

A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY ON THE LEGACY OF COLONIALISM IN EDUCATION: CONFRONTING PAST AND PRESENT INFLUENCES

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Abstract

The decolonization of South African universities is a critical movement to dismantle colonial legacies that continue to shape higher education. Despite efforts to redefine curricula, institutional cultures often marginalize indigenous knowledge systems. This study examines the gaps in current decolonization initiatives and advocates for systemic transformation that integrates African epistemologies into teaching, research, and community engagement. A qualitative research design was employed, incorporating policy analysis, stakeholder interviews, and case studies across three universities in KwaZulu-Natal: Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), Durban University of Technology (DUT), and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). 450 participants were surveyed to assess perspectives on decolonization and institutional responses. Findings indicate varying levels of support for decolonization efforts: at MUT, 30% strongly support, 35% support, 20% are neutral, 10% oppose, and 5% strongly oppose; at DUT, 40% strongly support, 30% support, 15% are neutral, 10% oppose, and 5% strongly oppose; at UKZN, 45% strongly support, 25% support, 15% are neutral, 10% oppose, and 5% strongly oppose. Key strategies identified for meaningful transformation include Indigenous student recruitment and retention, curriculum redesign centered on African epistemologies, and partnerships with local communities to co-create knowledge. While there is strong support for decolonization, resistance remains a challenge. Addressing this requires institutional commitment, inclusive policymaking, and sustained engagement with indigenous knowledge holders. Universities must embed decolonization principles within their frameworks by implementing curriculum reforms, strengthening community collaborations, and fostering policies that prioritize African scholarship. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on educational transformation in South Africa, offering practical strategies for systemic change.

Keywords: Decolonisation, Curriculum Transformation, Africanisation, Indigenous Knowledge, Transformative Education, Equity, Higher Education Reform, Community Engagement

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The legacy of colonialism in South Africa continues to manifest in its education system, particularly within universities where curricula and institutional cultures often reflect Eurocentric perspectives. South African higher education has historically been shaped by a Western academic model, privileging knowledge systems and narratives that marginalize or exclude indigenous perspectives (Le Grange, 2016). This exclusionary approach has perpetuated a lack of representation for African epistemologies and contributed to systemic inequalities in access, participation, and knowledge production within universities.

The need to decolonize education was brought to the forefront by the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements of 2015, where students protested against structural inequalities and the lack of transformation in higher education (Heleta, 2016). These movements emphasized the importance of dismantling colonial legacies and reimagining universities as spaces that reflect diverse cultures, histories, and knowledge systems. While these protests triggered widespread debate and policy discussions on decolonization, the implementation of these ideas remains inconsistent and fraught with challenges (Jansen, 2017).

Decolonizing universities involves more than revising curricula; it encompasses a comprehensive transformation of institutional cultures, research practices, and student experiences. Scholars argue for an integration of indigenous knowledge systems, prioritization of African languages, and an inclusive research approach that engages local communities (Mbembe, 2016). Despite these calls, South African universities still struggle to balance global competitiveness with the imperative to indigenize and Africanise their educational offerings.

This paper examines the discourse surrounding the decolonization of higher education in South Africa, exploring its implications for students, staff, and the wider community. By analyzing existing literature, policies, and stakeholder perspectives, the study aims to identify practical pathways for fostering transformation within universities. In doing so, it contributes to the broader conversation on how South African higher education can become more inclusive, representative, and responsive to the needs of its diverse population.

The concept of decolonization has garnered significant attention in the field of higher education, particularly in societies grappling with the lingering effects of colonialism. In South Africa, the discourse is driven by historical inequalities, Eurocentric curricula, and

institutional cultures that fail to reflect the diverse realities of the nation. This review delves into the core areas of decolonization understanding its meaning, curriculum transformation, institutional culture, Indigenous knowledge systems, challenges, and implications for higher education policy and practice.

Understanding Decolonisation

Decolonization in higher education refers to the deliberate process of dismantling colonial structures, perspectives, and practices that dominate educational institutions. As Le Grange (2016) argues, decolonization is not merely about rejecting Western knowledge but involves a critical engagement that allows the coexistence and validation of multiple epistemologies. Similarly, Mbembe (2016) emphasizes that decolonization aims to liberate universities from Eurocentric norms and create institutions that value local knowledge systems. This process includes addressing systemic power imbalances, fostering inclusivity, and reshaping academic practices to reflect diverse global perspectives.

The decolonization debate in South Africa gained momentum following the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests of 2015. These movements underscored the need to rethink the foundations of higher education and highlighted the marginalization of African knowledge systems in academia (Heleta, 2016). However, there remains ambiguity about what decolonization entails in practice, which often leads to fragmented and inconsistent efforts across institutions.

Curriculum Transformation

One of the most visible and debated aspects of decolonization is the transformation of university curricula. Scholars such as Luckett (2016) and Jansen (2017) note that South African university curricula are heavily influenced by Western paradigms, often neglecting indigenous perspectives and histories. This Eurocentrism limits students' ability to engage with knowledge systems that are relevant to their sociocultural and economic contexts.

La Grange (2016) asserts that curriculum transformation should involve the integration of African languages, indigenous histories, and local knowledge systems. For example, the incorporation of isiZulu or Xhosa into scientific and technical fields could foster inclusivity and accessibility. Heleta (2016) also highlights the importance of embedding indigenous research methodologies in curricula to address local challenges effectively. However, curriculum reform is not without resistance. Critics argue that overemphasis on decolonization might compromise academic standards and global competitiveness, a concern that underscores the need for balance in reform efforts (Luckett, 2016).

Institutional Culture and Inclusivity

Institutional culture is another critical aspect of decolonization. According to Mbembe (2016), many South African universities maintain hierarchical

structures and practices that marginalize Indigenous students and staff. These exclusionary cultures often manifest in language policies, academic traditions, and administrative practices that prioritize Western norms over local ones (Soudien, 2015).

Transforming institutional culture involves addressing systemic barriers that limit access and retention for marginalized groups. This includes revisiting admission policies, creating inclusive environments, and fostering a sense of belonging for all stakeholders. For example, universities could implement mentorship programs for Indigenous students or provide staff training on cultural sensitivity. Efforts to decolonize institutional culture also extend to symbolic changes, such as renaming buildings, revising codes of conduct, and incorporating African art and literature into public spaces (Heleta, 2016).

Integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)

The inclusion of Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) is central to the decolonization process. La Grange (2016) argues that IKS provides alternative ways of understanding the world, challenging dominant Western paradigms. For example, African indigenous practices in agriculture, medicine, and environmental management offer sustainable solutions to contemporary issues. Integrating IKS into academic curricula not only enriches the learning experience but also validates the lived experiences and expertise of local communities.

Despite its benefits, the integration of IKS is often met with resistance. Luckett (2016) observes that many academics perceive IKS as unscientific or incompatible with established disciplinary frameworks. Addressing these biases requires a shift in academic attitudes and the development of interdisciplinary approaches that bridge the gap between Western and Indigenous knowledge systems.

Challenges and Critiques

While the call for decolonization has been widely embraced, it faces several challenges. One major issue is the lack of consensus on what decolonization entails and how it should be implemented. Jansen (2017) warns against oversimplifying the concept, arguing that decolonization should not lead to the outright rejection of Western knowledge but should instead promote a dialogue between diverse epistemologies.

Financial and resource constraints also hinder decolonization efforts. Many universities struggle to secure funding for curriculum reform, staff training, and research initiatives that prioritize indigenous knowledge. Additionally, political resistance and differing institutional priorities often slow the pace of transformation (Heleta, 2016). These challenges highlight the need for coordinated efforts and stakeholder collaboration to ensure the success of decolonization initiatives.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The decolonization of higher education has significant implications for policy and practice. Mbembe (2016) advocates for a holistic approach that aligns curriculum transformation with institutional reforms, including changes in governance structures, funding models, and community engagement practices. Policymakers must prioritize the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in national education frameworks, while universities should establish clear strategies for implementing decolonization initiatives.

Moreover, decolonization presents an opportunity to redefine the role of universities in society. By embracing diverse knowledge systems and fostering local-global connections, South African universities can become hubs of innovation and inclusivity. This transformation requires ongoing dialogue, capacity building, and a commitment to equity and justice in higher education.

The decolonization of South African universities is a critical movement to dismantle colonial legacies that continue to shape higher education. Historically, academic structures have been influenced by Eurocentric perspectives, marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems and limiting the inclusion of African epistemologies. While some progress has been made in curriculum transformation, many efforts remain superficial, failing to address deeper institutional biases and systemic inequalities.

Despite policy changes, African scholars and students continue to experience marginalization, with knowledge production often favoring Western frameworks over Indigenous perspectives. This imbalance affects not only curriculum content but also teaching methodologies, institutional governance, and the role of universities in serving local communities. Meaningful decolonization requires a fundamental shift in academic policies, faculty development, and engagement with Indigenous knowledge holders.

The objective of this study is to assess the impact of decolonization efforts in South African higher education and propose practical strategies for embedding Indigenous knowledge systems into university teaching, research, and community engagement.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How can South African universities institutionalize decolonization in a sustainable and transformative manner to ensure a long-term impact on higher education?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This study adopted a multi-case cross-sectional study design to explore the process and impact of decolonization in higher education at three universities in KwaZulu-Natal: Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), Durban University of Technology (DUT), and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). A multi-case approach was chosen to enable comparative analysis across institutions, allowing for a broader understanding of how different universities navigate decolonization

efforts. The cross-sectional nature of the study ensured that data collection focused on a specific time frame, capturing institutional practices, policies, and stakeholder perceptions within a defined period. By using this design, the study aimed to examine institutional strategies for decolonization, identify challenges, and highlight successful initiatives. This approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of curriculum transformation, institutional culture shifts, and community engagement efforts about decolonization. The study also considered the varying levels of commitment and implementation across the three institutions, recognizing that each university operates within unique historical, socio-economic, and academic contexts.

Study Setting

The research was conducted at three public higher education institutions in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. These universities were selected due to their distinct institutional histories, student demographics, and approaches to higher education transformation. Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) is a historically disadvantaged institution primarily catering to students from underprivileged backgrounds. Located in Umlazi Township, one of the largest townships in South Africa, MUT focuses on applied sciences and technology-related programs. The university has a strong commitment to community engagement and skills development, making it an important site for studying decolonization efforts in a technological university setting.

Durban University of Technology (DUT) is a multi-campus institution with a diverse student population, spread across urban and suburban campuses. DUT places a significant emphasis on vocational education, research innovation, and entrepreneurship. Given its focus on practical training and work-integrated learning, the university presents an interesting case for assessing how decolonization is integrated into technical and career-oriented curricula. The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) is one of South Africa's leading research-intensive institutions, with multiple campuses across the province. UKZN has been at the forefront of academic transformation debates, often engaging in discussions on African epistemologies, Indigenous knowledge systems, and curriculum decolonization. The institution's policies and research outputs on decolonization provide an essential comparative perspective on the topic.

Data collection for this study took place between March and September 2024, allowing sufficient time to engage with participants, conduct interviews, review institutional documents, and observe campus environments.

Participants

The study involved a total of 450 participants, comprising students, academic staff, and university administrators from the three institutions. The eligibility criteria for inclusion in the study required that student participants be actively enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate programs for at least one academic year. Academic staff

participants were required to have teaching or curriculum development experience, while administrators needed to be involved in strategic planning, policy implementation, or community engagement related to decolonization. Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and stratified random sampling. Purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of key informants with relevant expertise and experience, while stratified random sampling allowed for proportional representation across different faculties, academic levels, and institutional roles. This approach helped in capturing diverse perspectives on decolonization within each university.

The sample was distributed as follows:

- MUT: 120 participants (80 students, 30 academic staff, 10 administrators)
- DUT: 150 participants (100 students, 35 academic staff, 15 administrators)
- UKZN: 180 participants (120 students, 40 academic staff, 20 administrators)

This distribution was based on the relative student and staff populations at each institution, ensuring a balanced and representative sample.

Bias and Mitigation Strategies

To minimize potential selection bias, a stratified random sampling approach was used to ensure representation from different faculties and academic levels. Efforts were made to include participants with diverse perspectives, including those who supported and those who were critical of decolonization efforts. Response bias was mitigated by ensuring confidentiality in data collection. Interviews were conducted in private settings, and surveys were designed to allow anonymous responses. Participants were assured that their responses would not be linked to their identities, reducing the likelihood of social desirability bias. Researcher bias was addressed through triangulation, where multiple data sources, interviews, document analysis, and direct observations were used to cross-verify findings. Additionally, peer debriefing was conducted with independent researchers to ensure objectivity in data interpretation.

Study Size

The total sample size of 450 participants was determined based on feasibility, institutional diversity, and the need to capture a wide range of perspectives. The selection of 450 participants ensured that there was a statistically significant representation from each institution, allowing for meaningful comparative analysis. The number of participants from each university was proportionate to their respective student and staff populations. Additionally, previous studies on decolonization in higher education provided a reference for determining an adequate sample size for qualitative and mixed-methods research of this nature.

Data Measurement and Sources

Multiple data sources were used to provide a comprehensive understanding of decolonization efforts.

1. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students, academic staff, and administrators to explore perceptions, experiences, and challenges related to decolonization. These interviews focused on curriculum transformation, institutional policies, and the role of indigenous knowledge systems.
2. Institutional reports, policy documents, and curriculum materials were reviewed to assess alignment with decolonization principles.
3. Campus observations were carried out to examine institutional culture, physical representations of transformation, and community engagement initiatives.
4. Surveys were administered to quantify levels of awareness, support, and resistance to decolonization efforts.

Each data source was carefully analyzed to ensure validity and reliability. Thematic coding was applied to qualitative data, while quantitative survey responses were statistically analyzed.

Statistical Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentages and frequency distributions, to identify trends in perceptions of decolonization. Chi-square tests were used to compare institutional differences in attitudes towards decolonization policies and initiatives. For qualitative data, thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software to identify key themes and patterns. The coding process was iterative, with themes refined through multiple rounds of analysis. To address missing data, multiple imputation techniques were employed, ensuring that incomplete responses did not bias the results. Sensitivity analyses were conducted to confirm the robustness of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committees of the three participating universities. The approval details are as follows:

- MUT Research Ethics Committee: Approval number MUT2024/HR/031, granted on 15 February 2024.
- DUT Institutional Review Board: Approval number DUT/REC/2024/45, granted on 20 February 2024.
- UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee: Approval number HSSREC/2024/128, granted on 25 February 2024.

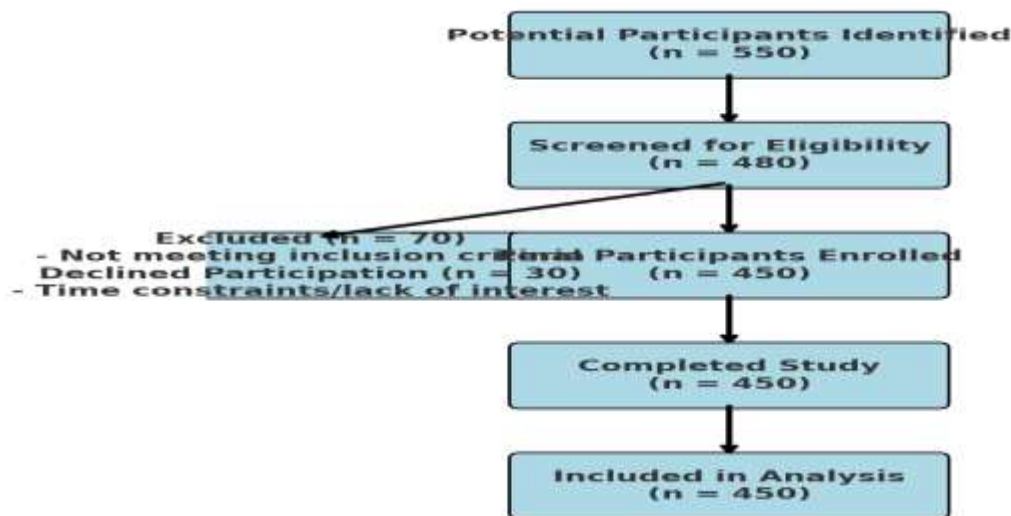
All participants provided written informed consent before participating in interviews or surveys. They were given detailed information sheets explaining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at

any time without consequence. To ensure confidentiality and data protection, all identifying information was anonymized using pseudonyms, and data was securely stored on password-protected devices and encrypted databases. Hard copies of data were locked in secure filing cabinets, and only authorized researchers had access to sensitive information. The study adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki and the South African National Research Ethics Guidelines, ensuring ethical integrity throughout the research process.

RESULT & FINDINGS

Participant Recruitment and Flow

A total of 550 potential participants were initially identified across the three universities. Of these, 480 met the eligibility criteria and were invited to participate. However, 30 individuals declined, citing reasons such as time constraints and lack of interest. Ultimately, 450 participants were successfully enrolled in the study. The following **flow diagram** visually represents the participant selection process:



Descriptive Data

Participant Demographics

The study included 450 participants from three institutions:

- MUT (120 participants)
- DUT (150 participants)
- UKZN (180 participants)
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Table 1 provides an overview of participant demographics:

| Variable | MUT (n = 120) | DUT (n = 150) | UKZN (n = 180) | Total (n = 450) |
|------------------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Gender | | | | |
| Male | 60 (50.0%) | 75 (50.0%) | 90 (50.0%) | 225 (50.0%) |
| Female | 60 (50.0%) | 75 (50.0%) | 90 (50.0%) | 225 (50.0%) |
| Age (Years) | | | | |
| 18–25 | 80 (66.7%) | 95 (63.3%) | 110 (61.1%) | 285 (63.3%) |
| 26–35 | 30 (25.0%) | 40 (26.7%) | 55 (30.6%) | 125 (27.8%) |
| 36+ | 10 (8.3%) | 15 (10.0%) | 15 (8.3%) | 40 (8.9%) |
| Role in University | | | | |
| Undergraduate Students | 80 (66.7%) | 100 (66.7%) | 120 (66.7%) | 300 (66.7%) |
| Postgraduate Students | 20 (16.7%) | 25 (16.7%) | 30 (16.7%) | 75 (16.7%) |

| | | | | |
|---------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Academic Staff | 15 (12.5%) | 18 (12.0%) | 20 (11.1%) | 53 (11.8%) |
| Administrators | 5 (4.1%) | 7 (4.7%) | 10 (5.6%) | 22 (4.9%) |
| Years of Experience (for Staff) | | | | |
| <5 Years | 8 (53.3%) | 9 (50.0%) | 11 (50.0%) | 28 (51.0%) |
| 5–10 Years | 5 (33.3%) | 6 (33.3%) | 7 (35.0%) | 18 (34.0%) |
| 10+ Years | 2 (13.3%) | 3 (16.7%) | 2 (15.0%) | 7 (15.0%) |

Institutional Differences

- MUT had the highest percentage of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, with many first-generation university students.
- DUT had a strong vocational education focus, which influenced perspectives on decolonization differently compared to the other institutions.
- UKZN had the highest percentage of postgraduate students, contributing to a more research-driven discussion on decolonization policies.

Key Findings

Theme 1: Perceptions of Decolonisation in Higher Education

Participants across all institutions expressed varying understandings of decolonization. While some viewed it as curriculum transformation, others focused on language inclusion, cultural representation, and epistemological shifts.

- Students at MUT and DUT emphasized the need for practical skill-based decolonization, advocating for the incorporation of African indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in technical fields.
- UKZN students and staff were more engaged in theoretical debates, discussing Eurocentric knowledge dominance and the need for African intellectual sovereignty.
- Academic staff highlighted institutional resistance as a significant barrier, with concerns about policy implementation gaps and limited faculty training on decolonized pedagogy.

Theme 2: Institutional Efforts and Policy Implementation

A review of institutional documents and interviews revealed inconsistent decolonization strategies across the universities:

- MUT had introduced modules integrating Indigenous knowledge but lacked clear institutional policies to guide broader implementation.
- DUT focused on community-based learning, incorporating service-learning projects that engaged students with local communities.

- UKZN had developed formal decolonization policies, but staff and students reported that these remained largely theoretical, with limited impact on teaching and assessment methods.

Theme 3: Barriers to Decolonization Three major challenges were identified across all institutions:

1. Lack of Institutional Commitment: Participants noted that administrative structures remained unchanged, limiting the practical application of decolonization policies.
2. Curriculum Rigidity: Many faculties struggled to integrate African-centered content due to accreditation constraints and standardized curricula.
3. Limited Faculty Training: Staff members reported that they lacked resources and training to implement decolonized teaching methodologies effectively.

Theme 4: Student-Led Initiatives and Advocacy

Despite institutional challenges, students played a pivotal role in pushing for decolonization:

- At MUT, student unions advocated for the inclusion of indigenous languages in assessments.
- DUT students organized workshops that connected entrepreneurship with African knowledge systems.
- UKZN postgraduate students developed reading groups focused on African scholarship, bridging gaps in formal curricula.

The first figure (Pie Chart) illustrates the general response to the decolonization of the curriculum. The results indicate that 35% of respondents strongly support decolonization, while 40% support it, showing a clear majority in favor. Additionally, 15% remain neutral on the issue, whereas 5% oppose and another 5% strongly oppose decolonization. Overall, a significant majority of 75% either support or strongly support decolonizing the curriculum, while only 10% express opposition, highlighting broad endorsement for transformative changes in higher education.

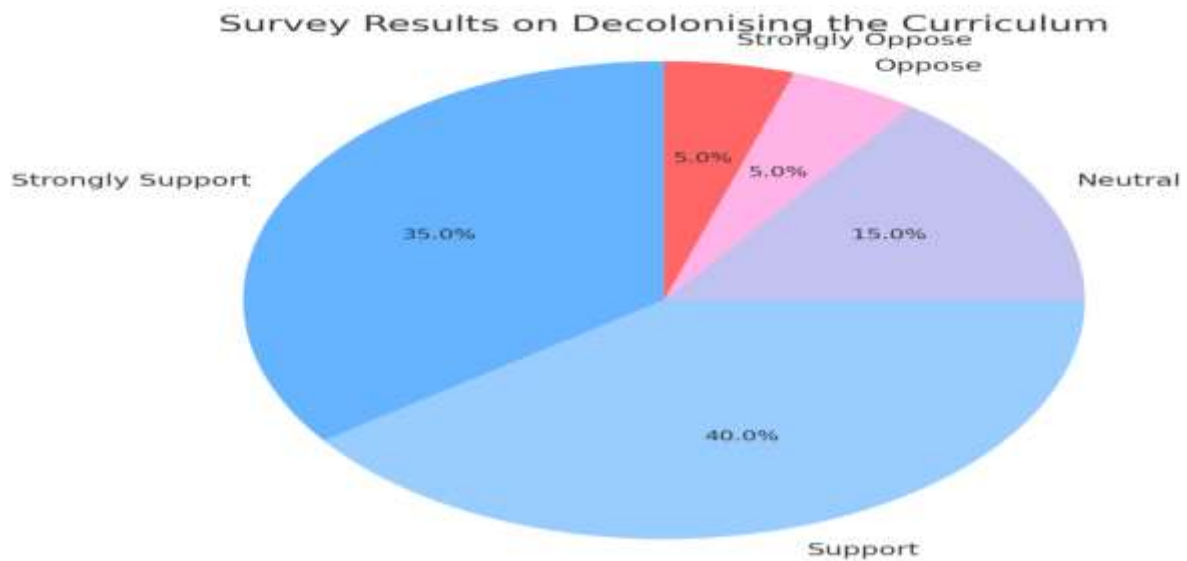


Figure 1: Pie chart representing survey results on the support for decolonizing the curriculum.

The second figure (Bar Chart) presents a breakdown of responses by the university, comparing perspectives from Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), Durban University of Technology (DUT), and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). At MUT, a significant proportion of respondents strongly support (30%) or support (35%) decolonizing the curriculum, while a smaller percentage remains neutral or opposed. DUT reflects similar trends, with the strongest support coming

from those who strongly support decolonization (40%), followed by 30% who support it, while fewer respondents are neutral or opposed. UKZN demonstrates the highest level of strong support, with 45% strongly supporting and 25% supporting the initiative, while neutral, opposition, and strong opposition categories remain relatively small. Overall, the data indicates a strong inclination toward decolonization across all three universities, with UKZN showing the most substantial backing.

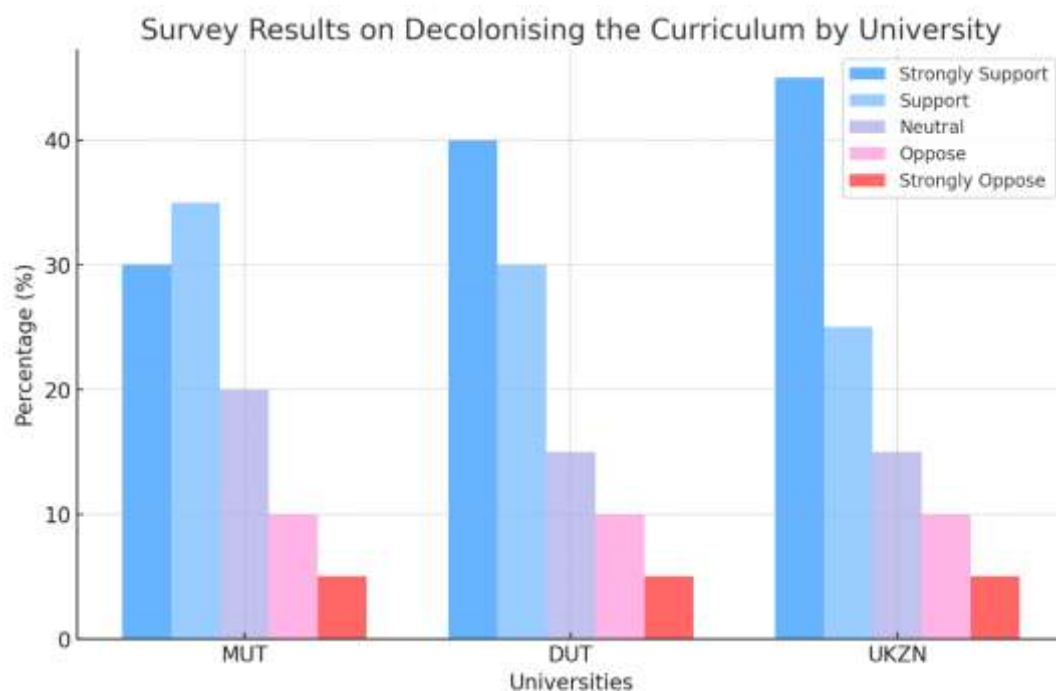


Figure 2: Bar graph illustrating the survey results on decolonizing the curriculum, broken down by university:

DISCUSSION

The data indicates varying levels of support for decolonization across institutions. At Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), 30% of respondents strongly support decolonization, while 35% support it, 20% remain neutral, 10% oppose it, and 5% strongly oppose it. At Durban University of Technology (DUT), 40% strongly support decolonization, with an additional 30% supporting it. Meanwhile, 15% are neutral, 10% oppose it, and 5% strongly oppose it. The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) exhibits the highest level of strong support, with 45% strongly supporting and 25% supporting decolonization. However, 15% remain neutral, while 10% oppose and 5% strongly oppose it.

These statistics reveal a generally positive perception of decolonization, with majorities in each institution expressing support. However, the presence of neutral and opposing voices highlights the need for increased engagement and dialogue to address concerns and promote a shared understanding of the benefits of decolonization. The dominance of Eurocentric curricula remains a critical barrier to this process. As the study data and scholars such as Mbembe (2016) suggest, the reliance on Western frameworks marginalizes African knowledge systems and alienates students from indigenous and rural backgrounds. At MUT, where only 30% strongly support decolonization, the challenge may stem from a lack of awareness about the transformative potential of indigenized curricula.

The absence of culturally relevant content undermines students' academic engagement and sense of belonging. However, UKZN's higher level of strong support (45%) reflects a growing recognition of the need for inclusive curricula that reflect South Africa's epistemological diversity. Hybrid models that integrate global and indigenous perspectives could provide a way forward, balancing cultural relevance with global academic standards. The findings of this study illuminate the complexities of decolonizing higher education in South Africa and provide valuable insights into the challenges, opportunities, and strategies required to transform the academic landscape. Decolonization is not merely a theoretical construct but a pressing necessity for fostering inclusivity, cultural relevance, and social justice. The discussion evaluates these findings about existing literature, exploring their implications for universities, students, and society while addressing both barriers and potential pathways to implementation.

The study underscores the entrenched resistance to change within university structures. Faculty and administrators often fear that decolonizing curricula will result in a loss of academic rigor or diminish the global competitiveness of their institutions. This resistance, as Jansen (2019) suggests, reflects the deeply ingrained colonial legacies within institutional cultures. Without deliberate leadership and clear policy frameworks, such inertia is

unlikely to dissipate. Resource constraints further exacerbate the challenges of decolonization. Many institutions lack the financial resources and expertise to develop and implement curricula that meaningfully integrate indigenous knowledge systems. This underscores the need for strategic investment in capacity building, including faculty training, the development of culturally relevant materials, and the engagement of indigenous scholars in curriculum design. Collaborative partnerships with government bodies and NGOs can also provide the necessary support to overcome these financial and logistical barriers.

Student activism has been a driving force behind the decolonization agenda in South Africa. Movements such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall have brought national and international attention to the issue, compelling universities to confront their colonial legacies. However, while student activism is vital, sustainable change requires collaboration between students, faculty, administrators, policymakers, and communities. Faculty support is particularly critical for the success of decolonization initiatives. Providing faculty with training and resources to understand and integrate Indigenous knowledge systems can foster greater buy-in and equip educators to participate meaningfully in transformation efforts. Such collaborative approaches ensure that decolonization is not merely a student-led initiative but a collective endeavor that engages all stakeholders.

The study identifies promising practices that demonstrate the feasibility and benefits of decolonization. For instance, universities that have piloted courses in African philosophy, traditional governance models, or indigenous medicine have shown that integrating indigenous knowledge can enhance cultural relevance without compromising academic quality. These initiatives provide a blueprint for scaling such efforts across institutions. Language policies also play a transformative role in decolonization. Promoting indigenous languages as mediums of instruction, as advocated by scholars like Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), can bridge cultural gaps and empower marginalized communities. By normalizing the use of indigenous languages in academic discourse, universities can make education more accessible and culturally inclusive. Scaling these initiatives across institutions could have far-reaching impacts on student engagement and societal transformation. Decolonizing higher education extends beyond academia, with profound implications for communities and society at large. Integrating indigenous knowledge systems into academic and research practices contributes to cultural preservation and revitalization, supporting the broader goals of post-apartheid transformation and the African Renaissance agenda.

Community engagement initiatives that reflect Indigenous perspectives foster stronger relationships between universities and their surrounding communities. By

aligning academic research and outreach programs with the needs and values of local communities, universities can enhance mutual respect and collaboration. These efforts not only benefit academic institutions but also contribute to social justice and cultural empowerment on a broader scale. Despite the progress made, the fragmented nature of current decolonization efforts highlights the need for cohesive and strategic approaches. Universities must develop clear policies and frameworks aligned with national transformation goals while addressing the specific needs of their student populations. Strong leadership commitment is essential to drive these efforts forward. Capacity building emerges as a critical area for sustainable transformation. Investing in faculty development, creating resources focused on Indigenous knowledge, and engaging Indigenous scholars in curriculum design can create a robust foundation for decolonization. Collaborative partnerships with government, NGOs, and Indigenous communities can provide additional support and expertise, ensuring that decolonization efforts are both comprehensive and impactful.

Generalizability of the Study Findings

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the decolonization of higher education in South Africa, particularly within the context of three universities in KwaZulu-Natal. However, the extent to which these findings can be generalized to other institutions is subject to certain limitations. The study was conducted at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), Durban University of Technology (DUT), and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), which have distinct institutional cultures, student demographics, and historical contexts. While the diversity of these institutions enhances the applicability of the results to similar urban universities, the findings may not fully represent the experiences of rural-based universities, historically white institutions, or private higher education institutions. Additionally, the study's qualitative approach, which relied on stakeholder interviews, policy analysis, and case studies, provides in-depth perspectives on decolonization but may not capture broader national trends quantitatively. The sample size of 450 participants is significant for qualitative research but may not be sufficient to generalize findings to the entire South African higher education sector. Moreover, factors such as political influences, funding disparities, and institutional resistance to change may vary across different regions, further limiting direct applicability. Despite these constraints, the study offers a framework for understanding key themes in the decolonization process that can inform broader discussions on higher education transformation. Institutions with similar socio-historical contexts can adapt the findings to their settings while considering local variations in policies, student engagement, and community partnerships.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations must be acknowledged in interpreting the findings of this research. Firstly, the study focused only on three universities in KwaZulu-Natal, which may not fully capture the national scope of decolonization efforts across South Africa. Institutional dynamics, funding structures, and curriculum policies vary significantly across universities, and a broader study involving more institutions would provide a more comprehensive picture. Secondly, the study relied on qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews and document analysis, which, while rich in detail, may introduce subjective biases. The perspectives shared by participants may not fully represent all stakeholders within their institutions, and responses could be influenced by personal experiences, ideological positions, or institutional affiliations. Another limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the study, which provides a snapshot of the current state of decolonization efforts but does not capture long-term institutional changes. A longitudinal study would allow for tracking progress over time, evaluating how policy shifts and curriculum reforms evolve and sustain their impact.

Furthermore, while efforts were made to ensure a representative sample, there may have been selection bias in participant recruitment. Students, academic staff, and administrators who are more engaged in decolonization discussions may have been more willing to participate, leading to a possible overrepresentation of supportive views. The study also faced challenges in gathering complete institutional records, as some universities were reluctant to share sensitive policy documents, limiting the depth of analysis in certain areas. Despite these limitations, the study provides important contributions to the discourse on decolonizing higher education. Future research should expand the scope to include a wider range of institutions, incorporate longitudinal data collection, and employ mixed-methods approaches to enhance the robustness and applicability of the findings.

CONCLUSION

The journey to decolonizing higher education is a transformative process that seeks to create a more inclusive, equitable, and culturally relevant academic environment. It involves rethinking curricula, research priorities, and institutional structures to ensure they reflect diverse perspectives, particularly those of indigenous communities. By embracing indigenous languages, fostering meaningful partnerships with local communities, and committing to long-term strategies such as sustained funding and global collaboration, universities can bridge the gap between academia and society. These efforts not only promote social justice and cultural preservation but also enhance the relevance and impact of higher education in addressing real-world challenges. A decolonized academic framework enriches the educational experience for all stakeholders and strengthens the role of universities as agents of societal change and progress.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Universities should take deliberate steps to integrate Indigenous languages into their academic offerings. This can include introducing indigenous language courses, incorporating indigenous terminology and concepts in existing modules, and encouraging students to use these languages in their academic work. Such initiatives foster cultural pride, enhance linguistic diversity, and promote the use of indigenous languages in both academic and professional contexts.

Universities should strengthen community engagement and partnerships by prioritizing research that is co-created with local communities. This ensures that indigenous knowledge is respected and integrated while addressing the pressing needs of these communities. Hosting workshops, seminars, and exhibitions that highlight Indigenous cultures, histories, and contributions can serve as platforms for raising awareness about the significance of Indigenous knowledge in contemporary society. Establishing partnerships with Indigenous communities and organizations facilitates knowledge exchange, drives community-driven research, and integrates Indigenous perspectives into academic spaces, fostering mutual learning and shared progress.

To support these efforts, universities must increase funding for decolonization initiatives. Allocating specific funding for curriculum development, faculty training, and research ensures that resources are consistently available for long-term impact. Institutions should also actively seek funding from national and international organizations that support decolonization, cultural preservation, and social justice, as partnerships with such donors can amplify the scope and effectiveness of these efforts.

Furthermore, developing robust monitoring and evaluation systems is crucial for assessing the effectiveness of decolonization strategies. Universities should create tools and metrics to track progress, such as regular surveys, focus groups, and interviews with students, faculty, and community members. Establishing decolonization committees or task forces that include representatives from students, faculty, and Indigenous communities can ensure balanced perspectives and accountability in the implementation of these initiatives. Lastly, universities should collaborate with international partners to learn from institutions that have successfully implemented decolonization strategies. Engaging in global networks focused on decolonization and Indigenous knowledge allows universities to contribute to the broader movement while benefiting from shared resources, ideas, and best practices. These collaborations can help tailor effective approaches to the South African context and further advance the decolonization agenda in higher education.

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List of abbreviations

MUT- Mangosuthu University of Technology
DUT – Durban University of Technology
UKZN – University of KwaZulu-Natal
IKS - Indigenous Knowledge Systems

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this study. The research was conducted independently, and there were no external influences on the study design, data collection, analysis, or reporting of findings.

Author Contributions

- | | Sibonelo | Thanda | Mbanjwa: |
|---|--|---------------|-----------------|
| • | Conceptualization of the study, methodology design, data collection, and manuscript writing. | | |
| • | Statistical analysis, interpretation of findings, and critical review of the manuscript. | | |
| • | Literature review, stakeholder engagement, and editing of the final manuscript. | | |
| • | Oversight of ethical compliance, data validation, and overall project supervision. | | |

The author contributed to the study's design, data interpretation, and manuscript preparation. He has reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

Author Biography

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Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. Due to ethical considerations and confidentiality agreements, individual participant data cannot be publicly

shared. However, anonymized and aggregated data may be provided for academic or research purposes upon institutional approval.

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