Language policy in post-apartheid South Africa has raised the official status of the nine most widely distributed indigenous African languages, so that the first languages of more than 90% of the linguistically diverse population are now constitutionally recognised. This implies that in public spaces such as educational institutions, government offices or health care facilities services should be available in these languages – and particularly so in the languages widely represented in a particular region, such as isiXhosa in the Eastern and Western Cape, or Tshivenda in the Limpopo province. This paper will refer to two kinds of situations in the Western Cape where the effect of such a liberal language policy can be tested, namely in (i) the use of indigenous languages in secondary schooling where learners are prepared for further education and training and for employment, and (ii) the language requirements set as entry qualifications at tertiary education institutions where both South African citizens and candidates from other African countries may be eligible. The paper will illustrate how entry requirements as well as educational practices perpetuate ideologies that still to a large extent exclude L1 speakers of languages such as isiXhosa or Shona (a Zimbabwean language widely represented in the new migrant population of the region). The paper will argue that post-colonial policies deliberately or inadvertently perpetuate linguistic and cultural distinctions that are disenabling to a majority of those that the new policies are intended to protect and socially advance.

Keywords: Language policy, post-colonialism, education.