opportunities to participate in education. Traditional degree-based systems often deepen these inequities by privileging those with financial resources and access to elite institutions.

In addition to her trivalent understanding of social justice, Fraser (2005) offers the concepts of affirmative (sometimes called ameliorative) justice and transformational justice as ways to talk about the impact of interventions (Mayisela, Govender & Hodgkinson-Williams, 2024). Affirmative justice involves changes that do not disrupt existing social structures, such as offering students educational materials translated into the language of their choice or through assistive technologies for those with disabilities (Mayisela et al., 2024). In contrast, transformative justice entails a fundamental transformation of traditional structures, addressing the "root of what matters" (Zipin, 2017, p. 68), such as fee-free education.

While Fraser's work does not focus on education, her participatory parity framework has been adopted for similar purposes in the local context. Winberg, Bozalek and Cattell (2016), for example, draw on Maton and Chen's (2016) notion of a "translation device" to translate Fraser's trivalent social justice framework in the context of professional learning in a postgraduate qualification. They explore how the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education Teaching and Learning [PG Dip (HETL)], a collaboration between three Western Cape Universities, contributes to socially just teaching and learning in higher education. Table 1 provides Winberg et al.'s (2016) summary of how inter-institutional collaboration activities and professional learning on the PG Dip (HETL) addressed Fraser's dimensions of social justice.

Table 1: Translation device for socially just pedagogies in inter-institutional higher learning (Source: Winberg et al., 2016)

Fraser's modes of social ordering	Dimensions of social justice	Inter-institutional collaboration	Professional learning on the PG Dip (HETL)
Redistribution	Economic	Sharing of resources	Sharing of knowledge and experiences
Recognition	Cultural	Parity of esteem	Affirming diversity (disciplinary, institutional, and individual)
Representation	Political	Collective decision-making	Enabling voices through critical reflection

Drawing on Winberg et al.'s (2016) approach, we will describe the structure and

design of the BOLD programme, highlighting specific design decisions at both the programme and course level that have the potential to overcome injustices by addressing economic maldistribution, misrecognition of identities, and exclusion from sites of decision-making.

The story of BOLD

The BOLD programme responds to a growing need for educational opportunities that support professionals in their online teaching and learning aspirations, both within and beyond the higher education sector. BOLD utilises learning design that draws on, inter alia, the disciplines of education, design, and information technology. While these disciplines have a well-established canon, blended and online learning design as an interdisciplinary area is poorly established in Southern Africa (Pallitt, Carr, Pedersen, Gunness & Dooga, 2018).

The BOLD design team has taught on the PGDip EdTech for many years, including a course on "Online and Blended Learning Design". Over time, it became apparent that a single course was insufficient to adequately address the increasingly complex and nuanced field of learning design. The BOLD programme was proposed to expand the single course in the PGDipEdTech into a diploma programme that would prepare participants to engage with learning design as a practice, a role and a site for research. At the end of 2019, funding from the UCT Formal Online Education project was secured for the design and development of this new programme. Due to competing demands related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent move to emergency remote teaching, programme development only started in earnest in 2022 and was submitted for accreditation in 2023. It will be offered for the first time as an accredited programme in 2026.

Design decisions to improve flexibility in BOLD through a participatory parity lens

In the next section, we describe a series of programme and course design choices that sought to create a student experience that was characterised by enhanced parity of opportunity and participation.

Economic dimension

Paying attention to Fraser's (2005) economic dimension of parity of participation led us to focus on questions of financial and material resource access (typically beyond the ambit of course design), which allowed us to create real opportunities for radical flexibility within the programme and course design.

Programme design: Flexible financial pathways

By structuring the programme around 10-credit courses, which are mirrored in short courses, the BOLD programme offers ways of distributing costs across time, mitigating the cost barrier. Conventionally, comparable qualifications at UCT may be taken over one or two years. Students are required to make a minimum initial payment (37 800 ZAR) by registration and finalise the total fee payment (48 400 ZAR) by mid-year. This is a substantial financial outlay for someone working as a freelance learning designer or new to the field. While the full PGDip will cost a similar amount in total, participants will have the option to register to take the course part-time over two years, enhancing affordability for a wider range of participants.

Furthermore, while applicants may apply directly for the PGDip, the short course route is designed to be an alternate, low-risk, rewarded entry point to the programme. In the BOLD programme, participants may opt to take up to 50% of their credits in advance as short courses. While short courses are typically priced at a higher rate than credit-bearing courses, the BOLD programme has aligned the cost of the short courses as closely as possible to the cost of a course in the PGDip in order to retain the short-course entry point as a viable option. At the time of writing this article, the cost of a 10-credit postgraduate course in the Faculty of Humanities at UCT was 3 750 ZAR. We costed a short course at 5 500 ZAR, factoring in the loss in DHET subsidies for courses taken outside a formal postgraduate

programme. At 5 500 ZAR, BOLD short courses will be offered at a cost point below the industry norm (an eight-week course offered in the sector can cost around 13 000 ZAR, or more). For participants who register for short courses rather than the PGDip, the additional cost per course is offset by some return on investment – even if participants elect not to apply for the PGDip, they receive a short course certificate which can be leveraged for employment purposes. Short course participants may, by attending all required sessions, receive a certificate of attendance; while participants who complete assessments are eligible for a "Pass certificate". Unlike in the diploma context where failing a course offers no tangible return, in the case of short courses, participation receives some, albeit limited, recognition.

While neither of these programme design choices fully removes the fee burden, participants who spread the programme over a number of years through the short-course mechanism can reduce the impact of the annual cost on finances through spreading the costs.

Course design: Open educational resources and freemium products

BOLD is committed to the design and use of open educational resources (OER) to reduce costs within the programme and contribute accessible materials and literature within the local learning design sector (Czerniewicz, Cox, Hodgkinson-Williams & Willmers, 2015). For example, all teaching slides, the accompanying course notes, and video interviews with guest lecturers will be available for reuse under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial (CC BY-NC) licence. This allows a student to use these materials in a range of ways, provided that they credit the BOLD programme and include the license when sharing. The licence also stipulates that users are not granted permission to use the material for commercial purposes – although the understanding of commercial purposes may be contested (Creative Commons, 2025).

Additionally, care has been taken in course design to overcome barriers to access in relation to educational technologies, tools, and platforms. It is commonplace for similar courses to require students to purchase access to tools that are deemed to be industry standard. In the local context, we are cognisant of two factors – firstly, access to so-called industry-standard tools is prohibitively expensive; and, secondly, there is considerable variation in what tools are considered industry standard in different contexts. This led us to use free tools wherever possible and encourage students to explore the limits of these tools available through freemium models or make use of proprietary tools to which they institutional access.

Cultural dimension

Fraser's (2005) notion of parity of participation relies in part on equitable recognition of the cultural and social attributes or resources brought by participants to an activity. We anticipated considerable diversity within the BOLD short course participant group – including commonly-considered dimensions of difference, such as race, class, or gender, but also other dimensions of difference, such as job role and experience, urban or rural location, level of digital literacy, and so on. As we designed the programme and courses, we regularly reflected on which elements of our participants' identities might be recognised and which marginalised by our design choices. In the section below, we describe a range of strategies employed to recognise the varying cultural and social attributes or resources brought along by participants.

Build your BOLD

In response to radical flexibility's demands for "more comprehensive measures of freedom" (Houlden & Velestianos, 2020, p. 144), coupled with Fraser's (2005) notion of misrecognition, we wanted to create a course structure that was as flexible, accessible, and personalisable for participants as possible. The BOLD programme, consisting of 120 credits, is therefore structured around 10-credit courses, organised in four clusters:

- Cluster 1: Learning Design – Practice, Process or Emerging field?
- Cluster 2: Learning Design for Social Justice
- Cluster 3: Designing Digital Habitats
- Cluster 4: Critical and Caring Reflective Perspectives on Learning Design

Clusters 1 and 2 consist of two mandatory courses and at least two electives, from which students must select one for each cluster. Cluster 3 offers a range of electives from which students choose three. Cluster 4 consists of three mandatory courses which must be taken last and in order. This structure offers students as much choice in content, sequence, and pacing of the programme as possible, while allowing the team to ensure coherence across the programme.

This stackable design opened up new ways to be flexible. Short-course participants may "stack" up to six short courses from Clusters 1–3 prior to applying for entry to the postgraduate diploma and receive Recognition of Advanced Standing. This responds to the need of such participants to explore the fit of the course for their needs, while potentially developing capacity to engage with the programme over an extended period. The short course route also allows responsiveness if new topics which were not planned for arise. An example of this was the advent of generative AI, which encouraged us to add an additional course on "Designing with AI" to the course offering in 2024. The ability to offer short courses allows us to navigate institutional bureaucracies and creates a level of responsiveness not usually awarded to formal programmes (which are usually only reviewed annually before the new course handbook is published).

To explore how we would accommodate both PGDip and short course participants in the same learning space, we started offering short courses from 2024 as part of a piloting process and will admit the first PGDip cohort in 2026. By structuring the programme around 10-credit courses, BOLD enables a degree of student choice that allows students to construct curricula that are responsive to cultural dimensions of diversity.

Making diversity visible: From personas to course buddies

BOLD has a diverse target audience, ranging from educators, trainers, learning designers, educational technologists, and practitioners from various sectors, such as higher education, schools, EdTech companies, corporate training, and NGOs. To design for such a diverse target audience, we drew on "personas" – a fictional person who serves "as an archetype or a way to make visible the needs, goals, technical experiences and accessibility requirements of larger groups" (Avery, 2022, p. 3) – as a design tool. Five personas were developed: each had a name, a visual representation (see Figure 1), and a back story. The personas were designed to offer participants a digital "course buddy" who could accompany them in their learning journey and enhance belonging by foregrounding diversity across multiple dimensions, and in so doing, avoid misrecognition.

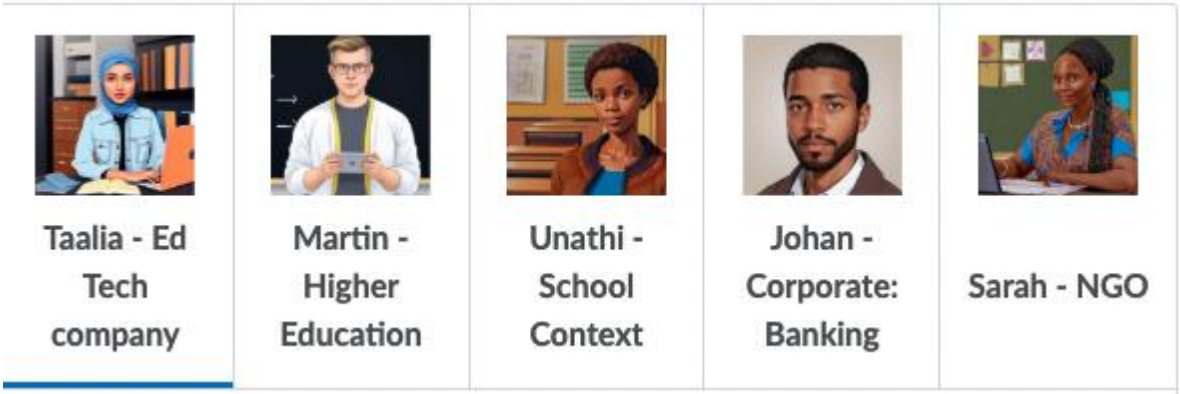

Figure 1: Course buddy personas developed to accompany participants in their learning journeys

As recounted in Huang, Gachago and Archer (under review), meaningful integration of the course buddies into the first pilot of a BOLD course proved challenging. While the personas were introduced as course buddies at the start, their role in the course was insufficiently developed, resulting in some students feeling that their context was insufficiently represented in the course. This foregrounded the potential for misrecognition – not only in the course design and in our dealings with students, but also in how we expected students to engage with each other. To address this, we adopted a more participatory approach in the second run of the short course, inviting participants to relate their experiences to those of the course buddies. In this way, participants came to appreciate the resonances between their and their peers' experiences and those of the course buddies. This contributed to developing a course community that better recognised the intersecting cultural dimensions of diversity, distributing the work of recognition through the course and the community.

Being flexible with time

Higher education institutions are notoriously inflexible when it comes to dates of application, offering a single window for registration, and timetabling of courses. BOLD attempts to address some of this inflexibility through the short course option. Students may register for the short-course version of any course at any time prior to the course if they miss institutional deadlines. While there will initially only be an intake for the PGDip every second year, participants can take short courses in the year there is no new intake, allowing them to work around the less flexible formal degree timeframes.

Supplemental success activities: Orientation and coaching

All first-year PGDip students will be required to engage with the self-paced, non-credit bearing Orientation course that provides detailed information about the programme and how to navigate learning pathways. The course explicitly describes what is expected of the students and provides useful resources on academic and digital literacies. Students are introduced to the course buddies and their back stories. As previously explained, the course buddies represent the different contexts and roles our students inhabit, such as higher education and school educators, non-governmental training facilitators, EdTech company employees, and corporate learning designers. The role of the design buddies in the Orientation is to allow students to see people like them being recognised as valued participants in the course, and to reduce the potential for misrecognition on grounds of employment and educational background.

Courses in the programme are structured around two weekly teaching sessions followed by optional coaching sessions. The coaching sessions function like tutorials, offering either additional support for material covered in the teaching sessions or supplementary content to enhance the learning experience. For instance, in the "Designing with AI" short course, the coaching sessions

have been employed to delve deeper into GAI tools introduced during the teaching sessions or to explore new tools based on participant requests.

Diversity in assessment as a tool for recognition

We have aspired to adopt a vision for assessment within BOLD that aligns with radical flexibility and social justice through designing assessments in the programme to support participants with practitioner and/or academic interests.

Our assessment design foregrounds authenticity, contextual relevance, multiple knowledges, multimodality, and inclusivity. Although assessments must be defined and set by course convenors in advance as part of the accreditation process, we have structured these in ways that allow for student choice and agency. For example, assessments are typically designed to ground participants' learning within their own professional environments and lived experiences. This gives participants choice in topics they would like to explore. We have also aspired to design for multimodal approaches to assessment, enabling participants to express their knowledge in diverse ways across courses.

A key mechanism to enable participant choice is the design of assessments that test the same learning outcome through different activities. To enable this, courses offer two parallel tracks: a scholarly track, and a practitioner track. Participants on the scholarly track are expected to complete assignments meeting academic writing and referencing conventions. In contrast, the practitioner track requires participants to produce assignments in a professional report-writing style that emphasises practical application and real-world relevance.

It is necessary to acknowledge that we have experienced obstacles in this regard because of institutional and administrative constraints, such as the need for standardising marking and the additional workload of assessing diverse assessments. Despite this, radical flexibility and inclusivity remain an aspirational goal. Our current approach is one that involves negotiated balance – a form of *pragmatic flexibility* that centres student agency and equity, while navigating systemic and administrative constraints.

Political dimension

Fraser's (2005) notion of political misrepresentation requires that we attend to who is able to participate in design at the level of programme and course. Within BOLD, we questioned whether we had given sufficient attention to "ordinary-political misrepresentation" (Fraser, 2005, p. 76), that is who is included in decision making processes and how. Typically, academic staff find themselves focused on ameliorative actions related to the political dimension with within a course context. We were, however, privileged in that creating a new programme, enabled us to consider carefully how to design for political inclusion at a programme level, as well as the usual course level.

Leveraging changes to policy

When introducing new approaches to course and programme structure that potentially challenge current institutional practices, one needs the support of an ecosystem of actors. While we can find "wriggle room" around institutional limitations in some instances, resulting primarily in affirmative changes, some of our ideas for this programme demanded that we advocate for change on a national and institutional level – particularly as relates to policy on micro-credentialing, providing potential for transformative change.

In our case, review of the institutional Continuing Education Policy (University of Cape Town, 2025) serendipitously co-occurred with our attempts at introducing flexible course structures. The new Continuing Education Policy emphasises the importance of articulation between non-credit bearing short courses and credit-bearing formal qualifications, supporting our attempts at providing multiple entry points into our PGDip.

In the absence of a national framework, institutional support is crucial to effect change. Seeking and developing such institutional support is relational work, which often emerged at various milestones within and beyond the immediate bounds of programme and course design. As Brown (2017) reminds us, small changes repeat at large across the system if you have built a network of receptive allies in the institution.

Mirroring PGDip in the short courses: Providing additional gateways to study

As previously discussed, the BOLD programme has multiple entry points: through the formal PGDip application process, and through the short course route. This mirroring of courses allows for the inclusion of students that previous application processes would have excluded out of hand. For example, in the PGDip EdTech, students must have a cognate degree in order to be considered for the programme. In the absence of such a degree (as we found was commonly the case for mature candidates with a diploma or for candidates from elsewhere in Africa with teaching qualifications) such candidates would be ineligible and, due to the absence of a scaffolded RPL process, would not be able to gain access to the PGDip EdTech. The BOLD programme, by mirroring courses and allowing participants to take up to 50% of their credits through short courses, enables us to more accurately determine who will be able to succeed in the PGDip.

The short course route also allows us opportunities to collaborate with programmes from other institutions by offering additional electives. One such example is our collaboration with the PGDip in Higher Education offered by the University of the Witwatersrand in a similar micro-credential format. Furthermore, participants can transfer short courses they have completed elsewhere for RPL for Advanced Standing if they are taught on a PGDip level and match the BOLD learning outcomes.

Recognition of prior learning

For participants who do not meet the formal requirements for entry into the PGDip, the short course "Becoming a Learning Design Professional" provides a pathway into the programme through a RPL route. As part of this course, participants develop a personal and professional development plan which can serve as evidence of experience and learning in the RPL application process. The personal and professional development plan may be presented either as scholarly task, aligned with academic reflective writing practices, or as a professional task, using linguistic and social conventions more commonly associated with professional improvement practices in industry and in support roles in academia. In the case of successful entry into the PGDip, the student will be awarded the credits via RPL Advanced Standing.

Co-creation as a voice for recognition

As we have argued elsewhere, ordinary political misrepresentation can take the form of "denying student and staff input into economic matters (e.g., infrastructural and/or equipment requirements, financial arrangements for bursaries), cultural matters (e.g., curricula, institutional norms) and political matters (e.g., institutional governance, national policy)" (Mayisela et al., 2024, p. 10). Co-creation at the policy, programme, and course level can be a powerful strategy to address such ordinary political misrepresentation. The BOLD programme is designed to allow students to signal their priorities through selective participation, offering maximum flexibility in terms of registration within restrictive sectoral norms.

The key area for student voice, within our locus of control, is within the boundaries of the courses themselves. Thus, all the BOLD courses share a common view, expressed in varying degrees of student voice within the course, addressing partially, at least, this political misrepresentation. Within the courses, student voice is valued as providing key insight into the student experience and sectoral practices. All courses, at a minimum, incorporate group work, student presentations,

and student choice at the level of curriculum and assessment choices. While the programme is in the design and piloting phase, we are drawing on pre-existing networks and connections for guest lecturers. It is, however, the intention of the design team and is budgeted for within the model, that, in future years, we will draw previous BOLD PGDip and short course students in as guest lecturers, leveraging their unique experience of the course and the field to enrich the experiences of future cohorts.

In summary, Fraser's three dimensions guided a series of design choices that fostered more socially just programme and course design. Table 2 below summarises the choices we have discussed above.

Table 2: Translating Fraser's dimensions into programme design and course design choices

Fraser's dimensions	**Dimensions of social justice**	**Programme design and course design choices**
Economic	Economic	Programme design: Flexible finances Course design: OER and freemium tools
Cultural	Cultural	Making diversity visible: From personas to course buddies Build your BOLD Being flexible with time Supplemental success activities: Orientation and Coaching Diversity in assessment as a tool for recognition
Political	Political	Leveraging changes to Continuing Education Policy Mirroring PGDip in the short courses: Gateways to study Recognition of prior learning: A short course route Expression of the political dimension within the course: Co-creation as a voice for recognition

Participatory parity and radical flexibility

A key goal with BOLD was to challenge and shift institutional practices and interpretations of policy to move us towards radical flexibility. Veletsianos and Houlden's (2020) definition of radical flexibility foregrounds centring relationality and systemic changes including educational structures, practices and a commitment to equity. Our analysis in this paper seeks to demonstrate how BOLD attempts to move beyond neoliberal understandings of flexibility to questioning fundamental assumptions about education's purpose, structure, and relationship to human lives and futures.

The BOLD programme aims to respond to the exclusion of non-traditional students from further study by foregrounding in the programme design the movement between formal and non-formal educational offerings. By developing clear integration between short courses, RPL and recognition of Advanced Standing, and formal postgraduate study, BOLD makes porous the boundaries that historically have excluded certain categories of students from participation in formal education. Furthermore, by enabling participants to distribute costs across time in ways that align with their own personal circumstances, the BOLD programme acknowledges how economic standing fundamentally shapes educational possibilities, and in so doing responds to South Africa's post-apartheid financial maldistribution.

BOLD welcomes participants from a wide range of different contexts and practices, intentionally designing for this kind of sectoral diversity. The "course buddies" approach goes beyond mere representation to create dialogic relationships with diverse perspectives, where participants' experiences actively shape the course content. By inviting participants to

reflect with the course buddies, BOLD questions whose knowledge counts and creates space for multiple epistemologies. As such, the programme design acknowledges that learning happens within complex cultural and professional contexts, not just within university walls.

To support this, the parallel assessment tracks acknowledge different ways of knowing and expressing knowledge, questioning what constitutes valid demonstration of learning. By grounding assessments in participants' professional environments, the programme recognises learning as situated in real contexts rather than abstract academic exercises and emphasises transfer into practice. The aspiration toward multimodal assessment challenges linguistic and cultural privileging in traditional academic assessment practices.

Leveraging policy changes represents a strategic engagement with systems to create more just educational futures. The RPL pathway acknowledges that learning happens throughout life, not just in formal academic settings, allowing non-traditional participants to access formal education. Finally, the programme positions itself as part of an ecosystem of change, recognising that educational transformation requires relationship building and networks of receptive allies.

Tensions and limitations

The BOLD programme's most transformative contributions to change within the institutional system required working across structures in the university, including not only academic staff within the department designing the programme, but working extensively with administrative colleagues in the faculty office and central institution planning departments. By restructuring the relationship between short courses and credit-bearing courses, various institutional practices including RPL, admissions, handbook entries, and assessment practices had to be revisited and, in some cases, reimagined, which required extensive stakeholder buy-in across the faculty.

However, working with the existing systems of the institution highlighted the extent to which transformative change required not only change within BOLD, but also structural change in institutional processes and practices. The BOLD programme and course design teams were continuously challenged to work towards flexibility, accepting that change happens slowly and in smaller steps than we would like as we built relationships and co-created confidence and the necessary institutional practices, policies, and guidelines in the programme design across different levels of stakeholders in the institution. While we may aspire to radical flexibility, in the short-term *pragmatic flexibility* allows us to adapt to different rhythms of openness, change, and resistance. Brown (2017, p. 78) reminds us that: "Adapting allows you to know and name current needs and capacity, to be in relationship in real time, as opposed to any cycle of wishing and/or resenting what others do or don't give you". We embrace this phase of adapting through pragmatic flexibility, while continuing to look to radical flexibility as an alternate way to engage with transformation that clings to the hope that all participants may come along in the transformative process.

While bringing the BOLD programme to this point in the process has highlighted various areas with opportunities for greater access and enhanced socially just learning, we must respond to critical voices around micro-credentialing. Authors such as Moodie and Wheelahan (2021) and Pollard and Vincent (2022) question the ability of micro-credentials to offer opportunities for deep learning and warn about the challenge of providing meaningful horizontal and vertical integration across micro-courses and individual learning pathways. If we are serious about radical flexibility that goes beyond neoliberal agendas for widening access and employability, epistemological and ontological concerns around creating spaces for critical reflexive practice must be foregrounded.

Conclusion

While there are aspects of the current South African higher education system which remain out of the scope of a single programme to transformatively change, such as the cost of higher education in South Africa, the BOLD programme seeks to ameliorate this inequity through distribution mechanisms and flexibility. BOLD questions who education serves by creating multiple pathways that accommodate diverse life circumstances and professional realities. Rather than merely making existing structures more accessible, BOLD aimed to restructure the qualification itself to challenge traditional gatekeeping in higher education. The mirroring of formal and short courses represents a philosophical shift about what constitutes legitimate knowledge acquisition and recognition and provides much needed championing of more flexible education pathways. BOLD questions traditional institutional boundaries around time (such as rigid schedules or application deadlines) to align more with the ever-changing realities of working professionals' lives. The ability to add short courses as new developments emerge (such as with the "Designing with AI" course) reflects education as an ongoing, responsive process rather than a fixed curriculum. Finally, by seeking inter-institutional collaboration, the programme challenges the notion of universities as businesses competing with each other for students, and offers greater flexibility and choice for students.

Disclosures

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest. All authors have approved the final version of this article.

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