

Whole-of-institution Curriculum Change: the NWU Programme Qualification Mix Project and the New Century Curriculum Project: unlocking the possibilities and potential for a new university education

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Abstract:

21st century challenges present new imperatives for higher education. Not least of these is the need for students to be able to collaborate and cooperative in multidisciplinary teams in order to address challenges associated with so-called 'wicked-problems'; be these in industry, society or the environment. The importance of developing adequate knowledge for expertise to be considered in a field, is as important as the skills needed to be able to learn from, and understand with, experts from other fields working in the same team, and addressing challenges, or project briefs, albeit from different perspectives. This paper describes the NWU approach to streamlining the University curriculum on the one hand, and creating new opportunities for inter- and trans-disciplinary work to be undertaken by students and staff in the curriculum, on the other hand. Two University wide projects provide the basis for whole-of-institution change to be planned and implemented over a period of 6 years (2022-2026).

Keywords:

Curriculum, interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary, higher education, transformation, decoloniality

1. Introduction

As NWU opened the 2023 academic year, the Vice Chancellor themed the year to come as a year of "review, reflection and new frontiers"², affirming the NWU Strategy Statement "To transform and position the NWU as a unitary institution of superior academic excellence with a commitment to social justice". 2023 was designated as a year to re-think the focus the University could bring to its strategy and in the context of this paper, to curriculum development in alignment with the new *NWU Teaching and Learning Strategy (2021-2025)*. The thrust, from a curriculum perspective, was thus to ready the University for 21st Century higher education in South Africa, recognising the challenges presented by the need for decolonising university education, and optimising the affordances of technology (arising particularly from the experiences of Covid-19 and what was envisaged for the NWU in its *Digital Business Strategy*). It was also necessary review the curriculum offering (termed by the national Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) as the 'programme, qualification mix' of higher education institutions, to reconsider whether the University was still fulfilling its mandate as a teaching learning and research balanced institution. In addition to this in the post-Covid 'moment', the need was felt by the management to revisit the student value proposition and whether it was affordable, attractive, relevant and enabling of both student and staff development. In this paper, the curriculum is regarded as the conceptual and as well actual teaching-learning space in which transformation, as defined within the NWU's *Teaching and Learning Strategy (2021-2025)* could be realised. Beyond the instrumental purposes of readying students for the world of work, the curriculum provides an opportunity for the

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² A version of this paper was provided as an Address to the NWU Faculty of Humanities: "Address to the guests and staff of the Faculty at the Colloquium on Transforming Teaching and Learning in the Humanities: Critical Reflection on Shifting Pedagogies in the Post-Covid Era". July 2023.

development of a student's life perspective, historical and critical understanding of the impact of people on each other, and our environment. The curriculum also offers an opportunity for students and academics to question assumptions underpinning many phenomena in which human agency is linked to destructive outcomes (poverty, climate decay, patterns of uncontrolled consumption and waste):

NWU is committed, through its curriculum project, to address relevant (UN, 2015) sustainability goals to ensure, amongst others, that its graduates are of the mind set to actively seek collaboration opportunities to contribute towards the alleviation of poverty and unemployment, promotion of sustainable economic growth and consumption patterns, securing of our planet, promoting peaceful and inclusive societies and achieving equality and empowerment of all people whom they come into contact with (*NWU Teaching and Learning Strategy, 2021-2025, 5*).

The importance of the links between the *United Nations Sustainable Goals* (2015) and the NWU brings to the fore the need for opportunities for inter-, multi-, and trans-disciplinary work as a critical affordance of both projects described later in this paper. At the outset, it also needs to be acknowledged that the curriculum must also link intentionally to the transformation of broader society:

It may seem that resisting the commodification of the university is unrealistic because students must leave the university and participate in the job market. However, this does not mean that students need only to learn the tools of their trade. The goal is to make the student a well-grounded member of society whilst ensuring that they will be equipped for the job market. Ultimately, the aim is to decentralise the university as the only site of knowledge production. The tension between Western knowledge production and African knowledge production, where the former relies primarily on text and the latter on orality, is proof that we should not overemphasise the university's primacy...Decolonisation necessitates multiple sites of knowledge. (Mutubi, 2022, 213).

In re-thinking the purpose of higher education and the links between decoloniality, the curriculum, transformation, technology, and employment, the need for inter- and trans-disciplinary work emerges because it enables a traversing of modalities, disciplines, communities, and work. Work of this nature has also been documented in comparative studies of American and South African higher education institutions focussing on change within the humanities curricula (see for example, Tella & Motala, 2021). A broader historical sweep concerning the impact of transformation on the South African education system is documented for example, in the CHE's *Review of Higher Education in South Africa Twenty-Fives Years into Democracy* (2022) or by Vally (2007) exploring the shift from People's Education in the 1980s to neo-liberalism in South Africa.

In fact, the emergent (new century, new world, new disciplines and new ways of working) defines the urgency of curriculum work, now: in the face of threats to survival, climate catastrophe, conflict and pandemic. Regarding this latter aspect, it is only in recent times, that a degree of clarity concerning the impact of Covid on education from 2020-2022 is coming to light. In South Africa, preliminary indications are that "...the analysis indicates that the pandemic has already exposed and further entrenched inequalities in terms of student access and success in South Africa". (CHE(a), 2022, i). Such findings must be contextualised globally where Covid is similarly considered a critical interruption (Bergan et al. 2021) in the trajectory concerning human development and our ideas of progress in relation to technological advancement (Solnit, 2020). Munck (2021, 33) argues that previous gross inequality and current still high unemployment place human existence in a state of precarity, even if the availability of online education taps into a deep desire for "more flexible modes of learning and [increased] access for long marginalised groups". NWU documented widely its responses to the pandemic and considered the importance of the interruption as an opportunity to re-think its approaches to access and success in online learning as evidenced in various reports of the NWU (<https://news.nwu.ac.za/experts/robert-john-balfour#documents>). In as much as interruption challenged the University, it also helped the leadership to clarify and articulate the University's position as regards online teaching and learning for contact and distance education, team teaching (across campuses particularly), and technology, access and student success, student experience and the commitment of the University to social justice and an ethic of care. Other policies, strategies, and declaratory statements ((for example, the *NWU Policy on Open Education Resources* (2023), the *NWU Declaration on the Decolonisation of University*

Education (2018), and the *NWU Language Policy* (2018)) also frame the two Projects described in this paper and link to academic planning done in the University's faculties, as well as an emerging scholarship on issues pertaining to the transformation of the curriculum³. Up to 2023 however, the basis for such planning was informed by these policies, but from 2022 it is anticipated that the Programme, Qualification Mix Project (the PQM Project), and the New Century Curriculum Project (NCC Project) would also contribute to the planning of curricula and student experience across the University.

The purpose of this paper is thus to nestle the two projects in the context of curriculum development and planning work at the NWU with reference to the South African context and to provide an international comparison example of successful whole-of-institution curriculum change.

To be sure, there are not many well-documented examples globally of institutional approaches to the University curriculum, and those are not well documented because the narratives associated with them lie mostly in institutional annuals or other reports. That noted, South African higher education institutions and regulatory bodies have engaged consistently over the last twenty years with a focus on the transformation of the curriculum, motivated in part by issues concerning epistemological access and student success, and in part by efforts to decolonise the curriculum. Notwithstanding the impact of Fallist Movements in 2015 (Jansen, 2017, *As by Fire*), concerns about access, success and relevance of the higher education curriculum offering are well documented in reports, for example, "A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: The case for a flexible curriculum structure" (CHE, 2013). In this report, the less-than-salutary performance of black South African students is noted, when compared to students of other race groups (particularly white students), in terms of completion rates, pass rates, and throughput rates across the higher education sector. Emphasising the importance of epistemic access, hand-in-hand with the need to reform pedagogies, approaches to assessment and a re-centring of African knowledge (rather than only a displacement of Western knowledge) are motivated on the basis that poor academic performance is a reflection not on individual students' deficit, or gaps, or needs, but because coloniality in education has influenced the performance of the majority of South Africa negatively, impairing both potential and performance of African students to contribute to the economy and change (for the better) every aspect of civil society. This paper recognises the scholarship on the transformation of higher education in South Africa, even in the post-Covid period, and it draws therefore on a selected example of whole-of-institution curriculum change to illustrate what was further intended with the PQM and NCC Projects at the NWU, rather than embarking on a restatement of the *NWU Teaching Learning Strategy (2021-2025)* aspirations. Having briefly described the context for an international as well as national (institutional) focus the next section of the paper compares an already documented whole-of-institution approach to curriculum reform with the work already commenced at North-West University.

2. The *Growing Esteem* Project at the University of Melbourne, the PQM, and the New Century Curriculum Projects at the NWU

James and McPhee (2012, 147) have reflected critically in recent years on the successes and limitations of the now-famous University of Melbourne rearticulation project known as *Growing Esteem*. In thinking through the new *NWU Teaching-Learning Strategy (2021-2025)*, reading around as well as reference to this project, influenced the identification of two key initiatives (projects) recommended by the Senate and approved by the NWU Council when the new Strategy was adopted. It is perhaps important to list in explicit terms the insights gained from *Growing Esteem* because it enables to situate ourselves as curriculum experts reconsidering the relevance, reach, influence, and impact on change concerning the NWU's curriculum, as a whole.

³ The University's positions on these various matters have also given rise to scholarship relevant to the focus as demonstrated for example by Olivier, Du Toit-Brits, Bunt, & Dhakulkar (2022) on open education resources and self-directed learning. Consider also Slabbert-Redpath's (2023) survey of work done in relation to the implementation of the *NWU Teaching Learning Strategy (2021-2025)*. The link between social justice and language has been explored by Mwaniki (2012).

James and McPhee noted that at the University of Melbourne, the pressure to change curriculum was propelled in part by a recognition that the undergraduate degrees and modules did not prepare students at the University for the careers they ultimately wanted, or the careers needed nationally or internationally. Behind this issue lay, and still lies the looming question as regards what a University education is good for, beyond securing better employment opportunities, at higher salaries than unskilled or semi-skilled labour. A second issue was that increasing numbers of undergraduate students were choosing programmes and subjects which in later life were not demonstrating value. Incorrect or ill-advised subject choices, exercised by students, were in part fuelled by the University's choice of model: a system that was characterised by accretion of subjects and specialisations without evidence of regular reassessments of relevance, other than the need of professors to have their areas of specialisation taught, and thus sustained within an intense internal competition for undergraduate student numbers so that careers can be built, structures can be motivated and resources marshalled to support all the aforementioned. Behind this issue lay the larger question regarding what a University curriculum was (and for what purposes the University exists), beyond the broadly defined areas of most traditional content stores, and programmes in which knowledge could be compartmentalised, specialised, and rarefied with increasing years of study. A third factor concerned the ongoing financial sustainability of precisely those areas of specialisation to be found in narrow specialisations and even more narrow electives; generally characterised as possibilities for choices for students to make to add to the holistic education. Such access to opportunities to think differently and see differently are particularly rare in the highly restricted and prescribed areas of content regulated by professional bodies, through legislation (Accounting, Law, Education, Health, Engineering, are highly regulated both nationally and internationally. A fourth factor, concerned niche within an already tightly squeezed competitive sector in which international students, given the pricing of the market, might elect increasingly to study at home, rather than abroad.

Having described four factors key to the University community considerations, it becomes evident how many of these NWU share with the University of Melbourne (indeed, probably any University globally wrestles with these dilemmas and concerns). That noted, the comparison to Melbourne is also deliberate because the *NWU Teaching and Learning Strategy 2021-2025* references precisely these same needs as seen below:

- Ensuring that curriculum renewal is future oriented, with engagement with various external role-players to design curricula that will address societal and environmental challenges (also considering a multi-, inter-, and intra-disciplinary learning and application of learning;
- Ensuring that curriculum design and renewal are data-informed; and
- Making sure that learning is designed for active engagement with a wide variety of media and opportunities for independent, self-directed, and collaborative learning (*NWU Teaching and Learning Strategy, 2021-2025, 9*)

I move next to describe briefly the features of the *Growing Esteem* model to afford an opportunity to contrast and compare ourselves, not with the intention of becoming similar necessarily, but perhaps in terms of understanding the reasons for our differences as Universities, and in particular as North-West University, situated where we are regionally, and with a multi-campus span, spanning also the historical of differential access, differential advantage, and disadvantages, different languages and communities and differences in historical aspirations and purposes. This diversity matters because it still influences who accesses NWU, where and when, in the course of their learning journeys.

The Melbourne (*Growing Esteem*) Model, as it came to be known, was not of course entirely new: the Bologna process (Bonjean, 2019) and the American liberal arts education model provide key influences on the thinking concerning the study pathways a student might pursue through the general formative degrees especially (in which a balance between specialisation opportunity and breadth of development in terms of subject-knowledge was held up as the ideal). The mantra of avoiding specialisation too early in studies was justified by the idea of students obtaining a broader education, sufficient general knowledge, and specialisation. When reading about these motivations and the documentation of the University's approach to the whole-of-institution change process, many of these motivations remain relevant. In the post-Covid moment, we are afforded a rare opportunity to intervene in our thinking

about the curriculum, within the NCC Project at NWU, to rectify some of the pre-Covid trajectories: accretion leading to multiple duplications within our curriculum, too many narrow specialisations, too early specialisation at the cost of the opportunity to develop broad inter- as well as intra-disciplinary collaborations to support students to work across disciplines, within teams, within the University and in communities beyond the University; and to have this considered as part of (rather than on the side of) the curriculum. Has our thinking in this regard been sufficiently clear thus far as NWU? Certainly if one considers the purposes of the PQM Project, that clarity as regards what “needs to go” is evident in the way that Faculties have engaged with the opportunity to reduce the accretions of the past by way of responding to the University’s guidance as regards the need to streamline, reduce duplication and refocus on our role as University in which postgraduate studies need to be further elaborated, general degrees at undergraduate level strengthened and articulation routes made stronger and better supported (with resources). “All good” so far perhaps, but what “about” transformation and decoloniality as described in the University’s *Declaration on the Decolonisation of University Education* (2018) or development of 21st Century skills also mentioned in the NWU’s *Teaching and Learning Strategy* (2021-2025)?

The transformation of the curriculum at NWU is influenced by the University’s stance on the decolonisation of the curriculum and is defined as follows:

- 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” worldview, undifferentiated and uncritical. 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, gender, religion or background, must be heard and examined in all 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: 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, socially responsive, and relevant so as to equip graduates to address the challenges of 21st-century society. (*NWU Declaration of the Decolonisation of University Education*, 2018, 3-4)

The Melbourne Model was not explicitly focused on indigenous knowledge systems, indigenous languages, or the role of indigenous knowledge in the curriculum, but it was concerned about student access and success in terms of the role of student voice and experience in successful learning. The PQM Project which commenced in 2022 (over the period of three years: 2022-2026) is well-known to the NWU at the time of writing this paper, and its directions and outcomes were endorsed by the University Senate: reduce the range of electives and ensure their financial sustainability, reduce the overlap between programmes and strengthen the general degrees, and related to these two previous aspirations, create the capacity and the space to innovate in new ways, with new discipline areas, in the curriculum. Unlike Melbourne, NWU is concerned to re-center African knowledge and African languages and the approach adopted to this challenge is to regard them as opportunities for growth and understanding of social justice and a commitment to diversity: to incorporate into the curriculum,

translanguaging pedagogies, and to use and develop the dominant regional languages of North West and Gauteng Provinces (Setswana and Sesotho) for use and understanding in teaching and learning. A strong basis for such an approach exists internationally and nationally, in South Africa. For example, international scholars, Garcia and Leiva (2014) have described the links between translanguaging and social justice, whilst local scholars such as Mkhize and Balfour (2017) have researched language rights in (higher) education in South Africa.

Growing Esteem had 12 defining characteristics of which a few are selected here for purposes of illustration: for example, Melbourne University was keen to provide for students to become more engaged in community work, to create opportunities for students to curate and stack workplace experience from the undergraduate years and, articulate more clearly into defined postgraduate (research) tracks. NWU has similarly committed to creating such opportunities, albeit not in the same ways: consider for example, the development of the Teaching and Learning Model at the University, and how this was developed with a view to providing academics, academic planners, and related support functions at the University, with a readily defined and schematic understanding of the relationships between space, technology, modality and the kinds of expertise necessary to navigate aspects of the teaching in relation to the capacities for which the spaces were designed. In relation to the possibility of students creating curating work experience gathered during their studies, the NWU Career Centre's *Employability Strategy* recognises the importance of 'workplace readiness' as a concept integral (rather than added-on) to the curriculum. On this topic the NWU Teaching and Learning Strategy (2021-2025) is clear: "It is the NWU's intent to use such engagement opportunities to better prepare students for the world of work, and to develop a culture of responsible and active participation in civil society, citizenship, and environmental stewardship" (8). And, in relation to the (community) engaged learning and research the challenge presented by the need to integrate service learning and community work into curriculum expertise beyond the possibilities afforded by Work Integrated Learning.

Not mentioned with as much force in the *NWU Teaching and Learning Strategy (2021-2025)* is the issue of survival and the environment, even though this is alluded to in the references to the *United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015)* described earlier in this paper. That this issue has become critically important to the NWU, in this new century, at this particular stage of environmental threat and climate change, is recognised in the focus of the NCC Project: the emphasis on opportunities in the final year of studies at the undergraduate level, to develop multidisciplinary competencies with a view to honing problem-solving and team-work skills so necessary when attempting to address the 'wicked problems' associated with the 21st Century. Underpinning this thrust was also a commitment through this work, and through the development of the Major, to expose students to research skills and research skills necessary for further postgraduate work (James & McPhee, 2012, 148). In relation to postgraduate, the need was expressed for the outcomes of undergraduate programmes and even modules, to better reflect the graduate attributes of the NWU in relation to defined postgraduate programmes. This (stronger) link between outcomes, graduate attributes, and postgraduate work links of course to enabling, through the curricular structures, through the resources that supported these, multiple opportunities for collaborative multidisciplinary research undertaken by academics. This aspiration is not accidental. Traditional university training is premised on the notion of increasing exposure (in terms of time) to a particular focus which gets to be narrowed the further one undertakes the journey into scholarship, and as noted earlier, recognition and celebration of this narrow focus (termed expertise) in scholarship is so ingrained in our mechanisms for recognition (consider, for example, how funding comes to be linked mostly to specialisation, especially in the Sciences and professions, or purposes of academic promotion, how evidence of single-authored scholarship is seen as a proxy for original research or original thinking). Experience with multidisciplinary programmes, projects, or focus tends generally to generate the following insights: academics do not train to become skilled "multi-disciplinary transversers" or "multi-programme navigators", and neither are their students encouraged to do so. Champions as regards multidisciplinary, programmes, projects, or initiatives, tend to be individuals who, when their tenure expires, or when they leave institutions, take with them the institutional memory of the initiative, and what is lost is also the impetus to continue with the important work begun, and the more important rationale to sustain that work. Further to this, the challenges of

establishing new disciplines which are in their own origins 'multidisciplinary' (consider, for example, new media studies, culture studies, gender studies, development studies, or comparative studies: for example, comparative education, comparative literature) are many; they 'suffer' from ill-definition, or a seeming lack of focus: their strength in terms of drawing on established disciplines (consider the role of sociology in gender studies) is simultaneously a weakness. In short, the way the 'traditional' curriculum is structured, and our training as academics is focussed, does little to promote creative and sustained responses to those needs we see evident in the post-Covid curriculum moment. For this reason, leaving innovation to disciplines, or even to programmes within the silos of Schools, Faculties, and even Colleges, risks at best becoming a partial change opportunity, or at worst, no change at all. For the University of Melbourne, the above whole-of-institution initiative came to be distilled into 6 undergraduate programmes, with a requirement for a student to undertake a quarter of one's studies in areas beyond those of the Major(s). The culmination of the degrees entailed the capstone project or seminar experience in which the focus was inter- multi- or trans-disciplinary work. It is important to signal that whilst there are differences in the definitions of such, there is also an established scholarship in which is described how such work comes to be defined and re-defined over time, particularly in relation to the development of new knowledge domains, or in the recognition that discrete knowledge domains cannot provide either solution to, or approaches to the research needed for complex social and scientific challenges⁴. In multidisciplinary research, different disciplines can investigate the same phenomenon but will make discipline-specific deductions (Leeftink et al., 2020; Soukop et al., 2018). Interdisciplinary research is closely related to multidisciplinary research but the different disciplines can compare findings and solutions through transferring knowledge across disciplines (Sakao & Brambila-Macias, 2018; Tobi & Kampen, 2018). Although the research team members contribute to the process, they remain within their disciplines. Transdisciplinary research tends to relate to real, complex, and socially significant problems and includes academic and non-academic actors who all value a mutual learning process with an outcome that is solution-focused (Max-Neef, 2005; Pohl, Truffer & Hirsh Hadorn, 2017). In our understanding of transdisciplinary work, what disciplines and non-academic agents bring in terms of insights, methods, approaches, and paradigms is what is welcome in transdisciplinary work, where 'influence on the other' is part of the learning. This further level of focus aligns well with the student value proposition as articulated in the *NWU Teaching and Learning Strategy* HE as a vehicle that offers:

- a personally transformative experience focused on the individual as part of a community of learning. That learning enables intellectual growth towards creating and enhancing the community and workplace, leading, following, and engendering civic responsibilities and rights. It concerns growing learning that adds value to science for the community, the nation, and the world;
- an academically transformative experience: it should lead to the development of understanding of knowledge, and to the construction of new knowledge. It should create an awareness of the deep links between knowledge, community, society, and the environment, such that it develops critical thinking, sophisticated conceptual and practical skills;
- a socially transformative experience: it contributes to the common good of communities, it focuses on sustainability, community and workplace leadership, work creation, and a concern with social issues, poverty, and inequality. A cherishing of values that support the dignity of the person, the solidarity of people, and a deep commitment to care for the environment (10).

In the above, an understanding of transdisciplinary work is commensurate with opportunities afforded by the community and the workplace: in other words, that work relates to the discipline(s) without being necessarily the taught experience of the classroom. Service Learning for the NWU is one such opportunity through which the interdisciplinary opportunity, can come to life, through the application of insights attained from the curriculum, the lived experience of using these insights in the development

⁴ Hughes (1985) considers that the argument concerning interdisciplinarity is that disciplines "do not give us the full picture of things seen in isolation" Hughes (14). For Hughes, there are four types of 'inter'-disciplinary integration: integration through correlation of subjects, integration through themes, topics on ideas, integration in practical thinking, integration through the learner's own interested in inquiry. Castán Broto, Gislason & Ehlers (2009) have also explored the development of the terms in relation to studies in which knowledge of more than one disciplinary field is necessary.

of ‘work’ experience, and the curation and assessment of the service learning undertaken, during the curriculum. Fortunately, this scholarship is well established in the scholarship of work-integrated learning (WIL), and workplace learning (WPL) (Balfour, 2023a & De Beer, et al. 2022). In principle, then the combined work of the PQM and the NCC projects should be enabling in two ways for the NWU. On the one hand, the PQM should enable the creation of curricular space (for students and academics) to conceptualise service learning relevant to the qualification, and the possibility for a structured, curated, and assessed portfolio of work experience gathered by students and integrated into selected modules within any students’ given programme. And, on the other hand, the NCC Project should be enabling of curriculum space and time to introduce new disciplines, programmes, and new ways for students to direct their own learning and engage in inter- as well as trans-disciplinary projects that anticipate the skills needed for the world of work as well as postgraduate research.

The table below offers a summary of the links and differences, between the two curriculum projects of the NWU. In the column associated with the PQM Project the aims of the Project are described, which cumulatively can be described as the intention to streamline, reduce, and rationalise the offering of programmes in excess of the minimum allowable credit loads and to equip the University with a sustainable means of managing the PQM in relation to its resource means. The NCC Project, on the other hand, aspires, within the context of what is enabled through the PQM Project, to support the creation of the conditions necessary to revise the University’s curriculum within a set of four goals in which the inter- and trans-disciplinary opportunities are created for students to work in self-directed as well as collaborative and cooperative ways on team projects, particularly within the final year of undergraduate studies. This emphasis on self-directed, cooperative, and collaborative work draws on the scholarship of teaching and learning which has gained ground and credibility in the past two decades as more research came to reveal the damaging effect of traditional teacher-centered approaches in higher education, especially in those contexts where there were no opportunities to engage in workshop- or laboratory-based work. Humanities and the social sciences have much to learn from the health and natural sciences about pedagogy since workshop-based and laboratory-based learning fosters self-directed learning, cooperative and collaborative learning, teaching and research.

Table 1: The aims of the PQM Project and NCC Project

	PQM Project Aims		New Century Curriculum Project Aims
1	Reduce Programme Duplications for a streamlined academic programme offering	1	Re-vision First Year studies for technology, AI, literacy readiness
2	Develop a model to determine the academic viability of modules with a view to curtailing the offering of non-viable modules and electives	2	Re-vision and design undergraduate exit-level studies for interdisciplinary collaboration, project, and capstone-seminar work in which research skills feature
3	Reassess and reduce credit loads within programmes with a view to ensuring that there is alignment between credit loads and module outcomes	3	In Year 1-Year 3 of the undergraduate curriculum, create opportunities in every programme for Service Learning to give expression to trans-disciplinary work undertaken by students
4	Clarify undergraduate and postgraduate articulation routes	4	Identify new areas of knowledge and/ or disciplines to be introduced to the PQM

The PQM Project has already made discernible progress over the period of the past two years and after four progress reports, a series of recommendations will be tabled at the University’s Senate in 2023, on the four aims above. In drawing this position paper to a close, paragraphs to follow describe the spirit needed to respond to challenges associated with the new century, not least of which are the

occurrences and reoccurrences of global pandemics such as Covid, but also the persistence of serious structural issues associated with the human economy as mentioned earlier (poverty, waste, and consumption management). Spirit is an appropriate term here because although the whole-of-institution curriculum change has already commenced at NWU, the one project (the NCC) has yet to commence, and thus is associated with aspirations rather than reporting on what has already occurred.

3. A rationale for change needed in the higher education curriculum in a New Century

In an important paper published by UNESCO's *Common Worlds Research Collective* (CWRC, 2020, 2) it is argued that "Despite efforts to promote education as the key to achieving sustainable lives, schools and higher education systems continue to prioritise workforce supply for economic growth over environmental sustainability". This publication references a worldwide concern with the dramatic effects of what has come to be termed 'ecocide' in terms of humanity's incapacity to control the destruction of the environment and resources associated with its own existence and needs (Maharaj & Tivana, 2023). While this destruction has been associated with capitalism in general and neo-liberalism, in particular, over the past two decades, it is critical to understand that the cumulative impact of mass consumption and waste of natural and non-renewable resources, is not the responsibility of one political or economic system, one class or historical epoch, but is the collective responsibility of a species whose practices over time can be seen to be problematic and risky for prospects of future survival for human, as well as all manner of life on the planet. The CWRC explains this as follows:

Along with this ecological reframing of justice, we have radically reassessed education's humanist knowledge traditions. Now wary of human-centric modes of thinking and acting, we actively resist the premise of human exceptionalism and refuse the perilous proposition of human dominion on Earth. As the 21st century unfolded, it became increasingly clear that capitalist extraction, production, and consumption so closely associated with human 'progress and development' were not only unsustainable but had fundamentally destabilised Earth's geo-biospheric systems (2020, 3).

Drawing from the CWRC documents, a few future-ready education aims (declarations) are described which are quoted below.

Table 2: Seven visionary declarations (CWRC, 2020, 3-9)

Education in 2050 (CWRC, 2020)	
1	By 2050, we have critically reassessed and reconfigured the relationship between education and humanism. We now retain the best aspect of education's previous humanist mission – to promote justice – but extend it beyond an exclusively human or social framework.
2	By 2050, we have fully acknowledged that humans are embedded within ecosystems and that we are ecological, not just social, beings. We have dissolved the boundaries between the 'natural' and 'social' sciences, and all curricula and pedagogies are now firmly grounded in an ecological consciousness.
3	By 2050, we have stopped using education as a vehicle for promulgating human exceptionalism. We are teaching that agency is relational, collectively distributed, and more-than-human.
4	By 2050, we have discarded education's human development/al frameworks. Instead of championing individualism, we now foster collective dispositions and convivial, reparative human and more-than human relations.
5	By 2050, we have recognized that we live and learn in a world. Our pedagogies no longer position the world 'out-there' as the object we are learning about. Learning to become with the world is a situated practice and a more-than-human pedagogical collaboration.

6	By 2050, we have re-tasked education with a cosmopolitical remit. This has moved it far beyond the universalist and anthropocentric claims of humanist, humanitarian, and human rights perspectives.
7	By 2050, the goal of education for future survival has led us to prioritise ethics of collective recuperation on this damaged Earth.

Naturally, the extent to which the NWU embodies these aspirations, the extent to which they are traceable, or interpreted in the curriculum (where, when, how, how much?) is the ongoing work of academics as curriculum specialists and the specialist curriculum support staff of the University. Notwithstanding the above, the seven visionary declarations are worthy of our attention as a University, when undertaking the re-education task of the NCC.

Of course, such an initiative regarding curriculum re-design cannot become the individual responsibility of a Programme or a Subject Group (or discipline) to conceptualise in isolation. Although this latter type of autonomy is important in the normal course of curriculum change and is in fact allowed by both the University's Rules and various regulatory body requirements, a whole-of-institution change is not the accreted sum of its parts, but rather the collective coordinated and committed efforts of the whole body, to change, as motivated in the terms described above. This explains the need for the NCC Project as the 'other side' as it were, to the PQM Project, as part of the NWU's *Teaching Learning Strategy (2021-2025)* going forward:

Success in the 21st century requires knowing how to learn and how to manage and adapt to change. It is essential that students develop robust critical thinking, problem-solving, as well as inter and intrapersonal communication skills to be successful in an increasingly fluid, interconnected, and complex world. The NWU will use the opportunities afforded by technology to re-imagine 21st-century teaching and the skills set needed by the 21st century lecturer, focusing on preparing students to be lifelong learners (6).

In light of the above, the rationale for the introduction of service learning opportunities, opportunities for students to work across the disciplines of their chosen specialisation(s), and the experience of the possibilities yielded through trans-disciplinary work, are the new frontiers contemplated in the opening sections of this paper in which the new year, in this new century, demanded and continues to demand a new set of orientations towards knowledge, teaching, and experience.

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