



# Deconstructing Decolonising in the Context of a South African Higher Education Institution

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## ABSTRACT

Decolonisation at its different levels and stages is a movement that started around the sixties and has swept across all continents of the world. However, there has been a re-ignition of this movement in recent years on the African continent, particularly in the education sector. This took a different turn in South Africa in late 2015 when the #Mustfall movement started. Different institutions responded to this in a frenzy and the result was absolute chaos in both the understanding of the subject and response to it. About eight years later many academics are still grappling with the meaning of the consult and how to go about decolonising in higher education. Though there is a dearth of academic writing on the subject particularly in South Africa, this has translated to little action and the vestiges of colonialism remain. This paper sought to deconstruct decolonisation from an institutional perspective and theorise how the same can be made to unfold within the stratosphere. This study was designed as a qualitative case study of a South African University and used interviews as the data generation method. The findings indicated that decolonisation is about politics, language, and identity, not forgetting an element of confusion. The paper concluded that decolonisation has to transcend individual understandings of the same to deal with all facets of the higher education sector. It, therefore, recommended the adoption of a holistic approach to dealing with decolonisation and an overall improvement in the understanding of lecturers on decolonisation. This paper makes a vital contribution to the body of knowledge by articulating the conflicting understandings that exist and the confusion it breeds. It also points to the lack of decolonisation within the higher education space.

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## INTRODUCTION

Decolonising higher education in general, and decolonising curriculum, in particular, has been at the centre of higher education discourse in South Africa since 2016. Numerous perspectives and viewpoints on the subject have emerged and alternative ways of decolonising have been articulated however, the curriculum in most parts remains colonised. Nyoni argues that the incessant calls for decolonising the curriculum are an expression of the changing geopolitics of knowledge where the recent epistemological pathway for knowing and understanding the world is no longer interpreted as universal and unbound by geohistorical and biographical contexts.<sup>1</sup> This need has also expressed itself in South Africa's higher education through the cry for transformation and as Saurombe argues, the decolonisation of the higher education curricula forms part of the process of transforming the higher education system in South Africa that started in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> However, what

<sup>1</sup> Jabulani Nyoni, "Decolonising the Higher Education Curriculum: An Analysis of African Intellectual Readiness to Break the Chains of a Colonial Caged Mentality," *Transformation in Higher Education* 4, no. 1 (2019): 1–10.

<sup>2</sup> Nampombe Saurombe, "Decolonising Higher Education Curricula in South Africa: Factoring in Archives through Public Programming Initiatives," *Archival Science* 18, no. 2 (June 4, 2018): 119–41, 121. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-018-9289-4>.

exactly decolonisation is, is a question that must be answered before a critical engagement on curriculum decolonisation can be made possible. Manathunga argues that decolonising higher education refers to a variety of positions that posit that colonial vestiges and their impact still linger on in the operations of higher education, despite formal independence decades ago.<sup>3</sup>

Deng argues that curriculum and the materials of the same like syllabi, textbooks, or teacher guides amongst others are critical resources that carry “capacity” for classroom teaching and transformation.<sup>4</sup> These tools when chosen correctly, embody in themselves a “curriculum (a school subject or course of study) in which the content is selected, organized, and transformed for social, cultural, educational, curricular, and pedagogical purposes. Yet what curriculum potential a material has depends on how a teacher uses the material, which in turn, depends on how he or she interprets what is contained in the material in a classroom context.<sup>5</sup> This means that how teachers understand the decolonisation of the curriculum would determine how they choose and interpret the materials they use.

Gado and Verma argue that curriculum orientations, political and social ideologies, and or educational philosophies have guided curriculum understandings and processes by setting priorities and answering value-laden questions.<sup>6</sup> But how such questions are answered, is heavily dependent on lecturers' understanding of curriculum priorities and the influences in the same. And since one of the key priorities in the South African higher education system as far as the curriculum is concerned is decolonisation, lecturers' understanding of the same becomes a key priority in dictating how the process unfolds and what the product will be. This makes the priority focus here, the teachers' or lecturers' agency. Deng argues that the teacher's agency rather than the curriculum as the focus is often evident in the “model of pedagogical reasoning articulated by Shulman and associates when advancing their conceptualization of teachers' specialized subject matter knowledge—in terms of content knowledge, Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), and curricular knowledge.”<sup>7</sup> The teacher is expected to critically interpret decolonisation of the curriculum in this case to be able to effectively enact it in the classroom. This is exactly what this paper sets out to do. Using a qualitative case study of a South African University, this paper seeks to deconstruct decolonisation of the curriculum from an institutional perspective and theorise how the same can be made to unfold within the stratosphere. The findings are presented in subsequent sections, however, a literature review precedes the discussion to provide more in-depth knowledge on the subject area.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Manathunga posits that the challenges of colonial vestiges are the processes of decolonisation as it relates to higher education. Manathunga adds that “decolonising higher education involves carefully interrogating our own entangled histories, geographies, and cultural knowledge to unearth new meanings and pathways which works towards the development of students who are consciously conscious of their education and everything it was supposed to do.”<sup>8</sup> Decolonisation as such is a complex activity focused on a process rather than a product. Chimbu adding to this opines that decolonising education is about deconstructing the coloniality of knowledge which occurs where “Western or Eurocentric knowledge is so privileged and dominant over other epistemes to the extent that it becomes common sense, normal, ideal, universal and hegemonic.”<sup>9</sup> Such coloniality turns to make Western or Eurocentric knowledge legitimated and pedalled as being neutral and universal, and any other ways of understanding or positionalities as not only pedestrian but also provincial and situated. Under such circumstances, decolonising becomes the only approach to recentre the peripheral and give voice to alternative understandings which had hitherto been relegated vis a vis its European counterpart.

Van Niekerk on the other hand provides an alternative perspective by looking at decolonising education as the indigenisation of the scientific and educational enterprise in a postcolonial context.<sup>10</sup> In his view, it is

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Manathunga, “Decolonising Higher Education: Creating Space for Southern Knowledge Systems,” *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South* 4, no. 1 (2020): 4–25.

<sup>4</sup> Zongyi Deng, “Revisiting Curriculum Potential,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 41, no. 5 (December 7, 2011): 538–59, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873X.2011.00563.x>.

<sup>5</sup> Deng, “Revisiting Curriculum Potential,” 538.

<sup>6</sup> Issaou Gado and Geeta Verma, “Emerging Issues and Trends in International Curriculum Discourse: Theoretical, Philosophical, and Pedagogical Positions,” *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 1, no. 2 (December 2004): 151–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2004.10411510>.

<sup>7</sup> Deng, “Revisiting Curriculum Potential,” 539.

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Manathunga, “Decolonising the Curriculum: Southern Interrogations of Time, Place and Knowledge,” *SOTL in the South: A Journal Dedicated to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the Global South* 2, no. 1 (2018): 95–111.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Chiumbu, “Why Decolonise Research Methods?: Some Initial Thoughts,” 2017, 2.

<sup>10</sup> A A Van Niekerk, “Is ‘Decolonisation’ a Legitimate and Appropriate Value in Biomedical Research and Teaching?,” *South African Journal of Bioethics and Law* 12, no. 1 (2019): 4–7.

about shifting the centre of gravity in education from where it has been (western) to Africa and its idiosyncrasies. Van Niekerk however cautions that researchers should be careful not to simply equate decolonisation and Africanisation, as this would bring catastrophic consequences.<sup>11</sup> Muldoon argues that decolonisation doesn't necessarily demand the elimination of white men from the curriculum, but it "is about challenging long-standing biases and omissions that limit how we understand politics and society... as well as broadening the intellectual vision that includes a wider range of perspectives."<sup>12</sup> While decolonising has come to mean different things for different people, it includes a vital reconsideration of who is teaching, what the subject matter is and how it's being taught.

Sibanda argues that from the research conducted by academics in South African higher education, four perspectives on decolonisation in higher education have emerged.<sup>13</sup> These are decolonisation as recentring, decolonisation as de-centring, decolonisation as unboxing knowledge, and decolonisation as facilitation of access to powerful knowledge. Decolonising as recentring focuses on the re-positioning of that which is sacred and home-grown.<sup>14</sup> Recentring is not just about making the peripheral the centre or making marginalised knowledge mainstream, but a refocalisation which not only makes mainstream but produces a keychain of the education stratosphere. This would result in the reversal of hegemony between legitimated and marginalised ways of acquiring knowledge. Chimbu concurs with this when he argues that "... it's not ignoring Western knowledge, but it is about re-centring Africa and its experiences."<sup>15</sup> This means that although there is still a need for a centre, this centre must be Africa thereby eschewing epistemic universalism. Kasturi concludes that decolonisation "is about defining clearly what the centre is and mapping out the directions and perspectives that studies should take if Africa is placed at the centre."<sup>16</sup>

Decolonising as decentring, on the other hand, is anchored on the desire to obliterate the hegemonic sway of Western knowledge to ensure parity and equality of knowledge. Olivier argues that the dismantling of epistemic violence "stems from epistemic autonomy which, itself, is a measure of the appropriation of diverse pieces of knowledge into the academy, including the hitherto unacknowledged and/or suppressed."<sup>17</sup> Sibanda adds that the obsession to rid all vestiges of erstwhile colonial powers from university curricula is regarded as narrow and parochial and a plurality of ways of knowing, with each knowledge defining the limits and possibilities of understanding other pieces of knowledge in an ecology of knowledge is advocated.<sup>18</sup> As such the decentring perspective focuses on moving education away from the totalitarianism of Western hegemonic epistemologies to a democratisation of knowledge and a redress towards the previously marginalised knowledge and social justice.

Decolonisation as unboxing knowledge is the third perspective that has emerged in the debates on decolonisation. Samuel argues that knowledge from the global north is not necessarily of western or global north origin, but it is rather a mere re-packaging and re-presentation of knowledge that crisscrosses the globe.<sup>19</sup> This knowledge which "originated from one source of the world, is represented and packaged as emanating from the superpowers of the rich and famous, paraded as evidence of legitimating motivations for ascendancy to the throne of privilege."<sup>20</sup> This repackaging makes every worthwhile knowledge appear to have originated from the global north. Sibanda adds that this notion of the global north as the progenitor of all the privileged knowledge(s) in the academy is regarded as a myth.<sup>21</sup> The West "has just claimed, with impunity, the role of legitimating knowledge(s) that ascends the citadel of privilege and those that remain at the periphery or get obliterated. It decides what voices to muzzle and what voices to trumpet."<sup>22</sup> This means that the dichotomy in the body of knowledge with regards to who owns what knowledge or where what knowledge originates from is

<sup>11</sup> Van Niekerk, "Is 'Decolonisation' a Legitimate and Appropriate Value in Biomedical Research and Teaching?"

<sup>12</sup> Muldoon, J. (2019). Academics: It's time to get behind decolonising the curriculum." *The Guardian*

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/mar/20/academics-its-time-to-get-behind-decolonising-the-curriculum>

<sup>13</sup> Malebo J Keebine-Sibanda, "Academics' Conceptions of Higher Education Decolonisation," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 35, no. 3 (2021): 182–99.

<sup>14</sup> Kasturi Behari-Leak, "Decolonial Turns, Postcolonial Shifts, and Cultural Connections: Are We There Yet?," *English Academy Review* 36, no. 1 (2019): 58–68.

<sup>15</sup> Chiumbu, "Why Decolonise Research Methods?: Some Initial Thoughts," 4.

<sup>16</sup> Behari-Leak, "Decolonial Turns, Postcolonial Shifts, and Cultural Connections: Are We There Yet?" 66.

<sup>17</sup> Bert Olivier, "Decolonisation, Identity, Neo-Colonialism and Power," *Phronimon* 20, no. 1 (2019): 1–18.

<sup>18</sup> Keebine-Sibanda, "Academics' Conceptions of Higher Education Decolonisation," 185.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Anthony Samuel, "Africanising the Curriculum: Indigenous Perspectives and Theories by Vuyisile Msila and Mishack T. Gumbo (Editors)" (Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Samuel, "Africanising the Curriculum: Indigenous Perspectives and Theories by Vuyisile Msila and Mishack T. Gumbo (Editors)," 27.

<sup>21</sup> Keebine-Sibanda, "Academics' Conceptions of Higher Education Decolonisation."

<sup>22</sup> Keebine-Sibanda, "Academics' Conceptions of Higher Education Decolonisation," 185.

a fallacy. Arguing against this, Samuel that “we are diverse, multiple, and continually contested beings, as new internal and external dialogues about who we are and who we want to be, consciously invade our being.”<sup>23</sup> Any attempt to box us is resisted.”<sup>24</sup> This diversity makes it increasingly difficult to box knowledge into categories and layers belonging to different regions or nations. Sibanda supports this by arguing that “boxing knowledge would render in-breeding knowledge coloured by habits, routines, and rituals, undesirable in the face of the porosity of borders that occasion fluidity as well as physical, methodological, and epistemological migration.”<sup>25</sup>

According to Samuel, “from this perspective, knowledge is located at the intersection of the “emic and home-grown culture-specific” and the etic, “generic, universalist” perspectives of the world we inhabit.”<sup>26</sup> The composition of ideas precludes exclusivity and individualism and rather encourages pluriversalism especially because knowledge is not neutral and is constantly being influenced knowingly or unknowingly by alternative cultures. The fourth and final perspective of decolonisation is decolonisation as the facilitation of access to powerful knowledge. This perspective although an unpopular one amongst many scholars sees decolonisation as giving students equal access to powerful knowledge which hitherto had been hidden or kept away from them. These ‘very powerful forms of knowledge’ according to Leibowitz must be communicated to students using the most reliable methods that guarantee that access.<sup>27</sup> This perspective acknowledges certain extant pieces of knowledge as powerful knowledge, thereby implying that there are others who are powerless or less powerful. The lack of access or the restriction of access to these powerful bits of knowledge is at the heart of the decolonisation cry. This perspective doesn’t seek to epistemic-ide extant knowledge be it powerful or less powerful, but rather their packaging and presentation.<sup>28</sup>

However, these perspectives on what decolonisation should do as well as the alternate understandings of decolonisation within the context of this paper need to be understood from the context of the curriculum. Jansen argues that the drive for the decolonisation of the curriculum in the higher education sector in South Africa has generated a lot of debate and raised some critical questions about what should constitute teaching and learning at the micro and meso level, as well as raise “broader political questions about the nature and transformation of the post-apartheid higher education trajectory, more than 26 years on.”<sup>29</sup> This means that there are serious issues and questions around teaching and learning in general and the curriculum in particular.

Fundamental questions therefore arise about what kind of curriculum is being used for teaching and learning and whether or not all students have access to the knowledge within the curriculum being taught as well as whether or not they have access to the knowledge codes. Motala et al. also add that it raises questions about “how subjugated and marginalised ideas are represented, recognised, and affirmed in the pedagogic space.”<sup>30</sup> In curriculum terms, questions have been raised about what knowledge and whose knowledge – with only weak answers supplied. These questions with weak answers create the need or necessitate the asking of further questions about university lecturers’ conceptual understanding of curriculum decolonisation and how they facilitate access to the curriculum and whose curriculum is being taught in the institution.

## METHODOLOGY

This research was designed as a qualitative case study of a university in South Africa. Cohen et al. argue that qualitative research is concerned with the why and the what by seeking to explore the meaning that participants of the research have constructed around the issue being explored.<sup>31</sup> The focus of qualitative research, therefore, is on the depth of information that would otherwise not have been available through other methods. The case in this study is a university in South Africa and the unit of exploration was education academics’ conceptual understanding of decolonising the curriculum. Having dealt with the case, the next focus was the sampling of participants. Nonprobability purposive sampling was used for this research. The rationale for employing purposive sampling was anchored on the fact that the researchers needed to choose certain categories of individuals who have a unique, different, or important perspective on the phenomenon in question. From this

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<sup>23</sup> Samuel, “Africanising the Curriculum: Indigenous Perspectives and Theories by Vuyisile Msila and Mishack T. Gumbo (Editors),” 19.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel, “Africanising the Curriculum: Indigenous Perspectives and Theories by Vuyisile Msila and Mishack T. Gumbo (Editors),” 185.

<sup>25</sup> Keebine-Sibanda, “Academics’ Conceptions of Higher Education Decolonisation,” 185.

<sup>26</sup> Samuel, “Africanising the Curriculum: Indigenous Perspectives and Theories by Vuyisile Msila and Mishack T. Gumbo,” 90.

<sup>27</sup> Brenda Leibowitz, “Cognitive Justice and the Higher Education Curriculum,” *Journal of Education (University of KwaZulu-Natal)*, no. 68 (2017): 93–112.

<sup>28</sup> Keebine-Sibanda, “Academics’ Conceptions of Higher Education Decolonisation.”

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan D Jansen, “As by Fire: The End of the South African University,” 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Shireen Motala, Yusuf Sayed, and Tarryn de Kock, “Epistemic Decolonisation in Reconstituting Higher Education Pedagogy in South Africa: The Student Perspective,” *Teaching in Higher Education* 26, no. 7–8 (November 17, 2021): 1002–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1947225>.

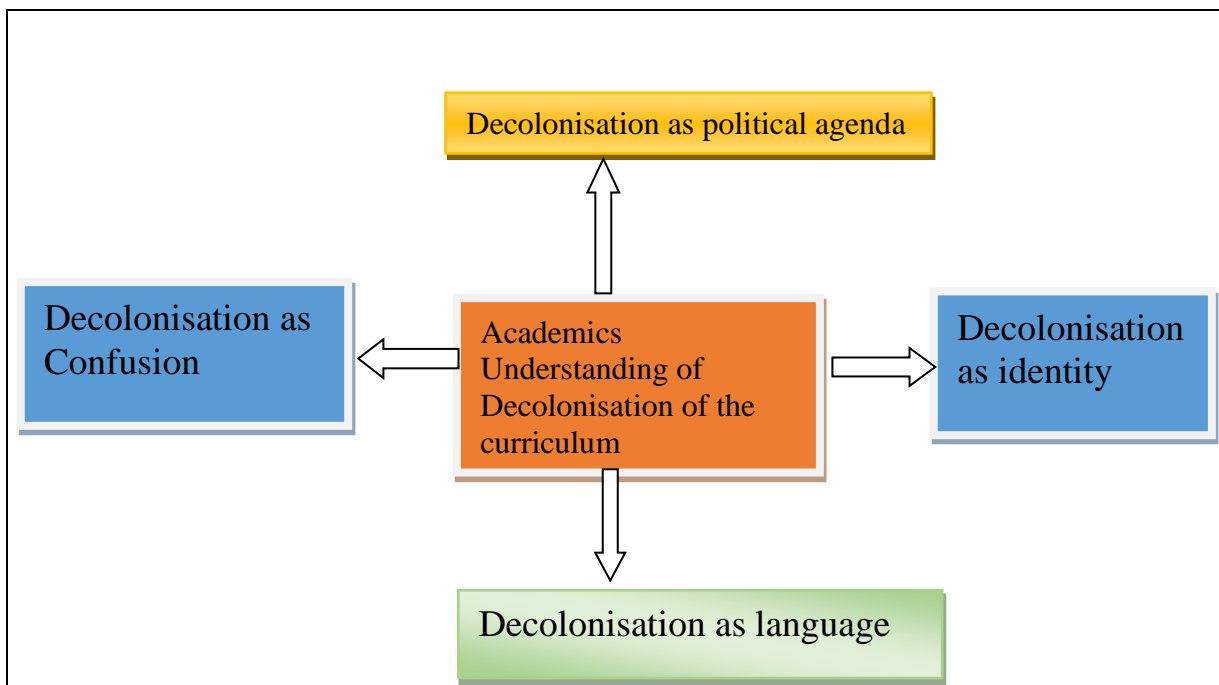
<sup>31</sup> Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison, “Research Methods in Education (Eighth Edi)” (London: Routledge, 2018).

perspective, 8 educational academics from a selected higher education institution in the KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa were selected. These academics came from all the departments within the school of education. They were also evenly distributed on the lines of race, gender and sex. The rationale for selecting academics of different disciplines/race/gender/sex was to gain an understanding of how these differences influenced their understanding, behaviour, and interpretation of their own context. Using purposive sampling to select participants in these researchers was effective as these participants were fully acquainted with the researchers.

This research engaged semi-structured interviews as the data generation procedure. This within the qualitative case study research frame, gives researchers the opportunity to not only generate in-depth data but also gives the participants to explore issues which the researcher might originally not have thought about.<sup>32</sup> In this research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all eight participants in their offices. The interviews lasted approximately one hour to two hours per participant. The interviews were recorded with a tape recorder and later transcribed by the researchers. It was in turn provided to the researchers for further checking before the researcher proceeded to analyse the data. An interview schedule was used to guide the interview; however, the responses of the participants were an overarching guide for the interview as the participants had to ask follow-up questions to ensure that every detail required was gotten. Upon completion of the interview, the researchers ensured that the real names of all the participants were replaced with code names using the Neto phenetic alphabet. The researchers also ensured that all ethical rules were adhered to. The data generated was analysed using grounded analyses. The data was then coded and categorised into different units in the bid to find meaning and patterns. From the coding and categorisations, themes were developed for analysis and theorising.

**Theorising The Findings: Education Academics Understanding of Decolonisation of The Curriculum**

Sibanda argues that there is a lack of uniform understanding of the meaning and workings of decolonisation and this is one of the reasons why the process has been slow.<sup>33</sup> With the general lack of cohesion and understanding on the subject, it is critical to understand or explore academic understandings of the subject both to provide critical viewpoints as well as aid other scholars in the understanding of the same. The diagram below shows the key themes that emerged from the analysis of the data.



<sup>32</sup> Melanie Nind and Sarah Lewthwaite, “Methods That Teach: Developing Pedagogic Research Methods, Developing Pedagogy,” *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 41, no. 4 (2018): 398–410.

<sup>33</sup> Keebine-Sibanda, “Academics’ Conceptions of Higher Education Decolonisation.”

## Decolonisation as Identity

Fomunyam et al. argue that decolonisation of the curriculum is a contextual issue owing to the fact that different institutions are responding to different issues.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, since the content in particular and the curriculum, in general, is different from each university regardless of the fact that they might be offering similar programs, it became increasingly critical to explore the different considerations of the decolonisation of the curriculum. The findings of this research indicated that decolonisation of the curriculum can be understood as a question of identity. To this effect, Tango one of the participants pointed out that:

*“Decolonisation in our context is about identity. It’s about who we are and who we want to be. It is about how colonialism and its heritage have altered our identity and changed who we are or were by changing our perceptions and understanding of things thereby changing our realities and worldviews which make us who we are.”*

As such decolonisation is about the reshaping of identity, the identity orchestrated by colonialism and its heritage which has lingered in education up until now. Alpha one of the participants on her part pointed out that:

*“You can’t separate identity from the decolonisation discussion. It is primarily about identity. When students complain about studying the death of white men, for example, they are complaining about what or who the content is shaping them to be. Dead white men are shaping their identity and that’s what the students don’t want. Decolonising is about shaping the identity differently.”*

To both Tango and Alpha, decolonisation in education is a function of identity, since colonialism was primarily about identity. Colonialism is anchored on changing or shaping the identity of the colonised, through different instruments and policies. Since education primarily shapes who humans are and how they interpret the world, it follows that the identity of the colonised was shaped and reshaped by the colonial education they received and the same has been passed down through the cracks with both the curriculum and pedagogy still primarily western-oriented.

As such to some of the participants, decolonisation is primarily about identity; that is who the education process is shaping the student to be. If the education primarily has a European worldview, the students would develop such views and it would eventually become who they are and how they see the world. Speaking about this, Bravo one of the participants noted that:

*“decolonisation is about who we are and who we want to be. When the statue of Cecil Rhodes was defaced at the University of Cape Town, it was about the identity of the institution and by extension the students in the university. When you look at the curriculum, it is primarily for student development. So the question of decolonisation is simply a question of identity. What kind of students or graduates is the current education producing? What kind of graduates do we want to produce? These are all questions of identity and are both at the heart of decolonisation”.*

From Bravo’s perspective, one can’t separate education from identity because education aims at shaping the identity of the student. Decolonisation, therefore, is the fight for the redefinition of identity for students and by extension national identity and consciousness. The two questions raised by Bravo show that he understands decolonisation as a question of identity. To add to this, Foxtrot argued that:

*“the current workforce or adult population of South Africa was shaped by education in general and the curriculum in particular. And here I am talking about all the different types of curriculum. With the terrible nature of the circumstances (with the nation being the most unequal in the world) we have to decolonise the education system. This is what decolonisation is about. Shaping the future generation of South Africans to be, live and act according to the principles of Ubuntu is decolonising.”*

If shaping the future generation of South Africans is at the heart of decolonisation, then the identity of who is being shaped and how he or she is being shaped is at the heart of decolonisation. Decolonising as such is a question of identity, be it institutional identity or the individual identity of the students, or the national consciousness of the collective student body. Identity can not be taken out of the drive for decolonisation. According to Tango, Foxtrot, Alpha and Bravo, decolonisation is about identity and how the same is shaped through education.

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<sup>34</sup> Kehdinga George Fomunyam et al., “Decolonizing Higher Education in South Africa: A University of Technology Introspection.,” *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Educational Studies* 15, no. 1 (2020).

### **Decolonisation as a Political Agenda**

Education is political in nature and every decision about it is political. Decolonisation can't be achieved without political will and even in the instance of decolonisation, the direction such decolonisation takes is also political. This is why some of the participants also thought that decolonisation was a political agenda. Positing on this, Charlie noted that:

*“decolonisation can also be seen as a political agenda. You know colonialism was political in nature and all that remains of it no matter how we want to look at it is inherently political. You can't remove politics from the decolonisation agenda. It takes political power to decolonise especially because of the steps we would have to take. So decolonisation is a political agenda.”*

The willpower needed to decolonise education cannot be over emphasised. This is why there has been much talk without tangible action on the decolonisation agenda. The politics at play in education becomes even stronger when considering the subject of decolonisation and the varying points of view that have emerged in the movement. Questions about the universality of knowledge and its contextual reality or application, the possibility and the nature of decolonisation in the sciences and whether or not Eurocentric views should be completely eradicated from the educational project are political issues requiring political action. As such the political nature of the decolonisation agenda can't be over emphasised. Adding to this, Delta another participant noted that:

*“to decolonise is to deconstruct the political structures built into education and the society by the colonial powers and these structures are still working against us today. This is why we still don't have our land back. This is why the factories and big businesses are still owned by white men both dead and alive. We need to destroy these structures and rebuild them through education. That is decolonising.”*

Decolonisation is a political agenda which requires political action to be effected. Decisions around curriculum change and or review, the theoretical direction, the sociological pathway and the pedagogical orientation are all political decisions to be made within the decolonisation movement making the decolonisation project a political agenda. Since education in general and curriculum, in particular, is universally understood as being political in nature, it follows, that decolonisation which is a function within the same is political in nature. Illustrating this better, Echo another participant pointed out that:

*“All this talk about decolonisation is just politics. We have been battling with this for twenty-eight years and the powers that be have managed to keep things the way they are. Students started demanding the decolonisation of the curriculum in 2016 and to date, we are still talking about it because it is political in nature. It is a political agenda that needs the political leadership to back it for it to succeed.”*

Decolonisation is seen and understood as a political agenda needing political solutions. Without such political power and will, decolonisation of education would be impossible which explains why some academics choose to describe it or see it as a political agenda.

### **Decolonisation as Confusion**

One thing that was also very clear during the interviews was the fact that most academics are confused about the meaning of decolonisation and how to go about the same. This is primarily important because, if there is a dire need for decolonisation as the academic world has touted, it follows that most academics have failed to realise the need for the same prior to the 2016 student protest. If this was the case, it means they didn't see education in general and curriculum in particular as colonial; hence the confusion surrounding the meaning of decolonisation and how to go about it. Bravo one of the participants speaking about this, opined that:

*“This decolonisation issue has brought a lot more confusion to education than help. Many people are more confused than they were before they started the decolonisation agenda. They don't know what to do or how to go about it. Everyone seems to know everything about the subject and everybody is decolonising but there is little or no change. I can say decolonising is really about confusion and no one really knows what it is about because if we did we would have decolonised by now.”*

According to Bravo, many are confused, and for good reasons because lecturers are expected to decolonise education but the structures and the status quo that enable the coloniality of education remain which begs the question of whether or not any real decolonisation can take place. Many are confused and taking steps they are not sure of all in the bit to decolonise. Adding to this, Alpha pointed out that:

*“Well, I can also say that confusion has come to be the order of the day in this decolonisation agenda. We have had countless seminars about decolonisation, written countless papers and attended and*

*presented at several conferences, but we are still confused about decolonisation. If you ask 10 lecturers now, at least six will tell you we have decolonised or are decolonising. But nothing has changed. We are more confused than we were when we started.”*

Having been used to the status quo for such a long time, it is understandable that many are confused and claim to be decolonising but with little change. Without a proper understanding of decolonisation and how to decolonise, no meaningful decolonisation will take place.

Delta further buttressing this point noted that:

*“the students who demanded decolonisation didn’t even know what they were asking for. The university administrators who took the challenge didn’t even know what to do. The lecturers who were charged to decolonise didn’t even know what to do because if they did and understood the importance of decolonisation they would have decolonised since. There is just confusion everywhere about this issue of decolonisation.”*

Decolonisation seems to have become the author of confusion in the educational circle and some don’t know exactly what to do. If the confusion about the meaning of decolonisation and the approach to decolonisation remains, the decolonisation agenda would never be accomplished.

### **Decolonisation as Language**

Another key theme that emerged from the data was the subject of language. That is decolonisation as an artefact of language. Language is the vehicle of education and without a command on language, it becomes increasingly difficult to learn especially when the said language is the medium of instruction. With English being the medium of instruction in South African universities, and with the same being the second or third language for a majority of the students, questions have risen about whether or not English is the best medium of instruction. Speaking about this, Tango one of the participants noted that

*“you know English is a colonial language and is part of what we need to decolonise. Students can’t learn in a language they don’t understand. Decolonisation is about language, moving away from English as the language of instruction to one of the local languages. Language is primarily the bone of contention here. If the language question is resolved decolonisation would be halfway done.”*

Language has and will always be a bone of contention particularly on a continent like Africa where the official language or the first official language is the language of the colonial master. With English as the medium of expression, there will always be questions about its appropriateness for teaching and learning. As such there is a need for decolonisation and some academics think language is the heart of decolonisation. Adding to this, Kilo one of the participants indicated that:

*“you know learners start learning in the local language before the switch in grade four. And some continue with the local language up until high school. And when they enter the university they are forced to study in English. This is not right and this is what decolonisation is about or should be about.”*

The ability or inability of several students to develop a command of the English language, and the questions about capital at all levels are at the heart of decolonisation. Language also gives a unique advantage to those who have English as their first language for these are able to participate effectively in the knowledge construction process, meanwhile, those who lack such command are at a disadvantage. Decolonisation is therefore understood as a battle about language in education.

Furthermore, since South Africa has eleven official languages, making one the official medium of instruction and more so a colonial language indicates the need for decolonisation. This is because this was the status quo during the colonial period and the same has been in place since then. Adding more insight into this, Lima another participant stated that:

*“Everyone should be allowed to study in their mother tongue, this means that the level of capital a student has will increase and they will be able to participate better in the knowledge construction process. Forcing students to study in a language which is not their first and in some cases not even second is the heart of the colonial project. We need to deal with this practically. Decolonisation is about language.”*

According to Lima, decolonisation is about language and serious measures need to be taken to ensure that things work accordingly. Golf another participant adding to this, propounded that “

*Ngugi says we can't talk about decolonisation without talking about language and I agree with him. Language is at the heart of colonialism. The colonial masters brought us English and when they left, they left it behind and have been oppressing us with it since. It has become a measure of intelligence and understanding. Dealing with the question of language is decolonising."*

Decolonisation to these academics is about language and particularly the language of teaching and learning which is primarily English. In the view of the participants, there is a need for the decolonisation of the same.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Decolonisation has come to mean different things to different people and the findings of this research attest to that. To the participants of this research, language, identity, confusion and politics or political agenda are the hallmarks of decolonisation. Fomunyam argues that there is a need for a change in institutional architecture, curriculum, and the democratising of university hegemony if decolonisation is to happen.<sup>35</sup> As such these understandings are in line with other understandings of decolonisation. The diversity of issues emerging in the drive for decolonisation all point towards the complexity of the subject as well as the confusion surrounding it.

Fomunyam adds that "language is an incongruous challenge in South African higher education and is magnified by globalisation and internationalisation.<sup>36</sup> While some universities use both English and Afrikaans as mediums of instruction, most universities use only English .... This lack of development of local languages and the continuous proliferation of English as the global language has created a dire need for decolonisation. Language is fundamental to the drive for decolonisation and universities must take it into consideration as they explore how to decolonise within the different institutions. Lin and Martin adding to this view posit that, when all the engagements Africa has had with the global North are examined, one thing is clear; the English language is an indispensable resource or has been perceived to be an indispensable resource that Africans and their governments must develop a command of to relate with the North.<sup>37</sup> This continuous proliferation and marketing of English on the African continent and its reinforcement through partnerships and grants has led to the collapse of indigenous languages. The strive to revive these languages is at the heart of the fight for decolonisation. Pennycook further confirms this when he argues that there is a need to view "the global dominance of English not ultimately as a priori imperialism but rather as a product of the local hegemonies of English... for power is not something owned by some and not by others but as something that operates on and through all points of society... Any concept of the global hegemony of English must, therefore, be understood in terms of the complex sum of contextualised understandings of social hegemonies."<sup>38</sup> Breaking the contextualised understandings of the social hegemonies is what some lecturers believe decolonisation should be about.

Language and identity are like two sides of a coin for they mutually enforce one another. Decolonisation is about language just like it's about identity. Fomunyam argues that the subject of decolonisation has come to mean different things in different contexts and to different people and one of such understandings is identity.<sup>39</sup> According to Jabosung et al., the attack on the statue of Cecil Rhodes at UCT and that of King George in UKZN, the 'Open Stellenbosch' cry, and the demand for a change of name for Rhodes University all point to identity and the changes needed in the current educational landscape. Institutional identity works towards shaping individual identity culture and architecture.<sup>40</sup> It is, therefore, vital that the decolonisation movement touches these parts of the higher education sector. Olivier arguing about the criticality of identity in the decolonisation process posits that three forms of identity construction can be considered here.<sup>41</sup> These are "legitimizing identity

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<sup>35</sup> Kehdinga G Fomunyam, "Decolonising Teaching and Learning in Engineering Education in a South African University," *International Journal of Applied Engineering Research* 12, no. 23 (2017): 13349–58.

<sup>36</sup> George Fomunyam Kehdinga, Theorising Decolonisation Globalisation and Internationalisation in Higher Education. In K. G. Fomunyam (Ed.), *Decolonising Higher Education in the Era of Globalisation and Internationalisation*, Sun Media, 2019, 23.

<sup>37</sup> Angel M Y Lin and Peter Martin, "From a Critical Deconstruction Paradigm to a Critical Construction Paradigm: An Introduction to Decolonisation, Globalisation and Language-in-Education Policy and Practice," *Decolonisation, Globalisation: Language-in-Education Policy and Practice*, 2005, 1–19.

<sup>38</sup> Alastair Pennycook, "English, Politics, Ideology: From Colonial Celebration to Postcolonial Performativity," *Ideology, Politics and Language Policies: Focus on English* 6 (2000): 107–19.

<sup>39</sup> George Fomunyam Kehdinga, "Decolonising the Engineering Curriculum in a South African University of Technology," *International Journal of Applied Engineering Research; Vol. 12, Issue 17*, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Kelly Ngesungwo Jabosung et al., "Decolonising Perspectives in the Era of Globalisation and Internationalisation" (African Sun Media, 2019).

<sup>41</sup> Olivier, "Decolonisation, Identity, Neo-Colonialism and Power," 5.

(which depends upon dominant social institutions such as education and religion, and contributes, in turn, to the establishment and maintenance of civil society); resistance identity (which manifests itself as active opposition to processes of social alienation and exclusion); and project-identity (that appears when social agents employ cultural material for the construction of a novel, socially redefining identity, with a view to the transformation of the social structure in its entirety, such as in the feminist movement). These three forms of identity construction have one way or another manifested themselves in the decolonial project. Legitimising identity was created and maintained through education or colonial education while resistance identity is being created in the strive to deconstruct colonialism, while project identity is the identity the higher education sphere is working towards building as decolonisation takes place. Fomunyan further confirms this when he argues that teaching and learning within colonial paradigms were used to develop certain types of students who would think and act in a particular way and the strive to decolonise is the moving away from such identity and the creation of alternatives.<sup>42</sup>

Decolonisation is also understood as politics or a political agenda. Since the very nature of colonialism was political, it follows that decolonisation in all its facets would be political in nature. Fomunyan argues that knowledge construction is a product of different political apparatus within the institution and this is enmeshed in the dynamics of power because of its ability to shape social conduct and relations in practice.<sup>43</sup> The plurality of voices which colonialism silenced and the knowledge which was epistemic-ide during this period can only be reconciled as a political agenda for this can't be done without the right political will and capital. Curley et al. confirm this when they argue that:

“if the university is a reflection of colonial structures that reproduce settler-enslaver for simulations, what are the steps to disrupt them? Can we build new forms of knowledge production that sustain relations to land and embody life differently? Colonial institutions divert attention away from the perpetrators of the ongoing acts of violence of colonisation, slavery, white supremacy, and capitalism towards a fabricated scarcity and impasse between Indigenous and Black futures. We must disrupt, subvert, or sabotage the structures of our institutions through acts of radical solidarity like community building between fields, departments, and world regions, translation work, and mutual aid. Settler-enslaver time and categories—old habits of trained thinking—foreclose coalition, solidarity, and the possibility of a present and future that makes space for Blackness and Indigeneity. It is only through dismantling these categories—in conversation with one another—that we can make this future we desire”.<sup>44</sup>

Decolonisation and politics are intertwined for one can not happen without the other for it is intricately a political project. Decolonisation is a political project as the title of Curley et al. article states and taking politics away from it will lead to continuous failure for the nature of the business is such that it can't happen without political will.<sup>45</sup> This is further confirmed by Fanon who adds that “decolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally.”<sup>46</sup> It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the “thing” which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself.” This deeply political process requires political will to actualise and universities need to muster both the political power and will be needed to decolonise education.

Decolonisation has also been touted by some to create more confusion than provide clarity on the future direction of education and what exactly it should focus on. To some of the participants, there is a lot of confusion about the meaning of decolonisation and how the same should unfold. This confusion is not new. Fomunyan speaking about this argues that until the process of decolonisation itself takes place, and the process of mental colonisation is untangled, the colonised will never be completely certain of what they are doing since those involved in the process of decolonisation are the very products of the colonised system.<sup>47</sup> Hlatshwayo and Alexander further confirm this when they argue that “although there is broad consensus in the field regarding the ethical commitment to transforming and decolonising curricula, there are still some disagreements and a

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<sup>42</sup> Fomunyan, “Decolonising Teaching and Learning in Engineering Education in a South African University.”

<sup>43</sup> Kehdinga, “Decolonising for Higher Education Excellence.”

<sup>44</sup> Andrew Curley et al., “Decolonisation Is a Political Project: Overcoming Impasses between Indigenous Sovereignty and Abolition,” *Antipode* 54, no. 4 (2022): 1043–62, 1058.

<sup>45</sup> Curley et al., “Decolonisation Is a Political Project: Overcoming Impasses between Indigenous Sovereignty and Abolition.”

<sup>46</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth, Inc.*, New York, NY (New York: Grove Weidenfeld A Division of Grove Press, 1963).

<sup>47</sup> George Fomunyan Kehdinga, “Decolonising Higher Education in the Changing World” (Sun Media, 2019).

great deal of ambiguity and confusion that academics express regarding what decolonisation means and what is demanded of them, and, perhaps more importantly, for them.”<sup>48</sup> There exists a lot of confusion about the meaning and process of decolonisation which explains why since 2016 the higher education system as a whole is still battling with the process and the cry for the same continues. As long as this confusion persists, the cry for decolonisation will continue.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following thoughts are critical in the decolonisation process, the undoing of the vestiges of colonialism and the meaning of decolonisation as a whole. First of all, proper education is needed on the subject of decolonisation for all those within the higher education sphere. Such education would open academics up to a more holistic understanding of decolonisation and help them formulate accurate pathways to achieving the same. Secondly, beyond the education of academics to improve understanding of the subject, there is a need for a holistic approach to decolonisation which would not pick and choose which aspects to engage but ensure that all the facets of education are engaged in the decolonisation process. Within such an approach, the curriculum would be engaged, language would not be left out, institutional culture and architecture would also be looked into, identity and pedagogy would be key and the political landscape would be tuned to work in unison to ensure the approach produces the desired results. Thirdly, decolonisation must be understood as a process rather than a product that can be delivered in the now and be done with. The vestiges of colonialism can not all be undone in a day from the educational landscape. However, this process has to start and progress timeously so that the gains made are not easily lost to what remains of colonialism. Lastly, as a product, the holistic approach needs to engage all the aspects of education needing decolonisation at the same time. This is because engaging one without the other would not produce any meaningful result. However, the engagement of all such facets at the same time would give academics the ability to measure the effectiveness of the approach and improve the same where there is a need. Without these, there would never be accurate inside data on whether or not it actually works.

## CONCLUSION

Decolonisation has and will always mean different things to different people based on the different experiences they have garnered over time and space. Decolonisation as language, identity, political agenda and confusion are simply manifestations of the different understandings of the subject and the different ways in which academics have engaged the decolonisation movement. However, none of the understandings can stand on its own because a more holistic understanding of the subject is needed if the decolonisation of education is to be actualised. Engaging decolonisation as simply a question of identity, for example, would lead to impartial or impractical decolonisation as other aspects within the higher education system needing decolonisation would be neglected. Decolonisation has to transcend these different understandings to be worthwhile. It has to engage all parts of the higher education landscape thereby ensuring that whatever results from the decolonisation process as education is free from the vestiges of colonialism.

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<sup>48</sup> Mlamuli Nkosingphile Hlatshwayo and Innocentia Alexander, “‘We’ve Been Taught to Understand That We Don’t Have Anything to Contribute towards Knowledge’: Exploring Academics’ Understanding of Decolonising Curricula in Higher Education,” *Journal of Education (University of KwaZulu-Natal)*, no. 82 (2021): 44–59, 53.

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