

# Decolonisation of Africa's Higher Education: A Reality?

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## **Abstract**

The paper sought to assess progress in the decolonisation of higher education in Africa. The research mainly focused on the challenges hindering progress as presented by research findings from various countries. It brings together and discusses varied views on the transformational process and suggests the way forward to achieve the intended goals. It was mainly review of literature on decolonisation of higher education from indigenous voices of Africa. This was triggered by the observation of varying levels of transformational practices towards decolonisation of higher education in African countries despite the fact that the message was conveyed decades ago. Researchers identified diverse interpretations, numerous targets, leadership and attitudes of the continent as the major groups of challenges hindering progress in African universities. It was observed that even if countries may be eager to decolonise their higher education, unless these challenges are addressed, the project is far from being a reality. For the project to become a reality, the continent should have a common understanding and map the way forward. The study therefore recommends that African nations should group and articulate policy regarding the issue and agree on the extent of Africanisation of higher education so that quality is not compromised.

**Keywords:** Decolonisation/ transformation, higher education, Africanisation, challenges, colonialism, Afrocentrism

## **1 Introduction**

The decolonisation of education systems has been topical in the continent for decades now. However, the urgency for this reform has been determined by individual states depending on their social, technological and economic atmospheres (Battiste 2013). As such, decolonisation progress in most African universities has never been monitored at a continental level but only national. The call for independence in acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, beliefs and habits throughout African education systems has been made to all nations that have suffered colonial influence (Wingfield 2017). Colonial powers imposed their education systems over Africa in a bid to promote their philosophical and ideological aims. As a result, African indigenous knowledges were pushed to the 'barbarian margins of society' (Ndlovu Gatsheni 2013). The foreign education which was selective, manipulative and enforcing strong identification with the colonisers' interests then dominated Africa culturally, linguistically and economically. For more than a century, 'indigenous students have been part of a forced assimilation plan with their heritage and knowledge rejected, suppressed, and ignored by the education system' (Battiste 2013: 23). What is interesting is that after gaining independence, African member states heed the call to this pan-African struggle of deconstructing knowledge and centralising its own throughout the education systems.

Because the project has generally been run autonomously in Africa, the levels of decolonising higher education in individual countries vary. Evidence of activities in universities reflects varied responses and commitment among African institutions of higher learning towards the transformation agenda. While some have made recognisable strides, some are still in the preliminary stages despite all the noise from the African voice. It is important therefore, to note from the onset that there appears to be too much theory than practice. Mabasa-Manganyi and Ntshangase (2021) observe that there is too much talk about decolonisation of our education systems and turning away from education systems that do not favour Africans but African education systems are not doing sufficient work to decolonise. African universities, both public and private, therefore, should be accountable in issues to do with transformation in the various areas that need decolonisation. It is surprising to note that decades after the adoption of the decolonisation agenda, Western knowledge continues to dominate indigenous knowledges in African universities (Mwamba 2021). This could be emanating from the diverse interpretations of and value attached to the concept by individual countries. What is lacking is a clear roadmap that guides the whole continent on the

decolonisation of higher education agenda. Considering that higher education is key in defining the citizenship of a country and continent, Africa needs to pay as much attention to the decolonisation project if it is to produce contextually and culturally relevant graduates.

It is therefore, against this backdrop that this study reviews literature on African countries' conceptualisation of decolonisation of higher education and factors affecting its progress in order to suggest the way forward for the continent. It seeks to answer these questions: Does Africa agree on what decolonisation of higher education entails? Can the decolonisation of university education be a reality that can be achieved in Africa? The purpose of this paper is to suggest that the project of decolonisation should be central in any African government for it to be a reality. There is need for support from different stakeholders in all the nation states for full transformation of higher education and university education systems in Africa.

## **2 Decolonisation and Afrocentricity**

Decolonisation of education is a pan-African struggle influenced by Afrocentricity. Afrocentricity is a critical perspective that places African ideals at the centre of anything that matters Africa; social, cultural and historical (Asante 1987). According to Ndhlovu-Gatsheni (2018: 26) at the centre of this Afrocentric worldview are six concerns and demands: 'complete African self-rule, self-regeneration, self-understanding, self-definition, self-knowing, and self-articulation of African issues after centuries of domination and silencing'. The decoloniality school of thought therefore aims at the restoration and re-learning of indigenous knowledge and practices that have been discredited in the past by forces of colonialism. The perpetrators of the decolonisation of education project consider Africa as the legitimate epistemic centre from which the people of this continent should look and make sense of themselves and the world, hence the need of 're-centering' our knowledge production (Ndhlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Ngugi 1986:16).

For decolonisation to be successful, Ngugi (1986) feels that there is need to decolonise the mind first because our mental universe was the most dominated area by Western ideas. The colonial education 'reinforced in Africans self-devaluation and self-hatred and a profound sense of inferiority that in turn compels them to lighten their darkness both physically and metaphysically' (Nyamnjoh 2004: 16). Apart from the mind Mbembe (2016: 29) feels that the struggle should be extended to knowledge and learning

institutions; apartheid buildings, the curriculum, assessment models, systems of access and management and the cycle that tends to turn students into mere customers and consumers. This implies that decolonisation of education should therefore entail transformation of all university education aspects that have been affected by colonialism.

In the process of decolonisation, Ndhlovu-Gatsheni (2018:40) proposes; 'returning to the base' which is 'the people' and rectify the marginality of the Global South knowledge and its research methodologies in order to bring in African indigenous people's worldview in knowledge production. Ndhlovu-Gatsheni's contribution implies the inclusion and valuing of local knowledges in higher education. Ngugi (1986:76) also believes that crucial in the process of decolonisation is to put the teaching and learning of African languages at the centre of the project and allow African people to use the very languages they speak. Additional languages should be 'for strengthening, deepening and widening this power of languages spoken by the people'. The respect for indigenous languages also allows Africans to contribute towards the definition of their education. That is, generally, Afrocentricity calls for the realisation of African worldviews at the centre of African education if we are to talk of African freedom and development. In Machingambi's (2020:43) words, the use of Afrocentric-compliant pedagogies, the conceptualisation and implementation of cutting-edge research driven by African knowledge systems should remain central to the decolonisation of university education. This discursive study, therefore, is informed by the Afrocentricity theory in establishing the challenges hindering African universities from making decolonisation of its education a full reality.

It is disturbing to note that despite the constant calls to decolonise education by African intellectuals 'Africans are still dominated by western particularistic world views'. The question becomes 'But why is it difficult to break from the coloniser's model of the world and the epistemology it produced?' (Ndhlovu-Gatsheni 2018:25; 27). This study therefore, seeks to answer this question basing on highlights from African scholars and suggest the way forward.

### **3 Decolonisation of Higher Education in Africa**

The decolonising agenda has gained a lot of traction worldwide and Africa has embraced the move to transform its higher education system. However, research has shown that the implementation process is not progressing as is

expected with some systems in the continent serving to maintain the status-quo. This section therefore attempts to answer one question: Why is the decolonisation of higher education failing to materialise? Below are four broad factors that are contributing towards the delay in achieving transformed university education in Africa.

### ***3.1 Divergent Interpretations***

Presenting at the launch of the Free State Centre for Human Rights, Majola (2016) noted that one major challenge in the decolonisation of higher education is the varied interpretation of transformation. The presenter said that some institutions have a very narrow interpretation of the term transformation while others understand the term to be more expansive. The issue of different views on the decolonisation agenda among and within nations is leading to slow and very slow progress in universities. As a result, the project of transforming higher education is becoming a challenge to many nations.

From all the reviewed literature, researchers discovered that decolonisation of education has generally two sets of definitions that come from different scholars. There is a view that explains the process as the eradication of all forms of colonialist education in Africa's institutions and centralises Africa's own (Naidu-Hoffmeester 2021). Those who affiliate to this view believe that when Africa is decolonising its education, this should be a process of completely removing and getting rid of education characteristic of colonies then replace with African teachings. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (202: 77) explains decolonisation as a project that is 'predicated on deracialisation, de-hierarchisation, decorporatisation and departiachisation of knowledge and education'. This definition implies total reversal of all colonial practices, knowledges and education systems in Africa. This view is radical in its approach to the decolonisation agenda as it believes that African knowledges are as good as foreign and can equally complete on the global market.

Another view defines the project as the incorporation of Africa's knowledge systems and cultures into university education. This definition sheds light on the need for a more pluralistic view in education whereby African and European knowledge systems are blended. This definition varies from the first one in that, it makes clear that decolonisation of education should not mean provincialisation of knowledge but the inclusion of African education in the global mainstream knowledge (Naidu-Hoffmeester 2021). However, both definitions are limited to the classroom (curricular). Wingfield (2017), in sup-

port, indicates that balance in education is crucial, meaning that African students should learn about advances and theories developed in both their countries and continent and also from the rest of the world. This is meant to avoid knowledge isolation and production of graduates who are irrelevant globally.

From the definitions, generally, Africa has two views of what decolonisation of education is; radical and moderate approaches. It is therefore prudent to weigh the two approaches as a continent and move forward together. Reviewed literature however, has shown that a cross - cultural curriculum seems to get much support as it positions the continent at a more competitive platform internationally. Senekal and Lenz (2020: 157) add support to 'a balanced approach: a hybrid curriculum where the youth will have the best education- with one foot in Africa as their stepping stone and with the other making strides on a global platform where they take part as intellectual equals'. In other words as Machingambi (2020) puts it, 'the call for decolonisation of the curriculum should not be misconstrued as a discouragement to learn from the West and the rest of the world but a call to make the university curriculum and knowledge as inclusive as is desirable'. A range of the proportion/amount of knowledge from the two world views should be agreed upon in order to produce relevant and competitive graduates. Although the implementation should put much focus on curricular, all the elements of decolonisation of education should be embraced. Hitherto Africa has one position, decolonisation of education cannot be a full reality.

### ***3.2 Numerous Targets of Decolonisation***

Many steps have been taken towards transforming higher education in Africa. However, this research has realised that there are too many targets of the decolonisation of higher education agenda. This is a possible derailing factor for the process to come into fruition in different national universities. Findings reveal that areas that have been colonised in higher education are so many that Africa has to take enough courage to tackle them. Furthermore, reviewed literature reveals that African states and universities vary on issues they give priority in the project such that many elements have remained untouched or unchanged (du Plessis 2021). The many issues raised by scholars as crucial in the decolonisation of higher education are demanding for most third world education systems such that the agenda becomes more theoretical than practical. The fact that African states have been colonised by seven different powers that caused varying degrees of damage to the continent's different areas

of university education is a fact to consider when trying finding solutions to these challenges. The degree of damage in different sections of education and the number of areas in nations that need prioritisation is affecting the decolonisation agenda.

In order to decolonise higher education, African scholars believe that implementers should consider all of the following critical areas:

decolonising the minds of the people first (Ngugi 1986)	colonised teacher and learner (Battiste 2013)
the curriculum and curriculum development (Lumambi 2021); (Hughes 2021); (Mbembe 2016)	learning institutions; apartheid buildings (Mbembe 2016)
teaching and learning/ pedagogy and research methodologies (Ndhlovu-Gatsheni 2018)	access; equity and equality (Lumambi 2021)
the structure of educational institutions and their roles (Krahn 2014)	language of education in teaching, learning and research (Ngugi 1986); (Mabasa-Manganyi and Ntshangase 2021)
Innovation and industrialisation (Department of Higher Education and Training, South Africa 2015); (Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development, Zimbabwe 2018a)	Social engagement/ community engagement (Department of Higher Education and Training, South Africa 2015); (Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development, Zimbabwe 2018a.)
educational policies (Nziramasa 1999); (Krahn 2014)	funding of education (Nziramasa 1999); (Ndhlovu-Gatsheni 2021)
repositioning indigenous humanities, sciences and languages as vital fields of knowledge (Battiste 2013)	knowledge systems to incorporate both indigenous and Eurocentric views/ reviewing philosophy of education (Krahn 2014); (Wingfield 2017); (Hughes 2021)
Contextualisation of knowledge/relevance (Krahn 2014)	Assessment (Ndhlovu-Gatsheni 2021); (Mbembe 2016)
educating the whole person (Nziramasa 1999)	empowering students (Nyamnjoh 2004)

valuing cultural heritage (Krahn 2014); (Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development, Zimbabwe 2018a.)	Broaden opportunities and increase success rates for black students (Department of Higher Education and Training, South Africa 2015)
Ensure accountable governance and management efficiencies (Department of Higher Education and Training, South Africa 2015)	stimulate a democratic and non-repressive institutional culture (Department of Higher Education and Training, South Africa 2015)
Disruption of Eurocentric consciousness within education and society (du Plessis 2021)	

Apart from being many aspects that need attention, Lumambi (2021:31) testifies that generally the major challenge with African universities is that ‘there has never been nor will there ever be an acceptable and common agreement among all universities regarding what constitutes decolonisation’. This implies that each university is taking it its own way and as a result, we have no remarkable results as a continent. He adds that different stakeholders in higher education have divergent interests and viewpoints regarding the project which means, ‘the debate as to what constitutes decolonisation and curriculum transformation differs year to year and from one scholar to another’. The project is therefore understood and approached differently in various countries’ universities. In most public universities there has been significant focus on decolonisation reflecting a better understanding and appreciation of the whole project than in the private ones. So, in some countries, private universities are lagging behind. For example, in South Africa they have noted that ‘whilst there has been a significant focus on transformation in the public higher education sector, there is limited knowledge and understanding of transformation issues in the private higher education sector ...’ (Department of Higher Education and Training, South Africa 2015). This implies that there should be more engagement activities with the private sector if Africa is to fully transform its higher education. Private universities’ education systems should align with the continental agenda.

In the 2015 South African description of higher education transformation, most decolonisation aspects seemed to feature. The Minister of Higher Education and Training said: ‘transformation must be performed to create an Afrocentric space, advance the decolonisation of knowledge, agitate

for better facilities and more productive practices, promote just pedagogies, broaden opportunities and increase success rates for black students, foster demographic representation on all levels of the academy and across university structures, stimulate a democratic and non-repressive institutional culture and ensure accountable governance and management efficiencies'. (Department of Higher Education and Training, South Africa 2015). This description can be used as a starting point for the continental project to be revived. In agreement with Soudien (2010), current researchers believe that it is however not essential that there be complete consensus around what it is meant to be but a broad agreement on the principles of transformation is necessary for the agenda to be a reality. Africa can then authorise universities to use their different visions, missions, mandates and niches to pursue the decolonisation project (Department of Higher Education and Training, South Africa 2015). To ensure progress, the continent will have to monitor the institutions' (public and private) commitment and see how governments can support universities' different mandates towards achievement of decolonised higher education systems. This can be done through the setting up of national boards that will sit at continental level.

### ***3.3 African Leadership***

According to Du Plessis, (2021) our African leadership is contributing towards the failure of the transformation agenda. The researcher indicates that the leadership has no knowledge of decolonisation, is reluctant to change the curriculum, has no connection with realities of students, has problems with white perspectives and lacks dialogue with key stakeholders. Such characteristics militate against our own agenda and initiatives as they actually confuse and demotivate implementers.

The role of leaders in government and higher education systems cannot be undermined if the decolonisation project is to be a success. These are the ones who should pioneer in crafting of policies, monitoring implementation and funding universities. They should be facilitating the production of national progress reports on developments, challenges and future plans and the finale tabling for continental reviews. From Du Plessis' findings, there is no meaningful contribution from our leaders. This is in spite of the fact that our leaders have influence in the formulation of developmental projects for example the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The issue of decolonising education applies to SDG number 4 on quality education. Africa

can only proudly talk of achieving the goal after significantly implementing the decolonisation project in the different areas highlighted under the Sustainable Development Goal. It appears they are not pulling together with the African intellectuals who are on the ground, who have abundant information about decolonisation and who understand relevance in education more. Regardless of how they are valued by their different governments, academics will remain 'the vanguard of the decolonisation project given their critical role as teachers, curriculum developers, assessors and researchers' (Machingambi 2020:32) hence, should be consulted in order to have quality higher education. As long as leaders are unwilling and hesitant to change and continue to denounce colonial education without committing themselves to serious exchange of opinions with significant stakeholders, decolonisation of African higher education will never be a reality. Leaders should dream, aspire and support for an African education system that is fit for purpose; an education that meets both local and international standards so that the continent does not become an 'island'. Above all, the project cannot bear fruits unless Africa accepts leadership as facilitators and not determinants of the reality. Leadership should be fully behind and supportive to the needs and efforts of the significant stakeholders.

### ***3.4 Africa's Attitudes***

The different attitudes of Africans towards decolonisation of education have delayed the success of the project. Negative attitude is one of the main reasons why university education has not been significantly revolutionised in post-colonial Africa (Senekal and Lenz 2020). While others have very constructive ideas towards transforming our higher education, some are resistant to change and present the process as impossible. But should we remain stagnant fearing change? Research has shown that some Africans have been seriously colonised mentally as they believe that local content cannot compete on a global scale and still perceive Western knowledge as superior. For instance, Senekal and Lenz's (2020:154) study, presents lack of content as one of Africa's challenges in implementing the decolonisation agenda. They say 'the information and knowledge that Africa has produced is not sufficient to compete on a global scale or to inspire Africans'. If our own knowledge is not adequate, why can't we adopt a hybrid education system that combines local and international knowledges and move forward? Does decolonisation really mean throwing away all foreign knowledge? If western knowledge is totally eradicated from

our education systems, will we be able to compete with other continents? Is our African knowledge so inferior that it can be rejected totally? This justifies Ngugi's (1986) call for the decolonisation of the mind such that Africans accept what is their own.

Some Africans believe that the continent lacks both human and material resources to implement Africanisation and so are resistant to change (Senekal & Lenz 2020). When such perceptions come from the affected people, then, one wonders whether our nations really understand the impact of European colonialism on the African education, knowledge and cultural system (Machingambi 2020). Are we really not able to fund decolonisation activities in our universities so that our higher education is liberated? Measures should be put in place to mobilise funds across the continent to support the project. Displayed attitudes raise many questions as to whether the continent is committed towards the agenda and whether the project will one day be reality. Africa has to change the negative attitude she has developed towards her own initiative, decolonisation of education is possible.

Another huge blow comes from the university staff. Du Plessis' (2021) study revealed that lecturers who should be key players in the process fear decolonisation and so are reluctant when it comes to implementation of transformation in higher education. This is because some older staff believe that old curriculum topics and pedagogies should not be changed. According to du Plessis (2021:63) this shows that lecturers are not willing to change and 'not ready to decolonise their minds and set out on new ways of thinking about Africa ... and what needs to be taught to students'. If lecturers' mindsets would match that of our university students, the decolonisation project would be a success. University students have formed decolonisation movements in some countries and committed themselves to confront unjust practices in different institutions of higher learning and transform them. This wave of student movements, for example, the South African 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign has yielded positive results in terms of decolonisation of universities. Decolonisation activities have been noticed in response to these student activists. If lecturers' attitudes could be influenced by students' practices towards transformation of universities and embrace the agenda, Africa's decolonisation agenda can be a reality. University leadership on the other hand should engage lecturers, conscientise them on decolonisation and give them enough space to exercise the expertise in the different fields for successful implementation of the project.

## **Conclusion**

The studies revealed that although the project is run autonomously in African universities, challenges derailing the project are almost similar across institutions. These were grouped into four broad categories namely: diverse interpretations of decolonisation, numerous targets of decolonisation, leadership and the continent's attitude towards the project. This research showed that there are two broad definitions of decolonisation of African education. Some Africans understand the decolonisation of education as the total eradication of all forms of colonialist education in Africa's institutions centralising African knowledges while the second view describes it as the incorporation of Africa's knowledge systems and cultures into university education. Generally, it was observed that colonialism in African universities has affected many areas hence, the transformation of university education has become a mammoth task for the third world countries. Affected areas include but not limited to knowledge, pedagogy, access, demography, infrastructure, culture and governance and management. African leadership has been accused of lacking decolonisation knowledge, being reluctant to change the curriculum, having no connection with realities of students, having problems with white perspectives and lacking dialogue with experts. It was also discovered that the process of transforming higher education is slow because Africans do not have confidence in their own content at a global level, they believe that the continent lacks resources to implement Africanisation, are resistant to change and perceive Western knowledge as superior. Researchers therefore, believe that even though there is evidence of transformational activities towards decolonisation in various universities, that can only be a reality if the above challenges have been attended to. The main argument is, Africa needs to be independent as far as acquisition of knowledge skills, values, beliefs and habits is concerned but these should not be limited to one country nor the continent (Wingfield 2017).

## **Recommendations**

In light of the above discussions, this study suggests that:

1. African nations should group up, deliberate, and agree on the processes and procedures for the decolonisation of Africa's higher education. They should also formulate and articulate the required policies for

implementation, targeted evaluation, as well as continuous updating for mainstreaming.

2. Indigenous voices should be heard while experts are engaged in the process to provide evidence-based scholarly and practical insights. Their suggestions and submissions should be compiled and assessed positively to come up with a common agenda to win the struggle. As noted, ‘both scholars and practitioners must join forces to bring theory and action together’ (du Plessis 2021: 57).
3. Individual African nations should be supported while also assisting each other. This applies when policies are formulated and promulgated, mainstreamed and implemented, as well as evaluated, upscaled, and improved in response to changing conditions.
4. Mainstreaming and implementation should be monitored using clear time frames, coupled with clearly stated goals of achievement at a continental level.
5. Nations should agree on the nature, conditions, and activation of coordinated decolonising and decolonised Africanisation of higher education. This should ensure that both quality and quantity are systematically improved and increased, without being compromised under any circumstances.

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