



Complicated conversations or convoluted archetypes? Higher education curriculum in South Africa

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Abstract

Universities are identified as change agents, with the curriculum as the instrument. Conflating the curriculum practice and graduate attributes or outcomes in South African higher education policy results in a simulacrum of education. Complicated conversations about curriculum are needed now: radically reimagining education's purpose and methods, holistically, relationally, and responsively. The dominant assumptions about curricula are rarely interrogated because universities and regulators fail to engage in complicated conversations about educational transformation across all the domains implicated in higher education, from student to state policymakers. This conceptual paper examines the formulation of *curriculum* as blueprint for the transformation of education in South Africa. Policies governing curricula prioritise employability and skills over transformative learning, limiting student and academic agency alike. Drawing on research undertaken for the Council on Higher Education and Universities South Africa on conceptions of curriculum transformation in South Africa, this reimagining of curriculum encourages the complex and subversive conversations currently marginalised by compliance-driven practice.

Keywords: curriculum transformation, higher education, South Africa, decolonisation, posthumanism, neoliberalism, compliance

Introduction

The transformation of higher education curricula in South Africa remains one of the most pressing yet contested domains of educational reform. More than three decades into democracy, South African universities continue to grapple with fundamental questions of what constitutes meaningful curriculum transformation and who should be involved in these

conversations. This paper argues that a fundamental obstacle to transformation is the reduction of curriculum to what Autio (2014, p. 18) termed mere technical documents rather than “complicated conversations,” which both constitute and effect, for the purposes of this argument, “genuine education.” In this sense, “genuine” stands in contrast to the simulacrum of education that results from compliance with the technical requirements. In higher education, complicated conversations permit for a diversity of views, include a variety of knowledges and knowers, and propose disruption of restrictive norms.

Drawing on research undertaken for the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and Universities South Africa (USAf) examining curriculum transformation across South African universities (Menon et al., 2025), the contention is that compliance-driven frameworks have resulted in a simulacrum of a transformed education; there is the appearance of transformation often without substantive change. Drawing on Baudrillard’s (1994) theorisation of simulacra as copies without originals and representations detached from any underlying reality, it is argued that this condition prevails in higher education in South Africa. Universities may present curricula with the appearance of transformation, reflected in policy documents, renamed programmes, and revised graduate attributes, while simultaneously retaining existing power structures and educational practice. The epistemological foundations, power relations, and lived experiences of learning remain largely unchallenged and unchanged (Castrillón & Menon, 2025; Ramrathan, 2016). Yet, paradoxically, while curriculum is widely acknowledged as central to transformation of the higher education sector, the complexity and depth of conversations about curriculum are rarely able to match the magnitude of the challenge.

This paper contends that South Africa is at a crossroads with respect to curriculum. It is useful to consider the contemporary period as defined by a tripartite matrix of tensions that animate the current higher education landscape. These are 1) the drive for transformation and decolonisation that underpinned the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements, 2) the growing demand for universities to respond to the challenges and opportunities inherent in the impending Fourth or Fifth Industrial Revolution/21st century skills, and 3) the pressures emanating from the post-1994 trajectory, which emphasise the instrumental and technicist approaches to regulating, managing, and delivering higher education. During 2015–2016, one of the issues raised was that curriculum failed to engage with the lived realities of students, in other words, their social contexts, cultural knowledge, and material conditions (le Grange, 2016, 2018).

In relation to curriculum transformation, Morrow’s (2009) articulation of epistemological access resonates; that beyond physical access to higher education, students must have access to the disciplinary knowledge practices and epistemic forms for meaningful participation. While universities have without doubt made significant shifts in pedagogy and content, the regulators’ dependence on compliance-driven frameworks risks further ossifying curricula, frustrating academia and, ironically, fuelling resistance to change. A brief consideration of how employability is wielded is pertinent. Assuming that a curriculum can provide the skills, understandings, and personal attributes needed for employment may increase the individual graduate’s chances of employment. However, it will do so only relative to other graduates, in

the context of limited employment opportunities and high national unemployment. Curricula that develop employability can still not address, for example, the lack of economic growth, or job opportunities for the youth.

The universities' self-evaluation of curriculum transformation

In 2024–2025, the CHE and USAf undertook a baseline study on curriculum transformation in South African universities in the period leading to the CHE's national institutional audit process (Menon et al., 2025). The study used both inductive qualitative and quantitative data and revealed a fundamental problem: there is no shared understanding of what curriculum transformation means across the higher education sector. The research analysed the self-evaluation reports (SERs) from the CHE's 2021–2023 institutional audits, combined with interviews with key university stakeholders. The findings demonstrate that curriculum transformation encompasses a broad and often contradictory range of initiatives including diversity, inclusivity, relevance, decolonisation, Africanisation, and social justice (Menon et al., 2025). The research methodology applied for the CHE/USAf report was qualitative and interpretive using focus groups that included academics, senior management, academic planning specialists, and quality assurance managers as primary data sources. The study utilised purposive sampling to select participants from various roles in South African higher education, ensuring breadth and diversity of insight. Data collection was conducted through structured focus group discussions, with sessions recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. Thematic coding was used to identify key themes and recurring tensions regarding curriculum transformation. Anonymity and ethical considerations were strictly maintained throughout, aligning with best practices for qualitative research (Creswell, 2013).

The analysis of the input from the diverse focus groups indicated clearly that curriculum transformation as understood and experienced in South African higher education is not uniform and is neither linear nor agreed upon. Instead, it is shaped by multiple, sometimes conflicting logics of policy, ideology, local needs, and institution-specific academic culture (Focus Group Participant [FGP], 2024a). While compliance with national directives and CHE audit demands emerged as a strong driver, participants consistently argued that meaningful transformation requires deeper philosophical debate, collective agency, and sustained engagement at every institutional level. Participants described curriculum transformation as “a journey of life . . . in this journey, many things may transform” (FGP, 2024b). Several pointed to the limitations of regulatory frameworks: “We should decolonise the funding framework for higher education. It is so hierarchical and outdated that it promotes a different agenda” (FGP, 2024c). The notion of *transformations* rather than a single transformation resonated. For one academic, the work of transformation must include “context, content, people, practices, and philosophy. Some are visible, some invisible, like ideology and hegemony” (FGP, 2024d). In practice, different institutional contexts result in diverse operationalisations of the understandings of transformation. For example, a rural university aligns its curriculum transformation agenda with student demographics and entrepreneurship, while others foreground Africanisation, multilingualism, or community engagement (FGP, 2024e).

The centrality of the students' experience was consistent in the discussions. "You don't just massify education; you must ensure students engage with teaching, learning, and peers in ways that enable success" (FGP, 2024f). Academics and students were both positioned as agents, with considerable energy spent grappling with how to make the student voice consequential: "Student input is gathered but seldom translates into redesign" (FGP, 2024g). Simultaneously, the deep agency of teaching staff was highlighted: "Policies and procedures can exist, but you need a change of heart among teaching staff" (FGP, 2024h). Some participants acknowledged that the "symbolic moves at institutional level" could obscure or slow change "in the hearts and minds of people" (FGP, 2024i). There were warnings of the "fear among academics . . . not everyone has a shared understanding," emphasising a need for ongoing conversation and pedagogic innovation (FGP, 2024j).

This collective account demonstrates that curriculum transformation is best understood as an ongoing, multidimensional conversation. It has no endpoint and is marked by contestation and hope. Perhaps most pointedly, one contributor asserted, "We cannot focus on transformation until we transform our own minds and approaches. Only then can we effectively transform the curriculum" (FGP, 2024l).

An empty signifier?

If the transformation of South African higher education is to be meaningful, there is an urgent need for expressive and eloquent curricula, not simplistic formulations driven by economic and compliance or reporting imperatives. In the absence of a shared definition, curriculum transformation risks being an empty signifier, contributing to the conditions that produce the simulacrum, a representation without substance. Current policy in South Africa is largely neoliberal and instrumentalist. Post-apartheid higher education policy is subservient to what (Badat, 2010) termed human capital imperatives, causing us to lose sight of the broader transformation goals. In this neoliberal paradigm, curriculum and curriculum transformation are technical tools, measured for compliance with policy and criteria rather than generating new and meaningful educational formats, suited to the context in which education happens. The reduction of curriculum to its ability to meet predetermined criteria means that its fundamental nature as living pedagogy becomes buried, a stagnating bureaucratic artefact (for example, the South African Quality Assurance [SAQA] entry for a qualification, or the SER submitted to the CHE). Although satisfying policy requirements and national policy dictates, the curriculum loses its connection to the realities of educational practice, thus performing transformation rather than being education.

Nonetheless, this paper does not assert that curriculum transformation does not happen. Rather, what is in evidence (the formally documented and recorded versions of curriculum) is not what academics or students experience in the realities of their classroom or other learning experiences. Compliance-driven curricula create the added risk of conformity superimposed with the need to demonstrate adherence to, rather than engaging with, the subversive and substantive work of education. The complex and often subversive conversations that characterise a genuinely transformative education in which criticality, reflexivity, embodied

learning, and ecological awareness are present become systematically marginalised by compliance with a set of indicators that are supposed to signal that transformation has occurred. Standardised curriculum formats render the nuanced, the contextual, and the transformative dimensions of education invisible at best, and devalued at worst. What happens in the realities of the educational spaces is disconnected from the formal curriculum, and the simulacrum that exists on paper may satisfy the policy requirements while the actual education or curriculum depends on good luck or chance. The individual academic's good will, their personal pedagogical knowledge and commitment, their willingness to work with or even around the system risks arbitrariness and inconsistency. Curriculum transformation happens where individual academics create it; yet is absent where they cannot or will not, regardless of policy or other dictates.

A posthumanist approach, as Cook (2016) articulated, requires curricula that are contextualised and historicised, that recognise learning as navigation through complex, situated realities. Policy-driven curricula impose standardised frameworks unable to account for the specific conditions, histories, and needs of the parties involved. le Grange and du Preez (2023) referred to this as the ghost of Tyler (1949) and others, where curriculum predetermines learning trajectories to specified ontologically defined outcomes, aligning with set competencies, and capable of standardised measure. du Preez et al. (2022) argued that in the convergence of posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism, a critical posthumanist stance is needed for curriculum enquiry.

Quality assurance mechanisms reinforce the ontology of curriculum as a stable object whose fidelity or quality can be verified through moderation, external examination, and compliance audits (Biesta, 2010). The result is that curriculum documents exist, processes are followed, reviews are conducted but are detached from educational outcomes, and represent education rather than produce it. Baudrillard's (1994) concept of simulacrum, the copy that has lost connection to any original reality, perfectly describes this state where curriculum exists as pure representation, signifying nothing beyond its own existence as policy artifact.

Education results where individual academics salvage educational purpose from the wreckage of compliance; where they leverage their own and their students' agencies, and navigate around constraints to create meaningful learning opportunities—despite the curriculum rather than through it. The argument is clear: the performance of curriculum transformation with no relationship to actual transformation means that what passes for education is a matter of chance. To move beyond this simulacrum requires rejecting curriculum instrumentalism and conceptualising curriculum transformation as meaningful actions able to accommodate the complex, critical, and contextual work needed. Drawing on posthumanist perspectives (Cook 2016) and recent empirical research (Menon et al., 2025), curriculum transformation demands an approach that contextualises and historicises agency, leveraging learning to navigate the world effectively while recognising the complex, often subversive conversations that tend to be marginalised by current compliance-driven practices. Building on Cook's (2016) posthumanist curriculum framework, meaningful transformation requires that we (state, university, academic, and student) move beyond neoliberal instrumentalism. A fundamental

tension in contemporary education, Cook (2016, p. 113) argued, is that although curriculum is “not merely a technical document or a list of learning outcomes but the heart of educational practice,” it has been reduced to exactly such technicalities. The posthumanist curriculum framework Cook proposed provides concrete alternatives to the paradigms that have ossified South African higher education. He identified four curricular imperatives: critical media literacy, critical cultural studies, embodiment, and performative pedagogy. In this way, he argued, the simulacrum of transformation evident in current practices will be addressed. The curricular imperatives he categorised share “a focus on selective permeability” (Cook, 2016, p. 115) designed to teach students what to absorb and what to produce in their engagements with technologies, other cultures, their bodies, and ecosystems. The focus on boundaries and relationships, rather than content delivery, aligns with posthumanism’s fundamental commitment to interconnectivity, challenging the humanist emphasis on individual autonomy that underlies both neoliberal education policy and archetypal curricula in South Africa.

To achieve such change requires complicated conversations (Pinar, 2019), critical dialogue on knowledge, what is included or excluded and why. As le Grange et al. (2024) theorised, such conversations manifest in three overlapping modes. First, reactive responses to immediate crises, secondly, interactive exchanges between distinct agents with predetermined goals, and lastly, intra-active engagements that recognise relational becoming through posthumanist sensibilities. It is the final mode that holds particular promise for South African curriculum transformation because it challenges the centrality of the autonomous individual subject, positioning curriculum work instead as distributed across human and more-than-human actants in non-deterministic ways (le Grange et al., 2024, p. 45). It is more than 40 years since Wynter (1984, p. 19) called on academics to engage in “disenchantment” with “the model of liberal monohumanist Man” and to recognise how “our present struggles with respect to race, class, sex, and . . . the environment, are all differing facets of the central struggle” to reimagine what it means to be human.

The urgency of the need for curriculum transformation in South Africa is amplified by global recognition that traditional education systems are inadequate for addressing contemporary socio-ecological crises. Monroe et al. (2023, p. 351) argued that education systems that leverage “theories, abstractions, and separations” to the disadvantage of complex conversations have contributed to rather than solved environmental problems; they called instead for interdisciplinary approaches that “weave connections” and focus on solutions through active learning in real-world contexts. Monroe et al.’s framework for agency in the Anthropocene demonstrated that meaningful curriculum transformation requires developing the competencies to explain human impacts on Earth’s systems, making informed decisions using diverse evidence sources and systems thinking, and demonstrating hope and respect for diverse perspectives in seeking solutions to socio-ecological crises. It is clear these competencies align with South Africa’s own imperatives of decolonisation, decoloniality, Africanisation, and social justice, and lend themselves readily to explanation beyond anthropocentric frameworks to embrace the posthuman condition (Cook, 2016). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2022, as cited in Monroe et al., 2023, p. 352) recognised (through the 2025 PISA Science Framework) that students globally “know about sustainability and are

concerned with related issues, but do not know how to address them.” This validates the CHE’s research findings about South African students who are in a similar predicament, and the international relevance of reimagining curricula beyond a checklist of graduate attributes towards genuine agency building.

It must be reiterated that definitional chaos is not merely semantic. Without clarity on whether curriculum transformation refers to content, pedagogy, learning outcomes, or to the full academic and student experience, it is nearly impossible to conceptualise, let alone effect, meaningful change or transformation. Menon et al.’s (2025) research found understandably wide variations in how universities reported on transformation in their SERs, with some institutions viewing curriculum reform as compliance with the CHE’s requirements and criteria, others arguing primarily through the lens of employability, with some emphasising decolonisation, and others focusing on technological responsiveness. Across the sector, different interpretations of transformation have ranged from utilitarian responses producing symbolic rather than substantive epistemological reorientation to thorough interrogations of curriculum and the academy. The plurality of views on curriculum transformation is of course a pre-condition of higher education, and a coherent philosophical and pedagogical foundation for understanding what curricula and curriculum transformation should be and can accomplish in contemporary South African higher education may be a utopian ideal. Nonetheless, for curriculum transformation to begin, it is the academics who will either gatekeep traditional disciplines or catalyse transformation through complicated conversations and enactments.

Reactive curriculum conversations have taken prominence at different times, but only during such crisis moments such as the #FeesMustFall protests of 2015–2016, the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions, and recurring demands for decolonisation. For example, the student-led protests of 2015 and 2016, particularly the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements, may have served as critical catalysts that necessitated renewed institutional commitment to curriculum transformation, prompting universities to establish committees, develop frameworks, and engage in critical reflection on the meaning and implementation of transformed curricula (le Grange et al., 2020; Menon & Castrillón, 2019); but whether and to what extent they impacted long-term on epistemologies, pedagogies, and practices is not entirely clear, even 10 years later.

The institutional location problem

Equally troubling is the absence of a clear home for curriculum transformation conversations. The directives offered by national policy and quality frameworks need new conversations to better articulate the present position and the envisaged trajectory of change. The research raises critical questions about where, within universities, discussions about curriculum transformation take place. Is this work led by deputy vice-chancellors for academic affairs, heads of transformation offices, quality assurance units, or academic planning divisions? Without a clear institutional location, curriculum reform risks being fragmented, superficial, or relegated to compliance exercises that satisfy audit requirements without fundamentally altering educational practices.

Structural ambiguity coupled with compliance necessities means that profound conversations about curriculum are frequently subversive, covert, or incidental to the approved curriculum. Complicated discussions about epistemology, power, knowledge production, and pedagogical approaches occur in the margins rather than at the centre of institutional planning and decision-making. The evidence points to a situation where transformation remains largely symbolic, visible in policies, strategic documents, and renamed buildings rather than substantive and embedded in the lived experiences of teaching and learning. In the context of converging institutional and systemic crises, Stein and de Oliveira Andreotti (2025, p. 121) contended that universities can no longer sustain “business as usual” approaches but must engage in difficult, generative conversations about their purpose and responsibilities. Their argument that existing universities are “ill-suited for the worlds to come” (Stein & de Oliveira Andreotti, 2025, p. 126) echoes concerns that South African curriculum policies prioritise skills and employability at the expense of transformative learning. By foregrounding intergenerational and interspecies responsibility, they support the case for deeper, more complicated curricular conversations that resist compliance-driven logics.

The compliance trap

Perhaps most damaging is the way compliance-driven frameworks have come to dominate what is termed curriculum “development” in the South African higher education system. The formal requirements of “constructive alignment” were intended to ensure coherence but in effect, have served to level the conventions and particularities of disciplines, and privilege professional and other accreditation requirements over genuine education. The emphasis on demonstrable outcomes, measurable competencies, and standardised graduate attributes creates what we characterise as archetypal curricula, resulting in fixed templates that, while compliant, may resist the dynamism and contextual responsiveness that transformative education requires.

As the research (Menon et al., 2025) demonstrated, SERs written in response to specific requests and in particular formats are constrained by page limits and the format determined by the guidelines. Writers of SERs have come to expect limits on the depth of institutional reflection possible and to the range of what is considered reportable (depending on whether it meets the requirements or has “appropriate” evidence). Universities work within CHE audit standards and focus areas which, while necessary for external quality assurance, may inadvertently narrow the scope of what counts as curriculum transformation. The result is a system that generates documentation and compliance but struggles to cope with experimentation and innovation and cannot facilitate the complicated conversations that Autio (2014) identified as the essence of genuine education.

Posthumanism and curriculum: Beyond neoliberal instrumentalism

Neoliberalism has profound implications for curriculum. Curriculum is wielded as a tool conceptualised as preparing employees for work, as a mechanism for economic development, or as the production of specific skills aligned with industry needs. Such instrumentalism of

curriculum (or of higher education, broadly) is evident in national policy documents that prioritise graduate attributes, work-integrated learning, and alignment with National Qualifications Framework requirements over questions about the purpose of education itself.

Posthumanism offers an alternative framework for reimagining curriculum. Rather than positioning education as primarily about producing economically productive individuals (as “work ready” and “employable” suggest), posthumanist perspectives emphasise relationality, complexity, and the entanglement of human and non-human actors in knowledge production. Moving past neoliberalism in the postcritical period requires what Smith (2014, p. 51) called “wisdom traditions,” which are approaches that are “deeply political” and constitute acts of “cultural insurrection.” The shift in perspective challenges the binary separations that characterise much curriculum discourse: between theory and practice, knowledge and skills, academic and vocational, local and global, traditional and innovative.

The binary trap: Self and other, being and belonging

Despite stated commitments to transformation, decolonisation, and social justice, curricula in South Africa remain structured along Western epistemological value systems that position African knowledge systems, Indigenous epistemologies, and non-Western perspectives as supplementary or alternative rather than foundational. A binary logic perpetuates the duality of systems, and manifests in various other ways. For example, curricula may include modules on African perspectives, leaving the core unchanged and the knowledge system unchallenged. Decolonisation or Africanisation is rendered an addendum to existing paradigms and not a fundamental decolonial reimagining of knowledge production. Students from marginalised backgrounds are positioned as requiring additional support to succeed in unchanged systems, rather than as holders of valuable knowledge that could transform those systems.

The research revealed just this pattern across numerous institutions. Universities acknowledge the importance of curriculum transformation and report on various initiatives; however, the fundamental architecture of curricula, their epistemological foundations, pedagogical approaches, and assessment practices remain largely unchanged. Transformation is reduced to the addition of content rather than a deep, structural transformation.

The South African context: Constraints and possibilities

South African higher education operates within a complex policy environment that both enables and constrains curriculum transformation. An enabler, for example, is the language policy, which calls for scholarship in and of African languages. By contrast, the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework, the CHE’s qualification standards, the SAQA criteria and requirements for the registration of qualifications, and various professional body accreditation requirements create a regulatory architecture that proscribes and prescribes curriculum. Although the aim is to ensure quality and comparability, these inadvertently limit the scope for institutional and academic agency in curriculum design. The emphasis on constructive alignment, on ensuring that learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment

methods are coherently linked, is the dominant paradigm. While conceptually sound, when combined with the accreditation and registration exercises of the CHE and SAQA, respectively, this approach may remove curriculum from any substantive engagement with questions about knowledge, power, and purpose. As the research suggested (Menon et al., 2025), there is significant dissonance between the literature on curriculum, the experiences of academics and students, and the received curriculum, regardless of how it is delivered.

The legacy of #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall

The #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements sent shockwaves through the sector. Despite two decades of the rhetoric and symbolism of transformation, the protests exposed the continuing dominance of Eurocentric perspectives and attitudes at South African universities. The emphasis on the transformation of access to higher education (demographics) and application of the deficit model to student success had masked the persistence of Western epistemologies. The protests revealed the inadequacy of transformation for students and staff. Students and staff reported experiencing universities as hostile, epistemically violent spaces that continued to marginalise and alienate through curricula that failed to reflect students' realities or validate their knowledge (Ahmed, 2020). The protests made clear that symbolic transformation alone, such as diverse student bodies, Black leadership, and renamed buildings, was insufficient without the substantive transformation of the curriculum or the academy itself.

In 2025, higher education in South Africa remains differentiated. Resources, student demographics, institutional cultures, and historical legacies shape the constraints and enablers for curriculum transformation. Historically advantaged institutions face different challenges to historically disadvantaged institutions, and universities with strong research cultures approach curriculum differently than those with teaching-driven missions. The research into curriculum transformation acknowledges differentiation as a significant variable in curriculum transformation, which takes a different form across institutions despite the national policy framework tending to standardisation (sometimes characterised as equivalence) rather than acknowledging and working with diversity. The 2021 Quality Assurance Framework acknowledged diversity, but it remains to be seen whether flexibility in its operationalisation will result.

Curriculum as complicated conversation

Pinar's (2019, p. 2) conception of the complicated conversations of curriculum provides a productive starting point for reimagining South African higher education curricula:

Engaging in complicated conversation is our professional calling. The concept of calling informs our profession's ethics, our commitment to study, and to teach as we engage in academic research to understand curriculum.

Rather than viewing curriculum as fixed in a set of documents, a list of outcomes, or a sequence of content, a complicated conversation has no presumed answers, nor even presumed conversers. It is premised on a dynamic, dialogic, and context-responsive approach to learning.

Every lesson, every interaction, every assignment becomes an opportunity for complicated engagement with knowledge, power, identity, and possibility. A good example of this is the approach taken to problem-based medical school training, and the successful challenge it posed to then-dominant modes of learning and teaching (de Andrade Gomes et al., 2024).

A full appreciation of the complicated conversations of curriculum has several cascading implications. First, it challenges the notion that curricula can or should be standardised across contexts, or that they can be reduced to a set of generic graduate attributes. The complicated conversations of curriculum are to be replete with social meaning, permeated with values, and consequently transformative of all participants. A conversation is not one-directional, and neither in this view, is a curriculum. Secondly, curriculum is *always* political, regardless of the form it takes. Curriculum involves choices about whose and what knowledge counts, the purposes education serves or should serve, and the futures that are imagined. Thirdly, complicated conversations demand that everyone in the conversation whether academics, students, or other stakeholders, are active participants in curriculum creation. There are no passive recipients or implementers of predetermined curricula. Curriculum follows from and is the complicated conversation, allowing students and academics to go where needed to learn and teach.

Contextualising and historicising agency

Unsurprisingly, the research into curriculum transformation (Menon et al., 2025) affirmed the emphasis on contextualising and historicising agency in curriculum transformation. The implications of this are many, including:

- Student agency: Students are participants in knowledge production. Their experiences, perspectives, and knowledge systems shape curriculum, and are not deficits needing remediation. Spaces where students can meaningfully contribute to the complicated conversations, and where their participation genuinely influences what is taught and how it is taught, are fundamental.
- Academic agency: The current lack of trust in academia must be challenged. Academics must have the freedom to experiment and be supported in their engagements in complicated conversations within their disciplines and across disciplinary boundaries. Only with trust and agency can academics be held accountable for quality. The current emphasis on compliance and standardisation constrains agency, makes learning and teaching technical, and focuses attention away from the learning and teaching relationship. Restoring academic agency requires institutional cultures that value curriculum scholarship, provide time and resources for curriculum development, and recognise this work in promotion and reward systems.
- Institutional agency: Universities' autonomy must be affirmed so that they are to be responsive to the demands, opportunities, challenges, and needs of their specific contexts, to student populations, developing unique institutional missions. Although national standards and qualifications frameworks can serve important purposes, they should not submerge institutional responsiveness and obstruct innovation.

Moving beyond employability

There is clearly value in preparing students for employment. However, the assumption that higher education links directly to “contributing to what works to ensure development, national cohesion or economic growth” is fundamentally flawed (Unterhalter & Allais, 2022, p. 19). As Unterhalter and Allais (2022, p. 18) argued: “many arguments about the public good [of higher education] emerge from the disciplines of Economics and Politics” resulting in “particular ideal types of higher education.” As a result, the instrumentalist approaches of the state reflect the limitations and restrictions above. An alternative is to be found in arguments that “portray the relationship between higher education and the public good as an intrinsic one, where the intellectual, physical and cultural experiences enabled through higher education express and enact the public good” (Unterhalter & Allais, 2022, p. 19). The intrinsic value of higher education is linked by example to “democratisation, critical thinking, active citizenship and reductions in prejudice—that is, these experiences may prefigure forms of universalisation and connection across existing boundaries of inequalities” (Unterhalter & Allais, 2022, p. 19). When the dominant lens through which curriculum is understood is employability, education is instrumentalised and impoverished.

The Menon et al. (2025) research unearthed a multiplicity of tensions between the state’s intended purpose (which defaulted to instrumentalism), and the sense that education has intrinsic value. These tensions ebb and flow depending on institutional contexts, histories, and realities. The higher education sector and the public good are not monolithic: “Like the socioeconomic context, [they are] highly stratified and pluralised” (Unterhalter & Allais 2022, p. 20). A more expansive understanding positions employability as one among several legitimate purposes, recognising that the most meaningful preparation for work in an uncertain future is the development of adaptive capacities, critical consciousnesses, and the ability to navigate complexity, capabilities that emerge from transformative rather than instrumental education.

Transformative learning, by contrast, involves fundamental shifts in perspective, identity, and understanding (Mezirow, 1991). For curricula to enable such transformations, they must challenge taken-for-granted assumptions by not reinforcing existing knowledge hierarchies and power relations. Curricula should create opportunities to question, critique, and reimagine fundamental assumptions about knowledge, society, and self. Curricula must create space for difficult conversations (le Grange et al., 2024), often uncomfortable, confronting, and unsettling. They require engaging with histories of colonialism, apartheid, inequality, and epistemic violence, demanding recognition of how current practices perpetuate these histories and consideration of alternatives. Curriculum transformation requires genuine epistemic pluralism—not the mere addition of African content but recognising multiple knowledge systems as equally valid, creating pedagogies that work with such plurality. Education develops critical consciousness, the students’ capacity to analyse power relations, recognise structural inequalities, and imagine alternatives. Curricula cannot be neutral or apolitical but must explicitly engage with questions of justice, equity, and social change.

Conclusion: A call for insurrection

Based on the research and the conceptual framework developed in this paper, several institutional strategies emerge as crucial for enabling meaningful curriculum transformation. Cook (2016, p. 152) warned against the dangers of “overmining” (viewing problems as too large for individual action). Higher education institutions should actively prevent the echo chamber in which the dominant epistemologies, perspectives, and voices are reinforced and where critical thinking is subsumed by the rhetoric of transformation. Universities must identify where curriculum conversations happen and ensure adequate resourcing, authority, and cross-institutional participation. This work cannot be relegated to transformation offices or quality assurance units working in isolation, but must be integrated into all academic planning, faculty development, institutional governance, and student engagement activities. A shared language and understanding may neither be possible nor desirable, however sharing an understanding of what curriculum transformation means and entails is essential and requires ongoing dialogue, professional development, and collaborative curriculum scholarship.

At the systemic level, policy shifts to support meaningful curriculum transformation and move beyond compliance are needed. While quality assurance and standards are important, the current emphasis on compliance may be counterproductive. Policies should create space for innovation, experimentation, and context-responsive curriculum development over standardisation. Curriculum scholarship should be supported and a shared lexicon of curriculum that respects disciplinary and institutional differences developed. At the level of teaching and learning practice, several approaches support the vision of curriculum as complicated conversation, including dialogic pedagogy, contextualised learning, and other approaches to connecting curriculum to students’ lives, communities, and contexts.

In conclusion, the South African approach to curriculum has tended to conceptualise it prescriptively, as an artefact in a fixed document (or in a curriculum design). Posthumanist scholarship, however, troubles this representationalist logic, arguing that curriculum does not pre-exist its enactment but rather emerges from the intra-active entanglements of human and non-human actors, materials, spaces, and temporalities (Barad, 2007; Snaza et al., 2014). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987/2008) concept of assemblage, curriculum might be understood less as an arborescent structure and more as a rhizomatic multiplicity, which emerges as a dynamic constellation of forces that continuously differentiate in practice.

The classical Indian raga offers a particularly productive analogy for reimagining the relationship between structure and emergence. A raga is neither a fixed composition nor structureless improvisation but rather, a melodic framework comprising prescribed ascending and descending note patterns (aroha/avaroha), characteristic phrases (pakad), microtonal inflections (shruti), temporal associations (morning/evening ragas), and affective moods (rasa) that together constitute a generative grammar for improvisation (Viswanathan & Allen, 2004). Crucially, ragas resist complete Western musical notation existing instead, in embodied, oral-tradition knowledge transmitted through practice and learning. The analogy deliberately disrupts Western epistemological dominance in curriculum discourse where symphonic

metaphors that privilege composer authority, reproducibility, and notational capture predominate. Raga pedagogy (if one can term it that) demonstrates how rigorous frameworks coexist alongside radical contextual responsiveness. Each performance of a raga differs from every other, not as a deviation from an ideal form but as an ontologically unique actualisation within mutually agreed constraints. In raga pedagogy, quality is assessed not by the integrity of the reproduction of a master recording, but through the performer's capacity for contextually attuned improvisation, affective resonance, and skilful navigation of traditional structures while generating novelty.

Extending this analogy to curriculum provokes fundamental questions about quality assurance regimes that privilege standardisation, alignment, and reproducibility. If we take seriously Barad's (2007) agential realism wherein phenomena emerge through material-discursive intra-actions rather than representing pre-existing realities, then the curriculum-as-score is clearly inadequate. The written curriculum document, like musical notation, may signal possibilities but cannot encompass the teaching-learning encounter, which is always co-constituted by pedagogical actors, classroom architectures, digital technologies, affective intensities, and unpredictable becomings (de Freitas & Palmer, 2016). Non-human elements are never passive instruments for human curricular intentions but agential participants that materially shape what counts as knowledge, who can know, and how learning unfolds (Taylor & Hughes, 2016). Yet quality assurance frameworks typically operate as if curriculum were a symphony score requiring faithful conductor-led reproduction, rather than a raga inviting contextually responsive improvisation within rigorous parameters (Osberg & Biesta, 2008). A posthumanist curriculum ethics thus attends not to adherence with the notated score but to the quality of relational improvisation within-and-against frameworks, asking: "What material-semiotic-affective conditions cultivate pedagogical performances that are simultaneously rigorous and radically open to difference?" Such a reframing demands policy and quality processes enabling not fidelity but responsiveness, not reproduction but creative imbrication to context. Writing about complicated conversations in curriculum, le Grange (2018, p. 6) argued that they "do not conform to predetermined outcomes, but, as in the case of improvisational jazz, produce something new and transform those engaged in the conversation."

South African higher education is at a critical juncture. The research into curriculum transformation reveals that despite policy imperatives, universities have largely failed to engage in the complex, difficult conversations necessary to achieve substantive change (CHE, 2017). The silence around curriculum, beyond compliance with regulatory and quality frameworks, reflects what Ball (2003) identified as the constraining effects of performativity, where academics are perforce preoccupied with predetermined outcomes rather than with interrogating the epistemological and ontological assumptions embedded in their curriculum structures. Moreover, le Grange (2016) argued that meaningful curriculum transformation requires acts of epistemic disobedience, with academic agents who actively resist colonial knowledge frameworks rather than simply diversifying content within existing structures. As Vorster and Quinn (2017) observed, academics face significant institutional and personal barriers to such transformative work, particularly when curriculum is reduced to technical specifications and graduate attributes that can be audited and measured. In the context of

converging institutional and systemic crises, Stein and de Oliveira Andreotti (2025, p. 121) contended that universities can no longer sustain “business as usual” approaches but must engage in difficult, generative conversations about their purpose and responsibilities. Reconceptualising curriculum as a complicated conversation (Pinar, 2019) rather than a predetermined blueprint requires acknowledging academics as *transformative intellectuals* (Giroux, 2020), agents capable of creating spaces for profound questioning of what knowledge counts, whose knowledge is legitimised, and how learning might transform students, academics, knowledge domains, and society. Posthumanist perspectives further complicate the notion of academic agency, suggesting that transformation emerges not from autonomous individual actors but through relational entanglements between human and non-human actors, institutional structures, and material conditions (Barad, 2007; Taylor & Bayley, 2019). Curricula must be understood as distinct from pedagogy and assessment, requiring academics to engage with disciplinary knowledge structures while simultaneously recognising their role as knowledge mediators who can destabilise taken-for-granted boundaries (Luckett & Shay, 2017). This framing challenges the simulacrum of curriculum as lists of outcomes or competencies, instead positioning curriculum transformation as an ongoing, iterative process of epistemic and relational work that exceeds compliance-driven practices and opens space for the kind of complicated conversations that South African higher education urgently needs.

Wynter’s (2003, p. 258) analysis exposes the fundamental tension between

securing well-being of the present ethnoclass (i.e. Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioural autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves.

This tension is particularly evident in curricula organised around graduate attributes and employability outcomes that assume anthropocentric, individualist models of learning. Posthumanist interventions challenge the assumption that “only humans have education” and call for decentring “the human as the primary object of all intellectual endeavour” (du Preez et al., 2023, p. 1), instead promoting relational, context-responsive curricula that recognise learning as emerging through entanglements between human and non-human actors, institutional structures, and ecological systems (Barad, 2007). When curriculum is reduced to individual competencies serving market imperatives, it reproduces Wynter’s (2003) *overrepresentation of Man*, a conception that claims universality while serving western bourgeois interests and foreclosing the cognitive and behavioural autonomy necessary for transformative change.

Moving forward requires acknowledging the complexity of curriculum transformation, creating conditions for the deep, difficult conversations that have been marginalised by current approaches. It requires destabilising neoliberal instrumentalism, recognising multiple knowledge systems, and restoring agency to students, academics, and institutions. Most fundamentally, it requires recognising that curriculum is not a technical document or an approved list of learning outcomes, but a space in which transformation happens or is forestalled. Advancing curriculum transformation requires “collective response-ability”

enacted through “intra-active complicated conversations” that are “slow, immanent, and affirmative” (le Grange et al., 2024, pp. 46–47). This ethical orientation, combined with Cook’s (2016) concrete curricular imperatives, offers pathways beyond the compliance-driven frameworks that currently ossify South African higher education. Such work involves “pushing the limits of complicated conversations” in ways that are “discomforting yet powerful as we constantly revisit our ethical obligations” (le Grange et al., 2024, p. 47). The research demonstrates the urgency of this work with the frameworks identified providing both philosophical grounding and practical direction for the journey ahead.

The implications of continuing as before are significant. As the research demonstrates, the absence of shared understandings, the lack of clear institutional homes for curriculum work, and the dominance of compliance frameworks are frustrating academics, limiting meaningful change, and perpetuating the inequalities that transformation policies aim to address (Menon et al., 2025). The time for complicated conversations about curriculum in contemporary South Africa is now long overdue. The question is whether the South African higher education sector will embrace with urgency this complexity or continue with the convoluted archetypes that promise transformation while delivering stasis. The sector is faced with a concatenation of pressures currently. Curriculum has always faced varied pressures, some of which might be familiar, and some of which will not have been conceived of. Do we stop circling around convoluted archetypes and lean into the discomfort of curriculum as complicated conversations, in the belief that it is only in genuine dialogue and active debate that transformation can begin?

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