



# Decolonizing the South African Higher Education Curriculum: Causes, Obstacles and Lessons

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## Abstract

The twenty-first century has been a time of revival and disruption for decolonization movements. Movements such as #Rhodes Must Fall have ignited calls for the decolonization of higher education institutions and challenged the colonial legacy of academia, including the curriculum. As elsewhere in the world, higher education in South Africa is under pressure to reinvent and transform itself. Curriculum decolonization is one of the central issues in the reform of higher education in South Africa, not only as a response to the legacy of the education system under the policies of past colonialism and apartheid, but also as a deep-seated demand for the realization of indigenous African cultural renaissance and social equality. South African universities, such as the University of Cape Town, have been moving towards the decolonization of South African higher education curriculum, but the process has not been a smooth one. Curriculum decolonization is committed not only to eliminating the legacy of colonial symbols and correctly positioning the national cultural identity of African people, but also actively shaping the value and status of local symbols. This paper discusses the reasons for the decolonization of South Africa's higher education curricula, as well as the challenges faced, and suggests implications for African countries, with a view to deepening the understanding of the process of decolonizing South Africa's higher education curricula and contributing to the process across the African continent.

## Subject Areas

Curriculum Development

## Keywords

Decolonization, Higher Education, South Africa, Curriculum, Reforms

## **1. Tracing the Causes of Higher Education Curriculum Decolonization in South Africa**

A report released by the South African Council for Higher Education in 2016 noted a lack of commitment to pedagogical transformation in South Africa and recommended that curriculum structures related to cultural transformation be revisited [1]. This highlights the importance of decolonizing higher education curriculum in South Africa, with university disciplines increasingly viewing decolonized curriculum as an imperative. The need and urgency to decolonize the South African higher education curriculum has three reasons.

### **1.1. Colonialism and Apartheid Rooted in South African History**

Although South Africa emerged in 1994 from a long period of social, economic and political oppression, as well as decades of apartheid rule and international isolation, its higher education system remains deeply affected by the legacy of its history, serving racial separatism and white supremacy. Not surprisingly, change in academia has lagged relatively behind, with white scholars still holding the majority of seats. Nowadays, colonialism continues to thrive in universities and in the language of instruction, while imperialist ideology is still embodied in the rejection and resistance to indigenous African philosophies, spirituality and culture [2]. Thus, South Africa's democratic transition in 1994 did not erase the deep-rooted divide between "white superiority" and "black inferiority".

### **1.2. Western-Centered Curriculum That Departs from African Knowledge**

Curriculum refers to materials and texts used for teaching and learning, implying knowledge that is considered relevant. Thus, curriculum can help validate and promote certain knowledge and perspectives while marginalizing others. In the architecture of colonial education, a Western-centered curriculum system has long been central and dominant. This phenomenon stems from a preconceived notion that the framework of knowledge brought by the European colonizers was the correct and only way to view the world [3]. As a result, the people of South Africa and Africa were unable to see themselves in these knowledge systems, leading to alienation from their own rich history of cultural and intellectual creativity.

### **1.3. The Need to Construct a New South African National Identity**

Since 1994, when South Africa made a historic turnaround and officially entered a new era of independence, the construction of a collective identity for the new South Africa has been a mission for the country's social progress and development. South Africa's educational reform has been a key step in the construction of a new South African identity, and the decolonization of the curriculum has been a central strategy of this reform. As this process moves forward, it leads young students to delve deeper into and expose the class oppression, sexism, ethnic exploitation, genocide, and unequal social ideologies behind colonialism. Development in

the fields of economics, education, law, and science are reinterpreted and implemented through an African lens to achieve cultural autonomy and educational justice in the true sense of the word. At the same time, the spirit of Ubuntu, as a basis for nation-building and African solidarity, can be passed on and promoted through the decolonization of the curriculum [4].

## **2. Practices of Higher Education Curriculum Decolonization in South Africa—Examples from the University of Cape Town and Nelson Mandela University**

After independence, many African countries embarked on the road of decolonization, among which the role of universities was particularly critical. The University of Cape Town and the University of Nelson Mandela are chosen as case studies because of their representativeness and contrast in the decolonization process of South African higher education. The University of Cape Town is classified as a “traditional white university” under the apartheid system, and its decolonization efforts represent the challenges and opportunities for the transformation from the existing European-centered paradigm. Nelson Mandela University is dominated by blacks in the post-apartheid period, which has unique symbolic significance and political value, and its experience focuses on building a new paradigm from an African perspective. This comparison is helpful to fully understand the diversity of decolonization practice in South Africa.

### **2.1. Practices at the University of Cape Town**

The term decolonization of the curriculum originated at the University of Cape Town. During a decolonization campaign, students demanded the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes, which served as a stark reminder of the Eurocentric academic paradigm. In January 2016, at the height of the student protests, the University of Cape Town established a Black faculty- and student-led Curriculum Reform Working Group to oversee the process of decolonizing curriculum and teaching in each department. The final practical outcome of the Curriculum Reform Task Force was the Curriculum Reform Framework, which adopted theories from the decolonial school of thought originating in Latin America. UCT brings students into the curriculum reform team and encourages students to participate constantly, because they are intellectuals themselves, not just learners, and they bring community knowledge to the university.

According to Lange, the Working Group on Curriculum Reform was systematically involved in the first attempt to decolonize the concept of curriculum at the University of Cape Town. It fruitfully contributed to the development of discussions within the university on knowledge and power, knowledge and identity, and the disciplinarity of knowledge. However, the participation of academic staff in the WG reform process was negative [3]. In addition, Ndelu has raised questions about the curriculum reform framework: whether it is binding on all faculties and academics; how the university plans to monitor and enforce compliance with the

framework; and how a binding framework would affect the principles of academic freedom that the university so carefully upholds [5].

## 2.2. Practices at Nelson Mandela University

The lack of a document that clearly guides the decolonization process within the macro-institutional framework of Nelson Mandela University, as compared to the University of Cape Town, can be seen as both a challenge and a unique opportunity to stimulate creativity and innovation on all sides. In the “Decolonising curriculum” section of its university website, it details the teaching and learning strategies it has adopted, “T&L’s approach is to engage in interdisciplinary curriculum dialogues, T&L’s approach is to engage in interdisciplinary curriculum dialogues, T&L’s approach is to engage in interdisciplinary curriculum dialogues, T&L’s approach is to engage in interdisciplinary curriculum dialogues, which guide and inspire the decolonizing and Africanizing of curriculum. In addition, all faculties are reviewing the decolonization program, ...” [6]. The Centre for Critical Studies in Higher Education has even organized a series of public lectures and seminars focusing on decolonization. In addition, Mandela University, in consultation with the local community, renamed academic buildings and student residences after individuals who contributed to the liberation struggle [7]. Much work is also underway to update and revamp the curriculum in the faculties of Mandela University, and the terms used on the website, namely “transformation” and “curriculum renewal” suggest a tokenization or dilution of decolonization. In this regard, Garuba’s caution is particularly pertinent, that merely adding African content to the curriculum is not enough to shake the entrenched Eurocentric framework. What he advocates is a fundamental rethinking and reconfiguration of the theoretical framework of the curriculum with a view to achieving a genuine decolonization of knowledge [8].

## 2.3. The Role of Students in the Decolonization Movement

In the process of decolonization of higher education curriculum in South Africa, student groups have played a vital role in promoting it. Represented by #Rhodes Must Fall and #Fees Must Fall, college students strongly call for the abolition of colonial symbols and the legacy of racial oppression by organizing demonstrations, sit-ins, petitions and social media propaganda, and promote the construction of a more inclusive and localized teaching system. These protests are not only responses to specific problems, but also deep resistance to institutional injustice.

In terms of curriculum reform, some colleges and universities began to include students in the reform mechanism. For example, the University of Cape Town has set up a working group on curriculum reform led by black teachers and students. Students put forward reform suggestions and participate in curriculum evaluation as “knowledge co-producers” rather than passive learners. This practice breaks the traditional power structure between teachers and students and helps to bring students’ life experience, local knowledge and cultural demands into academic

discussion. Although students have exerted a strong influence, the reform practice also faces certain bottlenecks. On the one hand, some teachers and administrators have reservations about students' participation, fearing that it will affect "academic freedom" or that the reform will be "radical". On the other hand, students' demands lack unity and sometimes tend to be fragmented. At the same time, due to the limitations of resources and systems, it is difficult for students' suggestions to be fully implemented at the level of various departments.

### **3. Effectiveness and Obstacles on Higher Education Curriculum Decolonization in South Africa**

It is undeniable that the efforts of higher education institutions such as the University of Cape Town and Nelson Mandela University, represented by the South African government and various stakeholder collaborators, have been fruitful. But overall, the development of South African courses has been as slow as a snail's pace [9].

#### **3.1. Effectiveness of Curriculum Decolonization**

##### **3.1.1. Localization and Diversification of Curriculum Content**

Indigenous cultures, histories and knowledge systems are increasingly integrated into the curriculum of South African higher education. For example, the University of Cape Town's Faculty of Humanities has introduced the Khanyisa program since 2020, which is based on continental content and non-traditional pedagogical methods aimed at developing critical reading and writing skills in the humanities [10]. The University of South Africa has also begun to systematically incorporate South Africa's indigenous history and cultural traditions into their curriculum in subjects such as geography, history and religion, rather than limiting themselves to Western academic perspectives. This diversification of educational content allows students to examine and understand their country's history and culture from a more holistic and indigenous perspective.

##### **3.1.2. Innovations in Teaching Methods**

Teachers have begun to move away from the traditional one-way transmission model in their teaching practices towards a more inclusive and interactive approach. Nelson Mandela University promotes a human-centred pedagogy that emphasizes equal interaction between teachers and students, encourages student participation in curriculum design, facilitates a shift from teacher-centred to student-centred teaching and promotes inclusiveness and diversity in the learning environment [11]. The University of Cape Town, on the other hand, promotes less time for traditional lectures, more time for interaction and skills development, and allows for multilingualism in the classroom to promote wider participation and understanding.

##### **3.1.3. Increased Equity in Education**

The decolonization of the curriculum has contributed to increased equity in

education. The Government and educational institutions have stepped up their support for disadvantaged groups, including by increasing investment in education, improving school infrastructure, and providing scholarships and bursaries to ensure that all students have equal access to education. In addition, the decolonization of the curriculum has contributed to the reform of the education assessment system. Outcome-based education, introduced in South Africa, sets clear educational goals and skillfully designs curriculum. Specific level requirements and assessment criteria are set for different areas of study, grades or stages, which are far more operational and superior to traditional education.

### **3.2. Obstacles of Curriculum Decolonization**

#### **3.2.1. Difficulty in Changing the Ideology of Teachers and Students**

Teachers and students in South Africa are likely to resist any reform measures that attempt to introduce indigenous African knowledge or critical perspectives, sticking to traditional teaching methods and content. In South African universities, white lecturers continue to teach their preferred westernized courses. Black lecturers are either reluctant to change the curriculum or lack the power and confidence to do so due to the low-level positions they hold to make curriculum-related decisions. Many black scholars may face disadvantages in academic background and resources when they enter the academic field, which leads to the gap between them and their white counterparts in academic qualifications and experience, thus lacking the right to speak in the reform. And senior teachers who have long been influenced by the Eurocentric education system tend to be conservative and even resistant to decolonizing the curriculum.

#### **3.2.2. Weakness of National Cultural Identity**

As a result of the historical legacy of apartheid policies and colonialism, South Africa's national cultural identity has been weakened and diluted to some extent. White academics still dominate in most historically white universities. White academics are able to reinforce the centrality of their perspectives in higher education curriculum through their dominant position. In such a context, South Africans were more likely to display a tendency to identify with colonial culture. At the same time, the dominance of English in practical South African life has led to the gradual marginalization of many native languages. This has deprived South Africans of the right to use their mother tongue, and exacerbated the loss of cultural identity and a weakened sense of identity.

#### **3.2.3. The Indigenous Knowledge System Has Not Yet Been Established**

Curriculum decolonization aims to integrate indigenous South African and African knowledge and perspectives into the education system, however, in its implementation institutions of higher education such as Cape Town, South Africa, have suffered from a knowledge gap and lack of resources. For a long time, South Africa's education system has been heavily influenced by European knowledge systems, resulting in a relative lag in the discovery and organization of indigenous

knowledge. Even more serious than the lack of widely recognized mainstream theories is the lack of theoretical frameworks and evidence-based research findings to draw upon.

## **4. Lessons for Other African Countries**

In exploring the decolonization of curriculum, we need to adopt an attitude of both breaking and building. By breaking, we mean deconstructing the colonial symbols in the African curriculum. The building is to reconstruct the local knowledge system in the African curriculum. Between “breaking” and “building”, it is also necessary to correctly position the national cultural identity.

### **4.1. Deconstructing Colonial Symbols in African Curriculum**

Deconstructing colonial symbols in African curriculum is essentially an examination and questioning of the deep, subconscious Western centrality of the curriculum. We must remain vigilant to prevent the practice of decolonization from falling into the quagmire of formalism-i.e., a mere critique of the cultural surface, a one-sided focus on which value symbols are presented and which are ignored in the content of the teaching and learning, to the neglect of the deeper goals and meanings of decolonization. At the same time, critique and reflection do not mean a wholesale rejection of Western thought. Western civilization, as a part of human history, is undoubtedly rich in wisdom and valuable experience. However, no system of thought should be sacralized or absolutized, and they need to be constantly adjusted and developed in dialogue with local culture and real needs.

### **4.2. Positioning the National Cultural Identity of African Peoples**

In the South African context, one of the obvious curriculum issues at the university level is the over-representation of “white” identities, while black voices are muffled. This shows that the subjectivity of the black community is still missing and that once-disadvantaged groups continue to face oppression in universities. The dignity of these groups should be respected and Black scholars should be given adequate space and support for academic research. They should not be seen as passive recipients, and the ideas of the black community should be treated, affirmed and strengthened on an equal footing with those of other groups. More importantly, a decolonized university must be a place that embraces multilingualism, with African indigenous languages, cosmology and ontology at its core [12].

### **4.3. Reconstructing Indigenous Knowledge in African Curriculum**

Because of the long history of colonization and racism in South Africa and the African continent as a whole, the outside world tends to misinterpret South Africa as a country that lacks knowledge production. Consequently, we need to examine and question higher education curriculum through an anti-racist and anti-colonial lens [13]. As a former colony, South Africa’s indigenous people’s experience and knowledge should be fully valued.



In the process of promoting the decolonization of South Africa's indigenous curriculum, efforts should be made to establish a knowledge discourse system with South African characteristics. This means that more attention and emphasis should be given to South Africa's unique experience and practical needs in the development of curriculum content, delivery methods and information reception, to ensure that the curriculum reflects South Africa's vision, historical experience and the challenges it faces.

## 5. Conclusions

The decolonization of higher education curriculum in South Africa is a transformative but complex journey shaped by its unique historical, political, and cultural contexts. Triggered by the enduring legacies of colonialism and apartheid, this movement is driven by the imperative to reclaim African identity, values, and knowledge systems. Case studies from the University of Cape Town and Nelson Mandela University demonstrate that while important strides have been made in diversifying curriculum content, rethinking pedagogy, and promoting educational equity, significant challenges remain—particularly in shifting entrenched mind-sets, establishing robust indigenous knowledge frameworks, and fostering a cohesive national cultural identity.

Despite these obstacles, South Africa's experience offers valuable insights for other African nations. It underscores the need to critically dismantle colonial structures in education, while also constructively rebuilding curriculum that centers African epistemologies and supports inclusive nation-building. Ultimately, true decolonization must move beyond symbolic gestures to achieve systemic transformation that affirms the dignity, knowledge, and agency of all African peoples.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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