



## **Transforming Ivory Towers to Ebony Towers: Lessons for South Africa's Curriculum Transformation in the Humanities from Africa and African-American Studies**

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## 1. Introduction

**South Africa's black majority government that came into power in 1994 viewed transforming the colonial and apartheid-inherited higher education sector as critical to the country's democratisation and development efforts.**

The real concerns of the new government revolved around the need to provide access to education for the underprivileged black majority, reverse the deep racial and gender imbalances, and craft a knowledge project that would be relevant to a democratic South Africa. President Nelson Mandela instituted a National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) in 1995 which developed a framework for coordinating South Africa's national education system. The right to access quality education is encapsulated in the South African Constitution of 1996, the Green Paper on Higher Education of 1996, and the Education White Paper 3 of 1997. The need for increased access to South Africa's 21 institutions of higher learning, and questions about social redress for the majority of poor black students are further addressed through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and in the National Plan for Higher Education of 2001.

Other important issues addressed in these policies and initiatives include: the need to resolve the under-funding of the humanities, the arts, and the social sciences; correcting the funding imbalances between historically white and historically black institutions; safeguarding African language studies; as well as the need for South Africa's Department of Education to develop strategies for transforming the sector.

Challenges around accessibility and inclusivity continue in the education sector. About 80 percent of 18 to 24-year olds – mostly black South Africans – remain outside the university system. Yet, education is a public good, and must thus be funded as such. In December 2017, then South African president, Jacob Zuma, announced a fee-free higher education policy that would subsidise students from poor and working class backgrounds from 2018. The South African government has since allocated an additional R57 billion to fund free education for the poorest learners on a means-tested sliding scale. The new system has changed from a student loan programme to a bursary scheme.

South Africa's universities, however, continue to be embedded in Eurocentric epistemologies. Humanities curricula remain largely untransformed and detached from the lived experiences of most South Africans 25 years into the post-apartheid era. The institutional cultures at the historically white universities such as the University of Cape Town (UCT), Witwatersrand, Rhodes, Pretoria, and Stellenbosch remain predominantly Eurocentric. Black academics also continue to be under-represented and to feel alienated within these universities.

In a bid to contribute to initiatives to transform South Africa's humanities curriculum, the University of Johannesburg's (UJ) Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPATC) in South Africa, hosted a two-day conference, on 18 and 19 August 2018, titled "Transforming Ivory Towers to Ebony Towers: Lessons for South Africa's Curriculum Transformation in the Humanities from Africa and African-American Studies". The meeting assessed key challenges in transforming South Africa's humanities curriculum, drawing lessons from post-colonial decolonisation processes in Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Kenya, and Ghana, as well as African-American Studies. About 225 students, academics, educationists, civil society, diplomats, and media representatives attended the conference. This report is based on discussions at the meeting, as well as on the conference concept paper.

“ Humanities curricula remain largely untransformed and detached from the lived experiences of most South Africans 25 years into the post-apartheid era.”



THE EXTERIOR OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING BUILDING IN TSHWANE, SOUTH AFRICA.

IMAGE SOURCE - Google Maps  
LINK - <https://www.google.com/maps>

## 2. Key Challenges in Transforming South Africa's Higher Education Sector

The challenges of transforming South Africa's higher education sector are embedded in a historical context of colonialism and apartheid. The education policies instituted in the post-apartheid era thus sought to prioritise transforming the education system to include the experiences and needs of South Africa's black majority. The country's transformation debates centred around issues of massification, race, gender, language, elite privilege, and access to educational opportunities.

The South African government sought to improve the academic administration and capacity at historically black universities (HBUs) such as Fort Hare, Limpopo, Walter Sisulu, Venda, and Zululand. However, the leadership that emerged from these institutions often failed to push for systematic institutional transformation. Historically, these black universities have also confronted greater challenges than historically white universities in terms of funding, infrastructure, research, and teaching. While UCT's recurrent expenditure was R 2.9 billion in 2016, University of Limpopo's was R1.5 billion in the same year.

The unequal distribution of funding across South Africa's 21 institutions of higher learning has failed to take into account the country's historical context, as well as its widespread political and socio-economic divisions. The 2013 report of the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Funding of Universities noted that historically black universities still had disproportionately larger numbers of poor black students. Historically black institutions therefore need substantial institutional development support and improved governance to assist their transformation efforts. While policies on transforming the higher education sector embrace the fundamental values of freedom, human rights, human dignity, the right to access, and the need to achieve equitable resource distribution; many challenges remain.

Students have led efforts to transform South Africa's humanities curriculum. This can be traced to protests by black youths in the 1970s and 1980s against the apartheid-era Bantu education system. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 was based on a system of racial segregation which regarded blacks as inferior and only deserving of limited and basic knowledge.

The 2015 to 2017 "Rhodes Must Fall" student movement brought to light the glaring failures around transforming South Africa's broader education system; the persistent institutionalised racism within many of the country's universities; as well as untransformed humanities curricula across these institutions. The protests began at the University of Cape Town, and spread to Wits, Rhodes, and other universities across South Africa. Students



“ The 2015 to 2017 “Rhodes Must Fall” student movement brought to light the glaring failures around transforming South Africa’s broader education system. ”

STUDENTS ATTACK THE STATUE OF CECIL JOHN RHODES AS IT IS REMOVED FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN IN SOUTH AFRICA IN APRIL 2015.

IMAGE SOURCE - BBC Newsbeat  
LINK - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/35443534/the-not-so-lucky-statues>

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highlighted critical issues of access, renaming colonial buildings, support for disadvantaged black students, and being able to stay in student accommodation during vacation periods. At Rhodes University, humanities students led the initial protests, challenging their courses as disproportionately reliant on Western knowledge and thought.

The leadership at many South African universities were viewed as unsupportive of the student movement, and accused of paying lip-service to transformation agendas. Students complained that management often failed to recognise the concerns of students. They also noted that the responses of the leadership of universities to their protests prioritised the securocratisation of university campuses, often based on claims about the need to safeguard university property and infrastructure. Such securocratisation of campuses was sometimes accompanied by police brutality, arrests, hospitalisation, court cases, rape incidences, and the harsh treatment of students. An estimated R1 billion of damages was, however, recorded during university unrest on various campuses.

Deep division, marginalisation, and exclusion on the basis of gender has also characterised much of South Africa's colonial and apartheid past. The government's Education White Paper of 1997 addressed questions around gender, highlighting the need for increased and broader participation to allow greater access and opportunities for more women to enter the higher education sector. A 2018 report by South Africa's Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) noted an increase in the enrolment of female students from 43 percent in 1993 to 58 percent in 2016. This increase was, however, largely attributable to greater female student enrolment (65.9 percent) in distance learning courses, leaving the participation of women in residential universities at about 54 percent.

Another persistent challenge has been the failure to produce a new generation of black South African female academics. According to a DHET report of 2015, about 61 percent of women at South African universities occupied administrative positions, while 39 percent were employed as academic staff. Women are also poorly represented in teaching and research at many South African universities, most notably at Mpumalanga (33 percent), Venda (35 percent), and Limpopo (35 percent). Furthermore, there is often a neglect in academic discourse and theory development at South African universities of experiences central to the lives of South African women.

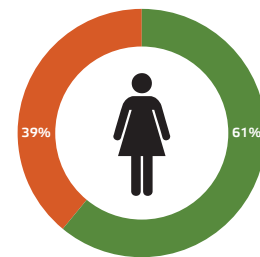
### 3. Lessons from Africa

After independence, African countries embarked on a transformation project as part of their national development efforts. From the post-independence era in the 1950s and the 1960s, scholars in countries such as Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Kenya, and Ghana began to transform Western narratives about the continent, as well as embedded Eurocentric curricula.

The major issues around decolonisation included: the need to address the relevance of Western knowledge systems, and to craft strategies and policies to transform post-independence education sectors. The development and recognition of African languages was another important aspect in transforming humanities curricula.

Some universities created centres of excellence such as the Ibadan School of History in Nigeria, the Dakar School of Culture in Senegal, and the Dar es Salaam School of Political Economy in Tanzania.

“Another persistent challenge has been the failure to produce a new generation of black South African female academics.”



ABOUT 61 PERCENT OF WOMEN AT SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES OCCUPIED ADMINISTRATIVE POSITIONS, WHILE 39 PERCENT WERE EMPLOYED AS ACADEMIC STAFF.

SOURCE - South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) 2015 Report



“ The Dakar School of Culture at the University of Dakar was a forerunner of the Afrocentric approach.”

THE EXTERIOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF DAKAR LIBRARY BUILDING IN DAKAR, SENEGAL.

IMAGE SOURCE - KCCT  
LINK - <http://www.kcct.com/university-cheikh/>

The Ibadan School of History emerged in the 1950s focusing on writing nationalist historiography. Members of the School included Kenneth Dike, Ade Ajayi, and Obaro Ikime. They used oral sources to write Africa's pre-colonial and colonial history from an African perspective, and produced much of the textbooks on Nigerian history at primary, secondary, and university levels. Nigerian critic, Peter Ekeh, however, argued that this history was too empiricist, not theoretical enough, and tended to promote elitist views.

Led by Senegal's Cheikh Anta Diop, the Dakar School of Culture was established at the University of Dakar in the 1950s. The School was a forerunner of the Afrocentric approach that later became part of African-American and Africology studies in the United States (US) by the 1980s, led by scholars like Molefi Asante and Leonard Jeffries. Diop challenged what he regarded as the cultural biases in Western scholarship about Africa. Similar to the Ibadan School, scholars such as Boubacar Barry and Théophile Obenga used oral sources to transform francophone Africa's history curricula. The Dakar School further sought to reverse the neglect of African languages. Cheikh Anta Diop's linguistic research drew strong connections between Pharaonic Egyptian languages and Senegal's Wolof, though critics challenged his approach as flawed.

Emerging in 1964, the Dar es Salaam School of Political Economy relied on Marxist ideological tools to build a nationalist historiography. One of its pioneers, Guyanese scholar-activist, Walter Rodney, traced the roots of Africa's under-development and marginalisation to the Western-dominated global capitalist system which he regarded as exploitative. Others like A.J. Temu and J.N. Kimambo sought to build a scholarship that would transform the curriculum through their research on indigenous economic production, class, social formation, and the impact of capitalism on Tanzania and Kenya. Critics like Kenyan's Ali Mazrui, however, complained that the Dar School lacked intellectual diversity, while others noted that its work focused disproportionately on African populations rather than on colonial structures.

In 1968, three emerging scholars at the University of Nairobi's Department of English – Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Henry Owuor-Anyumba, and Taban Lo Liyong – collectively transformed the English literature curriculum. These scholars challenged the Eurocentric syllabus that was being taught, arguing that just adding literature in English from other parts of the world was insufficient. They instead pushed to place Africa at the centre of reconceptualising a new humanities curriculum, transforming curricula across East Africa in the process.

Ghana's transformation project began in the 1950s under the government of Kwame Nkrumah, and addressed concerns around access, quality, inclusivity, and structure. The 1951 Accelerated Education Plan was the first post-independence education policy that sought to provide access to basic education for all school-going children. A free primary education policy was implemented a year later. One of the key focus areas for transformation also centred around developing the country's pre-university education. Important educational reforms further established an Islamic Education Unit in 1987 to introduce an integrated curriculum for both secular and religious education for teaching and learning at the country's Islamic schools.

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Finally, the Heinemann writers' series emerged in 1962. Writers included Chinua Achebe, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Wole Soyinka, Nadine Gordimer, Tayeb Salih, Ousmane Sembène, and others. The series produced 273 books, and essentially became Africa's literary canon. Although some critics have complained about its reliance on a Western publisher and for writing in a colonial language, this initiative made notable contributions to transforming humanities curricula across Africa. The series addressed issues around accessibility; production of low-cost paperbacks in affordable editions for African students; republishing and reprinting classic texts and titles; translating textbooks by African writers from French into English; producing textbooks for schools; and focusing international attention on the diversity of African literature.

#### 4. Lessons from African-American Studies

America's higher education sector was founded on a system based on slavery, racism, and the oppression of black people. This system excluded the majority of America's 12 percent black population. The post-civil rights era, from the 1950s, opened up opportunities for transformation and the possibilities for the country's black population to begin to access higher education in the US.

African-American students entered what were previously white institutions. Many alienated black students pushed for the establishment of African-American Studies departments from the 1960s as part of the struggle for the representation of their experiences and cultures in humanities curricula. African-American Studies thus prioritised research and the writing of the histories and cultures of African-American people.

Students in the US have championed the struggles against racism and the persistent marginalisation of black people. The 2015 "Black Lives Matter" civil rights protest movement spread to college campuses across America, particularly universities such as Missouri and Yale. It inspired students to protest against violence towards black citizens, as well as against racial discrimination more broadly.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) such as Spelman and Morehouse colleges, Howard, and Hampton, emerged in the 1800s. These institutions evolved from the deep-rooted struggles of black people for freedom and equality. They played an important role in sustaining black culture and providing quality education to black professionals who sought to improve the socio-economic conditions of populations in poor black communities.



“Historically Black Colleges and Universities played an important role in sustaining black culture and providing quality education to black professionals.”

STUDENTS ON THE OVAL AT SPELMAN COLLEGE IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA, US.

IMAGE SOURCE - UNCF  
LINK - <https://www.uncf.org/member-colleges/spelman-college>

Two schools of thought in the US provide potential lessons for South Africa's curriculum transformation efforts: the Atlanta School of Sociology of the 1890s, and the Howard School of International Affairs of the 1930s and 1940s.

Pioneered by Richard Wright and W.E.B. Du Bois, the Atlanta School championed research on poor black communities. Du Bois's 1899 *The Philadelphia Negro* stood out as a pioneering work that heralded the birth of modern sociology. The Atlanta School applied rigorous research methods of social science to collect data in order to disprove racist claims of white social scientists about black inferiority.

Scholars such as Alain Locke, Merze Tate, Ralph Bunche, and Eric Williams established the Howard School. They challenged mainstream Western analyses of empire and race in the study of international relations. The Howard School further pushed for the inclusion of global and local perspectives in the study of world politics.

Gender studies also constituted an important aspect in decolonising America's education system. By the late 1970s, strong black feminist scholars such as Alice Walker, Angela Davis, and Bell Hooks championed the establishment of Black Feminist Studies, exposing the marginalisation of the voices and experiences of black women in mainstream African-American Studies.

## 5. The Challenges of Creating New Pan-African "Schools"

The schools of thought in both Africa and African-American Studies had largely disappeared by the late 1970s, as new intellectual ideas took hold, and as new challenges arose. In the African context, the enforced cuts in higher education linked to the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the 1980s – combined with widespread university closures, strikes, and a weakening of the autonomy of universities – led to a mass exodus of many of the best African academics to the US and other parts of the West. These lessons are particularly relevant to South Africa in continuing to invest in higher education, maintaining the autonomy of universities, and ensuring that these institutions recognise and borrow from South Africa's geographical location in Africa.



“ The schools of thought in both Africa and African-American Studies had largely disappeared by the late 1970s, as new intellectual ideas took hold. ”

THE ENTRANCE TO THE UNIVERSITY OF FORT HARE IN ALICE, EASTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA.

IMAGE SOURCE - Time Live  
LINK - <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2018-08-13-academic-studies-resume-at-fort-hare-university-after-eight-week-strike/>