

## **Curriculum and the Future University A First Nations petition/entreaty.**

Thank you, Suzanne, and thank you, Rod, for your warm welcome.

Good morning, everyone!

We now know that the Bill to establish the new Adelaide University is likely to be passed by the SA parliament in the foreseeable future. Its vision is:

*'...to ensure(ing) the prosperity, well-being, and cohesion of society by addressing educational inequality, through its actions and through the success and impact of students, staff and alumni'.*

This extends to the achievement of social equity with special mention of First Nations:

*'Our university will work to embed Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and learning across our activities and would aim to become the university of choice for First Nations people across Australia'.*

These intentions echo government messaging from both the Federal Minister and the Interim Accord report to close the education gap affecting equity groups and low SES students.

Adelaide University will need to epitomise these ideals given its key role in the development of the social, cultural, political, and economic conditions of South Australia and beyond.

This requires producing graduates who are well equipped to respond to these challenges of modern society.

Given Universities themselves are places that produce and reproduce knowledge, the commitment to a new curriculum will therefore be fundamental to not only the new university's academic program, but particularly its vision to advance the interests of the state through the development of a skilled, capable future workforce.

Therefore, if we understand curriculum as 'totality of experiences – with multiple dimensions, including cognitive, social, political,

economic, moral, aesthetic, cultural and spiritual aspects of life – not just for living today, but to be transmitted generatively from generation to generation’, the critical importance of the new curriculum should not be underestimated.

It will be curriculum that organises and prioritises the knowledge that our educators decide needs to be transmitted from generation to generation.

Our teachers and students will need to make meanings from the past, in the present and into the future thus rendering curricula as dynamic, promoting growth and development.

It is therefore about developing intelligent human beings who know how the world works and are prepared to participate in the world as healers of ills and stakeholders in its development.

However, I argue such human beings are only exposed to certain knowledges at the expense of others and only know how the world works from a particular frame of reference.

Subsequently their roles as healers and stakeholders become compromised.

It is from this recognition that curriculum’s potential as a transformative educational technology has been subjected to various critiques that at once co-implicate the university.

A key criticism is that the curricula of western universities are characterised by the lack of scope and depth in the canons of knowledge informing it.

In effect, the academy supports and reproduces certain systems of thought and knowledge, founded on epistemological practices and traditions that are selective and exclusionary, reinscribed inter alia by colonialism.

In Australia, our mainstream education system was imported from the British imperial centre to establish an educated class of colonial administrators.

Indigenous peoples were rarely considered in these deliberations. European colonists instead assumed a position of superiority over First Nations societies which in turn denigrated their cultures and silenced their voices.

Therefore, my petition or entreaty this morning is for a decolonised curriculum for Adelaide University.

I make this call because unfortunately, colonial mindsets continue to both exist and account for the absence of a curriculum that embraces Indigenous epistemologies and decolonisation in favour of a dominant Eurocentric curriculum.

Eurocentric epistemological traditions have been positioned as the dominant knowledge canons of curricula resulting in the paucity of epistemic diversity. In this context, western knowledge is positioned as universal knowledge.

The framing of First Nations histories and the systematic omission of their contributions to global society enables a historic amnesia that produces a very narrow and constrained view of society.

In this regard, our education system risks remaining a colonial outpost and its curricula reproduces hegemonic identities instead of eliminating hegemony.

This indicates a complicity within the sector to ensure aspects of curricula remain Eurocentric which of itself contradicts the idea of a liberal university.

Consequently, it silences and makes invisible the reality of many Indigenous students.

For many Indigenous students, they find it difficult to express themselves in the classroom except in Indigenous studies courses,

and continually experience frustration with difficulties speaking from a position of Indigenous episteme/epistemology.

When they do so, they are unsure if they are being understood by others in the classroom.

In these situations, it is not unusual that Indigenous students often choose to stay silent, and this is often misinterpreted as a lack of interest or even intelligence.

On entering universities, Indigenous students have been expected to check their cultural perspectives at the door and replace them with views and informed perspectives embedded in the western intellectual tradition.

In general, the academy does not recognise the ontologies and epistemologies held by Indigenous students – it is largely indifferent to them.

In finding solutions to challenges of cultural conflicts - understood as the difference of cultural values - that inevitably occur at this interface, universities have usually focused on Indigenous students, rarely looking at themselves or the structures, discourses, practices, and assumptions that operate in the academy.

Institutional responses to these problems of cultural discontinuity usually involves accommodating Indigenous students or 'mainstreaming' them into the conventions of the university – mostly done by establishing support and counselling services and access programs designed to bridge the gulf between the culture of Indigenous students and that of the university.

Such programs have been established on the premise Indigenous people require special assistance to adapt to the academy.

The imperative is to help Indigenous students make the transition from their cultures to the academic culture.

While access and bridging programs have opened the doors to many Indigenous students, it is not the definitive solution.

The central problem is that Indigenous people are inevitably treated as outsiders.

While culturally based educational initiatives do much to make the academic world more hospitable and relevant for Indigenous students, these efforts do not reach Indigenous people outside of these specific programs.

And they don't address the core issue – the sanctioned ignorance of the academy at large.

In this context, it serves little purpose to mainstream Indigenous students into the academic culture and environment.

What needs to be mainstreamed is Indigenous philosophies and worldviews, inviting Indigenous philosophies and epistemologies in from the fringes so they can be heard.

However, it won't be enough to just include Indigenous epistemologies (Indigenous ways of knowing).

Fundamentally, the university will have to acknowledge it is founded on very limited conceptions of knowledge and the world.

We must therefore rally against systemic indifference and reinforce the academy's responsibilities towards other epistemologies.

Together we must show the academy how to confront its own indifference.

It is to draw everyone in the academy into the process of creating new knowledge. To not do so effectively amounts to maintaining a form of complicity in upholding epistemological blindness.

Decolonising our university will be a complex, difficult and perhaps impossible task as decolonisation is a contentious and messy process requiring disruption and change at multiple levels of the university.

The decolonising task must begin with a critique of colonialism. A first step would be to identify colonial histories that inform our curriculum and our pedagogical practices given colonial curriculum has been characterised by its unrepresentative, inaccessible, and privileged nature.

Decolonization involves identifying colonial systems, structures, and relationships, and working to challenge those systems, rather than the token inclusion of the intellectual achievements of non-white cultures.

It is not integration; decolonisation seeks space for other political philosophies and knowledge systems and to change cultural perceptions and power relations.

It becomes a culture shift to think more widely about why common knowledge *is what it is*.

A decolonised curriculum also goes beyond being “inclusive” or “diverse” and calls for a more radical questioning of the canon itself and the cultural authority that it is imbued with as it is the moral authority of the canon that is at the heart of the difference.

Decolonising the curriculum is a political project and it cannot exclude politics and power from the discussion.

The aim of a decolonized curriculum is about transforming society, about breaking down structural inequalities and institutional racism.

It is about recognising Indigenous sovereignty. As centres of knowledge production, universities must lead the way on this.

A decolonised curriculum is *not* just about assimilating new material from non-Western locations into existing theories.

Genuine engagement with decolonising curriculum requires linking structures of colonialism to the curriculum.

Decolonising the curriculum means understanding and challenging the ways in which our world is shaped by colonialism.

It involves recognising that there are multiple world views and multiple ways of knowing: for example, Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous ways of knowing.

We must recognise that colonial structures and institutional racism continue to inform present-day social relations.

The structural consequences of colonialism need to be taught in our lecture theatres in relation to how we understand and respond to contemporary social problems such as Closing the Gap.

Addressing these questions will be confronting, uncomfortable, threatening, challenging, and disturbing, and requires learning and unlearning our own privileges as educators.

Not everyone will be willing to put themselves through such a process.

This should not deter us from challenging the sanctioned ignorance of the academy. At the end of the day, it's up to the academy to do the hard work to address its own blind spots.

Decolonising the curriculum necessitates that the production, nature, and validity of knowledge cannot be a neutral project. Disciplines that are part of the academy have not been immune to the process of colonisation.

But decolonising is not about deleting knowledge or histories that have been developed in the West or colonial nations. It's not about keeping one and throwing out the other.

Rather, it is to situate the histories and knowledges that do not originate from the West in the context of imperialism, colonialism, and power and to consider why these have been marginalised and decentred.

It is about repositioning “who and what gets to occupy the centre and the margins of ideas and society” and to rebalance that power.

And as Spivak counsels, ‘our work cannot succeed if we always have a scapegoat’ (Spivak).

Instead of finger pointing, we need more decisions about future visions of the sort that require whole of university participation rather than being limited to random individuals or small groups - which can always be found.

Expectations of readily available answers and simple solutions must be dispelled – there are no ready made to do lists for those who write policies and curricula – decolonisation is a process and a journey, not a model.

It cannot be achieved in one year or by 2026 – it will be an ongoing project.

Decolonising the curriculum is about being prepared to reconnect, reorder, and reclaim knowledges and teaching methodologies that have been submerged, hidden or marginalised.

As educators and researchers with a thirst for knowledge, we should be embracing the decolonising project as one that opens new ways of knowing, of researching, and of understanding.

The complexities and challenges we face globally require us to be able to engage with contradictions, ambiguity, embrace difference, and critically question issues of privilege while educating and acting for justice.

Rather than rejecting the decolonisation of curricula as “cancel culture”, we must view the concept as an enlightening and transformative endeavour that enriches education.

It’s about thinking through how the forms of knowledge that we privilege and reproduce uphold colonial structures, and attempt to



bring in, include and develop alternative ways of knowing and thinking.

This must include the epistemes and ontologies of all who are educationally disadvantaged if we are serious about making a difference.

In conclusion, I argue that a commitment to decolonising our curriculum will require us to commit to a clear whole of university strategy to achieve this.

There will be several challenges to navigate. These include:

- We will need to ensure the new curriculum is relevant for the new students we hope will enrol, many of whom may not fit the profile of the typical mainstream, middle class university ready 18-year-old school leaver.
- The under-representation and undervaluing of the epistemologies of those who do not fit the into the mainstream. Do we insert these new inputs into an existing unchanged curriculum or undertake a more radical rethinking of how the subject is taught.
- The curriculum – and particularly its assessment systems – serve to reproduce society’s broader inequalities. This challenge has received very little attention in the recent debates on “decolonising”. It is the way in which the curriculum at every point – from who gets admitted, who thrives, who survives, who fails – mirrors back the historical and current unequal distribution of educational resources in the broader society.
- We need incisive analyses and alternatives, new possibilities, and not accept binary oppositions. We must openly embrace ambiguity so we can form new paradigms and epistemic relationships that will transgress and subvert the prevailing logic of colonial superiority. We must disrupt and rupture colonialism in solidarity.

- Accepting that a decolonisation of curriculum project will require different strategies, timeframes, different kinds of resources and expertise, and different lines of both responsibility and accountability.
- Understanding that our staff need to be supported in terms of commensurate resources, time, and space to undertake the work. This work needs to be mandated and legitimated by the university leadership as an immediate and ongoing priority.
- Professional development imperatives for staff must be made available. This work must also be recognised and valued for professional/academic career enhancement.
- We must build on what has been already achieved and ensure it is an essential part of the new academic business-as-usual. The Schools of Allied Health, Law, Public health, and Health and Medicine are already leading in this space.

More generally, it is not simply about what the academy can do for Indigenous people, it's also what the academy must do for itself.

As long we continue to ignore or shunt aside Indigenous epistememes, we will be continuing to support the colonial project.

We will have failed to expose our students to a range of knowledge's, perspectives, and experiences as a fundamental part of a unique higher education experience we promise them.

And by failing to open ourselves to the other, our new university will fail the project of charting a path into the future.

We have a once in a lifetime opportunity in front of us. Let us not lose this moment where we can make a real difference. If we choose to act, we have so much to gain. If we don't respond, we stand to lose much more.

Thank you.