

Covid was a setback for indigenous languages: South African lecturers on what went wrong

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Despite the numerous legislative policy documents and frameworks, in practice the use of indigenous African languages in South African universities falls far short of where it should be.

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South African indigenous languages are among those at risk of a **serious decline** due to the increasing use of digital technologies. By some estimates only **5%** of the world's languages are likely to survive online.

As hubs of knowledge generation, South African universities have an essential role in ensuring this does not happen. When democracy came to South Africa in 1994, multilingualism was seen as imperative to ensure that all of the country's 11 official languages were esteemed and promoted. Universities could play their part by using indigenous languages in high status functions: teaching, learning and research.

Despite the numerous legislative policy documents and **frameworks**, in **practice** the use of indigenous African languages in South African universities falls far short of where it should be. The adoption of remote (online) education during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 may have widened the chasm further. That's because English dominates in online engagements in this **context**.

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The **online teaching** employed by universities during the pandemic was conducted almost exclusively in English. If this continues, it could derail the **work done so far** in “intellectualising” indigenous languages – that is, developing them for use in high status contexts like education.

In a **recent paper** I drew on the reflections of seven lecturers from seven South African universities on the challenges of trying to teach online in more than one language. I looked at the implications for developing historically marginalised languages, as called for by the **Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions**.

What the lecturers told me suggests that if multiple indigenous languages aren’t used in higher education, their speakers could face even greater **exclusion** in universities. It will also set back the advances made in raising the status of these languages.

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Reflections from lecturers

The lecturers were teaching in fields like politics, history and education. Some were at traditional universities and others at universities of technology.

Their experience was that it was challenging to teach multilingually during emergency remote teaching. The challenges were in three categories:

- shifts from in-person to on-screen interactions
- shifts in the types of resources used to teach multilingually
- shifts from approaches that intellectualise indigenous languages to approaches that are focused on delivery.

Their view was that their experiences during Covid did not bode well for the intellectualisation of indigenous South African languages.

One participant was worried that multilingualism would become no more than a mechanical translation from one language into another. While the **translation of resources** is an important part of **multilingual education**, it is just the start. What must then follow is teaching students how to use indigenous language to come up with new ways of thinking about their disciplines, drawing on the indigenous knowledge systems that the languages are rooted in.

The participant went on to say:

Our students need vibrant, living multilingualism that demonstrates that intellectual work is not singularly about English. And that your professors are not English speakers. They are also Xhosa, and they have Afrikaans, and they have slang, and they have Zulu, and they have high language, and they have street language ... there is a cross-set of all our multilingual capability to convey the intellectual project.

Under the conditions of emergency remote learning, lecturers were under pressure simply to deliver the content of courses. This was true even for lecturers who wanted to use multilingual pedagogies. They were mindful of the need for multilingualism in higher education in South Africa. But the **conditions** under which they were teaching were such a hindrance that they defaulted to translation of resources like notes and slides.

...this has not been a huge success in that our sense is that students are just not reading.

The academics Rosalie Finlayson and Mbulungeni Madiba have **argued** that effective intellectualisation is what will see indigenous languages

developed, within the shortest possible time, to a point where they can express concepts that already exist in languages such as English and Afrikaans.

For this to happen, the focus must be on capturing African languages in written form to develop lexicon and grammar. This was a challenge during COVID because some web-based learner management systems don't support texts written in African languages. They don't have the special characters that a student should use in an exam to show what they know. So it's difficult to assess the candidate.

Indigenous language teaching resources, such as journal articles and textbooks, are scarce too. So lecturers had few resources to draw on when attempting to move their courses online. And the technology did not allow lecturers to write easily online as they would on a board:

As a language teacher, you are bound to write because when students don't understand what you are trying to teach, you have to put what you are uttering orally into writing for their full grasp.

Adapting systems for local use

In 2014, South African **scholars called for** the localisation of learner management systems to promote teaching.

Localising a learner management system entails adopting and modifying digital information and computer user interfaces into local languages, cultures, values and beliefs.

It is costly and requires institutions to collaborate. But researchers have been highlighting how important it is for raising the status of indigenous languages. The fact that it hasn't happened yet suggests it may be a priority for universities, which are best placed to do it, or for government, which is empowered to hold them accountable if they won't.

- **Sisanda Nkoala: Senior Lecturer, Cape Peninsula University of Technology**

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