**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Decolonial insights for transforming the higher education curriculum in South Africa

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## Abstract

While there have been several calls for decolonising the curriculum in South Africa, more needs to be done at the level of policy development and especially its implementation. The curriculum decolonisation impetus gained a few years back has abated somewhat, and there is a need to reinstate its significance amidst other imperatives we face in the current troubling times. There appears to be a reluctance to continue the decolonising journey, not least of all because of the continuing dominance of European hegemony in almost all facets of the lives of decolonised people, especially evident in the education sector, and specifically through the curriculum. The paper argues that without the decolonisation of the predominantly Eurocentric curriculum, the achievement of justice for the colonised remains elusive. This entails focusing the decolonisation debate from the objectification of the colonised to centring the African being, a reconceptualisation of epistemology as pluriversal and greater visibility of the colonised and coloniality as pre-conditions for decolonising the curriculum. The article reviews the South African response to decolonial insights and considers their implications for higher education curriculum development and practice. It identifies changing attitudes of, and ownership by, academic staff as a key challenge in the implementation of a decolonised curriculum and concludes with tabulating the implication of key concepts of decolonial theory for the curriculum.

**Keywords** Decolonisation · Higher education curriculum · Policy implementation

## Introduction

While there have been several calls for decolonising the curriculum in South Africa (SA), little has been achieved at the level of policy development and implementation. There appears to be a reluctance to embark on the decolonising journey, largely resulting from the continuing dominance of European hegemony in almost all facets of the lives of decolonised people, especially evident in the education curriculum. A fundamental problem of coloniality at the global level, including in Africa, is its misrepresentation of the world of the colonised, represented in the historical norms, symbols, gender and racial stereotypes and the 'objectification' of the colonised. A key part of the misrepresentation occurs in the colonial legacy of the Eurocentric curriculum.

The paper argues that without the decolonisation of the curriculum, the achievement of social justice for the colonised remains elusive. This entails shifting the decolonisation debate from object to subject, central to which is an adequate contextualisation of knowledge and visibility of the oppressed, as pre-conditions for decolonising the curriculum. The main argument made is that decolonial insights are not adequately reflected in higher education curricula in SA, with a need to focus more strongly on the decolonisation of the predominantly Eurocentric curriculum. This entails focusing the decolonisation debate from the objectification of the colonised to centring the African being, a reconceptualisation of epistemology as pluriversal and greater visibility of the colonised and coloniality as pre-conditions for decolonising the curriculum. Significantly, there is a need to go beyond theory and conceptual arguments and focus on issues of implementation, which has not received adequate attention hitherto. We draw on several insights from decolonial

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theory/ideas. One such insight centres around the notion of decoloniality of power, specifically how power relations are articulated in the curriculum, in the selection of knowledge, and how that knowledge gets transmitted to learners and students. An important consideration is how race, gender and ethnicity are represented by symbols and through the hidden curriculum. Thus, bringing greater visibility to the oppressed colonial condition is critical for making truth claims. Far be it from proposing dogma or grand theory, this article extends the debate with its enabling decolonial curriculum framework proposals, paying attention to issues of implementation and its associated challenges.

While the article's focus is on the African continent, it pays specific attention to the resonances of decolonial theory (DT) for transforming and decolonising the curriculum in SA. It commences with a 'decolonial' critique of the dominance of the Eurocentric curriculum, then explores the origins and primary constructs of DT, before tracing key propositions in the decolonisation of the curriculum debates. The article then reviews the South African response to decolonial thought, considers the implications of DT for higher education policy and practice, and ends with a proposal (in Table 1) that lists DT constructs/insights for curriculum transformation taking account of implementation challenges and the decolonial imperatives of epistemic and social justice, as the paper's main contribution. Key challenges identified in the implementation of a decolonised curriculum include changing academic staff attitudes, ensuring their ownership of the process and addressing academic freedom concerns.

## The dominance of Eurocentric curricula

The dominance of Western or Eurocentric curriculum in the education of the colonised, today's twenty-first century citizens, is at the heart of the experience of 'coloniality'. Western hegemony and ideology have influenced and continue to influence the epistemologies, theories, methods and outcomes of higher education research (and teaching) in Africa (Oparinde & Govender, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni Zondi, 2016. Western claims to scientific rationality, universality, objectivity and neutrality have dominated our research and teaching paradigms to the detriment of alternative approaches and conceptions of knowledge. In the view of one scholar, '[t]he main disputation is with those two fundamental tenets of Eurocentric academia: objectivity and universality'; 'the idea which European settlers brought with them of their conceptual framework of knowledge being the right way – and the only way – of looking at the world, is a kind of original sin of universities of colonial descent' (Zondi, 2021); and as expressed by another, 'epistemicide': how Eurocentrism smothered

other modes of knowledge (Brink, 2021, p. 404). The racial overtones in the case of SA, in particular, are undeniable, especially the universalisation of the white experience of the world as the only legitimate experience and trajectory of development (Lange, 2021). For Brink (2021, p. 374), this attitude is 'difficult to escape. Whiteness is like the water within which the fish are swimming: it is not consciously experienced by white people'. As Sardar points out:

> If Western civilisation and culture are responsible for colonial racism, and Europe itself has a racist structure, then we should not be too surprised to find this racism reflected in the discourses of knowledge that emanate from this civilisation and that they work to ensure that structural dominance is maintained. (Sardar, 2008, p. xv)

Race as a mediating factor in the South African context is undeniable, given the country's apartheid history, and its continued manifestation in the curriculum decolonisation project, an issue that the article explores. As for objectivity, 'This positionality of a free-floating signifier sold by Eurocentrism for centuries is a myth'; it is "an empty space called 'objectivity'". No author writes objectively. On the contrary, 'for a just and fair conversation', each should declare their perspective, as far as they are able. '[T]he positionality of the thinker must be declared upfront rather than hidden behind the veil of objectivity' (Zondi, 2021, p. 246). Against this backdrop, the decolonisation of the curriculum is not only a question of knowledge content, but it also foretells a pedagogic approach that confronts inequality 'by acknowledging how distantiation, exploitation, exclusion and hierarchisation manifest themselves in the classroom and at the university' (Lange, 2021, p. 283).

With reference to the selection of knowledge, the dominance of Eurocentric curricula without colonisation and coloniality tips the curriculum more towards knowledge of the powerful rather than truth or reality (of the colonised and oppressed), often resulting in decolonised people being viewed as objects rather than the subject. As such, colonisation and coloniality in the curriculum compromise the epistemological, ontological and axiological value of the curriculum (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). In analysing the nature of *curriculum*, Lovet & Smith (1995) explain the nature of curricula in terms of being centrally about knowledge, truth and reality and the assumptions underpinning each. From the stance of curriculum as a selection of knowledge, they explain that what is selected as valid knowledge for the curriculum may vary from different points of view with power and dominance playing a role in settling the issue. To reset the historical imbalance in the global knowledge reality, therefore, the turn to decolonial theoretical propositions is

fundamental to transforming the one-sided, Eurocentric curriculum. Off-course, the issue of knowledge selection relates to another important issue, namely academic freedom, a point that is discussed later.

An epistemic imperative for decolonising the curriculum is arresting the epistemic violence embedded in the hegemony of the Eurocentric curriculum. Spivak (1994) defines 'epistemic violence' as the: Eurocentric and Western domination and subjugation of the [*former*] colonial subjects… (leading to) misconception of their understanding and perception of the world. This is a result of 'violence of imperialistic epistemic, social and disciplinary inscription' (Spivak, 1994: p. 80). Indeed, epistemic violence destroys the soul of education, the universal goal of dispelling misconceptions of understanding and perception of the world and learning the 'truth about reality'. Epistemic violence erases the history of the subaltern (Spivak, 1994, p. 83).

Epistemic decolonisation holds that the Western and Eurocentric curriculum has denied or subjugated knowledge of colonisation. For example, to Tharoor's (2017) dismay, history as a school subject in British schools does not teach a single sentence about British colonisation! It is no wonder then that there is significant ignorance about colonisation, its means, goals and effects and about coloniality as it finds expression in academic knowledge, books, aesthetics and structures in institutions of learning. The exclusion of colonisation and coloniality from the curriculum has led to misconceptions. McQuade (2017) argues that colonialist views are not far behind us, a 2014 YouGov poll revealed 59% of British people view the British Empire as 'something to be proud of'. Those proud of their colonial history outnumber critics of the Empire three to one. Similarly, 49% believe the Empire benefited its former colonies. The continued role of institutions such as the British Commonwealth and British Council of Education reminds us that coloniality and European superiority, including 'powerful knowledge', are deeply ingrained in our lives.

Similar decolonisation processes took place in many African countries after independence, where universities went through 'vigorous efforts…to decolonise the disciplines, to strip them of their Eurocentric cognitive and civilisational conceits' (Zeleza, 2009, p. 112). Local academics used 'reflexivity and critical analysis' to establish themselves and their societies 'as "subjects" of their own destiny' as well as to reinvent their past and envision their future (Mudimbe, 1985, p. 206). In SA too, in the democratic era post-1994, government recommended that universities should undertake an ongoing macro-review of curricula to assess their relevance in a changing SA and beyond. As Zondi (2021, p. 260) observes, 'the widespread tendency to implement "decontextualised" curricula – a euphemism for pervasive Eurocentrism or dislocated curricula that erase experiences of Africa and the South – universities needed to act with speed to develop new curricula that would sensitise students to their epistemic, cultural, linguistic, historical and ideological location'. While there has been an ongoing polemic in academia and policy circles, the curriculum decolonisation project in SA has been largely stagnant; however, the project has received a much-needed boost with the student Fees Must Fall movement in 2016 (Lange, 2021; Zondi, 2021). And, as this article highlights, the continued stagnation of the curriculum decolonisation project can be attributed, not as much to conceptual and theoretical lacunae, but to implementation obstacles at the institutional level.

## Decolonial theory

For many scholars, the evolution of DT has provided the ingredients to not only challenge the dominance of Eurocentrism in the curriculum, but it also has provided the foundations for a broader, inclusive reality of knowledge and truth claims. As such, DT recognises the pluriversality of the world we live in, with its persistent social and economic inequalities, thus making the quest for epistemic and social justice a key tenet of its foundations.

In so far as knowledge and curriculum are concerned, DT challenges epistemic dependence on the West and strives for epistemic freedom and epistemic justice. It arises from a context in which the humanity of the colonised, particularly black people, is doubted and pushed aside or in Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, p. 10), 'saddled with irrelevant knowledge that disempowers rather than empowers individuals and communities'. DT imagines knowledge within a new horizon of possibilities that necessitate epistemological, theoretical and methodological renewal. In the main, it can be located at the interface of the three discursive traditions. *First*, in so far as challenges of marginalisation and subalternity in social inquiry are concerned, some convergence can be drawn with standpoint epistemologies (Harding, 2004), situated knowledge approaches (Haraway, 1991), critical theory and social knowledge perspectives (Barad, 2007; Longino, 1990). However, as theories rooted in Western epistemologies, they raise questions about not only their complicity with Western modernity but also their effectiveness in addressing the experiences of marginalisation of people who suffered from colonialism and apartheid.

*Second*, alternative epistemologies, such as epistemologies of the South, with the recognition of the centrality of social justice (Santos & de Sousa, 2014) and diversity in the world, represent perhaps the most important generative space of engagement around DT. They have provided a platform for uncovering the silences or absences imposed by a Western understanding of the world to acknowledge the multiplicity of sites, modes of knowing and forms of knowledge as well as new horizons and possibilities for social inquiry, including
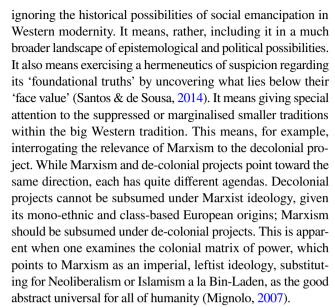
for example epistemic justice and freedom (Santos & de Sousa, 2014; Grosfoguel, 2007, 2013; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013), epistemological decolonisation (Nabudere, 2011a, b); pluriversal thinking (Dussel, 2005); decolonising methodologies (Smith, 2012); indigenous knowledge (Odora-Hoppers, 2000, 2002); linguistic emancipation (Ngugi, 1981); and Afrocentricity (Asante, 2015). This view is aptly captured by (Zondi, 2021, p. 267):

> The Afrodecolonial purview is attentive to the radical voices "from below" *in the evolution of a subject*, emphatically listening and sympathetically reflecting on the agency of the subaltern. It is an epistemic position in pursuit of justice that enjoins the thinker to identify with struggles for social, economic, cultural, linguistic, political and other forms of justice as being inextricably linked to one's own pursuit of epistemic justice. *It rejects the idea of being neutral in the face of injustice*. [our emphasis]

These developments could have advanced the project of decolonisation had the philosophical 'realism' with which the ontological and epistemological dimensions of DT speak to the concrete and lived experiences of the colonised. Suarez-Krabbe (2017, p. 68) notes that 'deep analyses of how settler colonialism impacts their places of enunciation are absent in crucial thinkers such as Quijano, Mignolo, Grosfoguel and Dussel', which question the validity of their decolonial ideas at the concrete level of marginalisation. With few exceptions, the same could be said about African epistemologists. The difficulty in SA is that, given their racially privileged place and position in hierarchies of knowledge, most of these can hardly existentially place themselves as part of the complex South African apartheid history. As such, in terms of materiality, the consequences of their decolonial enunciations remain limited. Africanisation could go a long way if it is not just driven by internal hierarchies and related interests beyond the politics of marginalisation. We thus concur with Ciccariello-Maher (2014) on the analytical possibilities that decolonial realism offers to DT. Underneath this metaphysical speculation lies a '"reality" characterised by the coexistence of being and sub/non-being, which gives the lie to prevailing universal pretensions, and it is this reality that the decolonial "realist" must not only diagnose, but also confront and ultimately abolish' (Ciccariello-Maher, 2014, p. 3). As will be discussed, driven by different concerns in different contexts, the plurality of decolonial realist accounts converges in the common concern with 'articulating the conditions that make us who we are as a plurality of realities that, however diverse, continue being framed by coloniality' across the world (Suarez-Krabbe, 2017, p. 59).

According to Santos & de Sousa (2014), keeping a distance does not mean discarding the rich Eurocentric critical tradition and throwing it into the dustbin of history, thereby ignoring the historical possibilities of social emancipation in Western modernity. It means, rather, including it in a much broader landscape of epistemological and political possibilities. It also means exercising a hermeneutics of suspicion regarding its 'foundational truths' by uncovering what lies below their 'face value' (Santos & de Sousa, 2014). It means giving special attention to the suppressed or marginalised smaller traditions within the big Western tradition. This means, for example, interrogating the relevance of Marxism to the decolonial project. While Marxism and de-colonial projects point toward the same direction, each has quite different agendas. Decolonial projects cannot be subsumed under Marxist ideology, given its mono-ethnic and class-based European origins; Marxism should be subsumed under de-colonial projects. This is apparent when one examines the colonial matrix of power, which points to Marxism as an imperial, leftist ideology, substituting for Neoliberalism or Islamism a la Bin-Laden, as the good abstract universal for all of humanity (Mignolo, 2007).

Such epistemological and political possibilities are also offered by Moya's generative, rather than isolationist or conformist, post-positivist realism based on an acute understanding of the colonial structure on which identities and knowledges exist, and fundamentally responding to the task of decolonisation (Moya, 2000). In this sense, the ethical, the political and the epistemological are linked together in a powerful form. This is, indeed, one of the features of the decolonial turn, that is, the refusal to segregate epistemology from ethics, politics and other areas of human creation, while recognising those whose knowledges and identities are subalternised in society and the academy.

## Decolonial theory and curriculum decolonisation

Coloniality is the issue, decolonisation is the aim (Brink, 2021, p. 374).

Central to the contribution of DT is its response to the consequences of the persistence of coloniality after the demise of direct colonialism and apartheid. Driving DT is the legacy of colonial genocides and 'theft of history' (Goody, 2006), epistemicides (killing of indigenous people's knowledges) (Santos & de Sousa, 2014) and linguicides (killing of indigenous people's languages) (wa Thiong'o, 2009, 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). According to Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 243), coloniality should not be confused with colonialism; it refers to the long-standing patterns of power that have emerged as a result of colonialism, which define 'culture, labour, inter-subjectivity relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations'. We experience coloniality 'in books, in criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations

of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience' (Mignolo, 2005, p. 6). And, paradoxically, coloniality is 'the pervasive state of domination by the West of societies which are de jure politically independent' (Lange, 2021). Coloniality is thus about power relations, hidden practices and attitudes, and in processes of formal education, in books and criteria for academic performance.

With globalisation, coloniality has become a global or universal phenomenon and 'as a fundamental problem in the modern age' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2014, p. 185; see also Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). In the same manner, as there is unease amongst South African (and African, Caribbean and South American (and other)) authors about pervasive 'colonial habits of being' in our universities, there is unease globally about the direction of higher education within the still-prevailing neoliberal, marketised global economy (Brink, 2021).

> "Knowledge is itself a form of power" said Francis Bacon four hundred years ago, and European-origin universities have been active agents in propagating and validating his claim. What we may learn from the decolonial perspective is that there is a converse to this principle, namely that power is itself a way of structuring knowledge. (Brink, 2021, p. 377)

But what does decolonisation mean? The concept of *decolonisation* has been for several years with different meanings. The prefix 'de' and suffix 'isation' of the word have specific nuances worth highlighting. The prefix 'de' denotes an *absence of a condition*—condition of coloniality. The suffix 'isation' suggests the *act of becoming*, the process of transcending coloniality, a process that takes place in an interconnected, dynamic and changing world. For Césaire (2000, p. 89, cited in Heleta, 2016), 'decolonisation is about the consciousness and rejection of values, norms, customs and worldviews imposed by the [*former*] colonisers'. wa Thiong'o (1981, p. 87) argues that decolonisation of the curriculum is about Africans seeing themselves 'clearly in relationship with ourselves and other selves in the universe'. He calls this 'a quest for relevance'. Transcending coloniality would thus entail a confrontation with the racial, gender, sex, ethnicity, class and patriarchical hierarchies 'that were put in place or strengthened by European modernity as it colonised and enslaved populations throughout the planet' (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 261). This would certainly entail examining the historical, social, economic and political constructs normalised in the curriculum at the level of knowledge, values, norms, symbols and other aspects constitutive of colonial oppression, including the historically constituted system within which they continue to be reproduced (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Suarez-Krabbe, 2017).

Of relevance to our argument on decolonisation are Maldonado-Torres' categories of coloniality. The *first* is 'coloniality of power' which reveals how global politics have been constructed and constituted into the asymmetrical and modern power structure that determines and sustains modern forms of exploitation, domination and oppression. What decolonial realism offers here is the imperative and the possibility not only of diagnosis but also of confronting this structure of dominance and the patterns of ontological differences it imposes on colonial subjects, very often interpreted as natural cultural differences. This relegates the colonised to the 'zone of non[-]being' (Fanon) and through which their humanity is constructed. As Ciccariello-Maher (2014, p. 17) puts it, 'decolonial realism entails a dialectical view of reality as a complex in motion, to be both grappled with and transformed'. It is this transformation that curriculum decolonisation from a realist perspective should seek to achieve. It is not enough to draw back the curtain to uncover the historico-structural differences without unpacking the functions they are designed to serve.

The *second* is 'coloniality of knowledge', which reflects the impact of colonisation on the different areas of production, structure and impact of knowledge (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 242). According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni, coloniality of knowledge:

> focuses on teasing out epistemological issues, politics of knowledge generation as well as questions of who generates which knowledge, and for what purpose; which explains why certain forms of knowledge (e.g., endogenous and indigenous knowledges) are pushed aside, to the margins of society or reconstituted to serve the purpose of global social domination. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, p. 10)

In the South African context, an obvious curriculum problem at university level is what has been described by Suarez-Krabbe (2017, p. 62) as the over-determination and over-representation of 'whiteness' in which black voices are deafened.

Transcending coloniality of knowledge requires relocating curriculum content from its imperial epicentre to the oppressed colonial subjectivity to unmask 'the racism hidden in the universalistic claims made by Eurocentric knowledge, along its distortions while bringing to the fore other knowledges and ways of knowing hitherto made invisible' (Dussel, 2019, p. 1). We work here with the concept of pluriversalisation coined by Escobar (2008) and Santos & de Sousa (2014) which calls for 'a world where many worlds are possible'. It implies an epistemological break with the uni-versal to accommodate the pluri-versal of different cultures and identities. As room is opened for other knowledges and ways of knowing, curriculum decolonisation would also pay attention to the race, gender and class hierarchies of knowledge inherited from apartheid and with explicit or tacit presence in curriculum materials. The emphasis on epistemic access stems from the need to address marginalisation, silence or subjugation.

The *third* is coloniality of being, a manifestation of the lived experience of colonisation, which, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) has pointed out, shows how whiteness under white supremacy ideology 'gained ontological density far above blackness', and blacks were reduced to a condition of 'non-beings' or invisibility in their own history. This can be seen in the experience of students in historically white South African universities (discussed later). He associates coloniality of being with the processes that contributed towards 'objectification'/'thingification'/'commodification' of Africans (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, p. 10). Decolonising the curriculum in this perspective entails bringing context (contextualisation), lived experience and subjectivity to curriculum practice. One cannot deal with the problems of coloniality without considering the historically constituted system within which they continue being produced, with race being a key determinant, highlighted in recent times by the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. The challenge here is universalism or essentialism, key attributes of Western epistemological tradition, that 'makes it difficult, if not impossible, to account for the nature of the intersections of race, class, gender, and other forms of difference, including their manifestations in lived experience' (Cross & Ndofirepi, 2017, p. 88).

Thus, decolonial realism cannot fulfil its promise without deconstructing apartheid categories of difference (either as categories of social and political practice or as categories of social and political analysis), and their ontological implications for the being of the marginalised. From a decolonial realist perspective, there should be a connection between everyday social experience and the somewhat experience-distant concepts used by current epistemologies. There is a pressing need to weigh limits or the material consequences of our theorising. To fulfil its mission in curriculum change, the integration of decolonial thought should be viewed as 'a vehicle through which the presence of the marginalised can be acknowledged, their discourses, voices and meanings can be articulated, and their involvement in intellectual production, through self-representation or, ultimately authorship, can be safeguarded in social theory' (Cross & Ndofirepi, 2017, p. 93). This is because curriculum and pedagogy as products of knowledge selection are never neutral and can be important technologies of subjectivation that undermine possibilities of the emergence of another subject of knowledge, another-thinking, another-logic and another-world view. Decolonising them is not just an epistemological challenge; it will require deeper changes in research priorities and practices. It also has relevance for how academics conceive of and enact the notion of academic freedom. At a conceptual level, the availability of multiple knowledges and knowledge traditions broadens the scope of curriculum selection, thus deepening one's interpretation, and ultimately exercise of academic freedom.

## Decolonial theory debates in SA

While scholars and academics in SA have engaged with DT debates, the implementation of the decolonisation curriculum project in the South remains in its infancy. In this section, the focus is on the theoretical discourse that has emerged in SA over the years, while the next section focuses on implementation and lessons learnt.

Six conceptions of decolonisation have been developed by Jansen (2017): decolonisation as the decentring of European knowledge; decolonisation as the Africanisation of knowledge; decolonisation as additive-inclusive knowledge; decolonisation as a critical engagement with settled knowledge; and decolonisation as encounters with entangled knowledge. Students in addressing the affront of the Eurocentric curriculum on their being have gone as far as to call for 'doing away with science' (Jansen, 2017). SA decolonial scholars, moreover, have called for overhauling the whole epistemological model underpinning the current educational system (Letsekha, 2013). For Ramoupi (2014, p. 271), the higher education curriculum must be decolonised so that it is not disconnected from African realities, including the lived experiences of the majority of black South Africans. Mitova (2017) advocates decolonising the curriculum without relativism. Thus, decolonisation propositions in the South African context follow the general rejection of the predominance of Eurocentrism, and concerns over the understating of the black experience.

For Fataar (2018), decoloniality can best be understood as a call for a type of cognitive justice based on an overhaul and expansion of the Western knowledge canon. The call is also for knowledge pluralisation, and the incorporation of the complex ways of knowing of subaltern and all previously excluded groups (in a similar vein to the South American school). It favours an intercultural understanding of heterodox forms of being human. All knowledge forms must be brought into play in an intercultural education that promotes a type of epistemic openness to the knowledges of all human beings. Despite accusations of being caught up in 'obsolete' knowledge of the past, decoloniality is focused on the complex challenges that characterise our 'post-human' condition. Similarly, Christie (2020, p. 23) argues for 'new ways of understanding and living in the world beyond existing ontologies of difference and also including the more-than-human world'. Questions about emerging life forms in the wake of climate change (Brennan, 2017), artificial intelligence and technological innovation take centre stage in their dynamic interaction with decoloniality. Thus, the call for decolonising education is nothing less than the full incorporation of all of humanity's knowledge systems, past and present, and in anticipation of future knowledge constellations, into the knowledge selection systems of universities. But not all knowledge can logically be included in the

curriculum. What is required is knowledge selection through the contingent curriculum processes of specific university programmes and modules.

An instructive contribution is that of Fataar (2022), who offers a conceptual toolkit for pursuing decolonial knowledge-building in SA, including practical proposals for decolonising the curriculum. According to Fataar (2022), knowledge-building emphasises a realist conception of knowledge, stressing that any discipline which has its own conceptual structure that is either vertical (specialist) or horizontal (everyday knowledge) ought to be taught. He argues that both sets of knowledge structures 'allow for fertile space for inserting decoloniality' (Fataar, 2022, p. 21). For example, the space to decolonise vertical knowledge structures in science could be opened up by highlighting the historical development of mathematics, astronomy and medical concepts. This would be done by incorporating hitherto ignored scientific work from India, Africa and Asia, where many of the foundations of these disciplines were laid. And Ubuntu-inspired philosophy provides fruitful ground for working with the context-related cosmological knowledges of people (horizontal knowledge), as would the incorporation of Ibn Khaldun's assabiyah into the knowledge structuring of history, law, sociology, public administration, philosophy and business management curricula. Such perspectives would extend our theoretical frameworks, in addition to introducing students to a much broader epistemological canon. Likewise, Fataar (2022) recommends different periodisation and conceptions of the world and African history and society in disciplines such as history, literature and law be included in the curriculum; and the problematising of the unilinear depiction of modernity as enlightenment against multiple models of modernity that include slavery, war, capital and other social systems before, during and after colonial or imperial modernity.

Furthermore, Fataar (2022) invokes the notion of knowledge regions to respond to the decolonial appeal for the contextual relevance of knowledge in the curriculum. This could find space in those knowledge areas or subjects with more significant contextual applications. Thus, Fataar points out that understanding the specific relationship between concepts and contexts in specific knowledge regions and their recontextualisation in the curriculum opens up the possibility of the incorporation of Africa-centred relevance into specific curriculum areas. For example, Fataar argues that this would apply to disciplines such as engineering, agriculture, bioinformatics and commercial law. The application of the disciplinary concepts in professional and vocational contexts would be emphasised. As Fataar stresses:

> This is not an either/or proposition. In other words, no field of knowledge is founded entirely on either contextual or conceptual knowledge. A knowledge area is constituted in a specific manner depending on the interplay between its contextual and conceptual knowledge dimensions. (Fataar, 2022, p. 23)

Other writers such as Vandeyar (2019) have focused on the obstacles to decolonisation, highlighting the academic as the 'Achilles heel' in the decolonising knowledge project. In the South African context, as elaborated in the next section, a major challenge centres around the 'readiness' and 'ownership' by academics to implement curriculum decolonisation initiatives. In contrast, Christie (2020) suggests that the schooling system in SA is designed to match the institutional framework and curriculum of unmediated Eurocentric modernism, and as such is unable to achieve its goals of redressing past injustices and providing education of progressively high quality for all. She asserts that:

> The dynamics of border conditions – the desire for what cannot be achieved, and the unwillingness to accept what exists – trap the system in its bimodal achievement patterns and its continuing inequalities. This is a cycle where the decolonisation of schooling remains an impossible dream. (Christie, 2020, p. 21)

Christie (2020) calls for *all-world ethics* of how we might live together with all others and the earth we share. For her, the conceptual challenges of current times include grappling with the legacies of colonialism and imperialism, the effects of global neoliberalism, ecological damage and climate change.

Christie's 'all-world ethics' viewpoint notwithstanding, we are more inclined to concur with Garuba (2015), who suggests that fundamental change can happen only if universities 'rethink how the object of study itself is constituted' and then reconstruct it for meaningful change. At the core then is the question of social justice, a re-ordering of power, expressed through curriculum transformation. Kaya & Seleti (2013, p. 33) argue that decolonised academia must reject the 'utilisation of dominant Western worldview of knowing and knowledge production *as the only way of knowing*' [emphasis added]. It is important to note that decolonisation does not require removing white men and women, both foreign and local, from the curriculum. As Mbembe (2016, p. 35) points out, decolonisation 'is not about closing the door to European or other traditions. It is about defining clearly what the centre is'. wa Thiong'o (1981, p. 93) adds that Europe cannot remain at the centre of the universe at African universities; Africa must be at the centre. The enormity of the challenge confronting African academia was enunciated by a South African higher education think tank, which stressed that the change at universities must entail 'decolonising, deracialising, demasculanising and degendering' the institutions as well as 'engaging with ontological and

epistemological issues in all their complexity, including their implications for research, methodology, scholarship, learning and teaching, curriculum and pedagogy' (Higher Education South Africa (HESA), 2014, p. 7).

Decolonisation insights thus have particular ramifications for the higher education system in SA. As Lange (2021, p. 274) suggests, the 2015–2017 student protests in SA signaled a 'deauthorisation' of the university as an institution, based on a critique of its characteristics: its European origins and its role in supporting colonial and racist projects; its justification of the universalisation of the white experience of the world as the only legitimate experience and trajectory of development; the dominance of European languages as the medium of instruction and languages of knowledge; the privileging of rational, logical thinking over other modes of thinking; the focus of what is taught and how it is assessed; the focus of what is researched; assumptions about the democratic character of the university's governance structures and processes; its culture and symbols; its distance from the (black) people outside the university; the composition of its staff and their cultural and emotional distance from black students. The South African student protests have therefore thrown the spotlight squarely on the higher education sector, in particular. And as discussed next, some universities have taken up the cudgels, and are attempting to transform the curriculum from its powerful Eurocentric, colonial and racist foundations.

## The curriculum decolonisation project in SA: implications for higher education curriculum policy and practice

Calls for curriculum change are not new in SA. Policymakers, for example, have called for its transformation 'in the context of post-apartheid SA and its location in Africa and the world' (DoE (Department of Education), 2008, p. 21). In general, however, little has changed in higher education curriculum policy and practice in SA and the continent, despite such calls. This was underlined by a 2016 report by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in SA, pointing to the lack of commitment to transforming teaching and learning, and recommending a rethink of curriculum structures linked to the transformation of institutional cultures (Zondi, 2021). The CHE Report coincided with student and staff protests of 2015 and 2016, which was, in part, a reaction to the perception that 'knowledge universities had produced almost 25 years after the end of formal apartheid, was still based on a Western and esteemed Eurocentric purview of the world' (Zondi, 2021, p. 261). In that context, the hashtag movements organised themselves around two major issues:

fee-free education and decolonised education (education free of coloniality). According to Zondi (2021), student protests included a focus on the fundamental transformation of the higher education system concerning: institutional cultures of exclusion (financial and non-financial); violence, racism and sexism; spatial dimensions; language and cultural practices; Eurocentric curricula; exclusionary governance practices; suppressive tendencies; exploitation of workers; and failure to realise the dreams of liberation; arguing that no serious attempt has been made to build an alternative, decolonised university; instead, the focus has been on instrumentalist notions of preparing students for a changing economy.

## Curriculum decolonisation at University of Cape Town

It is in this context that South African universities, such as the University of Cape Town (UCT), are beginning to review their curriculum policies and practices. In January 2016, at the height of student protests, UCT established the Curriculum Change Working Group (CCWG), at the request of a group of black academics and students (Lange, 2021). Besides the organisation and facilitation of discussions on decolonisation of the curriculum using a variety of participative methodologies (CCWG, 2018, cited in Lange, 2021), the CCWG worked directly in several sites at UCT: Occupational Therapy in the Faculty of Health Sciences, and three departments: Fine Arts, Drama, and Music in the Faculty of Humanities—in spaces where there was a confrontation between black students and (white) academics and/or management.

The final output of the CCWG was a Curriculum Change Framework (CCF) which was released for comment to the broader UCT community in the second half of 2018. What is significant is that the CCF adopts a decolonial lens to curriculum change, that is, it uses the theories of the decolonial school of thought that originated in Latin America, particularly the work of Nelson Maldonado-Torres (cited earlier). As such, the CCF is based on the following three conceptual pillars: the coloniality of power, which refers to the current unequal arrangement of political relations at a global level; the coloniality of being, which investigates the dehumanisation brought about by colonialism, its historical pervasiveness and its contemporary consequences for those peoples who were deemed to 'deserve' to be dominated; and the coloniality of knowledge, which focuses on destabilising the dominant narrative that has white European knowledge as the standard against which all knowledge is measured (CCWG, 2018, cited in Lange, 2021).

Finally, through its investigations, the CCWG added one more form of coloniality to the theoretical tools of the decolonial school: the coloniality of doing, which refers to the emulation by colonial subjects (under colonialism and coloniality) of the 'manner of doing' learnt from the oppressor (CCWG, 2018). This, in the curricular space, becomes especially obvious in the training of students in Western-defined professions or disciplines (e.g. nurses and occupational therapists). The CCF developed a theory of change to give effect to a review of the curriculum, which is based on the identification of five phases of engagement: contestation; re-positioning; reconstruction; reconstitution; and reflection, all of which presuppose different levels of awareness of an individual's race, class, gender, etc., and the role of these markers in their ways of thinking, knowing and acting. The CCF document offers nine recommendations that need to be implemented to attain curriculum change. The first two recommendations refer to modes of participation, which are a reflection of the CCWG's own working practice:

- Including students in curriculum review teams
- Holding discussions to be led by black scholars
- Reading with conscious intent (this refers to a purposeful effort to include in reading lists authors and themes not usually 'allowed to exist')
- Addressing institutional racism, ableism, sexism and heteronormativity (this recommendation not only is focused especially on aspects of institutional culture, but also points to the problem of inclusive pedagogies in relation to students)
- Encouraging a transdisciplinary curriculum
- Questioning the traditional relationship between teachers and students from a decolonial perspective
- Changing the approach to assessment so that it supports making explicit the genealogy of professions and disciplines as a way of exposing colonial lies
- Encouraging constant student participation, as they themselves are knowers and not simply learners, who bring to the university the knowledge held in their communities (ccf, 2019, pp. 64–67, cited in Lange, 2021).

According to Lange (2021), the CCF represents the first attempt to systematically engage with the notion of decolonising the curriculum at UCT. In doing so, it was productive in prompting discussion within the institution about notions of knowledge and power, knowledge and identity, the disciplinarity of knowledge, the definition of knowledge experts, the positionality of knowledge producers, and where student identity fits with regard to knowledge production. Responses from UCT's academic community were grouped thematically: knowledge, power and identity; pedagogy, curriculum structure and design; language and disciplinary focus; and institutional culture and curriculum change.

It should be noted, however, that academic staff participation in the processes of the CCWG was minimal. And herein lies the challenge of implementation. As noted by Lange, the consultation process elicited 19 responses, five from faculties and the rest from academics, emeritus professors and some students; and although overall participation through faculty-level engagements was evident, '[i]t could be argued that at a university of nearly 2000 academics, this was a very poor response rate indeed' Lange (2021, p. 287).

Moreover, as Ndelu (2020) suggests, at historically white institutions such as UCT, black academics are in the minority, and many are provoked into leaving because of a non-supportive environment and feelings of being marginalised. Ndelu also notes shortcomings in the CCWG framework, including:

> (1) whether it would be binding on all faculties, departments and academics; (2) how the university plans on monitoring and enforcing compliance; and (3) how a binding framework might impact on the principle of academic freedom, which the university so jealously guards. (Ndelu, 2020, p. 148)

The notion of 'enforcing compliance' needs to be treated with caution, though, as it sits uncomfortably with the principle of academic freedom. A related implementation problem is the issue of changing mindsets and ensuring ownership of the curriculum decolonisation project, aptly captured by Modiri (2020, 158):

> …as a result of its imbrication in a northbound and socially white gaze, the Westernised South African university houses a large cadre of academics – from all racial groups – who have neither the training, the will nor the imagination to radically reconfigure the knowledge archive in a way that would initiate a conceptual decolonisation of the disciplines and, hence, of the university.

Similarly, Mngomezulu notes that at SA's historically black universities, white lecturers have:

> continued to teach a Westernised curriculum with which they were comfortable. Even where black lecturers joined these universities, they were either reluctant to transform the curriculum or lacked the power and confidence to do so by virtue of the fact that they occupied low-ranking positions and could not make curriculum decisions. (Mngomezulu, 2020, p. 91)

At Rhodes University, the question of academic staff whiteness in the humanities is seen as 'limiting the extent to which their black students feel recognized' (Knowles, 2020,

p. 123). Citing Hooks (1994), Knowles (2020, p. 123) argues for the 'treatment of students as whole people, with rich experiences, passions and memories, to connect these to the kinds of examples and texts we use in our curricula'. Curriculum decolonisation initiatives, such as UCT's CCWG framework, therefore, must ensure that there are complementary programmes of orientation and training to facilitate changes in attitudes and buy-in of academic staff, while simultaneously devising ways to address staff concerns around academic freedom. In this regard, emphasis should be placed on the opportunities for deepening academic freedom, as recognition of multiple knowledges and knowledge traditions helps to expand the scope of curriculum selection.

Thus, although much work needs to be done, South African universities are finally beginning the difficult journey towards decolonisation of the university and of the curriculum. In Lange's view:

> it is a question not to be addressed solely by higher education systems in former colonial dominions; it is not only a matter of recognition of postponed or obliterated identities; it is not only a matter, as urgent as this is, of addressing the lasting power of racism. It is a matter of confronting where we went wrong as a civilisation and being ready to educate for a wholly different future. (Lange, 2021, p. 295)

However, SA is not alone in confronting the complexity and the challenges associated with decolonising the curriculum. In Maringe, 2017, p. 12), the 'decolonising teaching and pedagogy project' in Africa can be seen in terms of three interlocking dimensions, namely the content of teaching, resources and instructional approaches adopted at higher education institutions. He argues that this project has seen little change in spite of the turn towards decolonising the curriculum. Some changes have occurred in subject disciplines such as history and language courses, with the introduction of African histories and the teaching of some indigenous languages. However, other than changes in content and facts, the approaches to teaching history have remained static; in the teaching of indigenous languages, there is a tendency to teach these through the medium of English or French owing to a lack of resources, expertise and materials.

In a similar vein, Metz (2017, p. 22) poses the following questions: Are students being taught African perspectives and approaches and exposed to texts written by Africans? Is a music department teaching indigenous forms of music? Is a philosophy department teaching the work of sub-Saharan thinkers? He contends that such pedagogical approaches have not featured frequently in SA in the past 20 years. Citing the work of Soudien et al. (2008) and Jansen (1998), he asserts that 'much instruction is

decontextualised and not directly engaged with African perspectives' (Metz, 2017, p. 23).

The question of language policy and language use at higher education institutions is a major issue. As both Miti (2017) and Metz (2017) point out, English and Afrikaans have dominated as media of instruction at South African universities, a practice that goes back to the early years of colonisation, with the entrenchment of Afrikaans at the universities of Pretoria, Stellenbosch and Johannesburg (formerly Rand Afrikaans University) evident during the more recent apartheid era (Miti, 2017, p. 107). Moreover, it is not only the medium of instruction that poses problems, but also that textbooks and study materials are in colonial languages. Miti (2017, p. 108) suggests that, considering the challenges in making African languages the media of study in all disciplines, they should at the very least be used in the study of African languages, linguistics and literature. He draws attention to advancing the project of intellectualisation of African languages, which has commenced in South African universities such as Rhodes, KwaZulu Natal and UCT, to focus on:

- developing terminology in African languages for various professions;
- producing monolingual dictionaries in African languages;
- developing African languages for technology; and
- conducting academic research in various disciplines and publishing research findings in African languages (Miti, 2017, p. 109).

Metz (2017) highlights two further dimensions: aesthetics and governance at universities. Aesthetics refers to the influence of culture on university symbols, kinds of music played at university events, graduation ceremony rituals and dress code—while there have been some changes in this regard (e.g. in dress codes and food menus), there is still the overbearing symbolism of Western culture and aesthetics (Metz, 2017, p. 25). In terms of governance, little consideration has been given to African models in the running of universities, for example, the use of sub-Saharan restorative justice, as opposed to penalties such as student deregistration or expulsion (ibid, pp. 25–26).

In conclusion, we propose in a table format a list of DT insights/constructs that can serve as principles for curriculum transformation drawing on the various scholarly and programme insights discussed above. The insights and curriculum implications are far from exhaustive but could serve as a useful starting point for institutional curriculum engagement processes, as noted in the UCT case study.

**Table 1** Implications of DT insights/principles for curriculum

| Decolonial theory insights, principles | Curriculum implications |
|---|---|
| Historical context of coloniality | Highlighting Eurocentric, colonial and racist foundations in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and textbooks |
| Pluriversality and recognition of multiple knowledge systems | Multiple epistemologies validated; expansion of curriculum selection scope; enhancing academic freedom |
| Eurocentrism | Decentring of European knowledge; Centring of African knowledge |
| Pluriversality of the world we live in; Inter-connection between everyday social experience and epistemologies | Inclusion of reading lists, authors and themes not usually 'allowed to exist'; Including students in curriculum review teams; Holding discussions to be led by black and other marginalised scholars |
| Knowledge-building approach: interplay between contextual and conceptual knowledge dimensions | Incorporation of Africa-centred relevance into specific curriculum areas, such as engineering, agriculture, bioinformatics and commercial law |
| Towards an all-world ethics; Incorporation of all of humanity's knowledge systems, past and present, and in anticipation of future knowledge constellations, into the knowledge selection systems of universities; Interconnection of the ethical, political and epistemological | Encouraging a transdisciplinary curriculum; Educate for an inclusive future; Human interdependence with animals and nature; Selection of knowledge of colonised in university programmes and modules |
| 'Coloniality of knowledge' | Disrupting the narrative of white European knowledge as the gold standard against which all knowledge is measured |
| 'Coloniality of being' Non-being of the colonised | Centring the African being/subject in the curriculum Challenging the alienation of African subjects in the curriculum |
| 'Coloniality of doing' | Reviewing training of students in Western-defined professions or disciplines, e.g. nurses, occupational therapists |
| Coloniality of power | Understanding and challenging the colonial matrix of power |
| Curriculum and pedagogy as products of knowledge selection are never neutral | Reformulating the content of teaching, resources and instructional approaches adopted at higher education institutions; Addressing language issues and symbolic power; Changing assessment approaches to make explicit the genealogy of professions and disciplines as a way of exposing coloniality |
| Curriculum knowledge and epistemological connections; quest for relevance | Connections to the knowledges of people, their contextual life circumstances, indigenous knowledge systems, literacies, languages and ways of knowing; Inclusive pedagogies in relation to student diversity |
| Aesthetics: the influence of culture on university symbols | Addressing institutional coloniality in symbols, norms and values |
| African models of governance | Using sub-Saharan restorative justice, as opposed to penalties such as student deregistration or expulsion |

## Conclusion

The emerging body of research and writings on a decolonial view of the world has contributed significantly to the epistemological foundations of DT, and by implication to the liberation and empowerment of the citizens of 'coloniality'. However, if the aim of decolonisation is to be achieved, much more needs to be done. One important project is the decolonisation of the higher education curriculum. Here too, important work has begun at some institutions in SA. This article has sought to complement the curriculum initiatives of these education institutions in SA, by proposing an enabling framework for effective curriculum transformation that prioritises the decolonial imperatives of epistemic and social justice. A critical component of the proposed framework is the 'decentring' of the Eurocentric curriculum that continues

to misrepresent the reality of colonialism's erstwhile subjects, who seek the enjoyment of rights that all global citizens should be entitled to. This entails shifting the decolonisation debate from object to subject, central to which is an adequate contextualisation of knowledge and visibility of the oppressed, as pre-conditions for decolonising the curriculum. Beyond tackling the historical legacies of colonialism, there is an urgent need for the higher education curriculum to demonstrate a responsiveness to the emerging new world order, one that is characterised by deepening inequalities, exacerbated by technological advances, climate change, pandemics and persistent patriarchy. A transformed higher education curriculum with its sights set squarely on the ravages of coloniality is an important step towards a reconfigured education system within the changing contours of the world we live in. However, curriculum decolonisation initiatives in SA, although

possessed of a sound theoretical and conceptual base, face implementation challenges especially around academic staff engagement, attitudes and readiness to change. These challenges notwithstanding, curriculum decolonisation remains an important project in the search for social and epistemic justice in higher education.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethics approval** Not applicable as the article is a conceptual/theoretical paper that draws essentially from secondary sources.

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