

Put Africa back in our universities

Decolonising and reimagining institutions is not a mere theory or idealism but a responsibility

COMMENT

Wim de Villiers

It is important for us to engage with calls to “decolonise” and “Africanise” South African higher education because these address the very place and role of university in our society today.

What does the decolonising project entail? Looking at the literature, a crucial element is putting Africa at the centre of knowledge production, not at the periphery, as has been done for too long.

A prominent voice in the debate, Achille Mbembe, rightly remarks that, “with the advent of democracy and the new constitutional state, there are no longer settlers and natives. There are only citizens.”

Decolonising is our joint project as citizens, active citizens — individuals and institutions showing initiative and taking responsibility for dealing with crucial matters.

The first part of decolonising seems straightforward — it is about “seeing ourselves clearly” as Africans, as Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong’o puts it. That means rejecting the notion of Africa as a mere extension of the West, that the Western intellectual tradition is the only valid paradigm, that African thinkers cannot be thought leaders, that we have to mimic Europe or North America.

That is why I say to colleagues and students at Stellenbosch University that we should not aspire to be an Oxford or a Harvard “of the South”. Rather, we should be rooted in Africa and global in reach.

Being authentically African does not mean closing the door on the so-called Western model of knowledge. But it does mean placing Africa at the centre of our thoughts, words and deeds. We have to acknowledge the perspectives of our immediate environment and use them to enrich our insights and outputs. It is not either/or, one or the other, but and/and, using all models and perspectives.

That brings us to the more difficult bit, the second part of decolonising — giving substance to the alternative. What is it that we want to be as Africans? What does the new African university look like? What does it mean to be rooted in Africa? How do we properly recognise the contribution of African intellectuals and institutions to world knowledge?

Part of the answer is being honest with ourselves. For instance, to conceive of Stellenbosch University as an African university means we have to acknowledge our Western roots as well. And it also means we have to acknowledge our role in the history of racial exclusion in our country.

I am glad to say we have been doing that, ever since Stellenbosch University formally said it “acknowledges its contribution to the injustices of the past, and therefore commits itself to appropriate redress and development initiatives” in a strategic framework adopted in 2000.

Since then, our desire to transcend the divisions of the past has crystallised in our institutional intent to become more “inclusive, innovative



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and future-focused”.

More inclusive by broadening access to this public university serving the public good; more innovative by pursuing excellence as a national asset, contributing to human development with quality education and cutting-edge research; more future-focused by having an effect on society, here in our local community, in the rest of our country and further afield.

To be rooted in Africa means to be firmly connected to our continent and bearing fruit for the benefit of its people. Unisa academic Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni says “the African university must be distinguishable by its innovative fields of study and research agendas that are directly informed by the desire to solve pressing African problems and challenges”.

There is a perception that Stellenbosch is just a little piece of

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Europe in Africa, yet our university has an African Doctoral Academy as well as graduate schools in different faculties taking in students from all over Africa and producing record numbers of PhD graduates for the continent. This is how Stellenbosch University is helping to stem the African brain drain.

At the last count, Stellenbosch University had 764 projects with partners in 43 other African countries. This includes joint research and exchange programmes. About 14% of our students are international, with 56% of them coming from other African countries. This is how we are helping to develop the next generation of professionals in a variety of fields required to turn economic growth into social development.

I am not saying Stellenbosch University has arrived, that we are already the new African university we want to be. I am saying that part of “seeing ourselves clearly” means recognising we have made a good start. Much remains to be done. Decolonising the curriculum means including more African thinkers. We have embarked on curriculum renewal and we are getting input from both staff and students.

Another aspect requiring attention is our institutional culture. Mbembe says we need to create “conditions that will allow black staff and students to say of the university: ‘This is my home. I am not an outsider here. I do not have to beg or to apologise to be here. I belong here.’” I cannot agree more. Stellenbosch University certainly needs to be a welcoming home to all, and in getting there we have to ask some difficult questions and confront hard realities.

We are working on making our student body more diverse. A new admissions policy was passed by our council recently, to take effect from March 1, when the application period for 2018 commences. The revised policy expands Stellenbosch University’s admission criteria beyond applicants’ academic achievement and racial classification to include their socioeconomic status.

The fundamental objective is to maintain the university’s culture of academic excellence by attracting the best applicants and facilitating the transformation of Stellenbosch so that it has a more representative student body. The university’s reputation as a centre of excellence depends on attracting and maintaining a diverse student body, because this enriches the learning environment.

We are mindful of the multifaceted and complex nature of disadvantage in South Africa. For this reason, Stellenbosch recognises the need to reserve places for socioeconomically disadvantaged students, regardless of racial classification, who achieve the minimum requirements for a chosen course of study, but would not otherwise be admitted.

The policy, along with the targets set each year, will be adapted to reflect the progress made at the university and in our society with eradicating the effects of historical racial divisions. The long-term objective of the policy is to contribute to a non-racial and more equal society that will no longer require race- and class-based redress.

Shaping our universities to be more responsive to the needs of our time and environment is a responsibility we should not shy away from. We should raise the difficult issues. But we should always do so constructively. If we want to create a community of social justice and human dignity, then that is how we should also conduct ourselves in the open conversation about these issues.

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