



# Decolonising the university curriculum or decolonial-washing? A multiple case study

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## Abstract

In this article, we report on four case studies of how higher education institutions have grappled with the demands of decolonisation of their curricula. In some respects, the cases differ in form and content, and the unique responses to decolonisation of each institution are described and analysed. An important similarity among the institutions was the use of extensive public lectures, seminars, and workshops as a common strategy to deal with the calls for the decolonising of curricula. The inquiry is motivated by our concern that some institutions, in an effort to comply, might resort to instrumentalist and quick-fix solutions to decolonise curricula, which result in decolonial-washing rather than substantive change. We discuss the following themes based on the data and literature: decolonial-washing; decolonising of curricula as a national project; political symbolism; and the need for complicated conversations. We also reflect on the methodology used in this study.

**Keywords:** case study, complicated conversations, curriculum, decolonisation/decoloniality, decolonial-washing, higher education

## Introduction

Although decolonisation in relation to education is not a new conversation nor a uniquely South African one, the nation-wide student protests of 2015 and 2016 induced more intense conversations on decolonisation in the country. Since the student protests, we have witnessed a burgeoning body of literature being produced on the topic, statutory bodies making pronouncements on decolonisation, and universities responding variously to calls for the curriculum to be decolonised.

In response to students' calls, at a Higher Education Summit held in October 2015, the Minister of Education of Higher Education, Dr Blade Nzimande, beckoned all universities to Africanise/decolonise. Following this summit and in response to students' calls for the curriculum to be decolonised, some universities (e.g. Stellenbosch University) appointed task teams, while others appointed curriculum transformation committees (e.g. the University of Cape Town) in efforts to explore ways in which the curriculum of South African universities could be decolonised. In this article, we describe and analyse instances of decolonisation at four South African universities with different histories and cultures that are located in different provinces in the country.

The question guiding our inquiry was: How have selected South African universities responded to the call to decolonise their curricula in the wake of student protests of 2015 and 2016 and how might these responses be interpreted? The focus of our inquiry is thus on the period following the 2015 and 2016 student protests.

It is our contention that the decolonising of university curricula is an imperative. However, we are concerned that efforts to do so might become exercises in what we term decolonial-washing, a term borrowed from the word greenwashing that is used in environmental and sustainability studies to denote processes whereby a company provides a false impression or misleading information about the environmental soundness of its products. Decolonial-washing in this instance relates to a university giving the impression that its curricula are decolonised although this might not be the case. We aver that the decolonising of curricula cannot be an instrumentalist and quick-fix process but, rather, that it requires a great deal of individual and collective effort. Fanon (1967) forcibly reminded us that there can be no decolonisation without individual liberation. Moreover, we contend that engaging in complicated conversations is a necessary condition for decolonising university curricula.

Aoki (2004) pointed out that conversation is not "chitchat" nor is it a simple exchange of information because neither of these requires "true human presence" (p. 180). Pinar (2004) suggested that complicated conversations are premised on a commitment of scholars of curriculum to engage in such conversations with their peers, with their students, and with themselves and that such a commitment is accompanied by "frank and ongoing self-criticism" (p. 9). Le Grange (2018) added that frank and ongoing self-criticism mitigates against the effect of hierarchical power relations that could hinder productive conversations from occurring; in such conversations dominant voices and knowledges are decentred.

Before we present the cases, we offer a word on decolonisation and decoloniality followed by a discussion of the methodological approach guiding this exploratory inquiry.

## Decolonisation and decoloniality

Any discussion on decolonisation necessarily requires a discussion on colonisation. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (in Omanga, 2019) noted that colonisation could be viewed as a period in history that has a beginning and an end. In other words, we can refer to a time when colonists came, conquered, dominated, and administered people colonially, until colonised people fought and pushed back. Decolonisation<sup>1</sup> is understood to be the process of resistance by colonised people that results eventually in the undoing of colonial governance at the point when the country in question attains independence. However, attaining independence does not mean that colonialism has disappeared. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (in Omanga, 2019) has pointed out that colonisation institutes colonialism. The distinction between colonisation and colonialism is therefore important. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni put it,

Even when you push back colonisation as a physical process (the physical empire), colonialism as a power structure continues as a metaphysical process and as an epistemic project, because it invades the mental universe of a people, destabilising them from what they used to know, into knowing what is brought in by colonialism, and it then commits ‘crimes’ such as *epistemicide* (where you kill and displace pre-existing knowledges), *linguicide* (killing and displacing the languages of a people and imposing your own), *culturecide* (where you kill or replace the cultures of a people). (cited in Omanga, 2019, p. 2, emphasis in original)

Latin American scholars such as Maldonado-Torres (2007), Mignolo (2007) and Qujano (2007) have been helpful in providing us with a more nuanced understanding of the distinction between colonisation and colonialism by their invocation of the concepts coloniality and decoloniality. Qujano (2007) argued that although colonial governance might have been effaced at independence the logic of coloniality remained. In other words, the systems of power that classify, denigrate, and subjugate remain prevalent, and in a contemporary globalising world, these systems of power are more insidious than previous more naked forms of colonisation (le Grange, 2019). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013a) averred that coloniality is a global power structure that has been produced and is sustained by asymmetrical power relations between the Global North and the Global South. In response to coloniality, the Latin American scholars mentioned have invoked the term *decoloniality* as analytic (a critique) of coloniality. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013b) argued that decoloniality is premised on three concepts: coloniality of power; coloniality of knowledge; and coloniality of being. Coloniality of power relates to the current asymmetrical global power structure that is a consequence of the benefits of modernisation that have been enjoyed by the West by

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<sup>1</sup> Other scholars retain the concept of decolonisation in discourses on education by distinguishing between political decolonisation and cognitive/intellectual decolonisation. Indigenous peoples across the globe also invoke the term decolonisation to challenge the deficit ways in which they have come to be defined and to seek self-determination (for a more detailed discussion, see le Grange, 2019).

imposing the slave trade, imperialism, colonialism, and apartheid on the rest. Coloniality of knowledge relates to how the genesis of disciplines in the West resulted in epistemicides in the Global South and how Africa is now burdened with irrelevant knowledge that disempowers rather than empowers. Coloniality of being relates to how whiteness gained ontological density that far exceeds that of blackness and how Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) morphed into "I conquer, therefore I am" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013a, p. 12).

Although they did not express this in the same terms, Nkrumah (1965) and Fanon (1967) had a clear understanding of the difference between colonisation and colonialism as evidenced by the former's coinage of the term neo-colonialism and the latter's lament at the end of the Algerian war that decolonisation had not taken place, only Africanisation of colonialism. In other words, they had an understanding of the problem we now call coloniality and knew that dismantling it was a necessary but not an easy task for the reasons articulated by Maldonado-Torres:

[C]oloniality . . . is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day. (2006, p. 117)

However, we can draw inspiration from some of the giants of Africa's decolonial tradition such as Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, Steve Biko, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Ibekwe Chinweizu on whose thinking many contemporary scholars such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013b) and More (2014) have built their ideas. In an effort to challenge *linguicide*, we can draw on a rich history of South African intellectuals who have contributed to the development of African languages through creative literary and lexicographical works such as Vilakazi, Jolobe, Jordan, Nyembezi, and those building on their works such as Maseko and Vale (2016), Mona (2015) and Zondi (2020). Much work has been done to develop African Philosophy in collected works such as Makgoba (1999), Coetzee and Roux (2002) and Wiredu (2005). And we can draw inspiration from some of Africa's great though little known achievements in science (for more detail see Makgoba 1999; le Grange 2000). Moreover, insights can be gained from contemporary work on decolonising the university in relation to knowledge systems and disciplines (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Zondi, 2016).

Despite these sources, inspiration, and achievements, the project of decolonising the university curriculum in South Africa as a broad-based one is in its infancy. Although much work has been done to develop African languages and qualifications have been developed up to doctoral level, little progress has been made in making an African language the medium of instruction in higher education. In the arena of African Philosophy, More (1996), reported that with the exception of the University of Zululand, no other historically black university has included African Philosophy in its syllabi. This might have changed but would largely still be the case for historically white universities, with the possible exception of Unisa and North-West University. A perusal of publications and course guides in the science,

technology, engineering, and mathematics field produced by South African universities shows that very little work is being done at South African universities to decolonise this field.

Another question that needs answering is whether the decolonial project can be a broad-based project that is embraced by everyone. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (in Omanga, 2019) suggests not because if it is adopted widely it will lose its revolutionary impetus. He said,

Decolonisation has to remain a revolutionary term with theoretical and practical value. If it is immediately embraced by everyone and it's easily on the lips of everyone, there is a danger it might transform into a buzzword and a metaphor. There was a time when many academics never wanted to hear about the term especially where I am based in South Africa, and were comfortable with words such as 'transformation' and 'Africanisation.' Nowadays, everyone runs with decolonisation. (p. 6)

This leads to further questions. Who can embrace decolonisation? And, if not everybody, is the national project to decolonise the South African university curriculum flawed? And what did Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013a) mean when he claimed that decoloniality is not essentialist and fundamentalist and how does this align with his later argument that decolonisation should not be embraced by everyone. We do not provide definitive answers to these questions but do agree with Ndlovu-Gatsheni (in Omanga, 2019) that decolonisation/decoloniality cannot mean anything and therefore nothing in the end. Decolonising the university curriculum has, at least, to mean the decentring of Eurocentric epistemologies.

For us, decolonising the curriculum relates to what and whose knowledge and ways of being are included in education programmes. Some may argue that decolonisation is by nature a radical process that involves wholly replacing western knowledge in university programmes and others such as le Grange (2016) have argued that decolonisation of the curriculum involves decentring (not destroying) western knowledge so that it is placed on an equal plane with other knowledges such as indigenous knowledges.

Given the uncertainty as to whether decolonising the curriculum is feasible as a national project, an inquiry into how four universities responded to a national call for their curricula to be decolonised presents interesting findings as to whether there is evidence of a revolutionary project or whether all that has happened has been the creation of a buzzword in the name of which anything can be viewed as decolonisation.

## Methodology

The methodology used in this exploratory inquiry was a multiple case study situated in the interpretivist paradigm. Case study methods examine an instance in action or "a real-life, contemporary bounded system . . . or multiple systems (cases) over time" (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). Multiple case studies, unlike single ones, are used when researchers wish to draw conclusions about multiple cases based on an examination of similarities and differences among the cases. Following Yin (1994), who has observed that one advantage of a multiple

case study approach is that it enables researchers to analyse data within each case and across the cases, we chose a multiple case study approach because it enabled us to do both.

The cases were conveniently selected based on the contexts most familiar to us all. Data was generated from institutional documents, archival records, media reports, and formal and informal conversations with staff and students at the four institutions. We also drew on insights from our own experiences since each of us inhabited one of the four institutions. We adopted flexible methods to generate the data since such an approach enabled us to engage spontaneously with participants and analyse the documents.

## The contexts

Setting the context of cases is imperative for a multiple case study as Cohen et al., (2011) have made clear. We therefore provide a tabulated account of the context of each institution in terms of its vision statement, location, merger history, identity, and demography. Thereafter, we discuss each case separately, focusing on institutional initiatives towards decolonisation, student and staff responses to decolonisation, and offer a first level of analysis in each case. We then present a discussion section in which we offer insights based on a cross-case analysis.

As authors, we share an interest in how universities have responded to calls for decolonising their curriculum. Although all four of us are insiders in our respective contexts, all information and data used to construct the cases were in the public domain, available on the university websites, through google searches, in the media, or in academic articles.

**Table 1:** Institutional contexts

	<b>North-West University</b>	<b>Stellenbosch University</b>	<b>Nelson Mandela University</b>	<b>University of KwaZulu-Natal</b>
<b>Vision statement</b>	“To transform and to position [university] as a unitary institution of superior academic excellence, with a commitment to social justice.”	Stellenbosch University states that it aims to “be Africa’s leading research-intensive university, globally recognised as excellent, inclusive and innovative, where we advance knowledge in service of society.”	“To be a dynamic African university, recognised for its leadership in generating cutting-edge knowledge for a sustainable future.”	The university’s motto “inspiring greatness” is grounded in its vision of being a Premier University of African Scholarship, grounded in a research led teaching and learning environment.
<b>Location</b>	2 campuses in the North West province, 1 in Gauteng	Western Cape	Eastern Cape	KwaZulu-Natal
<b>Merged</b>	Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (with a satellite campus situated in Vanderbijlpark) and University of the North West in Mafikeng, formerly known as the University of	No merging took place.	This traditionally white university merged with a Technikon and a local satellite campus of Vista University	The University was formed through the merger of a traditional white established university (University of Natal) with that of a traditional Indian established university (University of Durban-Westville).

	Bophutatswana (with its Mankwe Campus) merged along with the Sebokeng Campus of Vista University.			
<b>Identity</b>	Traditionally, one campus was populated by mostly white, Afrikaans-speaking students and staff members, another campus by mostly black students and staff, and the third campus mostly by English-speaking metropolitan staff and students.	Traditionally, the University was an Afrikaner institution but its monocultural identity has been challenged by imperatives for change in post-apartheid South Africa.	The merged identity of the university is a work in progress, but the former university was politically conservative and consisted mostly of white staff and students while the former Vista University was created for Black students.	Drawn from two different histories, the University is now considered a diverse one, both in student population and staff composition. English is the main language of instruction with isiZulu being a conversational language that all students are required to study formally across its undergraduate programmes.
<b>Demography</b>	Of the 68,361 students who enrolled in 2019, 68% were African, 26% were white, 5% were coloured, and 1% Indian/Asian. At campus 2 98% of the students and 80% of staff were African. At campus 3, 7,680 students were registered of whom 84% were African. Demographically, the staff is 66% white, 29% African, 3% coloured, and 2% Indian/Asian. Of the 46, 945 students who registered at campus 3, 57% were African, 35% were white, 6% were coloured and 1% were Indian/Asian. The 1,247 staff members on this campus consisted of 84% Whites. ( <a href="http://www.nwu.ac.za/sites/www.nwu.ac.za/files/i-institutional-information/NWU-Quick-Stats-2019-2020.pdf">http://www.nwu.ac.za/sites/www.nwu.ac.za/files/i-institutional-information/NWU-Quick-Stats-2019-2020.pdf</a> )	In 2018, 31,765 students were enrolled at the university of whom 58,1% were white. Of the university's academic staff, 75% is white in a country where the white population is under 10%( <a href="https://www.sun.ac.za/english/Pages/statistical_profile.aspx">https://www.sun.ac.za/english/Pages/statistical_profile.aspx</a> )	The demographic profile of the university is diverse with an enrolment of approximately 27,000 full-time and part-time students, of whom most are Black.	The demographic profile of the university currently is diverse with the majority of students being Black in full-time study. Approximately 60% of its student population is drawn from quintile 1 to 3 schools. The current student enrolment is approximately 47,000 students on contact mode of delivery, registered across its five campuses.

## Cases

### North-West University case

#### *Institutional initiatives*

The #FeesMustFall, #RhodesMustFall and #DecoloniseTheCurriculum movements that were initiated in 2015 and 2016 were the driving force behind this institution's development of a "Declaration on the Decolonisation of University Education: The imperative to transform Teaching and Learning, the Research Agenda and Community Engagement."<sup>2</sup> The Declaration, with specific reference to the university's positionality pertaining to decolonisation and transformation, was formally released on November 26, 2018.<sup>3</sup> In the preamble to this Declaration, the university commits itself to practices that appropriate and encourage decolonisation within relevant contexts: it states that

[t]his declaration should be considered in the view of [the university's] commitment to be an internationally recognised university in Africa, distinguished for engaged scholarship, academic excellence, social responsiveness and an ethic of care. These features should be embedded in an organisational culture that has a transformational focus. It would reflect in behaviour that illustrates respect for diversity and inclusivity, together with a values-based, collective identity that promotes integration, participation and collaboration. Further characteristics of such an organisational culture would include innovation, joint and individual accountability, open and transparent communication, robust discourse and academic integrity.

The preamble also states that the document is not prescriptive since guidelines and strategies for decolonisation are contextual and ought to "reach maturity at faculty level." In addition, the purpose of the declaration is said to articulate the relationship between *transforming* curricula and experiences, and *decolonisation* in and beyond the University. The assumption, as explicitly stated in this Declaration, is that transformation and decolonisation are both driven by the trajectory of resistance and protest, and that higher education institutions need to grapple with this reality.

The Declaration further provided a brief background and context of the decolonisation debate, followed by a section listing definitions. These included: "decolonisation of teaching and learning practices", "curriculum transformation", "ethic of care", and "social justice." Against this background, the declaration statements read:

- Transformation of teaching and learning
  - Curriculum transformation and social justice
  - Curriculum transformation, inclusion and andragogy

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.nwu.ac.za/sites/www.nwu.ac.za/files/files/corporate/2018.Report.Decolonisation\\_of\\_University\\_Education\\_Declaration.pdf](http://www.nwu.ac.za/sites/www.nwu.ac.za/files/files/corporate/2018.Report.Decolonisation_of_University_Education_Declaration.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <http://news.nwu.ac.za/nwu-declares-its-position-decolonisation>



- Curriculum transformation, inclusion and language
- Curriculum transformation and curriculum design for access and inclusion
- Transformation and the research agenda
- Transformation and community engagement and service learning

Several public lectures, workshops, and colloquia were held before and after the Declaration was released. One such colloquium was organised by the Faculty of Humanities on November 18 and 19, 2019, and had as its main purpose the discussion of the decolonisation of the Humanities curriculum. One of the speakers, Dr Maerole Kgari Masondo, from the University of KwaZulu-Natal explored transforming the curricula for student success. Her contribution was summarised thus:

Dr Masondo said that, in the dispensation to construct a curriculum that will bring success to students in higher education, education needs to be relevant, meaningful and applicable to all students.

‘We need to draw from the worldviews of all the students we teach, which means we must decolonise, globalise, indigenise and Africanise the curriculum,’ she explained.

‘I believe that, if the NWU is serious about transformation of the curricula, the introduction of a decolonised curriculum should be implemented in quotas of 5%, increasing annually.

This does not mean replacing colonial themes or knowledge, but rather elevating African and Indigenous knowledge to an equal status with western knowledge,’ she concluded.<sup>4</sup>

A public lecture was also held on one campus in October 2019 during which Professor Ndlovu-Gatsheni presented an argument that we should opt for Africanisation rather than decolonisation when he suggested that “the methodology of content creation requires a new approach towards decolonisation, and . . . it can be better served under the concept of Africanisation as a school of thought and vision.” He also suggested that “curriculum and operational reflection as patterns of transformation at South African universities will require a horizontal internationalisation.”<sup>5</sup>

In line with the NWU’s call for curriculum transformation, the Centre for Teaching and Learning organised a colloquium aiming to deepen understanding of decolonisation in the context of the higher education curriculum and pedagogy across different disciplines. This colloquium can be accessed on YouTube.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://news.nwu.ac.za/nwu-hosts-stimulating-debate-decolonising-curriculum>

<sup>5</sup> <http://news.nwu.ac.za/public-lecture-calls-africanisation-instead-decolonisation>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxGKGe2BeN4>

### *Student and staff responses*

Student response regarding the decolonisation process took two different forms. At one campus student voices were mostly absent, whereas at the other two fiery protests took place.<sup>7</sup> The silence at the one campus could be ascribed to its historical context of being previously politically and ideologically conservative, while the other two campuses have always been spaces of contested values, ideologies, and politics. At the time of writing, no evidence could be found regarding staff responses.

### *Analysis*

Several points emerged when this case was analysed. These included:

- The Declaration that was released, together with the various public lectures, workshops, and colloquia that all took place at the end of 2019, could be seen as what Jansen (2002) described as a symbolic gesture by the institution to prove that it is doing something about the decolonisation *problem* i.e. decolonial-washing. In this sense one might rightfully question whether the intention was to actually decolonise any programmes or whether it was just a reaction to a national issue without any concrete action in mind as outlined by Tuck and Yang (2012) in a different context.
- What is also evident is that there is a disjuncture between the title of the Declaration and the actual content of the declaration statements. The impression is given that decolonisation and transformation is one and the same thing, or that one is, by default, implicating the other. In this sense, decolonisation is seen to be a metaphor for transformation, and vice versa (see Tuck & Yang, 2012). Decolonisation in such a context, one might argue, boils down to nothing more than just another buzzword used in the larger project of transformation. The question to be asked then is whether decolonisation as national project is indeed feasible.
- What is disconcerting is the manner in which decolonisation of the curriculum was quantified in one colloquium: ‘a decolonised curriculum should be implemented in quotas of 5%, increasing annually.’<sup>8</sup> What was meant by this is unclear, but what is clear is that decolonization, too, has fallen victim to performativity discourses and measurement rhetoric. So, the question then is this: Do we value what we measure, or do we measure what we value?
- The written and verbal evidence for this case is indicative of the intention to debate and continually revisit what decolonisation of the curriculum means. However, no evidence was available at the time of writing to confirm whether this has, in fact, happened. It is, therefore, unclear whether any complicated conversations like, for example, those that are frank and receptive to self-criticism as advocated by Pinar (2004) about decolonising the curriculum have been undertaken.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://mg.co.za/article/2016-02-25-nwu-closes-mafikeng-campus-indefinitel/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://news.nwu.ac.za/nwu-hosts-stimulating-debate-decolonising-curriculum>

## Stellenbosch University case

### *Institutional initiatives*

Calls during the student protests in South Africa to decolonise the university curriculum were the trigger for the appointment of a Decolonisation Task Team at the university to explore ways in which the curriculum could be decolonised. The Task Team delivered its report on July 31, 2017.<sup>9</sup> The report shows that the Task Team engaged seriously with literature on decolonization/decoloniality and curriculum and made arguably radical recommendations to the university management and council. The Task Team report provided

- a cursory analysis of post-colonialism, decolonisation, decoloniality, curriculum, and decolonisation of the curriculum. Based on this analysis, it offered guidelines for addressing the imperative of decolonising the curriculum, after placing it within the broader imperative of institutional transformation (Stellenbosch University, 2017).

In response to the report, the university management commissioned a “Curriculum Renewal Project” in which selected programmes from each of the 10 faculties were subjected to a process of programme renewal. Notice, that although the name of the task team was “Decolonisation Task Team” the curriculum project that unfolded from it is called a “Curriculum Renewal Project.” Moreover, in a report to the Department of Higher Education and Training on transformation at Stellenbosch University, decolonisation is subsumed under the banner of transformation and its implementation is to take place through the Curriculum Renewal Project. As the Curriculum Renewal Project unfolded it became evident that decolonisation was only one of a list of several renewal foci that faculties could draw on. In 2018 it was reported in the media that the Curriculum Renewal Project of the university was comprised of ten programmes that were in the process of being decolonised, one in each of the ten faculties. The headline of a *News24* article that reported on these developments at the university claimed: “Decolonising education: How one SA university is getting it done” (Etheridge, 2018, n.p.). This media report was endorsed by the university.<sup>10</sup> The programmes affected are: Conservation ecology; BA Language and Culture; BComm Mathematical Sciences; MPhil in Higher Education; Aspects of BEng programmes; LLB programme; MBChB programme (Medicine and Health Sciences faculty); BMil Technology (Military Science faculty); BSc Earth Sciences (Science faculty); and BDiv programme (Theology faculty).

During the curriculum renewal process an international expert was invited to the university to conduct a workshop to help staff to better align content, teaching/learning strategies, assessment, and outcomes. In this workshop academic staff members were introduced to the Carpe Diem learning design methodology (for more detail see Salmon, 2014; Volschenk, 2017). An analysis of the media report by Etheridge (2018) shows that the university’s focus was on programme renewal and not decolonisation. This is reflected in the words of the Vice-Rector for learning and teaching, Professor Schoonwinkel, quoted in the media report: “We

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<sup>9</sup> [https://drive.google.com/file/d/15f\\_tellj4317NEbR7UHnithzTfATbjA/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/15f_tellj4317NEbR7UHnithzTfATbjA/view)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.sun.ac.za/english/Lists/news/DispForm.aspx?ID=5638>

want to offer them (the programmes) in a fresh and exciting way . . . ” (Etheridge, 2018, n.p.). The institution’s focus on curriculum renewal and not decolonisation is evident in the process of developing the new MBChB, for example. In a 71-page report on a workshop to (re)design the MBChB programme, curriculum renewal is mentioned 16 times while decolonisation is mentioned only twice and only in the feedback section where one comment was that decolonisation had not been discussed at the workshop (see Volschenk, 2017). Moreover, the words of one of the members of the curriculum renewal team of the MBChB, Professor Hennie Botha, provided further support for our contention that the redevelopment of this programme did not focus on decolonisation: “The renewed MBChB curriculum will include much of the same content as the current curriculum, but we will be using modern new ways of teaching and learning that will be student-centred and utilize our teachers in the best possible way.” (cited in Stassen, 2019, n.p.)

In another media report published two years later the university claimed that it then had 18 programmes on the pathway to being decolonised. The article was entitled, “Stellenbosch University forges ahead with its decolonisation drive” (Mlamla, 2020).

### *Student and staff responses*

A minority of (mainly black) students at the university has been involved in student protests and calls for the decolonising of the curriculum. Given that there is not a critical mass of black and working-class students on the campuses since many black students are postgraduates who study part-time, students’ efforts are often thwarted by the lack of numbers needed to sustain protests and resistance efforts. Furthermore, a recent study by Kamanga (2019) documents black students’ lived experience of hidden racism at the university, suggesting that claims by the university that it is decolonising are exaggerated.

A minority of individual staff members continue to engage with decolonisation in venues where they lecture, and there have been ongoing seminars on decolonisation arranged by some faculties and the Centre for Teaching and Learning. Efforts to decolonise programmes have been mainly centrally managed and implemented in a top-down manner. However, a study by Costandius et al. (2018) documented, among other things, the settler (white staff and students) perspectives of student protests and decolonising of the curriculum in the context of the university being a predominantly white institution. They found that settler perspectives included ignorance and distance (the notion of “disappear the Native”,<sup>11</sup> fear of regression (e.g. that South Africa will become like Zimbabwe), racism, exclusion, and guilt or what Tuck and Yang refer to as “settler anxiety” (2012, p. 9).

### *Analysis*

Several points emerged when this case was analysed.

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<sup>11</sup> Tuck and Yang (2012) argued that this is a method used by settlers to avoid dealing with the process of authentic decolonisation. Costandius et al. (2018) averred that this notion was evident when white students asked why black students would not go to “other” universities.

- Given its context (described earlier) the claim by this university that it has 18 programmes which are at advanced stages of being decolonised would make any decolonial scholar suspicious. The lived experiences of black students at the university as reported by Kamanga (2019) as well as the settler perspectives reported by Constandius et al. (2018) suggest that as an institution the university has not even begun the journey of decolonisation. Its claims in the media are therefore overstated.
- There may be many reasons for the bold claims made. These include symbolic reasons that are not based on any intention to actually decolonise its programmes; settler anxiety (a need to show very quickly that it is doing something); ignorance on the part of a white university management about decolonisation; and a history of complying with national mandates as was done during apartheid, all of which point to, at best, a technical compliance.
- There is a clear disjuncture between the content and the name of the Task Team report and the content and the name of the Curriculum Renewal Project that unfolded. Again, there may be many reasons for this. We suggest two possible ones: the composition of the task team (more broadly representative) was very different to that of those (chiefly white senior managers) responsible for implementing the recommendations of the task team; and authentic decolonisation would be difficult to sell to a predominantly white-staffed university in which whiteness and whiteness thinking still thrive 26 years into South Africa's democracy.
- Although innovations including technological ones have been introduced, the understanding of curriculum in the Curriculum Renewal Project remains narrow and focused on what Aoki (1999) called the "curriculum-as-plan" to the detriment of the "curriculum-as-lived" (p. 180). Moreover, there is very little evidence that any complicated conversation on decolonisation/decoloniality has taken place.

## Nelson Mandela University case

### *Institutional initiatives*

A cursory glance at the macro institutional level shows that no single guiding document to steer the decolonisation effort at the University was adopted. This could be regarded simultaneously as a major weakness or an opportunity since it gives different stakeholders lower down at Faculty level the leeway to be creative and innovative without having to follow a specific script. On the university's website though, decolonisation and Africanisation are addressed under teaching and learning as follows: "The approach in T&L has been to engage in interdisciplinary curriculum conversations, which provide guidance and inspiration for decolonisation and Africanisation of the curriculum. Furthermore, the decolonial project is being interrogated by all faculties . . ." <sup>12</sup> The institution has hosted numerous public lectures and seminars on decolonisation that have taken place under the auspices of the Centre for Critical Studies in Higher Education. Furthermore, buildings and student residences have been renamed after individuals who have made a contribution to the

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<https://tl.mandela.ac.za>

struggle for liberation in a consultative process with local communities (*News 24, n.p.*).<sup>13</sup> This could be regarded as an important signifier and first step in the decolonisation process. Many efforts at renewing and transforming curricula at faculty level are under way but the terminology used on the website, namely “transformation” and “curriculum renewal” suggest symbolism or a dilution of decolonisation. In the Faculty of Education, for example, the reading lists in the Languages have been overhauled to include more writers and poets of African descent such as Sol Plaatje, Chinua Achebe, Gcina Mhlope, and Athol Fugard, among others. In Education Theory modules a critical pedagogy approach has been incorporated but whether this can be likened to decolonisation is a moot point. We argue that adding African authors to modules or reading lists does not necessarily equate to decolonisation since it does not decentre western knowledge. Garuba (2015) has a salutary warning for those who advocate additive approaches to the curriculum since this leaves Eurocentric worldviews and the status quo intact. He warns against decorating the master’s living room by adding raffia chairs and argues instead for a rethinking of the theories that frame the curriculum.

### *Student and staff responses*

Nelson Mandela University has experienced student protests ever since the initial ones in 2015. Each year since then, student protests have taken place with the longest one having been in 2016 when the campus was closed for three months.<sup>14</sup> The relationship between senior management and the protesting students has been tense at times but, on November 2, 2015, students were allowed to go and state their case at Senate. Some faculties have tried to include student voices in their curriculum renewal processes but the process is very uneven and often lacks a critical mass. Students seem to mistrust management and accuse its members of diluting the process (of decolonisation) by embracing a conservative language and vocabulary. In the words of a former Student Representative Council president, Mzileni (2019), in the *Eastern Province Herald*: “. . . the student movement must . . . wage a fight against the hijacking of decolonisation by university managers . . .” He continued, “. . . it is just games with nothing substantive and applicable in the actual decolonial turn that the university must . . . take” (p. 9).

### *Analysis*

Several points emerged when this case was analysed. These include:

- A preliminary conclusion one can draw is that the process to an African-purposed and decolonised curriculum will be a long journey which has only just begun. Besides the renaming of buildings one can infer that not much has transpired in the decolonial knowledge project thus far since the institution has merely adopted the rhetoric, language, and vocabulary of decolonisation. Heleta (2016) concurred and asserted that the curriculum in higher education institutions has remained largely Eurocentric and that it bolsters “Western dominance and privilege” (p. 1). We would like to insert a

<sup>13</sup> <https://news.mandela.ac.za/News/Institutional-naming-and-renaming-project-gets-und>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.enca.com/south-africa/nmmu-closed-after-students-protests>

caveat here though. There are small pockets of committed academics and students who embrace decolonisation and who are working hard to make it a reality.

- There are staff members who resist the notion of decolonisation and are more philosophically aligned to Eurocentric knowledge. An academic asked in a workshop, “How does one decolonise mathematics?” As Jansen (2009) has reminded us, one has first to change the curriculum maker before one can change the curriculum. Similarly, Fanon (1967) regarded individual liberation as a first step towards decolonisation and what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) has referred to in the title of his book as the “decolonisation of the mind.”
- The adoption of a more sophisticated understanding of what curriculum (development) entails in line with our argument that sees the curriculum as a complicated conversation or the curriculum as a “virtuous endeavour” as William Reid put it, would lead to a deeper engagement with decolonization (1999, p. 6). Reid argued famously that curriculum development and planning has more to do with virtue than with technique; it is a moral practice.

## University of KwaZulu-Natal case

### *Institutional initiatives*

Curriculum reconceptualisation is an on-going process informed by several stimuli responding to local, national, and international imperatives. The Colleges, as academic units, are responsible for decisions about their academic programmes, including that of transforming the curriculum. While the university has its vision and mission statement, the realisation of this devolves to the four Colleges. Hence, there may be variations in the ways in which curriculum transformation, including that of decolonising it, unfolds across these Colleges. Curriculum transformation has been an on-going process, largely in response to policy, accreditation, and review imperatives. The decolonial imperative for curriculum transformation was foregrounded by the heightened student protest of 2015 and 2016, initiated by the #FeesMustFall campaign which progressed into a call for decolonisation as a liberatory tool for the radical transformation of higher education in South Africa as a national project (Badat, 2015; Ramrathan, 2019). The decolonisation attempts presented here are those of the College of Humanities at this university, but we note that there are several activities, including seminars and workshops across other Colleges like, for example, the College of Law and Management.<sup>15</sup> Structural and procedural guidelines for the College of Humanities are facilitating the decolonisation of the curriculum. The structural arrangements include the appointment of co-ordinators and re-conceptualisation teams across the Schools to facilitate curriculum transformation. These co-ordinators are, in most cases, the Academic Leader of Teaching and Learning in each of the six Schools in the College of Humanities. Specifically, for the process of decolonisation, the College of Humanities has co-opted a senior academic working with three research assistants as the co-ordinator to lead the transformation process. Several activities meant to bring awareness to, and generate grass-root conversations among, staff on the discourses of decolonisation and curriculum transformation with a view to

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<https://www.ukzn.ac.za/news/teaching-and-learning-workshop-explores-decolonisation-in-higher-education/>

informing the decolonisation process have taken place. The activities included talking circles among staff members, workshops on blended learning, student participatory theatre, and chat groups managed through social media. These activities were video recorded and posted on a staff portal to give access to all staff in the College. A bank of literature on decolonisation and curriculum transformation was made available to staff on a specific portal for easy access.

### *Student and staff responses*

Of note is that beyond student protest actions no substantive engagement on issues of decolonisation have taken place. The activities over a two-year period that were led by the co-ordinator were not well attended by staff and students and follow-ups on issues of decolonisation did not happen. Reviewing the video recordings and field notes taken during the talking circles along with student participation in theatres and workshops that were held across three of the five campuses, revealed that the talk among staff members during the talking circles and workshops were about specific concerns rather than being part of deep curriculum conversations. Talk centred on international recognition as a scholar, the need to be globally relevant through the modules taught, what students can and cannot do, and personal aspirations like becoming and being a professor dominated the discussions. Conversations on matters of curriculum, despite the prompts, were largely superficial.

While there has been a growing body of research on decolonisation among staff that has resulted in publications, these remain largely at the academic and scholarly level in that few, if any, of these outputs by staff filter into the curriculum they offer. Some changes have been noted in the domain of language where, for example, Masters theses and PhD dissertations may be submitted in isiZulu and all abstracts of dissertations and theses are translated into isiZulu. In the School of Education, a number of specialisation modules in the Bachelor of Education in Foundation Phase teaching are offered through the medium of isiZulu, although this was in response to the shortage of Foundation Phase teachers able to teach in African languages. In addition, there have been some efforts made by staff to explore and include aspects of their modules in blended learning opportunities. Spaces in the university are also being viewed as possibilities for the demonstration of decolonisation. For example, new buildings and lecture theatres have been named after prominent African (not white) individuals to inspire students, as the Dean of the School reported, and have them engage with the life contributions of these individuals to education, and more broadly, to the liberation struggle.

Students were engaged through student led participatory theatre, scripted and performed by the Drama students. This participatory theatre was meant to encourage debates on decolonisation and to explore possibilities and ways of doing decolonisation. One of the challenges noted in engaging students through these participatory theatre productions across the three campuses where the College of Humanities offers its programmes was a poor response rate by students. The Drama students who performed these theatres had to do a great deal to round up students on each of these campuses by singing to attract their interest and then leading them to the venues where the theatre was to be performed. Extensive debates



among the students evolved but no consensus was reached on how to do decolonisation. Students were encouraged to continue with the discussions and debates through specifically set up Twitter accounts, but none participated in any of the conversations. A review of the recordings of these participatory theatres revealed concerns about language, history, basic education, and the issue of how to decolonise the curriculum. Students wanted teaching and learning through the medium of isiZulu. Whose history was to be told and how it was to be told also featured as concerns in the conversation. Despite much prodding by the director of the theatre and provocateur located among the students, talk about how to decolonise the curriculum remained at the level of wanting a decolonised curriculum.

### *Analysis*

Several points emerged when this case was analysed. These include:

- Political and ideological differences among staff and students on what decolonisation is and how to institutionalise decolonisation were noted. The low response rate to the opportunities created to engage in deep and critical grassroots conversation on decolonisation and curriculum transformation by staff and students suggests that, while attempts are being made by the institution to generate these grassroots conversations, decolonising the curriculum may not materialise any time soon. With respect to students, it seems that political activism driven by student politics are discrete points where student voices have been raised. Follow-on from these points of political activism draws little interest among students in pursuing these crucial conversations to transform the curriculum offered at universities. There are five reasons for these broad findings.
- First, the struggle for domination within the diverse semantics of decolonisation was noted. For example, debates on decentring the Global North references used in modules pitted against the defence of the internationalisation of academic engagement as a university education norm, emerged as a concern that inhibited actions aimed at decolonising the curriculum.
- Second, staff rationalisations for what the students can and cannot do emerged as a potentiality discourse. Noting the limited resources, poor access to the internet, and the challenges in using digital platforms, staff expressed concerns about student capabilities and their willingness to embrace such major curriculum changes as expected of the envisaged curriculum transformation. Decolonising the curriculum would mean a major review of the existing curriculum and some resistance to this was noted in staff.
- Third, a number of issues were seen to constitute a major stumbling block in moving forward substantially on the project of decolonising the Humanities curriculum. These included challenges relating to consensus on the process of transformation, external regulatory frameworks, the legitimacy and ownership of a revised curriculum, the fear of letting go of the familiar, and a lack of confidence in curriculum innovations and buy-in by students and staff. It is evident that decolonisation as a national project will be compromised if these challenges cannot be met.

- Fourth, for students the issue of language dominated the debates on decolonisation. Access to quality education also featured as a major concern but the articulation of what quality education is was not forthcoming. School education and the need for it to be decolonised as a feeder to higher education also emerged as a concern. Despite prodding by the student provocateur to find ways to decolonise the curriculum, students were unable to suggest how to progress into the doing aspect of decolonisation of the curriculum.
- Fifth, while opportunities to engage in deep curriculum conversations do occur, opportunities to encourage on-going conversations are not taken up in the Schools and Colleges.

## Discussion

From the discussion on decolonisation/decoloniality and the cases presented there is much that can be elaborated upon. In the space available to us we elicit four themes that provide insights into the project of decolonising curricula in universities that can serve as the basis for further exploration in South Africa's decolonial moment. The themes we discuss are decolonial-washing; decolonising of the curriculum as a national project; political symbolism; and complicated conversations.

First, in the introduction we invoked the concept of decolonial-washing. As mentioned, we extrapolate from the term greenwashing as used in environmental discourse. However, we expand the concept to mean more than just that which is misleading or the presentation of misinformation. For us, decolonial-washing also includes all instances in which decolonisation is used as a metaphor, whether deliberately or in ignorance. The most obvious case of decolonial-washing is evident in the Stellenbosch University case where the university that remains predominantly white 26 years into South Africa's democracy, publicly claims to have 18 programmes well on their way to being decolonised. An understanding of the institutional context and recent research reported by Constandius et al. (2018) and Kamanga (2019) suggest that the institution's claims are probably an overstatement. In all four cases, institutions used decolonisation as a metaphor; decolonisation has been equated with concepts such as curriculum renewal and curriculum transformation. This finding supports Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (in Omanga, 2019) concern that decolonisation can become a buzzword that means everything and then nothing in the end. In two of the cases institutions changed the names of their buildings or named new buildings for the first time after those who made significant contributions to the struggle against apartheid. Changing names of buildings could become exercises in decolonial-washing but can also serve productive purposes. They form part of the hidden curriculum (in a positive sense) of the institution and can become even more productive when the narratives of those whose names appear on the buildings become part of complicated conversations in teaching and learning venues.

Second, the 2015/2016 student protest re-inspired a national call for decolonisation, this time as a national project by higher education institutions with a decolonised higher education

curriculum being one of its goals. The feasibility of decolonising a higher education curriculum is largely dependent upon how institutions take up this goal. The case studies reported in this paper give us a momentary glimpse into the feasibility of a national project. As with any project, there should be a beginning date and an end date with reviews in between to establish progress or encourage re-direction. The competing interests, the institutions' vision and mission statements, being globally relevant and the lack of sustained, co-ordinated processes within higher education institutions suggest that decolonisation as a national project is unlikely to materialise. There have been pockets of expression alluding to the intent to decolonise the curriculum offered across universities, but the competing forces may render these expressions merely academic or theoretical. Almost half a decade has gone by since the student protest of 2015/2016 and these four case studies reveal very superficial attempts to decolonise the curriculum on offer and, therefore, we question the feasibility of decolonising the curriculum as a national project.

Third, symbolism was evident in all four cases to differing degrees as alluded to above. Political symbolism is a theoretical construct we borrow from Jansen (2002) that is used to explain the lack of fidelity between policy and practice in cases where policy implementation is never a serious intention. The data of Stellenbosch University suggests that decolonising the curriculum was used as a public relations exercise in the media as the following headline indicates. "Decolonising education: How one South African university is getting it done." At North-West University the following terms are used in the Decolonisation Declaration Statement: "Africanisation", "ethic of care", and "social justice", and in Nelson Mandela University "transformation" and "curriculum renewal" that suggest a softening of the terms used. At Nelson Mandela University, the student leader accused management of high jacking the process by introducing a conservative vocabulary. In three of the cases (North-West University, Stellenbosch University, and the University of KwaZulu-Natal) it appears that there was a disjuncture between the steering documents adopted and the eventual (curriculum) processes that unfolded. Symbolism is akin to decolonial-washing, the term we use to describe the decolonisation efforts at these four universities. In all four cases the process of decentring Western knowledge and the insertion of Indigenous and African knowledges is still largely absent, hence our reference to symbolism.

Fourth, we turn to the question of complicated conversations. Complicated conversations are not merely an exchange of information (Aoki, 2004), but a frank and continual self-criticism (Pinar, 2004) that mitigates against hierarchical power relations that hinder productive conversation from taking place (le Grange, 2018). Our research has indicated that few to no complicated conversations have transpired vis-à-vis the decolonisation of the university curriculum. Information was in many instances merely exchanged during public lectures, seminars, and workshops. Debates and other forms of conversations were encouraged in some instances (North-West University and the University of KwaZulu-Natal). However, no evidence of frank and ongoing self-criticism was evident. In the event where hierarchical power relations operate in the form of a top-down approach, for example, the decolonial project might be jeopardised. This might, among other things, result in epistemic injustices. Should we take seriously complicated conversations we might be in a more honest position to

reflect and self-criticise what and whose knowledge and ways of being we include and what we deliberately leave out for whatever reason. A complicated conversation about decolonising the university curriculum cannot take place without the input of students. Although there have been attempts to include them in the process, it seems that students have been on the margins of these discussions.

## Conclusion

This article is a snapshot at a very particular time and place in the ongoing efforts to decolonise the curriculum at four South African universities. What is clear is that understandings of the decolonisation of the curriculum differ across institutions and that the process and trajectories that each one will eventually take will be uneven and largely dependent on context, institutional will, and the lasting effect of each one's particular history. The danger, of course, is that institutional efforts might become exercises in decolonial-washing as decolonialisation becomes a metaphor for more palatable concepts such as curriculum renewal and curriculum transformation. This exploratory case study suggests that conceiving of decolonisation vis-à-vis the university curriculum as a nationally driven project may not be desirable given a South African higher education landscape that continues to reflect legacies of apartheid. Our concern is that decolonisation will become co-opted and lose its revolutionary impulse.

The multiple case study employed here enabled us to gain a bird's eye view of how different higher education institutions have dealt with decolonisation of the curriculum. We acknowledge that this exploratory study is by no means exhaustive and that it invites further in-depth (single) case studies on work done in institutions such as that of the African Decolonial Research Network which is based at Unisa.

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