

## **Decolonization at the University of Cape Town (UCT): meaningful, meaningless or just mean?**

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In an earlier [piece](#), I commented broadly on the VC-appointed, arguably biased and non-representative Curriculum Change Working Group's (CCWG) author-free Framework [document](#). My major concerns related to the Framework's unjustified assumption that UCT was and continues to be institutionally racist, thereby necessitating radical and rapid "decolonization". In this piece, I express concerns relating to the Framework's "Recommendations" – presented in larger and 'bolded' font. My responses/queries are in smaller font and 'unbolded'.

### **Authentic engagement drives meaningful curriculum change. This takes time and involves ongoing conversations with different stake-holders.**

Yes, there is always a need for "meaningful" curriculum change. But: what/who are "authentic engagement"; "meaningful change" and "stakeholders"; how is change to be "driven" and by whom; and on what time-scale should change be implemented? Also, if the desired pathway(s) of "change" is/are not obvious, who decides which one(s) to follow and on what basis?

For a century at UCT, these decisions were mediated through rational, respectful and evidence-based debate between/among academics (inhouse and international) and students (current and past) within departments, faculties and, ultimately, Senate on the relative merits of alternative (or multiple) and, ideally, evidence-based, ideologies and falsifiable hypotheses and paradigms. This produced strategies that could be assessed regularly (ideally objectively) by international peers, Senate and Council and modified, or even replaced, over time. This is why UCT acquired and has maintained high international ranking and produces leaders and innovators and high-quality research.

Frustrated Fallists (videoed [here](#), [here](#), [here](#)) and their resolute supporters (including the race-based, secretive Black Academic Caucus - see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and most – all? – CCWG members) eschew debate, replacing it with demands with short deadlines. If these demands are not met, Fallist 'protesters' resort to law-breaking defamation, hate speech, intimidation, assault and politically- and racially-based physical violence and destruction. The only 'explicated' examples of CCWG-supported curriculum change so far are the disastrous "Raju Affair" (discussed in great detail in four pieces: [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) – involving a strategy to decolonize mathematics – and the 2017 TB Davie Memorial Lecture presented by former UCT professor and eminent decolonist scholar [Mahmood Mamdani](#). Two core recommendations came from Mamdani's lecture:

1. 'If you regard yourself as prisoners in this ongoing colonizing project, then your task must be to subvert that process from within.'
2. Decolonization must be a multi-linguistic project. UCT must develop new African "language centres", and that these languages should feature strongly in mode-of-instruction, buttressed by massive translation programmes. This will "allow 21<sup>st</sup> Century African students" to "get to know neighbours" and "theorize [their] own reality". Otherwise, "a UCT student will [continue to] be a technician trained to apply theories developed elsewhere".

So, it's not enough to institute changes in curricula via subversion and dropping curriculum-components because they were developed elsewhere. The neo-curriculum must be communicated by academics who speak IsiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, siSwati, Sepedi, etc.

Finally, when the academic 'push comes to shove', which [philosophers](#) and epistemologists will UCT favour in choosing its new pathways?

Those who are motivated by racial (or other) self-identification, [prefer](#) German philosopher [Martin Heidegger's "Dasein"](#), a "primal nature of being", a self-identity based on a "shared history and destiny" underpinned by the anti-Cartesian ontology-based belief: "I think **BECAUSE** I AM". This belief-based, exclusionary ethos 'worked' for a few years for the Hitler and his Nazis, who were bent (with Heidegger's explicit support) on wiping out Jewry and achieving world domination via war.

Frenchman [Michel Foucault](#), described by T.B. Davie lecturer [Noam Chomsky](#) as "completely amoral" because he rejects the universal basis for a concept of justice, is favoured by those who believe that "power", rather than restricting "knowledge", ubiquitously controls, defines and develops knowledge relationally, past and present. Like neo-Marxist [Antonio Gramsci](#) before him, Foucault viewed 'power-knowledge' as the primary means of social controlling the masses. Where they differed in detail, Gramsci favoured the development of "organic intellectuals" (whose ideas are derived from the oppressed masses) to replace "traditional" Ph.D.-educated scholars at universities.

Foucault-rival and fellow Frenchman, [Jacques Derrida](#), is best known for developing a form of analysis known as [deconstruction](#). Deconstruction is a key tool the CCWG claims to use to expose flaws and instability in normative structures or universally-accepted views in order to render them untenable. In Derrida's view, "there is no out-of-context"; there are no solutions; there is never a moment when meaning is complete and total, even in the short term. There is just endless deconstruction, described by some as "agnogenesis" — the intentional manufacture of ignorance.

[Frantz Fanon](#), yet another Frenchman (but a person of colour ([PoC](#)) descended from Europeans, colonial slaves and Caribbean indigenes) demands that everything colonialist must collapse, because colonization is an inherently violent process. It is only through violence that the colonized can re-assert their own humanity. In his [Wretched of the Earth](#), Fanon sums up his views unambiguously: "decolonization is always a violent event... it reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives". "The native's work is to imagine all possible methods for destroying the settler." The practice of violence binds them together as a whole".

Then there is South African T.B. Davie's doctrine "aimed at the advancement of knowledge by the methods of study and research founded on absolute intellectual integrity and pursued in an atmosphere of academic freedom". That knowledge should:

1. "reflect the multi-racial picture of the society it serves;
2. give a lead to the cultural and spiritual development of the different race groups as part of the developments of the community as a whole;
3. aid the state by providing training for and maintaining standards in the learned professions and public services; and
4. serve the community in the true sense of the university, i.e. as a centre for the preservation, the advance, and the dissemination of learning for its own sake and without regard to its usefulness, to all who are academically qualified for admission, irrespective of race, colour, or creed."

VC Price's pre-Mamdani-lecture introductory comments gave Davie's 'principled-principal' stance short shrift, opening it to "reinterpretation". He said that, today, beyond "academic merit", Academic Freedom "may also entail other [unspecified] criteria". It is a "live issue not frozen in the [Daviean] 1950s". It needs to be "reinvestigated, reinterpreted, reunderstood [sic] and reapplied in the light of other [unspecified] issues" and a changing "institutional culture" facilitated by "fierce and robust discussions".

To my mind, this is a syncretistic Marxist (Groucho not Karl)/Derridean position: "If you don't like my principles, I have others." The BAC and radical Fallists are Heidegger/Derridians who use Foucault

and Fanon's methods. The current DVC for Teaching and Learning is an unabashed fan of Fanon. Let's see who/what the new VC favours when pressed by Fallist demands.

**Meaningful curriculum change requires leadership that has a proven trackrecord [sic] in addressing inequities in the academy, and that is sensitive to what it means and feels like to be marginalised.**

UCT's current status as a world-class institution is a product of longstanding and outstanding leadership by the likes of Davie, Stuart Saunders, Mamphela Ramphele and Njabulo Ndebele and its many highly [NRF-rated](#) academics who have "proven track records" characterized by high-quality research and outstanding graduates. There are no generally accepted systems that can assess inequities (immoral or grossly unfair behaviour) or the ability to sense marginalization. There are only relativist and subjective [opinions](#).

**In order not to discard what works and to avoid pushing the institution into implosion, it is important to blend formal structures with new emergent structures.**

The undisclosed authors of the Framework do not seem to remember that Fallists profoundly damaged "what works" by binging UCT to the brink (see [here](#) and [here](#)) of implosion during October-December 2016, and necessitating final examinations during 2017 being written in concentration-camp-like tents on UCT's Rugby Field patrolled by security personnel and guard dogs. Moreover, neither they nor the BAC and the Institutional Reconciliation and Transformation Commission ([IRTC](#)) Steering Committee have made any progress or reached consensus on what constitutes 'acceptable' protest. So, they still retain lawbreaking as a trump card.

It is not at all clear what the authors mean by "blending" and "new emergent structures". Surely, it's not the "blended learning" implemented in 2017 and [decried](#) by the Students' Representative Council. I hope that it's also not enforced 'hybridization' of highly contrasting or antithetical disciplines – producing something like 'socio-physics'. But, words at the bottom of page 57 such as:

1. "engagement with curriculum change ought not to rest on the question of expertise as a qualifier"
2. "includ[e] ... all students, academics, service and administrative staff, ordinary members of our society, communities we call home, and communities of practice"
3. "those who agitated for change are the main stake-holders"

suggest that the desired 'change' must be 'expertise-free'; cater for demands from those unfamiliar with academic competence, let alone excellence; and be driven by the lawbreaking, violent and destructive 'agitators'.

**When the intent is to decolonize the mind, texts from the epistemologically disenfranchised that otherwise would be excluded, should become core-reading material.**

I shudder to contemplate on what a decolonized mind might be. If the "epistemologically disenfranchised" are students educationally 'disabled' by the tragically dysfunctional South African

Basic Education System or academics wedded to destructive ideologies of any persuasion that offer no or weakly competitive alternative curricula and pedagogy, it's difficult to expect them to be trusted to choose which material should be included or excluded, let alone become core material. But, let all UCT's academic population (past and present) participate in unfettered debate. That has been prevented by Fallists for the best part of five years.

**Knowledge production must always be regarded as potentially violent towards marginalized communities. This must be mitigated by individuals and groups from marginalized communities increasingly becoming drivers of research, as members of the academy. Institutional racism, ableism, sexism and heteronormativity need to be addressed with honesty and courage.**

I shudder to see the underlined words above. If the individuals and groups that drive knowledge production, change and dissemination are chosen primarily on the basis of 'race', linguistic and physical ability, sexual orientation/identity and not internationally recognized academic achievement and their Afro-relevant research/educational track records, will highly talented students still flock to UCT and will families and mega-donors be willing to invest in them and our beloved institution? What has happened to [tie-breaking affirmative action](#)? When the best and brightest of her young educators and researchers leave for institutions who let them 'be what they can be', who will fill their academic shoes at UCT?

**Knowledge must be understood as both situational and relational, with questions rather than method, driving knowledge production.  
Transdisciplinarity must be encouraged.**

Heil Heidegger and Derrida! If transdisciplinarity connotes educational/research strategies that cross many [disciplinary](#) boundaries to create [holistic](#) approaches, e.g. [conservation science](#) – WONDERFUL! But this would require crediting Jan Smuts' [philosophy](#). If it's pedagogical melding for its own sake, it's likely to generate little more than mushy, miles-wide-millimetre-deep mediocrity.

**A pedagogy of being and doing should be embraced, so that pedagogic relationships are imbued with a consciousness that is inclusive, socially just and constructive.**

If by "being and doing" one's thinking is Dasein-constrained belief, the neo-curriculum could be little more than deconstructive retrograde nativism that devolves into merely 'just social', postmodern conversations.

**Assessment should be re-conceptualised as social practice in order to surface challenges that accompany it. Practices that encourage assessment for learning should be encouraged.**

If this means that UCT's academic scholars who publish in the journals [Science](#) and [Nature](#) or write award winning literature must be transformed into organic intellectuals who write for the Cape Times, say goodbye to talented academics and students and expect a 'rank' institutional ranking. I've suggested many times that, in addition to NRF rating, UCT's academics should be assessed in terms of their educational 'fitness' – the number of their outstanding academic graduate 'offspring'.

**Colonial lies embedded in disciplines, must be exposed and disrupted.**

Lies of all persuasion (false, evidence-free assertions and/or beliefs) should suffer these fates

**Students must continue to play a critical role in informing meaningful curriculum change.**

Absolutely, but they should be willing to achieve their aims through evidence-based, logical argument, not the sjambok, stones and petrol bombs.

All this said, the only acceptable substitute for elitist excellence at UCT should be non-racial perfection!