

Internationalization of African Universities: South African Student-centred Transformational Agenda

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Abstract: The internationalization of African Universities is not a new phenomenon, specifically because the system of higher education is considered a vital link to the attainment and dissemination of global knowledge. Over the years, internationalisation has been advanced through student exchange programmes enabling the calibration of local, national and international cooperation in African universities. However, the disruptions of COVID-19 impacted negatively on the entire institutional processes and national economies. With the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic season, several African institutions, specifically the education systems were compelled to adjust rapidly to institutional changes. In South Africa, internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) fosters an inclusive learning environment nationally. However, this role requires an interweaved approach that incorporates both intercultural and international dimensions. By blending the teaching curriculum, research and extracurricular activities, these activities aid students in effectively broadening their academic development. Internationalisation of Universities enable students to engage in greater international cooperation, innovation and scholarly inspiration. In post-COVID-19 era, South Africa local universities grappled with the emerging platformisation and accelerated technological innovation on teaching and learning. This reality sets a note for an urgent need to draw an understanding on how technological innovations coupled by a rapid integration of internationalisation in HEIs remain critical. These developments enriching academic excellence through a tapestry of cultural perspectives brought by a diverse student population and transformed curricula. This paper's main contribution to the internationalization of African Universities debates lies in its nuanced analysis of internationalization within the context of South Africa. The paper uncovers the tensions between internationalisation and the decolonisation rhetoric as key aspects of transformation agenda in African Universities, specifically in South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The paper argues that despite the growing necessity for decolonialization of the curriculum in African universities, in South Africa, a student-centred approach to internationalization remains critical to enhance transformation, in its broader sense.

Keywords: COVID-19, HEIs, Internationalization, South Africa, Transformation, Teaching and Learning

1. Introduction

For the past decades, African Universities have been vital instruments of development and the fabricators of agents of change. Generally, the African system of Higher Education existed through the establishment of ancient Museum and Library, centres of Christianity specifically monasteries and Islamic mosques such as the Cairo Al-Azhar Mosque University of 969 years (Abdelmassieh, 2020, p.27). For instance, the Alexandria Museum and Library established in third century B.C., in Egypt is known to have "left a rich legacy of scholarship covering a wide range of fields from mathematics and the sciences to philosophy and religion" (Zezeza, 2006). In South Africa as in most African Universities, the offered education to African students have not been equitable given the heavy reliance on Westernised curriculum which "glorifies Western culture," and alienates African cultural traditions (Tella, 2021, p.249). This study intends to uncover the role of internationalisation in the transformation and decolonisation of African Universities. Over the years, the decolonization of African Universities has taken centre stage in academic circles, specifically in South Africa. However, the complexity of the challenges faced by African Universities in the 21st Century, presents an urgent need to transform itself through internationalization process. A process which does not only decolonize the curricula and the teaching modes but infuses African traditions to balance the Western epistemologies in the production of pan-African scholarship. This has become a major focal point of transformation for African Universities as this demystifies the rhetoric framing Euro-civilizational superiority in the past centuries.

2. Methodology

This paper is qualitative in nature and employs a Purposive literature review. The objective of the study is to generate empirical knowledge and insightful understanding of the dynamics of internationalisation of African Universities with specific focus to South Africa. As such, the study uses reviewed literature for a specific purpose (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024). The purpose is to not only demystify the misleading rhetoric regarding Euro-civilisational superiority in African Universities, but to also allow the study to reflect broadly upon internationalisation and provide insights on its educational transformative role. To achieve

this research goal, the study has established an inclusive criterion where peer reviewed journals drawn from scholarly databases such as JSTOR, Science Direct, Google Scholar and institutional repositories were purposively selected. Key terminologies such as “internationalisation” and “transformation” in Higher Education have been instrumental in drawing a systematic review of “research, frameworks, and philosophy” used in South African education (Cook, 2019:56). The benefits of a purposive literature review lie in its ability to concisely address social phenomena through far-reaching research questions to produce novel insights on the complexities surrounding African universities.

Research questions uncovering why internationalisation remains a significant tool for transformation in African Universities, and how African Universities in the post-colonial era calibrated the internationalization of its curriculum are significant in shaping the realities and complexities in African Universities. Essentially, this study zooms into South African as a case study to interrogate how the evolving transformation agenda influenced internationalisation and the decolonisation in HEIs. The South African case study contextualises the dynamics associated with internationalization of African Universities, and the opportunities that this phenomenon presents for an accelerated transformation agenda through a student-centred analytical approach.

The conceptualisation of key concepts will follow to detangle the tensions between internationalisation and the decolonisation rhetoric found in literature related to transformation agenda in African Universities. The South African case study provides a better understanding in the evolving dynamics associated with the internationalization of African Universities and the opportunities that present an accelerated transformation agenda through a student-centred approach.

3. Conceptualising the Transformation Agenda in South Africa: a Student-centred Approach

Generally, transformation in Higher Education (HE) is a vital process of structural changes in the nature of policies adopted by institutional leadership (Masinde and Roux, 2020). In the context of South Africa, the Transformation of Higher Education took a significant turn in post-apartheid era. The 1994 democratic government sought to accelerate a transformation agenda which was inherently disproportional. The laws and policies governing South African the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) prior to 1994 did not reflect the constitutional principles of “human dignity, equality, freedom, non-racialism and non-sexism” (Majola, 2022).

Instead, the education system of the past was rooted in racial, socio-economic, and cultural discrimination. Thus, becoming imperative to accelerate a transformation agenda that creates and sustains an education system that is inclusive. To this end, the transformation of South African HEIs institutionalises equitable representation where access to higher education aligns with the promotion of democratic constitutional and legislative values that underpin a free and democratic society mentioned earlier. A student-centred approach is one in which the students at the HEIs shape the “interactions, structures and operations” from within (Wahl, 2022, p.12). The interactions, structures and operations within the HEIs reflect the critical values advancing the academic development of students. For example, values such as belonging, human dignity, agency, integrity, plurality/diversity, have ranked higher amongst the identified core-values associated with a student-centred approach as seen in figure 1 below:



Figure 1: Core-values associated with a student-centrism in South African HEIs

Source: Wahl (2022, p.13).

The above figure 1 depicts all the essential values associated with the transformative agenda imperative of a student-centred approach in South African higher education system. Only the values that ranked 50% and above have been selected as vital indicators of an ultimate student-centred value through which South African HEIs advance their teaching and learning mandates in line with the broader transformative agenda (Wahl, 2022).

3.1 The Significance of a Student-centred Approach as a Transformational Agenda in HEIs

A student-centred approach entails the implementation of teaching and learning practices that advance students' academic interests, optimises students learning processes. The optimisation of students' academic development is attained through collaborations, theory testing, creation of progressive knowledge that directs students' knowledge-building enhancing greater global impact (Trinidad, 2019). Internationalisation in institutions of Higher Learning, therefore, revitalises interconnections through student's active involvement in knowledge production not only through mobility but also in the content they learn. In advancing a student-centred approach education systems in HEIs embody a wide "range of educational outcomes, not limited to attaining a qualification but including other aspects such as moral development" (Xulu-Gama, Nhari, Alcock and Cavanagh, 2018 p8). In the context of South African HEIs, a moral development encompasses practices of internationalisation which underpins a transformational agenda. To cultivate knowledge-sharing at a global scale, internationalisation enhances inter-connectedness, and to an extent creates conditions to reform the historically immoral institutional practices that suppress and undermine African ontological experiences as inferior epistemologies (Hlatshwayo, 2020).

4. Understanding the Influence of Globalisation, Internationalisation and Decolonization of Curriculum in Sub-Saharan Africa HEIs

Globalisation is a global phenomenon that fuelled socio-economic and political pressures and introduced internationalization of education systems as a result of the longevity of Westernised influences in Africa, (Dzvimbo and Moloji 2013). Globalisation and internationalisation are, therefore, interconnected, as one cannot exist without the other. However, although both globalisation and internationalisation can transform institutional structures and practices at a global and international scale, to an extent, these two terms are slightly distinct. On the one hand, globalisation capacitates economic development and enhances the image of educational institutions by attracting international students and expanding research through collaborations as well as innovations driven by the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR), (Rensburg, Motala, David, 2015; Masinde and Roux, 2020; Tight, 2022). On the other hand, internationalisation has become a dynamic process in HEIs serving as a strategic response to globalisation. Internationalisation has, thus, become instrumental in shaping HEIs by enhancing an international context in its educational environment (Strielkowski, Grebennikova, Razinkina and Rudenko, 2021, p.5).

Similarly, in a globalised society, the internationalisation of African Universities and decolonization of curriculum have driven and shaped the essence of African education systems, specifically in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) region. In South Africa, for instance, with the adoption of the Transformation Strategy Group (TSG), in 2020, as designed by the Universities South Africa (USAf) commits to advancing knowledge that contributes towards redressing historically inherited inequities and improve social cohesion and to enhance the societal relevance of the science. Similarly, the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) holds a transformation Strategy which serves as a framework advancing a Student-centred approach in Higher Education System (Soodyall, 2025). The adoption of transformative strategies in HEIs demonstrate that the educational system recognises the existing need for a dynamic change in education through an emancipation and decolonisation of the curriculum to reshape African universities (Green, 2023; Luescher and Holtzhausen, 2023). In essence, internationalisation of HEIs is measured by the extent it facilitates exchange of student collaboration locally, regionally and globally through an "intentional integration of international and intercultural dimensions" of students at home or abroad (DHET, 2019, p.45).

In the context of South Africa, the internationalisation process in HEIs as well as the transformed content of curriculum are both significant. Through the internationalisation of the curricula, South African HEIs

have been able to foster curriculum transformation imperatives. As such, beyond fostering global mindsets and inclusive skills, internationalisation of the curriculum promotes the adoption of innovative teaching and learning methods that can generate relevant knowledge. A transformative knowledge that is not only responsive to the evolving socio-economic demands through community engagement but also advances output on research publications (Fakunle, Lock & Johnson, 2020, Luescher, *et al.*, 2023). Output on research publications has become one of the main indicators of institutional academic worth that provide measures for national and global rankings. Despite having been implemented as a national policy, in 2005, by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the adoption of the Research Output Policy showed a gradual improvement with an average growth rate of 8.06% (Mouton, *et al.*, 2019p.28). However, despite this slight progress, a growing criticism emerged, labelling the overall research output as a “meagre rise” in publication outputs (Sebola, 2023, p.222).

In spite of the pessimist outlook on internationalisation as observed in Sebola (2023), such views did not hinder South African HEIs from continuing to produce relevant research with a strong pan-African perspective (Tight, 2022). In fact, other African states such as Nigeria, Ghana, and across East Africa have also been generating research that examines the transformation agenda of African HEIs. Additionally, the Diaspora has also made significant contributions with scholars based in the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK) and other Western countries producing academic works engaging with the transformational agenda of African HEIs (Zavale & Schneijderberg, 2022). These developments demonstrate that not only does Internationalisation inspire knowledge production through practical multidisciplinary engagements but also fosters inclusion of intercultural curriculum in HEIs across the world. In fact, internationalisation in HEIs advances a global agenda connecting the Global North and the Global South through the International Education Agenda 2030. This agenda synchronises educational policies across borders in response to the demands of globalised economies (Rensburg, *et al.*, 2015 p.101; Fakunle, *et al.*, 2020; Lourenço & Paiva, 2024).

In African context, Internationalisation has also been a driving force for transformation taking a decolonial approach to correct the dehumanising narratives that suppress African traditions and epistemologies (Davids, 2024). This decolonial approach remains in motion as it aims to promote democratic practices that benefit all individuals regardless of gender, race or historical background (Rensburg, *et al.*, 2015 and Tight, 2022).

As Soodyall (2025) observes, in South African Society, the transformation of knowledge “will always be shortchanged unless it seeks active engagement and collaboration with knowledge and knowledge producers in the region and across the continent”. This assertion suggests that, inasmuch as Western influences have challenged the general composition of African educational systems, it is critical that African Universities retain their regional and continental sources of knowledge as well. For instance, while the educational systems of SSA Universities and Africa more broadly, have to some extent yielded to unavoidable and irreversible neo-liberal market economic pressures. To the most part, neo-liberal pressures have shaped the fabric of African educational systems, which have also led to the adoption of Eurocentric curriculum in HEIs. For instance, in South Africa, the Apartheid regime supported an exclusively Westernised Education model which accentuated the exclusion of minority groups in the knowledge development processes of teaching and learning (Mashilo, 2023 & Chawaremera, 2024).

The idea of internationalisation in African universities is not a new phenomenon. Internationalisation through education has been advanced globally even before the expansion of the notion of global citizenship. This notion was advanced in education through the 1974 Recommendation by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), (UNESCO, 2022). UNESCO’s approach to internationalization brings to light a multi-faceted dimension of the education system worldwide. Since globalisation has catalysed internationalization, specifically of higher education, this trend has become “irreversible” (Tsiligiris, 2014).

internationalization in HEIs serves as a global strategy that standardizes teaching and learning norms that states apply in their national education systems. In essence, internationalisation strengthens international cooperation as well as peaceful relations, Gultekin (2021). One can pose and ask, in what ways has the internationalization of universities created opportunities to advance the transformation agenda in Africa?

Over the years, internationalisation in HEIs has taken many forms, from cross-border activities such as conferences to student exchange programmes, research collaborations, and to some extent the

replication of curriculum in universities. Thus, enabling African Universities to bring into the global stage their Africanised worldviews and epistemologies. A process through which a nation's HEIs, their regulatory bodies, government departments, research institutions, and international organisations engage in educational activities to foster a multicultural and interdisciplinary connection. Tsiligiris (2014) points out that these connections, have in part, been a response to the transformative effects of globalisation that continue to shape African HEIs despite a multitude of complex challenges. For instance, in the institutional environment of South Africa and Africa in general, challenges associated with post-colonial transformation which have been ongoing for decades impact the manner in which the systemic teaching and learning methods and curricula are implemented. For these reasons, despite existing challenges integrating intercultural and international into the curriculum can expand the intellectual capacity of African Universities. It also presents progressive opportunities that reshaped positively institutional cultures, specifically in South Africa where decolonial rhetoric has opened old wounds accentuated calls for a curriculum revolution in HEIs (Green, 2023).

For the most part, the push for a curriculum revolution challenges the persistence of alienated opportunities in education and knowledge production which the post-1994 democratic transition sought to institute by pursuing a non-discriminatory educational system for all. However, as it turned out Students across public South African universities refuted the manner in which the teaching and learning methods and the curriculum has been taught. With the #Rhodes must fall campaign that took place, in 2015. Students across the country called for an urgent shift in the adoption of Westernised paradigms in the educational systems and the strengthening of pedagogies that drift towards a decolonial contextual lens (de Wit and Altbach, 2020).

The above incident demonstrated the significance of incorporating pan-African knowledge in the African University curriculum. The need for the adoption of Afro-centric teaching and learning methods in African HEIs cannot be compromised as the suppression thereof has shown to potentially lead to radical expression of discontentment and violent revolutions. Kasibe (2021) maintains that the manifestation of the #Rhodesmustfall campaign suggests that revolutions or any required transformation to the status quo, be it in an educational system or otherwise, requires a certain degree of sacrificial boldness. However, this does not in any form call for the complete eradication of the Western content in the education curriculum of African Universities as these westernised educational values also form part of African historical knowledge.

Ntloedibe (2019) asserts that, instead of destroying the Western perspectives or the pathogenic colonial knowledge, African HEIs should integrate relevant Western perspectives to advance African epistemologies. In this way, decentralising Eurocentric knowledge in practice allows educational programmes to critically examine colonial perspective to knowledge acquisition rather than eliminating them, specifically those with non-discriminatory inclination (Ndaipa, *et al.*, 2023). However, it is worth noting that, the resistance to exclusively adopting European epistemologies stems from the fact that, some Eurocentric curricula have historically been laced with distorted views regarding Africa and its descendants, thus, necessitating critical analysis and to an extent a drastic change to their adoption (Nyoni, 2019).

Despite these complexities, the adoption both Eurocentric and African-centred epistemologies in African universities would enable the validation of African knowledge patterns which are to the most part "grounded in the principle of interconnectedness that defines the communitarian traditional African thought" (Adeate and Sewchurran, 2023, p.2). For instance, in Cape Peninsula University of Technology students' responses to African infused epistemologies have been rather positive. Waghid (2022) maintains that the student-centred approach to decolonisation of the curriculum in South African universities has not only enabled the humanisation of education in institutions of higher learning but have also contributed to enhance students' socio-cultural worth in knowledge acquisition rather than seeing students from a human capitalist lens. The contribution this paper makes to this highly contested discourse, is that Eurocentric epistemologies can still be used for comparative analysis and development when integrated and adopted together with Afrocentric curriculum in African Universities. Below are a few opportunities that internationalisation offers for advancing a transformational agenda in HEIs:

5. Opportunities of Internationalisation for an Accelerated Transformation Agenda

South Africa experienced numerous educational reforms that impacted its internationalisation and transformational acceleration agenda. For instance, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic season, African universities had to use the emerged challenges to accelerate a transformational agenda through improvement of technological infrastructure (Mkuti & Aucamp, 2024). Arguably, the events of COVID-19 propelled the enhancement of information technology (IT) which became pivotal to meet the evolving pedagogical and curricula demands of students (Zezeza, 2021). Face-to-face class interactions had to be restructured into online platforms such as Blackboard. Students and educators had to enhance their digital literacy skills. However, the lack of international mobility resulting from COVID-19 restrictions also meant that African HEIs had to be innovative. The adoption of internationalisation plans and policies were accelerated with the goal of strengthening collaborations at home and abroad despite the mobility restrictions of that particular time (Quinlan and Singh, 2022).

In response, digital student-centred initiatives such as Thuso Resources and Thuso Connect were created, in South Africa to expand research and mentorship to emerging scholars (USAf, 2023). This emancipated trajectory increases the engagement of South African universities in global research activity as a strategic internationalisation integration initiative. By incorporating student-centred transformational practices in HEIs, students tend to embrace their own socio-cultural contexts into their studies. This approach enables them to draw strengths from socio-cultural engagements that aid the development of critical perspectives when addressing intricate pedagogic aspects.

6. Findings and Recommendations

This study's findings present clear evidence that eradicating the vestiges of colonial influence from African Universities' educational system, in its totality, is not the primary driver of internationalization or educational transformation. These findings are consistent with Ntloedibe (2019), who emphasises that while internationalisation plays a critical role in advancing an inclusive educational strategy a decolonised curricula is critical. To a larger extent, a decolonised curricula boosts Africanisation when the syllabus is African-oriented (Mashilo, 2023). This study found that despite the existence of progressive educational opportunities, an effective transformational agenda in South African Universities requires refinement. Only then, can the achievement of transformational education be fully achieved, specifically when students' educational interests are prioritised. The study also found that students that are encouraged to use their African language or express their views from an African perspective tend to gain confidence about themselves and their cultural affinities. Sadly, not all institutions of Higher Learning in South Africa have adopted an Africanised curriculum.

In light of these findings, the study recommends African Universities to prioritise the inclusion of Africanised curricula in its efforts to strengthen internationalisation. By integrating African epistemologies into the educational system, it leverages a meaningful educational transformation approach. While this study recognises the continued relevance of Eurocentric knowledge, it also highlights progressive historical educational systems that shape the much-needed transformation agenda in African universities. The study argues that, this in turn, fosters impactful student-centred competencies that contribute to local, regional, and international educational contexts.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of internationalization in African Universities conducted in this study highlights the significance of adopting diverse epistemological orientations beyond the deficiencies compounded by legacies of colonial educational systems. While the study acknowledges the limitations that colonial educational systems have had in largely suppressing African values in shaping students' experiences, internationalisation and decolonisation of the curricula in African Universities present opportunities intended to strengthen the integration of Africanised content in educational systems. In this regard, by prioritising students' educational needs in African Universities, specifically within the South African context, this study argues for a balanced educational system. More studies need to be conducted to critically examine the dynamics of the internationalisation process in accelerating a balanced educational transformation agenda, more so, in South African Universities where there are still noticeable imbalances between historically white institutions from the previously disadvantaged black universities.

Ethics and AI Declarations

I declare that an Ethics Waiver for Qualitative Study has been submitted to the IIE Research Ethics Committee (IIE REC). The research study is purely qualitative and devoid of human participants. I also declare that this project is an original work of the author, and no AI tools were used for its development.

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