

Science and decolonisation: a way backward

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This is a commentary on a piece by University of Cape Town (UCT) academics Prof Nicola Illing and Dr Alastair Sloan published in GoundUp and *UCT IN THE NEWS* in November 2016.

It is good to see that people in UCT's Faculty of Science are discussing the "decolonisation" of science.

Sadly, the video clip they refer to does not constitute "discussion". It was a monologue packed with grossly incorrect statements and extremely disturbing proposals, against which opposing views were aggressively suppressed. Enough said on that.

I am also concerned that the authors' goal is to find "a consensus view of what a decolonised science education means to staff and students". I would prefer the term synergistic synthesis. The word "consensus" reeks with the notion of compromise to mediocrity. But, before I go into detail, I want to outline what many of those who favour the process of decolonisation clearly define it to be as it relates to academic staffing, curricula and teaching methods.

What is "decolonisation"?

As far as I can determine (and please correct me), it is a process that *inter alia*:

1. dismisses the validity of ideas based, not on merit determined by rational debate, but on the race, gender, age, geographical origin and historical provenance of their promoters;
2. rejects their comparison via unfettered debate because they have merely been reified and have no ontological status;
3. assumes that there was a pre-colonial knowledge that was suppressed and can be resurrected;
4. asserts that there may also be new post-colonial knowledge/paradigms that can compete (even out-compete) existing alternatives ('colonial' or otherwise); and
5. questions the notions of what constitutes knowledge, who should produce, teach it and be taught - and how.

In the absence of 3 and 4, decolonisation is inherently locally socio-economico-politically selective, potentially exclusionary and deconstructive, and requires ideological expurgation and non-epistemic-based staffing attrition before there can be reconstruction.

Under these circumstances, if it fails to offer (to quote one UCT 'decolonialist' professor) something to "take the university to a higher level" adjudged by respected international reviewers, and (I would suggest) most of South Africa's currently unheard, un-consulted, "silenced" academics (and students, fee-paying parents, alumni and donors), regardless of how they "self-identify" would adamantly oppose such a process.

This is in sharp contrast to UCT's long-established policy of "adaptive transformation" that maintains that:

1. the potential validity of ideas should be based fundamentally on academic merit determined by rational debate;

2. the primacy of potentially valid, opposing ideas be determined by further unfettered comparison/rational-debate and scientific competition assessed using internationally respected criteria and within peer-reviewed literature;
3. pre-colonial knowledge that was suppressed/ignored must be resurrected and debated on equal footing;
4. new post-colonial knowledge/paradigms (regardless of the provenance) must also compete with existing alternatives ('colonial', 'Eurocentric' or otherwise);
5. knowledge constitutes reasoned information uncircumscribed by the conditioning effects of historical/socio-economic/political circumstances, and can be produced and taught by anyone assessed by epistemic peers on merit.

Now to specifics.

1. Yes, science "should be taught in its historical context"; "ethical considerations of both research and the opportunities that new technologies offer need to be widely debated"; and it is important to demonstrate "how their training in science can be applied in careers outside of academia".
2. Yes, "teaching and research [should] focus on subjects that will positively affect the majority of South Africans, or at least specifically African questions". But I would substitute focus with emphasise to minimise the danger of excluding perfectly applicable ideas because they are non-African-sourced.
3. I don't know what "changing the culture of the university and the demographics of the staff" entails. If it means academic 'cleansing' under any guise other than merit assessed using internationally accepted criteria, I oppose it. If it means hiring/firing/promoting people on any basis other than merit, I oppose it adamantly. If UCT adopts such a new culture, it will regress from a being centre with delusions of grandeur to becoming a collection of buildings populated by academics and students with aspirations to mediocrity driven by the desire to 'unoffend'.
4. I agree that applied research can be prioritised, but not to the exclusion of curiosity driven research. I abhor the term "basic/blue-skies" research. But, regardless of how it is characterised, poor research should not supplant good-to-outstanding research assessed by epistemic peers. Self-praise is no praise.
5. I don't agree that "it has become clear that most of us are unaware of the content of UCT's actual recent research outputs". These are splattered all over the pages of *UCT IN THE NEWS*, *The Conversation* and many other media conduits. It's the researcher's job to do this (emphasising its Afrocentricity – I prefer Afro-relevance), since it can be a key factor in obtaining employment.
6. Yes, "We can and should do more", if only the unlawful actions of protesters were curtailed and 'core' academics would buy into adaptive transformation. If the current educational/research momentum is lost, it may never be regained.
7. Prof Illing is spot on when she cites history in relation to the Cultural Revolution in 1970s China. If a similar movement happens in South Africa, it probably won't recover. Just see what's happened at many universities elsewhere in Africa.
8. There is only one viable strategy: "education [should] be taught at the highest international standard, so that students trained in Africa can become international leaders in all fields. Science is an international endeavour."
9. Yes, many students across all faculties at the UCT have been educationally 'disabled' by a collapsed Basic Educational System described by some as inferior to the vile Bantu Education. For 30+ years, UCT has 'addressed' this 'handicap' using various

forms of academic support provided by academic staff effectively outsourced from the 'core' departments. This approach has failed many students who form the legitimate core of the protesters. I will elaborate on this elsewhere. But, in short, 'core' academics need to become 'insourced' into the process, adapt (not-decolonise) curricula (making them job – especially school teacher – relevant) and mentor students face-to-face and one-on-one from day one to graduation to ensure that they get the most special of degrees, a JOB.

The time is over for the students to be 'sinking or swimming'. If the academics don't 'stand and deliver', it will be them who sink.