

BAQONDE, boosting the use of African language in education: an interview with Bassey Antia

Naomi Meyer, Bassey Antia

Interviews

2021-09-08



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BAQONDE

Learn in
Your Language

Photo of Bassey Antia: UWC; photo of world map: Pixabay; photo of BAQONDE logo:
<https://baqonde.usal.es/>

Professor Bassey Antia is the University of the Western Cape (UWC) leader of the BAQONDE project. He is in the Department of Linguistics at UWC. He discusses the project with Naomi Meyer.

I have heard about the multilingual project that UWC and other universities throughout the world are busy with. Please tell our readers about this?

The multilingual project you refer to goes by the acronym BAQONDE, a word which in Nguni languages means “(let them) understand”. In full BAQONDE stands for **B**oosting the Use of African Languages in Education. **A** Qualified **O**rganized **N**ationwide **D**evelopment Strategy for South Africa.

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BAQONDE is a collaborative capacity-building project and it seeks to facilitate and promote the incorporation of indigenous African languages into teaching and learning arrangements at participating South African Higher Education institutions. It seeks to do so through initiatives such as the following:

- Establishment and equipping of units to drive initiatives related to indigenous African languages
- Developing innovative multilingual teaching methodologies and training lecturers in these methodologies
- Developing resources for teaching and learning in African languages
- Fostering inter-institutional coordination.

It is a project that is very much aligned to national priorities. As you know, the recent (2020) Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions requires the development of indigenous African languages as mediums of instruction and as languages of academic discourse. In the past, similar policy initiatives have encountered challenges such as staffing, training and infrastructure, among others. These challenges obviously continue to exist, and BAQONDE is only one of the many kinds of initiatives required to ensure that language ceases to be an obstacle to understanding.

South Africa is a country with eleven (or more) languages and yet only Afrikaans and English are used as academic languages. Do you think that it will make a difference to students' marks and performance if they can study and communicate in their own languages? Please elaborate.

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We all have experienced, haven't we, friends who are usually, you know, exciting and lively in their familiar surroundings (and that includes when they are using familiar languages). But in settings or for topics that require the use of a somewhat unfamiliar language, these friends become like fish out of water – they are completely out of their depth and are forced to withdraw or to adopt a reduced personality.

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Absolutely, Naomi, language is a co-determinant of students' attitudes, participation and performance. We all have experienced, haven't we, friends who are usually, you know, exciting and lively in their familiar surroundings (and that includes when they are using familiar languages). But in settings or for topics that require the use of a somewhat unfamiliar language, these friends become like fish out of water – they are completely out of their depth and are forced to withdraw or to adopt a reduced personality. This is what happens in countless classrooms every day. Language contributes to the sense of estrangement many African students experience, some of the questions they ask about whether they belong to the higher education environment. Language may be a factor in determining who participates and does not participate in whole-class interactions. Language may be a factor in determining who understands how much from reading that has been prescribed. Language may be a factor in who goes beyond the minimum reading requirement. Language may be a factor in how well the lecturer is understood. Language may be a factor in who understands the assessment question. Language may be a factor in who can communicate their answers and be rewarded adequately for the knowledge they possess.

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In studies we have conducted at UWC, based on an initiative in which lecture material was delivered in varieties of Xhosa and Afrikaans, the evidence is strong that language is a co-determinant of students' performance. I think there's a YouTube presentation on that particular project.

From this source, and from the copious research produced by colleagues across the country, you will see that language can indeed make a difference. Of course, as a colleague, Ekkehard Wolff, puts it, “Language is not everything in education, but without language everything is nothing in education.”

Please tell me where and how you will start. There are many fields of study and there is plenty of jargon out there. What is your plan of action and which languages are involved?

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Ok, incorporating indigenous African languages into the curriculum and pedagogy across higher education is a tall order, but the magnitude of the task is no reason to despise humble beginnings. The task is multidimensional and multilayered, and no one single project can hope to address all the requirements. BAQONDE is complementing ongoing initiatives, and hopefully suggesting pathways for the many other interventions that are and will be needed. BAQONDE will not be the magic wand that will alone address this goal.

To understand where and how a project such as BAQONDE can start, it is important to establish a few things. The first is about understanding the range of issues that go into facilitating the use of, say, African languages in higher education. Some of the requirements include, in no particular order:

- Developing methods for teaching/learning multilingually. Both staff and students need support in how to teach or learn through the use of languages that include African languages.
- Multilingual resources (written, audio-visual material) have to be developed.
- Equipment and infrastructure for developing the resources need to be in place.
- Advocacy for the use of African languages.

Secondly, it is also important, as I have suggested elsewhere, to understand that there is actually an ecology of activities, micro-activities and settings involved in what we understand as learning and teaching, and that each of these is an opportunity for incorporating African languages. There is the voice of the lecturer standing in the front of the lecture hall. That voice can be in an African language. The presentation slides being used is another opportunity. A recorded podcast is an opportunity, as are various value-adding and postproduction activities (like voice-overs, subtitles). There are also opportunities in the various modalities for scaffolding texts prescribed for students to read. Developing texts in students' home languages is also an option. We must not forget settings like tutorials, practicals and demonstrations. Neither must we forget assessment contexts – there are opportunities in the setting of questions, in how students are allowed to answer and in the feedback given. These and many others are all opportunities for intervening to ensure that everyone has a fair chance at learning, and that the playing field for performance is somewhat levelled.

So, given the understanding that the scope for intervention is huge and, as you say, there are many fields of study, it is obvious there is only so much BAQONDE can do. Within a coordinated project framework, BAQONDE partners will leverage on existing strengths to address issues related to the requirements in order to make possible the use of African languages in several of the activities and settings of teaching and learning. BAQONDE partners will also prioritise disciplines. Each partner institution will also be guided by its language policy in the choice of project languages. Thus, Xhosa (University of the Western Cape and Rhodes University), Zulu (University of KwaZulu-Natal) and Setswana and Sesotho (Northwest University).

The European Union is also part of this project. How did this come about? Please talk to me about all the universities involved.

The coordinating partner (University of Salamanca, Spain) brought together partners from several other European and South African universities who have a pedigree in facets of multilingual education. Together they submitted a proposal in response to a competitive Grant Call in Capacity Building in Higher Education within the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union. The consortium that was birthed as a result is made up of the University of the Western Cape, Rhodes University, Northwest University and the University of KwaZulu-Natal, University of Groningen (Netherlands), Trinity College Dublin (Ireland) and the project coordinating partner, University of Salamanca.

The proposal was successful, and BAQONDE was unveiled a few months ago. It will be co-financed by the European Union over a three-year period.

Maybe can you tell me about this project's long term vision?

Through envisaged outcomes such as:

- a network of African Language Development Units (ALDUs)
- trained capacity in multilingual pedagogies
- a collection of resources for learning through the medium of African languages
- enhanced levels of awareness of the place and benefits of African language and multilingual arrangements in education,

BAQONDE hopes, among others, to:

- mitigate the language barrier to learning in higher education
- contribute to students' sense of belonging in the higher education space
- multiply itself through comparable initiatives in the future, and some of these will no doubt leverage on the expertise and resources BAQONDE will have generated
- contribute to broadening and diversifying the pool of the South Africa's workforce across sectors of the knowledge economy.

Also read:

[“In the belly of the beast”: South Africa's education discourses associated with the fourth industrial revolution \(4IR\)](#)

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[Pandemic tales: Making an educational life in a Stellenbosch University residence during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

[Kaaps is the future of Afrikaans](#)

[Listening, not squabbling, builds academic communities](#)

[Stellenbosch language debate: Speech by David Jantjies at the DAK meeting with the SAHRC](#)

[Press release: The first trilingual dictionary of Kaaps](#)

[Eileen Pooe's Setswana PhD: an interview in three languages](#)

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Kommentaar

Andries GH van Der Walt

2021-09-10 at 18:40

Sal Afrikaans deel wees van die projek, aangesien dit immers 'n intense Afrikataal is wat 'n plek het as onderrigtaal?

Reply

Dawid Visagie

2021-09-11 at 08:06

Afrikaans, hierdie Nederlandse dialek, hierdie Vreemde, Coloniser-taal is nie 'n Afrikataal nie en behoort nie deel te wees van die projek nie. Afrikaans het genoeg geld.

Reply

Reageer

Jou e-posadres sal nie gepubliseer word nie. Kommentaar is onderhewig aan moderering.

Reageer

Jou naam*

Jou e-posadres*

Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

PLAAS

Stel my in kennis indien nuwe kommentaar bygevoeg word.