CHAPTER 14

CURRICULUM TRANSFORMATION: LOOKING BACK AND PLANNING FORWARD

Suellen Shay and Thandeka Mkhize

Introduction

This volume provides an opportunity for critical engagement and debate from a variety of perspectives on the question: to what extent does undergraduate education in South Africa support the public good? The focus of this chapter is on curriculum – what have we learned in South Africa about attempts to reform curricula in order to address what we know to be an unjust and unequal differentiation of the student experience? This question is posed at a critical time – what the introductory chapter refers to as a ‘knife edge’ – with respect to the future of South African higher education. The undergraduate curriculum is one of the most critical items on this reform programme.

We begin by interrogating the broader purposes of higher education and the notion of the ‘public good’. As Marginson (2011) argues, higher education for the public good raises the questions of ‘whose public good?’ and ‘in whose interests?’ It could be argued that higher education in South Africa has always served the ‘public good’. As Lange (2012) argues, South African universities were part of the settler society, performing a variety of social, economic and ideological functions in the colonial context. Under apartheid, the system served the narrow exclusive interests of the white minority public. The legislatively differentiated apartheid system was set up to ‘serve’ a variety of different publics – in the first instance, the differentiation between the traditional universities and the technikons, and then within each of these sectors, a different racial, language and de facto socio-economic sectors of the public. Overnight, this differentiated system had to construct a radically different, democratic vision of the ‘public’, in short, a radical shift from the white minority to the black majority. The White Paper 3 (Department of Education [DOE], 1997) articulated this new vision and purpose for higher education. As Lange
The notion of broadening the public echoes strongly Fraser’s (2005, p. 73) definition of social justice. She writes, ‘Justice requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life’. A higher education system that seeks to be socially just is one that is seeking to ensure, to use Fraser’s term, ‘parity of participation’. ‘Parity of participation’ is a higher education system that enables equity of access and equity of outcomes. To achieve this, Fraser argues, means overcoming economic, cultural and political obstacles.

Social justice in higher education requires that fair opportunities are made available to all students to enter higher education and to be given the opportunity to succeed. Failure by higher education institutions to provide these opportunities has resulted in racially skewed participation rates and academic performance, high dropout and high failure rates of, particularly, black students. There are thus many obstacles that remain before ‘parity of participation’ can be achieved. Social justice in higher education remains a goal that South Africa has not yet achieved.

This review of what we know covers the following themes:

- The policies that have had a direct or indirect impact on attempts at curriculum reform in South Africa;
- The specific curriculum reform initiatives of the extended degree and the proposed flexible degree;
- The calls for a ‘decolonised curriculum’ and the implications for knowledge;
- Small scale qualitative and large scale quantitative studies on the student experience in extended degrees; and
- The scholarship on knowledge and curriculum, informing or in critique of these policies and practices.

The purpose of this review is to explore the history of attempts at undergraduate curriculum initiatives and reforms in order to map a way forward.

In this chapter, we explore the competing narratives of transformation from the mid-1980s to the recent student protests. We select one strand of this history of curriculum policies and interventions that has had equity of access and outcomes as its aim. We trace the evolution of the extended degree programmes (EDPs) from the mid-1980s to the proposed flexible degree in 2013. We agree, as Lange argues (2017), that the relationship between curriculum, knowledge and identity is critical to curriculum transformation. This is however not sufficient. We argue that structural change is necessary if we are to achieve systemic change.

**Curriculum reform: Competing discourses of transformation**

Since 1994 there have been a number of higher education policies that have directly or indirectly impacted on attempts at curriculum reform in South Africa (DOE, 1997;
The challenges set out by these policies, as well as the tensions between the challenges, are mirrored in the range of attempts to reform university curricula, as well as various curriculum initiatives. The White Paper 3 (DOE, 1997) refers to a threefold national agenda of transformation, reconstruction and development. The policy is explicit about the tensions between the challenges of transformation on the one hand and economic growth on the other. The White Paper's definition of transformation is unambiguously about 'parity of participation': the 'promotion of equity of access and fair chance of success to all who are seeking to realise their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities' (1.14). At the same time it notes the 'formidable' challenges for the South African economy in 'integrating itself into the competitive (international) arena … which places a premium on knowledge and skills, leading to the notion of the “knowledge society”' (DOE, 1997, 1.9). Thus, we can see in the White Paper the tensions between retrospective and prospective orientations (Shay, 2015). The former are oriented towards the legacy of the past and the need for redress and the latter are oriented towards the challenges of the future and the imperatives of a global economy. In the two decades since the White Paper 3 (DOE, 1997), these policy discourses of equity and redress vs. growth and economic development continue to compete for dominance in the policies which have followed: the National Development Plan (NPC, 2011), the White Paper for Post-School education and Training (DHET, 2013), and most recently the draft National Plan for Post-Secondary Education and Training (DHET, 2017).

Not surprisingly, the attempts at curriculum reform have mirrored these competing discourses for what constitutes transformation. For example, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (South African Qualifications Authority [SAQA], 2008) attempted to deal with parity of participation, as well as economic growth. Since the mid-1980s the extended degree programmes (EDPs) and the Foundation Grant have attempted to redress the consequences of inequality in access and success. In the mid-1990s there was an attempt to address the needs of the knowledge economy by shifting curriculum coherence from the disciplinary majors to outcomes-focused programmes (Ensor, 2004). Although the institutional mergers were not directly about curriculum reform, the implementation of the merger policy (DOE, 2002) had massive implications for university curricula, especially in the newly created comprehensive universities as curricula across different vocational, professional and academic pathways of the HEQSF were to be merged into one (Oosthuizen, 2014). More recently, the proposal for the flexible degree (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2013) attempted to build on the strengths and limitations of the extended degree programme by addressing both issues of equity and development, but as a system-wide reform rather than only for a minority of students. And finally, the calls for decolonising the curriculum which arose during the student protests have spurned all previous attempts at reform: the choice of the term ‘decolonisation’ itself signals a rejection of transformation as a ‘failed project’ (Mpofu-Walsh n.d.).
In Lange’s (2017) review of 20 years of curriculum reform ‘against the grain of student protests’, she argues that all the policy attempts of the past two decades have failed to bring about the transformation of university curricula. Her critique is that the policy choices of the past two decades did not create the space for an examination of curriculum from the point of view of epistemology and identity. Instead, much of the attempts at reform focused on structure, leaving issues of epistemology and identity unquestioned.

We argue that at this point in time the review of the undergraduate curriculum is essential. We argue that the transformation agenda must be sufficiently broad to address the concerns of the White Paper 3 (DOE, 1997), but must now also include the critiques arising from decolonisation. A transformation agenda must now include the imperatives for equity, appropriately prepared graduates, and a decolonised curriculum. In order to address these transformational goals, in order to achieve systemic curriculum review, structural change is essential.

Curriculum-based attempts for ‘parity of participation’ – from extended to flexible structures

In order to look at the relationship between curriculum, knowledge and identity, as well as issues of curriculum structure in more depth, we focus on one strand of policy and intervention. We examine attempts by the higher education sector to address ‘parity of participation’ through curriculum: the establishment of academic development programmes (ADPs), which later became extended degree programmes (EDPs). These were followed in 2013 by the proposal for a restructuring of the undergraduate degree, referred to as the ‘flexible degree’ (CHE, 2013).

The courses, and eventually the accredited state-subsidised programmes that were established by academic development practitioners in the mid-1980s were not set up to reform South Africa’s higher education undergraduate curriculum. They were set up to address the challenges faced by initially white English-speaking universities, as increasing numbers of black students were being admitted. (While sharing many common features with ‘academic development’ in the UK, South African ‘academic development’ historically had students as its primary focus; see Chapter 15 for further discussion.) It was clear that, although these students were some of the most talented students in the country, unless some kind of curriculum support was put in place, these students were unlikely to succeed – this was referred to as a ‘revolving door’ syndrome. The model of curriculum provision that developed over the next decades, and exists to this day in nearly all South African higher education institutions, is an extended degree. The programme specifics vary across institutions and faculties, but essentially the first academic year is extended over a period of 18 months or two years, giving students more time and a more supportive pedagogy (e.g. smaller classrooms, specialist teachers etc.). By 2004 these programmes had been formalised into state-approved extended degrees that attracted additional state subsidy. This is referred to as the Foundation Grant and consists of ring-fenced funding for students on approved EDPs.
These programmes from their onset understood their mission to be about access for students who would not otherwise have been admitted. Access was understood to be both about formal entry into the university and epistemic access to the disciplines and their respective modes of inquiry. It was premised on the need to address and redress the injustices of apartheid education and the consequential ‘gap’ in students’ preparedness for university studies. Most of these programmes understood their role to make explicit the underlying epistemological foundations of the disciplines – the ‘literacies’ – that caused many students to stumble. The premise was also, though this was less explicit, that universities were ‘under-prepared’ for these students who represented the best that the schooling system had to offer. Thus, this reform was never simply about a different structure, that is, an additional year added to a degree. It was about a curriculum structure that enabled formal and epistemological access to the disciplines as a form of redress for the ongoing injustice of unequal education.

These programmes over their three decades of history are an interesting case study for the relationship between curriculum, knowledge and identity. Even those programmes which have successfully offered students sound epistemological foundations for further study have had little or no impact on the knowledge (both the ‘what’ and the ‘how’) further along the degree – the so-called ‘mainstream’ curriculum has been largely unaffected. Thus, with a few exceptions, these programmes have been an extended first year over two, rather than an extended three years over four. The sound curriculum and pedagogic principles that inform the foundational years of the degree have not extended across the full degree or diploma (CHE, 2013; Shay, Wolff, & Clarence-Fincham, 2016; Smith, 2012); the epistemic transitions further along the degree remain significant obstacles for many students. This has resulted in generally poor completion rates for many of these programmes (Shay et al., 2016).

From a more critical standpoint it could be argued that the existence of the EDPs has deferred the need for curriculum review of the so-called ‘mainstream’ undergraduate curriculum. Lange’s (2017) argument about the relationship between curriculum and identity is apt here – the higher up the degree, the more academics are invested in the knowledge transmitted through curriculum. Transformation of the curriculum beyond first year would require in some cases changes to how academics view their knowledge, their discipline and ultimately themselves. These shifts in academic identity are a necessary condition if students are to gain epistemological access to their disciplines, since providing epistemological access includes the narrowing of the gap between the worldview of students, lecturers and the target knowledges (Boughey, 2005). Currently, this gap is wide.

Over the years, issues of academic development identity, both those of students and staff, have become increasingly troubled, as Clegg (2009) notes across many national contexts, not only South Africa. The burden of stigma has hung over the programmes from their inception. Students feel misrecognised by a deficit discourse of ‘underpreparedness’ and ‘disadvantage’ (Kotta, 2011; Luckett & Naïcker, 2016; Mogashana, 2015). This is not to deny that a significant number of students have benefited from these programmes. While these programmes
have played a critical role in equity of access, they have not been as successful in achieving equity of outcomes (CHE, 2013; Lange, 2012; Luckett & Shay, 2018). These programmes cannot be the model for transforming curriculum — they cannot be the solution to the crisis of throughput currently in evidence. As the CHE (2013, p. 70) concludes in its review of the extended degree programmes, ‘notwithstanding evidence of progress and success, the benefits of curriculum extension will not be fully realised until it is taken to scale and become an integral element of mainstream provision’. Luckett and Shay (2018) are more critical, arguing that these programmes are more affirmative than transformative, using a distinction made by Fraser (2009). This distinction points to approaches that enable the status quo to prevail, as opposed to approaches that genuinely bring about change of the whole system.

Responding to the limitations of the extended degree, in 2012 the Council of Higher Education (CHE) commissioned a proposal for the restructuring of the undergraduate degree; this has come to be called the flexible degree, that is, the restructuring of the length of the undergraduate degree from three to four years. This proposal is an attempt to deal with some of the shortcomings of the de facto two-track curriculum system currently in place: the extended degree curriculum and the ‘mainstream’ curriculum. It addresses in structural terms the assumptions about entry level, for example who is the curriculum for, how to ensure that there is epistemic access at all major transitions in the degree, and more elective space to allow for some breadth of knowledge to ensure better prepared graduates. It challenges ‘colonial’ assumptions about the three-year minimum time as ‘normal’ minimum time to graduation.

More specifically, the flexible degree proposal seeks to address key existing structural problems through a set of curriculum reform principles. Once again, the flexible degree was never simply about an additional year. The restructuring would enable the implementation of four principles. Firstly, the principle of foundation provision: a recognition that serious knowledge gaps need to be filled, given problematic curricular assumptions about students’ prior knowledge. Secondly, the principle of epistemic transitions is an acknowledgement that addressing the entry-level gaps will not suffice; there is a need to scaffold students’ epistemic development beyond foundation provision. Thirdly, the principle of enhancement notes that there is a need for a structure that enables greater ‘breadth’ of exposure in order to produce graduates for the contemporary world. Fourthly, the principle of enrichment acknowledges that there is the necessity for ‘curriculum enrichment through key literacies’, for example digital, quantitative, academic, multilingualism (CHE, 2013; Shay et al., 2016).

The proposal was presented to the sector and the ministry for higher education and training in 2013. While most of the sector was cautiously supportive of the proposal, the minister of higher education at the time was not. The reasons given for rejecting the proposal were that the performance data supporting the proposal were dated (‘things had improved’) and the state had devised other less radical mechanisms for addressing the systemic problems. These included the ring-fenced funding for the improvement of teaching and learning and doubling the numbers of students on the extended degree from 15% of the enrolments to 30%.
In retrospect there are lessons to be learned. One of the failings of the proposed policy is that it did not make sufficiently explicit what the restructuring would enable. The goal for reform is not a restructured curriculum – the goal is what the new structure enables. Secondly, the proposed policy underestimated the relationship between curriculum reform and academic identity. Any significant curriculum reform will be a profound challenge to academic identities. If academics do not subscribe to the fundamental principles underpinning the reform, it is likely to be met with resistance. Thus, going forward, any proposed structural reform needs to make more explicit what the new structure enables that the existing structure cannot accommodate. In addition, the impact of the restructuring on academic identity should not be underestimated. Many academics see their primary purpose to transmit the knowledge of their discipline and ideally, to encourage postgraduate students to enter their area of specialisation. They do not see their primary purpose as enabling epistemological access, nor do they necessarily have any commitment to the breadth of a student’s academic experience. The key principles of the flexible degree were and remain a ‘hard-sell’ to the academy.

 Barely had the dust of the flexible degree consultation process settled, when the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement put a different set of education issues on the table. Apartheid had created a legacy where, to this day, the quality of education is to a large extent based on race. Issues of income level, schooling, race, home language and cultural background all intersect to complicate the issue of access to higher education in South Africa (Ferreira & Mendelowitz, 2009).

 One of the main grievances of protesting students during the #RMF movement was the need for a decolonised curriculum. Their argument was that the university curriculum needed to be ‘transformed to reflect the lived experiences of African people, including recognition of their scholarly work which is often on the periphery’ (Lange, 2017, p. 10). Thus one of the meanings of ‘decolonising the curriculum’ was putting African scholarly work at the centre of the curriculum. There has been much debate, however, about what a decolonised curriculum might look like. Mbembe (2016) cautions against taking the curriculum decolonisation project at face value and argues that a curriculum that has Africa at the centre need not shut out the West and other parts of the world, but consider them from an African perspective. Jansen (2017) teases out a number of strands of potential meanings: decolonisation as the decentring of European knowledge, as the Africanization of knowledge, as an additive-inclusive approach, as critical engagement with settled knowledge, as encounters with entangled knowledge, and as the repatriation of occupied knowledge. Each of these he discusses in terms of their different political understandings of what needs to be changed.

 We turn back on this brief history of attempts to enhance ‘parity of participation’ through curriculum change to explore what we can learn that will shape the interventions we put in place going forward, at institutional and national level. Following from Lange (2017), the relationship between curriculum, knowledge and identity needs further exploration.
Conceptualising curriculum and knowledge: The how, what and who of knowledge

From some theoretical perspectives, curriculum, knowledge and identity cannot be separated. Bernstein (1975, p. 85) defines curriculum as ‘what counts as valid knowledge’. Bernstein’s interest is in the underlying rules, what he calls ‘codes’ that shape what is considered valid, or, put another way, the principles which regulate why in any given curriculum certain kinds of knowledge, skills and dispositions become privileged over others. These rules shape not only selection (of knowledge), but sequence, pacing and evaluation. So, while the focus of curriculum review is often on what is taught (e.g. the content) and how it is taught (e.g. pedagogy), a Bernsteinian focus is on the codes where ‘codes’ refer to underlying principles which shape the what, how and why of curriculum choices. These choices are not neutral. All curricula involve a set of assumptions about, for example, who the curriculum is for, what kind of graduates will emerge, and what kind of graduates does society need. These assumptions are invisibly embedded in admission points and subject requirements, in expected curriculum load, in progression rules, in expectations of minimum time, and in rules for academic exclusion.

The term ‘curriculum structure’ refers broadly to the parameters of starting level (and related assumptions about students’ prior knowledge), duration, the pace and flexibility of progression pathways, and the exit level (CHE, 2013). Structural decisions are based on assumptions about knowledge (how much, what kind, whose) and identity (who is this curriculum for, who is best suited to teach). All of these constitute the exoskeleton or structure of the curriculum. Long before a student writes their first essay or test, these structures shape students’ experience of the curriculum as either enabling or obstructive. Like the colonial lines drawn on the map of the African continent, these structures represent a whole range of political interests that may have little to do with students’ best interests. In this sense, to open up curriculum structures for interrogation is an important part of the decolonial project. To interrogate the structure is to disrupt assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge and identities. The review of structures is also a strategic catalyst for change. National or institutional policy cannot mandate changes to knowledge and identity, but it can mandate changes to structure. Thus curriculum restructuring can be a powerful lever for curriculum reform.

Alongside the trajectory of both policy and curriculum interventions detailed above, there has been a rich and sustained body of scholarship on the relationship between curriculum and knowledge, sometimes arising out of the policy and practices and sometimes in critique of them. As noted above, there has been a significant body of scholarship arising out of the field of academic development that has explored the ‘literacies’ as a means of enabling epistemic access, that is, the academic discourses that students require to succeed in the disciplines (Bangeni & Kapp, 2017; Boughey, 2005; Thesen & van Pletzen, 2006). The focus of this scholarship has been less on the ‘what’ of knowledge and more on the ‘how’. How do students become fluent in the discourses of the academy and their respective disciplines? The challenge
of navigating the ‘epistemic transitions’ of the undergraduate degree remains critical if we are to address issues of academic dropout and poor completion rates due to repeated failure.

Another more recent body of scholarship since 2000 in South Africa has looked at epistemological access from a social realist point of view, that is, reasserting the ‘what’ of knowledge, that knowledge matters, that there are different forms of knowledge and that giving students access to ‘powerful knowledge’ is a matter of social justice (Muller, 2000, 2009, 2014; Young, 2013). This scholarship has spawned a number of studies exploring knowledge and curriculum differentiation in the disciplines (Luckett, 2012; Shay, 2013; Wolff & Luckett, 2013).

The third growing body of scholarship is around issues of ‘whose’ knowledge. These debates have been around for years but rose to the fore during the 2015 call to decolonise the curriculum. #RhodesMustFall exposed the epistemic dislocation that students feel within the so-called Western or colonial traditions of knowledge (Motsa, 2017). The protests called for a re-examination of the notion of ‘epistemic access’. Epistemic access can only be understood within a framework of epistemic diversity, that is, epistemology that is open to dialogue among different epistemic traditions (Mbembe, 2016). This call questioned the Western academic model of knowledge production still in use in most South African universities – a model that creates the perception that legitimate knowledge can only be produced by the West, that Africans are incapable of knowledge production. The aim of higher education is to develop students’ intellectual lives through redistributing equally ‘the capacity to make disciplined inquiries into those things we need to know, but do not know yet’ (Mbembe, 2016, p. 30).

The problem with respect to a systemic plan of action for curriculum reform is that these bodies of scholarship are sceptical of each other. Even before the protests, it was difficult for those in the social-constructivist literacy camp to engage in dialogue with those in the social realist ‘powerful knowledge’ camp. Each has different ontological points of departure. The basis of legitimacy lies in different underlying codes, what Maton (2014) would refer to as a stronger knowledge codes in social realist views of knowledge and stronger knower codes in social-constructivism and postcolonial theories of knowledge. Since 2015 it has been even more difficult to find a common platform to talk about curriculum reform. The ‘decolonial’ framing has become the dominant frame for any review discussion. This is understandable given the high levels of frustration at previous failed attempts at transformation. It has however had the consequence of narrowing the reform agenda, as well as polarising the debates. The knowledge debates have shifted away from how to promote epistemological access to powerful knowledge to ‘whose’ knowledge, where legitimacy is strongly located in the knower or the producer of the knowledge. Maton’s (2014) argument is apt: knowledge claims always have both an epistemic and social relation, that is they are always about something and about someone. The issue is which is dominant and whose interests are served by this.

What we can see over this period from the 1980s to 2016 is that, although the same call is made for social justice and for parity of participation, the understanding of the problem has
evolved. To some extent these different understandings sit uncomfortably beside each other as we face questions of ‘where to next’? One body of scholarship is trying to re-centre knowledge and the other is questioning: whose knowledge? What legitimates this as powerful knowledge? Any attempt at systemic curriculum reform has to contend with policy discourses reflecting different priorities, different theories underpinning the relationship between curriculum and knowledge, and even different understandings of ‘decolonisation’ that appear incommensurable.

For the possibility of any systemic curriculum reform agenda going forward, the starting point is respectful, productive dialogue where a sufficiently common base of values and goals can be found. We believe that curriculum that enable ‘parity of participation’ can be one of the goals, although assumptions underlying this have to be thoroughly interrogated from the start.

For the possibility of any systemic curriculum reform agenda going forward, we need to keep our goal of ‘parity of participation’ in view. Despite what might appear to be incommensurable positions, it is imperative that we commit ourselves to respectful dialogue that can find a sufficiently common base of values that can inform reform practice.

**Conclusion: What now?**

Moving forward, the state has the opportunity to return with renewed commitment to ‘parity of participation’, to equity of access and equity of outcomes through a bold policy of curriculum transformation. There is currently no policy or intervention in place that will address the scale of the change needed. The existing state commitments – ring-fenced funding for teaching and learning and increasing the percentage of students on extended curricula – will not bring about the necessary change. Leaving institutions to address the challenges will not ‘move the needle’ of systemic change. What is now required from the state is a bold policy on curriculum restructuring. This restructuring would enable at institutional level a different undergraduate degree that adheres to the principles outlined in the CHE’s (2013) flexible degree proposal and at the same time is responsive to some of the key issues arising from the calls for decolonising the curriculum.

This policy must not fall into the trap of previous attempts where structural changes are prioritised, bypassing changes to knowledge and identity. The challenge is that policy cannot, we would argue, prescribe or mandate on issues of epistemology (what, how and by whom knowledge is produced). Nor can it mandate on issues of identity – student or staff (who the teachers and who the taught should be). Policy can however address structure. A restructuring can thus be a lever for change, to bring about an interrogation of the status quo; a policy on curriculum restructuring can provide the enabling framework for knowledge and identities to be reimagined, decentered, recentered.

In closing, we return to the proposition that curriculum is central to a transformed student experience. Curriculum can play a significant role in addressing the unjust and unequal differentiation that our students experience. A reform agenda which ultimately addresses issues of knowledge and identity needs to start with a bold re-framing, an interrogation of key
assumptions which underpin our current curriculum structure. We close by suggesting four guiding questions for such a curriculum transformation process:

- In what ways does the curriculum structure (issues of entry, placement and progression) enable a successful student experience?
- In what ways does the curriculum content recognise and speak to diverse students’ experiences – prior to and upon arrival at university?
- In what ways does curriculum content and epistemology centre the rich sources of knowledge production in and about Africa, in and through its languages?
- In what ways does our curriculum prepare our students for the challenges of a rapidly changing workplace?

References


