# Rethinking the curriculum and diversity in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** The increasing diversity of students entering higher education has amplified the demand for a more inclusive and representative curriculum. Higher education institutions (HEIs) must adapt their curricula to meet the needs of diverse stakeholders while fostering social cohesion as a means to promote inclusivity. This study, conducted as a desktop review, explores the relationship between curriculum transformation and diversity within the higher education sector. The research is framed by Diversity Pedagogy Theory (DPT) and Global Diversity Management (GDM) to analyze the role of multiculturalism in higher education. Findings highlight that diversity and multiculturalism are critical drivers of transformation in HEIs. However, the legacy of apartheid, which used cultural, linguistic, racial, and social differences to justify exclusionary policies, continues to influence perceptions of diversity. Multicultural education emphasizes equal learning opportunities for all students, and institutions that cultivate inclusive environments contribute to both academic success and students' personal and professional development. The study recommends that HEIs adopt a proactive approach to integrating diversity into educational spaces. Academics must be equipped to create transformative learning experiences that foster critical consciousness and social awareness among students. Despite progress, addressing historical inequalities remains a pressing issue, requiring HEIs to actively engage in systemic transformation. Calls for diversity and inclusion must extend beyond local contexts, embracing a global perspective to ensure meaningful and lasting change in higher education.

**Keywords:** diversity, higher education, curriculum, multiculturalism, transformation

## Introduction

Student demographics in higher education (HE) are rapidly evolving due to increasing massification and internationalization (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020). In recent years, calls for greater diversity in HE has intensified, highlighting the need for more inclusive institutional practices. The July 2021 unrest further underscored the urgency of embracing diversity, as social tensions and divisions emerged across various demographic and cultural boundaries. This has reinforced the importance of intercultural communication, social cohesion, and diversity initiatives within educational institutions to address the complex challenges associated with an increasingly diverse student body. According to Phillips (2019), diversity encompasses a broad range of inherent and sociocultural differences that shape individuals' perspectives and experiences. These dimensions include gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality, age, ability, class, religion, language, culture, and values, among others. In universities, diversity is often classified into four key areas: representation, institutional climate and intergroup relations, curriculum and scholarship, and institutional values and structures (Phillips, 2019). However, Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill (2020) argue that while student populations are diversifying rapidly, higher education institutions are adapting at a much slower pace, leading to persistent inequities. As a result, marginalized student groups face greater challenges in achieving academic success compared to their more privileged counterparts. A diverse curriculum is essential for addressing these disparities and preparing graduates with the knowledge and competencies needed to navigate a multicultural world. This includes incorporating diversity-focused fields of study, sequencing diversity-related content within programmes, equipping faculty with inclusive pedagogical strategies, and ensuring that students have meaningful opportunities to engage with diverse perspectives. Ultimately, higher education must transform its

curriculum to better serve its stakeholders, foster social cohesion, and drive meaningful and lasting diversity within academic institutions.

**Diversity and the curriculum**

Vandeyar (2020) highlights that the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements were catalysed by the controversy surrounding the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, igniting broader discussions on decolonization and structural reform within South African universities. This sparked widespread curriculum transformation efforts across campuses, leading to the establishment of committees such as the Curriculum Transformation Committee, which was tasked with operationalizing these changes. Academics were required to reassess and revise their study materials and teaching approaches to align with decolonization efforts. However, despite increasing enrolment from historically marginalized students, concerns remain about whether universities are perpetuating social inequalities by failing to adequately address the needs of this growing student demographic (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020). There is a pressing need to re-evaluate how higher education experiences can become more inclusive in fostering diversity and social cohesion.

Chouari (2016) emphasizes that cultural diversity has become a crucial aspect of modern education due to the increasing multicultural nature of classrooms worldwide. Unlike monocultural settings, where students share common backgrounds, diverse classrooms present unique challenges that require educators with specialized communication and interaction skills. In regions like South Africa, where the number of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students is growing, academics must be better equipped to navigate these complexities, particularly at the university level. Cross (2004) observes that South Africa's social, cultural, linguistic, religious, and racial diversity is increasingly reflected within higher education institutions. As a result, concepts such as diversity, diversification, and diversity issues, which have long been central to American academic discourse, are now integral to discussions on higher education transformation in South Africa. Universities are addressing these challenges within the broader transformation agenda, which influences areas such as student access, faculty recruitment, academic programmes, research, and the overall learning environment.

Diversity is a fundamental component of multiculturalism, but multiculturalism extends further by promoting the recognition and appreciation of diverse contributions and perspectives (Phillips, 2019). In the South African context, however, both multiculturalism and diversity are deeply intertwined with the country's apartheid history (Harper & Badsha, 2000). Phillips (2019) underscores the importance of an institutional approach to studying diversity, arguing that it should take into account specific societal contexts, embedded social mechanisms, and underlying values and beliefs to prevent overgeneralization.

Phillips (2019) also asserts that diversity and multiculturalism are increasingly shaping higher education. These terms are often used interchangeably, as they both emphasize the inclusion of diverse populations and their contributions. However, South Africa's apartheid regime reinforced negative perceptions of diversity by justifying its racially exclusionary policies through cultural, linguistic, and social differences. Multicultural education aims to rectify these historical injustices by ensuring that all students, regardless of gender, social class, ethnicity, or cultural background, have equal opportunities to learn (Chouari, 2016). Harper and Badsha (2000) stress that achieving a nationally coordinated approach to campus diversity requires redefining, reevaluating, and reaching a collective understanding of diversity within the South African context. Diversity has traditionally been associated with race, gender, and culture, but recent research expands this definition to include factors such as age, physical attributes, sexual orientation, ethnic and religious backgrounds, socio-economic status, birthplace, education, and political affiliations.

Vandeyar (2020) argues that as universities enrol a growing number of culturally diverse students, the demand for academics who can effectively engage with these students has increased. An educator's ability to recognize their own belief systems and value structures, alongside those of their students, significantly influences how successfully they navigate diverse classroom dynamics. Thomas and Maree (2021) note that HEIs serve racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse student bodies. Institutional responses to diversity and curriculum transformation have been shaped by three key factors:

- Market-driven pressures, often influenced by financial constraints and institutional sustainability.
- Evolving knowledge production models that affect academic programmes; and
- Moral and cultural considerations linked to the ongoing transformation of higher education (Cross, 2004).

Universities that foster inclusive learning environments not only enhance academic performance but also prepare students for success in postgraduate studies and professional careers. Within higher education, the student-academic-curriculum relationship is embedded in historical, political, social, and educational contexts. Addressing

transformation in one of these areas without considering the others may limit the effectiveness of change. Although student demographics have shifted significantly and there has been a strong push for curriculum decolonization, little attention has been given to ensuring that academics are equipped to deliver this curriculum effectively.

A key concern raised by students during protest movements was that certain curricula are still taught in oppressive environments by educators who display demeaning behaviour, unprofessional conduct, and discriminatory practices (Vandeyar, 2020). Academics are not just passive conveyors of knowledge but are shaped by their identities, values, beliefs, and lived experiences, all of which influence their teaching. Thus, they should act as agents of educational transformation who foster social cohesion. Recognizing and addressing cultural diversity in the classroom requires educators to consider various factors that influence students' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours, including:

- Race, gender, and age, which shape self-perception and peer interactions;
- Ethnicity, which reflects cultural heritage and national identity;
- Religion, encompassing belief systems and moral values;
- Language, where linguistic barriers should not become barriers to education;
- Socio-economic status, influencing educational access and experiences; and
- LGBTQIA+ identities, which contribute to diverse perspectives and lived experiences.
- Thomas and Maree (2021) emphasize that students from backgrounds that differ from the dominant institutional culture may experience alienation. This is particularly evident in racially diverse student populations, where academic experiences are often shaped by language and institutional culture. Such disparities challenge notions of equal opportunity, meritocracy, and race neutrality, demonstrating that academic success is often racialized, with some students benefiting while others face systemic disadvantages (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Danowitz and Tuitt (2011) advocate for curriculum diversification as a means of fostering an inclusive learning environment. According to Phillips (2019), diversity can be integrated into curricula in three ways:
- The Additive Approach, which introduces multicultural perspectives as optional elements;
- The Integrative Approach, which incorporates multiculturalism as a core component of the curriculum; and
- The Transformative Approach, which positions multiculturalism as the foundation of curriculum design.
- Regardless of the model used, a diverse curriculum aims to provide an accurate, intellectually honest perspective, preparing students to thrive in multicultural societies and meet diverse learning needs. As Chouari (2016) suggests, diversity in the curriculum is a pedagogical strategy that connects education with the ongoing process of democratization. Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill (2020) argue that rather than treating diversity initiatives as isolated projects, HEIs must adopt a cohesive, flexible institutional approach that fosters sustained and meaningful engagement with diversity at all levels of education.

**Theories**

**Diversity Pedagogy Theory (DPT)**

Sheet (2009) describes Diversity Pedagogy Theory (DPT) as a framework that highlights the intrinsic link between culture and cognition in the teaching-learning process. Essentially, effective educators must recognize the critical role of culture in shaping pedagogy. According to Sheet (2009), DPT asserts that culturally inclusive educators:

- Observe students' cultural behaviour patterns to identify individual and group competencies and skills.
- Apply this knowledge to inform teaching strategies, ensuring that instruction aligns with students' cultural backgrounds.

Academics who are culturally competent should not only facilitate learning but also be adaptable, adjusting their instructional methods to create inclusive and effective learning environments. The ability of an educator to progress from novice to expert in cultural competency depends on their willingness to embrace diversity as an integral part of education and actively expand their understanding of the cultures represented in their classroom.

DPT equips educators with pedagogical tools to foster inclusive teaching by developing culturally responsive attitudes, knowledge, and instructional methods. This theory interconnects culture, cognition, and education, ensuring that classroom practices are informed by a deep understanding of how cultural factors influence students' social and cognitive development. Ultimately, diversity pedagogy acknowledges the active role of students in their own learning, emphasizing identity, social interaction, and a culturally supportive environment as essential components of academic success.

**Figure 1: Intersections of Diversity Pedagogy**



*Source: Sheets (2009)*
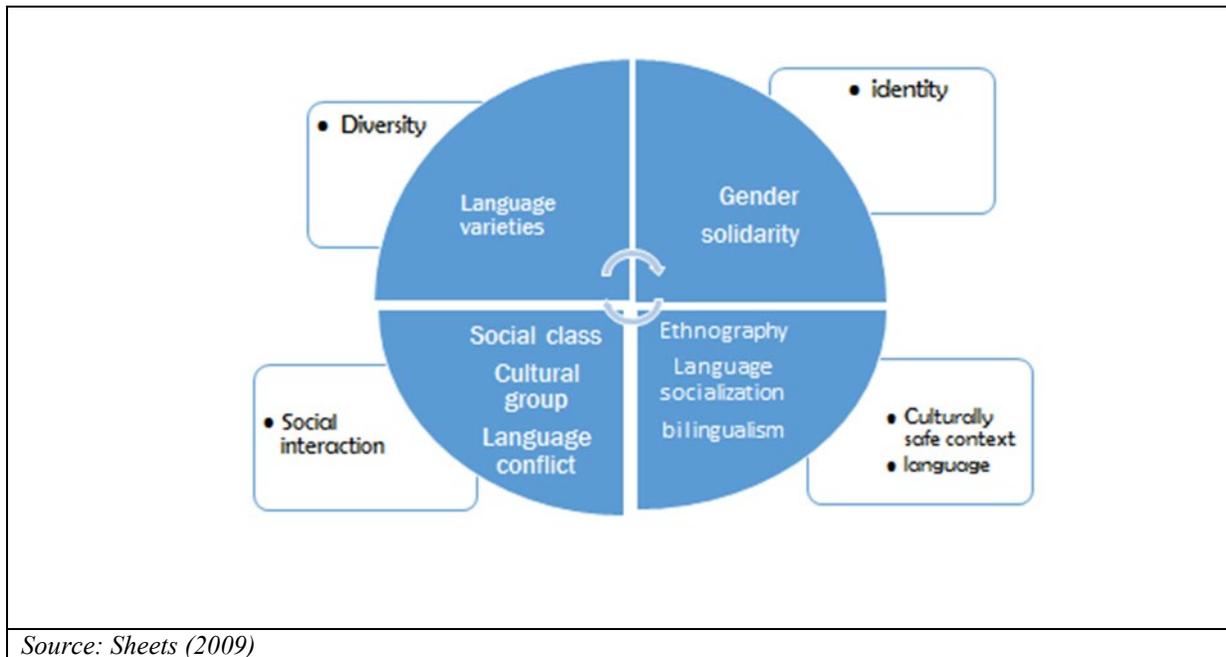
**Global diversity management (GDM)**

Higher education institutions worldwide face the complex challenge of aligning their diversity management strategies across national networks, as interpretations, approaches, and outcomes of diversity initiatives vary across different contexts. Global Diversity Management (GDM) has emerged as a response to this need for internationally coordinated efforts in fostering diversity. GDM is a strategic management approach aimed at leveraging diversity within organizations. Nishii and Ozbilgin (2007) expanded on this concept by developing an inclusive model designed to address gaps and inefficiencies in existing global diversity management programmes. This model is based on three key principles:

- Inclusive organizational participation: GDM promotes the active inclusion of global units to ensure that employees feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute meaningfully to organizational processes and decision-making. In the context of higher education, empowering academics as employees enables them to act as agents of change, who in turn empower students.
- Cultural sensitivity and HR flexibility: Effective diversity management requires flexibility in HR practices, balancing standardized policies with localized cultural considerations. This ensures that institutional structures accommodate cultural differences while maintaining diversity as a core value. Academics and students alike must embody these practices to foster inclusivity within higher education institutions.
- Context-specific diversity goals: Diversity strategies should acknowledge socio-historical power imbalances and set locally defined objectives to address historical discrimination and inequality. A holistic, culturally responsive approach must be adopted at all levels of the institution, from management to faculty and students, ensuring that diversity goals are unified and effectively implemented.

**Figure 2: A Process Model of GDM**



Source: Nishii and Özbilgin (2007, p. 1887)
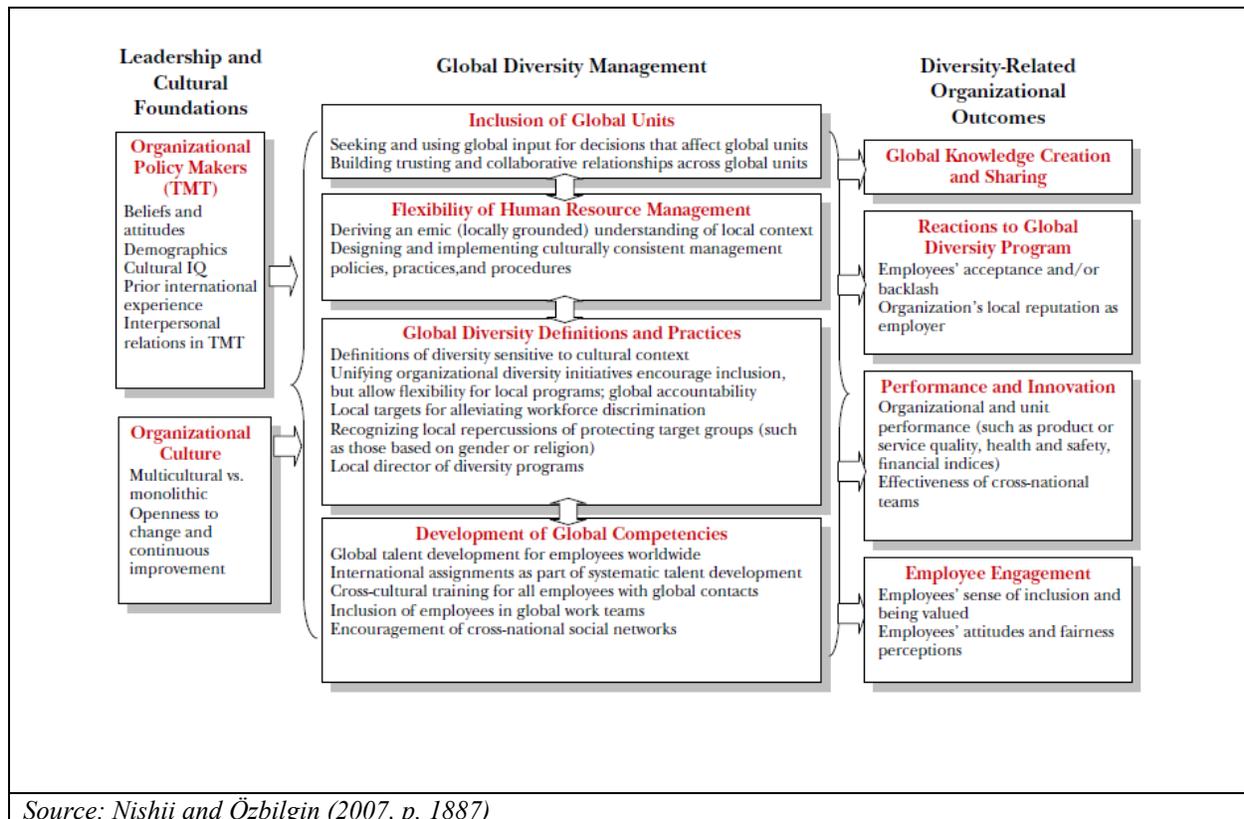
The Diversity Pedagogy Theory (DPT) and the Global diversity management (GDM) theory can assist collectively in the following ways:

- Empowering academics as diversity champions: Training and mentoring academics in DPT-based teaching practices will enable them to become key advocates for cultural diversity and awareness. This, in turn, will foster tolerance and inclusivity among students both on and off campus.
- Embracing a holistic view of diversity: By integrating diverse epistemological perspectives, all stakeholders can contribute to a multifaceted understanding of diversity—beyond race and culture—to include sexual identity, socio-economic backgrounds, and individuals with disabilities.
- Institutional accountability for diversity: Higher education institutions must ensure that all stakeholders actively engage in diversity initiatives, with clear accountability measures aligned with the institution's diversity policies and organizational culture.
- Tailoring diversity management to institutional needs: HEIs should customize diversity management programs to fit their unique institutional contexts. Regular policy reviews and annual assessments will help measure progress and refine strategies.
- Enhancing cultural competency and representation: Institutions should implement cultural competency initiatives while also diversifying staff and student populations, ensuring that diversity is reflected at all levels.

**Discussion and Recommendations**

Culture influences various academic subjects, including religion, language, and identity, as these elements are deeply rooted in cultural expression. Academics play a crucial role in fostering an environment where students feel a sense of belonging by recognizing and valuing diverse cultures within the classroom. While institutions such as the University of Zululand may not be highly culturally diverse in terms of student demographics, their faculty members come from a range of cultural backgrounds, presenting an opportunity for inclusive and culturally responsive teaching. Vandeyar (2020) advocates for a proactive and compassionate approach to diversity in education. Creating inclusive educational spaces requires actively incorporating student perspectives and ensuring that they feel heard and valued.

Compassionate engagement extends beyond kindness and empathy to include a deep sense of responsibility in addressing student challenges. Research on student engagement suggests that equalizing access to learning in higher education requires treating students as active participants in their education, rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020). When students are empowered through staff-student partnerships, they take ownership of their educational journey and actively contribute to shaping their learning experiences (Chouari, 2016). This approach redefines teaching and learning as a shared, collaborative process, where decision-making power is distributed between academics and students.

Thomas and Maree (2021) emphasize the importance of integrating African languages into university curricula and instructional systems. They argue that HEIs must allocate resources to support the use of African languages in academia, both as a commitment to transformation and as a Constitutionally mandated responsibility. A truly multilingual education system would legitimize African languages as mediums of knowledge and enable African students to excel in higher education without feeling pressured to assimilate linguistically or culturally. Additionally, institutions must actively promote inter-ethnic cohesion to counter ethnic bias and discrimination within the higher education space.

Danowitz and Tuitt (2011) stress that effective pedagogy should embrace diverse student identities and incorporate inclusive teaching practices. This involves:

- Supporting students' intellectual and social development by designing academic programmes that cater to the specific context and needs of diverse learners.
- Developing and utilizing learning resources that foster student engagement, ensuring an environment where students are challenged academically while also contributing to collective knowledge development.
- Acknowledging cultural diversity in the classroom and leveraging these differences to enhance the overall learning experience.
- Creating an inclusive and welcoming learning environment where diversity is actively engaged as part of individual and collaborative learning.

Academics must be equipped to fully engage students by creating transformative educational experiences that cultivate critical consciousness (Vandeyar, 2020). Critical consciousness refers to an individual's ability to understand their social and political realities, recognizing systemic inequalities and their root causes. When students develop this awareness, they become more attuned to issues of social justice, race, and equity within their education. Encouraging critical thinking in this way allows students to form deeper connections with their learning, making their academic journey more meaningful and impactful (Vandeyar, 2020).

## Conclusion

South African campuses have embarked upon a wide range of initiatives to foster and respond to the changes within South African society while preparing students for the realities of increasing globalisation. There is a slow but steady redirecting of student bodies and staff to reflect the demographics of a South African society. There is still an active need for increased awareness to address the social imbalances inherited from apartheid and the need to be responsive to wider social needs. Calls for transformation and diversity within HEI's must incorporate academics and students to be actively engaged and bring about systematic change and embrace diversity not just locally but within a global context. The handling of diversity will be a contentious issue for years to come, during which upheavals and changes in educational philosophy and practice will still be part of South Africans' lives. To handle cultural diversity effectively in education, academics need to recognise the validity of differences. It requires a reappraisal of personal and institutional ideologies and perceptions, and a frank conviction and dedication to facilitate and manage learner diversity. It's up to us as academics to a create a place of self-cultivation and identity construction through cultivating a human culture grounded in the spirit of Ubuntu - 'I am because we are'.

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