Afrikaans varsities perpetuate

The use of a language that bars the majority of students is indefensible

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In the past two weeks, we have seen protests erupt at former Afrikaans-only universities, specifically at the University of Pretoria and the University of the Free State.

The reasons for the protests were many and included workers’ wages, accommodation, fees and the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction.

At Stellenbosch University, a court case between AfriForum and the university was settled out of court last month and seemed to involve a reversal from the position of making English the primary medium of instruction at the university and instead giving English and Afrikaans equal status.

For too long the issue of language in education has been dominated by ideological viewpoints that have little appreciation for, or understanding of, the empirical reality in South Africa. Of course, language is inherently political – dealing as it does with issues of power, culture and identity – but those promoting or opposing a particular view need to show how those views square up with the linguistic, historical and socioeconomic context that we find ourselves in.

Our aim here is to put some empirical evidence on the table so that we can move away from the anecdotes and ideologies that are currently driving policy and public perception.

For more than 50 years, the apartheid government nurtured and resourced white-only schools and universities – both English and Afrikaans – while systematically under-resourcing institutions serving black students.

At the height of apartheid, the government allocated the same amount of resources to one white pupil as it did to 10 black pupils. Even at the end of apartheid, the average white child was receiving three-and-a-half times as many resources from the government as the average black child in one of the homelands.

This legacy lives on in the post-apartheid period with the former model C schools continuing to be well resourced as a result of the inertia of institutional functionality and the ongoing investment by parents (of all races) who can afford fees, bequests and donations. The same can be said for former white-only universities.

At universities, the three major barriers preventing black students from accessing high-quality institutions are fees, language and weak academic results (from attending dysfunctional schools). The evidence of financial exclusion and financial inaccessibility is now well known. A research note published by our colleagues earlier this year showed that the cost of a BA degree at Stellenbosch increased 30% between 2006 and 2015 and now requires 44% of average adult income.

But there is far less evidence on the table about how many students are excluded from Stellenbosch because of language.

Of those students who qualified with a bachelor’s pass in matric 2014, every single student in the country took either English home language or English second language. In contrast, 61% of matriculants who qualified with a bachelor’s pass did not take any Afrikaans subjects, either as a home language or a second language.

If one looks at black African students only, then 86% took no Afrikaans at all. It is reasonable to assume that 86% of black African students who qualify to go to university understand no Afrikaans at all.

How then are these students meant to understand some of their university subjects in Afrikaans if they are accepted at Stellenbosch University?

Frequently these students are told, “if you don’t speak Afrikaans then go to one of the English universities”, as if there were an abundance of high-functioning English universities.

There are only a limited number of first-choice universities, and Stellenbosch is one of them. Under apartheid, Stellenbosch, like its English white-only counterparts, was heavily resourced for 50 years and cannot now be claimed by only one group. Stellenbosch has some of the best facilities and faculties in the country and should be available to all students, not only those who understand Afrikaans.

It is an uncomfortable truth that not all South Africa’s 26 universities were born equal or are equal today – much like the born-frees. In the recent QS university rankings, Stellenbosch was ranked the second-best university in South Africa (after the University of Cape Town). In contrast, over the past five years, three universities were placed under administration because of gross maladministration and bankruptcy.

Of course the QS rankings (like any rankings) are always dodgy, but Stellenbosch remains in the top five universities in the country irrespective of the measure you choose, such as National Research Foundation-rated professors, research output, PhD production and students’ first choice.

At Stellenbosch, there are still dual-medium English and Afrikaans classes, in which lecturers switch between the two languages while they teach, essentially excluding (or confusing) those students who do not understand Afrikaans. In some courses, there are also interpretation services. (Importantly, this is usually from Afrikaans to English, not the other way around).

A common thread of student protests at Stellenbosch has been that the interpretation services, referred to as ghost whisperers, are inadequate, frustrating and create second-class students in the lecture hall.