

English only please (article for the Mail & Guardian published online on 26 June 2019)

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Increasingly statutory, professional and even funding bodies are approaching universities in relation to the languages of instruction used in classrooms. SAICA (Accounting) and Engineering's Ikhlasa Student Financial Aid Programme (ISFAP) are bodies which have stipulated that English is required because either the assessments associated with the board are to be taken in English (SAICA), or the bursaries allocated (by ISFAP) are dependent on English being the medium of instruction. Coupled with other "requirements", for example, those made by the pronouncements of the Chief Justice, concerning English as the language of the Courts, and it seems clear that the entrenchment of English monolingualism, has gained momentum. And not only monolingualism, but also the direct accountability required by professions in relation to the content areas, credit loads and even restrictions pertaining to electives within academic programmes, as offered by autonomous universities. In the last few years, stipulations concerning either the languages associated with professions or the languages perceived to be required by the marketplace, have found their way into the discourse of higher education. Emboldened also by the spate of law cases in which bodies such as Afriforum, Solidarity and other bodies (Gelyke Kanse) have not to date been successful in reversing the trend in universities to have English as the primary medium of instruction (with some support made available in Afrikaans, and even less support in terms of other indigenous languages), universities are seemingly eagerly responsive to the requirement for English for all, and indeed for everything. These same universities have been slow to use, support and develop African languages as required since 1996, some closing departments of African languages and indeed Afrikaans, along the way.

Occasionally academic leaders (even Vice-Chancellors like UCT's Prof Phakeng) will address the important links between access to higher education and success through language. It seems everyone knows that learning through a home language is highly correlated to academic success, and highly correlated with success in acquiring a second or third language. And yet, our commitment to push beyond the rhetoric, the good intentions, and even beyond the educational evidence to make multilingualism a reality in teaching learning in schools, let alone universities, is weak. That weakness is an ideological one: our inability, given persistent inequalities in our economy in terms of ownership, or persistent inequality between race groups, to face the persistence of memory. The memory in this instance is Apartheid's insistence on mother tongue education or Afrikaans throughout high school, not as a means of enabling access, or as a means of enhancing students' success, but rather as a mechanism to sustain the underdevelopment of black people. That memory is searing and it lives on in the inequalities we see around us: in terms of the success of some groups, more than others in higher education, the growing disparity between rich and poor, the persistent inequality between race groups in terms of poverty and employment. Because of the unique constellation of long-lived histories and the rejection of racism, the recognition that key educational opportunities had become the perverse instrument of the state, remained a sore point after 1994. An attempt through the 1996 Constitution to rectify this is evident in the clauses pertaining to the rights to education through the mother tongue, but this together, with every other piece of legislation from the South African Schools Act to the Languages in Higher Education Policy, remains tenuous, vulnerable and unrealisable. Examples of mother-tongue education in schools, examples of successful teacher training programmes which equip students for multilingual classrooms, the examples of universities which do indeed offer support in a variety of languages other than English, in a consistent and accessible way in the curriculum, are few, under-recognised and under-researched. Exemplary though they may be, they remain seemingly singular in the global current of English as the language of mobility and globalisation, and they remain invisible in the national politics of race and success in higher education. The December 2017 judgment of the Constitutional Court on the unviability of Afrikaans as a language of instruction, at the UFS (affirming thus the Council endorsed policy to make English the primary means of instruction), again for a mixture of ideological and access reasons, risks sealing the fate of all South Africa languages, other than English, to the status of perpetual minority, even if the languages of the communities surrounding our universities, are majority languages.

Languages are not simply abstractions; they live in the minds and mouths of their speakers, and when they are not used in higher education, their capacity to develop academic or industry-based complexity of vocabulary, is

limited. And, unsurprisingly their speakers do not develop that capacity either, having instead to develop it through a proxy language (academic English) which is no-one's mother tongue. We know, from the ubiquitous presence of academic literacy courses (in English) in every South African institution, that accessing English is more difficult than accessing the bricks and mortar of these institutions, we know that success through English remains debilitating as seen in the drop-out rates, that it does not work for anyone other than the privileged middle classes. Yet our investment in higher education remains focused on enabling them (the majority of our students), to access institutions in the language that a minority of our students use with ease and confidence, coming from our few excellent public and private schools. The tragedy of our approach to the present, is not our incapacity to recognise the legacies of the past, but our persistent refusal to transform the present, so as to enable a better future. And, as the courts and professions insist on English only in their respective domains, they express unwittingly their failure to recognise that access to, and the creation of a better quality education system, undermines their own accessibility to the people they are meant to serve.