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# Decolonising the curriculum: it's time for a strategy

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Students cheer as a statue of Cecil John Rhodes is removed from the University of Cape Town in April 2015. REUTERS/Sumaya Hisham

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In April 2015 a statue of colonialist Cecil John Rhodes was removed from the University of Cape Town's campus in South Africa. The statue was the flash point around which students organised themselves under the banners of #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall and drove a national – later international – debate about decolonisation and structural change in universities.

In the 14 months since the statue was removed, there has been a great deal of debate about “decolonising the curriculum” but very little change. This is understandable – statues fall, fees fall but curricula don't “fall”. There is a risk that because of fatigue, frustration, and silencing this important moment will pass us by. It will take years if not decades to gain momentum again. I believe that it's important to be clearer about the range of issues that feature under the “decolonising” banner.

To this end, I carefully read three pieces contributed by students Calum Mitchell, Brian Kamanzi and Njoki Wamai to the website University World News' special edition on decolonisation. I reread and listened to earlier contributions to tease out from the many entangled demands a list of challenges. The six which I'll explore in this article are by no means the only ones and are not discussed in order

of priority. But I found that they recur again and again. With a proper, focused strategy and resources, they can be tackled – and universities can ensure that these crucial debates result in real change.

### **Challenge #1: A “fit” undergraduate curriculum**

One of the challenges raised is that South Africa’s undergraduate curriculum is simply no longer fit for its purpose. This echoes a much bigger debate in other parts of the world and raises fundamental questions about the appropriateness or “fitness” of the existing undergraduate bachelors degree across disciplines.

Its fitness is questioned on two points. Firstly, there has been a massive **expansion** of higher education. It has opened up in the past two decades to South Africans across race and class lines. But is the curriculum actually relevant for these new students, many of whom don’t fit the profile of the typical “mainstream” middle class, white, “university-ready” 18-year-old school leaver?

Secondly, is it fit for the rapidly changing world into which graduates of these degrees move into? Leading universities around the world and in some cases entire national systems are courageously **revamping** their undergraduate curricula to address these changes of demography and the future world of work.

### **Challenge #2: Real world relevance**

This notion of “relevance” is another challenge. Professional areas of study like health sciences, engineering and law have grappled with their relevance to the “real world”. For example, in an African medical curriculum, should universities prepare students for the problems of first world specialists or those of doctors working in poor, rural areas? Or both? Many professional curricula have shifted to problem-based or problem-centered.

A focus on problems raises other issues: the balance and sequence of theory and practice, and the plurality of theories and methods required to solve the problems. Very few of today’s “**wicked**” problems can be solved through one perspective or one method of investigation. These kinds of curriculum change are highly complex and contested but are being tackled in many disciplines.

### **Challenge #3: Students’ voices must be heard**

Students argued that they need to have a voice or a say in curriculum matters that affect them. This raises issues of meaningful representation of students on departmental and programme governance structures. Some academics will be concerned or even opposed to this. They need not be.

Students are not naive about their role in curriculum change. They know they are not the experts -- they have come to university to be taught by the experts. But they do have a perspective that comes from their experiences both inside and outside the classroom. If students’ input is valued, the overall quality of the curriculum will be strengthened.

### **Challenge #4: Dominating worldviews**

One of the concerns of the decolonising movement is how curriculum content is dominated by – to name some – white, male, western, capitalist, heterosexual, European worldviews. This means the content under-represents and undervalues the perspectives, experiences, epistemologies of those who do not fit into these mainstream categories.

African Studies expert Harry Garuba situates the current agitation for change in the long tradition of calls for curriculum change of the 1960s in post-colonial Africa and the moves of multiculturalism in the 1980s in the US. He makes a useful distinction between inserting these new inputs into an existing largely unchanged curriculum versus a more radical rethinking of how the subject is taught.

Again, this kind of debate happens best in individual disciplines – though it can be precipitated by external events, as has been the case in Economics.

### **Challenge #5: Power plays**

Another challenge raised by students is that many curricula are taught in oppressive classrooms by academics who are demeaning, unprofessional and use their power in ways that discriminate unfairly against students.

Misuse and abuse of power by academics on students or students on academics is simply wrong. The inadequacy of existing policies and procedures for exposing and addressing the abuse of power has been brought under a very **harsh spotlight** at South African universities. The extent to which academics are unaware of their “rank” and its potential harmful consequences on students will nullify everything else that’s done. For this reason, one could argue that this is the most important item on the agenda.

### **Challenge #6: Reproducing inequalities**

The curriculum – and particularly its assessment systems – serve to reproduce society’s broader inequalities. This challenge has received very little attention in the recent debates on “decolonising”. It is the way in which the curriculum at every point – from who gets admitted, who thrives, who survives, who fails – mirrors back the historical and current unequal distribution of educational resources in the broader society.

### **A clear strategy is key**

Some of these challenges may fit more or less appropriately on the “decolonising the curriculum” agenda. Perhaps it doesn’t matter: they are all important. The point is that they will require different strategies, different kinds of resources and expertise, different lines of responsibility and accountability. The risk of not having a clear strategy is that the curriculum will look no different in 2020 than it does in 2016.

