

## Curriculum Transformation at a Private Higher Educational Institution: An Exploratory Study on Decolonisation

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### ABSTRACT

Decolonisation of higher education is an important subject which has gained much support in public universities in South Africa. While curricular and other changes are currently being implemented in public universities to align with decolonisation goals, there currently does not exist a decolonisation and transformation strategy for private higher education institutions (PHEIs). The private sector's role in education is becoming increasingly important, with a higher growth rate than that of the public sector. Despite this, most studies on decolonisation continue to reflect the public sector context. There is little scholarly work, if any, that reflects decolonisation initiatives in the private educational sector. However, private higher education has an important role to play in South Africa, and decolonisation is thus also important in this domain. The purpose of this study is to explore ways to transform curricula at a private higher education institution in South Africa. This article, which is an exploratory study, aims at initiating conversations that support curriculum change and to unpack some of the obstacle's lecturers face regarding transformation at a private tertiary educational institution.

## Introduction

In South Africa, like many other countries, higher education is offered by both publicly-funded institutions, and privately-funded (mostly by parents and students) institutions. In 2015, the #FeesMustFall student protests in South Africa included a call to decolonise education which brought much of South Africa's public universities to a standstill. For the first time since the end of apartheid<sup>1</sup>, there was a unified, student-driven call that spanned across most public universities, addressing fees, social justice, and the nature of knowledge. Public higher education institutions (HEIs) experienced disruptions from students (and some staff) who demanded equality, social justice, and transformation within these educational institutions.

The call to decolonise knowledge in South African HEIs arose out of colonial legacies that have continued post the 1994 transition to democratic rule in the country. Decolonisation has become an important social and political agenda at HEIs. Public higher education in South Africa is in a state of social change — attempting to create universities that foster social justice. Thus, much of the discourse on the transformation of higher education relates to the building of equal and inclusive societies, particularly for students who were previously excluded and/or disadvantaged.

In the private sector, which also falls under the umbrella of the South African higher education oversight bodies, the need to address decolonisation is also important. However, the management, business strategy, and funding model at private higher educational institutions (PHEIs) are different to those of public universities. These differences underscore the incompatibilities of campaigns like #FeesMustFall and equitable access in the private sector.

The purpose of this article is twofold: firstly, it aims to report on the findings of an exploratory study that was conducted at a PHEI as a starting point for curriculum change in an engineering department at a South African PHEI; secondly, it aims to present cybernetics as an approach to such curriculum change. As a first step in addressing these objectives, this qualitative, exploratory study was conducted at a PHEI with a group of software engineering lecturers and their students to explore

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<sup>1</sup> There have been many earlier isolated student protests often relating to registration fees (Speckman, 2014: 127), challenges with management, obstacles to student success, support and access. However, the massive protest action of 2015 had support from most public university student bodies with seven universities having closed on 21 October 2015 (Naicker, 2016: 55).

methods of initiating curriculum change that could serve as a step towards decolonising the course<sup>2</sup>. It was important to first establish what the perceptions and attitudes of the lecturers and their students were concerning the topic of decolonisation in order to identify strategies to achieve curriculum change at this PHEI<sup>3</sup>.

The aim of the exploratory study was to gain an understanding of academics' and students' conceptualisations and attitudes towards decolonising the curriculum at the PHEI as well as investigating possible avenues for such curriculum change. In this study, the term decolonisation is used as a blanket term to describe the efforts that educators, managers, policy makers, and students enact to transform their educational spaces as well as their social world to address historic social injustices. These injustices include: the exclusion of Black South Africans<sup>4</sup> from higher education; the lack of acknowledgement and engagement with African worldviews within curricula; narrow scope and implementation of language policies; and insensitive signs and symbolism in and around places of learning. Decolonisation is defined as the undoing of colonialism and a move towards actively acknowledging that reason and truth are vested in worldviews — in this case, colonial values and norms which were unjustly blanketed over many African cultures (Baron, 2017). Decolonisation is also intimately linked to social justice. One of the many aims of decolonisation is to remove racial and social inequalities with the goal of achieving social justice (Mbembe, 2016).

Thus, in this study, the decolonisation agenda is conceptualised as a strategy that addresses present and past injustices with the aim of achieving social justice for previously disadvantaged groups. There is also an aim of educating those groups who were not directly negatively affected by educational exclusion but who, as citizens, should understand the purpose and nature of decolonisation in South Africa. Thus, the term represents much more than the work of transforming a single curriculum; it covers the whole educational space and all its interlinkages. In this study, the aim was to investigate perceptions of decolonisation in a general sense, but the work to be completed in changing the curriculum reflects a small part of an ongoing decolonisation agenda.

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<sup>2</sup> One may argue that the idea of decolonising a computer-based curriculum is a contradiction as it continues with epistemic violence since such curricula still remain out of reach for many poor and/or marginalised people. Such a debate falls out of the scope of this article.

<sup>3</sup> The reason for this pre-enquiry was that starting a decolonisation process without partnering with the people on the ground (academics and students) would be hierarchical; thus, it was important to first meet with the academics and students and understand their ideas about decolonisation which were then used in identifying the approach to decolonising a software engineering curriculum.

<sup>4</sup> Other racial groups also experienced racial segregation in South Africa during apartheid.

## Decolonisation at PHEIs

The mission to decolonise was underscored by the widespread student protest action of 2015 and the many renewed calls for the transformation of higher education; however, the difficult task is in the implementation of this agenda in a way that is agreeable to all role players. The lack of transformation manifests in unequal access to education, perpetuation of colonial legacies, and exclusionary language policies (Cloete, 2016). Shay (2016) points out that the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall<sup>5</sup> campaigns may have increased the debate around curriculum transformation but that there has not been enough tangible change. Habib (2016) attributes this slow transformation to inconsistencies in addressing decolonisation, which in some places seem to have lost its trajectory. Heleta (2016) found that one of the disastrous effects of colonialism was the suppression of local knowledge systems and the promotion of Western knowledge; even after the demise of apartheid in 1990, South African HEIs continue to be rooted in colonial and Western worldviews.

Presently, decolonisation at public institutions is an ongoing process that has not been fully realised. Thus, the 2015 student campaigns aimed at emphasizing the issues of decolonisation and necessary transformation, including issues of access to education and ever-increasing tertiary fees, can be argued to have been inevitable. Unless these matters are meaningfully attended to, protests and tension are bound to continue. Thus, transformation in public universities remains a highly relevant endeavour in higher education.

### *A Transformative Shift in South African Higher Education*

Vanderstraeten and Biesta (2006) state that education is an activity that should bring about change; thus, academics should consider their pedagogy not only around education but also as a vehicle for social change. This requires academics to re-think their pedagogy in a way that accepts different approaches through the adoption of historical, cultural, and alternative understandings. One method of achieving this is to encourage students to participate in community projects that foster solving problems together with community representatives. Hoosain and Sinha (2018) showed that academics could deliver on decolonisation through initiatives that combine student projects with community service with a focus on local relevance. This approach of students engaging with their communities through assignments and group projects, not only benefits communities, but learners

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<sup>5</sup> #RhodesMustFall was a protest movement in 2015 aimed at the removal of the Cecil John Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town. Rhodes is considered a white supremacist (Rhodes, 1902; Maylam, 2005).

as well. Students get an opportunity to be exposed to diverse cultures, value systems, and the social ills that many communities face daily.

Le Grange (2016) emphasises the importance of conversation, stating that transformation of the curriculum requires conversations that are ongoing and inclusive. Similarly, Jansen (2018) emphasises that transformation is not the end but the beginning of an incomplete conversation. Jansen also highlights the importance of conversation in the decolonisation process. Integrating a decolonisation agenda into classroom conversational spaces requires mutual understanding and tolerance. According to Keet and Swartz (2015), this should include collaboration with a wider audience (society), and curriculum change should be aligned to culture, local experiences, and social justice. By incorporating students' worldviews, as well as the lived experiences that community members face in their daily lives, a collaborative process may provide a mixture of experiences, viewpoints and real-world pragmatics needed to inform HEIs as they take steps towards transformation. This process would likely rely on adopting a multidisciplinary and intersubjective approach to curriculum change that incorporates not only local knowledge, but a deep awareness of human dignity and social justice.

### *Social Justice*

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2015) argues for social justice to be a fundamental purpose of education and should include human dignity, equal rights, and shared responsibility for a sustainable future. Social justice has become an increasingly pervasive issue in recent history due to poverty, inequality, and oppression experienced by many groups in our global diverse society; thus, it is important that students and educators understand different types of injustice — even injustices that are unconsciously enacted through unchallenged stereotypes and bias. Freire (1972) argued that education systems require reform and traditional education has contributed significantly to maintaining oppression, and social injustices, by alienating and treating students like commodities<sup>6</sup>.

In attempting to address the issue of social injustice in South Africa, Leibowitz (2017) states that HEIs can achieve social justice by recognising the values, knowledge, and attributes of students from various backgrounds. Badat (2010) advocates for a social justice programme that would focus

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<sup>6</sup> The proposed steep increase in university fees in 2015 was the catalyst for not only the protest action for lower fees but also the call to decolonise education. The commodification and monetization of knowledge within education, while out of the scope of this paper, is another avenue that is relevant to decolonisation and transformation.

attention on equality, equity, and redress, through measures that would be in favour of those who are disadvantaged. Chilisa (2012) suggests that a social justice agenda must allow students space to tell their stories and share their worldviews. While these proposals are noble, educators do not necessarily know how to achieve these goals and some educators unfortunately do not feel the need to embrace this challenge, particularly if the organisation does not prioritise such an agenda. In public universities, there has been significant support for activities that align with the institution's decolonisation goals. However, in the private sector, these institutions also need to focus on developing a generation of graduates who become socially aware, responsible, and committed to social justice, and thus much work needs to be done at PHEIs.

### *Transformation at Private Higher Educational Institutions*

The role of PHEIs in South Africa is significant as they have become important partners in the delivery of education and training (National Planning Commission, 2012). An analysis of empirical data reveals that the private higher education sector has grown to become a significant player in the higher education system (Levy, 2018). Private higher educational institutions have attempted to create their own unique position in the market — complementing the public sector rather than competing with it (Varghese, 2014). According to Statistics South Africa (2017), there was an over 50% increase in student enrolments in PHEIs in the six-year period from 2010 to 2016. According to the Council on Higher Education (2017) in South Africa, the increased student protests and ongoing instability at public institutions have created a significant increase in the demand for private higher education and resultant growth. However, one should not assume that because these institutions are private, that they are immune to the contextual factors and social ills that have plagued South Africa. On the contrary, private institutions have a vital role to play in transforming South Africa.

In trying to develop a successful decolonisation strategy at PHEIs, several challenges are present. One significant challenge is that there are limited studies on the topic of decolonisation at PHEIs in South Africa. While there is growing literature on the topic of decolonising curricula, these scholarly outputs are aimed at public institutions. The authors of such publications are also mostly working within the public university space, thus reflecting a different context when compared to the private educational institutions. A search of South African journal articles, as well as masters and doctoral studies, confirms that little, if any, have been published on the topic of curriculum decolonisation at PHEIs. There is thus a gap in the literature on the topic of decolonising curricula at PHEIs which supported the need for an exploratory study.

## Theoretical Framework

Attempting to navigate decolonisation as a topic of enquiry requires a deep investigation into one's own research methods as there is no apolitical and unbiased approach (Baron 2019; 2021). For this reason, second-order cybernetics was used as a theoretical framework as cybernetics, and more specifically, second-order cybernetics, is concerned with the study of communicating systems and the philosophy of science. The observer is thought to be part of the system, negating claims of objectivity and ultimate truth.

### *Second-Order Cybernetics*

Cybernetics could be thought of as a framework that provides the researcher with the tools to deal with multiple realities while acknowledging the role of each observer (including the researcher) within the observing system. Cybernetics does not have a home discipline, as Pask (1961: 11) states:

Cybernetics... like applied mathematics cuts across the entrenched departments of natural science; the sky, the earth, the animals and plants. Its interdisciplinary character emerges when it considers the economy not as an economist, biology not as a biologist, engines not as an engineer. In each case its theme remains the same, namely, how systems regulate themselves, reproduce themselves, evolve and learn. Its high spot is the question of how they organize themselves.

From Pask's statement, the reader may conclude that cybernetics does not follow a traditional mode of thought. The Greek word, *Kybernetes*, translated into English, is pilot or steersman. The study of cybernetics is also the study of patterns, regularity and feedback, which translates into circular causality (Glanville, 2002). Circular causality is a troubling aspect for scientists who prefer to base their assumptions and hypotheses on linear causality and thus prefer to report their results in terms of a traditional linear cause-effect model. Scientific tools frequently rely on linear causality for their algorithms and proofs. Much of the statistical modelling that scientists rely on assumes a linear model, yet social systems are not necessarily linear. Circular causality is particularly relevant in social systems in which there are continuous influences on the actions of people within the system, including, environmental, societal, religious, political, and other extraneous sources. For example, in a business there is an ongoing circular causal process (Beer, 1972).

Second-order cybernetics arises when cybernetics is applied to the subject of cybernetics. Anthropologist and cyberneticist Margaret Mead (1943) realised that her mere presence in the cultures she was studying impacted their behaviours; her presence within the system (group)

impacted these very systems. Mead was one of the forerunners of second-order cybernetics (Glanville, 2015). Second-order cybernetics adds the observer into the observing system. Thus, second-order cybernetics challenges the independence and objectivity of research — tying the researcher to her research findings. This implies an ethical and intersubjective agenda which is what we believe research should aspire to. The inability of the researcher to “know for sure” implies a humility in her work, acknowledging her own limitations (Baron, 2019). These limitations include the inescapable epistemology that the researcher is tying into her research. Even with rigorous reflective practice, there is still bias that is perpetuated as there is no escape from one’s beliefs and values — one’s worldview.

The idea that observation is tied to the observer challenges the 2500 years of Western epistemology and its focus on a realist view (von Glasersfeld, 1990). The Western view of epistemology depicts an experience of reality as more or less picture-like (iconic) or as a matching function. However, in cybernetics, perception is an adaptation in the functional sense. Thus, observing and understanding becomes the study of how the mind operates (von Glasersfeld, 1984). This is an important aspect in conversation theory (CT) whereby conversation is the primary tool to understand the mechanism of understanding of the other person. The goal is to understand the understandings of the other in the conversational domain.

#### *Conversation Theory as a Framework for Decolonisation in the Classroom*

Conversation theory takes the conversation as the fundamental unit of enquiry for investigating human learning. Conversations provide a context for the human world which becomes the domain which we inhabit — bringing forth our self-consciousness. CT has its roots in the works of Luria (1970), but also in the works of Piaget (1959), Landa (1971), Kelly (1955), and Bateson (1972), as well as the information-processing approaches of Broadbent (1972). This theory focusses on the architecture of conversations, the structures of interactions, the creation of knowing, and the evolution of perspectives (Pangaro, 2001). CT sets up a system within which to view learning, focussing on proof of understanding (Pask, 1976a).

The cybernetic perspective that is followed in this exploratory study is based on Gordon Pask’s conversation theory (1975; 1976a; 1976b). Pask’s CT aligns with the purpose of decolonisation, as it provides an approach for educators and learners to converse and navigate through complexity — learning about the others’ learning. Grover (2016) describes the learning process in a cybernetic



classroom as a system where conversation and responses require interaction between teacher and learner. Within the context of decolonisation, a cybernetic epistemology encourages discourse so that the voice and worldview of each participant becomes an important influence in how messages are understood by the individuals.

Attempting a conversational approach in the classroom does require a paradigm shift in the way the lecturers understand their students, as adopting cybernetics requires academics to engage with their students in a heterarchical process whereby students become co-creators of knowledge (Baron, 2018). In a cybernetic classroom, the role of the lecturer becomes important as she has the responsibility for creating an atmosphere of curiosity, collaboration, and engagement. In doing so, the dialogue between the lecturer and students becomes co-created — reflecting the role players who are party to these conversational spaces. Cybernetics provides a framework that assists the lecturer in steering conversational constructions of possible avenues that support a decolonial approach for understanding reason and knowing<sup>7</sup>. While the participants may not all be experts in the field of their studies, the participants are experts in their own worldviews.

CT is used as a framework as it provides dialectical tools that may encourage discourse and reflexion<sup>8</sup> amongst educators, students, and other interested participants (management and corporate entities). By engaging in open-ended reflexive conversations — learning about one's own and others' learning and understanding — these conversations become a guide for transforming the curriculum.

A traditional classroom is generally teacher-centred: the teacher teaches, and the students listen — often resulting in less engagement during the learning process. This teacher-centred approach creates a hierarchy in the system, with teacher detached from the student. The teacher should rather act as a steering agent of the learning process whilst allowing students to share their own stories and worldviews. This move from hierarchy to heterarchy is useful in opening up conversational spaces for participants to openly engage. Through collaborative engagement, lecturers and students can adapt and reflect in community with one another, thereby creating an inclusive approach to curriculum transformation (Baron, 2016). As educators, there is a need to bear

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<sup>7</sup> The word knowing is used instead of knowledge as knowledge requires a person to know and experience in the present tense during the conversation.

<sup>8</sup> Although Schön (1983) used the term *reflective* in his writing about reflective practice, the term *reflexive* is used here based on von Foerster's use of the term which he expanded to include the relationship of oneself to the context and to others as well, allowing for a dynamic circular loop of contemplation and change invoked from several sources (Glanville, 2013; von Foerster, 1991). Thus, reflection in community with others is termed reflexive practice in this context.

in mind that information is not knowledge, and that knowledge is acquired over time as von Glasersfeld (2002) points out: knowledge is not passively received but actively built up.

Implementing CT in the classroom allows the teacher to gain a deeper perspective of students' worldviews as conversations are not one-sided but based on mutual understanding and learning. This in turn changes the traditional classroom into a social learning space where students can tell their stories and share their worldviews. One of the benefits of a conversational learning approach is that it encourages students to take part in a shared system where there is constant feedback and interaction. This process allows for mutual learning and reflexion. In this study, the three principles listed below were used as a guide (Baron, 2016: 8):

- i. inviting each learner to actively participate in knowledge creation;
- ii. inviting the students to discuss their educational aims, goals, and learning styles; and
- iii. setting the students' context and experience of their context as a trajectory for the class's learning outcomes under the co-direction of both teacher and students.

Adopting a conversational approach in the classroom does not only allow for increased participation but also allows the teacher an opportunity to develop an awareness of the students' knowledge. Thus, the individuals become part of the decolonisation process as the narratives of the participants are reflected upon. This reflexion allows the participants an opportunity to understand what decolonisation may be and its role in curriculum development.

## Methodology

This exploratory study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design guided by a second-order cybernetic perspective. The aim was to gain an understanding of academics' and students' conceptualisations and attitudes towards decolonising the software engineering curriculum as well as possible ideas for what a decolonised curriculum may entail. The module of software engineering was chosen for this study as this module aligns with one of the author's own teaching experiences and she wanted to be personally involved in the whole process, including any new projects emanating from the study. The field research was thus conducted by one of the authors who currently holds the position of senior head of programme at the Independent Institute of Education (IIE). Two relevant activities of her work include curriculum development and accreditation. She has worked as a lecturer at a public university for six years and has been working in private education for nine years. For this study, the researcher was also one of the lecturers for the module. The study

spanned across two semesters and took place at one of the campuses of the IIE in Johannesburg, South Africa. The IIE is the largest private higher education institution in South Africa.

As an initial point of entry into the study, the researcher engaged with the Dean of Research and Postgraduate Studies as well as the Teaching and Learning Manager at the PHEI to understand management's vision of decolonisation. Informal discussions with lecturers at the PHEI took place including observations made from past workshops sessions that were provided on the topic of decolonisation. Consultations also took place with three academics from public universities to gain insight into how these academics pursue decolonisation in their own curricula. These consultations occurred prior to the formal start of the study.

The explorative study was then proposed, and ethical clearance was obtained. The study consisted of three parts. The first part was conversational interviews with the two other lecturers of the module (the module had three lecturers with the researcher also fulfilling this role). The second part was the interviews with the students. The third part was the reflections with management which took place after the interviews were thematised and analysed. The qualitative study made use of semi-structured interviews based on a second-order cybernetics framework. The student interviews were aimed at inviting participants to engage and communicate openly with a scope for deep clarification. The aim of these interviews was to learn about the interviewee's point of view. This is particularly relevant in qualitative research as it relies on conversations between the researcher and her participants and allows the researcher to engage and learn in open reflexive conversations with both lecturers and students. The interviews ranged between 15 and 20 minutes.

### *Participants*

The participant interviews of the exploratory study included two lecturers and five students enrolled in the module called Software Engineering, which is in the Bachelor of Computer Application Development. The two lecturers are independent contractors who are industry specialists in the field of computer engineering. These two lecturers are in their 40's and have been teaching the module for a few years. In terms of the students, the researcher described the study to the student group and asked if anyone would like to participate. There were five students who volunteered out of a pool of 90. The sample consisted of two females and three males. The demographics of the student

group were mixed, consisting of black, white, and coloured<sup>9</sup> people with an age range of 19 to 22 years old. The participants were purposively sampled in the sense that only students enrolled for a software engineering module as part of their undergraduate qualification in Johannesburg, South Africa were invited to participate. While the researcher did not enquire about the students' economic status, the general demographic of students attending this campus is mostly affluent. The total number of participant interviews was seven: two lecturers and five students.

Even though there was a total pool of 90 students who were enrolled for software engineering on the Johannesburg campus, the response rate was low. There were repeated efforts by the researcher to cajole more student participants for the study; however, there was insufficient engagement from the students to expand the study sample. This low response rate was a concerning finding when compared to the public sector where there has been a lot of interest in decolonisation activities.

After all the interviews were conducted, reflective sessions took place with five staff members (management) at the PHEI to reflect on the findings. Appointments were made with five senior managers in the PHEI. These staff members were met on a one-to-one basis. These meetings were relaxed and informal but notes were taken for each meeting. The total number of participants in the study, including the five managers, was thus 12.

### *Student Interview Process*

The researcher explained the aim of the research to the participants, both in the call for participation and in the commencement of the interviews; however, a decision was made not to define decolonisation or to provide the researcher's ideas about this topic as the study was meant to determine the attitudes and ideas of the students and lecturers. This means that the conversations were aimed at learning about the participants and attempting to understand their understanding of this topic.

The following questions were posed to guide the interviews<sup>10</sup>:

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<sup>9</sup> In South Africa, the population is categorised into four groups, with mixed-race individuals being termed 'coloured' (Posel, 2001: 56). The South African national statistics use the four categories listed as: Black African, Coloured, Indian/Asian, and White to report on the demographic data of the country's population (Statistics South Africa, 2019). The term coloured can be considered offensive in some countries but is in official use in South Africa.

<sup>10</sup> This is a non-exhaustive list of questions. These were merely 'starter' questions. The aim was to converse rather than simply to get questions answered. This is in keeping with a conversation theory approach — learning about the participants' own worldviews and ways of thinking.

- What does decolonisation in education mean to you?
- Do you think there is a need to decolonise our curriculum? Why or why not?
- Should students be part of this decolonisation process? Why or why not?
- If yes, what approach would you use as a student or lecturer to decolonise a module like software engineering?

With the students' permission, the interviews were audio recorded using a cell phone. The recordings were then listened to repeatedly. These interviews were transcribed for analysis. The data was coded and categorised using thematic analysis. Sentiment analysis was conducted counting key words. Themes emerged which were categorised under relevant headings. Evidence for each of the themes was then used as part of the presentation of the results.

## Findings and Discussion

The results of the thematic analysis revealed several themes within the responses:

- i. Attitudes to decolonisation;
- ii. Decolonisation of the web;
- iii. Barriers to learning;
- iv. Planned decolonisation at PHEIs.

The last theme (iv) is a general overarching theme born out of informal conversations and scheduled consultations that led up to the pilot study. This last theme was also based on the reflective conversations and reflective consultations conducted post-study with five managers at the PHEI to understand their conceptualisation of the topic and to identify a shared vision going forward. The following are descriptions of the main themes that emerged, including examples from the participants' responses.

### *Thoughts on Decolonisation*

The students and lecturers from the PHEI indicated that they were never directly affected by the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests; however, they showed a variety of opinions concerning curriculum decolonisation. The two lecturers lecturing software engineering were interviewed. Responses from Lecturer 1 highlighted that decolonisation was more "suited to the Faculty of Humanities" whilst Lecturer 2 said that she was uncertain about decolonisation as there

was little scope for this, citing “increased research output, workload and the independent contractor model” as her reasons. Two notable student responses to the question on decolonisation were: Student A stated: “I associate those campaigns with burning tyres and buildings and I am happy that it does not happen here”; and Student B had a similar association linking decolonisation with “violence and destruction of property”.

It should be known that even though participants had negative feelings towards the term decolonisation, the interviewer’s goal was not to change these views, merely to explore them. It seems that when the protest action peaked in 2015, there was shocking imagery and a lot of commentary about decolonisation, including emotional responses. Such viewpoints become newsworthy as they are eye-catching and tend to remain in the minds of individuals who in turn associate decolonisation with such news stories — often negatively framed. Even though the authors are biased in support of decolonisation, it is imperative that the participants be given the respect and space to voice their opinions since the purpose of the study is not to explore the authors’ viewpoints, but rather that of the participants. Some of the responses demonstrate there are misunderstandings about decolonisation as a long-term process, thus highlighting the importance of this pilot study in investigating the beliefs and attitudes of the staff and learners. In the public sector, the conversations and debates on decolonisation were often heated and addressed deep societal topics with many themes emerging. However, in our study at this PHEI, it was found that phrases such as “social responsibility” and “community engagement” resonated more deeply with the students than the word decolonisation and thus much of the interview time was spent on discussing community engagement.

### *Decolonisation of the Web*

Student D argued that as a South African software developer, he should become “familiar with the eleven official languages in South Africa as the government websites that we worked with such as the as Department of Home Affairs and eNaTIS<sup>11</sup>, were only available in English and this is not suitable for people who may need to apply for his or her Identity document or drivers licence in a rural community”. The student further added, “Google Translate integrated [into the websites], would provide some sort of translation to these services. A good start of the decolonisation process would be to ensure that us ICT students are educated on using language translators on the websites and systems we develop”.

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<sup>11</sup> This is the electronic national administration traffic information system (eNaTIS) used in South Africa.

Student D's response immediately prompted the lecturer (co-author) to introduce a new topic for the next lesson, called "Decolonisation of the Web". This new topic allowed the lecturer to not only continue the conversation around decolonisation, but at the same time to unpack the students' and the lecturer's curiosity regarding how South African government websites can be adapted to include different South African languages. This point speaks to the many countries who have more than one official language. For example, there is an increasing reliance on online platforms for governmental (and corporate) activities, including applying for passports, licenses etc. Lack of language support may alienate groups by not catering for multiple languages. Software engineering students being made aware of this weakness can address such limitations. Another project was also initiated called "Coding for a Cause" which was introduced to develop social awareness among the software engineering students with the intention for students to develop solutions that may solve problems in impoverished communities. This approach follows from the recommendations by scholars which call for curriculum change to be aligned to culture and social justice with the aim of equality (Badat, 2010; Keet & Swartz, 2015). Since academics set the curriculum, they are primarily responsible for initiating and overseeing curriculum change that may provide at least some transformation, and thus academics could deliver on decolonisation by championing community-based projects that focus on local relevance (Hoosain & Sinha, 2018).

### *Barriers to Learning*

One of the benefits of a conversational approach is to encourage students to take part in a shared system where there is openness and interaction. The following responses show the openness of the conversational forum. One student raised a concern about lecturers and operational processes that resulted in a sense of isolation on campus. Student E stated: "I feel isolated and our problems are often not heard, and lectures often came late to class. Considering the fees we pay, more attention needs to be given to our concerns". Student C also expressed her concern with regards to fees at the PHEIs: "fees on campus are quite high and this could be a barrier to completing my studies". This point resonates with students at public institutions regarding access<sup>12</sup>.

Even though some of the students' concerns are not directly related to the curriculum, it was important to listen to what students were adding to the conversations as this allowed the lecturer to

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<sup>12</sup> Much of the discourse on the role of higher education both at public and private institutions is in building more equal and inclusive societies (Bawa, 2017). In line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), particularly goal 4, students' access to higher education together with the retention and throughput rates of students should be the key concerns to enable student success (Council on Higher Education, 2012).

reflect on and develop a deeper awareness of some of their concerns regarding barriers to learning. It is important to note that if students' views are not included and reflected upon within the conversational process, they will struggle to find meaning in the curriculum transformation agenda. Thus, the approach is one of partnership rather than a hierarchical top-down approach. There is a need to acknowledge and even invite participants to discuss their contextual information as part of their narrative. A participant's context provides a frame for her content.

### *Planned Decolonisation at a PHEI*

After the exploratory study, a series of reflective conversations took place with senior managers at the PHEI. From these conversations, it was interesting to note that although the student-driven campaigns such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall created widespread awareness and action among students and lecturers at the public universities, this level of engagement was not readily matched in the PHEIs. It appears PHEIs were relatively shielded from the protest action and the resultant consequences of this important step in the country's history. However, this does not mean that PHEIs do not have an important role to play in the transformation of higher education in South Africa.

In the lead up to this exploratory study, the researcher found that academics from public institutions were more open to discussing the topic of decolonisation whilst some academics at the PHEI were somewhat reluctant as they did not resonate with the term decolonisation. Lecturers at the PHEI also highlighted that curriculum cannot be limited to local content alone as it needs to be globally competitive. This was evident in a lecturer's comment: "how does one decolonise a programming module without removing Java or C# as a language from the module". Students also showed an awareness of the influence of globalization and opted to continue their studies in English as they argued that it made them globally competitive.

While the aim of this study was not to "school" the participants on what decolonisation is or should be, the comments made by some participants demonstrated that for decolonisation to be positively implemented, the role-players would need to understand the benefits and importance of decolonisation. Thus, it became clear that more work needs to be done in the PHEI to gain a deep understanding of the decolonisation agenda. It also highlights that future workshops held at the PHEI need to be more conversational. If the workshops engage participants (PHEI staff) and learn



about their understandings (positive or negative) of decolonisation, the workshop may achieve enhanced outcomes.

Another finding was that many educators at the private institution felt lost when it came to decolonisation, as they believed they lacked the skills and guidance to adopt a decolonial approach, and that it was likely to be a challenging task. However, these educators did agree that decolonisation should be considered, also citing the UN's SDGs.

In the reflective part of this study, further conversations with senior managers in the PHEI highlighted that the topic of decolonisation was certainly not something PHEIs should omit or ignore. They pointed out that one mode of transformation could be driven by integrating the UN's SDGs as it will allow PHEIs to not only develop sustainable partnerships, but to enable a multidisciplinary approach to curriculum decolonisation. This is in keeping with what Bawa (2017) advocates for all HEIs in South Africa — both public and private — to explore and integrate the UN's SDGs as a strategy to underpin the decolonisation process.

In the public sector, academics and students felt the need to actively engage in debate, discussion, and attend workshops on decolonisation for a variety of reasons. Many of these initiatives are still ongoing. In some public universities there has even been a new requirement for a “decolonised pedagogy” as criteria for promotion. In the private sector, however, this has not been as forthcoming. Whilst there are workshops on the topic of decolonisation at PHEIs, it became evident in this exploratory study that for many academic staff members this is a less important activity and does not lead to major pedagogic changes in the academic's work.

One reason for this is that the employment model for instructors at private institutions is quite different to that for public universities. The public universities have mostly full-time academics who are employed for many years with a growth path from junior lecturer to professor. Such academics are required to align to their public university's decolonisation goals and additional work and time spent on meeting such goals is part of their employment. Lecturers at public universities are often also curriculum designers. In the PHEIs, however, many lecturers are part-time contract workers who often hold other employment in their respective industry of specialisation. This difference in employment structure may be a hurdle to achieving momentum for a decolonisation agenda at PHEIs, as part-time contractors would need to be interviewed with decolonisation as a key topic in the interview process as well as stated in the job description. Furthermore, decolonising current

curricula takes time and effort which also means more billable hours for these contract workers which is something PHEIs would need to factor in. In general, it was found that full-time staff at the PHEI had a higher commitment to decolonisation as compared to part-time contractors.

The #FeesMustFall protests were applauded for raising awareness about the funding problem in public universities in South Africa resulting in government and public universities exploring different funding models to cater for other student groups who could not secure funding for their tuition. For example, the “Missing Middle” is described as a significant group of students who are “too rich” to qualify for a government bursary, but too poor to qualify for commercial loans. This group has been identified and some assistance has been provided for this group in the public sector. However, an initiative such as the “Missing Middle” does not align with the funding model for the private sector (which is parent and/or student funded). PHEIs generally charge more for their courses and rely heavily on student fees for the day-to-day running of the institution, whereas public institutions of higher education receive significant funding from the government in South Africa.

## Conclusion

A software engineering course was used as a trial to start decolonising curricula at a PHEI. This pilot study proposed second-order cybernetics as a theoretical framework to navigate this important topic which was found to be a useful approach. The focus was on conversational engagements relying on openness and eagerness to learn about the participants and their unique contexts. Conversation theory (CT) assisted in mitigating value judgements when discussing decolonisation and transformation of the curriculum since conversations are about learning about the other party (Glanville, 2012). CT helped to encourage conversations and reflexions amongst participants. Introducing topics such as “Decolonising the Web” and a new project called “Coding for a Cause” encouraged discourse in the class that went beyond thinking about technology in isolation but rather assisted in creating contextual awareness to use technology to address the needs of impoverished communities.

The early findings from this exploratory study suggest that there is a major difference between public and private HEIs in the motivations, attitudes, and methods of addressing decolonisation. While there is a lot of scholarly output on this topic, this output reflects the public sector and there are minimal, if any, scholarly publications dealing with decolonisation of private intuitions. Within the PHEI in this study, there still exists some confusion about decolonisation amongst part-time

contractors as well as within the small student group who participated in the study. In terms of the staff at the PHEI, it seems that employment type impacts the degree of motivation in dealing with this topic. Full-time employed staff were more committed to the decolonisation agenda while the part-time academic staff who participated in this exploratory study did not see decolonisation as a priority. This last point may simply be that these part-time contractors were not employed for this purpose — highlighting the different roles lecturers at PHEIs play when compared to lecturers at public universities who tend to work in these universities for much longer periods.

As we seek to transform 21st-century teaching and learning and better understand the role of transformation in higher education and in society, the authors, as well as the academics, grasped that they would have to gain a deeper understanding of a changing curriculum with new methods of teaching and learning, including the integration of the UN's SDGs as a strategy to achieve decolonisation. With that said, the task that lies ahead for PHEIs is not just about embracing corporate social investment projects but requires an epistemological shift and ongoing conversations that promote inclusivity and lifelong learning experiences for all. This includes taking an ethical responsibility to ensure that the social space provided for learners is open and engaging but also increases social awareness of the context within which these PHEIs operate. The PHEIs have an important role to play in achieving these goals but a lot of work needs to be done.

### Future Study

The next phase of the study will explore the practices and principles of integrating social responsibility and community engagement as part of a decolonisation strategy in the Work Integrated Learning module that students complete in the final year of their qualification. The Work Integrated Learning (or WIL) module is designed to expose students to a local community in their chosen field. Students will be required to identify a social need and collaborate with an organisation in their local communities to develop a solution that is sustainable, socially responsible, and relevant for the community they have chosen to work with. It is expected that the findings from this study and any future studies will stimulate the development of a suitable framework for the integration of the UN SDGs as a strategy towards decolonisation within this PHEI. These activities aim to provide a basis for a much-needed, institution-wide framework.

## Limitations

This study relied on in-depth conversational methods but did not have a large sample size, thus generalisability is low. There was little interest from students for this study and it seems probable that follow up studies may have similar challenges in attempting to cajole participants to partake in these types of study. This lack of participant interest is nevertheless a useful finding as it shows the need to introduce decolonisation into the interview process when hiring new part-time contractors who would then be aligned to the PHEIs future decolonisation goals. This may assist in improving participation from the necessary role players. The study proposed cybernetics as a framework owing to its cross-disciplinary nature. Cybernetics is a challenging philosophy and requires extensive reading and self-reflection to engage in this approach.

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