

Preliminary Remarks

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I am Professor Robert Balfour and on behalf of the Deputy Vice Chancellor of the Vaal Triangle Campus, Professor Linda du Plessis, and the Vice-Chancellor of the North-West University, Professor Dan Kgwadi, I am delighted to convey both our congratulations to the graduands present today, and our appreciation to the families, loved ones and friends honoured as guests of the university and our students.

Goeie middag dames en here. Ek is Professor Robert Balfour, en namens Prof Linda du Plessis, Adjunk Visekanselier van die Vaaldrihoekkampus, en Prof Dan Kgwadi, Visekanselier van die Noordwes Universiteit, is ek baie bly om u as graduandi ons gelukwense te gee vandag. Ek wil ook ons waardering vir die ondersteuning van families, geliefdes en vriende, vir ons graduandi, uitspreek.

Address to Meeting

Following such a tremendous recognition of the achievement of our graduates today, let us remember the dedication of our students to their studies, the long nights and weekends spent studying and preparing to improve their qualifications and lives. Let us offer one round of applause again to our students here. This afternoon I want to talk about **Decolonising the curriculum and its relationship to language in South Africa**.

Midst the #FeesMustFall movement and #DecoloniseTheCurriculum debates an opportunity remains unexplored for universities to engage proactively with the role language development can and should play in developing intercultural awareness as well as multilingual competence in South Africa's higher education institutions. To date most language policies as legislated in universities, for example, motivate for the use of English on the basis that it enables access to universities. In reality such access is enabled mostly for those middle class young people emerging already enabled from South Africa's class-divided education system. The arguments around language for access and participation have a decidedly pragmatic flavour: on the one hand, there is a discourse evident in discussions, research as well as policy documentation about the importance of access to the epistemological worlds of students and what they bring to the higher education spaces in which they are taught and engaged. On the other hand, language is somehow regarded as an invisible component of this world; the unspoken assumption being that the languages which are brought into these spaces are useful only to the extent that they enable the acquisition of English or the learning of academic literacy particularly. English or Afrikaans function as transparent mediums through which knowledge is acquired. We academics pride ourselves that our students should emerge from our courses and programmes with relative fluency in written English, aided of course by a plethora of aid-type structures (such as writing centres or extended programmes or foundation courses); the very presence of which belie the extent to which universities, let alone colleges, have really adopted South Africa's commitment to multi-linguality as described in the *Constitution* (1996), or any other piece of legislation related to languages in education. A commitment to multi-linguality would not stop at efforts to acquire English and academic literacy. It should go much further.

Fact is: we still expect 'them' to assimilate with 'us'; we still expect their worlds to become accessible only as a means of understanding 'ours', through the language of our choosing. If students do bring to the university a range of potential learning resources which they have developed through the still very uneven and unequal South African school system, it means mostly very little in university teaching and learning. That poorer students take longer to finish their programmes, or drop-out sooner from universities, than their enabled middle class counterparts is used in the media as a cruel comment on State attempts to massify higher education and widen access: a kind of self-damage in which responsibility for the sector's underperformance is placed squarely on the shoulders of government (Ndebele, CHE Report, 2014). Higher education institutions are blame-free. The ivory tower remains ivory because of an unspoken "fit or fail" law. It is however, not all gloom, the announcement at the end of 2017 as regards Free Education for among South Africa's most poor students promises hope for universities as well as students. Languages are a means not only of enabling access for students, but also a way of accessing students' experience and worlds, not simply with an 'enabling access and participation' perspective, but with a view to recognition of worlds that ought to be part of the curriculum making and curriculum experience in higher education. Andre Goodrich, an Anthropologist at NWU, makes a similar point, not about the othering of people directly, but about the othering, or exclusion that occurs even within the curriculum. He argues that the colonial character of a discipline can be discerned by examining

the zones of exclusion it has produced. Thus when we look at the development of subjects in the humanities over the last fifty years, whole new areas have arisen from the ground-breaking scholarship of academics who have through multi-disciplinary work, created new areas of focus and of expertise. For example, whole departments of African Studies; Gender Studies; Popular Culture; Queer Studies; Indigenous Knowledge Systems-IKS, Consumer Sciences and Media Studies, Critical Accounting, and Serious Gaming emerged. The development and inclusion of new disciplines into the curriculum arises not only from the interests of academics, but also from the ways in which Universities respond to new developments in society, and to my mind these new knowledges need to be included because they make the curriculum more relevant and more engaging to students. And after all, what is a University without students? What is knowledge if no-one reads it, and what is change, except the impact of new understanding or knowledges on our current practices and traditions? When we speak about the need to create a University that is truly responsive to our students' worlds, we think thus of the learning they bring, the languages they bring, but also from the other end of this continuum, the new knowledges we need to nurture, encourage and develop at the NWU. Jansen in his book *As By Fire* (2017) provides an accessible understanding of different perspectives on what decolonization is. Decolonization can refer to the de-centering of knowledge such that instead of focusing primarily on the western origins and aspects of knowledge, to one that displaces western knowledges to the margins and centres instead, African or African-contextualised knowledges, for example, including indigenous knowledge in the curriculum. A second perspective entails Africanisation of knowledge in which, for example in the context of English or English literature you shift focus from Shakespeare, Dickens and the great Western texts, to include texts written by prominent African scholars, writers, historians, scientists and poets. A third perspective entails achieving decolonization of the curriculum by including other knowledges such as Eastern, African or Southern knowledges production and so for example, instead of focusing on Western philosophers in a BA, one should focus also on philosophers from South America, India, Asia and so on. A fourth perspective on decolonization entails an overt criticality of the curriculum itself and exploring its biases towards the West, or its gaps in terms of addressing African intellectual traditions. Decolonization can also be, according to Jansen, creating an understanding that our very ideas of what Western knowledge are essentialised, are entangled with a truly global set of origins of knowledge sometimes claimed by one culture, but in fact arising from many others. Finally, there is decolonization as what Jansen terms as the "repatriation of occupied knowledge" and in this last perspective efforts to achieve inclusivity are treated with care because they may result in domestication of knowledge.

The infusion of IKS (whether this be through the study of microbial qualities of indigenous plants long used for medicinal and other purposes in our communities (see the work of Josef de Beer in our Faculty at NWU), or through the celebration of South African literatures as these have developed in indigenous languages as well as English) in the curriculum goes beyond Africanisation. This work has occurred in pockets and is not yet a groundswell of curriculum change in South Africa. Thus we know that decolonisation has not yet occurred, and one of the main reasons this has not been seen to happen effectively or in a far-reaching and visible manner, occurs (in my view) in relation to the use and place of indigenous languages in the higher education sector. Scholars in the decolonisation debate have spoken much on what it means to access the epistemological worlds of students, but grounding that discussion must occur in the context of who people are. Language is central to identity as well as to what knowledges students bring, what is valued as worthy of use at a university and how that recognition goes beyond the pragmatic concern with scaffolding new knowledge on to what we think students know. It is for this reason that scholars such as Leigh-Ann Naidoo, Achille Mbembe (both at Wits) and Jenni Case (formerly at UCT) argue that not enough has been done, and that debates concerning transformation have not addressed or touched on the business of curriculum development or design. Similarly then university teaching and learning policies are thin in relation to what exactly curriculum transformation means, and absolutely silent on the relationship between curriculum, decolonisation and Africanization. In a context in which higher education remains experienced as exclusionary by many young people, the calls to embrace English as the primary language of learning (especially in formerly Afrikaans medium institutions) are profoundly ironic since they are premised on an understanding that that choice will be more enabling. This is both true and false. True insofar as English is a second language for the majority of South African students lucky enough to gain access to a university place, but false insofar that gaining such access means anything in terms of either recognizing, let alone accepting the diversity of students' worlds and experiences of education in South Africa. The likelihood of real recognition, indeed self-reckoning, occurring in universities, remains small for as long as previously colonial languages remain primary as the languages of teaching and learning. Academia in this regard still directs an unyielding face Westwards, and continues to speak through only two of our eleven tongues. When the audience to which you speak is multilingual, and you seek to touch, and reach people with words, using more than one language is important because without that acknowledgement we will as teachers or academics only ever be aware of who is speaking, and remain ignorant as to who is listening.

Key questions that bring together the challenge of multilingualism and the opportunity of decolonisation concern whose knowledge counts and whether the curriculum as we have it is sufficiently transformed?

Vote of Thanks

Let us also remember the parents, families and loved ones, friends and support teams of our graduates and without whom the achievement celebrated here today would not have been possible, and so let us offer to them a special round of applause.

Finally, to the staff of the faculties and schools of the North-West University who worked with the students, guiding and enriching their lives through the sharing of wisdom and knowledge, let us offer to them too, a special round of applause. Enjoy your day and may you travel home safely after this ceremony. Before closing, I call on the Pastor to conclude this presentation ceremony with a prayer and then we shall stand to sing the National Anthem of South Africa.

Prayer

Please stand for the singing of the South African National Anthem

After the anthem - "By the power vested in me, I hereby dissolve this meeting of the North-West University".

References

Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. 1996.

Jansen, J. 2017. *As by fire: The end of the South African university*. Cape Town, Tafelberg.