

**North-West University's Declaration on the Decolonisation
of University Education: The imperative to transform
Teaching and Learning, the Research Agenda and
Community Engagement**



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1. Preamble

As a leading university in Africa, North-West University (NWU) is driven by the pursuit of knowledge and innovation. It has a unique institutional culture, which is based on the values it supports. The University commits itself to practices that are appropriate and encourage decolonisation within relevant contexts. It therefore recognises the importance of transforming university education by transforming teaching and learning, as well as its approaches to research and community engagement. The advancement of the broader social justice mission of higher education institutions will reflect in the NWU's strategies, financial plans and operations across the three key University roles.

It is important to recognise the fact that this declaration does not include specific examples, guidelines, rules or strategies for decolonisation. Such matters should be addressed in a contextual manner within the framework of this institution-wide declaration and reach maturity at faculty level. It is thus acknowledged that every faculty should attempt to decolonise both the content of its academic programmes, and its approaches to, and methods of teaching, learning and assessment in its lecture halls, laboratories and other teaching venues in a differentiated manner. The University's existing faculty-integrated teaching and learning plans provide guidance in this regard. Faculties should furthermore go about their research agenda in similar vein. Due consideration should be given to prioritised research fields and foci, how research is pursued, who serves to gain from such research, and ensure that research outcomes are implemented. Equally, the NWU priorities regarding its engagement with community should be based on comprehensive engagement with external stakeholders, and practices should be characterised by doing it **together with society**, rather than doing it **to society**.

This declaration should be considered in the view of NWU's commitment to be an internationally recognised university in Africa, distinguished for engaged scholarship, academic excellence, social responsiveness and an ethic of care. These features should be embedded in an organisational culture that has a transformational focus. It would reflect in behaviour that illustrates respect for diversity and inclusivity, together with a values-based, collective identity that promotes integration, participation and collaboration. Further characteristics of such an organisational culture would include innovation, joint and individual accountability, open and transparent communication, robust discourse and academic integrity.

The declaration makes the assumption that all faculties will recognise and commit themselves to the objective of embracing decolonisation practices in an equitable way. This will foster greater inclusivity, which will consider a diversity of viewpoints, and ultimately enhance student success and contribute to social justice.

Finally, the document is intended to frame an ongoing debate around decoloniality, to create an open space for critical engagement, rather than offer a definitive and final NWU position.

2. Background and context of the decolonisation debate

This declaration articulates NWU's stance on decolonisation and its relationship to the important issue of transforming its curricula and approaches to teaching and learning, research practice, and engagement. It also focuses on transforming the experiences of its students and staff in terms of inclusivity, and various typologies of engagement and recognition. This involves adding value to its mutual engagements and providing optimal opportunities for success whether as employees or students of NWU. The declaration incorporates key policy documents of the University, such as its strategic plan, its Teaching and Learning Strategy, its research agenda and its community engagement strategy.

The NWU Teaching and Learning Strategy therefore highlights the transformation of teaching and learning practices, teaching and learning content, and the composition and design of its programme

curricula to improve access, overcome challenges related to technology inequity, and enhance success. It also considers these transformation initiatives within the context of debates related to the decolonisation of the curriculum in and beyond the University.

Due to the context of severe financial constraints, universities in South Africa face vociferous calls for transformation, not only in terms of broadening access, but in terms of their orientations and institutional cultures, their curricula, and their research, in order to better reflect the political realities and requirements of a transforming South Africa. HEIs have been at a social justice /equality /equity-development/quality impasse for the past 25 years.

Decolonisation is a political, economic, intellectual, cultural and social project. It owes its origins to African resistance to European colonial rule, particularly from the 17th century onwards. Debates around decolonisation are associated with 'ideologues' like Gandhi, Nkrumah and Tambo, and intellectuals like Biko, Plaatje, Fanon, Césaire, Achebe and Ngũgĩ. These individuals began writing in Africa on this theme from the 1950s. By the 1970s, certain movements began to question issues related to equality in a more fundamental manner. These arguments were enriched by the experience of resistance politics¹ and cultural production. They questioned colonial assumptions, and the role and purpose of institutions that had been founded by colonial powers in the colonial period, whether for settler or indigenous populations.

Decolonisation, as an experience, is not restricted to Africa.² Key to the intellectual interrogation of imperial assumptions of the "other"³ was concern about the impact of explicit economic exploitation and the associated, explicit and implicit dehumanisation of the people conquered by Western colonial powers. In South Africa, more recent historical manifestations of this intellectual school of thought can be found in "peoples' education" and "equal education", which gained currency in the 1970s and 1980s. This prepared the way for a substantive revision of the curriculum and the education sector after 1995. Calls for a decolonised curriculum serve as a powerful critique of not only "what is taught" at universities, but also "how teaching occurs". Through engaging with other than the traditional stakeholders, the enrichment of the curriculum via the inclusion of 'other types of knowledges', would create more relevance and continued enrichment of scientific knowledge and classroom/ teaching practices from non-traditional sources.

Curriculum transformation currently drives the trajectory of resistance and protest. Institutions of Higher Education are grappling with this reality due to opposing interpretations of the concept 'decolonisation'. One interpretation essentially hinges on globalisation and proposes that universities should not decolonise to the extent that they become irrelevant and uncompetitive. Institutions should preferably use the latest and most relevant knowledge, and should rather focus on the co-creation of knowledge, as an alternative to a mere replacing of one body of knowledge with another. Those opposing this interpretation seek to broaden the meaning of, and guard against crude understandings of the concept. Assumptions that decolonisation will inadvertently compromise standards are questioned.

There are several examples in history and in the literature that describe the scramble for Africa and the African, Indian and Chinese Diasporas. By the 1980s, this scholarship of decolonisation was a fully-fledged part of university conventions. However, it did not focus equally on the respective diasporas, nor was it covered to the same extent across the northern and the southern hemispheres. The degree to which post-colonial literature and post-conflict scholarship in disciplines⁴ come to be embedded in the formal curricula of schools or universities depends largely on geo-political context.⁵ The decolonial experience is, however, applicable to people irrespective of their past: whether colonising or coloniser. Awareness of decolonisation is often most acute in former colonies, where the decolonisation of the 1960s continues to be experienced in the unequal power relations that are witnessed in structural and economic terms in the post-colonial state.

The great strides that have been made in the general transformation of education in South Africa between 1995 and 2004 cannot be underestimated. These transformation initiatives provided the foundations for an education system that aspired to quality provision, equal access and the generation

¹ Resistance politics can refer to pacifism, as adopted by Gandhi or Tambo in the early years, or to armed resistance, as adopted by Mandela, Mugabe, Slovo and Nujoma.

² Several eminent theorists on this theme are from other formerly colonised parts of the world (for example, Mignolo in South America, and Roy and Spivak in India).

³ The concept of "otherness" can be defined in terms of race, gender, religion, ideology, social class, language or educational background.

⁴ Found typically in history, literature, languages, sociology and anthropology.

⁵ The use of indigenous knowledge systems in the sciences, for example, is still relatively rare in Africa and absent from curricula in the northern hemisphere.

of new knowledge through research that was suited to the needs of a modern South African society that had recently experienced freedom from oppression.

The generation of knowledge and associated curriculum reform has been a slow process. This is partly due to the fact that it is easier to change institutional and political structures than it is to change people and values, or to develop a new generation of academics.

The #FeesMustFall, #RhodesMustFall and #DecoloniseTheCurriculum movements that were initiated in 2015 were a reaction to the impact of the cost of higher education in a system where high levels of student debt and failure had become unacceptably “normal”. These movements can also be attributed to the slow pace of institutional change. Several authors have elaborated on the fact that the end of the apartheid system in 1994 did not result in significant change in the knowledge systems practised at most South African universities. They suggest that the curricula of academic programmes are largely Eurocentric, with a focus on Western dominance and privilege.

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) acknowledges that curriculum change was neglected in the early years of transformation. The #DecoloniseTheCurriculum movement has, however, provided many students – in solidarity with some academics – with a platform to express a deep and painful sense of inadequacy, alienation, failure and isolation. This was even the case at institutions that were seemingly geared for an enabled and successful middle class, who were Western⁶ in their orientation and relatively unaware or unperturbed by the plight of the “missing middle”, as it has come to be described in the popular media. Many South African students are calling for an end to domination by “white, male, Western, capitalist, heterosexual, European worldviews” in higher education. They would like to see the incorporation of other South African, African and global perspectives, experiences and knowledge systems in the curriculum, as well as in approaches to teaching, learning and research.

The focus on the curriculum as part of the Fallist Movement (which calls for someone or something to “fall”) is thus not accidental. The imperative to transform the curriculum should not only be seen in the light of curriculum content or design, but also in terms of pedagogies for inclusion and the development of support systems to sustain student engagement and ultimately student success. Such systems should also support research initiatives in the scholarship of teaching and learning to optimise classroom practices for effective transformation.

Despite the clear mandate given in the White Paper on Higher Education in 1997, in which community engagement is to be the third pillar of higher education, it has been relegated to volunteer and philanthropic status at the university, without proper budgets, staff resourcing and clear accountability. In most cases, community engagement has remained the stepchild of higher education. Several discourses have emerged on how the scholarship of engagement can refresh the curriculum and create inclusivity of different types of knowledge. The ultimate challenge is to measure effect and transformation levels, not just the activity. To support this, tenure and promotion procedures that stimulate the scholarship of engagement should be affected.

3. Definitions

Within the context of NWU, central concepts to this declaration are defined as follows:

3.1 Curriculum of academic programmes: This includes references to curriculum content (intended outcomes, values, ideals, approaches and subject matter), the ways in which such materials are taught, the methods and approaches implemented in assessing the extent to which students have attained such outcomes, pedagogies for inclusion and the development of support systems to sustain student engagement and ultimately student success – all in a contextualised setting.

3.2 Decolonisation of the curricula: This involves placing African identity, knowledge, history, society and ideals on an equal footing with foreign (Western, European or American) values, ideals, approaches and content in academic programmes. This exposes students to an African-centred worldview, while acknowledging the existence of other worldviews and perspectives, without assuming a uniform, monolithic or one-dimensional “African” world view, undifferentiated and uncritical⁷. It can include, but is not limited to, studying works by African authors, scientists and artists, “western” theorists, academics, thinkers and philosophical pioneers and ground-breakers that do not necessarily have their origins in Africa, The voice of both the student and the broader society, irrespective of culture, language,

⁶ Terms such as Afrocentric, Eurocentric and Western are loosely used. Their generic meanings are assumed at the expense of scientific analysis. These terms should be problematized as the foundation for ongoing debate.

⁷ If students are to be critical of any body of thinking they would have to be familiar with the dynamics of the theories they are seeking to understand and criticise.

gender, religion or background, must be heard and examined in such module content and outcomes with a view to recognising and developing new Africanised and other alternative knowledge types and their underlying assumptions as relevant to the area of study.

3.3 Decolonisation of teaching and learning practices: In his book, *As by fire*, Jonathan Jansen notes that “the curriculum itself is dead until it comes alive in the teaching and learning process.” Decolonised teaching and learning practices inspire students to think critically on and engage with issues such as discrimination, racism, inequality, poverty, colonialism, alienation, inclusion and ethical conduct. Furthermore, decolonised teaching and learning allows students to interpret curriculum content based on their own experiences, according to their cultural norms, personal belief systems, preferences and backgrounds, and to share their interpretations with fellow students as valid and valued real-life experiences.

3.4 Curriculum transformation: A transformed curriculum should be coherently designed, intellectually credible and socially responsive and relevant so as to equip graduates to address the challenges of 21st-century society.

3.5 Ethic of care: An ethic of care includes a caring relationship between and among management, staff and students. It encompasses a concern for the transformation of structures and systems within which practices of care take place to ensure that these are no longer discriminatory, belittling and oppressive.

3.6 Social justice in the context of NWU: This involves a focus on that which is valued and beneficial for all, including the recognition and protection of human rights, equality, fairness, freedom from oppression and discrimination. From an engagement perspective, sharing of expertise and tailor-made solutions in order to alleviate challenges, or specific community issues that create imbalances in terms of fairness and social justice.

The following sections describe five features of NWU’s position on the decolonisation of teaching and learning, as well as the transformation of the curriculum.

4. Declaration statements

4.1 Transformation of teaching and learning

4.1.1 Curriculum transformation and social justice

The transformation of the curriculum includes considerations related to social justice, such as access to equal education, quality in education, and access to education by all. The higher education sector has been perceived as being insufficiently prepared to accommodate learners graduating from a school education system that is largely perceived to be inferior, according to the CHE’s Report on Curriculum Reform, published in 2013. This situation perpetuates historical inequalities. Important gaps have been revealed between schools and universities in relation to an integrated approach to student success. Initiatives to address these gaps have been fairly localised to individual universities and selected schools networks. There is sufficient data to demonstrate causality between:

- Type of schools children attend and their success in higher education.
- Language of instruction in schools, and success in navigating the language of instruction at universities.
- Literacy level, and success in navigating the literacy demands of the higher education curricula.
- Class background and finding a sense of belonging and success.
- Access to funding as opposed to access to debt.
- Level of quality care and the support of students, and observed drop-out and throughput rates.

In other words, households with lower income levels are generally clustered in communities where schools are either remote or where the level of education is perceived to be of a lower quality. The quality of education has a direct impact on literacy development at school, and also the support received at home. Children from poor communities are exposed to a lower quality of education and performance during their years at school. They are predisposed to failure and therefore already disadvantaged in terms of their potential success in higher education.

All universities in South Africa have declared a commitment to social justice and social responsiveness in their vision and mission statements, but very few have clearly conceptualised and defined its meaning. The student protest movements that have been active in South Africa since 2015 have pushed universities to consider their contribution to social justice and nation building. Academics and university

leaders have the intellectual resources and capacity to respond creatively, imaginatively and usefully to a range of needs that have been clearly articulated by students. When addressed, these needs will contribute to enhancing higher education in many respects, including the transformation of the curriculum. Ultimately, these efforts are aimed at creating a socially just and free society in which historical redress is used to address the social injustices of the past. Since 2015, NWU's students and academics have hosted and supported a range of seminars, colloquia, and conferences with the theme of decolonisation. They have featured speakers from outside the University, drawn from South Africa and the rest of the world, who have come to engage with the University. The NWU has approved a framework to enhance student access, retention and attainment in order to improve student success at a university-wide level (the ARAS Framework).

4.1.2 Curriculum transformation, inclusion and andragogy

Curriculum transformation contributes to the creation and development of institutional culture. As part of its commitment to social justice in the workplace, NWU aspires to be a welcoming, open, inclusionary, reflective and critical learning space. In relation to the experience of teaching and learning, many universities are challenged when it comes to dealing with what it means to be alienated (“unhomed”). This is particularly the case in institutions whose cultures, languages and modes of interaction seem to be alien and removed from the student’s experience. Recognising that the schooling system does not prepare university entrants sufficiently for literacy, knowledge and teaching skills associated with university study, NWU acknowledges that developing a culture of inclusion must go beyond simply welcoming new students (or staff) to the institution. It must focus on creating inclusive and participatory teaching spaces. The flowering of activity and interest in debates on decolonisation enables NWU to commit itself to support teaching renewal through andragogic skills development among its teaching staff. This is one of the initiatives faculties plan to use to support multimodal team teaching across the University’s campuses. Although University teaching is still largely teacher-focused, the debate has shifted from the lecturer/teacher-centred versus the learner/student-centred dichotomy, towards a learning-centred/collaborative mode. University teaching needs to become more learning focused to develop a disposition to self-direction, collaborative and cooperative learning. This manifests as a demonstration of critical thinking. The professionalisation of University teaching is considered to be one of the important building blocks for a strong, existing focus on the scholarship of learning and teaching. Another important element in this regard is the development of lecturers’ skills and teaching capacities, as occurs through the development and support initiatives of the NWU’s Centre for Teaching and Learning.

4.1.3 Curriculum transformation, inclusion and language

Language is not only a method of human communication. The spoken or written language, as well as sign language, consists of the use of words and signs in a structured and conventional way. It is also a transparent means of transmitting knowledge. Language offers opportunities for learning and accessing the life-worlds of students and staff in an inclusive learning environment. The development of a language policy, and the accompanying language planning, can also not be divorced from curriculum transformation, as the medium is as important as the message. The art or science of teaching adults, known as andragogy, needs to be supported by high levels of language skills, together with an awareness of how trans-languaging enables a student to achieve success within local, African and global contexts. In the consultation and revision associated with its Language Policy and Plan, NWU is committed to further developing its capacity to support student learning through language access. This can be done through the provision of voice-overs, in-time interpreting, sub-titling or the dubbing of lectures. Furthermore, the University’s three regional languages function as national languages, making it imperative for the University to include a focus on the development of functional literacy in an African language as part of its graduate and exit attributes. This should be offered together with its existing emphasis on the development of literacy in English and Afrikaans. In the same spirit, while acknowledging the diversity in our Academics profile, competency in one or more local languages by the staff should be encouraged and cultivated. Language, as used within and for the curriculum, functions as a means to achieve inclusion by recognising that inclusive teaching and learning spaces provide opportunities to students and staff beyond simply what is prescribed. The NWU’s languages are not restricted to the domain of teaching and learning. It is acknowledged that the use of the NWU’s three languages extends to all areas of communication and functioning, precisely with the purpose of enabling communication and intercultural awareness, without forfeiting their responsibility to prepare students for the global academic society.

4.1.4 Curriculum transformation and curriculum design for access and inclusion

The context for curriculum reform at universities in South Africa is pressing, and demands imaginative, engaged leadership from every academic at NWU. It also needs to be considered in relevant partnership with the employers of graduates, professional bodies - industry-facing and beyond - to remain

accountable to the communities and different professions served by NWU graduates. Student experience is as much about the formal curriculum as it is about the hidden one, as many aspects of the holistic development of students are about the communities to which students may return after graduation.

The #DecoloniseTheCurriculum movement exposed the complacency that had settled over higher education, with its preoccupation with ranking and rating performance. This largely took place to the exclusion of student experience (and by implication student life). The debates revealed that many academics perceive decolonisation as a recent historical development. Academics are not equally familiar with the existing scholarship on the Africanisation of the curriculum and its links to teaching and learning in post-colonial (and decolonised) Africa. Adopting a more holistic perspective on knowledge development and dissemination requires due consideration of related and other knowledge and critical competencies. Although the human, social, natural and health sciences differ significantly in various aspects, the curriculum content of all these fields has its foundations in evidence-based research. The subjects in these sciences are also progressively imbedded in each other. Funding agencies, professional and statutory bodies, which require content specialisation, remain part of the equation. Such content should be presented in an African context with African problems. Alongside the contextualisation of curricula, admission requirements and academic prerequisites should not be compromised for increased access. A much richer vision for student academic development needs to be embraced at NWU. Students' experience of the curriculum needs to reflect an awareness of, and a relevance to the African context. Such content should also link to the global context, and place Africa on an equal footing as the locus through which students evaluate, contrast and assess knowledge emanating from other sources and histories through the facilitation of peers and academics.

At NWU, the transformation of the curriculum entails an explicit focus on multimodality insofar as a graduate is expected to function responsibly as part of a face-to-face, online and virtual learning community. Multimodality enables the University to widen access, support learning (contact or distance) through the availability of online and interactive delivery channels and resources, and provide for a student's experience of the curriculum to be textured and rich in different opportunities for interaction. Key references to blended learning, multimodal programmes and online resources in the NWU Teaching and Learning Strategy needs to be operationalised, in tandem with strategies that will bridge digital inequity, in order to circumvent the further marginalisation of already needy students. It remains a strategic imperative of the NWU to ensure that both academics and students are capacitated and have equal access to teaching and learning opportunities, equal access to technology and broadband internet at the point of use, both on- and off-campus. This strategy therefore needs to be implemented together with a broadening of supporting IT infrastructure.

4.2 Transformation and the research agenda

While little exposure is given to the transformation of research in the "decolonisation of the curriculum" debate, it has been argued that research is a highly moral and civilised search for knowledge. It represents a set of uniquely human activities that reproduce particular social relations of power. It has furthermore been argued that decolonising research is not simply about challenging qualitative research or refining it. It represents a much broader, more purposeful agenda of transforming the institution of research. This includes consideration of the underlying structures, and ways of organising, conducting and disseminating research and knowledge that are often taken for granted. There is a compelling drive to interrogate the existence of the affective and effective role of academic research in the curriculum. This debate should include its content and relevance, how it is conceived, generated, packaged and delivered in the African context.

Research is not divorced from the praxis of teaching and learning. It manifests through the inclusion of research into the body of knowledge, and constitutes a critical engagement between the lecturer and students in a decolonised curriculum. This encompasses what is both taught and learnt and the resultant social and personal impact thereof. Neither do these process stand in isolation from community engagement. It goes beyond doing research on society and includes the generation of knowledge with society partners that contribute to different types of knowledge by using established participatory research methodologies such as action research and appreciative enquiry.

4.3 Transformation of community engagement and service learning

It is argued that universities are resource rich and inextricably linked with their communities. In order to be beneficial to democracy and development, it is imperative to establish and maintain honest mutualistic, respectful partnerships with their communities. This demands that universities become more vigorous partners when searching for answers to moral, civic, social, and economic challenges.

Protests about fees are fundamentally about inequality and the conditions that produce this. Protests about gender-based violence, racism, language and belonging are fundamentally about the violation of the right to education as one of several injustices experienced (for example, # RapeMustFall). The collective impact of the fees and decolonisation debates have brought to the fore the fact that the very sites of higher education are spaces or places in which gender-based, race-based and class-based prejudice against students and staff occur. The range and frequency of protests in 2015 and 2016 suggest a lively degree of responsiveness by students to issues affecting the transformation of higher education as a whole. That responsiveness occurs as a result of an awareness of deepening inequality in a world where the discourses of participation, access and transformation are in uneasy tension with obvious examples of extreme capitalism, materialism and consumerism. This permeates popular cultural tropes of “success”.

In order to achieve sustainable change in transformation and decolonisation, community engagement is considered one of the main processes to ensure relevance, democratic renewal, equity and social justice. A variety of well-researched and established methodologies and tools should be utilised to maintain relevance, create discourse and sensitise staff and students to their social and environmental responsibilities, and create a culture of care and an understanding of the benefits of diversity.

The NWU interpretation of community engagement is aligned with the stance of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), as a process of creating a shared vision amongst the community, especially disadvantaged and other partners, local, provincial, national, NGOs, higher education institutions, business, donors and society as equal partners and to the equitable benefit of the whole community. This approach challenges academia, researchers and policy makers to push community engagement beyond the notions of community service and philanthropy.

At NWU, the commitment to social justice entails the creation of opportunities through service learning, workplace internships and other forms of work-integrated learning for students to work in partnership (professional and other) with communities. NWU’s community engagement initiatives are characterised by a shift away from notions of simply working in communities to working with communities. The decolonisation of the curriculum is particularly practicable within the work-integrated learning environment in the communities served by the different specialisations in each faculty. Staff and postgraduate students are encouraged to engage with different South African populations, and to find solutions for South African problems. Faculties should have a strong community inclusion approach, working in communities, with communities. Undergraduate and postgraduate students have various opportunities to engage with communities during their training.

5. Scope and applicability

The imperative to appropriately decolonise the curricula of academic offerings, approaches to teaching, learning, assessment, research and community service with a view to greater inclusion and transformation, is applicable to all academic and academic support staff, students and management structures at NWU. It is also applicable to all physical and virtual teaching and learning spaces on all of NWU’s campuses, and at all distance tuition support centres.

6. Conclusion

NWU seeks to be a socially responsive and relevant institution, mindful of its obligations to accelerate the transformation of staffing through its recruitment and retention policies, and to create a culture that is both inclusive and academically rigorous. A commitment to social justice implies an ethic of care, integrity and respect. Social justice becomes the lens through which the nature and practices associated with curriculum innovation remain focused, enabling student success, and staff development and retention, making NWU a university of choice for staff and students in South Africa, Africa and beyond. In this light, NWU views the decolonisation of university education as a call for reflection and action with the purpose of enabling greater relevance, reorienting its focus on Africa in terms of the construction, development and communication of knowledge, and enhancing students’ experience of the curriculum.

Note:

In order to create a reader-friendly document, all references to authors have been removed from the text.

Once the document has been approved, a complete list of consulted publications will be included.

(approved by Senate 30 October 2018)