Decolonisation of the curriculum: A case study of the Durban University of Technology in South Africa

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The call for the decolonisation of universities and curricula in South Africa was at the centre of the 2015 Fallist protests. The protests, which left a trail of destruction and many universities closed for periods of time, had as one of their positive outcomes the precipitation of a renewed interest in the decolonisation of university education debate. The debate on decolonisation at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) in South Africa is long overdue, given that the Western model of academic organisation on which it, like most South African universities, is based, remains largely Eurocentric. This paper adds to the debate by discussing what decolonisation might mean to the DUT's students, staff and the greater community. It explores the importance of decolonisation and how this process can be taken forward at DUT. The purpose is not to prescribe how decolonisation is to be done but to open up ways of (re)thinking university curricula and opportunities for further discussion and action.

Keywords: Africa; Africanisation; community; curriculum; decolonisation; indigenisation; internationalisation; staff; student; university

Introduction

This paper is as a result of the Durban University of Technology (DUT) 2017 Annual Performance Plan, which required the University to engage with students and staff with the aim of developing a discussion paper on decolonisation at DUT. It is largely influenced by ideas that were discussed at the workshop conducted by the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) of the Durban University of Technology (DUT) on the 16th of March 2017 under the theme *Decolonising the curriculum: A series of unfortunate problematisations*. The workshop was conducted in the DUT's Mansfield Hall at Ritson Campus.

The paper also takes into consideration suggestions that emerged in the two debating sessions conducted under the theme *Decolonisation in Higher Education*, that were held on the 4th of August and the 5th of October 2017. The Research and Postgraduate Directorate was the main organiser of the sessions co-hosted by the following:

- The Institute for Systems Science (iSS)
- The International Center for Non-violence (ICON)
- The Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT)
- The Writing Centre (WrC)

Both the workshop and the debating sessions were attended by DUT staff and students. They were attended by approximately +/-100 participants in each session.

This paper is also a culmination of the many meetings that the Institution's Decolonisation Task Team, which comprised both staff (four representatives from the Teaching and Learning ambit, two from the Research, Innovation and Engagement ambit, one post-graduate student, three undergraduate students), convened to deliberate on how a balanced paper on decolonisation of education at DUT could be compiled. In these meetings, many leading scholars on decolonisation of education were discussed and consequently shaped the content and structure of this paper. Such scholars include Frantz Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Achille Mbembe, Ashley Currier, Philippa Levine, Nompumelelo Motlafi, and many others.

Decolonisation is a broad term that is understood differently by different people, especially in the higher education landscape. One of the biggest challenges encountered in this decolonial conjuncture is to create a shared understanding of what the term means to different stakeholders. This paper explores key issues in the decolonisation debate from the perspective of students, staff, management, the greater community and leading scholars on the subject. The paper will by no means be exhaustive in its attempt to define the term. It is intended to stimulate discussion that may lead to a better understanding of what decolonisation entails at a university of technology (UoT) like DUT. The following questions were used to guide the decolonisation workshop and debates that were conducted at DUT. However, the second question was not foregrounded as the Institution, as spelt out by the 2017 Performance Plan had already taken the position that it would go ahead with the decolonisation process. Emphasis was therefore placed not on why it is important to decolonise but how to roll out the process. The following questions were used with the hope of foregrounding the central issues on decolonisation:

1. What is decolonisation?
2. Why is it important to decolonise?

3. Is it necessary to consider what is taught and how it is taught?
4. How can the decolonisation process be steered without stifling other equally important processes such as internationalisation and globalisation?
5. What is the role of multilingualism in the decolonisation process?
6. What should be added or removed from the curriculum to ensure decolonisation?
7. How can teaching and learning be constructed to ensure decolonisation?
8. What aspects of the DUT's identity, architecture and culture need to be maintained or changed?

This paper is structured as follows. The first section is a general overview of what constitutes decolonisation. This is necessary as 'decolonisation' is a contentious term. What follows thereafter is a section that seeks to clarify whether decolonisation is synonymous with Africanisation as the two terms often used interchangeably. This is followed by the discussion on decolonisation of the curriculum, which begins with the explicit curriculum and details how multilingualism can be handled in the decolonisation process at DUT. Next is a discussion on the hidden curriculum of architecture and public spaces, which is followed by the discussion regarding how internationalisation can contribute towards decolonisation at the Institution and the conclusion.

Towards an Understanding of Decolonisation

Although there are divergent views on what decolonisation means, we can be guided by some leading scholars, such as Wa Thiong'o (1994:94) who states:

> *Education is a means of knowledge about ourselves [...] After we have examined ourselves, we radiate outwards and discover peoples and worlds around us. With Africa at the centre of things, not existing as an appendix or a satellite of other countries and literatures, things must be seen from the African perspective [...] All other things are to be considered in their relevance to our situation and their contribution towards understanding ourselves. In suggesting this we are not rejecting other streams, especially the western stream.*

Following Wa Thiong'o (1994), we, academics at DUT, take the stance that the way we participate in the world of knowledge is consciously driven by our location on this continent and by the realities of our history. This means, first, that the needs of this context, the resources of our environment and the ways in which African people have developed knowledge to address those needs and drawn on those resources inform our ongoing development of knowledge. It means, secondly, that we participate in knowledge production with others around the world as peers. We recognise that their perspective, likewise, is influenced by their contexts and locations. Such a vantage point has implications for the kind of curriculum content and the ways in which curricula are designed and implemented in African universities. Such implications will be

discussed below. However, before we look at these implications, it is imperative that we attempt to deconstruct the term 'decolonisation' in order to establish the beginnings of a shared approach at the University.

An etymological and linguistic analysis of the word 'decolonisation' might help shed some light on what decolonisation might entail in the context of a large South African university of technology. Decolonisation is a noun made up of a prefix 'de-,' which according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, is a Latin prefix used to indicate removal, separation, dethroning, negation or reversal. As a Latin prefix, it also served the function of undoing or reversing a verb's action, and hence it came to be used as a pure privative – "not, do the opposite of, undo" - which is its primary function as a living prefix in English, as for example in 'defrost,' 'defuse' and 'deregister.' The prefix 'de-' is combined with the verb '-colonise,' which according to the Oxford Online Dictionary (Oxford University Press, 2017), means to appropriate (a place or domain) for one's own use. Its synonyms include to: occupy, take over, seize, capture, or take possession of. The Latin suffix '-ation,' which means action or process of doing something is then added to generate the noun 'decolonisation.' From the analysis of the noun decolonisation, it is clear that the term refers to a process that involves dealing with the effects of colonisation. The biggest challenge, however, is not deciding whether decolonisation is necessary in the higher education context or not, but rather how it can be achieved. It is important to acknowledge from the outset that the decolonisation mission is a mammoth challenge as it is not an event but a process that involves careful planning; listening to many divergent voices; reflecting on what is possible and not possible in the University context; and implementing and reviewing of all actions.

Decolonisation is a necessary response to colonialism and apartheid in South Africa. Colonialism and apartheid resulted in the denigration and decimation of indigenous knowledges (Le Grange, 2016:4). Santos (2014:92) refers to the decimation of knowledge as 'the murder of knowledge' which he designates epistemicide. He writes:

> Unequal exchanges among cultures have always implied the death of the knowledge of the subordinated culture, hence the death of the social groups that possessed it. In most extreme cases, such as that of European expansion, epistemicide was one of the conditions of genocide. The loss of epistemological confidence that currently afflicts modern science has facilitated the identification of the scope and gravity of the epistemicides perpetrated by hegemonic Eurocentric modernity.

In the words of Le Grange (2016:4), it is because of epistemicide that cognitive justice should be sought. In other words, it is time to recognise other

knowledge traditions such as African traditions, which have hitherto been on the periphery due to overreliance on western and northern knowledge traditions. But does this mean an outright abandoning of hegemonic knowledge traditions and replacing them with the previously marginalised knowledge traditions? We argue that it certainly does not. There should be ways of working with existing knowledge traditions in a manner that will make them more relevant to the African context. These will be proffered as steps towards decolonisation at DUT.

From the outset, it is important to note that diversity of knowledge traditions ought not be viewed as a stumbling block, but a resource, which can be harnessed for the growth and development of higher education. Before exploring how diversity can be utilised for the greater good, it is essential to clear one misconception that is often associated with decolonisation in Africa, that is, that decolonisation is synonymous with African-isation.

Is decolonisation synonymous with Africanisation?

Often-times, decolonisation and Africanisation are assumed to be synonymous and are even used interchangeably by some scholars and general users of these terms. However, in this paper we would like to make a distinction between the two terms that are both popular but used differently by different people. We begin by tracing the history of the relationship between the two terms.

From the late 1950s to the late 1970s, some African nations like Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia and Mozambique liberated themselves from the yoke of colonialism. This was a nation-building era, characterised by intense debates on decolonisation and Africanisation. During this time, 'decolonisation' became synonymous with 'Africanisation.' It was a period of undoing the evils of colonisation through nation building projects that would show the world that Africa was at last free from colonisation, and hence, the two terms were used interchangeably in most literature. Fanon (1963) however, was extremely critical of "Africanisation," which he dismissed in Chapter 3 of *The Wretched of the Earth* as a form of chauvinism, which had the potential to metamorphose into racism. Although Fanon dismissed the ideology on entirely political grounds, his reasoning still has a place in today's debates on the decolonisation of universities and curricula. Since the term Africanisation is controversial, we will not equate it with decolonisation in this paper. As the focus of this paper is not on Africanisation, we choose instead to turn our focus to talking about the African continent and the values, norms, sensibilities, hopes, fears, and aspirations of its people.

Decolonisation of the curriculum

Curriculum scholars identify three broad perspectives on curriculum, which have hitherto not received much attention in relation to the decolonisation debate that has taken centre stage in the South African higher education landscape. These are: the explicit, the hidden, and the null curriculum. Le Grange (2016:7) defines the explicit curriculum as that with which students are provided such as module frameworks, prescribed readings, assessments guidelines, etc. The hidden curriculum is what students learn about the dominant culture of a university, and what values it reproduces. The null curriculum is what universities leave out, namely, what is not taught and learned in a university. These distinctions help us to identify the explicit, hidden, and null curriculum at DUT, and to identify ways of (re)thinking the curriculum such that it is decolonised. We begin with the explicit curriculum and how lessons can be drawn from the theoretical perspective proposed in this paper.

In this paper, we propose that the decolonisation of the curriculum be underpinned by a humanistic philosophical approach. Le Grange (2016) proposes a four pillar humanistic approach that is central to the emergent indigenous paradigm. These are:

- **Relational accountability:** this concerns the fact that all constituent parts of the curriculum are connected and accountable to both human and non-human relations.
- **Respectful representation:** this relates to how the curriculum recognises and generates opportunities for the knowledge of indigenous people and their voices.
- **Reciprocal appropriation:** this alludes to the fact that the benefits of knowledge generated and disseminated are shared by both universities and communities.
- **Rights and regulation:** this constitutes the observation of ethical protocols that accord copyright of knowledge to indigenous peoples of the world where appropriate.

These key pillars of the decolonisation process deserve our attention when conducting educational research within and on our practice as members of the community of a university of technology. In particular, as a UoT is called to "be a preferred university for developing leadership in technology and productive citizenship" (DUT, 2018:para. 1) it is important to place greater emphasis on embracing indigenous knowledge systems (IKSs), including African technologies and knowledges, which may curb what the former Minister of Higher Education Blade Nzimande (Dell, 2014) constantly referred to as "mission drift" at universities of technology. More importantly, this may help attain Julius Nyerere's dream of liberating African minds. According to Nyerere (1978:27–28), "The ideas imparted by education, or released in the mind through education, should

therefore be liberating ideas; the skills acquired by education should be liberating skills […] Teaching which induces a slave mentality or a sense of impotence is not education at all — it is attack on the minds of men." In other words, decolonisation has to start in the mind. Once the mind is liberated institutions can readily embrace indigenous knowledge systems.

Multilingualism

We continue with the explicit curriculum and how lessons can be drawn from Wa Thiong'o's positions, especially on issues pertaining to language. Central to his seminal 1994 publication, *Decolonising the Mind* is the need to teach African languages. Mbembe (2015:17) reiterates this position by emphatically stating that,

> *A decolonised university in Africa should put African languages at the centre of its teaching and learning project […] The African university of tomorrow will be multilingual. It will teach (in) Swahili, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Shona, Yoruba, Hausa, Lingala, Gikuyu and it will teach all those other African languages French, Portuguese or Arabic have become while making a space for Chinese, Hindu etc. It will turn these languages into a creative repository of concepts originating from the four corners of the Earth.*

Thus, decolonisation is not about closing the door to western and northern traditions. It is about making African knowledge the centre in relation to other knowledge traditions, which are all encapsulated in different languages. Multilingualism is therefore the way forward and below are some of the ways in which it can be encouraged, nurtured, and implemented in the teaching and learning project at a UoT. It should, however, be noted that considering the numbers of African languages spoken, it is not practically feasible to try and embrace all of them at the same time. IsiZulu, for example, as one of KwaZulu-Natal's main official languages, can play a significant role in promoting multilingualism. Below, are ideas on how multilingualism can be utilised as a resource at DUT.

It is a fact that English is the official medium of instruction (MoI) in modules other than language modules such as isiZulu at the Institution. Furthermore, the position of the English language as the educational and social lingua franca that unites students and staff who speak different languages is not in question. However, it is imperative that more languages be used in teaching and learning. Embracing multilingualism is crucial as, significantly in an academic context, it boosts concept learning. Concept development is at the core of the teaching and learning of subjects laden with specialised terminologies, and requiring critical thinking. It is here that multilingualism can play a decided role in the dissemination of knowledge and the facilitation of critical thought.

Researchers (Blommaert, 2008; Canagarajah, 2011; Henricks, 2016; Lu, 2009; Pennycook, 2010; Tyler, McKinney & Guzula, 2015) generally agree that when we negotiate and contest the meanings of terms in different languages, including African languages, we facilitate deep as opposed to surface approaches to learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007). Additionally, the learning of a threshold concept (Meyer & Land, 2006:1) can be facilitated by the use of the mother tongue in the classroom and this aids our understanding of the "troublesome" or "core" concepts that are unfamiliar when entering a new field of study.

As an example, Tyler et al. (2015) report on the way in which studies conducted at the University of Cape Town (UCT) have shown how Economics students have deepened their understandings of concepts like 'deficit' by debating the meanings of multiple terms used to express a concept in different languages. They observed that these students have an advantage over monolingual English speakers, who may accept the English term at face value, without interrogating its meaning. Rather than proving its obvious efficacy however, the question at this stage is how multilingualism might be embraced at the University. The following are some of the ways we can begin to view different languages as meaning-making resources rather than as liabilities.

- **Multilingual classroom talk:** Scholars generally agree that it is good practice for students to use their first language to discuss and ask questions in small groups in what is known as 'exploratory talk' (Blommaert, 2008; Canagarajah, 2011; Lu, 2009; Pennycook, 2010). Henricks (2016:20) clearly explains that the purpose of exploratory talk is to clarify ideas in pairs or groups. She further states that in this relaxed context, accurate language is not important. She is, however, unequivocal in distinguishing exploratory talk from 'presentational talk,' which is more formal and meant to display the speaker's knowledge. Henricks (2016:20) further argues that "Switching between languages in exploratory talk and using English in presentational talk is useful for facilitating epistemic access in what students are likely to experience as a safe classroom space." This, she argues also creates social cohesion in the classroom. Exploratory talk is most applicable to small classes, especially tutorial groups where a tutor can work with small groups and one-to-one consultations such as those offered by the DUT Writing Centre. It only works where the mediator shares the same language with the learners, or where the learners themselves share the same language. For example, two learners sharing the same language, be it isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, Afrikaans, Chi-Shona, or other languages, can explore concepts as pairs.

- **Translanguaging:** This is a neology that was first coined by Cen Williams in 1994 to refer to "the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system" (Canagarajah, 2011:401). In translanguaging, the learner

and/or the teacher can use a concept in one language, isiZulu, for example, to explain a concept presented in English. Henricks (2016:20) refers to an isiXhosa example *ukulawula ngegqudu,* which literally means 'to control with a stick' or knobkerrie (*knopkierie* in Afrikaans, *induku* in isiZulu), which she says can be used to effectively explain the concept of patriarchy. The benefits of translanguaging are immense. These include:

- the maximisation of learning (Hornberger, 2005);
- boosting learners' confidence and motivation (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Lin, 2013);
- balancing the power-relations among languages in the classroom (Canagarajah, 2011);
- both the teachers and learners enrich their linguistic repertoires in the learning process; and
- using of higher order thinking and intercultural negotiation to draw on nuanced meanings of concepts in the multilingual classroom (Henricks, 2016:20).

Translanguaging is important at DUT, which has a student population of about 30,000 students, more than 80% of which are disadvantaged students, drawn mainly from deep rural and peri-urban communities of KwaZulu-Natal (81% African, 1% coloured, 11% Indian and 2% white students) (DUT, n.d.). The majority of the students speak at least English and one African language, mostly isiZulu, along with other languages spoken in South Africa, for example, isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, Afrikaans; and those spoken in the broader region for example, KiSwahili, ChiShona and ChiBemba. This means that DUT is a multilingual speech community, where translanguaging can be practised in ways suggested above under the subheading **"Multilingual classroom talk."**

- **Cornell or split-page summary:** Scholars generally agree that the Cornell or split-page[i] summary creates opportunities for students to gain epistemic access in multilingual classes. Henricks (2016:20) is one of the scholars who supports this method. She argues that students can use this method to translate concepts and write down questions in their first language. This, she further argues creates opportunities for students to use their language repertoires to build their understanding of disciplinary knowledge.

From the above suggestions, it can be concluded that multilingualism is achievable in the tertiary classroom. In the words of Tyler et al. (2015:1) "when languages are viewed as resources rather than problems, it paves the way for the thoughtful, planned and informed use of more than one language in science classrooms and textbooks." Furthermore, multilingualism enhances meaning making, which ultimately enriches students' learning of both subjects and multiple languages. More importantly, promoting multilingualism can help to create new knowledge especially in science – knowledge that is inclusive of the indigenous knowledge systems that have hitherto been marginalised in the country's curriculum. Multilingualism can be utilised to create and express accepted scientific meanings. The multilingual composition of DUT ought to be reflected in its teaching and learning practices; that is, one way of ensuring that students, especially African students who do not have English as their first language, do not feel alienated, which is a recurrent motif raised by students and staff in the decolonisation debates.

The Hidden Curriculum of Architecture and Public Spaces

Architecture and public spaces play a crucial role in the decolonisation process. The learning spaces and other buildings at the university are not just buildings, but represent specific cultural values. In Bourdieu's terminology, they embody significant symbolic capital. As such, any decolonisation process ought to consider the contentious issue of architecture and public space. In the words of Mbembe (2015:5),

> The decolonisation of buildings and of public spaces is inseparable from the democratisation of access … But when we say access, we are also talking about the creation of those conditions that will allow black staff and students to say of the university: "This is my home. I am not an outsider here. I do not have to beg or to apologise to be here. I belong here."

Again, the motif of alienation is central to the decolonisation process. Although the above quotation specifically refers to African students, the decolonisation process should make all students whether disabled, black, white, coloured, Indian, local or international feel at home. The following recommendations may be positive steps towards the decolonisation of the University's public spaces.

- **Renaming of the university:** The current name Durban University of Technology is insensitive to the multilingual nature of the institution. Here, we can take a leaf from our neighbouring university, University of KwaZulu-Natal – Inyuvesi yaKwaZulu-Natali, whose logo carries both the English and isiZulu name. Having such a bilingual name is of profound symbolic significance. It signifies that the University is proud of its local heritage, the isiZulu language and culture as epitomised by the isiZulu name; at the same time, the University values global knowledge as represented by the English name. Renaming the University will therefore be one symbolic gesture to show that it is committed to decolonising the university and its curricula.
- **Making signage multilingual:** The current signage seems insensitive to the multilingual nature of the institution. The inclusion of at least one regional official language, which in this case is isiZulu, is highly recommended. Such an inclusion is a way of showing that DUT's hidden curriculum or null curriculum values indigenous languages, such as isiZulu.
- **Redesigning of architecture:** The current infrastructure is by and large Western in design, representing Western aesthetics. Decolonisation does not imply destroying 'modern and historical buildings' and replacing them with 'mud huts,'

which, even if it were desirable, would detract from the pressing concerns of food security, accommodation and employment across the continent. However, a university in Africa should indeed show that it is in Africa, and not in Europe. Since the option of destroying what we have is not feasible, existing buildings may for example be decolonised through paintings and artefacts that tell African stories, in particular those that talk about KwaZulu-Natal and its encounter with the world. As the University continues to grow, new buildings should also take classical as well as contemporary feats of African architectural design into consideration. This would more actively value and promote our own art and design, especially that produced by our own students. It is essential to involve students more in the designing of buildings. For example, DUT offers Architectural Technology in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment, where students doing this programme can be tasked with projects on how to design the University's spaces in this decolonial dispensation. Such projects should involve both female and male students, and take pains to promote female students in particular, who should be given an opportunity to design and redesign public spaces in ways that make the University community stand against violence against women. Student input ought to be valued in the designing of new spaces and refurbishment of already existing spaces. That is one sure strategy for ensuring that students do not feel alienated, but instead promote a strong sense of belonging amongst them.

The Contribution of Internationalisation to the Decolonisation of The Curriculum

> "I think of internationalisation in terms of building capacity for the university to work with a diversity of backgrounds; [I view it as a way of exposing students to multiple perspectives and worldviews]" (Hessdörfer, Pabst & Ullrich, 2010:5).

Internationalisation of the curriculum in the context of higher education can differ greatly, as it means different things to different people. Notably, internationalisation seems to be the direct antithesis of decolonisation. However, if the curriculum is internationalised with the recognition of the importance of decolonisation, the two can co-exist; they can be viewed as complimentary rather than contradictory. It should, however, be emphasised that indigenous knowledge ought to take centre stage in the way it is packaged and disseminated worldwide. For example, research on indigenous ways of curing medical conditions, such as high blood pressure, cancer, aids, and arthritis, ought to be given prominence, as this would lead to the international recognition of African indigenous knowledge.

Below we suggest how the curriculum can be internationalised in ways that promote the decolonisation process.

- Partnerships with local and other universities in Africa and other parts of the world such as Cuba, should be strengthened. The current situation in which DUT has more partnerships with universities

in the Global North only serves to perpetuate hegemony.
- Promotion of cross-cultural experiences, particularly at undergraduate level, cannot be overemphasised in this globalised world. DUT requires a much more concerted effort to expose students to diverse perspectives and worldviews through well-coordinated exchange programmes.
- The university needs to start collaborating on the basis of what it offers about Africa, and not what it might hope to receive from Europe.
- Channels need to be created for the appreciation, marketing and exportation of the education products created within the university be it publications, innovations, or whatever knowledge outputs they are.
- Recognising things that are intrinsically African, which we do not need from the Global North and other parts of the world.
- Developing a unique South African education brand that foregrounds *ubuntu* (humanism).
- Developing a curriculum that results in the University retaining its best minds.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to shed light on what decolonisation means and how it may be enacted at DUT, which as discussed is a unique UoT, whose curriculum can be decolonised by considering its location and the students and community it serves. The paper is, however, by no means prescriptive, but opens up ways of (re)thinking the university curricula and the ways in which it is delivered. For a contentious topic such as decolonisation, it was not possible to incorporates suggestions made by students and staff, as some suggestions still need to be debated further. It is hoped that the paper will ignite more discussions on decolonisation and lead DUT to practical steps leading to a decolonised university. As emphasised in the introduction, this is a long process. This paper ought to galvanise the DUT community into more discussions that will culminate in tangible resources such as a user-friendly decolonisation toolkit that staff can use in determining the extent to which the principles of decolonisation have been integrated into their DUT curriculum.

Acknowledgements

Notes
i.   See: https://sites.google.com/site/notetakingandstudyskil-ls/note-taking-methods/cornell-method.
ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.

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