

Bilingual universities the only way to promote diversity



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The language debate rages on in tertiary education. The latest from the desk of the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Blade Nzimande, is the pronouncement that South Africa no longer has (or should have) Afrikaans, Zulu or Tswana universities - only South African ones.

The gist of his message is that places of higher learning should adopt language uniformity, and the language they should settle on is English.

Charged debate

The Minister's words revive a politically and emotionally charged debate around the use of Afrikaans in some of South Africa's most prominent educational institutions, including the University of Stellenbosch (US).

Few would argue that English is one of the world's most dominant languages. Everyone should be able to read, write and speak it. But does that mean an indigenous language with a respected academic tradition should be allowed to "wither on the vine"?

In my view, it shouldn't, as it is neither constitutionally right nor desirable. Indeed, imposing one standard on all groups goes against the grain of the rainbow nation ideal.

What is right

Dave Steward of the FW De Klerk Foundation writes on Politicsweb.co.za that depriving students of the right to be educated in their mother tongue is unconstitutional (Section 29 (2)). He explains that the Foundation isn't asking for a single-medium university (the option is provided for in the Constitution, with qualifications) - only that Afrikaans be allowed to continue as a medium of teaching in Stellenbosch - one of four universities in an Afrikaans-majority province.

A constitutional scholar lends his voice to the call for abolishment of single medium instruction in another [article](#). Pierre de Vos takes it one step further, arguing that Afrikaans should not be the sole medium of instruction even in individual classes. The availability of English would counteract the informal exclusion of Black students. His second argument is that the culture of initiation, which likewise alienates, should be eradicated, and I couldn't agree more.

What is beneficial

Exclusion is not only unconstitutional but also undesirable. Accommodating diversity/plurality is socially beneficial, as amply illustrated by the advent of democracy in South Africa and the participation of all groups in all economic and social spheres. It has been recognised by government as an excellent way to promote learning at lower levels, and can be just as beneficial at tertiary levels, to promote a thinking culture, one that also appreciates and respects differences. McGill.ca is one of the top universities in the world (21st in the [QS World University rankings](#)), and manages this feat despite teaching in French as well as English.

To impose language uniformity would be to ignore persistent differences and risk losing the diverse and plural character of South Africa.

Too much trouble?

What then of the immense investment and efforts required to "elevate the status and advance the use of" our other indigenous languages, in the words of the Constitution?

In my view, the only way to preserve and promote academic linguistic diversity without devastating cost is to introduce the option of bilingualism at all universities - English and one other. There is no reason why Stellenbosch cannot accommodate English and Afrikaans, or the University of KZN English and Zulu, or NMMU English and Xhosa. The fact that not all indigenous languages have an academic tradition does not mean the government shouldn't support establishing those traditions.

Local and international examples do not preclude this option, despite interpretations to the contrary.

France, the bastion

France is the bastion of nationalism and protecting linguistic heritage, and yet a business school in Versailles, the heart of French cultural life, presents MBA courses in English. Bowing to the superior record of English as the business lingua franca is however no precedent for Stellenbosch, where an excellent academic tradition exists. If Stellenbosch presents a lone example of a thriving non-English university, it must be allowed to survive.

The fact that Afrikaans Chemistry books are unlikely to have kept up with English ones of late may not be an argument either. Many other university subjects are local in character and produce local language content, and that is as it should be. English and Afrikaans can peacefully coexist in such an environment.

Wales

Another country grappling with language preservation is Wales. The Welsh government requires Welsh translations of all its Web properties, even though popular requests for it are insignificant. Welsh is also being retained in primary schools, requiring a huge investment.

The extra investment naturally means that less money will be channelled into other projects. And that will be the choice for Stellenbosch. If translation is required on a considerable scale to support bilingual teaching, something else will have to give.

How invested in plurality are we?

The last example is indicative of the political will and economic investment required to sustain linguistic plurality, as envisaged in the Constitution.

Although sustaining the investment beyond primary school will be more controversial, adopting a model of bilingualism would greatly diminish the cost of providing for linguistic diversity. It would also provide a balanced alternative to the all-or-nothing approach - catering for all indigenous languages, or none.

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