I don't speak and learn what I like

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Many recent articles in the *Mail & Guardian* on African studies and African languages in the academy have served to illustrate how contested the university curriculum is.

It is likely to remain so, if we consider how little progress we have made towards the goals long ago articulated at a key conference called "Transforming South African Universities". Convened in 1998 by the University of Fort Hare and the justice ministry, the conference's critical recommendation centred on changing the curriculum of post-apartheid education.

"Constitutional interpretation must reflect an African character in which the fundamental values are African in character and outlook," wrote Professor BP Banda at the conference.

"Such an African outlook will have to be achieved through an input made by black academics as well as legal practitioners."

Yet I am writing more than a decade later about the same concern. The shift from a eurocentric to an African character of education has not occurred. Education in universities and schools continues to be Eurocentric, meaning that European and white values are perceived as the standards on which the country's education system is based and in which it is rooted.

The decolonisation of Africa cannot be achieved under these circumstances. Schools and universities in African countries are the centres of cultural domination, and they need to be transformed.

The research of which this article is part will serve, I hope, two purposes. First, it will inform the ongoing efforts of the two national education departments to Africanise education; and second, it will assist school governing bodies, which are constitutionally mandated, as communities, to be part of their children's education.

**Pandor's legacy**

One of former education minister Naledi Pandor's most important legacies was the 2008 report she commissioned on transformation, social cohesion and the elimination of discrimination at universities.

The conclusions relevant to African-centred education included this: "With institutions failing to transform and not, as merely one result of this failure, making the space of Africa a primary site for their knowledge-production endeavours, higher education would not provide the leadership and the guidance to other arenas of work and social delivery, via the kind of knowledge that would be useful in dealing with the country's endemic poverty and the attendant problems of crime and anti-social behaviour."
The report says the education system has not taken on board the knowledge production of the majority of its citizens, who are Africans. For example, indigenous knowledge systems continue to be mentioned in passing in policy documents without any indication of how they might be implemented.

In the longer term, the big question concerns the role of the university in the developing context of South Africa and Africa. This question must pivot on knowledge and knowledge production. There is no doubt that the university as an institution is going to become even more crucial in terms of the social, economic and environmental challenges that the country, the region, and indeed the world are facing. What kind of university is required in this new space?

**Nzimande's bold move**

In April, Higher Education and Training Minister Blade Nzimande entered this space boldly when he suggested knowledge of an African language should be a condition for graduation in any university degree. Speaking in his mother tongue, isiZulu, he said: "Akukwazi ukuba yithi kaphela ekathiwa sifunde isingisi nesibhunu bakwethu, kodwa ezethu iyilimi nabanye bangazifundi [We cannot be expected to learn English and Afrikaans, yet they do not learn our languages]."

Those in Africa who do not speak any African language do not have the slightest idea what it means to be disempowered by simply speaking a language that is not your mother tongue in formal settings. For example, in a primary-school setting an African child may have to write, speak and read in the language -- the mother tongue -- of his or her classmates. From early years in the primary schools, to high schools, to universities and to the workplace, most mother-tongue speakers of English and Afrikaans never experience the disempowerment that disadvantages the majority of African and black South Africans -- young and old.

But the matter is not merely about Africans being the only ones learning English and Afrikaans while English -- and Afrikaans-speakers do not learn our African languages. The greatest concern for the African majority in South Africa is to return to the source; African languages are the sources that carry knowledge about ourselves and our arts, culture, history, heritage and traditions.

Bantubonke Stephen Biko was the most cultured activist-intellectual of our generation and I believe his African-centred writings, *I Write What I Like*, should be at the centre of education in preschools, schools and higher education and training institutions.

Consider his 1971 passage: "One of the most difficult things to do these days is to talk with authority on anything to do with African culture. Somehow Africans are not expected to have any deep understanding of their own culture or even of themselves. Other people have become authorities on all aspects of African life ... [T]here is so much confusion sown, not only among casual non-African readers, but even among Africans themselves, that perhaps a sincere attempt should be made at emphasising the authentic cultural aspects of the African people by Africans themselves."
Biko to be compulsory reading?
My suggestion that Biko be compulsory reading in South African education comes from encouraging findings of research I conducted earlier this year for this study at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon, in Accra. There it is a university requirement that every student who graduates in any faculty has taken a course in African studies.

What will happen when the children of all races in South Africa are allowed to have a dialogue with Biko's thinking? These children will comprehend the country of their birth, or country of their settlement, better than if we marginalise African knowledge producers like Bantu Biko. When we allow Biko and his generation of the Black Consciousness Movement to become part and parcel of our education, curriculum and content, we will put into practice the central argument of African-centred education that "the education of any people should begin with the people themselves".

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