

Towards Nourishing Universities

8 October 2025
Keynote address
Transformation
Indaba
Stellenbosch
University

By Christi van der Westhuizen (D.Phil.)

Professor of Sociology

University of the Western Cape

For use or quotation,
contact the author on
cvdwesthuizen@uwc.ac.za

The Ongoing Transformation Journey

- **Ultimate Goal:** Transformation is a change toward South Africa's **1996 Constitutional vision**, underpinned by **equality, freedom, and human dignity** (primus inter pares).
- 8 dimensions of transformation as articulated by Times Higher Education: transformation of the institution, of talent, of internationalisation, of teaching and learning, of the student experience, of social impact, of research and of leadership.
- **Cross-Cutting Dimension:** The **transformation of institutional culture** is a necessary, **cross-cutting dimension** that impacts all others.
- **Key Warning:** If institutional culture is not effectively addressed, transformation in other areas will be **hobbled**. This is especially true for Historically White Institutions (HWIs).

Transformation, Massification, and Historical Resistance

- **Massification's Promise:** Expansion of access has "unbolted the doors" for women, Black, working-class, and poor people, suggesting a greater **democratisation of higher education**.
- **The Elite Challenge:** This transformation runs against the **historical grain** of the university as an **elite institution**, especially for top-tier HWIs which marshal significant resources and influence.
- **Intractable Culture:** Incidents (e.g., Reitz, FMF clashes, Wilgenhof) are painful reminders of the **intractability of inherited institutional cultures**.

Institutional Cultures as Carriers of Coloniality

- **The Root Problem:** Institutional cultures spring from **colonial longevities** and are, in fact, **carriers of coloniality**.
- **Defining Coloniality:** The **persistence of colonial ways** of doing, thinking, and being, despite the official end of colonialism.
- **Exclusion:** Policy-driven transformation has **run up against institutional cultures**. Exclusion and marginalisation persist in both **access to** and routine encounters **in** universities (race, class, gender, sexuality).

The "Next Phase": Focusing on Norms and Underpinning Knowledges

- **The Challenge:** University efforts focus on combatting prejudice, changing language policies/names, and advancing non-racialism. However, deep transformation requires removing obstacles rooted in **apartheid-era legacies**.
- **New Tools Needed:** We need **sharper, contextualised tools** to understand everyday exclusions/inclusions.
- **Epistemic Decolonisation:** Transformation involves ontological (being) and **epistemological (knowing)** aspects. This means redeeming worldviews and theories not rooted in Euro-American theory.
- **Situated Knowledges:** Institutional culture is reproduced through specific, shared ways of **sense-making** and **world-making**.

The Mechanics of Institutional Norms

- **Culture as Sense-Making:** Culture is learned and shared ways of making sense of the world, which has **material effects**.
- **The Power of the Norm:** Norms are the bedrock, working **invisibly** as "taken-for-granted" prescriptions for being and doing. Breaches are subject to sanction.
- **Normalisation:** The continuous iteration and reinforcement of norms creates a "**naturalness**" ("the way we have always done things").
- **Inequality Perpetuated:** Cultural positions with **privilege** prevail, creating **normativities** that determine **who may belong, and how**.
- **Conclusion:** We must confront and overturn the spoken and unspoken norms that perpetuate **institutionalised forms of racism and heteropatriarchy**, which resist possibilities for equitable futures.

Neoliberalism: Market vs. Public Good

- **Tension:** Neoliberalism directly opposes the project of **transformation**.
- **"Counting Culture":** Neoliberal universities favour **quantifiable metrics** and bureaucratic technocracy.
- **The Problem:** This mindset dismisses institutional culture as unmeasurable.
- **Market Remake:** Higher Education has been corporatised over 40 years, driven by **financialisation** and **commercialisation**.
- **Appropriation:** Education, once a public good, now targeted for **capitalist appropriation**.

Neoliberalisation: Circumscribed Change

- **Depoliticisation:** Neoliberal focus on metrics reduces transformation to a "tick-box exercise."
- **Reality Ignored:** This misses the **intangible dimensions** of power and bias—the core of colonial and apartheid **normativities**.
- **The Trap:** Numerical inclusion can be **highly circumscribed**, preventing **substantive change** to power relations.

Transforming Institutional Culture: A 4-Part Framework

- **Goal:** Enable "the next phase of holistic transformation" through cultural change.
- **The 4 Cross-Cutting Dimensions** (from our book):
 - **Historicisation** & Contextualisation (Analysis)
 - Centrality of **Lived Experience** (Situated Knowledge)
 - Diagnosing **Encumbrances** (Identifying Barriers)
 - **Activist Dimension** (Resistance and Action)

Dimension 1: Analysis

- **Historicisation**
- Draw lens wider: Cultures reproduce orders of domination inherited from the **Global North** (e.g., US university model).
- Colonial Genesis: African universities historically provided officials for the **colonial state**; goals later overtaken by nationalism/neoliberalism.

Dimension 2: Subjectivity

- **Lived Experience & Normalization**
- **Normalization:** The pivot around which institutional culture revolves.
- **Embodied Knowledge:** Lived experience is central; subjects are produced by and *in turn produce* culture.
- **Academic Norms:** The unspoken script prioritizes **detachment and citation**, suppressing own thought/experience.
- **Neoliberal Link:** Citation becomes **currency**; knowledge is treated as **capital**, erasing relational and human aspects.

Dimension 3: Encumbrances to Deep Change

- **Not Just Numbers:** Transformation requires deeper **structural changes**, not just improved numerical representation.
- **Resistance:** Universities are entrenched social structures, resistant to change despite diversity.
- **Adaptation Trap:** Marginalized groups often **adapt to systems** instead of institutions altering.
- **Power Reproduction:** Universities reproduce power relations, social stratification, and inequality.
- **Conformism:** Older and newer forms of power converge, imposing **conformism** despite strategic inclusion of some excluded individuals.

Dimension 4: The Way Forward (Action)

- **Goal:** Break coloniality habits and **institutionalise humanisation**.
- **Start with Self:** Change begins with **self-reflection** (personal responsibility) and challenging internal assumptions.
- **Collective Action:** Self-reflection must feed into **collective reflection** and systemic transformation.
- **Shared Intentionality:** Requires an honest, concerted institutional commitment to confront **racism** and other oppressive practices.
- **Conflict & Reimagination:** Following bell hooks, conflict can be generative if overcome through mutual accountability, creating space to **reimagine university cultures** and carve out just alternatives.