

*Comments on the Curriculum Change Working Group Framework Document*

Given its urgency, I think we should welcome the facts that a working group has given the issue of decolonisation of the curriculum sustained and careful thought and that it has produced a document which will help the way we all think about what we learn and teach. I'd like however to register some strong reservations about claims made in the document and, consequently, in the role it might play. These reservations, in some measure, echo those of my colleague, George Hull, but differ slightly in emphasis.

Let me begin with the document's attack on a prominent figure in my discipline: René Descartes. At page 20 the document states,

Coloniality of being, which essentially means dehumanisation or the disintegration of being, rests on René Descartes's [sic] *Cogito ergo sum*, which is in fact built on 'I conquered therefore I am' or 'I possess therefore I am'

From the list of references, it seems that the Working Group didn't bother actually to read Descartes. If it had it might have learned that the point about the *Cogito* is that it allows Descartes to infer his existence from a premise which is not capable of being doubted. For, if I doubt the premise (that I think) then, since doubting is a form of thinking, I must be thinking. Now, though 'I conquer therefore I am' and 'I possess therefore I am' are valid inferences as, indeed, is the inference 'I jump therefore I am', these are of no interest to Descartes since the premises—'I conquer'; 'I possess'; and 'I jump'—are capable of being doubted. So it is hard to see how this could possibly be a good reading of Descartes, or, indeed, of his influence on thought.

In *The Meditations* Descartes is concerned with intellectual autonomy and thus with challenging and questioning existing intellectual authority. The book is an exercise in taking responsibility for one's own thinking and it exerts its power, not by claiming any kind of authority for itself, but by taking its reader through a thought experiment, which we each ought to be able to recreate for ourselves. It makes no assumption about the character of its reader, the thinker, who embarks on the task of taking responsibility for her own thinking. So it is utterly mysterious how Descartes is recruited as chief instigator of the coloniality of knowledge 'which projects the only legitimate thinker as white, heterosexual, able-bodied and male.'

But, somewhat ironically, I think this observation about his project will not, in view of the Working Group, get Descartes off the hook because now another accusation will emerge from his assumption about the universal validity of his thought experiment, the universal validity, that is, of reason. The Framework Document sets itself clearly against the universality or objectivity of knowledge: all knowledge is rooted in positionality and so it pretty uniformly pluralises the terms 'knowledge' and 'epistemology'. Though it is not spelled out, I think the Framework Document takes it that claiming the universal validity of one's knowledge is claiming a spurious authority and a right to suppress others' claims to knowledge; that is, the claim of universality buttresses an odious arrogance. But this ought not to be the case; it is certainly not a logical consequence of universality; and ought never to follow, provided one has appropriate respect for fellow enquirers. For then, the claim to universality or objectivity entails that a divergence with another enquirer ought to give one pause,

ought to give one a reason to question the validity of one's own claim. It places enquirers in a shared space, a space in which we learn from one another. Viewed like this, claims about the objectivity of knowledge are claims which fit best with humility in enquiry, not arrogance. Conversely the claim that 'knowledge must be understood as both situational and relational' (p.5) can be seen as a way of dismissing another's disagreement: it doesn't count because it emanates from a positionality one rejects. And it can be seen as encouraging disagreement to focus not on the matter of the disagreement but on the underlying divergence in positionality. I think there are potential dangers here too.

These are large and complex issues. My point is not to take a strong stand on them here. My point is that the Framework Document does so; that it does so without demonstrating good reason; and, as my colleague George Hull says, does so ill advisedly, if this is intended as an official statement of University policy.