

Policy Brief

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# Transforming South Africa's Higher Education Curricula

**IPATC**  
INSTITUTE FOR PAN-AFRICAN  
THOUGHT AND CONVERSATION



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# 1

## Introduction

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As South Africa celebrates its 30 years of democracy, it becomes imperative to engage the quest for the transformation of the country's humanities curricula. Despite the abolition of the apartheid regime in 1994 and the promotion of transformation efforts in its higher education system, university curricula remain largely unchanged, thereby reflecting Western dominance. National policies and institutional efforts aimed at curriculum reform, such as the 1995 National Commission on Higher Education, the 1996 Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation, and the 1997 White Paper, have not achieved significant transformation. Indeed, efforts towards elevating the quality of education have persisted without adequately addressing the need for a curriculum that embraces inclusivity and diversity.

Universities, established during colonial and apartheid eras, have functioned more as extensions of Western influence rather than centers of African teaching and learning. As a result, post-colonial African universities have retained their Eurocentric curricula, with limited success in adopting African-driven epistemologies. This is despite previous efforts by scholars like Kenneth Dike from the Ibadan School of History, including those associated with the Dar es Salaam School of Political Economy in Tanzania and the Dakar School of Culture in Senegal. The infusion of Western knowledge and technology into Africa has further reinforced Eurocentric systems, resulting in its status as a recipient of Western ideologies at the expense of its cultural values and ways of knowing. This trend has generated misconceptions regarding 'black inferiority' and a deep-seated dependency on Western economic, political, and educational models. Notable critiques, like Claude Ake's book, *Social Science as Imperialism*, highlight the need for Africa to retract from this dependency and reclaim its knowledge systems. However, despite efforts, South Africa's attempts to create an independent educational framework have struggled, underscoring the ongoing challenge of decolonising education on the continent.

The #FeesMustFall movement, which started in October 2015, emerged as a pivotal student-led protest in South Africa, becoming the most significant demonstration since the 1976 Soweto uprising. Initially focusing on the abolition of tuition fees, it quickly evolved into a broader call for addressing the deep-seated issues of Eurocentric dominance, Western hegemonic models in academia, and systemic racism within higher education. A notable achievement of the movement was the removal of the Cecil John Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town, which represented a symbol of British imperialism. The movement's intensity exposed the unpreparedness of the national security apparatus and the non-responsiveness of university and government institutions, which led to the widespread destruction of property and disruption in the academic programmes, further highlighting the urgent need for substantive reform in South Africa's higher education system.

# 2

## Contexts

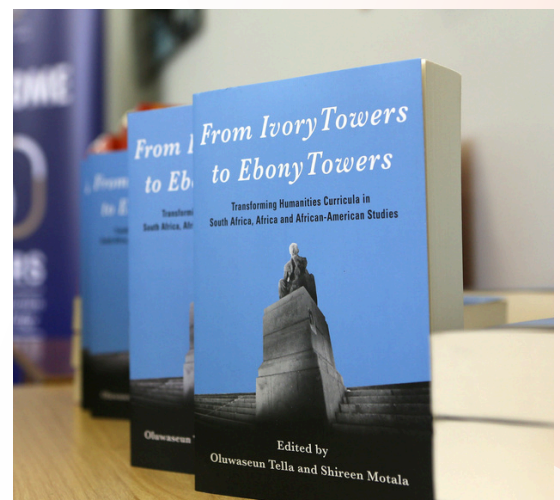
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In response to the #FeesMustFall movement and the demand for curriculum transformation in South African Universities, the Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPATC) at the University

of Johannesburg, supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, launched a three-year project aimed at influencing higher education policy and curriculum transformation in South Africa. The project focused on five key objectives: transforming the humanities curriculum, impacting policy-making processes, educating key educational stakeholders, incorporating the experiences of student activists into curriculum reform, and broadening public understanding of higher education transformation through African and African American perspectives. The project has realised its objectives through diverse initiatives such as hosting a significant conference on curriculum transformation and publishing policy briefs and newspaper articles, as well as a comprehensive 24-chapter volume titled "From Ivory Towers to Ebony Towers: Transforming Humanities Curricula in South Africa, Africa and African-American Studies" (edited by Oluwaseun Tella and Shireen Motala), which was used for teaching and learning. These efforts have facilitated a reevaluation of the humanities curriculum, deepened Pan-African perspectives and fostered collaboration between policy practitioners, university administrators, staff, and students towards curriculum transformation

This policy brief emerges from the physical launches of the book in partnership with the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in Pretoria, and in four South African universities in 2022 namely: the African Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS) at the University of Witwatersrand; The University of Western Cape (UWC), in collaboration with the Centre for Humanities Research at the UWC; Faculty of Humanities at the North-West University (NWU), Potchefstroom; and Department of Cultural and Political Studies at the University of Limpopo (UL). It leverages insights from the book to explore transformation lessons from six African countries: Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, and Ghana, including African-American studies, thus situating South Africa's transformation efforts within historical and contemporary contexts. The comparison between African-American studies and historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the US shed light on the similarities and challenges both systems face in their transformation journeys.

The discussions during the book launches addressed vital aspects of South Africa's path towards transforming its education sector, offering vital perspectives. The identifiable themes underscore the layered and complex debates surrounding the transformation agenda and the need for continued engagement and action. In totality, the various policy dialogues and book launches from 2020-2022 attracted 535 participants – 372 online and 163 physical attendees. They comprised diverse stakeholders from South Africa, other African countries and the US, including students, academics, faculty members from South African universities, contributors to the edited book, policy practitioners, officials of DHET and members from research councils.



**DISPLAY OF THE BOOK TITLED " FROM IVORY TOWERS TO EBONY TOWERS" AT A LAUNCH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN CAPE IN CAPETOWN , SOUTH AFRICA.**

Source: IPATC

### 3 The Sites of Struggle: The South African University

The historical context of higher education in South Africa reveals a landscape characterised by the resilience of colonial and apartheid legacies, making transformative efforts particularly challenging. Institutions of learning like the Ibadan School of History, Dar es Salaam School of African History, and the Dakar School of Culture, along with African-American initiatives such as the Atlanta School of Sociology and the Howard School of International Affairs, have historically contested Western epistemologies. These initial efforts aimed at decolonising African knowledge systems, championed by figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois, encountered significant obstacles due to institutional resistance and the dominance of European narratives. In contemporary South Africa, the higher education sector is still grappling with the remnants of colonialism and apartheid, evidenced by the stark disparities between historically white and black universities, and culminating in the violent #Fees-must-fall movement in the country. The discussions revealed how historically white institutions were established to fulfill the industrial and technical needs of a white-dominated society, whereas Historically Black Universities (HBUs) were designed to perpetuate apartheid's segregational policies, not to be centers of knowledge production for black academic advancement.

“*In contemporary South Africa, the higher education sector is still grappling with the remnants of colonialism and apartheid, evidenced by the stark disparities between historically white and black universities, and culminating in the violent #Fees-must-fall movement in the country.*”

The post-apartheid era has seen attempts to address these issues through initiatives like the National Commission on Higher Education of 1995, aiming to redress past injustices and promote racial and gender equality within universities. Key documents such as the Education White Paper No. 3 of 1997 and the Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997, along with the 2008 Report on transformation and social cohesion, signify efforts towards curriculum transformation and greater inclusivity. Despite these important steps, the structural and institutional challenges persist, with universities continuing to struggle with their historical legacy of segregation and an inadequate response to the contemporary needs of South African society. This ongoing struggle highlights the complexity of fully achieving the desired transformation within the higher education system.



**GROUP PHOTO DURING THE LAUNCH OF THE BOOK AT NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY, IN POTCHEFSTROOM.**

Source: IPATC

## 4

## The Purpose of the University: Marketised Metrics or Pillars of Communities

The role of universities in South Africa has increasingly evolved, shifting from their original purpose towards a more market-driven model that emphasises commercialisation and professionalisation. This transformation has led to students being viewed as “commodities and customers” and the prioritisation of research publication outputs for academics, under the aggressive “publish or perish” ethos. Such changes have impacted funding allocation and perpetuated inequalities between historically white and black universities, exacerbating societal disparities. The discussions reflected a growing awareness and movement towards a transformative, decolonial turn in higher education, emphasising the importance of centering African knowledge and employing indigenous languages and methodologies in knowledge production.



**DR TELLA OLUWASEAN IS THE CO-EDITOR OF THE BOOK AND IN THIS IMAGE HE WAS ADDRESSING THE STUDENTS AND STAFF AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO .**

Source: IPATC

Universities in Africa should respond to their communities more effectively by integrating diverse, global knowledge systems while prioritising African perspectives. This approach would require the adoption of cross-disciplinary and inclusive strategies from other post-colonial contexts in countries like India. This is required for effective reflection of the needs of South Africa's diverse society. Furthermore, at the heart of these transformation efforts was the challenge of decolonising the human mind – a complex process hindered by centuries of colonial influence on thought and knowledge production. The necessity for Africans to critically examine and deconstruct their conditioned perspectives to truly embrace and advance African knowledge production is essential. This introspective journey is crucial for overcoming the deep-seated impacts of Western and Eurocentric ideologies on African identity and psyche, marking a pivotal step towards genuine educational transformation and the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa.

## 5

## The Totalisation Project: Emergence of Black Consciousness and African Humanism

The discourse on the transformation of university education in South Africa is deeply entwined with the necessity for decolonisation, as highlighted by stakeholders during discussions on Africanising the curriculum. However, these conversations often remain at a superficial level, lacking in depth and actionability towards genuine transformation. Thus, the Western totalisation project, through its historical roots in racism, slavery, and colonialism, has profoundly shaped South African epistemologies and ontologies, constraining authentic and autonomous thought processes and identities. The emergence of a ‘new’ black consciousness movement challenges this totalisation, emphasising the alienation caused by whiteness and its pervasive control over various aspects of life, including education. The Extension of University Education Act No. 45 of 1959 serves as a stark reminder of the institutionalisation of racial segregation in higher education, perpetuating the degradation and marginalisation of non-white individuals.

Despite South Africa's democratic advancements, racism persists within higher education, as evidenced by incidents at some universities in the country. This ongoing struggle raised questions regarding the feasibility of decolonising the curriculum within a totalising Western paradigm. There were divergent perspectives on whether to selectively incorporate beneficial Western knowledge or to dismantle the dominant system entirely to achieve true decolonisation. New African humanism scholars advocated for the reclaiming of stolen intellectual contributions and reasserting the value of non-Western societies in global knowledge production. This approach seeks to redefine humanism by integrating new black consciousness and African perspectives, thus challenging the historical and ongoing impacts of racism on identity and thought.

**“ The emergence of a ‘new’ black consciousness movement challenges this totalisation, emphasising the alienation caused by whiteness and its pervasive control over various aspects of life, including education. ”**

As reinforced during the meetings, the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue during the #FeesMustFall movement symbolised a step towards change. However, it underscored the need for a deeper engagement with curriculum transformation and a more comprehensive confrontation of racism and Western totalisation in higher education. It thus becomes important to understand the origins and transmission of racial ideologies from Europe to South Africa. This is crucial for developing a truly deconstructed and decolonised curriculum, reflective of a society striving towards equality and inclusivity.

## 6 Transformation vis a vis De-colonisation

The discourse on higher education transformation and decolonisation in South Africa revealed two pivotal themes: activism as a transformative force and the role of language in decolonisation efforts. Activism, exemplified by the #FeesMustFall movement, has underscored the systemic issues in the decolonisation of the curriculum and highlighted the persistent inequalities in education. Despite its initial noble intentions, the movement faced challenges such as violence, loss of public sympathy, the co-optation of its agenda by political rivalries, and personal ambitions by key student leaders. Nevertheless, it brought the demand for free education and the need for curriculum reform to the forefront, leading to institutional engagements on these critical issues. .



PROF. SHIREEN MOTALA IS THE CO-EDITOR OF THE EDITED VOLUME. THIS IMAGE WAS TAKEN DURING THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND BOOK LAUNCH.

Source: IPATC

Language remains a central theme in the decolonisation project, acting as both a medium of identity construction and a tool for exclusion under the apartheid regime. The push for recognising indigenous languages and knowledge systems in academic settings was highlighted as a vital step towards decolonisation. Efforts like the acceptance of isiXhosa for doctoral dissertations at Rhodes University were highlighted as commendable steps toward embracing linguistic diversity and pluralisation of knowledge.

This approach challenges the dominance of Western epistemologies and languages in education, advocating for a reevaluation of African identity and the rejection of oppressive labels. The discussions revealed a complex landscape of transformation and decolonisation, marked by the struggle against entrenched Western ideologies and the quest for an authentically African epistemology. This involves redefining Africanisation beyond mere departure or exclusion and tackling the inherent contradictions of using Western theoretical frameworks to decolonise education. The ultimate goal is to liberate the African mind from the constraints of harmful labels and empower it to embrace its rich linguistic and cultural heritage in pursuing genuine transformation in higher education.

## 7 Images from the Five Book Launches



**BOOK LAUNCH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN CAPE ON 22 JULY 2022 .**

Source: IPATC



**GROUP PICTURE DURING THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND BOOK LAUNCH ON THE 30 JUNE 2022.**

Source: IPATC



**GROUP PICTURE DURING THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO ON 30 NOVEMBER 2022.**

Source: IPATC

## Transforming South Africa's Higher Education Curricula



**PANEL 2 DURING THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND BOOK LAUNCH.**

Source: IPATC



**GROUP PICTURE DURING THE BOOK LAUNCH AT NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY ON THE 21ST OF OCTOBER 2022.**

Source: IPATC



**BOOK DISPLAY AT NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY IN POTCHEFSTROOM AT OUDRIFT RIVERSIDE LODGE.**

Source: IPATC



**BOOK LAUNCH HELD FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING AT THE SHERATON HOTEL IN PRETORIA, ON THE 8TH OF JUNE 2022.**

Source: IPATC



**PROF. SIPHAMANDLA ZONDI (DIRECTOR OF IPATC) AND DR ADEOYE O. AKINOLA (HEAD OF RESEARCH AND TEACHING AT IPATC) CONVERSING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND BOOK LAUNCH.**

Source: IPATC



**MR MUSAWENKOSI MALABELA WAS ONE OF THE PRESENTERS WHO SPOKE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO BOOK LAUNCH.**

Source: IPATC

## 8

## Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Generally, discussions surrounding curriculum transformation in South African higher education revealed a complex interplay of historical legacies, structural challenges, and contemporary societal needs. The path towards genuine transformation is nuanced, demanding a shift beyond superficial changes to address deep-rooted systemic, institutional, and attitudinal barriers. Central to this endeavour is the imperative to recenter Africa within the educational narrative, ensuring that the curriculum not only reflects African realities and perspectives but also empowers students as agents capable of shaping meaningful societal contributions. The debates and reflections captured during the meetings underscore the necessity of a decolonial approach that begins with the liberation of the human mind from colonial conditioning and Western-induced brain trap. It is very decisive to critically examine and redefine the purpose of universities, embrace linguistic diversity, and foster an inclusive curriculum design process that involves a wide range of stakeholders.

Moreover, the significant role of activism, as demonstrated by the #FeesMustFall movement, highlights the urgent need for continued engagement and dialogue among students, educators, policymakers, and the broader community to drive forward the transformation agenda. The discussions further point to the importance of acknowledging and integrating the experiences and contributions of HBUs in the transformation discourse, recognising the unique challenges and opportunities they present. Ultimately, the journey towards curriculum transformation and decolonisation in South Africa is an ongoing process that requires a collective commitment by all stakeholders to reimagining and reconstructing the educational landscape to better serve the needs and aspirations of all South Africans. This endeavour is not only about reshaping curricula but further redefining the very essence of knowledge production, dissemination, and application in a manner that truly reflects and celebrates the rich diversity and potential of the African continent. The discussion offered the following key recommendations:

- **Center Africa in Transformation Agendas** by prioritising the inclusion of African perspectives and realities at the core of curriculum transformation efforts, thus ensuring the relevance of education in the empowerment of African students.
- **Adopt a Holistic Approach to Decolonisation** through comprehensive structural, institutional, and attitudinal changes to facilitate genuine decolonisation of the higher education system.
- **Address Systemic Miseducation** by recognising and tackling the issue of miseducation by reforming educational resources and approaches to reflect true African contexts and challenges.
- **Align Curriculum with Local, National, and Global Needs** by reforming the curriculum to produce graduates equipped for innovation and job creation, particularly addressing local-level challenges while also considering national and global demands.
- **Re-evaluate Educational Terminologies and Approaches** by critically rethinking and redefining educational terms and approaches to avoid perpetuating colonial legacies and fostering a genuine African knowledge system.

- **Inclusive Curriculum Design** by ensuring the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders, including students, local communities, and entrepreneurs, in the curriculum design process to meet societal needs.
- **Empower and Integrate Historically Black Universities** by focusing on the unique contributions and challenges of HBUs in the transformation discourse and ensure their active participation in transformation processes.
- **Sustain the Momentum of Student Movements** by acknowledging the role and sacrifices of student activists in the #FeesMustFall movement and other protests in support of curriculum transformation and incorporating their insights and demands into ongoing transformation efforts.
- **Promote Language and Knowledge Pluralisation** by advocating for the inclusion of indigenous languages and diverse knowledge systems in academic settings to enrich learning experiences and preserve cultural heritage.
- **Comprehensive University Reform** by undertaking a thorough review and reform of university structures, administration, and cultures to remove barriers to transformation and decolonisation, making the environment conducive to implementing recommended changes.



**BOOK LAUNCH HELD AT THE SHERATON HOTEL, IN PRETORIA WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING (DHET) OF SOUTH AFRICA.**

Source: IPATC

**THE PROJECT WAS SPONSORED BY THE CARNEGIE CORPORATION OF  
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### About our Policy Briefs:

Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPATC) Policy Briefs are a series of reports from seminars we have held that are research-based on relevant topics, intended for strategists, analysts and decision makers in foreign policy, aid and development. They aim to inform public debate and generate input into the sphere of policymaking. The opinions expressed are outcomes from seminars and those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute and the University of Johannesburg.



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### About the Institute

IPATC was established at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in 2016 as one of nine flagship centres of excellence to conduct research. It provides a forum for scholars, practitioners, and civil society actors across Africa and its Diaspora to dialogue and contribute to the rigorous production and dissemination of Pan-African knowledge and culture. The Institute seeks to promote original and innovative Pan-African ideas and critical dialogue in pursuit of global excellence in research and teaching, and to contribute actively to building an international profile for UJ on Pan-African issues.



