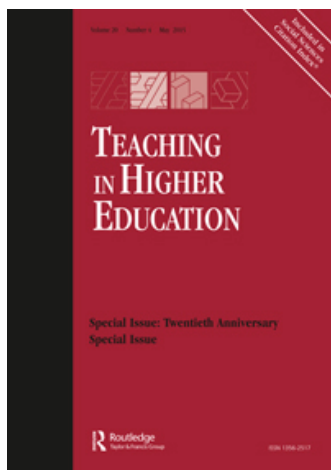


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### Curriculum reform in higher education: a contested space

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## Curriculum reform in higher education: a contested space

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Drawing on the theoretical and analytical tools from the sociology of education, in particular the work of Basil Bernstein and Karl Maton, the paper explores the tensions within curriculum reform discourses and how these tensions play out in different global contexts. The analysis focuses on two curriculum reform policies – Hong Kong and South Africa. On the surface the policies appear to be addressing a similar problem of inadequate schooling systems and proposing a similar solution, the restructuring of the undergraduate degree from three to four years. Drawing on the principles of temporality and specialization from Legitimation Code Theory, the analysis shows that the underlying logic for these reforms is very different. A comparison of these different logics provides insight into the highly contested space of curriculum reform and the implications for addressing inequality.

**Keywords:** curriculum reform; higher education; Legitimation Code Theory; inequality; Basil Bernstein

### Introduction: curriculum reform (finally) on the agenda

A decade ago Barnett and Coate (2005) argued that curriculum is a ‘missing term’ in higher education policy. The focus of their review was on the UK but they suggested that in fact the field as a whole has paid little attention to curriculum. Ten years later a scan through the higher education literature would suggest that this is no longer the case. Curriculum reform – or curriculum ‘transformation’ as it is sometimes referred to – is finally on the agenda. At the transnational level globalization and internationalization have been key drivers in attempts to ‘align’ curriculum, as seen in the Bologna Process and the Tuning Project (Watson 2009). A global shift to ‘knowledge-based economies’ has led to national and institutional curriculum debates about how best to prepare graduates for a knowledge economy. The challenges of access and retention have led to rethinking curriculum interventions to address major articulation gaps between secondary and higher education. These reforms are responses to an entanglement of ‘wicked problems’ facing higher education globally including unequal educational provision, massification, and the rising expectations of middle-class families, growing demand for specialized knowledge, the employability agenda, shrinking public funding, to name a few (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009).

While these are indeed global challenges, a deeper investigation suggests that there are significant differences in how these challenges are experienced locally and how they shape curriculum reform priorities across different types of institutions and different

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national contexts. With a close eye on the university rankings, some research-intensive institutions around the globe are using curriculum reform to strategically position and distinguish themselves in an increasingly competitive future (KWP 2010; SUES 2012). Other reform narratives – whether at national or institutional level – are dealing with the weight of the past, the legacy of poor, and unequal educational provision and the resulting low participation rates, poor retention and marginal pass rates. These pre-occupations with the burden of the past and the uncertainty of the future are not mutually exclusive, indeed many reforms attempt to address both. They do, however, represent tensions for policy-makers as choices inevitably must be made.

The impetus for this paper is South Africa's current curriculum reform proposal to replace the current 3-year undergraduate bachelors with a 4-year degree structure (CHE 2013). The proposal argues that the current structure poses a systemic obstacle to access and success that can only be overcome through deliberate intervention at a systemic level. The proposal has been controversial and now awaits a response from the Minister of Higher Education and Training. This contestation is to be expected as beneath the transformation rhetoric attempts to reform higher education through curriculum will bring to the fore profound divides around two basic questions: What is the problem which the reform seeks to address? How does the curriculum need to change to address this problem? In the case of the South African proposal there is general consensus that the problem to be addressed is the apartheid legacy of unequal educational provision that has resulted in a higher education system which is failing the majority of its population. There is, however, fierce disagreement about the nature of the reform required to address this problem.

The aim of this paper is to explore below the surface of curriculum reform discourse some of the tensions and how these play out in different global contexts. In the next section I draw on the sociology of education for the theoretical and analytical tools used to explore and conceptualize these tensions. I then turn to a comparison of two instances of curriculum reform policy discourse: Hong Kong and South Africa. Both have recently experienced political transitions that have given rise to wide-ranging policy change in higher education in each case resulting in policy proposals for (and in the case of Hong Kong the implementation of) a 4-year undergraduate degree. At the same time they are each situated at different ends of the economic spectrum thus providing a contrast in the effects of global positioning. The key argument advanced in the paper is that underlying these reform discourses are very different logics – different conceptualizations of the need for reform as well as different reform solutions. In conclusion I return to the potential of curriculum reform and the particular challenge of inequality.

### **Theoretical and analytical tools: exposing (some of) the tensions**

The paper draws on the theoretical and analytical tools from the sociology of education, in particular the work of Basil Bernstein and Karl Maton. Bernstein defines curriculum as 'what counts as valid knowledge' (Bernstein 1975, 85). This definition places knowledge at the center of its conceptualization of curricula. This concept of knowledge is rooted in social realism which, as Maton (2014) argues, insists that knowledge is 'not only social, but it is also real ... it has properties, powers and tendencies that have effects' (9). Whatever else it may do, curricula must enable access to this knowledge – it must enable 'epistemic access'. This is a term coined by Morrow (2009) to underscore that formal

access to the institutions that produce knowledge is not enough; meaningful access is access to the knowledge ‘goods’ (Muller 2014a, 2).

Bernstein’s definition – ‘what counts’ – also signals that curricula are constituted by a set of choices. Bernstein (2000) summarizes these as choices about selection (the content of the curriculum), sequencing (what order/progression), pacing (how much time/credit), and evaluation (what counts for assessment). Bernstein is clear that these curriculum choices are constituted by a set of underlying principles that legitimate certain curriculum choices and practices and not others.

To understand curriculum reform discourse and the tensions that emerge I draw on Bernstein’s (2000) pedagogic device which models three fields which constitute pedagogic discourse: the field of production (the site where ‘new’ knowledge is created), field of recontextualization (the sites where knowledges from the field of production are selected, rearranged and transformed into curricula), and field of reproduction (sites of teaching and learning). Thus curriculum and curriculum reform are practices located in the field of recontextualization – the site where knowledge from many different sites of production is selected, rearranged, transformed into curriculum. This field is ‘an arena of conflict and struggle’ for dominance (Bernstein 2000, 62) regulated according to Bernstein by the ‘recontextualizing rules’ or what Maton (2014) calls a ‘recontextualizing logic’. From this theoretical point of view the struggle in curriculum reform is over the recontextualizing logics – different underlying principles legitimating different curriculum choices.

Building on Bernstein’s work, Maton’s (2014) Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) offers a conceptual and analytical tool kit to make visible the underlying principles that inform the logic of these choices. LCT’s has a number of principles but for the purpose of this analysis I draw on two – temporality and specialization – that give analytical purchase on some of the curriculum reform tensions identified in the discussion above. Temporality refers to the orientation of the practice: is it retrospective (looking back) or prospective (future orientated). Specialization refers to the basis of achievement: is it about what and how you know (a knowledge code) or who you are (a knower code). These tools are used to expose the recontextualizing logic or the basis on which certain curriculum choices are made. The principles are not binaries but rather reflect different degrees of presence or dominance in a plane of infinite analytical possibilities. Thus retrospective and prospective orientations are not mutually exclusive and neither is inherently better than the other. The same applies to knowledge and knower codes. The question is whose interests are being served in any particular curriculum reform discourse.

For each case I analyze key policy documents that focus on higher education reform. In the case of Hong Kong this includes two policy reports of the University Grants Committee (UGC 2002, 2010). I also draw on commentaries on these policies (Cheng 2001; Jaffee 2011; McGaw 2006; Skidmore 2012, in the case of Hong Kong). In the case of South Africa this includes the White Paper on Higher Education 1997, the CHE Report (2013). Secondary sources include Badat (2009), Fisher and Scott (2011). The analysis focuses on the policy discourse, not curriculum practice or implementation.

The analysis compares each case using the framing questions of first, how does the reform discourse represent the ‘problem’ that needs to be addressed? To address this question, I explore its temporal orientation. Is the orientation of the problem retrospective or prospective? In other words, is the problem situated in the past or the future? Second, how does the reform discourse represent the ‘solution’? For this I use the concept of specialization. What specializes the reformed curriculum: is it curricula specialized by a

knowledge code (what and how you know) or by a knower code (who you are)? The aim of the analysis is to expose these underlying principles to better understand curriculum reform, more specifically, to understand different transformation priorities.

### **Analysis: exposing the dominant logic of reform**

Before I turn to the analysis, I briefly describe some of the contextual similarities and differences. Both countries have experienced significant political transitions in the past two decades. In 1994 South Africa transitioned from apartheid to democracy. In 1997 Hong Kong gained its political independence from Britain to become incorporated in China as a Special Administrative Region. Both higher education systems have felt pressure from both national and global imperatives. In both cases the reforms are responding to the perceived inadequacies of the existing education system to meet these imperatives. In both cases there has been a flurry of policy reforms.

There are, however, significant differences in the 'health' of their economies and their education systems. Hong Kong holds a strong position in the global economy on a range of indicators (Skidmore 2012, 4). In contrast South Africa with its triple challenges of inequality, poverty, and unemployment is struggling to keep pace with the BRICS economies. While both reforms are in response to perceived poor education systems, the state of the two systems is very different. The Hong Kong education system as a whole is in 'good health' (McGaw 2006) with a primary and secondary sector which, according to a range of indicators, is one of the top-ranked among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries. The UGC (2002) policy refers to the development of Hong Kong's eight public universities as a 'success story' with rapidly growing participation rates, high completion rates and high levels of employer satisfaction (15). Four of Hong Kong's eight universities are in the top-200 2014 Times Higher Education rankings and two of those are rated 43 and 51.

In contrast, despite many of the post-apartheid gains, South Africa's education system is characterized by very poor educational performance particularly in the areas of mathematics and science where South Africa ranks at the bottom in comparison to other developing countries (Fisher and Scott 2011). While there have been many policy initiatives to effect the size, shape, and quality of the higher education system, the overall participation rate is low and particularly low for Black students who make up the majority of the population. While enrolments have increased significantly, retention rates are not good. Fisher and Scott (2011) argue that South Africa is a 'low participation, high-attrition system that it has not yet come to terms with its developing-country environment' (16).

Against this backdrop I turn to the analysis of the curriculum reform discourses.

### **Representations of the 'problem': retrospective or prospective orientation**

Hong Kong's restructuring of its undergraduate curriculum needs to be understood in the context of waves of policy calling for educational reform starting back in the 1970s (Cheng 2001). These reforms have in part been a response to global economic shifts in the modes of production, in the case of Hong Kong a shift from manufacturing to financial services. The UGC (2002) notes, 'in the course of our re-structuring Government's most fundamental task is to make significant investment into education to prepare each one of us for the advent of a knowledge-based economy' (3). 'Without a

highly educated and capable workforce, with the necessary developmental skills, there will be no success in building a knowledge economy ... which is essential to Hong Kong's place as a developed, internationally focused community' (UGC 2002, 4).

Although the Hong Kong policy premise is a 'healthy' economic sector (as noted above), there are nonetheless some 'significant issues' which require 'firm and in some cases urgent action' (UGC 2010, ii). The policies argue that if Hong Kong is to strengthen or even hold its global position it will need to deal with the perceived shortcomings of the existing education system in preparing students for Hong Kong's international interests and responsibilities (Skidmore 2012, 4). '(Our) biggest challenge is ... providing our next generation with the best education, in order for them to be competitive in a globalized world' (UGC 2010, ii). There are numerous references to the 'fierce competition' with more 'established and mature systems' (Europe and North America) and with younger systems that are catching up (Mainland China; UGC 2010, ii). There is a particular concern about its relationship to mainland China: 'the future of Hong Kong's HE sector lies in its ability to stay relevant in the process of internationalization and the rapid development of Mainland China' (UGC 2010, 4). Thus the policy paints a picture of a future in which Hong Kong's global economic position is uncertain. The investment in educational reform, especially post-secondary education, is 'an investment in the fundamental economic health of a society' (UGC 2010, 14).

Against this backdrop, the policy proposals have been radical, resulting in a restructuring of the entire education system from primary through to post-secondary – referred to as the 3 + 3 + 4 structure – reducing secondary schooling by one year and increasing higher education by one year. According to Skidmore (2012), one of the major drivers for the 4-year degree is to align Hong Kong with its competitors, Mainland China and the USA which also have 4-year degrees. This alignment will enable Hong Kong to compete on the global stage ensuring an exchange of students and staff. The 4-year degree is thus part of its internalization strategy to attract increasing numbers of 'non-local' students. It is about attracting talent, increasing competition and quality. It is first and foremost a market logic.

Thus the orientation of the policy discourse is prospective – an imaginary future in which Hong Kong is threatened unless it strengthens its position in a global landscape. The curriculum reform is thus seen as a means to enhance its advantage by structurally aligning the curriculum with other competitors and producing graduates who can contribute to the 'knowledge-based economy'. I will return to how it is envisioned that the curriculum will do this, but first, I turn to how the 'problem' is represented in the South African policy discourse.

In the lead up to 1994 and in the 20 years since there has also been a multitude of policies directed at higher education reform (Badat 2009). The White Paper (1997) on Higher Education refers to a threefold national agenda of transformation, reconstruction, and development. The policy is explicit about the tension between the challenges of transformation on the one hand and economic growth on the other. In the White Paper (1997) transformation is understood as the 'promotion of equity of access and fair chance of success to all who are seeking to realize their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities' (1.14). At the same time it notes the 'formidable' challenges for the South African economy in 'integrating itself into the competitive (international) arena ... which places a premium on knowledge and skills, leading to the notion of the "knowledge society"'

(White Paper 1997, 1.9). Thus we see in the White Paper tensions between retrospective and prospective discourses – those of transformation with its imperatives of redress and those of ‘reconstruction and development’ with imperatives of global competition. In the nearly two decades since the White Paper these policy discourses continue to compete for dominance.

South Africa’s proposed 4-year degree must be understood in the context of this post-apartheid policy tension between redressing the inequities of the past and addressing imperatives of the future. With respect to the latter, there are multiple references throughout the report to the graduate of the twenty-first century and the development needs of a future South Africa. The terms of reference specifically call the task team to investigate ‘the potential of curriculum reform linked to graduate attributes in the context of a changing world – national, regional and international’ (CHE 2013, 30). The report argues that extending the duration of the degree is ‘a mechanism for both enhancing academic success and enabling students to engage *with the changing role of knowledge in contributing to social and economic development in the 21st century*’ (CHE 2013, 29; italics added).

I would argue however that the more dominant conceptualization of the problem which the reform seeks to address is retrospective – the imperatives of dealing with inequality. The reform is seen as a means of structurally addressing the articulation gap and thus eliminating the discrimination of the past. The report ties itself to what it argues is a consistent policy thread from the 1997 White Paper through to more recent policies which have called for a review of the undergraduate curriculum. Such a review is necessary ‘given its appropriateness and efficacy in dealing with the learning needs of students, given the context of schooling in South Africa, given the acknowledged gap between school and higher education’ (CHE 2013, 29). The reform must address unfinished business:

While steady progress has been made since 1994 in addressing equity of access, equity of *outcomes* remains elusive. Thus a key strategic objective – to produce increasing numbers of graduates with the skills and competences to meet the human and resource and knowledge needs of the country – remains unfulfilled. (CHE 2013, 27)

Thus in comparing how each of the reform cases represent the ‘problem’, in the case of Hong Kong the orientation of the policy discourse is prospective, unambiguously future-oriented. It is about Hong Kong leveraging its global position by producing the ‘kinds of graduates’ required for the ‘new century’. It has a strong market logic. In the case of South Africa while there are some references to the prospective, the dominant logic is retrospective. It is about redress. It has a strong political logic. It is about confronting the legacy of apartheid education and the gross inequalities of access and success that now characterize South Africa’s system of low participation and high attrition.

### **Representations of the ‘solution’: knowledge or knower specialization**

The above analysis shows that although the ‘problem’ in each case appears similar – an inadequate education system – the recontextualizing logic is different. Simply put the Hong Kong reform discourse is dominated by a market discourse of competition, the South African reform discourse is dominated by a strong political discourse of social justice and the imperatives of redress. We now turn to representations of the ‘solution’. In



each case the proposed solution is more time, but more time for what? In order to analyze the policy discourse of ‘solution’ I draw on the principle of specialization. Specialization asks, what is the basis of achievement – does the curriculum reform discourse privilege the knower (who you are) or knowledge (what and how you know). Again a reminder that both are always present, the analytical question is what which one is dominant.

In relation to ‘more time for what?’ Hong Kong’s policy asserts, ‘to assume that it will be more of the same is to miss the single greatest opportunity in this generation for re-thinking the curriculum and the way it is delivered and assessed’ (UGC 2002, 25). The policy urges the university sector ‘to provide students with a broader education promoting critical thinking, whole person development and life-long learning’ (Skidmore 2012, 87). The additional year is in response to a general critique that the existing qualification is too ‘specialised and career-focused’ (Skidmore 2012, 87).

We need specialists, (but) we also need those who can as necessary move beyond that specialism – not by becoming specialist in two areas, but by seeing the creative and unexpected connections and building teams with varieties of skills and the capacity to work together. (UGC 2002, 25)

The assumption of the reform appears to be that as far as depth is concerned, that is, the knowledge and ways of knowing of a particular discipline, Hong Kong’s students are well-prepared; what they lack is breadth. What does breadth include? Surprisingly there is very little guidance in the policy on how the extra year is to be used. There is reference to the inclusion of curricula which combine Western and Asian problems, international matters and language. Students need to be bi-literate (Chinese and English) and have trilingual (Cantonese, Putonghua, and English) abilities (UGC 2010).

Jaffee (2011) argues that the move to a 4-year degree is indicative of a more profound shift in Hong Kong’s understanding of the purpose of higher education from the British model of professional and disciplinary specialization to the American liberal arts model which has a more formative purpose ‘involving exposure to a wide range of perspectives, integrative and interdisciplinary thinking, the cultivation of generic skills untethered to specialized disciplinary content knowledge’ (197). Jaffee’s contention that this is a shift in purpose may be over-stating the case but these contrasting models point to longstanding debates between curricula which privilege depth (knowledge code) vs. those that privilege breadth (knower code). What we see in the Hong Kong curriculum reform, perhaps on the assumption of a strong knowledge code, is an attempt to strengthen the knower code – ‘whole person development’, the formation of a particular graduate identity, one who can compete in the international arena. I now turn to how the South African proposed curriculum reform represents the ‘solution’. What does the reform discourse privilege?

In contrast to the Hong Kong policy, the CHE policy is a more prescriptive about how the extra time is to be used. While respectful of the autonomy of institutions, the report argues that the extra year needs to address three different ‘structural’ problems.

The first is ‘discontinuity between secondary and higher education in South Africa’ what is referred to as the ‘articulation gap’ (CHE 2013, 18). Drawing on decades of experience in ‘bridging’ this gap through extended curricula for talented but educationally disadvantaged students, the policy stipulates that the extra time must be used to ‘provide additional curriculum time for foundational learning’ (18). This involves ‘not only subject knowledge but also academic skills, approaches to study, background or contextual

knowledge and forms of social capital' (17). The second 'structural' problem that the curriculum reform must address is 'key transitions' through the undergraduate curriculum (CHE 2013, 19). Essentially these are 'epistemic' transitions, transitions in 'types of knowledge' – different ways of knowing and doing at different stages of an undergraduate degree, for example, in an Engineering degree the epistemic transition from the basic sciences to the applied sciences. The proposed policy is not prescriptive about how these transitions should be supported but exemplars are provided of different kinds of curriculum interventions. These two structural problems focus the reform is on strengthening the knowledge code to enable epistemic access. The third 'structural' problem calling for 'urgent attention' is 'curricula to be enhanced to meet contemporary local and global conditions' (CHE 2013, 19). Here the discourse is similar to that of the Hong Kong reform. The formation of a particular kind of knower – 'broadening the curriculum to include learning that is professionally and socially important in the contemporary world ... and that lay the foundations for critical citizenship' (CHE 2013, 19).

To summarize, specialization asks what is the basis of achievement – is it 'who you are' or 'what and how you know'? The dominant logic of the Hong Kong curriculum reform discourse is to strengthen the knower code through an emphasis on 'breadth' and the formation of a particular kind of 'knower'. Again in the case of the South African reform there is some reference to 'breadth' and the opportunity of the extra time for curriculum 'enhancement'. But the dominant logic is an attempt to strengthen the knowledge code with its emphasis on epistemic access through foundational provision and scaffolding the upstream epistemic transitions.

### **Discussion: the stakes in the arena of struggle**

This paper explores two cases of curriculum reform discourse. Though both policies propose 4-year degrees the analysis reveals different recontextualizing logics, different problem and reform solutions, and ultimately different transformation agendas. Curriculum reform is conceptualized as an 'arena of struggle' over the basis of legitimation. The principles of temporality and specialization are used to provide insight into some of the tensions that might be at play in these reform initiatives. There are no claims that these are the only tensions. Other analytical tools will bring others to surface. So what insight is gained from the analysis for curriculum reform more generally?

The temporality 'lens' brings into view reform discourses caught between the imperatives of legacy on the one hand, and imperatives of an anticipated or imagined competitive global future. The South African reform discourse illustrates this tension where both imperatives are present but the imperatives of 'redress' dominate. The 'problem' foregrounded by the reform is the years of legislated structural inequality and its persistent devastating effects two decades on. The problem is well-articulated. It includes the 'gap' between public secondary schooling and university preparedness and the manner in which this becomes a barrier to access or may result in vulnerable academic trajectories. This concern is by no means unique to South Africa: the problem of the articulation gap is prevalent in reform discourses globally. What is less prevalent, however, is the necessary deeper retrospection (and introspection) required for meaningful transformation: where the problem is understood – beyond inadequate schooling – to be the very higher education institutions themselves and the ways in which particular ways of knowing/acting/being serve to structurally privilege some groups and exclude

others. As Thomas argues ‘higher education has a central role to play in addressing issues of inter-generational poverty and inequality but to do so it must transform itself’ (Thomas in Hall 2012, 1). Can genuine transformation of curricula happen without a retrospective orientation, without a deep cognizance of the structural imprint of exclusion? In my view, not likely.

At the other end of the temporal tensions, through the Hong Kong case study we gain insight into a policy discourse grappling with the range of potential threats of an uncertain global landscape and the dangers of slipping behind. The imperatives of the future are well-articulated in the Hong Kong case. They include the need to ‘do or die’ – to aggressively assert what is ‘distinctive’ in order to ‘stay in the game’. With respect to retrospective discourses, in particular the challenges of inequality, the Hong Kong policy is fairly silent. There is one reference to how widening participation will enable not only a more skilled workforce but will promote ‘social integration’ of groups previously unrepresented (UGC 2010, 200). There is a recognition of policy tensions. How, for example, a heavy reliance on English may lead to ‘disembedding’ which occurs when ‘activity that takes place in the global space becomes sufficiently important to overshadow or displace activity in the domestic space’ (UGC 2010, 66). For example, since fluency in English is a marker of privilege in Hong Kong, the disembedding brought on by internationalization could serve to reinforce Hong Kong’s already severe class divisions (Skidmore 2012, 97). With the exception of these few references, the unspoken assumption of the policy is that the higher education system is serving those who deserve to be there. A recent *New York Times* editorial notes that one of the fundamental issues which lies at the heart of Hong Kong’s recent Occupy Central protests is ‘a persistent and widening wealth gap’ (*New York Times*, 21 October 2014). This does not appear to be a ‘fundamental issue’ which Hong Kong’s curriculum reform has prioritized.

To what extent are the priorities of the Hong Kong reform discourse typical of the discourses of other parts of the economically advantaged higher education sector? The King’s–Warwick (2010) study suggests that it might be. There appears to be a pattern of research-intensive universities in the developed world having a similar preoccupation with how curriculum reform can strengthen their global positioning. If it turns out with further analysis to be the case, then one needs to ask about this discursive ‘absence’ of concerns about inequality in the world’s leading universities. In fairness perhaps the problems of ‘redress’ or ‘widening participation’ are dealt with elsewhere. Given that many of these universities are situated in highly differentiated systems, perhaps the responsibility for ‘redress’ lies in some other tier of the system. This poses particular challenges for aspiring research-intensive universities in the developing world. Unlike their peers in the developed world they cannot take the educational preparedness of their students as a given, nor can they assume that other parts of the sector will absorb the ‘problem’. Such universities – top-ranking universities in Brazil, India, and South Africa, for example – will truly distinguish themselves as global leaders to the extent that they commit to simultaneously rectifying the past and addressing the future. This requires curriculum reform that intentionally provides multiple pathways at entry to ensure equity of access and success, but at the same time ensures that the curriculum is responsive to the range of challenges of the contemporary world. It requires a kind of Janus-faced curriculum reform strategy.

The specialization ‘lens’ brings into view the tensions in reform curriculum discourse between privileging a ‘what and how you know’ and ‘who you are’. The Hong Kong case sets out to strengthen the knower code. The South African case is a strengthening of the

knowledge code. Some will argue rightly that it is problematic to polarize these codes. What any curriculum reform should be striving for is to produce graduates who have both depth of disciplinary specialization but also crucially have the capabilities to work across these areas of specialization in order to understand and solve the complex problems of our world. It is also possible that strengthening the knower code is an important corrective for curricula in education systems such as Hong Kong where a strong knowledge code is assumed. It can be argued that it is perhaps in the best interests of students who have come from an education of narrow specialization.

Whether these assumptions are correct in the developed world will be debated. What we know is that ‘depth’ cannot be taken for granted in South Africa. The basic epistemic building blocks – the ‘know that’ and ‘know how’ of the disciplines are not appropriately in place for the majority. What we have witnessed in the past 20 years in South Africa, as Morrow (2009) argues, is that formal access to the institutions that distribute knowledge is not a sufficient condition for epistemic access. In contexts similar to those in South Africa, transformation will require curriculum reform that places epistemic access as its central driving logic. Referring specifically to science and engineering, Muller (2014b) argues that the curriculum of the future must enable a ‘fairer and more just access to knowledge ... it needs to illuminate the differential internal epistemic and pedagogic architecture that we require students to negotiate’ (7). This curriculum reform project is both educational and profoundly political.

### **Conclusion: addressing inequality, not optional**

There is a mounting case that inequality may be one of the most pressing challenges we face as we move through the twenty-first century (Piketty 2014; Hall 2012). The question arises, what will be the role of higher education with respect to this challenge? More specifically, in what ways can curriculum transformation in higher education address inequality as a matter of priority? The answer to this question is not straightforward. Hall (2012) argues that the role of universities is ‘inherently ambiguous’ (16). They can be transformative by disrupting and reversing cycles of inequality for individuals and families who have been ill-served by public education. At the same time universities are gatekeepers of the existing order and thereby serve to perpetuate inequality. Indeed the current global market-driven discourses of reform suggest that it is unlikely that the world’s leading (and best resourced) universities will make inequality a central feature of their strategic mission. They have other priorities. It is debatable whether they should have this option. In South Africa – and other developing countries – addressing the problem of inequality through curriculum reform is not optional.

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