

SUBMISSION IN SUPPORT OF THE CURRICULUM CHANGE FRAMEWORK

Staff in the UCT School of Architecture Planning and Geomatics

Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment

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As the undersigned staff of the UCT School of Architecture Planning and Geomatics we are responding in support of the Curriculum Change Framework because of its questioning of the relationship of knowledge to society, and because of the ethics and methods by which the agency and consciousness of bodies excluded from curriculum change become included. These are crucial considerations in the authentic transformation of departments as the site of disciplines.

The challenge of the Curriculum Framework

A Curriculum Change Working Group consisting of student activists and eminent scholars was appointed by the Vice Chancellor in April 2016 during Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall student led protests. The protests had challenged existing social relations of knowledge production, transmission and management, surfacing questions of decolonising curricula and pedagogy; how to shift ‘the marginalisation and exclusion of particular identities and scholarly traditions and perspectives – especially from Africa and the global south’, and how to transform ‘the dominance of cultural assumptions that perpetuate negative stereotypes in curricula and pedagogy’.¹

A preliminary conceptual framework located these intentions within the context of an increasingly unequal society, so that the university must be both responsive to societal needs (e.g. broadening access and improving success in higher education) and must tackle issues of inequality within its institutional structure – i.e. as both ‘a site of complicity’ and ‘a potential agent for social change’.²

In terms of knowledge and curriculum this societal locatedness requires interrogation of:

- ‘the ways in which race, class, gender and (dis)ability interface with our disciplines, and the environment within which we must all collectively teach, learn and live’;
- ‘the hegemonic Eurocentric influences on global thinking about the context and foundational knowledge of many disciplines’;

and of ‘changes in the curriculum and pedagogy needed to equip students to grapple with the challenges of post-apartheid South Africa’.³

Within postcolonial societies like South Africa, and dominantly white, male and heteronormative institutions such as UCT, the curriculum change framework also challenges the way dominant concepts of ‘diversity’, ‘inclusion’, and individual academic freedom are constructed within hegemonic whiteness, and the marginalised agencies of those bodies and knowledges it constructs as ‘diverse’ and ‘included’.

Decolonial Openings

The analysis in the framework derives from well-developed and well-argued scholarship of curriculum change, based on an ethical Freirean focus on social justice as the starting point of curriculum questions, drawing on a sociological Bernsteinian analysis of the curriculum as a pedagogic structuring of knowledge which relays consciousness, and developing a political analysis

¹ ‘Curriculum Change Working Group’, UCT News 17 August 2016.

² ‘Feedback Form – Terms of Reference: UCT Curriculum Change Working Group’ (undated).

³ ‘Curriculum Change Workgroup – Preliminary Conceptual Framework’, 16 August 2016.

of the power relations embedded in these knowledge structures from the work of various scholars of the coloniality and decolonisation of knowledge (Maldonado-Torres, Bhahba, Gordon, Mignolo, and others). Here curriculum is understood as a social practice that invests in the recognition of all participants, and reveals the invisible and idealised subject of knowledge that dominates curriculum discussion.

Beyond a comprehensive theoretical development, the framework extends to consider critical methodology and inclusivity in the design of curricula. The terms of reference of the working group included 'initiating a deep conversation about the curriculum' throughout the institution, debating 'pedagogic and assessment practices which are perceived as exclusionary', discussing community engaged scholarship, sharing resources and examples of curriculum innovation, developing a framework for curriculum transformation, and proposing 'mechanisms for holding academic leadership accountable for meaningful curriculum change'.⁴

The methods of participation were tested in three sites of engaged scholarship within both the humanities and the sciences. They include study circles which create awareness and inclusion of students as co-creators of knowledge, knowledge cafés which deepen the understanding of common interests, and faculty workshops which unpack curriculum assumptions and contestations.

Changing institutional culture at the sites of disciplines and departments

The context of this statement of endorsement for the adoption by UCT of the Curriculum Change Framework are a series of struggles since 2016 in the UCT School of Architecture Planning and Geomatics led by black staff and students and their supporters for transformation of School institutional culture and curricula. These struggles over the last three years have yielded very little success against powerful vested interests and renewed investments in the maintenance of the status quo, leading to the non-transformation and recolonisation of the department being referred to the UCT Office of Inclusivity and Change in 2018. The curriculum change framework offers a remarkable opportunity and supportive framework to vitalise innovation in transformation and redress disciplinary intransigence, where they occur, through advocacy and incentive at the departmental level.

Despite the mobilisation and success of the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall protest movements at national and institutional levels, departmental sites of struggle over the curricula of disciplines often remain untransformed. In these cases, the power relations of knowledge production, transmission, and management often remain dominated by conservative white men who maintain the deep pedagogic structures of the colonial curriculum through exclusionary practices which involve little, if any, transparency, discussion, and agreement. In such circumstances the alienation of young black students and the frustration of young black staff who, having agitated for curriculum change find themselves branded as divisive or destructive, are increasing. At best in such departments, 'decolonising curricula' occurs segmentally within standalone modules rather than systemically as a pedagogic structuring of knowledge. This has been the experience within the UCT School of Architecture Planning and Geomatics, an experience that is shared in many sites across the university.

The Curriculum Change Framework brings to departmental conditions a necessary and workable set of ethics, methods, theories, and questions for the authentic transformation of knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy, to be undertaken collaboratively across institutional hierarchies. It is the building of this collaborative consensus, critically and patiently, that is necessary for the long-term and student-centred teamwork required to change the curricula of disciplines.

⁴ 'Terms of Reference: UCT Curriculum Change Working Group', 16 August 2016.

The curiously low-key release of the Curriculum Change Framework report in a 'From the VC's Desk' news item⁵ after two years of development, and the limited online curriculum change framework feedback in 2018, signals the need for more substantive public engagement in 2019. We look forward to the opportunity to participate in such engagements across the university and within departments.

This framework is substantive, scholarly, theoretically and ethically engaged, methodologically rigorous, and contextual. We support its adoption.

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⁵ 'Curriculum Change Working Group report', UCT News 28 June 2018.