"We've been taught to understand that we don't have anything to contribute towards knowledge": Exploring academics' understanding of decolonising curricula in higher education

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Abstract

Universities in the Global South continue to grapple with the ethical demands of decolonising and transforming the public university and its episteme orientations. In this paper, we contribute to the emerging body of work in the Global South that attempts to make sense of the transformation and decolonisation discourses by exploring academics' understanding of decolonising curricula in South African higher education. Using purposive sampling, we interviewed eight academics from the school of education who teach in a research-intensive university in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. We relied on the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu to think through the notion of a research-intensive university being a contested and structuring field constituted of various actors and agents who are struggling to make sense of, and understand the calls for, decolonising and transforming curricula. The findings suggest that, largely, academics understand the decolonising of curricula as a response to the need to tackle and theorise the Eurocentric thought in curricula and to re-centre African epistemic traditions and as well as navigate what they refer to as the confusion, ambiguity, and discomfort of decolonisation. We end this paper with some empirical and theoretical reflections on how exploring academics' understanding of decolonizing curricula is central to the broader project of achieving social justice in the Global South.

Keywords: decolonisation, transformation, education, academics, Global South, curricula, higher education

Curricula remains largely Eurocentric and continues to reinforce white and Western dominance and privilege while at the same time being full of stereotypes, prejudices and patronising views about Africa and its people . . . South Africa must completely rethink, reframe and reconstruct the Eurocentric and colonial curriculum and teaching methods at universities . . . [The] higher education system requires a fundamental overhaul of the whole epistemological model underlying the current educational system. (Heleta, 2018, p. 2)

Introduction

Universities in the Global South[1] continue to face intensive scrutiny and critique regarding the ever increasing demands to change, reform, transform, decolonise, and, in the Indian higher education context, to de-commodify curricula in the academy (Dey, 2019; Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam, 2019a; Hlatshwayo & Shawa, 2020). Common to the above debates is the assumption that the contemporary university in its current constitution not only colonises, oppresses, and marginalises, but also fails to serve the interests of society, and thereby continues to reinforce its structural inequality (Heleta, 2016; Mbembe, 2016; Morreira, 2017). In South Africa, the emergence of the #RhodesMustFall student movement in 2015–2016 became an intellectual signifier in foregrounding the deeply embedded coloniality and epistemic displacements in curricula in the South African academy. Various academic fields such as education, English literature, sociology, political science, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, and others came under scrutiny as choosing to privilege the epistemic traditions of the "dead white men" to whom Pett (2015) refers in the title of his piece in *The Conversation*, at the expense of knowledge productions from the Global South. In this paper, we contribute to the emergent literature in an exploration of the understanding of academics in an education faculty of what it means to decolonise curricula. We suggest that doing so offers us some insight into how academics make sense of and understand the calls for transformation, and to what extent this has implications for knowledge production, pedagogy, assessment, and other struggles in the university.

We begin this paper by linking the calls for transformation and decolonisation in the South African academy to the broader struggles in the Global South and discuss how South African universities are responding to these challenges, tensions, and opportunities. We then introduce our theoretical framework, Bourdieu's field theory, since it offers useful insights into, and understanding of, the notion of a research-intensive university being a formative structure. The education academics are viewed as competing actors who are grappling with the calls to decolonise curricula. We then outline the research methods of the study and clarify how data was generated, analysed, and theorised. Thereafter, we turn to the heart of the paper—the findings and the discussion—in which we consider the three main themes of decolonisation as 1) the dismantling and displacement of a Eurocentric curricula, 2) the re-

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[1] By Global South, we are not referring to physical boundaries and borders across different countries. We are referring specifically to the epistemic communities and alliances that exist between those who share a common experience and memory of colonisation and apartheid. Thus, the alliances are not necessarily physical, but intellectual and epistemic in nature (see Chakrabarty, 2009; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012; Gordon, 1997).

centring of African epistemic traditions, and 3) as disruption, ambiguity, confusion, and discomfort. Finally, building on the views and understanding of academics in the field of education, we suggest how higher education in the Global South in general and South African higher education in particular, can begin to respond to the clarion calls for decolonising curricula.

Transforming curricula: Struggles, tensions, alienation

Universities in the Global South are struggling to respond to the ever increasing demands to reimagine the purposes of higher education in a way that moves away from following the colonising neoliberal regimes in favour of embracing democratic institutions that foster social justice and belonging (see Badat, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Quijano, 2000). Curricula, and curriculum design is at the very heart of this demand, with both academics and students seeing the political economy of curriculum as offering a useful opportunity for dismantling and challenging whiteness (Heleta, 2018). Universities in India, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, UK, the US, Turkey, South Africa, Latin America, and others are all currently engaged in the struggle to transform curricula, and attempt to provincialise Europe (Chakrabarty, 2009). This has meant challenging the inequality in global knowledge production, with the Global North ceasing to be seen as the epicentre of all epistemic thought, and the Global South re-emerging as valid, legitimate, and a recognised producer of knowledge. Writing about the challenges of explicating, exploring, and exposing coloniality in the field of anthropology, Sanchez (2018) has suggested that there is a socially constructed inequality in the ways in which the history of white people and people of colour is written:

> If it is to be successful, decolonizing anthropology entails careful thinking about the relationship between power, place and race. A categorization of the world into a simple binary of 'white people' and 'people of colour' fails to interrogate the edges of racial identities, and the tensions and plurality of experiences within them. It is also not helpful for addressing the intersection of race with structures of gender and class. Similarly, a coding of the world into colonized and colonizer does not grapple with the difficult fact that colonialism was not practised and experienced consistently across different times and region. (Sanchez, 2018, pp. 3–4)

In the South African context, the calls for decolonising and transforming[2] curricula have often suggested that the post-1994 political dispensation did very little to challenge or interrupt colonial and apartheid epistemic traditions, and bring about new and inclusive knowledges in curricula (Heleta, 2018; Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam, 2019a; Hlatshwayo & Shawa, 2020). The 1990s and early 2000s were shaped and informed largely by a policy framework that sought to open the doors of higher education to all, especially for the millions

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[2]   While there are new and emergent debates in South African higher education on the differences between transformation (which is seen as reforming the system) and decolonization (which is seen as overhauling and restructuring the system), in this paper we have adopted and operationalized both transformation and decolonization as being concerned with changing the system and attempting to make it socially just and inclusive.

of Black[3] students who were then structurally trapped and prevented from accessing historically white universities (Badat, 1994; Council of Higher Education (CHE), 2008, 2016). The emergence of the #RhodesMustFall in the 2015–2016 moment sought to challenge the "dead white men" discourse still prevalent in curricula and to call for the re-centring of knowledges from the Global South. The movement suggested that there still existed what could be referred to as epistemic colonisation (see Keet, 2014), that is, colonisation at the level of thought and thus some efforts needed to be made to reclaim these forgotten and othered epistemic traditions still located at the margins of the academy. What was particularly interesting about the #RhodesMustFall movement was the manner in which the students linked the intersectional struggles of negotiating an alienating institutional culture, spatiality, gender, and heteronormativity to tackling transformative pedagogies since all are dialectically aligned with ensuring that curricula represents and responds to our context (Almeida & Kumalo, 2018; Buthelezi, 2017; Chikaonda, 2019). This was significant in that it moved beyond the narrow and nativist conception of Africanisation which essentialises and simplifies what it means to be a political African subject (see Msila and Gumbo, 2016). The student movements called for a broader understanding of transforming curricula beyond precolonial, nativist, monolithic, and indigenous conceptions of Blackness (see Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam, 2019a; Naicker, 2016; Ngcobozi, 2015).

For Le Grange (2016), an authentic commitment to decolonising curricula is about the rejection of the Euro-universalism of thought, as represented by the Cartesian duality of *cogito ergo sum*. The "I" of Cartesian duality represents and signifies the colonising European subject who is all-knowing, all-powerful and epistemically representative of the silencing and erasure of the colonised Other, including their ways of being, seeing, knowing, and thinking. Writing about this dialectical decolonisation, Le Grange (2016) suggests that

> decolonisation of the curriculum must involve liberating thought from the fetters of cartesian duality—from Descartes' cogito, 'I think therefore I am'. He [Le Grange, 2015] argues that Ubuntu (I am because we are) and the active force of currere celebrate the oneness of mind and body and the oneness of humans and the more-than-human-world. Rather than subjectivity being individual, it is ecological. A decolonised curriculum is evidenced by a shift in subjectivity from the arrogant 'I' (of Western individualism) to the humble 'I' to the 'I' that is embedded, embodied, extended and enacted. In an ever-changing world the pathways for becoming of a pedagogical life cannot be known or defined (Le Grange, 2016, pp. 8–9).

In this paper, we contribute to this emerging literature on South African higher education by exploring academics' understandings of decolonising curricula in the South African academy.

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[3]   Black is used in this context to denote two things. First, we do not use Black as an apartheid and post-apartheid racial category and classification. Rather, we use Black in the Bikoist and Black consciousness tradition to denote all those who suffered and were discriminated against during apartheid (see Morgan & Baert, 2018). This includes those who are called black African, and colored, and those of Indian and Asian descent. Second, Black is capitalized to acknowledge the real and material challenges that those who are Black are still experiencing in the Global South (see Grier et al. 2019). While we recognize the contemporary debates regarding the biological existence of what is known as race, we do, nonetheless, argue that Black is still experienced in all its complexities, challenges, brutalities, and nuances.

We suggest that exploring this understanding of what the decolonising of curricula entails offers us useful insight into how academics make sense of the struggles to transform and decolonise curricula, and enables us to grasp the implications of some of the struggles, tensions, and ambiguities that academics are facing as well as the many realities they experience as they make sense of these calls.

Theoretical framings: Bringing in Bourdieu

Bourdieu's theoretical notion of field theory is important if we are to understand the field of higher education and its role in contributing to inequality in society. Bourdieu (1986/2011) draws on Weber's sociology of religion to argue that society is differentiated across a number of different semi-autonomous fields such as those of economics, language, education, political science, sociology, and others. These semi-autonomous fields are governed largely by their own rules of the game (Maton, 2013) which include, for example, the economies of scale, rewards, and sanctions (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986/2011; see, too, Naidoo, 2004). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1974/1992, p. 97) have theorised a field as a "network or configuration, or objective relations between positions . . . [that] are objectively defined in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions as well as their objective relations to other positions." Put differently, a field could be referred to as the "structured space of positions in which the positions and their interactions are determined by the distribution of different kinds of resources or capitals" (Ihlen 2005, pp. 2–3). Thus, a field should be seen as a space in which individuals compete with one another for resources. These resulting contestations and divisions often reflect class divisions, those between the dominant and the dominated class as well as between the economic and the political elites in society. In the field, the struggles are often for the different forms of capital— economic, cultural, and social. Economic capital refers to the money, land, and other physical resources to which an agent may have access and/or possess. The cultural capital exists in three forms; in the embodied state through personal attributes, dispositions, taste, and habits (Bourdieu, 1986/2011); through cultural goods like books and music that an agent consumes and/or listens to, and theories that an agent adheres to, practices, and inculcates; and through the institutionalised state in terms of qualifications and schooling as well as associations, the membership of which tends to signify belonging, acceptance, and (political) recognition (Bourdieu, 1984).

Social capital refers to the networks and connections that reflect the "aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu 1986/2011, p. 83). In other words, social capital is made up of the connections, networks, membership, both formal and informal, to which an agent has access and from which an agent can actually withdraw.

Habitus refers to the "the semi-conscious dispositions that people, particularly in their early lives, acquire through social or material interaction with their habitat and through the social relations in their part of the social field" (Fairclough et al. 2002, p. 9). Habitus can be

understood as a set of assumptions, the taken-for-grantedness that agents often have in how they make sense of and understand the world.

Overall, Bourdieu offers some insightful theoretical tools we can use to make sense of the field of South African higher education and the contested calls for transformation and decolonisation. Scholars such as Naidoo (2004), Booi et al. (2017) and Hlatshwayo (2015) have employed Bourdieu's field theory to analyse and theorise the structural inequality and struggles in the academy, with emerging Black academics and Black working class students both feeling that they do not have the *right kind* of capital to navigate a historically white university's institutional culture with its racism and oppression; this leads to their being marginalised and feeling that they do not belong. The concepts underlying field theory and the different forms of capital and habitus described as existing within that field, give us a rich language of description that enables us to describe a research-intensive university as a contested and complex field within the South African academy.

Methodological and data generation decisions

The study was underpinned by a qualitative interpretivist case study (see Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Yin, 2017). We were interested in exploring the understanding of academics in education about what decolonising curriculum in South African higher education implies. The question that guided the study was this: What are academics' conceptual understandings of the notion of decolonising curriculum in South African higher education?

The setting of the study was a research-intensive university in KwaZulu, South Africa, that underwent a merger[4] and became a traditional university. Eight academics, ranging from lecturers to senior lecturers[5] were purposively sampled across the School of Education. Attempts were made to diversify the sample in terms of age, race, sex, gender, discipline background, academic background, and religious orientation. Gatekeeper permission and ethical clearance were obtained from the university. All participants were given consent forms and were also informed verbally about their rights in relation to taking part in the study. They were assured that their anonymity was protected, and informed that they had the right to withdraw at any stage. Semi-structured interviews were held with all eight academics who participated in the study, and member checking was done to ensure that they were given a chance to go through their interview transcripts to approve, rectify and/or amend them to ensure that what was captured was exactly what had said and meant (see Birt et al., 2016; Simpson & Quigley, 2016; Varpio et al., 2017).

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[4] The apartheid regime sought to create different and fragmented institutions of higher learning across the system that would fit with the broader project of dividing the population through racial and tribal classifications (Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam, 2019a). The democratic dispensation thus had the ethical responsibility of merging some of the institutions to create a single coordinated higher education system in South Africa that was regulated and coherent and that enabled progression in the system (Badat, 2004; Jansen, 2003).

[5] In South African higher education, the traditional rank, hierarchy, and promotion range for academics is Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor, Professor.

The data was analysed in two ways. First, we began with a thematic analysis in which we coded, classified, and categorised the data in an effort to allow the data to speak for itself before imposing the theoretical framework (see Braun et al., 2012; Kilgore, 2017). Second, we drew on the theoretical concepts of field theory, habitus, and the different forms of capital to see to what extent common (theoretical) patterns emerged from it.

Findings and discussion

Decolonisation as responding to (Eurocentric) thought

Decentring Eurocentric thought is at the centre of what academics strongly believe is meant by decolonising curricula in South African higher education (Heleta, 2019). For the academics who took part in this study, the urgent priority facing the South African academy at the moment is ensuring that we expose the colonial roots of the curricula through exploring the kind of readings that are prescribed and the need to reclaim African historiographies.

> I think it will start with the selection of readings. Who are we selecting and why [are] we selecting them . . . currently. I'm not teaching and what I used to do before [was to] ask myself the questions, 'Who am I selecting?', 'Why must I select?', 'From which regions of the world [should I select]?' [This was] because I think it is important especially in higher education. There's a policy draft on internationalisation and I think knowing you and the student exchange was also part of the project of internationalisation [since] we need to expose our students to the different parts of the world. So, for me that was one. (Thoko)

> I would say that it is understanding that you have Eurocentric historiographies on [the] one hand and accompanying that [are] African perspectives because of the world that we [are] living in now during modernity. There's this conflict between Eurocentric historiographies and African historiographies and at some point we need to find a balance. So, decolonization is not entirely about doing away with the Eurocentric thinking. It's more about complementing each other so finding out as an African person firstly who are you as an African person and what makes you African. You do actually have agency and you don't have to . . . be imprisoned by the hegemonic epistemic challenges that we faced as Africans . . . so [we must] try to include African scholars in our modules and in our works. Even when we are publishing we are encouraged to use African scholars and that way we are also influencing the way we teach and what we teach. (Ntokozo)

For the academics above, the politics of selecting which particular readings to use lies at the heart of the decolonial project. Looking at the often hidden, intimate. and isolated site of curriculum design, or what Bernstein (1975) refers to as the site of the discursive gap is critical to achieving the decolonial agenda in curricula. Ntokozo's and Thoko's conception of decolonising curricula reflects the arguments advanced by scholars such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), Hlatshwayo and Shawa (2020) and Heleta (2018) who are not necessarily calling for the rejection of all Eurocentric scholarship and its epistemic traditions but for the re-centring

of previously othered knowledge systems, and for this agenda to be prioritized in higher education curricula. For Ntokozo, there is a tension between Eurocentric and African epistemic traditions, and, for him, the decolonial project is to ensure that there is a sensitive balance between the two. Ntokozo's and Thoko's conceptual understanding of decolonising curricula in the South Africa academy reflects Mbembe's (2015) argument that the Eurocentric canon is often deeply embedded in the curricula of the Global South, and that this is one that "tries to portray colonialism as a normal form of social relations between human beings rather than a system of exploitation and oppression" (p. 32).

Buhle, below, offers a different conception of decolonising curricula. For her, decolonisation is a dialectical relationship between decolonising the mind as well as the place one is occupying. For her, there is a relationship between the mind and space. She believes that before we attempt to decolonise and transform our environment, we need, first, to focus on the self and make sure that we are transformative intentional actors. She said,

> Decolonising the curriculum is a last resort. I think we first have to decolonise our minds . . . because I can't get to decolonise the documents or the theories and the philosophies when my mind is still. . . stuck in a colonial way. So, it starts with the individual and [deciding] what is it that needs to be done. So decolonisation is broad and it goes a very long way because [we are] decolonising the space that was previously a white space and . . . we also wonder how people are reading your presence in the space, because when you say you are decolonising the curriculum they will even question what . . . you know about the theories for you to be able to go to the extent of decolonising. It's all about . . . how are we thinking about the things that we do and particularly in [this] space, and how we are thinking about the things that we are teaching.

Buhle's concern about the need to decolonise the mind indicates some of the pain, anguish, and frustration that Black academics often have to navigate and negotiate when they make their entry into the academy where they are often seen as bodies out of place (see Khunou et al., 2019) and as "space invaders" (according to the title of Puwar's (2004) book) who are neither valued nor recognised. For Black academics, like Buhle, who do not have the right kind of habitus in the academy, that is, the values, attributes, gazes, and dispositions that are valued and legitimated in it, teaching and learning and changing curricula often bring challenges and meet resistance, resulting in academics being questioned, judged, and deemed potential troublemakers who do not know what they are doing.

Academics, largely, have understood the decolonising of curricula as not only responding to the Eurocentrism in them, but also as balancing the tension between European epistemic traditions and African knowledge systems. This has meant that academics are critically aware and reflective of the kinds of readings they are choosing, and the geographical positions of scholars they are citing. The discourse of decolonising curricula has largely been underpinned by a re-centring of other knowledge systems rather than the replacement of Western epistemic traditions. Often, academics are aware of the struggles they are confronting in the

academy and of the need to have the right kind of habitus in order for them to navigate and negotiate the space.

Re-centring African epistemic traditions in curricula

Re-centring African epistemic traditions features prominently in the literature as one of the strategies for decolonising curricula in the Global South (see Le Grange, 2016; Madlingozi, 2018; Zondi, 2018). Re-centring African epistemic traditions is also critical to the academics who took part in this study about how curricula could be transformed and decolonised in the South African university. For most of these academic participants, dismantling the Eurocentric curriculum and its colonising gaze is not enough. They also expressed some of the excitement, frustrations, challenges, and opportunities that come with attempting to transform curricula. Reflecting on this, Menzi comments below on what could be referred to as an epistemic and ontological separation in having to dislocate himself and his indigenous knowledge systems that are not recognized, valued, and legitimated in the South African schooling system, in order to negotiate his entry and success at university. He said,

> I grew up in a context where . . . lots of black South Africans can relate to this . . . where my worldview as an African person for instance was completely removed from my education[al] worldviews. As a rural young man I had practices and experiences which were not given attention in the educational system in the classroom so I was taught science and technology in an abstract westernised way which did not have a direct link to who I am as a person. So, my personal world views and my educational views were not meeting each other. There was no interaction and it made me struggle so much in learning science. I will give you some instances; growing up I knew how to ferment a number of foods and locally here you ferment Zulu beer and all that so I know how many days particular food items will stay before they ferment. (Menzi)

For Menzi above, there are epistemic and ontological implications that come with having to implement alienating and largely Eurocentric and colonising curricula. There was a social disconnection between the indigenous knowledge systems that he was taught and in which he was socialised at home and curricula that kept rejecting him and making him feel inferior in the classroom. As we can see, the traditional cultural capital with which he grew up did not align with that valued by the university and this resulted in conflict. This social disconnection has real and material implications for how he struggled academically given that the curriculum was alienating and, furthermore, inaccessible to him. Boughey and McKenna (2016) write about this phenomenon in the South African academy as consisting of methods and strategies that decontextualise learners in that their habitus and cultural capital that they bring to the academy along with their backgrounds, perspectives, indigenous knowledge systems, traditions, and cultural practices are disregarded at the altar of Eurocentric methods and their voices are silenced along with their languages. The aim becomes one of inducting students into a specific academic literacy and other forms of colonising regimentation to make them fit neatly and cleanly into the academy.

Continuing on this existential conception of curricula and why they need to be decolonised, Sithembile sees this endeavour as Africans fighting to be themselves and to succeed in the academy.

> Decolonisation is just decolonisation which is the Africa we've been taught or made to understand [in which] we do not have anything to contribute towards knowledge. We don't have any form of systematic learning that existed before hence there is nothing to harness from that, so we were then given a Eurocentric kind of way of thinking. So now for me it's just the reclaiming back of what Africa has to ask for in terms of knowledge systems that worked for thousands of years. (Sithembile)

Decolonisation as negotiating confusion and ambiguity, and dealing with disruptions

Although there is broad consensus in the field regarding the ethical commitment to transforming and decolonising curricula, there are still some disagreements and a great deal of ambiguity and confusion that academics express regarding what decolonisation means and what is demanded of them, and, perhaps more importantly, for them. They need to know how to embrace the call to begin to decolonise their curricula. Njabulo and Sithembile commented on these challenges in feeling that "they have to" decolonise, and navigating what they feel is increasingly becoming an imposed decolonial "buzzword" for them. Njabulo said,

> I know I have to do it and I think I have kind of. . . an idea how to incorporate it into my teaching and making sure it is part of the course that I'm teaching but I haven't started doing [this]. It is taking time for me to really get to a deep understanding of what these people mean. When I say what do these people mean, I'm talking about the people who are advocating for decolonisation. To some extent, I got involved in a committee which was involved in curriculum transformation in another university and I discovered there a lot of misunderstandings about what this mean[s].

Sithembile said,

> For me, I always get the sense that people think that there has not been some form of decolonising the curriculum that had been taking place before it became the buzzword. . . for me the fact that in our teaching we draw on our African context . . . although we are [also] speaking in terms of these dead white men. But we also supplement the understanding with our own kind of context so it's not like I don't know for me. It's as if we are acting as [though] it's something that some people have not done. We've always taught our context. You understood where you were at so when you speak and [use] examples . . . you draw from . . . things that will relate to the learners that are in your school.

For Njabulo, there is frustration, confusion, and animosity surrpunding the calls for decolonisation. She feels that the project has become impositionist in nature, with "these people"—her fellow academics and proponents of decolonisation—forcing her to transform

and decolonise her curricula. This, we argue, raises the ethics of decoloniality so we have to ask to what extent can we decolonise and transform curricula through the neoliberal individualist framework in which individuals are asked to self-transform and decolonise in and of themselves without any external force or pressure? Teferra (2020) echoes Sithembile's and Njabulo's argument above and calls for what he refers to as the shift from "dumb decolonization" to "smart internationalisation" (para. 8) in cautioning against what he sees as the hidden and implicit co-option of the nativist conceptions of the university in rejecting its universal epistemic orientations. Although we are deeply troubled by Teferra (2020)'s conceptual and philosophical collapsing of decolonisation with Africanisation, his critique is nonetheless valid in helping us to align decolonising curricula with the imperatives of internationalisation which would enable South African universities to be competitive and to become centres of choice in global knowledge production.

Furthermore, beyond Sithembile's suggestion that decolonisation has become a buzzword there is a growing sense from the academics that the calls for decolonising curricula have been rooted in what academics have termed the "disruptive" and "politicised" student protests. Reflecting on this, Menzi said,

> Disruptive university student strikes sometimes can be politicised and things can get out of hand quickly and easily. You know there's this usual stuff of stopping lectures and not allow[ing] anyone to come onto campus and all that. So, yes, if that is what disruptive means . . . sometimes . . . when people strike what I ask them is. 'Why strike?' and sometimes they misinterpret [but] sometimes you see people striking [and]you don't even know why they are striking and even those that are participating in the strikes don't know why they are striking! So sometimes they just take management on [with] no prior notice or information or queries or enquiries. And boom there is a strike so there's disrupt[ion] of academic programs and people don't go in or come out and all of that but . . . it is disrupting the academic programs and it was stopping people from coming in and going out [of campus].

In the extract above, Menzi equates decolonising of curricula with the emergent student protests that have largely disrupted the academic programmes at South African universities. Other academics have reflected on feeling vulnerable, isolated, and, at times, depressed in attempting to engage with student protests that have often disrupted lectures and seminar discussions while feeling that they are not getting any support from the university itself. These concerns are further echoed by Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam (2019a) who write about what they refer to as the underbelly of the #RhodesMustFall that resulted in the increasing militarisation, bullying, entitlement, demands, and contestations in curricula reform in the South African university.

Conclusion

Universities in the Global South continue to grapple with the increasing clarion calls for decolonising and transforming the public university (see Mukherjee, 2017). In South Africa,

the 2015–2016 student movements brought to our dinner tables discussion of the often marginalising and alienating curricula that academics and students often experience and struggle to negotiate (Heffernanet al., 2016; Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam, 2019b). In this paper, we have foregrounded and explored academics' understanding of decolonising curricula in a research-intensive university in South Africa. The findings suggest that academics often understand the decolonisation of curricula as being, largely, a process of responding to and dismantling what is seen to be a Eurocentric and colonising one, and the need to re-centre African epistemic traditions such as indigenous knowledge systems. There are still growing concerns regarding the confusion and ambiguity, and the disruption that is brought about by decolonisation with some academics feeling that they do not understand what decolonisation is committed to and what the implications are for them. Also, they experience the vulnerability that comes with the increasing militarisation and student protests on campus. Based on the above conclusions, we therefore make the following recommendations.

- More theoretical and empirical research is still required to explore academics' understanding of the calls for transformation and decolonisation. There is often an implicit and hidden assumption that academics 1) know and understand what decolonisation is, 2) what is expected of them, and 3) that they all have a singular and monolithic conception of achieving decolonial aims. Further research is still required to explore all these nuances, complexities, and potential contradictions.
- There is often a conceptual collapse and categorical error that is made in the literature when decolonisation is used interchangeably with the nativist forms of Africanisation (see, for example, Teferra, 2020; Madlingozi, 2018). Further theoretical explications are required that will tease out the differences so as to avoid ambiguities and confusion between the two theoretical strands.

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