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NEW ZEALAND
Indigenisation threatens the university's very foundations

Elizabeth Rata 03 June 2023

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New Zealand's universities have in great haste, and without debate, embraced anti-universal decolonisation and indigenisation. While a recommitment to the principle of universalism is not impossible, it will depend upon university leaders with the courage to speak in defence of science.

When a university no longer commits to the principle of universalism it can neither claim, nor does it deserve, the title of university.

New Zealand universities are **rapidly indigenising** and in so doing may undermine the very universal foundations that give the name university its purpose and meaning. We need to ask why New Zealand's universities, among the best in the world throughout the 20th century, have embraced anti-universal decolonisation and indigenisation.

The answer has deep historical roots. Decolonisation and indigenisation are today's expression of the Counter-Enlightenment communitarianism ethos that has resisted the Enlightenment's liberal democratic ideals since the 18th century.

At its heart is whether the group or the individual is the primary social and political category. Although an old battle in 21st century clothes, the type of re-emergent communitarianism depends on a country's particular history. New Zealand's version is retribalisation, with demands that ancestral kinship **serves as the political category**.

Decolonising and indigenising all government institutions, including the education system and the universities, are **retribalism's strategies**.

Reactionary modernity

The reactionary modernity that rejects universalism and its accompanying individual rights for communitarianism is justified by a virulent mixture of revisionist history, **performative culture**, corrupted leftism and postmodern relativism.

Universal human rights are claimed to be identity group rights, whether of kinship, race, sexuality or culture. The rights that first served Enlightenment universalism now serve the Counter-Enlightenment division. Modern science, developed to serve universal humanity, is wrongly labelled just one of the many cultural ways of knowing by identity groups.

In this anti-democratic modernity, the authority that individuals seized from the aristocracy and the priesthood, that right to think for themselves and make public those ideas, now stands accused as the enemy. Better, say the reactionaries, to embrace the authority of race, kin or cultural identity, than allow the rational individual to be the author of his or her own destiny.

Science

It is the universities that are the target of this prolonged attack on individual thought. We should not be surprised. Modern science admits no authority but that of justifiable reason. However, a direct attack on individual reason is not easily achieved, despite postmodernism's best attempts.

The problem is science itself. Its truth-seeking mission cannot operate without reason, and reason cannot exist without the individual. It is the individual who thinks and it is science's abstractions that train thought into rational logic.

Science allows individuals to develop and justify naturalistic explanations for physical and social phenomena. Its concepts refer to the theorised structures and properties of the physical world, its methods are those of hypothesis, testing and refutation, its procedures those of criticism and judgement.

It is humans daring to provide naturalistic explanations without reference to the priestly interpreters of supernatural beliefs that give science its authority. It is the authority of the scientific method, long exercised in the university. Traditional knowledge can be included, but **only by submitting to scientific criticism**.

Who holds authority over knowledge?

And this is the nub of the matter – who holds authority over knowledge – today's communitarian priesthood or the scientific method? Because New Zealand universities are proceeding apace to indigenise, what is happening in my country is instructive.

Justified by retribalisation politics with the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi **used as the mandate**, the aim is to insert traditional ways of being, thinking and doing into all areas of the university. The commitment to a revisionist historical treaty can be found **in universities' strategic plans**.

Curriculum initiatives along with **research ethics and funding** are also required to demonstrate a treaty commitment. There is **some dissent**, but accusations of racism and **the response** to those who have spoken publicly have silenced opposition.

Social justice

Ironically, decolonisation and indigenisation are justified using the universal human rights argument for equity. But this will not be the outcome. The anti-universalism of this dawning reactionary age will indeed divide society into two groups – but not those of coloniser and colonised locked into the permanent oppressor-victim binary used to justify communitarianism.

Instead one group will comprise those who receive a sound understanding of science, mathematics and the humanities. Their intelligence will be developed in the demanding engagement with this complex knowledge. It is to be hoped that they will serve as the guardians of the Enlightenment's democratic modernity.

The second group will comprise those who remain restricted to the type of knowledge acquired from experience and justified in identity ideologies. Discrediting science as **'Western'**, identity-based cultural beliefs and practices will exclude these young people from the benefits of a scientific education.

It will be a tragedy for New Zealand if indigenising the nation's universities continues to advance unchallenged. However, given our universities' history of excellence, one dating back to the University of Otago's foundation in 1869, a recommitment to the principle of universalism is not impossible. But that will depend upon university leaders with the courage to speak in defence of science.

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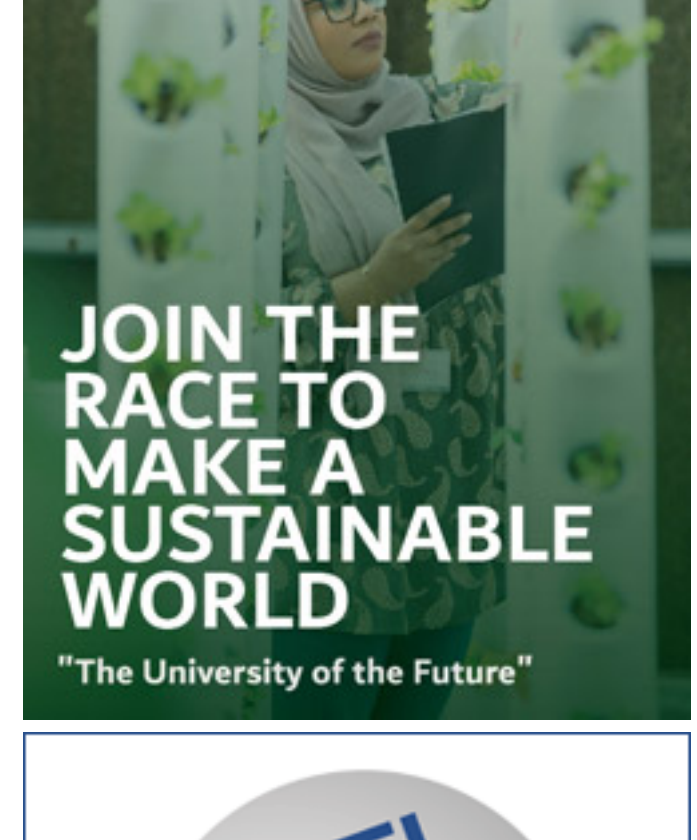
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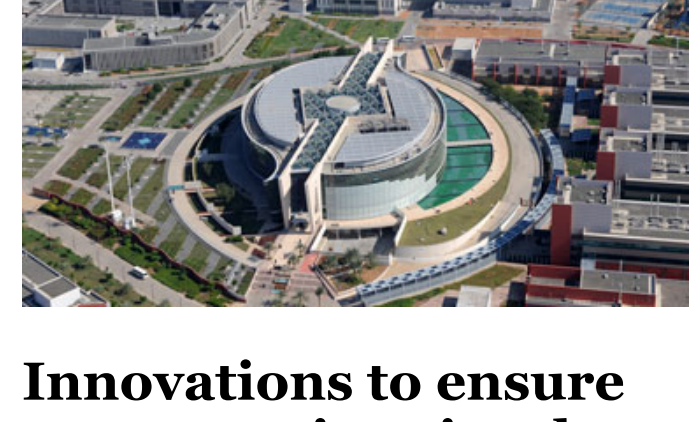
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Stellenbosch University staff

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UAE University staff

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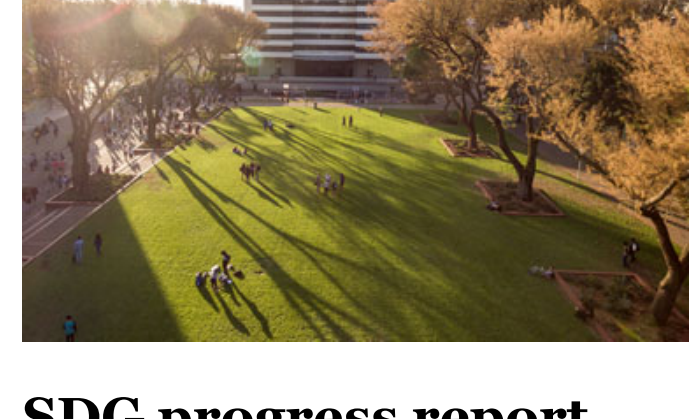
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Aftab Dean

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University of Pretoria staff

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