It is of great concern that the Mail & Guardian's education section, which last week dealt with the language issue at universities, is promoting English only and ignored opposing views.

I want to respond chiefly to the article by Nic Spaull and Debra Shepherd (“Afrikaans varsities perpetuate racial divisions”, March 4), because they are both economists and from experience I know that language issues usually do not receive much attention from economists.

Spaull and Shepherd want to restrict their discussion to empirical reality because “ideological viewpoints ... have little appreciation for, or understanding of, empirical reality”. This is a rather ingenious move, because it creates the impression that empirical facts form the basis of their argument and discredit opposing views as merely ideological. If you propose an empirical approach and strive to be objective, it is imperative that all the facts are taken into account, and not a selective few. The facts should obviously also be correct.

An important question: Why do Spaull and Shepherd focus on black African students only and ignore coloured students?

In 1996 South Africa adopted a new Constitution that, inter alia, emphasises the importance of multilingualism.

There are currently three universities in the Western Cape, of which two (the universities of Cape Town and the Western Cape) use English as the medium of instruction, whereas Stellenbosch uses English at postgraduate level and Afrikaans and English at undergraduate level.

If we want to restrict ourselves to facts, the language demography of the Western Cape could serve as a point of departure. According to the 2011 census, about 2.8-million individuals in the province use Afrikaans as first language, 1.4-million use isiXhosa and 1.1-million use English. Given these figures, one should not be phasing out Afrikaans but rather adding isiXhosa at one of the three universities in the Western Cape.

Internationally, many smaller languages face extinction (take Irish as an example) and if no action is taken to promote them, they may eventually die. In the same way that we protect endangered species, we should also endeavour to protect languages, because they are national assets and part of our cultural heritage.

Economists often emphasise the direct cost of multilingualism but tend to ignore its social benefits, which are more difficult to quantify. Multilingualism could empower individuals, improve their self-conception and contribute to economic progress.

If multilingualism is important to South Africa — and, according to the Constitution, it is — we must actively promote it. If decolonisation is high on the agenda, the imperial language should not be promoted further at the expense of our local languages. — Professor Theo van der Merwe, department of economics, Unisa.