

CURRICULUM TRANSFORMATION FRAMEWORK DOCUMENT

**REIMAGINING CURRICULA FOR A JUST UNIVERSITY  
IN A VIBRANT DEMOCRACY**

Work Stream on Curriculum Transformation at  
the University of Pretoria

**A. INTRODUCTION**

Over the past 22 years, significant progress has been made in transforming South Africa into a democratic society based on the values of human dignity, equality, human rights and freedom. Nevertheless, exclusion, marginalisation and social injustice remain stark. The Higher Education sector mirrors these challenges, which concerted action by students across universities in the past years has placed firmly on the national agenda for immediate attention. The interlinked imperatives that have been identified include the transformation of the demographic composition, institutional culture, governance and curricula of South African universities.

Decolonising and democratising the curriculum has become a central rallying cry. While curricula were changed with the advent of democracy in the 1990s, it is clear that much more needs to be done. This is especially true if transformation is understood as moving from one configuration to another, characterised by on-going rethinking and renewal in the pursuit of social, environmental and cognitive justice – not only in Higher Education but also in the country at large.

The UP community shares a deep desire to move to a just and equitable future. This desire stems partly from our acknowledgment of the history of UP, including the corrosive legacy of Christian National Education and the university's active role in the production and maintenance of the systems of colonialism and apartheid, as advanced by colonial and Afrikaner nationalist ideologues who worked as academics at UP. The call to transform curricula is inseparable from a larger vision of a return to the idea of the university as a space for critical inquiry, thinking and democratic public engagement. Presently we are faced with the challenge of the corporatisation of universities, which undermines this very idea. A transforming curriculum resist corporatism and managerialism, including instrumentalist versions of internationalisation that merely service the academic, social and political objectives of the Global North to the detriment of local knowledges and objectives. It is a curriculum that asserts and celebrates local capacity to produce cutting edge research with a global reach.

Out of a lekgotla between student societies and UP management in March 2016, three work streams were formed. Apart from the work streams on language policy and institutional culture, we have embarked on a process of critical consideration of the meaning and shape that curriculum transformation should take.

A final definition of transformation of curriculum is not supplied in this document. Instead, flowing from discussions in the work stream, four drivers are provided to guide an inclusive process of engagement on what curriculum transformation entails in this context. The approach adopted is cognisant of the differences in disciplines across UP's nine faculties, including the requirements of professional bodies. Nevertheless, the point of departure is that every field of study holds implications that either advance or deter human and non-human life. Therefore, academic endeavour, prominently visible in curricula, must be in service of the public good and the actualisation of human potential.

The four drivers of curriculum transformation, as set out below, are:

- Responsiveness to social context
- Epistemological diversity
- Renewal of pedagogy and classroom practices
- An institutional culture of openness and critical reflection

## **B. FOUR DRIVERS OF CURRICULUM TRANSFORMATION**

### **1. Responsiveness to social context**

**A transforming curriculum is one that registers and is attuned to local and global contexts, histories, realities and problems. Such a curriculum promotes both a critical and self-critical stance. It acquires concreteness, relevance and purpose by being located within a specific social, economic, environmental, intellectual, political and legal context. Questions concerning development, social justice and globalisation, among other issues, should be central to teaching and research. This further entails:**

- Retrieving and foregrounding historically and presently marginalised narratives, voices and subjugated knowledges, not only as process of nostalgia, but as creating new forms of telling, being and becoming. Re-interpreting those narratives from the viewpoints, analyses and life experiences of the subjects of those narratives themselves, wherever they may be located, in response to both the historical and contemporary contexts.
- Acknowledging indigenous knowledge systems hitherto repressed in the South African context. Positioning these systems not as sites of immutable truths, but as sites of contestation, which are generally affected by flows and currents of thinking from within and from without.
- Critically examining the role of race, socio-economic class, gender, sexuality, culture, nationality, age and other categories of identification

and disadvantage within disciplines, while underscoring our common humanity.

- Prioritising social transformation by focusing on the ways in which disciplines can contribute to the development of society and realisation of a dignified and sustainable life for all South Africans. In particular, students should be empowered to participate in positively transforming society at all levels.
- Envisaging students and academics as thoughtful citizens, part of a greater and diverse public, who are able to contribute meaningfully to different communities, society, the continent and the world by drawing on:
  - *Critical thinking*: the ability to problematise received wisdoms within disciplines and to question old and new frameworks, to exercise judgement and engage in reasoned debate.
  - *Critical literacy*: the ability to independently read, analyse, reflect, evaluate, conceptualise and synthesise arguments, approaches and solutions.
- Engaging the life worlds that students inhabit by linking teaching material to current affairs and cutting edge research. Foregrounding interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary work.
- Attracting students that reflect the diversity of social identities in South Africa. In this regard, all endeavours must be made to remove economic obstacles to ensure that prospective students are not excluded on the basis of class.
- Developing a compulsory foundational course for all first-year students in African history, thought and society, political economy and human rights.

## 2. Epistemological diversity

**Curriculum transformation is a constant encouragement of epistemological diversity. Diversifying epistemology means bringing marginalised groups, experiences, knowledges and worldviews emanating from Africa and the Global South to the centre of the curriculum. It involves challenging the hegemony of Western ideas and paradigms and foregrounding local and indigenous conceptions and narratives, while recognising the global context. It further entails:**

- Cognisance of our location in the Global South and its entanglements within colonial and imperial hierarchies of power, maintained by cultural and psychological hegemonies through different forms of violence and the compliance of local elites.
- Encouraging epistemic diversity and pluriversality between different intellectual and cultural heritages, whether in the North or the South,

thereby enabling the crossing of borders, sharing and meeting of different ways of knowing, being and feeling. Locating received theories in local contexts and seeing subjugated indigenous knowledges as legitimate sources of theoretical abstraction.

- Excavating and recuperating African, Latin American and Asian knowledges and practices that have been devalued and marginalised and, in some cases, decimated and distorted by US and European centrism and epistemic racism and sexism.
- Honestly and critically reckoning with the histories of all disciplines and dominant traditions within disciplines to examine their underlying colonial biases and exclusionary cultural norms at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and class, as well as the complicity of disciplinary knowledges with various forms of violence and oppression over time. This involves, among others, the acknowledgment that even those few historically white universities that admitted a limited number of black<sup>1</sup> students operated on the principle of racial segregation and that black people were mostly excluded from Higher Education, bar the Bantustan universities and two universities set aside for 'coloured' and 'Indian' students. White women were first excluded from universities and later prohibited or discouraged from entering certain disciplines. Hidden histories, including of the contributions by black people and women, should be excavated.
- Interrogating the requirements of professional bodies in relation to the necessary intellectual and ethical development of disciplines in a democratic society.
- Not merely adding new voices and theories but reconceptualising the way in which knowledges and sources of knowledge are organised, valued and represented within disciplines and subject areas. This entails a rethinking of the very structure of disciplines and modules.

### **3. Renewal of pedagogy and classroom practices**

**Curriculum transformation involves continuously rethinking and re-evaluating the ways in which we learn and teach. This includes responsiveness to and training in new pedagogical methodologies and approaches within disciplines. It further entails:**

- Providing support for the transition from high school to university, from undergraduate to postgraduate studies and on to the world of work, by addressing students' learning impediments and relating their home literacies

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<sup>1</sup> 'Black' is used in this document to refer to people who, due to colonial and apartheid racialisation, were historically discriminated against in the provision of Higher Education. It includes the former apartheid categories of 'Indian' and 'coloured'.

and school literacies to the university curriculum. It moves from the understanding that learning also occurs beyond the walls of the lecture hall.

- Addressing the invisibility of certain groups by critically interrogating the composition of students and staff, especially in disciplines historically dominated by one sex, gender, gender identity and/or race, and removing pedagogical and classroom hindrances in the way of diversification.
- Including in teaching and learning the affective dimension of multiple forms of oppression, including various kinds of pain produced through these subjugations and associated practices. Working with the specificity of our apartheid past to acknowledge the effects of victimhood and false senses of superiority, and to innovate instead of being paralysed in relation to that past.
- Being receptive to new modes of delivery, for example through technological innovations in the learning process, without detracting from the substantive content that must be taught, while ensuring that all students have equal access to such technology.
- Pursuing inquiry-led teaching and learning. Rather than testing (only or predominantly) for memory (rote learning), students are encouraged to do more writing and research.
- Creating a robust UP learning space that is also affirming and sensitive to student diversity by actively including students across differences such as race, sex, gender and gender identity, sexuality, socio-economic class or disability. Materials and assessments should not privilege some identities or experiences over others.
- Equipping students with skills to contribute to society and be efficient professionals. These competencies include:
  - Literacy
  - Numeracy
  - Conceptual / abstract thinking
  - Critical thinking
  - Ethics, accountability and integrity
  - Problem solving
  - Communication
  - Interpersonal skills
  - Service to society and community
  - Other discipline-specific skills

- Ability to reach out and collaborate across identity categories, including but not limited to gender, sexuality, race, class and age.

#### **4. An institutional culture of openness and critical reflection**

**A transforming curriculum exhibits understanding that a 'hidden curriculum' can be found in the spaces, symbols, narratives and embedded practices that constitute the university and in the diversity, or lack thereof, of the staff and student cohort. Transformation requires exposing and resisting the subliminal practices of the hidden curriculum that are part of South Africa's legacy of discrimination. It further entails:**

- Advancing an intellectual culture of critical reflection about both academic and public matters of concern and openness to difference based on human dignity.
- Accelerating transformation of academic staff through the hiring, support and promotion of black South Africans, women, disabled and gender non-conforming academics, particularly seeking out scholars who advance subaltern, subjugated and indigenous knowledges within their fields, especially in cases where currently employed academics do not have sufficient training in those areas.
- Reviewing and redefining the identity of the university, including its dominant subjectivities, its historically entrenched narratives and ways of doing, the deeply held stereotypes concerning which knowledges and voices count, and the devaluations of bodies, ideas and memories cloaked in 'culture', 'standards' or 'tradition'. This extends to the practices and policies of the university, for example, institutional planning and operating procedures, graduation, language, staff appointment and promotion criteria, and performance management.
- Dismantling institutional hierarchies and reviewing organisational processes and practices to enable collegiality, dialogue and democracy at all levels of the university. This includes problematising and resisting corporatist and managerialist imperatives, as these silence academics outside of official structures and stifle on-going reflection on and transformation of curricula, institutional culture and the academic space.
- Interrogating and reimagining spaces and symbols to situate the university within its historical, cultural and global landscapes. Architecture and iconographies (names, insignia, statues, buildings, portraits) in the university space should resonate with a diversified student, staff and community population.

### **C. SELF-REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR FACULTIES**

- Evaluate the current curriculum offered in your faculty in relation to, but not limited to, the four drivers listed above. You may wish to pay attention to areas where good progress has been made in transforming the curriculum as well as any limitations, gaps and shortcomings in the curriculum in its present form.
- How would you describe the challenges and limitations faced in your faculty in transforming the curriculum in light of, but not limited to, the four drivers above? What are the blind spots in your disciplines? You may wish to consider issues pertaining to the nature of specific disciplines, the influence of professional bodies, and practical issues relating to resources and the demands of the world of work. How could curriculum transformation, with particular emphasis on the context of learning, epistemological diversity, renewal of classroom practices, and social justice, be approached in your faculty and related disciplines within it?
- Outline fully the steps you will take as a faculty and as departments to address the imperatives of curriculum transformation, as per this document. Reflect on the possible social attributes, knowledge, and competencies that a graduate of your faculty should possess. How would a graduate trained at UP differ from one trained in other locations and contexts?
- Please include an overall plan in this regard, accompanied by a clear timeline, where possible, of short-term, medium-term and long-term priorities. Teaching and learning committees should lead this process.