

Exploring Opportunities and Obstacles in the Decolonisation of South African Higher Education Curriculum

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Abstract: This research investigates the intricacies of decolonising the higher education curriculum in South Africa, with the ultimate goal of advancing social justice, a cornerstone of democracy. Drawing on an extensive review of literature and institutional analysis, the study delves into the multifaceted nature of decolonisation efforts within the South African higher education landscape. Central to this inquiry, is the conceptualisation of social justice, encompassing principles of equity, inclusivity, and the warranted recognition of historically marginalised perspectives. Through an exploration of both the opportunities and obstacles inherent in the decolonisation process, this research sheds light on key themes including potential institutional resistance and epistemological shifts. Furthermore, it underscores the significance of embracing indigenous knowledge systems, fostering critical pedagogies, and promoting culturally responsive teaching practices as pivotal strategies in advancing social justice agendas. By critically examining these dynamics, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in curriculum transformation initiatives aimed at promoting social justice in South African higher education. This paper will inform institutional stakeholders on objective realities of the implementation of this progressive practice.

Keywords: Decolonisation, Social justice, Higher education, Curriculum transformation, Inclusivity

1. Introduction

Decolonisation of educational curriculum in Higher Education Institutions is a reality faced by institutions in a bid to illustrate democracy, transformative constitutionalism and equitable progression. With 2024 marking 30 years of democracy for the Republic of South Africa, a reflection into transformative practices in education becomes pertinent in assessing the country's democratic progression. The conundrum arises in balancing these fundamental interests and acknowledging obstacles that could prejudice this progression. Decolonisation of curriculum involves the re-evaluation and transformation of the content taught and the methodology implemented in educational institutions. The rationale behind decolonisation is to dismantle colonial legacies and structures of power (Lebeloane, 2017). The process of decolonisation has fundamental aims to challenge Eurocentric bias while promoting indigenous knowledge which furthers recognition of the heritage of indigenous persons in South Africa (Dastile, 2013). It addresses historical injustices through acknowledgment and confrontation while simultaneously celebrating cultural diversity and inclusion of the marginalised and underrepresented groups of people (Dastile, 2013). In empowering marginalised communities through relatable education, culturally, a sense of belonging and self-worth can be argued as significant benefits thereto (le Grange, 2016). Critical pedagogy is also cultivated through the encouragement of critical thinking on issues to do with power, privilege, and oppression (Machingambi, 2020). In essence, the decolonisation of curriculum seeks to create an educational environment that is inclusive, equitable and relevant to the diverse realities of learners in tertiary education. This study has classified decolonisation to primarily include transformed use of language for instruction, module selection, prescribed material and assessment criteria. This classification will form the basis for the discussions on opportunities, obstacles, case studies and recommendations to be made for a sustainable decolonisation of a curriculum.

2. Research Methodology

The research methodology for this paper is primarily based on an extensive literature review. The objective was to gather, analyse and synthesise information from a wide range of academic materials and research papers to identify key themes, opportunities, and obstacles related to the decolonisation of a curriculum. The initial phase of research involved a search of academic databases, including JSTOR, Good Scholar and Institutional repositories, to identify relevant literature published in the last decade. Keywords such as "decolonisation of curriculum", "higher education", "curriculum reform", "post-colonial education", and "educational transformation", were used to ensure a broad and inclusive search. The inclusion criteria prioritised peer reviewed articles, books, conference papers and theses that specifically addressed decolonisation efforts in Higher Education. The selected materials were systematically reviewed to extract relevant data and insights. Each of the sources were examined for its discussion on decolonisation processes, theoretical frameworks, practical implications, challenges that were faced and outcomes observed. The review

was structured in a way that highlights both the successes and barriers encountered in various contexts, providing a balanced perspective on the issue.

For the synthesis of findings, the analysis of the collected literature was conducted using a thematic approach. Key themes were identified and grouped into categories of relevance and relatability, inclusivity and diversity and critical thinking and analysis. The thematic analysis enabled an understanding of the multifaceted nature of curriculum decolonisation. Based on the thematic analysis, conclusions were drawn regarding areas of opportunity and obstacles in the decolonisation of curriculum. Opportunities were identified in innovative pedagogical practices, interdisciplinary approaches, and community engagement strategies that have shown promise in fostering a more inclusive and representative curriculum. Conversely, obstacles like entrenched institutional norms, lack of resources and resistance to change were also highlighted. This provided a nuanced view of the challenges that need to be addressed. By systematically analysing a diverse range of materials, this study provides understanding of where progress has been made or can be made. It also identifies the barriers that must be overcome in a bid to further the agenda of decolonising curriculum in higher education.

3. Opportunities and Obstacles to be Realised in the Decolonisation of Curriculum

Advocacy for decolonisation of curriculum has been driven for a multitude of reasons. Positive changes have been attributed to decolonisation of curriculum for a just and inclusive society. The below are some of the opportunities that can be realised, together with obstacles that can delay or in some instances, hinder the active implementation of the categorised forms of decolonisation identified in paragraph 1 above.

3.1 Relevance and Relatability

Decolonised curricula are inevitably more relevant to local contexts. Benefits to be realised from this are enhancement of practical application of learning (Le Grange, 2016). Learners are better equipped to tackle real life situations with skills cultivated through relatable hypothetical scenarios (Le Grange, 2016). An example would be a psychology student who is informed on certain mental ailments that are identified in the South African context but not acknowledged by western curriculum. In practice, should a patient come and present the ailment, the learner (now professional) would be equipped to assist or have literacies to make the relevant referral. Through decolonisation, the dominance of western knowledge paradigms are challenged (Lebeloane, 2017). There is also a systematic reshaping of knowledge production and increase in indigenous representation which is crucial to a country's identity (Abdi, 2012).

A fundamental challenge to the above benefit through decolonisation is the unfortunate reality of possible resistance to change. Established faculty and academic traditions in some in some institutions tend to resist change to curriculum as they perceive it as an attack on their expertise or as an unnecessary overhaul of successfully proven teaching methods. A recent case study done at an unnamed South African University had one Senior Department staff member allude to the following, *"I am sitting with an older staff, who still believe that the old topics in the curriculum is fine"*, (du Plessis, 2021). It is imperative to acknowledge that decolonisation must encompass elements extending to more than just curriculum (du Plessis, 2021). The methodology or teaching and lecturer attitudes and deliveries are also crucial (du Plessis, 2021). Democratic advancement, social justice and constitutionalism warrant that these challenges be addressed at thirty years of democracy. Reworking faculty academic training and recruitment is a lengthy process, and this research acknowledges the time that it will take for a comprehensive decolonisation in this regard. The importance thereof, however, needs to continuously be emphasised on to foster more, relevance, relatability and confidence in learners of all racial and cultural demographics.

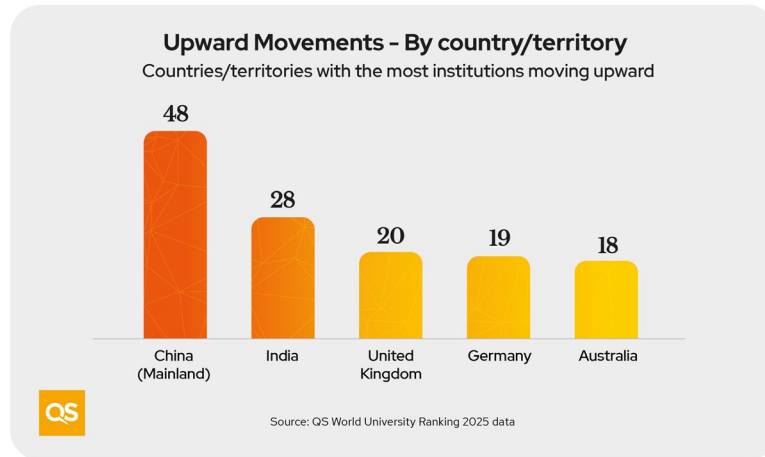
3.2 Inclusivity and Diversity

Imperialism has been criticised to have brought about lack of identity and confidence in indigenous cultures and practices given the negative connotations that were projected onto these practices by the imperialist ideologies (Martin, 2013). With independence and exposure there is a move towards self-realisation and actualisation by the indigenous persons (Bond, 2014). Furthermore, with decolonisation of curriculum, comes the incorporation of diverse perspectives and knowledge into the curriculum (Machingambi, 2020). This can be attributed to allowing students from various backgrounds to see themselves reflected in their education and therefore further cultivating a sense of belonging (Machingambi, 2020). It affirms respect for diverse cultures and experiences (Le Grange, 2016). By virtue of confronting the nuanced historical injustices and inequalities, decolonisation inevitably promotes social justice values in South Africa (Fataar, 2018). John Stuart Mill contextualised social justice in contemporary politics, social science, and political philosophy and defined it as the fair treatment and equitable status of all individuals and social groups within a state or society (Dilulio,

2022). In a democratic dispensation, it is pertinent that students have prescribed material and modules that equip them with the critical skills and knowledge to advocate for diversity and societal inclusion (Le Grange, 2016).

Arguments have been levelled against South African education for not having made the necessary strides in education to uphold social justice (Badat & Sayed, 2014). Assertions made suggest that social justice is threatened by the gatekeeping academic practices of the South African higher education institutions (Jansen, 2004). Attributed to the gatekeeping have been aspects such as complexified language of instruction (English and/or Afrikaans) and somewhat exorbitant fees to which the South African masses cannot afford (Badat & Sayed, 2014). A study at 20 years of democracy established that, *“Twenty years later, formally desegregated yet class-based educational institutions, continuing disparities and inequities, and poor academic achievement are key features of the contemporary educational order.”* (Badat & Sayed, 2014). In endorsing the agenda for multifaceted decolonisation of curriculum, the aim would be for the disparities and prejudices to be systematically reduced, and, eventually eradicated (Albertyn, 2019). Principles of social justice are enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (from hereunder referred to as *“The Constitution”*). This is evident in the bill of rights as a whole, the equality and non-discrimination clause in section 9, socio economic rights and affirmative action. It therefore becomes imperative that academic practices in higher education institutions, implement transformative practices that promote the agendas of social justice and correct historical injustices.

Section 6(2) of the Constitution states that, *“Recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages”*. In a bid to further this constitutional objective, it is imperative that the use of the indigenous languages (acknowledged in Section 6 (1) of the Constitution) in Higher Education institutions be endorsed and implemented where benefit may be realised. Germany, as a leading academic and economic state, advocates for a German taught curriculum despite the popularity of English as an academic language of instruction. A study at the Technical University of Munich, found that the 71% students receiving education in their native language (first language, German), comprehended the taught curriculum more, excelled at assessments and became formidable professionals in their specialised industry (Fulda and Missal, 2021). This fared higher than a success rate of 56% in an unnamed institution where students received instructional learning through the use of a second language to them (Fulda and Missal, 2021). The Technical University of Munich is ranked thirty-seventh (37th) in the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings 2024 and thirtieth (30th) in the Times Higher Education (THE) Rankings 2024 (QS, 2024). *“Being the first of its kind to incorporate both employability and sustainability factors into the methodology, the QS World University Rankings provides the higher education sector, governments, and students a reliable rankings system that identifies the world’s leading universities in a range of performance metrics.”* (QS, 2024). The above constitutional provisions and case study would inform a motivation in support of native languages being used for teaching and learning in Higher educational institutions. The below image illustrates the projected highest upward movement in ranking for specific countries’ universities in 2025. Of note is the 48% climb of China which has some exclusive standard Chinese speaking and learning institutions or standard Chinese option of educational delivery. Also, Germany is projected at a 19% climb, with a learning environment that also offers some exclusive German speaking and learning institutions or German option of educational delivery (QS, 2024). While it cannot be substantiated that the climbs are subsequent to the use of indigenous languages, it is evident that institutions in countries incorporating indigenous languages for instruction are thriving. The upward movement would create a rebuttable presumption that there is minimal to no detriment from use of indigenous knowledges. A finding was made that less Chinese descent students chose to take up studies outside of China as they have a sense of belonging within their local institutions (Gao, 2021). Although international students tend to render a mixed review on student experience due to the indigenous languages used for instruction in some institutions, student enrolment boosts in China can also be attributed to the low emigration rate (Gao, 2021).



Source: QS World University Rankings Website (2024) - <https://www.qs.com/rankings-released-qs-world-university-rankings-2025/>

Contextual criticism can be levelled against the upward movement in China given the complexities of a very diverse South Africa. The reality of curriculum transformation into the implementation of indigenous languages will be more complex in the South African context than it would be for other jurisdictions. Germany has only German as their official language while South Africa has eleven (11) officially recognised languages. This entails a multitude of curriculum translations, and several other factors would ripple from that. For instance, there would be budget implications to acquire resources for the transformation and the question becomes whether the state's educational department has sufficient resources to fund the exercise. Several international learners seek education in South African Institutions and the multilingual identity of South Africa would require an English alternative to be maintained. The academics to deliver the academic material would also be subject to literacy in the specific indigenous languages and the question then arises on whether there would be multiple sessions to cater for each indigenous language. A pertinent question also prompted by that would be if the institutional premises would have capacity for the different groupings, whether the education is delivered physically or virtually. Resource availability would be nucleus to this transformative exercise and funding avenues, by the state and private stakeholders, would need to be established.

3.3 Cultivating Critical Thinking and Analysis

Pursuant to tertiary studies, learners are expected to possess reasonable critical thinking skills (Golden, 2023). Faculties bestowing professional qualifications such as accounting, law, engineering, and medicine, require a superior possession of critical thinking and analytical skills (Golden, 2023). Decolonised curricula which amplify the voice of the marginalised and promotes inclusivity and equality encourages critical thinking. Learners can be encouraged to critique power structures, colonial legacies and historical injustices (Fataar, 2018). This would cultivate an educational environment that is democratic in nature, and it could engrain essential qualities such as the challenging of stereotypes and dominant westernised narratives (du Plessis, 2021).

A risk that can be levelled against the above submission is the risk of a prejudiced global competitiveness on the part of the learners who receive a decolonised curriculum educational delivery. There is concern to be noted that the curriculum may not adequately prepare students for the global job market. This will particularly apply to job markets where international standards and knowledge are crucial. This study in no way intends to cast doubt on the ability of South African higher educational institutions to decolonise curriculum in a way that competes in the international space. However, in light of this risk posed, it would be pertinent that caution is exercised as far as curriculum structuring is concerned.

Another risk worth acknowledging is that of exclusion of minority groups not covered under the decolonisation agenda. The transformed curriculum poses a risk with regards to inadvertently excluding other minority groups. For instance, contextual relatability will not be realised by international learners in institutions, and neither will the incorporation of indigenous languages. One could aim to debunk this theory through an assessment of China and Germany and acknowledge the continued influx of international learner enrolments in their higher education institutions. However, there are several other factors that need to be acknowledged, such as the substantial subsidising of fees for international learners in the several institutions in those

respective countries. South African public higher education institutions currently subsidise some international learner fees too which could incentivise and still promote international student enrolments. An example of this is the subsidies for students from the Southern African Development Community (SADC). SADC member countries include Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (Chawarika, *et al*, 2024). SADC students pay annual local tuition fees, which are more affordable than international fees in South African public universities (University of Witwatersrand, 2024). International undergraduate students from outside of SADC pay double the local tuition fees (University of Witwatersrand, 2024). The international learner enrolment may not be prejudiced in light of incentivised enrolments such as the above, however, it will be crucial that the transformative practices towards decolonisation do not amount to segregation of minority groups as they also contribute to the fiscus income and the academic reputation of the South African Higher Education Institutions.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This exploration of the opportunities and obstacles in the decolonisation of the South African higher education curriculum has revealed a multifaceted process that possesses aspects of potential as well as notable challenges or risk areas. Undoubtedly, the decolonisation of the curriculum presents an opportunity to enhance inclusivity as well as diverse knowledge systems and African epistemologies. There is significant benefit to be noted for the marginalised persons within South Africa through an active academic acknowledgement of their histories. This will inevitably enhance student learning experiences.

However, the path to decolonisation of curriculum is not without obstacles. Traditional academic paradigms pose a threat to implementations thereof as institutional resistance may be faced. Overcoming this hurdle will require faculty development programs with sustainable dialogues that are inclusive in nature. Where intervention programs are already in place, constant reflections on the effectiveness and impact thereof will be critical. Additionally, financial, and human resources, if lacking, may cause a delay in the effective implementation of aspects of the decolonisation process. In a bid to address the challenges identified and harness the opportunities previously identified, the following recommendations are proposed by this paper:

4.1 Institutional Commitment to Demonstrative Leadership and Faculty Development and Support

The leading authorities within higher education institutions will be required to demonstrate a strong commitment to the decolonisation agenda. Institutional culture needs to be constantly driven towards diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, comprehensive development and support programs must be implemented within faculties. The developed programs must be sufficient to equip academics with the knowledge and skills that are needed to integrate diversified teaching perspectives. Lastly, collaboration must be encouraged and celebrated and extend to interdisciplinary collaboration where necessary. This paper acknowledges some progresses made to date but in light of du Plessis' case study, it is evident that some institutions continue to maintain stagnancy and have not implemented any transformative processes while others have formulated policies in theory but have neglected to implement same.

4.2 Resource Allocation

Secure funding and resources are essential to continuing to drive a multifaceted agenda such as curriculum decolonisation. In the case of a developing economy like South Africa's, it will be invaluable for institutions seeking to implement particular agendas, to seek external funding for specific projects. While always seeking government support is essential and mostly useful, partnering with philanthropic organisations (if successful), will also be a step in the right direction. Government funding can be subject to political agendas and shifts, which may affect the consistency and direction of curriculum reform. Philanthropic organisations can provide a more stable and apolitical source of support, ensuring that decolonisation efforts remain focused on educational goals rather than political ones. Philanthropic organisations often also have extensive networks and can collaborate with other independent bodies without fettering of a political nature.

4.3 Monitoring and Evaluation

Like any multifaceted project, it will be imperative for institutions seeking to implement decolonisation of curriculum projects to establish sound monitoring and evaluating mechanisms. In the absence thereof, there is no accountability and progress assessment. Information gathering sessions from academics and students alike will be instrumental in monitoring impact and informing future strategies.

4.4 Closing Remarks

The decolonisation of curriculum, even in the specific categories identified in this paper, is a progressional exercise. The key aspects that institutions who aim to further implement effective mechanisms must uphold are social justice, inclusivity, and democracy. Rome was not built in a day. The progress to date by some institutions and faculties can and must be applauded. However, this movement is an uphill movement that will require constant monitoring and evaluation as well as accountability. It cannot be treated as a tick box exercise and requires genuineness and sincerity in correcting the wrongful past of the democratic Republic of South Africa. With the objectives of the Constitution in mind, it can and will be done, gradually and with inevitable lessons and obstacles along the way.

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