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Decolonisation is not even a footnote: On the dominant ideologies and smokescreens in South African higher education

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The turn to democracy in South Africa brought hope for a higher education sector that would play a key role in tackling racial inequalities and injustices. However, transformation promises ended up being largely smokescreens for maintaining entrenched racist and capitalist logics rooted in colonialism and apartheid. Instead of focusing on epistemic decolonisation, universities became commodified and commercialised neoliberal enterprises focused on the maintenance of Eurocentric epistemic hegemony. In this conceptual article framed within the decolonial theoretical framework, we critically interrogate how two dominant ideologies – the Rainbow Nation and neoliberalism – have sidelined fundamental transformation and epistemic decolonisation in South Africa. Focusing on the Department of Higher Education and Training's *Strategic Plan 2020–2025*, we illustrate that decolonisation is not government's priority and that neoliberal visions continue to dominate strategic planning for higher education. We argue that the lack of political will and policy alignment from the government will contribute to the further entrenchment of coloniality, Eurocentricity and neoliberal logics at universities. We conclude with the call for critical engagement with the history of universities and their role in propagating and supporting colonialism and apartheid and argue that progressive scholars and students must continue to organise within South Africa and beyond and work on the radical dismantling of the Eurocentric and neoliberal universities.

Contribution: While other scholars have engaged separately with neoliberalism and the Rainbow Nation and their impact on higher education in South Africa, in this article, we bring these two ideologies together to show how they have combined to prevent decolonisation of higher education.

Keywords: higher education; university; neoliberalism; Rainbow Nation; decolonisation; transformation; South Africa.

Introduction

The turn to democracy in South Africa brought hope for a higher education sector that would play a key role in tackling systemic, structural and deep-rooted racial inequalities and injustices and building of a better country for all. However, transformation promises, commitments and agendas ended up being largely smokescreens for harbouring the damning effects of entrenched racist and capitalist logics rooted in colonialism and apartheid. Instead of focusing on epistemic decolonisation, redress and social justice, universities were transformed into neoliberal enterprises focused largely on marketisation, commodification, commercialisation, performance management and/or profit generation while maintaining Eurocentric epistemic hegemony. Hlatshwayo (2022:2) highlights that post-apartheid higher education has been in an existential, systemic and structural crisis, where whiteness, Eurocentricity and 'neoliberal forms of coloniality' remain deeply entrenched.

A genuinely transformed and decolonised university is an institution that is concerned with the question of knowledge, curriculum and epistemic access and pluralism, as well as the institutional inequalities and inequities in terms of infrastructure, resources and funding (Motala, Sayed & De Kock 2021). The role of the university in a complex and unequal country such as South Africa should be to 'interrupt the dominant power/knowledge matrix in educational practices in higher education' (Morreira et al. 2020:2) through unearthing, exposing, challenging and dismantling the colonial, neocolonial and Eurocentric practices, legacies and influences at the university and in

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the knowledge project and curriculum. Most importantly, epistemic decolonisation goes beyond the university and should aim to contribute to unravelling and dismantling of the cultural, intellectual, political and economic remnants and structures of colonialism, apartheid and racial capitalism in the broader society, which continue to maintain coloniality and structural inequalities and inequities (Oyedemi 2021).

Yet, the focus on epistemic decolonisation has been absent in South African higher education for the most part of the post-apartheid period (Le Grange 2019) and has only gained traction as a supposed priority in university agendas because of the student activism in 2015–2016 (Badat 2020; Boughey & McKenna 2021; Hlatshwayo 2021; Luescher et al. 2023). The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student protests were a stark reminder that the struggle against racism, coloniality and commodification in higher education had barely begun and that the transformation agendas that the universities boasted off were smokescreens aimed at hiding their capitalistic, extractive and Eurocentric agendas and worldviews, which were in a direct conflict with the social justice imperatives. Apart from being driven by material challenges linked to the high costs of higher education and underfunding of universities by the government, student protests were also inspired by the 'need to resist the violent demand that black students and academics assimilate into settler cultures and the old liberal/new neoliberal values that still define South African universities' (Morreira et al. 2020:5). While some gains have been made by the student movement and progressive academics, universities in South Africa remain Eurocentric and neoliberal entities.

This conceptual article is concerned with epistemic decolonisation in post-apartheid South Africa. The article is framed within the decolonial theoretical framework. Decoloniality, as it applies to knowledge, is defined as an 'inherently plural set of practices that aim to interrupt the dominant [Eurocentric] power/knowledge matrix in educational practices in higher education' (Morreira et al. 2020:2). It entails critiquing and challenging the coloniality of knowledge and the Eurocentric epistemic hegemony (Zembylas 2018) and outlining what 'needs to be dismantled, reimagined and reconstituted' (Hlatshwayo 2024:241) in the quest for a truly decolonised university. The decolonial framework allows us to critically interrogate how dominant ideologies and discourses have been used in South African higher education to sideline epistemic decolonisation and to explore how this can be tackled and redressed. In this article, we bring neoliberalism and Rainbow Nation together to show how these two ideologies have combined to prevent epistemic decolonisation in higher education. Previous research has engaged with neoliberalism and the Rainbow Nation and their impact on higher education and decolonisation in South Africa, albeit in most cases engaging with these ideologies separately. Hlatshwayo (2021) has explored the crisis in the Rainbow Nation through a critical reflection about the 2015–2016 student protests. Similarly, Oyedemi (2021) has written about the decolonial project,

student activism and the way the Rainbow Nation project has undermined the decolonial project in the country and at the universities. Gqola (2001) has explored how the Rainbow Nation ideology has contributed to erasing and silencing the past injustices in post-apartheid South Africa. Research has focused on the ways the celebration of diversity at the expense of decolonisation has undermined fundamental transformation and the quest for social justice and redress in the society and in higher education (Makhubela 2018). Scholars have also written about the post-apartheid embrace of neoliberalism and the focus on commodification and performance management at the expense of social justice and redress (Baatjes, Spreen & Vally 2012), the political and socio-economic factors behind the student protests (Mabasa 2017), the impact of neoliberalism on transformation and decolonisation of South African higher education (Heleta 2023) and the way neoliberalisation impacts the curriculum (Hlatshwayo 2022).

In this article, we will illustrate how, under the influence of neoliberalism and the Rainbow Nation ideologies, the higher education system and institutions have been unable or unwilling (Hlatshwayo 2022):

[T]o seriously confront the history of imperialism, colonialism, apartheid, and … the neoliberal logic that continues to shape and affect the very ontology and epistemic orientations of higher education in the country. (p. 2)

As such, South African universities, 'previously a vital cog in the reproduction of racial capitalism … [continue] to entrench inequality by embracing a neoliberal, market-oriented ideology' (Baatjes et al. 2012:139) while also maintaining the coloniality of knowledge and Eurocentric epistemic hegemony. Finally, we will show that, despite the rhetoric, epistemic decolonisation is not more than a buzzword at most universities and does not feature in the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) current strategic plan for the higher education sector. In terms of the structure of the article, the next section will discuss the state of transformation in South African higher education. This is followed by a critical unpacking of the Rainbow Nation ideology and its impact on higher education. We then turn to the neoliberal ideology and its impact on higher education, followed by a critical discussion of relevant sections of the DHET's strategic plan for the 2020–2025 period. The final section will grapple with whether epistemic decolonisation can be achieved in South African higher education, ending with a call to expand the struggle for a better world and a decolonised higher education sector.

The (largely) untransformed South African university

The university in South Africa is a microcosm mirroring the historical and contemporary socio-economic, structural and systemic entanglements of the broader society. The entrenched inequalities embedded in the higher education

system and societal fabric have not been dealt with after the end of apartheid, and this has translated into often superficial and/or performative transformation agendas. Higher education was a key sector that contributed to the promotion of white supremacy and political, social and economic subjugation of black people since the inception of the sector after the colonial conquest (Heleta 2023; Kamola 2016; Mabasa 2017). During apartheid, all universities played a role in white supremacist social engineering (Motala et al. 2021). This was done through segregation based on race, different institutional mandates, denial of academic freedom to historically black institutions (HBIs) and black academics in general, full control of HBIs by the apartheid regime and underfunding of HBIs while generously funding historically white institutions (HWIs) (Baatjes et al. 2012; Heleta & Jithoo 2023; Kamola 2016; Motala et al. 2021; Oyedemi 2021). As Essop (2020:8) points out, 'like much else in the broader society', South African higher education 'remains hostage to the inherited inequalities and legacy of the apartheid past' long after the transition to democracy. The sector has failed to transform itself from the colonial and apartheid legacies and structures (Luescher et al. 2023), which continue to shape and influence the university, the knowledge it produces, the education it provides to the students and the inherent cultures, environments and operations of most institutions that continue to subjugate, extract, erase, exclude, isolate and oppress through epistemic violence and Eurocentric hegemony.

Transformation in higher education since the end of apartheid has been largely about demographics and numbers and not about apartheid-era institutional cultures, politics of knowledge, epistemic decolonisation and promotion of plurality of knowledge (Baatjes et al. 2012; Badat 2020; Hlatshwayo 2024; Mbembe 2016; Motala et al. 2021; Luescher et al. 2023; Vorster & Quinn 2017). To a large extent, expanding access and increasing demographic representation of black students and staff have been key transformation priorities of the government and the higher education sector (Badat 2020; Motala et al. 2021; Vorster & Quinn 2017). The expansion of access for black students has been achieved, in part, through the policies of neoliberal 'predatory inclusion' of students from poor backgrounds through the provision of income contingent loans and subsequent indebtness of many graduates (Masutha 2023:62). In addition, while changes are evident in terms of the increased demographic representation of black students in higher education, they still lag far behind white and Indian students in terms of participation rates (Essop 2020). Furthermore, while changes have been made in many institutions regarding the increase in demographic representation of black staff, most HWIs continue to be dominated by white academics (DHET 2022). Most importantly, demographic changes have not led to 'deep, lasting transformation' and epistemic decolonisation in South African higher education (Luescher et al. 2023:xvi). Arguably, the increased demographic representation of black students and staff at public universities has exposed more black people to epistemic violence, othering, 'social

dislocation and trauma' (Hlatshwayo 2024:244). As a result of underfunding, South African higher education has also experienced growth in casualisation of academic work, where precarious and temporary staff and postdocs are employed to teach or conduct research. In 2017, for example, 63% of all academic staff in public higher education were on temporary contracts (Essop 2020). Badat (2020) stresses that in this environment, epistemic decolonisation and social justice are not prioritised.

In terms of the knowledge project, universities have significantly expanded the production of new knowledge since the end of apartheid (DHET 2023). However, the national and institutional policies and incentives that focus on quantity rather than impact and quality have created a 'system founded on rent seeking, which is antithetical to socially valuable intellectual inquiry' (Muller 2017:66). In such an environment, academics and researchers are seen primarily as producers of output that feeds the neoliberal knowledge economy (Hlatshwayo 2022). Knowledge production at universities is guided by the DHET's research outputs policies and guidelines, which force academia to neglect journals from the rest of the African continent and much of the Global South and focus primarily on publishing in journals based in Europe and the United States, propagating unequal power relations and bibliometric coloniality in the process (Heleta & Mzileni 2024). Furthermore, inequalities in knowledge production between HWIs and HBIs continue unabated, with the large majority of scholarly output produced by HWIs and some merged institutions (DHET 2023; Essop 2020; Heleta & Jithoo 2023). Historically white institutions prioritise research collaboration with Europe, United States and other countries in the Global North while neglecting the African continent and much of the Global South. In this way, they continue to entrench and maintain coloniality of knowledge and Eurocentric hegemony (Heleta & Jithoo 2023). Similarly, curriculum in South African higher education remains largely Eurocentric (Badat 2020; Heleta & Chasi 2024; Hlatshwayo 2022; Le Grange et al. 2020; Mbembe 2016; Modiri 2021; Morreira et al. 2020; Motala et al. 2021; Vorster & Quinn 2017; Zembylas 2018). Despite all the rhetoric, universities continue to be the 'sites of the reproduction of coloniality through their endorsement, legitimation, and valorisation of particular forms of knowledge, pedagogy, and practice' (Motala et al. 2021:1012). The matters of curriculum transformation and decolonisation have been 'relegated to the margins' (Le Grange 2019:30). This has been deeply ideological; curriculum development is a political process influenced by ideological, political, social, ethical, moral and other beliefs, views and perspectives of curriculum makers (Heleta & Chasi 2024; Vorster & Quinn 2017). This remains linked to the belief in Eurocentric supremacy in all things knowledge and education, resulting in largely white and Euro-American curriculum propagated at universities, while sidelining, othering and erasing the knowledges, perspectives and worldviews from the African continent and the rest of the Global South (Heleta 2023; Heleta & Chasi 2024; Keet 2014; Le Grange 2019; Mabasa 2017; Mbembe 2016; Modiri 2021; Oyedemi 2021; Zembylas 2018).

The Rainbow Nation ideology and myths

The lack of fundamental transformation and epistemic decolonisation in South African higher education cannot be understood without a critical engagement with the ideologies which have shaped the post-apartheid period. Key among them has been the Rainbow Nation. The Rainbow Nation ideology was invented in the early 1990s and was supposed to portray a unified South African post-apartheid nation. The term was first publicly proclaimed in reference to South Africa by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in 1989, when he called on the then apartheid president to engage with the anti-apartheid activists who represented the vision of a 'new' South Africa (Tutu 1994). In 1993, Archbishop Tutu referred to South Africans as 'the rainbow people of God' working hand-in-hand to overcome apartheid divisions (Tutu 1994:254). Nelson Mandela (1994), during his inauguration as the first democratically elected president of South Africa in April 1994, referred to the country as the 'Rainbow Nation at peace with itself and the world', committed to justice, peace and prosperity for all. The Rainbow Nation became a powerful ideology (Myambo 2010) and an 'authorising narrative' (Gqola 2001:96) propagated by the post-apartheid political elites (Habib 1997), shaping the way the country has dealt with the past and present inequalities, inequities, injustices and social relations.

The Rainbow Nation ideology claimed to be focused on bringing South Africans of all races together to live in harmony after centuries of colonialism and apartheid (Habib 1997; Myambo 2010). However, instead of critically engaging with the past and being committed – through action – to justice and redress, the Rainbow Nation ideology was used to hide deep-rooted structural socio-economic racial inequalities and has contributed to the reproduction and maintenance of the oppressive status quo and coloniality. This ideology was aimed at reconciliation and moving on after centuries of horrific racist crimes, but without justice, redress or critical and deep engagement with the past (Gqola 2001; Hlatshwayo 2021; Mabasa 2017; Myambo 2010; Oyedemi 2021). Makhubela (2018:11) writes that the Rainbow Nation ideology contributed to the promotion of 'violence of silence and forgetting – ignoring historical and continuing subjugations and power relations by rejoicing in the multi-coloured present'. Gqola (2001:103) adds that this ideology reduced racial inequalities and injustices 'to a nonentity, so that ultimately white supremacy, which drove apartheid and remains reflected in institutional racism, albeit not state-sponsored, becomes a phenomenon that is whitewashed of all meaning'.

After apartheid ended, the higher education sector of the newly conceptualised Rainbow Nation was largely allowed to hide its ugly racist and repressive past. Even the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that aimed to unearth the truth about some past injustices excluded the higher education sector from its proceedings despite its systemic 'collusion and complicity in furthering, fortifying and sustaining the apartheid regime and agenda' (Tufvesson 2012:7). Instead of critically unpacking the history of the higher education sector and asking what it would take to dismantle white supremacy in the society and within the university, bring about redress for past injustices and inequalities and create a system that promotes epistemic decolonisation, the sector was allowed to move on without any form of accountability. While the TRC has had many shortcomings and has failed to engage with centuries of racist oppression, subjugation and looting and bring about meaningful redress and reparations to the victims of colonialism and apartheid (Barnard-Naudé 2024; Madlingozi 2023), the appearance of universities in front of the TRC would have sent a symbolic message that the sector was a key part of the crimes of humanity and that it required radical transformation and decolonisation.

In the post-apartheid period, South African universities and academia have to a large extent accepted and propagated the Rainbow Nation myths, rhetoric and narratives (Madlingozi 2006; Mabasa 2017; Modiri 2012; Oyedemi 2021). This has allowed them to whitewash their own past and has also impacted the way they looked at the country's past and present in their academic work. Embracing and/or not critically questioning the Rainbow Nation ideology and myths has contributed to the failure to provide a historical, structural and critical analysis of the existing system that continues to reinforce structural racialised inequalities rooted in colonialism, apartheid and racial capitalism (Madlingozi 2006; Myambo 2010; Subreenduth 2006). Apart from some exceptions, South African academia has failed to meaningfully and critically interrogate the underlying socio-economic and political assumptions of the Rainbow Nation ideology (Habib 1997). Furthermore, academia did not sufficiently problematise and interrogate the celebratory Rainbow Nation narratives and rhetoric, which all too quickly proclaimed the end of apartheid and racism and the arrival of unity, equality and better life for all. Instead of asking critical questions, much of academia chose to accept the rhetoric and 'artificiality of unity … amidst the boiling rifts that socially, culturally and economically separate the population' (Oyedemi 2021:221). This way, a large section of the academia has ignored the ongoing suffering and exploitation of black people, on one side, and continued white prosperity and privilege, on the other side (Modiri 2012; Oyedemi 2021; Subreenduth 2006). In such an environment, universities remained spaces where black students were 'trained to assimilate' to whiteness, capitalism and neoliberalism (Fikeni 2016). This was done through the curriculum which was 'designed to meet the needs of colonialism and apartheid', and which continued to be propagated in the Rainbow Nation's universities long after 1994 (Mbembe 2016:32).

While a handful of critical scholars have engaged with the Rainbow Nation myths before 2015 (see, for example, Gqola 2001; Madlingozi 2006; Modiri 2011; Myambo 2010), this ideology was put under the spotlight in higher education

during and after the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student protests in 2015–2016. Student activists began to ask critical questions about continued racism, whiteness, coloniality and structural inequality and oppression in the society and at universities (Badat 2020; Hlatshwayo 2021, 2022; Mabasa 2017; Oyedemi 2021). Student activists exposed the lack of transformation and decolonisation, which ensured that much of the higher education system remained a 'vulgar expression of the brutal and violent anti-black society that South Africa continues to be' (Makhubela 2018:2). Student activists – among other demands – called for a critical engagement with the fact that, 'in-between the rainbow (of the new South Africa), there is a grey line (inequality, injustice and disadvantage) that reminds us that the "Rainbow Nation" project is far from complete' (Modiri 2011:194). Importantly, as highlighted by Hlatshwayo (2021), the failures, crises and ruptures of the Rainbow Nation – and the largely empty rhetoric about the post-apartheid transformation in the society and the epistemic transformation in higher education – became a rallying cry during the student protests. This way, student activists began questioning *everything* about the past and present that was silenced, ignored and sidelined in the Rainbow Nation *by design*, as critical questions would undermine the supposed unity in the country, bring to the surface the ugly past that remains the present reality for the majority of black people and possibly lead to deep engagements about justice, redress and genuine societal and epistemic decolonisation.

The neoliberal university

In the same way we cannot talk about the lack of epistemic decolonisation in South African higher education without an engagement with the Rainbow Nation ideology, it is equally impossible to talk about this without a critical engagement with neoliberalism and its impact on higher education. Colonialism and apartheid were based on capitalist economic exploitation and extractivism and the Eurocentric and white supremacist ideology. Despite the formal end of colonial and apartheid rule, capitalism, through the neoliberal project, and the Eurocentric ideology and hegemony continue to shape and influence the South African society, economy and higher education (Mabasa 2017; Oyedemi 2021). The progressive and emancipatory visions of higher education that have existed in some circles during the anti-apartheid struggle and in the first years of transition to democracy were interested in transforming universities into progressive sites for critical interrogation of the racist past aimed at redress, justice, decolonisation and creation of better life for all (Baatjes et al. 2012; Kamola 2016). However, in the mid-1990s, they 'lost ground to a conceptualisation of universities as sites for integrating South Africa into a "global knowledge economy"' and producing skills for the markets (Kamola 2016:44). Rather than contributing to fundamental change in a complex and deeply unequal society, universities continue to 'service a capitalist [and neoliberal] labour market predicated on an (unequal) social structure shaped by class, racism, patriarchy, and other social fractures' (Badat 2020:34). It is pivotal to situate the neoliberal university in South Africa

within the agenda of the post-apartheid government, which embraced neoliberalism after coming to power in 1994; it is this very ideology that drove the policy and priorities in the higher education sector (Baatjes et al. 2012; Badat 2020; Heleta 2023; Hlatshwayo 2022; Kamola 2016). In such an environment, it was impossible even for more progressive universities to escape the 'market debasement of higher education' (Baatjes et al. 2012:139).

The neoliberal market logic became the norm in the post-apartheid period, leading to underfunding of higher education by the South African government and forcing institutions to increase tuition fees, transform into corporate entities focused primarily on producing knowledge for economic gain and graduates for the marketplace, and seek other sources of funding (Baatjes et al. 2012; Badat 2020; Boughey & McKenna 2021; Mabasa 2017; Heleta 2023). Neoliberalism sees higher education as a commodity and a space where capacity for the marketplace is produced by universities and academics who are in the business of selling the educational products to their customers (the students) to help them get employment and contribute to the needs of the markets, industries and employers. The purpose of the neoliberal university is not to develop critical knowledge and thinking aimed at dismantling local and global white supremacy, racial capitalism and redressing socio-economic inequalities and inequities rooted in colonial and apartheid oppression and exploitation. The purpose, under the neoliberal logic, is to develop skilled individuals to contribute to the local and global capitalist and neoliberal project (Baatjes et al. 2012; Boughey & McKenna 2021; Connell 2013; Mbembe 2016; Kamola 2016; Heleta 2023; Hlatshwayo 2022). Similarly, being a corporate enterprise guided by the cost-benefit analysis (Boughey & McKenna 2021), the neoliberal university is primarily interested in investing in disciplines, programmes and research that can sell and bring income and profits; often, this comes at the expense of the disciplines that focus on justice, redress and criticial thinking, to mention only a few (Boughey & McKenna 2021; Mabasa 2017).

Mabasa (2017:99) notes that higher education should be a key site of the struggle against the racialised capitalist and neoliberal order in post-apartheid South Africa. This is primarily because of the sector's 'strategic location as a centre of knowledge and skills production' in the country. Universities are the places where 'cultural, political, historical and scientific paradigms' are shaped, developed and propagated; these paradigms ultimately guide country's developmental choices (Ibid.). However, under neoliberalism, universities, instead of being 'beacons of truth and critical thinking – become purveyors of spin, image-making, manipulative marketing, organised boasting and sometimes more toxic forms of deceit' (Connell 2013:106). More so, rather than developing new and contextually relevant ideas, discourses, paradigms and development models, universities have continued to import and propagate Eurocentric hegemonic ideas, discourses and models. In this manner, the neoliberal university has directly contributed to the

entrenchment and maintenance of the Euro-American capitalist and neocolonial ideologies and dominant discourses (Mabasa 2017). The neoliberal university has also failed to 'deliver on the promised "democratic dividends" of post-apartheid South Africa' (Hlatshwayo 2022:13). Through their neoliberal structures and logics, universities have contributed to further entrenchment of racial inequalities in the country (Baatjes et al. 2012; Mabasa 2017).

Neoliberalisation of higher education has undermined and prevented epistemic transformation, as the focus of university leaders and administrators has been on commodification, corporatisation, managerialism, performance management, exploitation of poor black support staff through outsourcing, third-stream income, profit-making, bottom line and development of skills for the marketplace (Baatjes et al. 2012; Badat 2020; Heleta 2023; Hlatshwayo 2022; Mabasa 2017). Many universities were also focussed on chasing a place in the 'global knowledge economy' shaped by the Eurocentric hegemonic discourses, ideologies and priorities (Kamola 2016; Mbembe 2016). This left no space and/or interest for deliberations about a meaningful contribution to the promotion of social justice and epistemic decolonisation within and by the university (Badat 2020; Heleta 2023). As highlighted by Baatjes et al. (2012), the neoliberal and corporate university, 'contrary to the hegemonic discourse, is neither efficient nor effective and, most important, has little to do with social transformation or sound pedagogical practice'. Student protests of 2015–2016 were a direct response to the neoliberalisation and commodification of higher education (Boughey & McKenna 2021; Heleta 2023; Hlatshwayo 2022; Mabasa 2017; Morreira et al. 2020). However, student activism has been unable to dismantle the neoliberal university model in South Africa, which remains as strong as ever.

Decolonisation is not even a footnote for Department of Higher Education and Training

Oyedemi (2021:226) argues that the South African higher education requires a 'radical decolonisation agenda that will destabilise the colonial–apartheid coloniality'. The aim of the decolonial agenda should be dismantling of the Eurocentric hegemony that assumes and attributes truth and legitimacy only to white and Eurocentric knowledges, worldviews and ways of knowing (Mbembe 2016; Modiri 2021). Motala et al. (2021:1016) argue that there will be no meaningful decolonisation of the university, curriculum and knowledge in South Africa 'without robust policy alignment'. To this, Keet (2014) adds the need for political will to tackle the neoliberal ideology, coloniality and Eurocentrism within the DHET and universities. In this section, we illustrate the failure of the government and the DHET to facilitate a robust and meaningful policy alignment and put pressure on universities to take epistemic decolonisation seriously. Our primary focus is on the DHET's (2020a) current national strategic plan for higher education, which indicates where

the government priorities currently lie and what the DHET expects the universities to focus on and deliver during the 2020–2025 period. However, before unpacking this document, we briefly reflect on transformative commitments and priorities in government's key higher education policy documents since the end of apartheid. This helps to illustrate the government's failure to drive epistemic transformation and decolonisation in the post-apartheid period despite the rhetoric and responsibility to do so, while also showing that the current strategic plan is largely a continuation of government's 'business-as-usual' since 1994.

The 1997 Education White Paper outlined the transformative goals for the higher education sector and called for rethinking and transforming 'all existing practices, institutions and values' in the aftermath of colonialism and apartheid (Department of Education [DOE] 1997:6). It highlighted that public institutions funded by taxpayers were responsible for contributing to national higher education policy priorities and transformation goals. The 1997 White Paper further highlighted that, while the institutions had the autonomy and independence regarding the curriculum and knowledge production, there was 'no moral basis for using the principle of institutional autonomy as a pretext for resisting democratic change'. It stressed that the government had a responsibility to ensure the public accountability of the institutions when it comes to curriculum and research transformation and diversification (DOE 1997:8). Despite this policy rhetoric and commitment to hold public universities accountable, in the years following the 1997 White Paper, the higher education sector continued to neglect epistemic transformation (Luescher et al. 2023). The 2013 *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training*, while observing the pervasive marginalisation and discrimination of black students and staff at many HWIs and highlighting that the key transformative goal of the higher education sector must be the 'elimination of racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination' in the society and at institutions (DHET 2013:8), failed to link any of this to the knowledge project and curriculum. Furthermore, while the 2013 White Paper affirmed the responsibility of the government to ensure the public accountability of universities when it comes to curriculum transformation – as highlighted in the 1997 White Paper – it also noted that the responsibility for curriculum is solely on the institutions. During all this time, the government was fully aware of the challenges linked to Eurocentricity, coloniality and epistemic violence in higher education. A 2008 report by the Department of Education found that most universities in South Africa were closely associated 'with the project of Westernisation', propagating Eurocentricity and whiteness as the only credible ways of seeing, imagining and interpreting the world, while sidelining other knowledges and ways of knowing (DOE 2008:41). Finally, while failing to mention or envisage epistemic decolonisation, both the 1997 and 2013 White Papers were framed around the neoliberal logics and visions of higher education as a tool for development of graduates for local and global markets (Hlatshwayo 2022).

We now turn to the DHET's 2020–2025 strategic plan. The change the DHET (2020a) aims to achieve in South Africa through higher education is:

> [A]n improvement in the economic participation and social development of youth and adults, which will be realised as a result of expanded opportunities, excellent teaching and learning, the provision of education and training relevant to the needs of employers and the optimal use of resources. (p. 30)

Prioritising social development and improving the chronically low participation of young people in the economy must be a priority of all levels of government in South Africa, as well as the universities. Similarly, teaching and learning in higher education should be of top quality, and the resources should be used optimally (Luescher et al. 2023). However, our concern here is with the neoliberal vision of higher education and the emphasis on the provision of knowledge, skills, training and education 'relevant to the needs of employers'. Apart from contributing to economic development, higher education must play a key role in promoting social and epistemic justice (Essop 2020). In a complex and deeply unequal and inequitable society such as South Africa, where contemporary inequalities and inequities are rooted in the colonial conquest and looting, white supremacy and capitalist exploitation, and where the higher education sector had played a fundamental role in all this, universities should be more than efficient producers of skilled workforce for the local and global marketplace. Universities should be developing 'graduates who are socially, politically, and not only economically, aware and who can contribute to the development of societies where the vast majority live in unfavourable living conditions' (Boughey & McKenna 2021:7). When the DHET (2020a) discusses the priorities for the higher education sector, the focus is on improving the quality of education and student success rates. But the quality is in no way linked to the need to move away from the Eurocentric, capitalist and neoliberal discourses, ideologies, worldviews, dogmas and priorities; it is about higher education being responsive to the needs of the economy, work readiness and preparation of students for employment and meeting the needs of the industries and the neoliberal economic system and capitalism, at home and abroad.

In the DHET's Strategic Plan, decolonisation is mentioned only once, in passing, and as a footnote: 'Improved decolonisation and Africanisation of curricula' is one of the possible outcomes in a figure describing a high-level logframe for the post-school education and training sector, which includes higher education (2020a:24). There is no engagement in the document with decolonisation as a concept; no vision; no what, why and how; whether this is important or a priority; what support would be provided to the universities or what the DHET expects the universities to deliver in terms of epistemic decolonisation. There is also no mention of colonialism, apartheid or coloniality and how all this may be impacting higher education, institutional cultures, knowledge and curriculum. Decolonisation for the DHET is something that may happen while the universities go about their business of developing graduates for the local and global industries and markets.

Importantly, while the DHET's Strategic Plan mentioned decolonisation only once and as a footnote, this was removed altogether in a revised version of the document. At the same time, the neoliberal visions and logics of higher education, outlined in the original Strategic Plan, have remained in the revised version (DHET 2020b). Finally, the DHET (2020a:19) sees the 'pressure to transform the sector through transformed language policies and a transformed curricula' as one of the *key challenges* facing higher education in South Africa. The choice of language here is important. Coloniality and Eurocentricity of knowledge and curriculum are not seen as key challenges in higher education; the challenge facing universities is the 'pressure to transform' and decolonise the curriculum and knowledge and incorporate indigenous languages in higher education alongside the colonial- and apartheid-imposed languages. Despite all the scholarship and rhetoric about the need to transform and decolonise higher education since 2015, epistemic decolonisation remains absent in the DHET's strategic priorities.

The lack of engagement with the concepts of coloniality and epistemic decolonisation in the DHET's current strategic plan is a continuation of the DHET's past policy and strategic thinking about higher education transformation in South Africa. At the same time, it is also a prime example of the DHET's failure to engage with key concepts, concerns and calls for change in the sector since the 2015–2016 student protests. While it may be understandable that these terms and concepts were not part of the DHET's strategic and policy thinking and vocabulary before 2016, to see this completely neglected, ignored and sidelined in the current strategic plan for public higher education is highly concerning. This exemplifies the DHET's lack of interest to engage with and tackle relevant and difficult issues linked to transformation of higher education in South Africa – such as epistemic violence at the level of knowledge and curriculum (Hlatshwayo 2024; Keet 2014) – despite the rhetoric that claims otherwise (Luescher et al. 2023). It further exemplifies the neoliberal capture of the DHET, which shows that the department is not interested in higher education transformation beyond certain goals and targets, such as student and staff demographics and the increased production of human capital for the markets and industries. All this points to the 'failures of the post-apartheid democratic government to tackle the imperial/colonial/apartheid logic that is still deeply rooted in higher education' (Hlatshwayo 2024:241), despite the government's own recognition of the responsibility to ensure the public accountability of universities regarding the dismantling of colonial and apartheid logics, epistemologies and institutional cultures and transformation of the curriculum and knowledge (DOE 1997).

Conclusion: Can South African universities be decolonised?

In navigating the above debates and arguments surrounding ideologies and discourses that have prevented fundamental transformation and epistemic decolonisation of higher education, we are left grappling with what it takes to have

decolonisation become more than a buzzword in South African higher education. How to get epistemic decolonisation to be at the centre of the DHET's and institutional strategic thinking and planning for higher education? Bhambra, Nişancıoğlu and Gebrial (2020:513–514) describe decolonisation as a process of 'interrogating, resisting, dismantling, reforming or transforming the university. It is about critically engaging with how the university has historically produced, sustained and justified violence and domination across the world'. In 2015 and 2016, black student activists exposed the failure of university leaders, administrators and academia to do this after the end of apartheid. They challenged the neoliberalisation and commodification of higher education and called for dismantling of the Eurocentric epistemic hegemony. Their activism has forced universities to begin to engage in discussions about coloniality and epistemic decolonisation. Luescher et al. (2023) argue that in the aftermath of the student protests, the higher education sector has finally entered the 'deep transformation' era focused on tackling the legacies of colonialism and apartheid in university structures, cultures and curriculum and meaningfully transforming and decolonising knowledge. However, the evidence points to largely performative changes taking place at universities (Badat 2020; Heleta 2023; Heleta & Chasi 2024; Heleta & Jithoo 2023; Hlatshwayo 2022; Le Grange et al. 2020; Morreira et al. 2020). Much of the work on curriculum decolonisation at universities has been superficial. Le Grange et al. (2020:26) call the university efforts 'decolonial washing', explaining that the 'decolonial transformation' at universities resembles greenwashing and the provision of false impressions by corporations that are polluting the environment but using marketing strategies to portray themselves as caring for the nature and environment. Similarly, the much-needed policy alignment and direction from the government (Motala et al. 2021) and the political will, courage and support to tackle coloniality (Keet 2014) have not been forthcoming. DHET (2020a) does not consider decolonisation as a priority in South African higher education. Instead, its neoliberal visions dominate the strategic planning for the higher education sector. In such an environment, combined with the cuts in public spending on higher education, the focus on social justice and epistemic decolonisation at universities will continue to be sidelined and neglected in the quest of further corporatisation and commodification (Badat 2020). This, it is important to note, is contrary to the transformative visions of post-apartheid higher education and is a prime example of the government's failure to ensure public accountability of universities regarding the dismantling of colonial and apartheid epistemologies (DOE 1997).

As discussed in the introduction, a number of scholars have written about the ways neoliberalism and the Rainbow Nation have impacted higher education and prevented epistemic decolonisation. In this article, we have brought these two ideologies together to show how they intersect and how they have worked towards the same goal – the maintenance of the oppressive socio-economic and epistemic status quo in the society and in higher education. The government's turn to neoliberalisation soon after the transition to democracy has sidelined the progressive visions of higher education, which hoped to transform the sector from a colonial and apartheid tool of racist oppression and epistemic othering and injustice, to a site for critical interrogation of the past and present and envisioning of a more just and equitable future. Neoliberalisation ensured that the universities were underfunded by the government, with institutional leaders and administrators focussed on building corporate enterprises, commodifying knowledge, enhancing the bottom line by any means necessary and producing skilled 'human capital' for the industries and marketplace. In this way, higher education has contributed to the maintenance of racial capitalism and the neoliberal socio-economic order in South Africa while maintaining Eurocentric hegemonic knowledge, ideas and worldviews. Accepting and propagating the Rainbow Nation myths as the truth and the key approach for moving on after centuries of racist settler-colonial oppression has ensured that there would be limited critical engagement about the past, including the racist history of the higher education sector and its role in the propagation of white supremacy, segregation and oppression. While this has been unjust and has not contributed to the fundamental societal transformation, it was also contrary to the basic academic principles of critical inquiry, search for truth and the purpose of the university. In higher education, the Rainbow Nation ideology served as a perfect discourse – or an excuse – for historically white universities and much of white academia to not engage with the country's racist past and their own role in maintaining white supremacist oppression and subjugation of black people.

If South Africa and its universities want to genuinely decolonise the higher education system, institutions, knowledge and curriculum, the starting point must be a deep, critical and comprehensive engagement with the history of the institutions and academia and their role in propagating, supporting and enabling colonialism, slavery and apartheid and profiting off blood money and land theft. The higher education system was allowed to hide its past, complicity and crimes during the TRC, but it is never too late for truth, justice and redress. As Makhubela (2018:16) points out, it is paramount 'to come to terms with … [the South African higher education sector's] collusion in the violence of the colonial empire', adding that decolonisation 'begets a restorative justice, a justice that privileges the aspirations of those damaged by the racist colonial–apartheid establishment and not the preservation of the complicit institutions'. This is part of the 'complicated conversations' about colonialism, apartheid and coloniality and the past and current racial injustices and inequalities; without this, there will be no decolonisation in higher education (Le Grange et al. 2020:26).

In a comprehensive report about the state of transformation in higher education, Luescher et al. (2023:xxii) highlight that there is a need for a 'creative re-imagination of the public university in South Africa as a transformative institution, which would take on a much more intentional, systematic,

and comprehensive transformation agenda'. It is evident that the re-imagination is not yet forthcoming from the institutions themselves, or the DHET. We see this as the continuation of the business-as-usual, despite the often-heard rhetoric about the need for meaningful transformation and decolonisation. The higher education sector remains Eurocentric on many levels and particularly within the historically white universities. As a result of, in part, the lack of political will within the government to hold public universities accountable regarding dismantling of colonial, apartheid and Eurocentric logics that shape curriculum, knowledge and education in higher education, universities never needed to engage meaningfully in epistemic decolonisation. The only reason decolonisation became a buzzword in South Africa over the past decade is because black student activists fought for it. Yet, despite this, decolonisation never became a strategic priority in higher education. If public universities are not required to make this a priority by the DHET, which provides significant funds and strategic vision to the sector, why would the neoliberal and largely Eurocentric universities do much, if anything, about this?

Much of what we write about in this article has been written and spoken about since 2015; a few scholars even wrote about decolonisation before it became a popular buzzword (see, e.g. Keet 2014; Subreenduth 2006). Yet, the critical and decolonial scholarship has not been able to influence the higher education policy and strategic priorities on the national level. Similarly, the scholarship and the calls for epistemic decolonisation have been largely used performatively and superficially by university leaders and administrators interested in ticking boxes instead of driving fundamental change. None of this is the fault of the critical and decolonial scholars or the student activists. Those in power within the DHET and institutions must be called out and held accountable for the failure to transform and decolonise universities and knowledge. Most importantly, South Africa needs *more* critical scholarship, praxis and engagements about coloniality of knowledge, Eurocentrism, curriculum decolonisation, tackling neoliberalisation and commodification of higher education and on how to achieve broader socio-economic decolonisation in the country. All this needs to happen through organising and critical engagements within the universities – between academics, researchers, students and staff – and between university communities and the broader society. Engagements are also needed across borders, within Southern Africa, across the African continent and rest of the Global South and with indigenous peoples, immigrant communities, progressive people, scholars and thinkers in the Global North. The struggles against coloniality, neocolonialism, white supremacy, capitalism and neoliberalism are global, and we must organise on the global scale and in solidarity with the oppressed and subjugated everywhere. When it comes to the struggle for epistemic decolonisation, Walsh's (2023) call for the expansion of decolonial scholarship and praxis to grow the fissures and cracks within the systems and institutions in order to dismantle coloniality and the Eurocentric status quo is particularly relevant.

Decolonisation of knowledge is a radical process of disruption and dismantling of 'epistemological, economic and political … forms of coloniality that pervade both higher education and society' (Motala et al. 2021:1004). In South Africa, decolonisation complicates the 'Rainbow Nation' myths as it asks difficult questions about the past, present and future and demands dismantling of Eurocentric knowledge, ideas, worldviews, institutional cultures and ways of knowing and understanding the world that have been dominant since the colonial conquest. Decolonisation also complicates and disrupts the neoliberal university, its corporate image, its exploitative nature, its managerial structures, its rigid and Eurocentric institutional culture and knowledge project, its business interests and links and its vision and goal of being accepted into the 'global knowledge economy'. Decolonisation must be a radical process of dismantling neoliberalisation, commodification and Eurocentricity and developing a genuinely public, developmental and pluralistic higher education system. Given the lack of political will within the government and institutions in South Africa, we are unlikely to see a truly decolonised university any time soon. The dominant and hegemonic discourses and ideologies, local and global, and the powerful that promote them will continue to silence, co-opt, sideline and undermine any attempts to dismantle the status quo. But we should never stop imagining and fighting for a better world and a decolonised university.

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