

DECOLONISATION: Means interrogating the formulation of what constitutes the curriculum. Issues of power, race and class are traditionally seen as outside the curriculum, which leads to the danger of separating knowledge from the social issues.

SOUTH AFRICA is grappling with decolonisation and universities have been looking at their curriculum in this regard for some time.

This intensified towards the end of last year as decolonising education was among the issues under scrutiny during the rise of student activism.

Students say transformation has fallen short of true change, said Kasturi Behari-Leak, Academic Staff Development Lecturer at the Centre for Higher Education Development at the University of Cape Town.

But what is not clear, Behari-Leak said at the British Council Going Global conference, was how university academics and management interpret colonisation and respond to it.

Professor Rajendra Chetty, Head of Department of Research and Postgraduate Studies at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, said universities should reconceptualise their research in context.

They rely on Eurocentric knowledge, and there is an increasing move to disrupt these notions and an openness to alternate knowledge frameworks.

"Colonialism is entrenched and regarded as normal. It has become totalitarian, preventing other knowledge to become admitted," he said, adding that Westernised

'DECOLONISATION' OF CURRICULA

universities are capitalist, patriarchal, Western and Christian-centric.

He said this is a worldwide problem, and one is likely to find the same curriculum and authors used across universities.

"Decolonisation means interrogating the formulation of what constitutes the curriculum," he said.

Issues of power, race and class are seen as outside the curriculum and there is a danger of separating knowledge from the social issues.

Chetty accused universities of complicity in perpetuating imbalances through their curriculum, and gave as an example the language training of medical students, saying evidence from provincial hospitals showed that a language barrier impeded the healthcare of patients.

He said business school curricula, as another example, do not address workers' rights.

Professor Harry Garuba, Director of the School for African and Gender Studies, Anthropology and Linguistics at the University of Cape Town, said disciplines are seen as natural, but when we see them as historical, we realise that what is valued is

what the discipline deems is valued.

"We can then ask: What happens when these disciplines move to their colonies or the global south for example?"

Disciplines were produced at moments in history, Garuba said, and sometimes were produced with the needs and requirements of the state in mind.

For some people entering these disciplines in the 1960s and 1970s, the disciplines contained them.

But over time, people have found new concepts and therefore deficits in the ones they were using.

"At every level they have to expand and change," Garuba said. In literary studies, for example, there were narratives out there that weren't previously termed "literature". In some cases, they now form part of the curriculum. People were encountering new objects of study and tried to fit them into their discipline, Garuba said, and the response was new fields or discipline expansion or new disciplines like African history and African philosophy.

Professor Lesley Le Grange, Distinguished Professor at Stellenbosch

University, said while post-colonial studies is well established in many universities as a field of study, the post-colonial university itself has not really been reimagined. When looking at the decolonisation of the curriculum, the one used in most universities and schools in the world is a factory model, which gets neatly packaged, he said.

Brian Kamanzi, a Master's student in engineering at the University of Cape Town, said engineering disciplines evolved out of the industrial revolution in Europe. Most disciplines emerged out of a particular context and to solve certain problems.

Kamanzi said there has been a decline in funding for the humanities and an increase for STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) disciplines, and he asked if we are making active efforts to intervene and promote critical consciousness.

He alluded to the Grand Inga hydro-electric dam in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a landmark project which was intended to contribute to the acceleration of Africa's development.

But he said that, so far, it

has failed to meet its potential and asked on what basis did those system engineers who were involved agree to participate in a project that would have certain impacts on society.

"Do we see engineers enable themselves to think of different ways this can be funded?" he asked, commenting on mining funding of the project and the fact that the primary artery serves the mines first.

He asked if engineers are even thinking of a more democratised way of funding the provision of power.

The British Council said decolonising higher education curricula can be a powerful catalyst for change in achieving national economic, political and social development goals.

It said higher education institutions in the post-colonies "must give serious consideration to the curricula which addresses the economic, education and health crises, political instabilities and a grossly unequal world".

It added that "the need for innovation in education which inspires thinking, doing, being and becoming agents of change is critical to being able to achieve national economic, political and social development goals."

This is a summary of the Going Global conference's session on universities and decolonisation.



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