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## University language policy exposes societal fractures

**Sharon Dell** 08 February 2019

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Criticism by a senior government minister of the adoption this year by one of South Africa's top, formerly Afrikaans universities of English as the language of teaching and learning for all first-year students has restoked debate on a highly emotive issue, exposing identity-based fractures that persist in the post-apartheid society.

In what has been described as a “surprising” Twitter post, Finance Minister Tito Mboweni said he “publicly and in his personal capacity DISAGREED” with the phasing out of Afrikaans as a medium of teaching at the University of Pretoria.

“As a country, you are shooting yourselves down. You will regret it in 30 years’ time,” he tweeted.

Two days later, Mboweni tweeted a link to a 2016 article by language practitioner Khethiwe Marais which argued in its closing lines that Afrikaans should be used as a resource for the development of multilingualism as promoted by the South African Constitution, which gives equal status to the country’s 11 languages.

“It took commitment, political will and resources to develop Afrikaans to where it is today as an academic language and a language used in other higher domains. Afrikaans is a close example and role model of what is possible in the development of language and people. For Afrikaans this should be lessons learnt and shared with the other official languages of the country,” Marais wrote.

### Outspoken tweets

A long-standing member of the African National Congress (ANC) and former governor of the South African Reserve Bank, Mboweni has **garnered something of a reputation** for his outspoken Tweets.

Tolika Sibiyi, who is a national executive committee member of South African Youth Council, an umbrella body of all youth formations, called on Mboweni in a news article to substantiate what he described as his “wild claim”.

Mboweni also faced tough criticism from fellow Twitter users, including far-left political party the Economic Freedom Fighters whose leader, Julius Malema, tweeted: “But you are becoming too much now, is no longer a joke. Arg.”

Another Tweet, from a “Neo ntsoelengoe”, simply stated: “1976 class won't like this tweet at all Minister” – in reference to the 1976 Soweto Youth Uprising which saw South African school children gunned down



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by apartheid security forces during a protest against Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, part of the official education system for black people known as 'Bantu Education'.

However, Mboweni also received some support from the likes of Corné Mulder who called him a “very wise man”. Mulder is a member of parliament for the Afrikaner-dominated Freedom Front Plus.

The stance taken by Mboweni, a member of the ruling ANC, ironically also lands him in the same camp as minority rights group AfriForum, which, together with trade union Solidarity, took the university to court in an unsuccessful bid to stop the move, thereby delaying its full introduction by some three years.

### **Court cases**

The University of Pretoria decision follows earlier moves towards English-only policies at the University of the Free State and the University of South Africa, and greater emphasis on parallel medium instruction at Stellenbosch University – all of which have been opposed by Afrikaans and minority lobby groups.

In a 2017 Constitutional Court ruling upholding the decision by the University of the Free State to become an English-medium institution, Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng, summarising the university’s case, said the use of Afrikaans had “unintentionally become a facilitator of ethnic or cultural separation and racial tension”.

“Its continued use would leave the results of white supremacy not being redressed but being kept alive and well. It is for that reason that a policy revision or intervention has since become necessary,” he said.

However, resistance to ‘unilingualism’ persists in sectors. In its latest statement on the University of Pretoria issue, AfriForum said it finds it “worrisome” that the university, notwithstanding many international research projects and expert opinions, did not understand that unilingual education “undermines social cohesion and increases the potential for conflict and student non-performance”.

### **'Phasing out'**

AfriForum also questioned the university’s commitment to a gradual phasing out of Afrikaans.

According to Director of University Relations at the University of Pretoria Rikus Delport, students who registered prior to 2019, including those who registered in 2018 for the first time, would continue to receive lectures, tutorials, study guides and assessment material in Afrikaans for those programmes which were offered in Afrikaans at the time of enrolment – provided that the class size remains practically feasible and it is academically justifiable.

“Where assessment and question papers are set in Afrikaans, currently enrolled students will also be allowed to answer in Afrikaans,” he said in a statement on 23 January.

However, according to Ohann Fourie, AfriForum Youth’s national coordinator for campuses, the university’s undertaking to last year’s first-year intake that lectures, tutorials, study guides and assessment material would be provided in Afrikaans for courses that were offered in Afrikaans at time of registration “no longer holds water”.

“AfriForum received a number of complaints from students who

already in 2018 did not receive these services. The university simply dodges its undertakings with excuses that these lecturers cannot speak Afrikaans, for example. These students are then left to their own devices.”

### A question of numbers?

Delport said the university’s decision was based on the fact that students reporting Afrikaans as their home language had dropped from 85% to 30% between 1992 and 2015.

This rationale was subsequently questioned by Theuns Eloff, executive director of the FW de Klerk Foundation and former vice-chancellor of Potchefstroom University (now North-West University, where the Potchefstroom campus is one of the few remaining sites of Afrikaans-medium instruction), who argued that the university’s English-only policy, which has been on the cards for three years, had in fact contributed to that decline.

“[The policy] became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Fewer students who want to study in Afrikaans will go to a university denying them that right,” he wrote in an article published on *Politicsweb*, in which he also refers positively to Mboweni’s “perhaps surprising tweet”.

Known as a “reconciler”, who in 1987 was part of the Institute for Democratic Alternatives in South Africa delegation which met the ANC in exile, Eloff argued that Delport’s comments suggested that “if too few citizens want to exercise their constitutional right to education in the language of their choice where that is reasonably practicable (as it was at the University of Pretoria), those rights can just be taken away by an organ of state, and in the case of a university, institutions serving a public function.”

Eloff said while comments in the media by University of Pretoria Vice-chancellor, Professor Tawana Kupe, indicating that the new policy would reduce the costs of duplicating programmes “made financial sense” and were “at least truthful” (against the backdrop of Kupe’s other claim that an English-only policy would ensure the university was a South African university as opposed to an Afrikaans university), he said questions remained about whether a constitutional mandate to foster multilingualism can be abrogated by a claimed lack of money.

“What would happen to other constitutional rights if the same logic applied?” he asked.

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