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What a new university in Africa is doing to decolonise social sciences

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It's time for students to see Africa differently. Shutterstock

It's not often that you get to create a new university from scratch: space, staff – and curriculum. But that's exactly what we're doing in Mauritius, at one of Africa's newest higher education institutions. And decoloniality is central to our work.

I am a member of the Social Science Faculty at the African Leadership University. Part of our task is to build a canon, knowledge, and a way of knowing. This is happening against the backdrop of a movement by South African students to decolonise their universities; Black Lives Matter protests in the United States; and in the context of a much deeper history of national reimagination across Africa and the world.

With this history in mind our faculty is working towards what we consider a decolonial social science curriculum. We've adopted seven commitments to help us meet this goal, and which we hope will shift educational discourse in a more equitable and representative direction.

Seven commitments

#1: By 2019, everything we assign our students will be open source

Like most institutions of higher education in Africa (and across much of the world) ALU's library is limited. Students often deal with this by flouting copyright and piracy laws and illegally downloading material. We don't want to train our students to become habitual law breakers. Nor do we want them to accept second-tier access to commodified knowledge.

Our aspiration is that by 2019 everything we assign in our programme will be open source. This will be achieved by building relationships with publishers, writers and industry leaders, and negotiating partnerships for equitable access to knowledge. This will ensure that a new generation of thinkers is equipped with the analytic tools they need.

It will also move towards undoing centuries of knowledge extraction from Africa to the world that has too often taken place with little benefit to the continent itself.

#2: Language beyond English

Students who read, write and think in English often forget that knowledge is produced, consumed, and tested in other tongues.

We commit to assigning students at least one non-English text per week. This will be summarised and discussed in class, even when students are unable to read it themselves. Our current class comprises of students from 16 countries who between them speak 29 languages. English is the only language they all share. Exposing students to scholarly, policy, and real-world work that's not in English means they are

constantly reminded how much they don't know.

As we grow, students will also be expected to learn languages from the continent: both those that originated in colonialism (Arabic, English, French, Portuguese), and those that are indigenous such as isiZulu, Wolof, or Amharic.

#3: 1:1 Student exchange ratio

Having cross-cultural experiences, particularly as an undergraduate, has become an important part of demonstrating work readiness and social competency in a "globalised" world. But scholars have shown that globalisation is often uneven. Strong currencies enable such experiences, so those who benefit usually come from Europe and North America.

This has had huge implications for higher education, where "student exchange" usually takes place at a ratio of 10:1 – ten Americans or Norwegians, for instance, exploring South African townships, for one Ghanaian who might make it to the Eiffel Tower.

In Social Sciences the body is the research tool and the mind the laboratory in which experiments are undertaken. We support as much exchange as possible across the broader institution. But our commitment when it comes to student exchange is strictly 1:1 – one ALU student goes abroad for every one exchange student we welcome into our classroom.

#4: Text is not enough

Africa's long intellectual history has only recently begun to be recorded and stored through text. If students are exposed only to written sources, their knowledge is largely constrained to the eras of colonisation and post-coloniality.

To instil a much deeper knowledge and more sensitive awareness to context and content, we are committed to assigning non-textual sources of history, culture, and belief: studying artefacts, music, advertising, architecture, food, and more. Each week students engage with at least one such source to attend to the world around them in a more careful way.

#5: We cannot work alone

Social scientists often assign themselves the role of deconstructor: unpacking power, race, capitalism and consumption with glorious self-righteous abandon. My colleagues and I recognise that we cannot work alone, and require our students to play a central role in contributing to the university's outputs.

We design our curricula in such a way that students are compelled to create, iterate, work with feedback, apply that feedback, and critically appraise it. We want them to collaborate with as wide a range of other people as possible, stretching them to use language and the tools of analysis that they acquire in their

training with real world implication. For example, students recently worked with our legal, policy, and learning teams to write the university's statement on diversity.

#6: Producers, not only consumers

The students who choose to come to the university bring with them tremendous insight and experience. These are often developed and augmented by spending time in the quintessential multi-cultural environment of the campus and dormitories. That allows certain fusions, tensions and commonalities to emerge much more clearly than they might in other places.

Working and living within this environment, it's essential that students start contributing to discourses surrounding Africa as early as possible. It might take years to know how to write a publishable scholarly article – but an op-ed, podcast or YouTube video is not quite so demanding. This allows students to get accustomed to their voices contributing to and shaping public dialogue in and about Africa.

#7: Ethics above all

Social Sciences both reflect and shape the world. Our programme, then, is committed to the principle of “do no harm”, and also to be an impetus for good.

Students will learn to think and act to the highest ethical standards, and to feel confident in asking the same of others working with them. This is essential in bringing into being a world in which Africa's place is both central – as it has arguably always been to global capitalism – and also respected.

Collaboration

It's early days at ALU. There's a lot we still need to do, and it will take time for us to build the institution into what we collectively envision. These seven commitments are an important foundation for the Social Sciences.

We're inviting responses and collaborations through our blog, through email or through collaborations with our students.



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