






# The politics of knowledge in South African universities: Students' perspectives



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Knowledge-making in South African universities is set up and framed in particular ways, with a Euro-centric bias. We argue that many of the contributions that African first year entering students could make to this process of knowledge-making are dis-abled, leading to alienation. In this article, we argue for a different perspective and approach to teaching and learning in the humanities. Former Extended Studies students from a South African university have worked collaboratively in a knowledge-making project, and using data generated from this, suggest different kinds of environments and strategies for more inclusive teaching and learning. Using an African feminist theoretical and methodological lens, we consider alternative ways of knowing, and recognition that supports powerful senses of belonging and agency, using examples from student experiences of an Extended Studies humanities programme. We contrast this with how humanities programmes are experienced by some first-year students at the university, sometimes with tragic consequences. Finally, we recommend pedagogic, curricula and extra-curricular changes that can be made, to realise the possibilities of decolonised knowledge-making that is more relevant and inclusive. The authors believe that the ideas around decolonising knowledge that are explored here are more broadly applicable and necessary.

**Contribution:** The article contributes to the conversation on decolonising the humanities curriculum, by including students' experiences, concerns, and suggestions.

**Keywords:** African feminism; decolonial; knowledge-making; university; first-year students.

## Introduction: The context, the question and the project

Knowledge-making in universities is shaped by ideas about knowledge that have been developed over centuries, mostly in the imperial West (Moletsane 2015). Our study considers the implications of this in a small South African university, where in 2021 the majority of first-year students were black and from lower-income group families and qualified for the state-supported National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). It is safe to say that in the most unequal country in the world (Sguazzin 2021), with the highest percentage of youth unemployment (Flanagan 2021), there are important contributions to these and other social problems which are anticipated from the relatively small percentage of young people who find themselves in South African universities. In this article, Rhodes University (RU) is used as a case study to consider how to reframe how we think about knowledge to be decolonised, inclusive, relevant and sustainable. Rhodes University is a small, formerly white, state university in South Africa, where 88% of the undergraduate student population is black people (RU Digest of Statistics 2022). It will use the reflections of former Extended Studies (ES) students who were engaged in a knowledge-making project in 2020–2021. The ES programme is part of a national intervention to increase access to previously disadvantaged groups (CHE 2013). It is an academic support programme where students are provided with additional augmented support for their two first-year subjects – in this case, Political and International Studies 1, and Sociology 1. The ES class is usually about 30–40 students, and we see each other for five double periods each week. The article considers pedagogy (ways of teaching), curriculum (content and assessment) and organisational context as the mutually constitutive components that affect this kind of knowledge-making.

## Research methods and design

The knowledge-making project, *With Dreams in Our Hands* (WDIOH), that gave rise to the findings in this article was set up during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) lockdown in South

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Africa in 2020 (for more details on the project, see Knowles 2021). The project was part of a PhD (Knowles 2023) and former ES students were invited to be part of the project through an open Facebook post. Frustrated with ways in which the author felt ES and other students are marginalised in the university system, the project's aim was to set up a platform for knowledge-making that recognised students as legitimate knowledge-makers. The project was ethically run, using principles of African feminism (Mkabela 2005) and permitted by the Education Faculty Ethics Committee. The 24 former ES student participants who volunteered for the project are scattered across South Africa – some are still students (undergraduate and postgraduate), some are working and some are in-between. We collaborated in the qualitative knowledge-making project, guided by African feminist methodology principles (Knowles 2021; Ntseane 2015). Working online over 6 months, through a series of workshops, we firstly came up with topics we felt were relevant to the times. Secondly, the project participants responded to one of four final topics, according to the guidelines drawn up collaboratively in our online workshop. Once these responses were submitted, we anonymously reviewed each other's work (two or three each), again according to the guidelines agreed upon in online workshops. We reflected on the process of writing and reviewing and the content of the submissions in a further set of workshops. We then volunteered to become part of writing (among other forms of meaning-making and dissemination) teams to address the topics in more depth, using the submissions, reviews and workshop transcriptions as data. The authors of this article are two undergraduate and two postgraduate students at Rhodes University and our ES lecturer. Over the past year, through nine online workshops and tasks in between, we scrutinised the submissions and transcriptions using reflexive African feminist analysis to find themes and compare claims that people made, looking for similarities and differences. We used empathy and openness in our readings and discussions, recognising that experience is a valid form of knowing, which people experience differently depending on their context and looking for connections between them. These are distinctly African feminist ways of working with knowledge (Ntseane 2011). We worked together online and on our own in between workshops to bring our individual voices to the process of writing, critique each other's work and build our argument for this article. Our positionality as participants in the project and located in a web of power arrangements was carefully and reflexively navigated, using individual and group reflections to remind ourselves of our political, intellectual and ethical responsibilities (see Knowles 2021). What we have produced from this process is, we believe, an African feminist praxis and a contribution to knowledge about inclusive teaching, learning and research. The findings from the project are ongoing and the subject of future articles, and this article sets the tone for them. It demonstrates the kind of knowledge that can be produced by an Afrocentric and student-centred pedagogy and practice that began for us in ES classes and continued for the duration of the project, even though constrained by pandemic lockdown conditions.

This article will address the politics of knowledge – firstly, by discussing different ways of knowing and being that students bring with them when entering the university and what we imagine knowledge could be in universities; secondly, by contrasting this with how knowledge is set up and legitimised in university humanities programmes, using our experiences at Rhodes University. It will look at how the ES programme provided an alternative space to the mainstream and what kinds of recognition and support this encouraged. Finally, it will make recommendations about what could change to make knowledge-making more inclusive and relevant.

## Different ways of knowing and what can be imagined

The question of 'what can be imagined in how we think of knowledge?' is partly addressed by Luckett (2016:416) when she poses the question: 'what must the world be like for black students at a post-colonial university?' She writes in response to protesters' anger and their demands in the 2015 student protests in South Africa, calling for decoloniality and curricula that centred the experiences of (poor, black) students and Africa. Lewis and Baderoon draw on the work of Collins to suggest 'seeing from below' (Collins in Lewis & Baderoon 2021:2–3) as a way to see the world differently. They argue that these perspectives and understandings 'speak not only about and to – but beyond – their own locations' (2021:3). This has been our strategy in the WDIQH project and in the writing of this article.

Lander (2000) and Chavunduka (1995) have argued that Western views of knowledge, since their introduction in Africa and other non-Western societies, have failed to understand or include an encompassing, holistic way of knowing and knowledge production. The current problem with educational structures that have inherited this system is that their knowledge is based on cultural values that are different from those existing in most of the African indigenous societies and that shape peoples' ways of knowing and being (Lewis & Baderoon 2021). This is a complex challenge in that, firstly, the institutional cultures of all universities everywhere will be challenging to some; secondly, it is the nature of universities to challenge students to bring about new learning and ways of learning; and thirdly, the binaries of what is Western and what is African are often blurred. Ndlovu (2018) addresses some of these conundrums, arguing that 'crafting a different future for the African subject' involves conscientisation of the chains of coloniality, in order to withdraw from and transform the 'structural system of colonial domination' (p. 110). This article is a contribution to this work.

The authors argue that how we could foster knowledge in the country, and in universities, that allows people to be recognised and to thrive is by working with knowledge that speaks to who they are in the most holistic sense. Knowledge that speaks to their political, social, economic, cultural and spiritual communities helps them to better understand their backgrounds and futures and enables criticality (Hames

2021). The authors argue for knowledge that is collective, spiritual, transformative and generative – the knowledge that ‘does not only counter racist and patriarchal world views; it envisions new ways of being human and is therefore relevant to all’ (Lewis & Baderoon 2021:3).

Despite problematic practices and inadequate resources in the state schooling system (see Amnesty International’s report of 2021, *Broken and Unequal*), students come to university with prior experience of life, knowledge and ways of knowing. The authors argue that their presence at university deserves recognition that embraces diversity of experiences, knowledge and pedagogy to form more inclusive and relevant curricula. Heleta (2016:2) observes that universities have not done much to welcome ‘different bodies and traditions of knowledge and knowledge-making in new and exploratory ways’. And as Heleta (2016) suggests, lecturers make assumptions about who their students are and fail to adjust their pedagogy to a demographic beyond their own comfort zones. The implications are that first-year students are treated as though they come to university lacking moral and cultural maturity, and as blank slates and empty vessels, students are dependent on the university to fill them with knowledge to address the deficiency (Shahjahan, Wagner & Wane 2009:64). The tragic consequence is that alternative ways of knowing, teaching and making knowledge are too easily excluded or marginalised. The extent of this exclusion hinders many first-year black students in their ability to resonate, understand and reciprocate. It is set to erase indigenous knowledge as though there is no place for the kind of knowledge passed on by grandmothers and grandfathers through storytelling, riddles and idioms in the university space. We argue that it does not have to be this way.

African feminism, as we will explain, gives us insight into how ‘there are various practices that tend to legitimise particular knowledges, rendering them of most worth – while marginalising others’ (Moletsane 2015:42). Moletsane goes on to argue that this needs to be re-ordered by, for instance, valuing indigenous and context-specific knowledge. She discusses research practices in local communities that have resonance with how lecturers sometimes think about their first-year students, urging us to ‘recognise and acknowledge them as dynamic individuals and groups capable of understanding and articulating their own issues, and as able to identify local solutions to address these’ (2015:43). This can happen in lecture rooms when students feel recognised and safe and can then think critically about the challenges in communities and how to address them. Some of the values that are recommended as principles for knowledge-making from an African feminist perspective are a sense of the collective and a shared orientation towards knowledge; spirituality as part of the knowledge-making process; and communal knowledge-making (Ntseane 2011).

Later we will make recommendations about how some of these different ways of knowing and being can be achieved.

Before that, we discuss some of the difficulties and challenges to achieving them, given the colonial roots of South African universities.

## Results

### How university knowledge-making is set up and legitimised

Knowledge-making framed in academic institutions in racial, religious and gendered ways, through culturally insensitive lenses, results in a reluctance to recognise alternative pedagogies and epistemologies (Moletsane 2015; Tamale 2020). It is our experience and argument that knowledge-making in universities fails to transcend many of the Western ideas and principles that have been put in place to operate the academy over centuries. Instead, the first-year programmes in humanities are often set up to ‘suppress heterogeneity’ (Tamale 2020:63), as they devalue prior experiences of many black, first-time entering students. Lewis and Baderoon (2021) argue that voices such as these from the margins ‘can intervene at distinct moments’ to envision ‘new ways of being human’ and to produce ‘future possible worlds’ (p. 3).

One of the ways in which this marginalisation is evident is in the texts recommended in curricula, for instance in Sociology and Political and International Studies. The texts that first-year students are compelled to consume are raced, classed and gendered in such a way that bears no resemblance to the lives of young black students. The authors of this article experience much of the teaching and learning as emphasising Eurocentric white male ways of thinking about knowledge while excluding a more maternal influence on knowledge, which is what has shaped many of the knowledge experiences of black first-time entering students. For instance, many of us have experienced that there is a rejection of spirituality and the embodiment of knowledge in the realm of academia.

The project WDIOH was co-created by students to reflect on topics we selected and to use these to make knowledge. In a follow-up workshop, we asked: how did you experience university knowledge in your first year? The answers reflect how humanities knowledge is perceived:

‘I understood at that time knowledge as white and male because we would engage the Dead White Men theories in every course, be it sociology or politics, there was Marx and Durkheim. I had this idea that knowledge is white and dominated by men.’ (WDIOH Workshop 2021)

It is unclear whether this experience is a continuation from experience in school curricula or specific to university. But it points to what stood out for us in our first year. Another fellow student explained:

‘I was going to say that before even considering gender as a defining category [for knowledge in first-year university], race is the biggest defining category. So, before asking the question of what gender is knowledge, we should firstly ask the question of what race and what religion is knowledge, because for the most part

people who wrote back in whatever century were the first to construct the supposedly knowledge. Those people were probably Christians and white. So, that affected how we understand knowledge because for the most part back in whatever century it was, women were not even allowed to produce knowledge.' (WDIOH Workshop 2021)

What emerged in discussion were collective experiences of alienation in the university environment, where students feel unrecognised by the kinds of text they are presented with and then are unable to make meaningful contributions in class discussions or assignments. As we will discuss in more detail later, this is exacerbated by the language issue. In a submission earlier in the project, a fellow former student spoke of the strangeness of learning everything in English when he arrived at university and how this limited his engagement with deeper issues the knowledge brought up:

'All of my life up to that moment I had communicated in vernacular languages. Even the English I encountered, I engaged it in my vernacular language ... So before one even engages with Karl Marx, one was confronted with English itself. Reading was much easier than raising a hand to ask a question in Barrat [lecture room] I must confess ... So to avoid this seemingly apparent embarrassment on raising a hand to ask, say, why Marx's "Historical Materialism" pays no regard to problem of race in society for instance. Not asking at all felt safe.' (WDIOH Submission 10, 2020)

Another argued that the inequalities, for instance of social class, evident but seemingly unrecognised in the lecture room, limited how much he felt he could engage, resulting in a kind of rote reproduction of knowledge that had very little relevance to his life:

'Inside universities materialism create "outsiders within" whereby I am part of the university but because of my poverty university rejects me all the time. These inequalities and hardships we experience makes one question the relationship between inequalities and academic achievement. As it stands, I feel alienated. The fact that I have no personal control over learning shows powerlessness. This absence of personal control makes me to be pushing to able to submit the required work that I should submit, not to learn. In terms of meaninglessness, learning becomes irrelevant knowing that I do not learn for the future. There is no welcoming and conducive environment that I feel needs to build to what I cover in academics. This condition created disconnection from myself and academics.' (WDIOH Submission 16, 2020)

These sentiments were echoed by another:

'I did not feel like I belong. To a certain extent, I do believe I was projecting my own insecurities out into the world. I saw myself as inadequate, as undeserving of a seat at this table and believed that everyone else saw me the same way. So, I shied away from anything that would make me the centre of attention, if I had a question I would not ask, if I had an opinion or knew the answer to a question, I would not say anything.' (WDIOH Submission 4, 2020)

These reflections reveal that not all knowledge at the first-year humanities level is welcoming of some students' ways

of being. The historical and foundational framing of knowledge gives authority to white, male Eurocentric knowledge and disables what can be important contributions of students in universities and particularly the black majority. As a result, we do not recognise ourselves in this knowledge and are alienated from our own rich cultures and histories of knowledge-making.

Many of the project submissions spoke about the way that language limited how much they felt they belonged or could engage with knowledge-making:

'In my experience it is the pressure that comes with the studies that you have to take in a language that is not your own. A language that you do not fully understand but you are expected to know it well, according to the demands of being at university in South Africa ... Not coming from a model C school at times can affect confidence also within lectures because at times the content that is being taught or questions asked, can be things that we understand and know only if they were asked and taught in our language. Then things would be far better in terms of success in the university space. But instead, it can make you feel inadequate and become an under performer because of the impact it has on our ability to think and show creative capacity as black students. It can make us get trapped in a vicious cycle of toxic thoughts, hating on yourself for not being born in a better off family which would have afforded you better education, that would allow one to function better within the university space.' (WDIOH Submission 6, 2020)

This experience is an example of ways that university knowledge is lopsided, and these experiences of anxiety and depression are far more common than they should be (Malaika 2020). Indigenous language and culture were neither welcomed in academic knowledge-making nor represented in the academic texts which were used for this. As a fellow student observed:

'In my first year in Humanities, I would look at the reference list at the end of my tutorial submissions or essays and never find a familiar surname or name. The more I engaged with texts, the more I longed for representation and familiar experiences. I ended up consoling myself saying, "that is why I don't understand Western theories". At first, I used to think this how it supposed to be, that the only legitimate voices are Western voices through a particular language, and the harder it is to understand this Western knowledge means the power in it and the relevance of it. For some time, I held this view, until I realized that this is deliberate exclusion, some oppositional voices and nuances to traditional knowledge-making are not fitted, thus denied legitimacy, and my failure to understand does not signify how powerful the knowledge is, but rather how deliberate the exclusion of poor black students is.' (WDIOH reflection 2022)

Lewis and Baderon (2021:2) help us to understand the issues around knowledge production and point out that to honestly answer the question *what kind* of knowledge matters, we need to link it to *whose* knowledge matters. They argue that identity politics in the 20th century has enabled understandings of the wide range of knowers. Weiler (2009), on the other hand, argues that the question of *what kind* of knowledge and *whose* knowledge should instead be linked to the question of power

and that it is crucial to understand it through this lens, as it will help us to create a political theory of knowledge production. Lewis supports this, arguing that the powerful 'also wield control over and access to knowledge' (Lewis in Arnfred & Adomako Ampofo 2010:205). First-year humanities lecturers, where Sociology and Politics curricula deal with subjects such as inequality, are more powerful than their students, with the responsibility to recognise issues of inequality that exist in every lecture room. They could collaborate with students to produce contextually relevant, African-centred, culturally respectful, ethical knowledge that seeks ways to reconfigure the inequalities. Instead, unfortunately, this submission suggests otherwise:

'The sad thing about poverty is that as students at some point we get tired that every time we must constantly perform our poverty for us to get assistance. The fact that we must prove that we are poor every time to the institutions of higher learning for consideration of our grievances is a proof that universities lack comprehensive understanding of our societies. The experience of those coming from disadvantaged background have less platform in informing the realities of the university. For me, universities should know by now that they are an unequal space. It is the duty of universities to know that we are an unequal society, universities deal with knowledge. It is the duty of universities to also inform decisions that help to close the gap of inequalities not to deny them.' (WDIOH Submission 16)

## Discussion

### What was different in Extended Studies

Students in the humanities ES programme that we consider here see each other for five double periods every week to augment the work of mainstream subjects. The bulk of this work is learning how to read, write and understand the concepts taught in the Politics and Sociology mainstream courses and trying to make these relevant to our lives. The lecturer attends many of the mainstream lectures with her students. Because the ES class is a smaller group of students, and we see each other every day, we can do things differently. The kind of pedagogy employed is based on bell hooks' transgressive, liberatory pedagogy (1994), which argues for a 'radical pedagogy' where 'everyone's presence is acknowledged' (1994:8) – and in our case, this included our language, race, class, gender, culture, problems at home or on campus, our fears and our dreams for our futures. The ES students can express themselves in any language that they are comfortable in, even their native language – and where necessary, someone will translate for those who do not understand. Even though we were coming from different schools and had different life experiences throughout high school, the ES class brought us together because we all shared one common goal in mind, to learn. Extended studies offered a different experience for first-year students; this stood out because first-year students in mainstream experienced their first year differently, and this will be explored in the following section.

In mainstream lectures, lecturers typically follow the conventional ways of teaching, which mainly comprises

doing most of the talking themselves, teaching in English and requiring students to speak in English. Students who attended ES classes shared how they were uncomfortable in mainstream lectures, and this influenced their overall class participation, as they felt out of place. In ES, there was an emphasis on group work, where students were encouraged to discuss concepts, find local examples, share their experiences, dissect difficult readings and work on assignment questions together.

One former fellow student explains:

'Extended studies felt like a safe space, a family, for so many of us. It gave me the opportunity to be myself because I knew I was surrounded by one of my own, people who understood me and afforded me the opportunity to make mistakes. When I wanted to voice out something, I did not have to think about how it would sound to the next person, how my English accent would be, worry about the need to sound intellectual and smart. I was surrounded by people who needed to hear what I had to say as much as I needed to hear what they had to say. We did not have to perform for anyone.' (WDIOH Submission 4)

For those who struggled to speak in class, the open-door policy with the lecturer outside of lecture times meant that students could see her on their own or in small groups. One student admitted despite the relative freedom in class, she preferred, at first, these one-on-one opportunities:

'I grew more comfortable in the ES class as weeks went by because we engaged one-on-one with the lecturer and could easily open up ... ES lecturers are somehow aware that not engaging in class discussions does not necessarily translate to "not knowing" or "understanding" the work, but we lack confidence and the ability to address a large group of students ... It is not easy opening up, it is a process.' (WDIOH Submission 1)

One of the lessons we learn from the experience in ES classes, and supported by former students here, is an atmosphere of recognition. Inequalities are not ignored – they are acknowledged. Getting to know each other in regular group work, which operated with the ethics of care and respect, enabled a sense of freedom and confidence. Where that freedom was inhibited in some way, one-on-one sessions with the lecturer helped to build understanding and confidence. A focus on group work, using the language of choice, enables students to grapple with concepts and work with knowledge in ways that are relevant and sustainable. As a former fellow student observed:

'In conclusion, the amount of confidence one has in the teaching and learning process has effect on their knowledge production. Students need to own knowledge production, they have to understand that they play a crucial part in it. This will cause an unbelievable amount of improvement.' (WDIOH Submission 4)

### Steps we can take to make university knowledge-making more inclusive

There are ways that universities can address the inequalities between students from the so-called developed and underdeveloped backgrounds to make knowledge-making more relevant and inclusive. We make some recommendations

based on the data from the project and our own experiences. Experiential knowledge, produced reflexively, gives unique perspectives that reveal aspects of social issues that are otherwise hidden beneath more dominant discourses. Following Moletsane's (2015) arguments around the politics of knowledge production, we thoughtfully bring our own experiences as 'substantial participation and contribution from those most affected' (Moletsane 2015:36). The recommendations arise from epistemological and ontological challenges inherent in the colonial knowledge framework that influences how universities operate and determine what counts as knowledge. We look at the data through a lens of African feminism, which argues that knowledge is embodied and communal, and it can also be spiritual and maternal (see Lewis & Baderoon; Knowles 2021; Ntseane 2015). All the points we make here are interlinked and contribute towards enabling a more inclusive teaching and learning environment.

### Language matters

Usage of different languages is vital for students to feel welcomed and important in the lecture room. Being taught in a foreign language makes it challenging to express yourself, especially when you come from a differently developed background and schooling and have been taught even the subject of English in isiXhosa or other indigenous languages. As shown in this article, language can often be a barrier to speaking, raising a point or asking a question in a lecture room (WDIOU submissions 2020).

These barriers to engagement are epistemological as well as ontological. When students' ways of being and ways of knowing are recognised and accommodated, it changes how they feel and engage intellectually. A former fellow ES student compares the learning experience in a monolingual English humanities lecture and in isiXhosa lectures:

'It was different for a student who came from a class in which English was their second language because you would listen attentively. The lecturer would speak those bombastic English words. You would lose track of what is being said and focus on figuring out what the word means but not paying too much attention to what is being taught. You would write down those words on a piece of paper so that you could look it up when you are in res; while the lecturer is speaking, you would be looking at a slide show, note-taking maybe looking through the reading, and listening to what other students engaging with the lecturer. In the IsiXhosa Home Language, it was a complete shock that you could feel so relaxed, laugh out loud and engage with the lecturer without overthinking and thinking about how to construct the sentence in your head before you speak. Everyone was engaging.' (WDIOH, reflection 2022)

In our experience, not enough effort has been made to encourage critical engagement with students who feel more comfortable in indigenous languages, but there are some laudable exceptions. Notably, the Political and International Studies Department at Rhodes University now provides course outlines and assignment questions in isiXhosa for first-year students, and they are invited to submit assignments in their own languages. Dr Siphokazi Magadla, working with the isiXhosa Department, makes a number of arguments for the

use of multilingualism in mainstream teaching. Dr Magadla (Head of Department of Political and International Studies at Rhodes) is one of the champions of multilingualism in the university and has presented and written on the subject. She was interviewed for this article by one of our team.

Firstly, Magadla argues that being able to work with concepts in isiXhosa strengthens English language development. She describes how working with senior students to translate course outlines and assignment questions into isiXhosa had the knock-on effect of improving English skills through this work. Her argument is that gaining confidence in isiXhosa increased confidence to work with the concepts in English (S. Magadla & N. Babeli, pers. comm., 25 April 2022). Related to the given point, in ES classes, students reported that a sense of belonging was fostered even where English was the main language spoken:

'We feel as though you are important. We are a small group of students from "similar backgrounds", and our ideas and opinions about a particular topic are valid. Our lecturer would always say, "there are no wrong answers, we must speak our minds, and we can express it in any language, and it will be translated". This focus on a freedom of expression, and welcoming different views, rather than being correct, gave many students the freedom to speak, raise their points and ask many questions. It was different in a mainstream class. We would watch other students who would engage with a lecturer regularly. Besides knowing the work context, they spoke fluently and confidently.' (WDIOU reflection 2022)

Secondly, and related to this former student's experience, Magadla argues that one of the most successful parts of her multilingualism project is the tutorial work, where they have 'normalised a multilingual discussion so that students just understand what's going on here' (S. Magadla & N. Babeli, pers. comm., 2022). If students can make sense of the concepts and questions in their indigenous language, they are more likely to articulate their understanding of concepts, even if it is in English:

At the heart of it, with the understanding that most of them are going to write in English, but they will understand the question to understand the content because it's in their language. (S. Magadla & N. Babeli, pers. comm., 2022)

Thirdly, multilingualism is helpful on a broader, national scale, where, as Magadla argues, 'we are by nature bilingual, really multilingual' given the number of indigenous languages in our country. Normalising the use of isiXhosa in an Eastern Cape province university where this is the main language spoken has the effect of welcoming non-isiXhosa speakers from other provinces and countries into the language and world of its people. She argues that:

[T]hey then acquire a new language which is predominant to where they are, you know ... after four years it should make sense that they acquire isiXhosa as another language of competence. (S. Magadla & N. Babeli, pers. comm., 2022)

Final comments on this aspect are that it is clear from the submissions of students to this project and the interview with

Dr Magadla that we need to encourage students and lecturers through multilingualism to be comfortable enough to raise their views on different perspectives and to develop translation skills in their collaborative efforts to understand and be understood. This will create an environment where innovative ideas from difficult aspects of life can be developed. The promotion of multiple languages can be followed through to signage on campus, online university sites and even books and learning materials. This kind of recognition of who the students are influences how welcome students feel and how they engage with knowledge.

But importantly, without political will, strategic prioritising and investment, it rests on a few motivated individuals to carry this forward. As Magadla notes:

It must not be symbolic as it is now. Right now, it depends on individual departments, and really the enthusiasm of individual academics within departments... you definitely need political will beyond just a cosmetic approval, you know or statement that says that they support this. They really need to invest in it. (S. Magadla & N. Babeli, pers. comm., 2022)

The relationship between power and knowledge includes the resource allocation to projects that are deemed valuable by the institution. We argue that despite the issue of language and inequalities of access, the success of students disadvantaged by endemic inequalities is not yet sufficiently valuable to those who could release the funding required to address language issues in the institution.

### Representation matters

Representation without a transformational agenda will not necessarily bring about the changes that are necessary in society (Hassim, Goetz & Hassim 2003:5). But it is one of the identified shifts that would lead to a greater sense of inclusion and legitimacy for first-year students. The WDIOH students argue that having more black African lecturers, and lecturers who care about students, is essential (WDIOH reflection 2022). Even if they do not necessarily actively make allowances for these, they can understand many black African student challenges such as language barriers, a lack of information, poverty and even family issues. Some topics are raised in classes about societies, for instance in the study of sociology. It helps to have a lecturer who understands the experience and uses examples from familiar societies such as the townships. It helps students to be more open and give their views, experiences and challenges. If a particular student cannot understand what is being said, the lecturer can explain in the language that the student understands. The student can also respond or ask questions in the language on how they understand the work in their language.

Importantly as well, the texts that inform first-year curricula are too often disproportionately authored by white, male, elite thinkers. Texts that are written by African women and men are more likely to speak to the complexities of black life and serve to recognise and inspire students who feel encouraged to become academics themselves.

Representation makes a difference to how welcome and legitimate students feel and the extent to which they feel they belong and can aspire to academic careers. Who their lecturers are in the classrooms and who the scholars and voices of authority are in required texts and reference lists all contribute to legitimising the contributions of young black people in knowledge-making in universities.

### Recognising inequality of opportunity and capability matters

We have noticed that students from disadvantaged backgrounds have few to no computer skills. Almost everything in university now requires knowing how to use computers. Our assignments must be typed in a specific way, so a student must know how to create and save a Word document accordingly (WDIOH Submission 3). We recommend that universities should provide computer literacy to all first-year students or students struggling to use a computer, based on the computer literacy course we do in ES.

Reading and writing skills are essential. Each department should emphasise and demystify the reading and writing skills associated with their discipline, based on the information literacy and academic literacy and augmented courses offered in ES. Some students also face challenges in constructing good academic essays because of their backgrounds. Building their confidence through regular writing opportunities, assessed through peer review, would build their capacities as knowledge-makers.

There are other life skills that would be useful to learn while completing undergraduate courses, which also recognise the inequalities that students bring to university. Skills associated with research, such as translating and transcribing, and skills around job searching, CV writing, and how to interview are all important for life beyond university. Learning to drive, learning to budget, learning about nutrition and cooking for oneself, are all skills which recognise that students have a life outside of the classroom but which they have not necessarily had equal opportunities to develop. What we argue is that the energy and experiences of students themselves can be more fruitfully employed in making these things happen as part of an institutional commitment to recognise and address the inequalities that are exacerbated by a narrow approach to knowledge and knowledge-making in our universities.

## Conclusion

Knowledge-making as individualistic, and linguistically exclusive, has been constructed through predominantly colonial, patriarchal and capitalist ideas which are simply not relevant to the lived experience and futures of young black people in South Africa. We argue that an African feminist lens helps us to see a different kind of knowledge-making that does not pretend to be neutral while exacerbating the inequalities inherent in South African society. It helps us to see that knowledge-making can be embodied, communal and welcoming of differences. Using data generated from a project

that sees former ES students making knowledge together, we have centred student voices to argue for a different orientation in humanities studies. Our recommendations include: (1) much more rigorous engagement with multilingualism in teaching and learning; (2) more lecturers who understand or have experienced the kinds of conditions common among the majority of poor black students; (3) more Afrocentric scholarship and representation in curricula; and (4) working collaboratively with students themselves in creative and sustainable ways to initiate courses and opportunities outside of the set curricula of the university. This enables the agency of students, who can engage critically with the concepts in an atmosphere that celebrates a diversity of languages and experiences and can produce knowledge that is relevant and sustainable.

The article hints at structural and systemic changes that need to happen in the university. We have brought attention to the differences in teaching and learning cultures present in ES classes on one hand and many of the mainstream classes on the other. We believe that treating students with respect and kindness and finding ways to inspire their active participation in knowledge-making do not have to be limited to ES classes but can in fact be part of a broader transformation. Knowledge-making as an inclusive, welcoming process requires an orientation that is supported by African feminist principles of connection, the embodiment of knowledge and mutual respect. Inspired by Collins' idea of 'seeing from below' (Collins in Baderoon & Lewis 2021:2–3), we have argued for a re-politicisation of knowledge to include black students' contributions and aspirations.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

All the authors collaborated over a period of 18 months, first as part of a knowledge-making project and then in the analysis of the data from the project, as well as the writing and reviewing of the article. While the corresponding author, C.R.K., conceptualised and managed the many workshops held during this time and took responsibility for the final editing. Each author has participated fully and made a significant contribution to this original work.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Rhodes University Education Faculty Ethics Committee (ref. no. 2020-1476-3515). The data for the project, *With Dreams in Our Hands*, has been given ethical clearance, and each member of the project has signed consent and given

permission for their words to be used in academic articles. All material has been anonymised as per the consent agreement. Original files are stored on a computer.

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### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author, C.R.K.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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