

Accelerating Transformation for an Inclusive and Competitive Wits



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Context

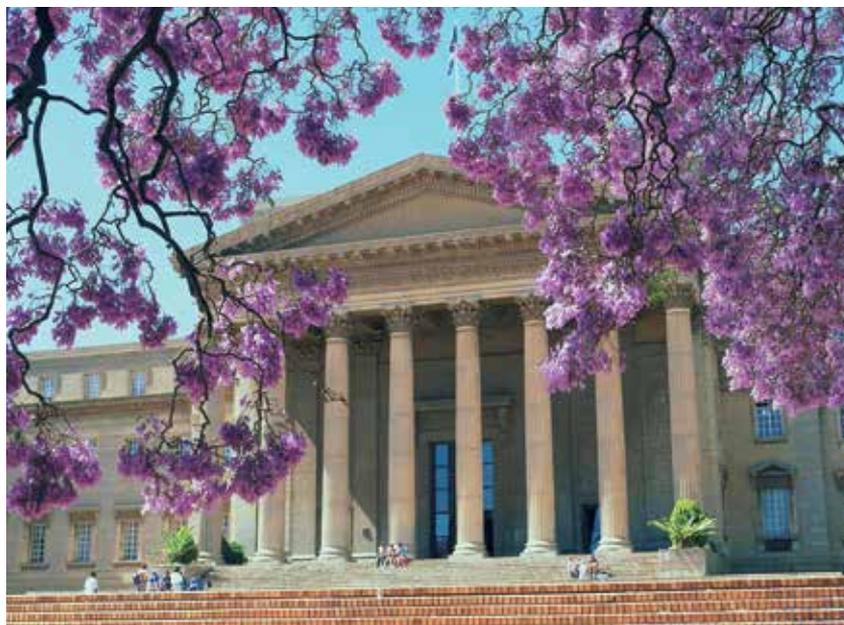
What does transformation mean for universities in South Africa in 2015? Two views are evident in the public discourse. On the one hand, there is a call for a more holistic definition of transformation that involves amongst others:

- a diverse and cosmopolitan student cohort;
- enhanced access for talented students from poor and marginalised communities;
- a dramatically increased African and Coloured representation in the academy;
- an evolution of the institutional culture where Black staff and students feel comfortable within Wits;
- a reorganisation of the curriculum to incorporate African theorists and contextual challenges;
- and an end to the exploitation of workers through the insourcing of all outsourced services.

On the other hand, there are those who suggest that transformation at Wits is really about the lack of African and Coloured representation in the academy. There is a fear that a focus on broader issues would merely detract attention from this Achilles heel of the higher education system in South Africa.

Two additional considerations have become obvious. The first is that ‘transformation lethargy’ is most keenly experienced ‘at the level of the corridor’. Yet in almost all of these cases, managers confirm that they are open to and supportive of transformation. The problem lies not in the professed commitment, but in the ordinary interactions with colleagues. There are cases of overt racism and where these occur, they must be condemned and dealt with firmly and expeditiously. But the deeper problem lies in the ‘colour blind’ interactions, for although many may see them as proof of institutional progress, others view them as insufficiently appreciative of the burdens of our history. They would argue that you cannot switch from a racialised past to a colour blind present without continuous racialised outcomes.

The second consideration involves interrogating the thinking of the advocates of transformation. Many transformation advocates draw their intellectual inspiration from Steve Biko and Franz Fanon – but they tend to have an ossified and simplistic reading of these activist intellectuals. In many of the engagements of the past few months, I heard colleagues justify non-engagement by quoting Biko’s refusal to immerse himself in the official and oppositional structures of power in the apartheid era. But can one truly draw lessons of praxis from the apartheid



era to the contemporary one without critically interrogating the possibilities and limitations of the new context? Abstracting from institutional power allows one to avoid confronting these difficult questions, without which we are unlikely to make significant transformative progress.

Similarly, Fanon has been read in problematic ways, especially by student and scholar activists involved in the struggles around symbols and naming. Participants often suggest getting rid of statues and memorials celebrating British colonialism and apartheid's heroes, and replacing them with those of the liberation movement. But Fanon was as critical of the nationalist political elite that followed colonialism as he was of the white settlers themselves. This suggests that besides a few cases like Mandela, Sisulu, Tambo, Biko, Sobukwe and the like, one should be careful of simply replacing 'White' symbols and names with Black ones. It is worth bearing in mind that if we are meant to follow indigenous African traditions in this regard, then we should probably be naming after symbolic events and/or convey evocative descriptions. We should use a plurality of philosophies to under girth the naming and establishment of symbols.

There is also a racial and ethnic essentialism that has come to define a strand of thinking within the transformation movement. Legitimate criticisms of the colour blind approach of mainstream liberalism have sometimes morphed into an illegitimate racism. This is most easily recognisable in the loose language about all 'Whites being racists' and 'Jewish donors controlling Wits'. The racial essentialism is also manifest in the implicit assumption of some advocates of transformation that all claims of prejudice by Black staff and students are legitimate. This has sometimes enabled them blindly to defend blatant racism to advance their own aspirations.

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An advance on transformation cannot be premised on the philosophical impulses of a racial and ethnic essentialism, nor can it be premised on colour blindness. We have to recognise that we come from a racialised history with consequences that translate into our present. Responsiveness to transformation has to proactively confront our racial legacies and affirm the victims of apartheid. This is the real stuff of contemporary transformation. But it need not, and should not, translate into a racism and racial chauvinism.

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Transformation at Wits

Wits recognises the need to accelerate transformation. Despite the University's policies and professed institutional and individual commitments, the pace of transformation has been slow. Following a series of conversations with stakeholder groups on the slow pace of transformation at Wits and in the higher education sector, Wits has developed a strategic plan based on three important premises.

First, a broad definition of transformation is necessary at Wits. It must include, amongst other factors:

- dramatically increased African and Coloured representation in the academy;
- curriculum reform to include African contexts and theorists;
- a diverse and cosmopolitan student cohort across campuses and residences;
- enhanced access for talented students from poor and marginalised communities;
- an institutional culture that makes Black staff and students feel comfortable;
- an institutional naming policy that reflects the diversity of our traditions;
- a language policy that enhances our understanding of one another and prepares students for the workplace;
- and an end to the exploitative practice of outsourcing.

Secondly, as described above, an advance on transformation cannot be premised on the philosophical impulses of a racial and ethnic essentialism.

Thirdly, it is necessary to remain cognisant of the constraints and trade-offs involved in driving a transformation agenda. Any initiative must be compatible with the University's fundamental mandate to be a globally competitive, research intensive institution that is responsive to local development imperatives. It must also be cognisant of the University's finances and should not jeopardise the fiscal health of the institution.

Strategy

Wits has developed a strategic plan to accelerate transformation to ensure an inclusive and competitive institution.

Diversifying the Wits Academy

The key transformative issue at Wits is the need to increase the African and Coloured representation in the academy and professoriate. There are initiatives underway to address this issue, including government programmes, but they are not significant enough to impact on the racial diversity of the Wits academy.

Wits will thus mobilise a minimum of R45 million from our own resources to underwrite two initiatives. About R35 million will be dedicated to underwriting

the costs of appointing between 25 and 35 new African and Coloured academics, taking into account gender diversity. These will be tenure track positions and may require a mandatory period of service for a limited time. A further R10 million will be dedicated to a special programme to advance 30 to 35 African and Coloured academics who are currently within the Wits system towards promotion to the professoriate level over two to five years. It must be stressed that the promotion criteria for the candidates will not change but an enabling environment will be developed for them to achieve the existing promotion requirements. This will involve smaller teaching and marking loads, research support and mentorships, etc.

All senior academics will be required to mentor at least one African or Coloured South African and representation on the Staffing and Promotions Committees will be expanded to include a member of the Transformation Committee.

In addition, Wits will aim to mobilise a further R45 million from international foundations and local sources to expand the programme, to keep it sustainable and to increase the number of scholars that is supported.

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Curriculum Reform

A proactive strategy is required to address curriculum reform and will take different forms in different disciplines. In some cases, it may require the inclusion of new subject matter and reference material, while in others it may require rethinking the teaching pedagogy by contextualising the subject matter with the use of relevant local examples and/or using alternative technological instruments to transmit knowledge and enhance understanding. In relevant disciplines, this would be subject to the requirements of and engagements with industry players and appropriate professional and accrediting bodies.

Curriculum reform does not mean a retreat into the local and a focus on the teaching of Africa and its problems. While this is important and needs to be incorporated, we must continue to focus on the rest of the world, and learn from their academic and scientific communities. We must become an equal constituent part of a global scientific academy of commons. How to structure the balance between local responsiveness and global competitiveness in the curriculum will be determined at the School and Departmental level, stewarded by institution-wide oversight. We will also consider the possibility of a mandatory course for all students that emphasises South Africa's history, citizenship, civic service and a broader sense of ethics.

Student Admissions

The current demographic profile of the Wits student body is about 75% Black and 25% White. From the perspective of achieving a balance between demographic diversity and cosmopolitanism, this demographic profile is appropriate, although

we are open to increasing the proportion of white students to about 28%, which constitutes their current proportion of the Gauteng student pool. This balance is not only important for historical redress but also for generating the soft skill sets – intercultural personal skills and cultural tolerance across racial, ethnic and religious boundaries – that are required for 21st Century citizens and professionals who need to operate optimally in multicultural South African and global workplaces.

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This demographic and cosmopolitan success is not equally spread across the institution. There are programmes that are still largely dominated by White and Indian or African students. This is problematic in terms of our institutional and pedagogical goals and is being addressed. In a similar vein, our attempt to increase the number of talented students from rural schools and quintile one and two urban schools in our MBCh programme has recorded some significant progress, although we have not achieved all our targets. We have identified the challenges in

this regard and are developing solutions.

Promoting Diverse and Cosmopolitan Residence Life Experience

Over 97% of our students in our residences are Black (this includes 4.78% Indian and 1.80% Coloured), with only 2.26% White students in residences. This violates our goal to promote a diverse and cosmopolitan environment. Attempts to address this situation were met with opposition from some students who claim that poor students would be disadvantaged and that White students would receive special attention. The former criticism is valid and a strategy needs to be developed to mitigate this. The latter criticism needs to be challenged. While special attention cannot be accorded to White students, increasing their representation in our residences should be a strategic priority on the grounds of both our pedagogical and institutional goals. Moreover, we should not allow our deliberative engagement on this strategy to be compromised by opportunistic racialised labelling of any kind. But cosmopolitanism means more than an enhanced representation of White students. It must also involve establishing an environment in which persons from multiple religious backgrounds – Christian, Hindu, Muslim, traditional African, Jewish, atheist – and cultural experiences have significant presence within our residences.

Institutional Culture

Many Black students continue to feel marginalised even though they constitute the majority of students. Equally important are the many allegations of racism that are continuously received from both staff and students. It goes without saying that racism has no place at Wits and needs to be decisively dealt with whenever it rears its head, lest it destroys our ability to achieve the goal of establishing a diverse and cosmopolitan university.

Transforming our institutional culture requires the effort of every single person at Wits. As scholars of social inclusion have so often argued, it requires a sensitivity from White staff that they do not act or operate in ways that can be read as alienating or discriminatory. But it also requires from Black staff and students a consciousness not to read every act as racist and exclusionary. Building a new, inclusive institutional culture requires everyone to proactively participate in

developing new forms of engagement that enhance social interaction, teaching, research and service. We must all feel that we own the corridors and spaces of Wits University.

Institutional Naming

While Wits does not have any statutes that could create political controversy, it does need a proactive strategy on the naming of buildings and other sites. Some of this has been undertaken in recent years, but we need to be more proactive in this regard. Two considerations require reflection. First, we need to strike a balance between names derived from sponsorships and donations and those that emanate from strategic considerations such as the establishment of an institutional identity. Secondly, our naming strategy should be informed by both Western and Indigenous traditions. The former follows the convention of naming after individuals while the latter tends to do so through evocative descriptions. This is often not understood by many politicians and activists engaged in naming who erroneously think that they are following indigenous traditions by replacing the names of White apartheid politicians with those of Black politicians and liberation heroes.

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We should guard against this becoming a widespread practice for not only is it important in an educational institution to name after scholars, artists, poets and students, but it is also too soon to determine the legacy of most contemporary politicians. This does not mean that we should not name buildings after noted celebrated figures of our liberation, including Biko, Mandela, Sisulu, Sobukwe and Tambo, amongst others. We should definitely do so. But we should also remember to name beyond celebrated politicians and heroes to also include other categories relevant to our mandate. Moreover, we must be consistent with our indigenous tradition and also name through evocative descriptions. We should also consider commissioning a statue or piece of work that reflects our vision of transformation and commemorates our commitment to it.

Language

Learning multiple languages, in particular the indigenous languages of South Africa, is an important means of enhancing our mutual understanding and appreciation. Multilingual graduates are also more capacitated and effective in the workplace. In this context, multilingualism is particularly important for Wits given that we strive to be a cosmopolitan institution situated in the economic heartland of the sub-continent. However, we must also recognise the primacy of English in global economic and political interactions. This is why it is important to keep English as a primary language of instruction. However, we will create the resources and instruments to enable staff and students to develop competence in one of at least two African languages located within the two major language clusters of Nguni and Sotho. In addition, our language policy suggests that we adopt South African Sign Language as part of our linguistic repertoire. One way to do this would be to develop online courses for these languages so that undergraduate and postgraduate students can complete them at any point during their course of study.

Insourcing

There have been calls by students, staff, unions and external stakeholders for all services that were outsourced over the past two decades to be insourced by the current management. This has been motivated on the grounds that the workers who service Wits from these outsourced companies tend to be grossly exploited. It is hard to argue against this advocacy when the salaries of workers are considered and their stories are heard. However, Wits does not have the resources required to insource these services and to put the workers directly onto our payroll. If we were to do this without throwing the institution into financial crisis, we would be required to increase student fees by an additional 15% above the normal annual increase, or get an equivalent increase in subsidy from the state. The former is difficult given the current economic plight of our students and their families, and the latter is unlikely to happen in the near future.

We have established stopgap measures by writing into our existing contracts clauses that require companies to abide by certain minimum salary thresholds and observe labour relations requirements. If they fail to do this, we are entitled to cancel our contracts. But the dilemma of activating this leverage is that it effectively leads to workers losing their jobs. We will improve on our existing provisions by hosting regular meetings with employers and relevant unions so that we do not find out about abuses at a crisis point. We will also assist workers to establish cooperatives so that they can bid competitively for contracts.

Wits will look at partnering with civil society organisations, unions and other universities to launch a national campaign, the goal of which will be to increase subsidies to universities with a view to insourcing all outsourced services that involve vulnerable workers. Until we are successful in realising this outcome, we are going to have to manage the challenge using the stopgap measures identified above.

Conclusion

While it must be recognised that there have been significant transformative gains since 1994, these can no longer be deemed sufficient 21 years into the democratic transition. Increasingly, universities have become delegitimised in the eyes of incoming generations of students and academics. This has been evident for some years, although it took the *Rhodes Must Fall* movement to bring the crisis to a head across the higher education system. Wits is thus committed to urgently addressing transformation and we look to all our partners for support along this journey.