

# A Desktop Review of Linguistic Practices in Higher Education Post #FeesMustFall Protests: An Appraisal of Academy and Multilingual Citizenship



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## ABSTRACT

Student protests nationwide in the form of #FeesMustFall in South Africa between 2015 and 2016 catalyzed a national conversation on decolonization, inclusivity and linguistic transformation in higher education. This qualitative desktop review examines the evolution of linguistic practices in a South African university post-protests, focusing on the intersection of academic discourse and multilingual citizenship. This review is premised on Language Management Theory which endorses deliberate processes which seek to influence language behaviour among language users. Through an analysis of secondary sources, the study explores the implications of linguistic practices for epistemic justice, academy, and multilingual citizenship post #FeesMustFall demonstrations. The findings highlight the continued hegemony of English in communication, classroom interactions, and research. However, the university has taken steps to promote multilingualism by offering African language courses to first-year students in humanities and engineering programs. The institution also recognizes linguistic diversity as a valuable asset that empowers people in multicultural and multilingual settings. This review contributes to the ongoing discourse on language, power, and knowledge production in African higher education, providing insights for policymakers, educators, and language practitioners who are committed to creating inclusive and equitable academic spaces.

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## INTRODUCTION

The #FeesMustFall movement, which swept across South African universities from 2015 to 2016, marked a pivotal moment in the country's higher education landscape. Beyond the demand for free quality education, the protests highlighted the need for decolonization, inclusivity, and transformation. A crucial aspect of this transformation is the reevaluation of linguistic practices in higher education. For decades, English has dominated South African university spaces, often marginalizing indigenous languages, and perpetuating epistemic injustice. The #FeesMustFall movement's emphasis on decolonization and Africanization necessitates a critical examination of linguistic practices, recognizing language as a site of power struggle.

South Africa has a long and complex history of struggle and segregation, rooted in centuries of colonial rule and exacerbated by the implementation of apartheid in 1948, a system of institutionalized racial discrimination that lasted for forty-eight years. Under apartheid, laws were established to segregate communities, restricting free movement for historically disadvantaged groups, and denying basic rights to the majority black population while privileging the white minority. This deeply entrenched system of inequality shaped every aspect of society, from education and employment opportunities to housing and access to resources, leaving a legacy that continues to impact the nation today. Predominantly white universities in South Africa had established themselves as active participants in the ‘separate development’ initiatives, as was advocated for by pre-democratic government(s). Historically white universities were almost exclusively inaccessible to students of African descent due to state laws that disallowed African students’ admission to predominantly white institutions where the language of teaching and learning was either English or Afrikaans.<sup>1</sup> University policies were strategically crafted to reinforce the socio-political and economic aspirations of the white minority, while simultaneously preserving the power dynamics that favored them. According to Bunting, the National Party government introduced a constitution premised on racial division.<sup>2</sup> The pre-1996 constitution made a distinction between ‘general affairs’ which accounted for issues that affected all racial groups in the country, and ‘own affairs’ which was an entity that catered for educational affairs that only affected white, colored and Indian communities. This racialized discourse sought to maintain social hierarchies and uphold misconceptions about people and their languages.

Despite this oppressive history, from 2015 significant events occurred in higher education institutions in South Africa which sparked national conversations around decolonization, language and inclusivity. The #FeesMustFall protests are inarguably one of the movements that shaped higher education’s transformation agenda. This movement foregrounded the need for transformation in higher education. In 2016, Wits University provided an update on its implementation of the transformation plan, which was foregrounded on several key strategies, which included amongst others curriculum reform and language policy. In this update, the university pronounced, “The University’s Language Policy has been approved by the Senate and Council and the executive team is developing a plan to resource its implementation. All official University letterheads are also being revised to reflect information in three languages – English, isiZulu and Sesotho.”<sup>3</sup> By analyzing policy documents, academic literature, and institutional reports, this study seeks to explore the implications of linguistic practices for epistemic justice, academy, and multilingual citizenship.

Higher education institutions in South Africa have acted consistently with the call of the Department of Higher Education and Training to develop language policies that seek to address linguistic disparities, which are a direct consequence of colonial legacy in a democratic dispensation. The University of Witwatersrand is among the first universities to comply with this call. The university developed a language policy in 2003 intending to intellectualize Sesotho. However, the policy was never implemented. Through the #feesmustfall movement, a clarion call was made for the decolonization of higher education institutions. In response to the call, the university adopted eight areas of priority in its accelerated transformation programme in 2015. Two of these priority areas are language policy and curriculum reform. The institution revised its 2003 language policy in 2015. It added isiZulu as another language that will be developed by the institution. There are various reactions to the language policy among academic staff and students. The language policy aims to redress past linguistic prejudices and enhance inclusivity. This article evaluates linguistic practices in the institution with the view that linguistic practices exude attitudes towards inclusivity or the perpetuation of colonial linguistic legacies.

This study asks the following questions.

- How have linguistic practices in South African higher education evolved since #FeesMustFall?
- What challenges persist in transforming linguistic practices?

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<sup>1</sup> Mbulungeni Madiba, “Towards Multilingual Higher Education in South Africa: The University of Cape Town’s Experience,” *Language Learning Journal* 38, no. 3 (2010): 327–46.

<sup>2</sup> I. Bunting, “The Higher Education Landscape Under Apartheid,” in *Transformation in Higher Education*, ed. et al. Cloete N (Norwell, MA: Springer, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> New start for Sesotho and IsiZulu at Wits <https://www.wits.ac.za/news/latest-news/campus-updates-and-notice/2016/update-on-the-implementation-of-wits-transformation-plan-.html>

A researcher's approach to studying the world is shaped by his beliefs, values, and experiences, which are influenced by the environment in which they live.<sup>4</sup> In view of Lather's statement, the researcher herein seeks to evaluate linguistic practices at this predetermined institution of higher learning, with a special focus on the academy and multilingual citizenship. This research which seeks to identify linguistic experiences is underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm. Creswell explicates that through the interpretivism approach, researchers tend to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon and its complexities.<sup>5</sup> The researcher employs this approach in order to understand the impact of the transformation mechanism in the institution and how indigenous South African languages have been positioned after the #feesmustfall demonstrations. This approach is viable for this study because linguistic practices in institutions of higher education have, in the past, been motivated by sociohistorical and sociopolitical events that shaped the language discourse in the country. Therefore, the study will view linguistic practices in view of the recent socio-political unrest that happened between 2015/16 wherein higher education institutions were reminded of their role in transforming lives.

While language policies have been developed and revised in a number of universities in South Africa, the role of African languages in higher education is being overlooked. In Madiba's study, students from historically disadvantaged schools at the University of Cape Town reported having difficulties with the language of teaching and learning, and this has had a negative impact on students' success.<sup>6</sup> Through feesmustfall demonstrations, students demanded that the university should be organized in a manner that responds to the needs of society. In light of this, this study will contribute to ongoing conversations about language, power, and knowledge production in African higher education. The study will also inform policymakers, educators, and language practitioners who are engaged in creating inclusive and equitable academic environments.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section contains literature that addresses the country's efforts to address language inequalities, the language policy for higher education, the language policy framework for public higher education institutions and multilingualism in higher education.

### Student Protests: A Drive for Social Change

Students' protests in South Africa are a preferred method among students to subdue the government and institutions into reflecting on socio-historical and socio-economic issues that affect them. In the 1970s, the black student body rejected the new education laws and this turned into a mass rejection of Apartheid administration by Africans in South Africa. This was the result of the government overlooking indigenous languages while seeking to enforce that secondary education should be conducted monolithically in Afrikaans. Giliomee observes that the future of Afrikaans in homelands was threatened as many homelands started using English and an African language as official languages of the homeland after the protest of the seventies.<sup>7</sup>

South Africa is a country faced with many injustices that perpetuate social, political and economic inequalities in many societies. The prevalence of these injustices sometimes hinders the prospects of inclusivity and access. Mdepa notes that "as fees at South African higher education institutions increased over the years, access and persistence at universities were challenging for many students."<sup>8</sup> Changes in social institutions, academic institutions, politics, and the environment create social change or demand for social change. Notably, students will either revolt or pronounce their position whenever the need for social justice must be expressed in any institution. According to Khetoa et al., students indicated that their limited competency in the language of teaching and learning affects their performance.<sup>9</sup> As such, the study

<sup>4</sup> Patti Lather, "Research as Praxis," *Harvard Educational Review* 56, no. 3 (1986): 257–78.

<sup>5</sup> J. W. Creswell, *Research design. Qualitative and mixed methods approaches* (London: Sage, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Madiba, "Towards Multilingual Higher Education in South Africa: The University of Cape Town's Experience."

<sup>7</sup> H. Giliomee, "Surrender Without Defeat: Afrikaners and the South African 'Miracle'". *Daedalus* 126, no 2 (1997): 113-146.

<sup>8</sup> Anele Mdepa, "Higher Education Funding Crisis and Access: Student Protests, UWC# FMF, and Social Movements," *University of the Western Cape*, 2022, 108.

<sup>9</sup> S. G. Khetoa, N. T. Mokala, and L. G. Matee, "Humanizing Teaching Pedagogy: An Evaluation of Disciplinary Literacy in Higher Education," *African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning* 7, no. 1 (2023): 154–67.

recommended that multilingual pedagogies, such as translanguaging, can be useful to advance the project of teaching and learning in higher education.

### **Multilingualism in higher education**

Although South Africa has a rich cultural and linguistic diversity, the use of African language in higher domains remains a contentious subject among language practitioners, linguists, education specialists, and government officials. Pre-democratic governments in South Africa systematically encouraged the decline of indigenous languages by discouraging the promotion of these languages for academic purposes. The socio-cultural and cognitive value embedded in African languages was strategically undermined under the regimes of separate development. However, with the advent of democratic governance, the narrative of African languages changed due to their elevated status. The development and use of indigenous languages are advocated for in the country's constitution. This momentous development in the history of South African languages encouraged the Department of Higher Education to develop policies encouraging the use of previously marginalized indigenous languages. The language policy seeks to transform linguistic practices in higher education. Moreover, in terms of previously marginalized indigenous languages, the policy seeks to support their employment in support of the academic endeavor.

The objective of the policy lies in the principle of redress and empowerment. This ought to create conditions for the use of previously marginalized indigenous languages together with English. Over the years, Universities in South Africa have adopted multilingual language policies with the view of implementing multilingual education.<sup>10</sup>

Universities in South Africa are then tasked to the country's universities conceptualize this linguistic reality on the definition that multilingualism is an ordered linguistic exchange where speakers possessing multiple linguistic repertoires can formally use a certain language for academic purposes and other languages for communicative purposes.<sup>11</sup> A more generic definition is centralized on the benefits inherent in multilingualism. Van der Walt looks at multilingualism as the ability of students to use their main languages and acquired languages to enable them to succeed in their academic endeavors.<sup>12</sup> This sense includes multi-language pedagogies that will promote students' participation and understanding in lecture halls, tutorials, or any linguistic exchange. In the South African context, this means fostering the use of colonial languages together with African languages to make meaning of our teaching and learning experience.

The universal status of multilingualism in many societies and countries tends to be either official or unofficial.<sup>13</sup> The official status of multilingualism is enshrined in the country's constitution and is applied among other sectors in the education sector.<sup>14</sup> Unrecognized or undocumented multilingualism takes stage on campus lawns, dormitories, university foyers, students' discussion platforms, residences, or dorms.

### **Language and Decolonization**

Student protests between 2015 and 2016 refocused transformation discourse on a more "radicalized" discourse of change. Vorster and Quinn note that South African universities have pronounced extensively on the discourse of transformation without engaging in significant structural and cultural changes beyond changing staff and student demographics.<sup>15</sup> The language situation in South Africa remains largely the same, with English occupying a prestigious position while the discourse around African languages points that these languages will be used once they have been significantly developed to express scientific thought. Despite this, the researcher is of the view that every language innately possesses the ability to express

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<sup>10</sup> Mbulungeni Madiba, "Multilingual Education in South African Universities: Policies, Pedagogy and Practicality," *Linguistics and Education* 24, no. 4 (2013): 385–95.

<sup>11</sup> Emma Dafouz and Ute Smit, "Towards a Dynamic Conceptual Framework for English-Medium Education in Multilingual University Settings," *Applied Linguistics* 37, no. 3 (2016): 397–415.

<sup>12</sup>C. Van der Walt, *Multilingual Higher Education: Beyond English Medium Orientations*. (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Benard Odoyo Okal, "Benefits of Multilingualism in Education," *Universal Journal of Educational Research* 2, no. 3 (March 2014): 223–29, <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2014.020304>.

<sup>14</sup> Okal, "Benefits of Multilingualism in Education."

<sup>15</sup> Jo-Anne Vorster and Lynn Quinn, "The" Decolonial Turn": What Does It Mean for Academic Staff Development?," *Education as Change* 21, no. 1 (2017): 31–49.

educational concepts. However, African languages have been relegated to nothingness under apartheid and the colonial period. In the regimes of apartheid and colonialism, English and Afrikaans were imposed on indigenous South African people. This imposition of languages was more visible in higher education where English and Afrikaans were used as languages of instruction and were consequently also the languages of exclusion.<sup>16</sup> The researcher further argues that the imposition in education specifically must be unmasked to expose its effects on students who lack the desired competency and performance in English. Inclusive approaches to the programme of teaching and learning must be adopted to humanize the teaching and learning experience at institutions of higher learning in South Africa.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Any intention towards the introduction of multilingualism in education must be informed by rigorous methodological practices or approaches. This research is premised on Language Management Theory which endorses a shift from the traditional language planning model which is mainly top-down.<sup>17</sup> Given this theory, language-related problems are resolved at a micro-level where stakeholders who are involved in the process of teaching and learning negotiate solutions to their problems. Spolsky expounds that language management theory “accounts for language choices within a domain on the basis only of internal forces, derived from language practices, language beliefs, and language management within the domain itself”.<sup>18</sup> In Spolsky’s view, the fact that any individual has varying roles in a domain exposes an individual to language practices and language beliefs that affect his language choices in different domains. As such, certain language practices can be imposed through language management principles. Therefore, this theoretical underpinning is vital in reviewing language practices that emanate as a result of language management practices.

This theoretical framework originated language planning; however, this theory was conceptualized to cater to language problems emitting at micro levels. This theoretical conceptualization is mindful of the fact that individuals in an institution have unmatched linguistic needs that cannot be overlooked for an institution to realize its goals and objectives. Nekvapil postulates that the ideal of language planning activity can be encapsulated by the following process: the identification of a language problem in individual interactions, followed by the adoption of measures by a particular language planning institution, and then the implementation of these measures in individual interactions.<sup>19</sup> In an academic establishment, stakeholders in the form of lectures, students, and support staff extensively rely on language to develop and maintain relations in support of institutional goals and objectives. South Africa is plagued with literacy challenges as a result of socio-political and socio-economic challenges that affect the teaching and learning project.<sup>20</sup> This situation is further exacerbated by un-transformed linguistic practices in higher education despite the teaching and learning environments having diversified. In recent times, research has proven that learners resist monolingual policy prescriptions in favor of more inclusive teaching and learning approaches.<sup>21</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

This study is underpinned by a qualitative desktop approach wherein qualitative research “is an interactive process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied.”<sup>22</sup> In light of this definition, this study reviewed linguistic practices at Wits University by evaluating institutional documents, such as language policy. Qualitative research is rapidly changing as a result of the deployment of information technology.<sup>23</sup> Presently, information or vast amounts of data can be effortlessly obtained

<sup>16</sup> S. I. Radebe, “The Importance of Indigenous Languages in the Decolonization of Higher Education in South Africa: A Case Study of the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s Language Policy” (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Madiba, “Multilingual Education in South African Universities: Policies, Pedagogy and Practicality.”

<sup>18</sup> Bernard Spolsky, “Towards a Theory of Language Policy,” *Working Papers in Educational Linguistics* 22, no. 1 (2007): 1–14, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Jiří Nekvapil, “From Language Planning to Language Management” (*Sociolinguistica*, 2006), 95.

<sup>20</sup> Khetoa, Mokala, and Matee, “Humanizing Teaching Pedagogy: An Evaluation of Disciplinary Literacy in Higher Education.”

<sup>21</sup> Leketi Makalela, “Translanguaging as a Vehicle for Epistemic Access: Cases for Reading Comprehension and Multilingual Interactions,” *Per Linguam* 31, no. 1 (May 22, 2015): 15, <https://doi.org/10.5785/31-1-628>.

<sup>22</sup> Patrik Aspers and Ugo Corte, “What Is Qualitative in Qualitative Research,” *Qualitative Sociology* 42 (2019): 139–60.

<sup>23</sup> David Brown, “Going Digital and Staying Qualitative: Some Alternative Strategies for Digitizing the Qualitative Research Process,” in *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 3, 2002.

from internet sources. Internet sources are rich in data that could be used to understand social problems in social research studies. People rely on technological advances to extract, share and store information. “Digital convergence is reshaping the way individuals and organizations collaborate and share information. Audio, video, animations and other kinds of rich media enhance existing digital communications and enable new forms of human interaction.”<sup>24</sup> The #FeesMustFall started at Wits and rapidly spread to other universities in the country. The popularity of this protest was enabled by social practices such as hashtags which are popularly used on X (formerly Twitter). Hashtags were strategically used to place students’ grievances before a bigger audience and to create awareness about students’ challenges in higher education. As such, numerous media houses were able to report on student issues on television, newspaper websites, and so on. These reports inherently carry important details that comment on a number of important issues in society.

This study employed a qualitative desk-based approach. Bassot narrates that a desk-based approach is a form of empirical research where a researcher elicits data indirectly in that the data is collected via the Internet.<sup>25</sup> In this form of enquiry, data retrieval is the first and foremost consideration to be made, with a specific focus on the accessibility of the required data. In view of this approach, data was collected on digital platforms which included digital research journals, magazines, and online newspapers. Brown expounds that research journals lie at the heart of a qualitative process, especially among social scientists.<sup>26</sup> In this qualitative desktop enquiry, the researcher reviewed published materials that were obtainable from internet sources that bear comments on linguistic practices in higher education post the #FeesMustFall demonstration in South Africa. The data reviewed in this study were the data that already existed which were collected primarily for purposes other than this present study. The use of secondary data was qualified herein by the assumption that secondary data is sometimes sufficient to provide adequate information that addresses the research problem of the study. As such, the secondary data used in this study included research publications and institutional publications.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides a discussion of the Wits Language Policy and provides an overview of the linguistic situation at the institution.

### Background to Wits Language Policy

Wits first adopted a ‘transformative’ language policy in 2003 wherein the policy was framed by the recognition that South Africa needs to develop and maintain its official languages. These policy changes were informed by the recommendations of the Ministry of Education’s Policy for Higher Education, which made pronouncements on the necessity of developing multilingualism, which would serve as a resource to mitigate hindrances to access and success in education.<sup>27</sup> The university remarked through its policy document that it was difficult to choose which languages to develop, as it hosted 76 languages between staff and its students. However, the institution chose to develop Sesotho and IsiZulu, seeing that they were the widely understood languages in the immediate environment of the institution. In its policy document, the institution committed itself to a phased development of Sesotho with the intention of introducing a bilingual medium of instruction, with Sesotho equitably with English in the teaching and learning programme. The introduction of Sesotho as a medium of instruction was determined in 2011. The university noted that it is common practice for administrative and support staff to alternate between English and African languages in social and work contexts.

In its 2015 Language Policy, the institution committed itself to a multilingual approach to tertiary education with a view of developing isiZulu, Sesotho, and SASL as university subjects, and subsequently as languages of teaching and learning that can be used parallel to English. This commitment was informed by research conducted at the institution, which highlighted that the Wits community relies on multilingual

<sup>24</sup> Brown, “Going Digital and Staying Qualitative: Some Alternative Strategies for Digitizing the Qualitative Research Process.”

<sup>25</sup> B. Bassot, *Doing Qualitative Desk-Based Research: A Practical; Guide to Writing an Excellent Dissertation* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022).

<sup>26</sup> Brown, “Going Digital and Staying Qualitative: Some Alternative Strategies for Digitizing the Qualitative Research Process.”

<sup>27</sup> University of the Witwatersrand, *Language Policy*, 2003, <https://www.wits.ac.za/media/wits-university/about-wits/documents/LanguagePolicy.pdf>.

practices for practical reasons which include social interaction, and knowledge acquisition in tutorials and practicals.<sup>28</sup> The implementation of this policy started in 2019, with first-year students in the faculties of humanities and engineering having to enroll in an African language as a requirement. To date, this requirement has been put into practice in the last five years.

### **Language Policy Provisions**

Through its 2015 policy, the University of the Witwatersrand commits itself to a multilingual approach to education and the phased development of isiZulu, Sesotho, and SASL as languages that can be acquired as subjects and used as LOLTs together with English.<sup>29</sup> The policy stipulates that this development will be conducted in phases wherein phase 1 (developing a multilingual linguistic landscape and branding) of the policy will be completed by 2016, and phase 2 (development of materials and resources needed for the teaching of isiZulu, Sesotho, and SASL as subjects for communicative purposes) will begin in 2018. The policy stipulates that in 2018 the university will concentrate on stage 3 to develop the linguistic abilities of staff and students in indigenous South African languages to become competent either in isiZulu, Sesotho, or SASL.

Tshwane in a witsvuvuzela publication indicates that the institution had been unable to implement the language policy which was initially adopted in 2003.<sup>30</sup> Since then, the institution adopted an improved language policy in 2015. In view of the different stages of implementation of the newly adopted language policy, Tshwane registered concerns about multilingual signage with some expounding that “there is a need for a more comprehensive approach to the situation instead of a ‘cosmetic’ one”.<sup>31</sup> Despite these concerns, multilingual signage is crucial for cultural inclusivity and promotes linguistic equality.

### **Conflict and Controversy**

The use of African languages in higher education is an issue fraught with controversy and conflicting views. The University of the Witwatersrand Language Policy Survey Report indicates that “tensions and contestations that continue to emerge in any public discourse on African languages development in South Africa are often linked to race and power.”<sup>32</sup> The report further indicates that the staff “felt that African languages do not have a role to play in the 21st-century global village imperatives; economic development of countries; and advancement of technology”. This perspective narrowly views the importance of African languages in domestic issues. The imposed hegemony of one language in the livelihood of the institution undermines the principles of inclusivity and representation. The South African constitution guarantees language rights; therefore, in a multicultural and multilingual institution, exoglossic practices must be reviewed. Language and politics are inextricably linked. Socio-political affairs of the state in relation to language use may manifest in the manner in which state languages are treated. Leketi celebrating International Mother Tongue Day argues that “much work needs to be done to tackle the unfounded myths borne out of the colonial discourses of divide and rule, and which many speakers of African languages have mistakenly come to believe.”<sup>33</sup> The controversy surrounding the development of African languages is fueled by mythological thoughts that “(a) African languages are not developed for academic and scientific communication, (b) it is expensive to use many languages, therefore, having only one language makes economic sense, (c) people do not need African languages because they are not geared for employment and upward social mobility, and (d) It is the democratic rights of parents to choose English in lieu of African languages.”<sup>34</sup> These mythological assumptions are in tandem with the staff’s beliefs as conveyed in the wits survey report earlier in the paragraph.

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<sup>28</sup> University of the Witwatersrand, “Language Policy Survey,” 2014, [https://www.wits.ac.za/media/wits-university/about-wits/documents/Language Policy Survey Report 2014.pdf](https://www.wits.ac.za/media/wits-university/about-wits/documents/Language%20Policy%20Survey%20Report%202014.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> University of the Witwatersrand, “Language Policy Survey.”

<sup>30</sup> T. Tshwane, “New Start for Sesotho and IsiZulu at Wits,” *Wits Vuvuzela*, March 18, 2016, <https://witsvuvuzela.com/2016/03/18/new-start-for-sesotho-and-isizulu/#more-31398>.

<sup>31</sup> Tshwane, “New Start for Sesotho and IsiZulu at Wits .”

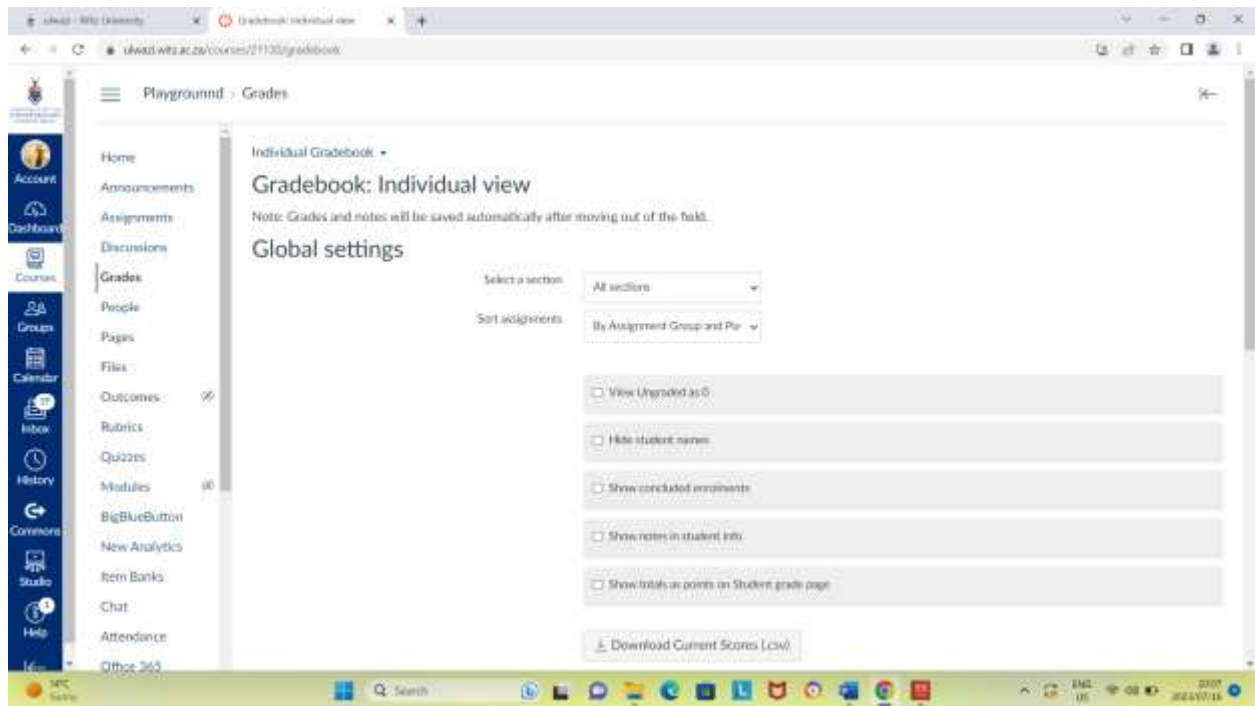
<sup>32</sup> University of the Witwatersrand, “Language Policy Survey,” 106.

<sup>33</sup> M. Leketi, “African languages for sustainable development”. *Wits News*, February 25, 2020. <https://www.wits.ac.za/news/latest-news/general-news/2020/2020-02/african-languages-for-sustainable-development-.html>

<sup>34</sup> Leketi, “African languages for sustainable development”.

## Monolingual Online Resources

The university expounds in its language policy document that it upholds multilingualism. As such, the university's Learning Management System affectionately known as uLwazi is an online resource which enables academic staff to design learning experiences, provide educational resources, promote student engagement and interactions, and assess student learning through dedicated course sites.<sup>35</sup> Access to this teaching and learning platform requires literacy in English since the tools for learning, teaching and assessment are offered in English. African languages are also taught using this platform; however, students and lecturers must be competent in English in order to navigate this platform.



*Figure 1: Screenshot of uLwazi course panel*

It is important to note that while the platform is fully prepared in English, it also allows for the integration of African languages, especially in the announcement, discussions and big blue button sections. The BigBlueButton section is a virtual classroom software which enables educators to interact with students remotely. Lecturer-students' interactions are not limited to English but can be conducted in any language of teaching and learning. For English medium classes, class interactions may be limited. This is the same with African languages, depending on the stream at which the student is learning a language. There are mother-tongue streams and language acquisition streams in the Department of African Languages for both Sesotho and isiZulu. Interaction with uLwazi depends on an adequate understanding and competence in English.

## Lecture Room Practices

Lecturers in any teaching activity remain aware of students' ability to make sense (or not) of the material presented to them in the language of teaching and learning. The institution recognizes multilingualism; however, the practice of multilingual orientation is limited to tutorial sessions and for communicative purposes outside lecture halls. The notion that languages must be kept apart narrowly views languages working together as a resource that can empower students in the learning process. This institution through its language policy indicates that English remains the language of teaching and learning while isiZulu and Sesotho are being developed (University of the Witwatersrand Language Policy). Wits students are taught and tested exclusively in English.

<sup>35</sup> Wits University Online Resources <https://www.wits.ac.za/teaching-and-learning/online-resources/>



## RECOMMENDATION(S)

The role of indigenous African languages must not be limited to a communicative purpose in higher education. Plans to intellectualize Sesotho and isiZulu must be clearly stated and a clear plan must be communicated so that these languages can be fairly placed in the discourse for a decolonized education. Moreover, departments and schools must target students who will produce research in these languages so that these languages can be used in knowledge production.

## CONCLUSION

This research sought to evaluate linguistic practices at Wits University post #feesmustfall demonstrations. Students called for the decolonization of higher education institutions, thereby calling for the implementation of the language policy. The study followed a qualitative desktop approach with the aim of unmasking current language practices in the institution. This research was underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm. By using this research paradigm, the researcher intended to explore, explain and articulate the dynamism or lack thereof in relation to language practices since #feesmustfall demonstrations took a position of a transformative nature regarding the application of indigenous languages in the institution. It has been determined that the language situation remains largely the same. Sesotho and isiZulu have been developed to meet the need to be offered as communicative modules and as modules offered in the Department of African Languages. English continues its hegemony in areas of communication, classroom interaction and research. However, the institution upholds multilingualism by offering African languages of the institution to first-year students in humanities and engineering faculties. The institution should embark on a language policy awareness campaign and educate both staff and students about their roles in upholding the language policy. The language policy must be extended to three more faculties: science faculty; commerce, law and management; and health sciences. This will help students be of service to diverse clients once they complete their studies at the institution.

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