

## THE CONVERSATION

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# What “decolonised education” should and shouldn’t mean

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The demand for “decolonised education” may jeopardise research and learning in South Africa. Nic Bothma/EPA

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University students in very different countries – South Africa, England and the US – argue that it’s time to decolonise higher education. What does this mean? What would acquiescing to the students’ push mean for research, science and academic collaboration?

First it’s necessary to understand those two words: “decolonisation” and “education”. The Cambridge dictionary calls decolonisation “the process in which a country that was previously a colony controlled by another country becomes politically independent”.

“Education”, meanwhile, is what the Oxford dictionary calls “the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction, especially at a school or university”.

Placed together, then, the decolonisation of education means that a nation must become independent with regards to the acquisition of knowledge skills, values, beliefs and habits. This makes a lot of sense. It’s surely what any nation should be doing. But I would argue that the term is being badly misinterpreted among South African students. As one student at the University of Cape Town has explained it:

*For decolonised education to be introduced, the existing system must be overthrown and the people it’s supposed to serve must define it for themselves.*

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This is not an isolated view espoused by an individual.

These are very dangerous ideas. What's really important is that South African teachers, lecturers and professors must develop curricula that build on the best knowledge skills, values, beliefs and habits from around the world. These cannot be limited to one country nor one continent – be it Africa or Europe.

And while it may surprise many calling for “decolonised education”, South Africa's universities are not ivory towers: they are hotbeds of research solutions for the nation, drawing on local and global theories, thinkers and science. Much of this work could be undone if students push their thinking about “decolonised education” into practice.

### **Good science transcends geography**

Most of the research done at South Africa's universities and by its research councils focus on South African and African questions. The National Research Foundation (NRF) which funds most of the active university researchers in the country has as its object of foundation:

*...to support and promote research through funding, human resource development and the provision of the necessary research facilities in order to facilitate the creation of knowledge, innovation and development in all fields of science and technology, including indigenous knowledge and thereby to contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of all the people of the Republic.*

The first six centres of excellence funded by the country's Department of Science and Technology focused on tuberculosis, biodiversity, invasion biology, tree health, catalysis and strong material. These are all important areas of research for South Africa. Likewise, the Square Kilometre Array is a project which, while funded nationally and internationally, will result in the training of a generation of new knowledge workers – young scientists and engineers. Many of these will be South African and benefit the local economy hugely.

Most of the successful researchers in South Africa I know are dependent on research funding from a local industry. This research helps South African industries to solve problems and is an essential part of their success. These industries employ the citizens of South Africa.

My own research programme is a good example. I collaborate nationally and internationally. I use cutting edge technology and the most recent knowledge from top science journals to study organisms which are of local relevance. I sequenced the first fungal genome in Africa by Africans. I could have done this by outsourcing to technology platforms off the continent, but I didn't.

As a consequence the University of Pretoria, where I hold a South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) position has an internationally competitive research programme on genomics. Our focus is on locally important organisms, but we use the best techniques and methods developed

internationally to achieve our research goals. The field is a fast moving one and there are new developments published everyday. We need to keep up with what's happening internationally but also be publishing our own research in the international arena.

Our work in the Forestry and Agricultural Biotechnology Institute isn't unique. Thousands of researchers around South Africa are using a combination of local skills, local knowledge, global knowledge and technology from different worlds, whether in Africa or elsewhere. It's only by "standing on the shoulders of giants" that, as 12th century theologian John of Salisbury put it, "We can see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature".

### **Balance is crucial**

The risk of adopting student protesters' stance on "decolonising education" is that South Africa rejects all the advances of modern medicine, education and science that originated elsewhere in the world.

This would, for example, mean rejecting the use of penicillin, the yellow fever vaccination and HIV ART drugs. None of these were developed in Africa.

If we isolate ourselves, knowledge wise, South Africa's own amazing advances would be lost to the rest of the world. Other countries are happy to benefit from our discoveries. We should continue to benefit from their discoveries, too.

I'm not suggesting that South African students shouldn't learn about their own country, continent and the remarkable work that's being done by African researchers for African nations. But they should also be learning about advances and theories developed in the rest of the world.

This is already happening in places: Life Science departments at the University of Pretoria, for instance, boasts a curriculum that performs this epistemological balancing act. Students use the best textbooks available. The information in these books is then supplemented with local knowledge and context. Students are taught about DNA and heredity, which is international, but then they learn about the biodiversity of African plants, birds and mammals.

They learn about the organisms that are models internationally for the study of genetics – Yeast, *Drosophila*, *Neurospora* and *Arabidopsis*; they also learn about the research that's being done at the university and elsewhere in South Africa to solve local problems.

The challenge for tertiary educations in South Africa is to ensure that the curriculum presented is based on international best practice. We cannot limit the knowledge base of South Africa's next generations to only regional knowledge and culture. This would be tantamount to "throwing the baby out with the bathwater". We must however, be locally relevant and celebrate the research and researchers in South Africa.

My hope for South Africa is that in some cases we will lead internationally that "best practice"; in some cases we already do.



Knowledge   Research funding   Higher education   Indigenous knowledge   South African universities   Decolonisation  
African science