South African Higher Education: Transformation or/and Decolonisation?

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ABSTRACT

Transformation is the christened name of institutional activities seeking to change South Africa 'into the opposite of apartheid', including in higher education (HE). However, transformation failures meant that students at universities in South Africa, through several #MustFall movements, protested around their misgivings about 'transformation' and advocated for a decolonial turn. Decolonisation, therefore, has become the preferred name for change to some sections of HE, thereby creating a conflict with 'transformation'. Our study collected responses on the meaning of transformation and decolonisation and their capability to change the hegemonic structure and Western institutional culture in universities. The qualitative study was anchored in Fomunyam's social transformation theory and used semi-structured interviews to collect data from 11 participants from a South African university. They were analysed thematically (reflexively). Findings depicted opinions favouring both transformation and decolonisation to achieve changes required in HE. The liberal and linguistic nature of transformation means it can be manipulated for different agendas and research purposes. Meanwhile, decolonisation, anchored in histories of Africa's oppression, is specific about recentring Africa in the universities. In conclusion, it is vital to exercise caution to avoid 'decolonial fatigue' which would make decolonisation a rhetoric just like transformation.

Introduction

'Transformation' was adopted as a symbol of change in the 1991 Convention for a Democratic South Africa to undo colonial injustices in South African society (van Schalkwyk, van Lill, Cloete & Bailey, 2022). Similar transformation efforts were adopted in higher education (HE) by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). For instance, the 1997 Department of Education White Paper took transformation as a baseline. Simply, transformation can be interpreted to mean creating racial equalities in universities. Nonetheless, the term has been criticised for encompassing a diversity of possible meanings, ranging from racial and gender diversity, to language, change in epistemological traditions, or multicultural university culture (Fomunyam, 2017: 169, 172), with a proliferation of interpretations on the accord of 'transforming', and unreliable measurement (van Schalkwyk *et al*., 2022).

Despite transformation's wide acceptance amongst HE stakeholders, including attachment of transformation goals to universities' mission statements, only slow and small transformation has been witnessed (Fomunyam, 2017). Limited transformation endeavours, seen in the breeding of tokenistic approaches, have resulted in lack of significant HE transformation (Heleta, 2016; Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017; Vorster & Quinn, 2017; van Schalkwyk *et al*., 2022). The continual transformation failures reached a climax in 2015 with what Keet, Sattarzadeh and Munene (2017: 1) described as the "most wide-ranging expression of discontent within and with higher education post-1994 and with the South African democratic project", namely, the #MustFall uprising and violent protests. Inherent in these protests was the call for university and curriculum decolonisation and free education (Muraina & Mlambo, 2022). Vorster & Quinn (2017: 37) argued for a decolonial turn vis-à-vis a total multidimensional discourse that recognises a stronger discourse "beyond transformation of numbers" and students' alienation.

Students' call for HE decolonisation is not an innovative call (Heleta, 2016; Mbembe, 2016; Vorster & Quinn, 2017). Unfortunately, many HE stakeholders usually dissociate from it. This study argues that the colonial departure of decolonisation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 3) might be one of the reasons it is pushed to the margins. By departing from coloniality, it brings back memories of the violence of colonialism and continuing coloniality, for both the oppressors and victims of these regimes. As a redemptive epistemology, decoloniality forbids the glorification of the 'modern' world as a result of the white, urban, able, and Euro-American man. It advocates for retelling the modern amidst the vitality of colonial difference and contributions of Blacks (see Bhambra, 2016). Keet *et al*. (2017) and

Zwane (2019) have asserted that students' call for decolonisation is overdue. Despite these realities and the wide attention and debate garnered by decolonisation vis-à-vis students' specific demands, there are indications of a transformation-decolonisation conflict.

The DHET minister averred that transformation is a complex and multi-dimensional term and there is a need to continue to interrogate its meaning and is situated within a larger country-wide transformation effort (Nzimande, 2015). However, students continued to demand a 'free decolonised education' as the ultimate HE goal. The students successfully motivated and put decolonisation on the lips of the majority of education stakeholders such as, but not limited to, universities' managements, organisations, lecturers, and researchers. Importantly, this recognition can come in the form of lip service or a box-ticking activity (Zwane, 2019) and views decolonisation as a movement or project (le Grange, 2016).[1] It can be observed that several higher education institutions' (HEIs') managements and organisations have tended to shift towards either transformation or decolonisation, or have different interpretations of, relationships with, and use of both terms, (un)consciously. These multiple interpretations and the probable transformation-decolonisation conflict motivated this study amidst the desire for structural HE change.

'Transformation' is "the dissolution of existing social relations and institutions, policies and practices, and their re-creation and consolidation into something substantially new" (Badat, 2009: 456). Hence, transformation can be understood as a form of change with intentions similar to decolonisation's intentions: change the Western-centric nature of HEIs and recentre Africa in HEIs. In addition, transformation and decolonisation have been used diversely in research. For example, both terms have been used similarly (Hlatshwayo & Alexander, 2021). Ngubane and Makua (2021) use transformation linguistically, that is, to mean a vision for a new university, especially one that respects African pedagogies such as Ubuntu, and that is socially just. Meanwhile, Fomunyam (2017) sees decolonisation happening only after transformation. Finally, transformation has been considered as the past in the country's HE discourse, and decolonisation as the present (Pillay & Swanepoel, 2019).

In response to the inconsistent usage and varied interpretations of transformation and decolonisation, this study interrogated how staff of a university in South Africa adopt and interplay the HE social change vis-a-vis the concept and practice of decolonisation and transformation.

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[1] See Andreotti, Stein, Ahenakew, and Hunt (2015) and Zembylas (2018) for different interpretations of university decolonisation.

Specific objectives included collecting responses on meanings and interpretations of these terms, discussions on their capacity to rectify apartheid and change the Global-North-hegemonic structure and institutional culture in HE. Despite the current prevalence of decolonisation in the South African HE discourse in conjunction with the pre-existing transformation agenda, this article is a leading study and contributes significantly to teasing out the (sometimes unsuspected) probable tensions and differences between the two HE concepts.

Transformation and Decolonisation Praxis

Understanding South African HE history is imperative to understand the limited post-apartheid transformation endeavours and the clarion call for decolonising HE. When the National Party took over government, it advanced the existing British segregational rule (Butler, 1998). In 1959, the apartheid government legislated the notorious Extension of University Education Act and structured universities ethnically and racially, prohibiting integration on these bases (Reddy, 2004). Black students could not study at universities not demarcated for their 'tribe', nor at universities declared whites-only universities, unless they acquired a special ministerial exemption. This was granted under exceptional circumstances, such as the disciplines in which they desired to study not being available at their 'tribal' universities (Reddy, 2004; Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017). The Act was not different from the racial Bantu Education Act of 1953. Through financial deprivation and infrastructure decay in Black education institutions, both Acts stifled access to universities for Black students and, by extension, reduced the number of Black intellectuals and professionals (Reddy, 2004). The Bantu Education Act separated schools according to racial categories. White schools received comparatively better funding and infrastructure from government, and university qualified educators. Meanwhile, Black schools had the opposite experience, to the extent that one classroom would serve two grades (Tabata, 1959).

When the African National Congress (ANC) took over government from the National Party it was confronted with an 'ethnically' and racially engineered society and sought to rebuild this through values underpinned by "inclusivity, equality, and respect of human dignity of all its citizens" (Adonis & Silinda, 2021: 74). Therefore, the ANC initiated a lengthy transformation process to dismantle the 'ethnically' segregated HE sector and to usher in one reflecting a new 'rainbow nation', which culminated in the establishment of the Council for Higher Education (CHE) to manage HE transformation. For example, one of the significant transformation endeavours concerned merging historically white universities (HWUs) with Historically Black Universities, as illustrated in the

National Education Plan in 2001 (Ministry of Education, 2001). However, this merger was not buttressed in justice nor on the principles of a prospective united South Africa and rainbow nation because the most renowned HWUs [were] not affected by the merger thus, signifying unequal power relations among HEIs. For instance, the University of Cape Town (UCT), the University of Pretoria, the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS), Stellenbosch University, and Rhodes University (Karodia, Shaikh & Soni, 2015) were not included. Moreover, many of these HWUs maintained the 1959 Extension of University Education Act; thus, students' residences and sport facilities were segregated according to students' skin colour (Reddy, 2004).

In consistence with the National Education Plan on transformation, the Department of Education acknowledged the required restructuring in the demographic composition of the national student body (Department of Education, 1997). Furthermore, it acknowledged that access remained a challenge such that black and women students were under-represented in business, commerce, science, engineering, and technology programmes, as well as in postgraduate programmes in general. Meanwhile, this continues to find expression in South African HEIs (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017; Muraina & Mlambo, 2022: 66). Similarly, South African academics stand a relatively lower chance of attaining promotion to senior academic positions (Sadiq, Barnes, Price, Gumedze & Morrell, 2019). Furthermore, black women academics in South Africa are reduced to social reproductive labourers to Black students who are underprepared for university. This impedes and slows the Black female academics' progression as their attention is redirected to be 'caregivers' and 'role models' in lieu of teaching and research (Magoqwana, Maqabuka & Tshoaedi, 2020).

Originally, the 1997 Department of Education White Paper focused explicitly on numbers, including changing student numbers and staff to correlate with the nation's demography vis-à-vis achieving redress and racial equity (Vorster & Quinn, 2017). While asserting the multiple ways in which South African HEIs define transformation, Fomunyam (2017: 172) concluded that transformation is mainly defined in terms of numbers, i.e., transforming universities meant accepting Black students in HWUs as auxiliary students. This view of transformation is a limited view of institutional changes required by the nation's HE sector vis-à-vis evidence that the post-apartheid university is significantly epistemically and culturally Western and Eurocentric (Heleta, 2016). Despite this limited definition, transformation has no defined targets of measurement, and is inconsistent where they do exist (van Schalkwyk *et al*., 2022). However, several events such as the 'Mamdani and Mafeje affairs' (Mangcu, 2008; Fomunyam, 2017; Ndelu, 2017) and the 'Reitz Four' incident (van Schalkwyk *et al.,* 2022: 7) have continually painted "transformation as incomplete" (Blignaut, 2021: 28). Transformation is

usually 'wilfully blind' to HEIs' whiteness and Eurocentric curriculum and pedagogy, the paternalistic nature of the university (Heleta, 2016; Mbembe, 2016), and the pain and deprivation of Black students (Ndelu, 2017).

The transformation mission had good intentions to change the HE apartheid structure to reflect the new aspirations of a democratic South Africa. However, it was limited, as it failed to discard its inherent taints of substitution via massification of Black students and academics into the universities. For instance, issues such as curriculum change and funding, which are a sine qua non to transformation, changing colonial artefacts, and dismantling racial institutional cultures received little attention (Heleta, 2016; Adonis & Silinda, 2021). Moreover, transformation limitations can be attributed to lack of efficient leadership and academic staff resistance (Taylor & Taylor, 2010). Some staff showed deficient commitment to the transformative agenda, particularly in HWUs, while citing the sacrosanctity of academic freedom, university autonomy, and government non-interference. These staff claimed that transformation initiatives such as the ANC's affirmative action policies were an expression of reverse racism and posed a threat to meritocracy (Karodia, Shaikh & Soni, 2015; Adonis & Silinda, 2021).

Several maleficent endeavours and conniving schemas aiming to forestall transformation were devised by HWUs. At Rhodes University, Black academics holding PhDs, and thus being markers of transformation, were systematically retrenched while white administrators performing dubious activities were retained. "Retrenchments are most likely to affect people who have no relatives working in Rhodes (and) marriage or blood ties to an incumbent staff member is a key to both job access and security" and nepotism and cronyism were the mantras of employment (Taylor & Taylor, 2010: 908). The Rhodes University case study demonstrated academics' lack of commitment to HE transformation. Moreover, Black professors were victimized in white universities, such as the Professor William Malegapuru Makgoba affairs at WITS (Mangcu, 2008: 51), under a function called "The Gang of 13" (Taylor & Taylor, 2010: 903). The assault and appropriation to falsify and manipulate Prof Makgoba's C.V. created a ceiling and capped Black professors' academic achievements. Hence, overachievers can be assaulted while forces are tarnishing their image and discrediting their reputation, which ultimately can lead to frustration, resignation, exit from the ivory tower, and greater Black pain, as in the case of Prof Makgoba (Taylor & Taylor, 2010: 903–904).

In addition, the Mamdani affair at UCT and the Makgoba affair at WITS exposed the fallacy of meritocracy in HWUs and that white scholars often invoke schemes to frustrate transformation

endeavours (Mancgu, 2008; Taylor & Taylor, 2010). These two scholars were victimized by white colleagues for calling for and endeavouring to implement a decolonial curriculum at their respective universities. Conniving schemes to get rid of them were devised by their respective universities/colleagues to tarnish their scholarship. Consequently, they resigned,, or were fired, because of the toxic working environment (Mamdani, 1996; Taylor & Taylor, 2010).

At face value, transformation depicts decolonial features, notwithstanding that this did not materialise. For instance, Black students' and academics' massification gives the impression that epistemic disobedience is going to ensue because of a greater Black presence at universities. However, epistemic disobedience did not materialise due to universities' neoliberal policies and attitudes. Neoliberal policies stifle transformation's transcendence to decolonisation (Magoqwana *et al*., 2020). Furthermore, transformation buttressed in Black massification and recruitment of Black African academics, in particular women, did not materialise in deep transformation and dismantling of colonial institutionalised ontologies qua white supremacist ideas that "Black bodies are presumed [intellectually] incompetent" (Magoqwana *et al*., 2020: 12). The universities, by and large, view enrolment of African students and women as a means of receiving subsidies from government; thus, contributing to the commodification of HE.

Colonisation is the forceful imposition of foreign rule in a different territory, while coloniality is endeavours to obliterate people's ontology (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Coloniality seeks to appropriate and deprive Africans of a sense of imagination; hence, to insert blinkers on how Africans think and relate to the world (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). The theorising of the coloniality of being reflects that decolonisation has different significations to different people (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). The essence of decolonisation is the resistance and reversal of coloniality and the 2015-2017 #MustFall students' movement captures HE decolonisation endeavours signalling epistemic disobedience in various manifolds, including post-apartheid demographic transformation failures (Zembylas, 2018). The HWUs' forestalling of transformation and the government's snail's pace to implement transformation prepared a fertile ground for the #MustFall movement.

Students confronted HE coloniality and called for intersectional decolonisation not limited to capitalism, race, sexuality, neoliberalism, internationalisation, and commoditisation. Students became HEI iconoclasts vis-à-vis #RhodesMustFall at UCT and its mutation to a coherent #MustFall movement in other universities (Muraina & Mlambo, 2022). Students at the University of the Free State and Stellenbosch University demanded a review of the Afrikaans language policy, citing that

Afrikaans is exclusionary and hinders their academic excellence (Adonis & Silinda, 2021). Mbembe (2016) also dispelled the suppositions that students' demand for the fall of colonialist statues was trivial and argued that it is important to change the image of the university because colonial iconographies induce a state of humiliation and mentally harass Black students. Moreover, it remained significant to end the symbolism of whiteness as the epitome of knowledge production. Hence, decolonisation signifies education that reflects students' ontologies and discards Euro-American colonial imaginary seeking to obliterate Africa's sense of imagination (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

The decolonial clarion called for epistemological freedom, cognitive justice, and the dismantling of the structural barriers excluding African students' access to HE (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Decolonisation is the vehement rejection of the assumption that white people are the epitome of knowledge production and rejection of the notion of the invisibility of the knower qua hubris of the zero point. However, the invisibility and neutrality of the knower maps the world and global socio-economic and political issues, further classifying people while projecting into morality and ethics and privileging Euro-Americans' cognition and ontologies (Mignolo, 2009; Grosfoguel, 2011). Therefore, decolonial intellectual orientation is geared towards dismantling the Western exclusive and inalienable right to knowledge while the rest of the world imbibe produced knowledge (Mignolo, 2009; Grosfoguel, 2011).

Social Transformation theory

This research adopts the theory of social transformation (Fomunyam, 2017, 2018). The theory consists of four essential elements that all work together to ensure change and societal transformation: resistance to change, advocacy for change, alternate vision, and nation building. Fomunyam (2018) postulates that without resistance to change there would not be a de facto societal-driven impetus for change. Resistance to change by the apartheid government influenced radical demand for change, including in HE structures, even before the end of apartheid (Reddy, 2004; Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017). When those in power see the need for change but refuse, they practise resistance to change, either through "escapism" (silencing the calls for decolonisation through digression and unarticulated arguments) or a "praise-singing strategy" (discrediting decolonisation calls through tactics of conservatism and reservation of the status quo structure – analysing its achievements and "failures/limitations" (Fomunyam, 2018: 1534). This prompts society to advocate for change – for example, the #RhodesMustFall movement.

Advocacy for 'change in the system' is evident in the DHET activities that produced the Department of Education (1997); meanwhile, current calls for a decolonial turn amidst the #MustFall uprising is advocacy for "change of the system" (Fomunyam, 2018: 1535). By seeking to change the system, students' alternative vision for the university includes recentring Africa, while making African knowledges co-exist respectfully with Western epistemologies (le Grange, 2016; Council of Higher Education (CHE), 2017). Finally, the product of these processes is to build a nation that is diverse, inclusive, and equal for all the citizens. Social transformation theory is a change-oriented body of thought and hence offers a pathway for discussing required HE change vis-à-vis the possibility of transformation and decolonisation.

The theory of social transformation theorises transformation and decolonisation in an intersectional and middle-ground position. While not being an anti-, post-, or decolonial theory, the theory advances societal change that is democratic and plausible for the majority of South African HE. Moreover, the notion of "change in the system" and "change of the system" signifies the difference in what transformation and decolonisation, respectively, seek to achieve (Fomunyam, 2018: 1535). Additionally, the "resistance to change" discourse through praise singing and escapism represents practical measures by which some HE stakeholders subvert decolonisation demands. This study discerns from Fomunyam (2017) that transformation is a prerequisite condition for decolonisation. This is due to certain forces that resist transformation, informed by peoples' fear of losing their privilege in the academy. These resisters to transformation execute it in an ebullient yet subtle manner, such that an uncritical mind would not be conscious of it (Taylor & Taylor, 2010). Resistance to transformation by the privileged frustrates the oppressed; therefore, the oppressed and the marginalised commence initiatives that advocate for change expressed in decolonisation praxis.

Decolonial praxis seeks to dismantle HE colonial structures such as, but not limited to, views that white people are the epitome of knowledge production, and that epistemic knowledge is neutral and not mediated by power and politics (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Decolonisation endeavours to transcend transformation's lip-talk, expressed largely as massification of Black people in HE, and advocates to dismantle the myth of South African exceptionalism, and hence locate South Africa within the broader African continent, the Global South and the rest of the world (Mbembe, 2016; Zembylas, 2018). Decolonialists are systematic in their approach through consciousness that South African and African experiences cannot be isolated from global experience, albeit that global experiences should not be allowed to obfuscate, marginalise, or cascade, and, in the last instance, signify South African and African experiences (Fomunyam, 2017, 2018).

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Methodology

The way of knowing in this study is based on an interpretivist epistemology. Furthermore, a critical qualitative inquiry design provided the blueprint for the study (Denzin, 2019). It is a critical, change-oriented design which goes beyond writing about change to creating socially just societal changes that will serve the underprivileged. In conducting the research, the researchers were fazed about the inconsistent and (mis)appropriation of the two concepts; hence, an epistemological vision for a change concerning proper appropriation and intentional usage, clarifications, and nuances was desired by this study.

As part of a larger study (see Muraina, 2022), 11 semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted amongst three HEI staff groupings at UCT[2]. The three groups were university administrators (three), decolonisation researchers (four), and lecturers (four participants), whose participants are mainly based in the Humanities faculty. Participants were selected using stratified (to divide the university staff into three groups) and purposive (researchers' judgement) sampling techniques. The researchers' judgement included that the participants have considerable experience working in the study's socio-cultural contexts and are positioned to speak about the history and current debates about transformation and decolonisation, nationally and locally.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, synchronous mediated interviews were conducted, mainly on Microsoft Teams (see Tracy, 2020). A challenge encountered in adopting a virtual interview method included the need to reschedule an ongoing interview due to bad connectivity. A thematic (reflexive) data analysis approach was used (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Analysis followed a non-cross-sectional method of data organisation (Mason, 2002). The whole study involved reflective reading and independent interpretation of each transcript – inductive or bottom-up thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo v.12 was used to create nodes. Within these nodes, a specific research question within the overall study on transformation and decolonisation discourse in universities in South Africa "evolved through the coding process" (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 84). In relation to the interpretivist epistemology, the study used a constructivist perspective to read data meanings with their structural conditions. Subsequently, three broad meanings, or themes, were generated, which are analysed in the next section. Extracts from the data were captured based on their frequency and significance to the analysed theme. Extreme views were also captured, albeit contextualised in the analysis interpretation.

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[2] See https://doi.org/10.25375/uct.20239611.v1 for the data corpus consented to be stored in a repository.

A potential ethical concern in the study was how to manage power relations, in particular the recognition that the participants are 'influential' people in the academy. As a result, the researchers maintained formality while displaying a desire to listen and learn from interviewers, still asking probing questions where necessary. Moreover, the study ensured participants' anonymity and confidentiality of data collected. Due to the predominant adoption of virtual spaces, no significant risk nor harm was experienced during data collection. The study received ethical clearance from UCT's Sociology department.

Data Analysis

The three themes from the findings will be presented and discussed below. To ensure anonymity of participants, each response has been labelled as 'Researcher' – R, 'Administrator' – A, or 'Lecturer' – L, plus a number. Hence, R2 is the second decolonisation researcher interviewee.

Meaning of transformation

The interviewer asked participants questions about how they understood transformation. Two sub-themes emerged, as explained below.

Transformation as large-scale changes

> The idea of transformation from the early 1990s was supposed to be a revolution when it made its way into South African policy from the Reconstruction and Development Plan. What it said was that every aspect of South African life will have to be inspected and change into the opposite of apartheid – A3.

> A lot of transformation committees in higher education are trying to do a lot more than just [a] box-ticking exercise, and really think carefully about the same sorts of things, as I just mentioned, around how we decolonise, power relations within universities. What do we have to do to shift spaces from one that centres whiteness to ones that sort of centre blackness or African experience in a particular way? So that's what I would like to think transformation at universities is – A1.

Transformation as racial politics

> The discourse of transformation of higher education is quite linked a lot of the time to race politics – R1.

> The university's transformation policy is very much about transforming the demographics of who is at the university. So, trying to get more Black students into the university was

the main focus. And now, in terms of staff as well, because we don't have very many Black professors – R2.

Data affirmed transformation as a policy and agenda in South African policy circles from as early as the 1990 negotiations and post-apartheid reconstruction period (van Schalkwyk *et al*., 2022). The first sub-theme's conception of transformation presents it as a large-scale revolution in societal processes and relations, and inclusivity and equality of races, consistent with Badat (2009). Participant A1 could not delineate that efforts such as changing power relations and decentring whiteness and recentring Blackness were transformation or decolonial activities. Moreover, these activities were attached to the universities' transformation committees. The administrator interpreted that the #MustFall movement has been significant in expanding the conception of transformation in this case, and for HEIs' transformation committees.

The second and popular conception of transformation in HE was mainly interested in providing access to HEIs for hitherto marginalised Black people and in ensuring that university demographics correlated with the national demographic profile, i.e., "demographic transformation'"(Fomunyam, 2017: 173). Transformation actions mentioned in the interviews included the creation of nGAP positions[3] (A1), and production of additional Black academics by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) (L2). Also, NSFAS's – (National Student Financial Aid Scheme) establishment was intended to ease university access for the disadvantaged Black majority social class (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017).

Meanwhile, data did not depict some of the literature's use of transformation, such as curriculum or epistemological transformation (Heleta, 2016; Blignaut, 2021). This paper argues that transformation conceptions, including those extended to transforming Eurocentric power relations and Western institutional cultures (see Fomunyam, 2018), do not represent the everyday and layperson's understanding of transformation. HE transformation mainly represents racial diversification and massification of the university, amongst students, staff, and executives.

Meaning of decolonisation

Subthemes were generated on how decolonisation is conceived and understood amongst HE non-student stakeholders.

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[3] nGAP is an initiative of the DHET in collaboration with HEIs to produce a new set of Black South African academics through PhD training and assist them with a footing in university faculties.

Decolonisation as wholesome dismantling and rethinking, hence, 'a way of life'

> Decolonisation really is a broad thing, which includes the meaning of human life and the value of human life, i.e., that certain lives are more valuable. So, science in combination with capital devotes time to protect some lives over others [i.e., global Covid-19 virus and vaccination (re)production] – L2.

> Decolonisation is about the institutional culture and the idea of a university, altogether, and about knowledge. It's about the values, the beliefs [of a university]. You know, when we had RhodesMustFall, the students were talking about the statue and other symbols and artworks in the institution; it can also be about the language in which we teach – R2.

Coloniality as decolonisation departure point

> Whereas, decolonisation has a much clearer sense of location, clearer agenda and clearer about who the actors are, both as heroes and villains. Decolonisation is tied, more specifically, to processes and histories of oppression, and coloniality and colonisation. And then seeking in a more strategic, conscious manner, how to respond, redress, undo and affirm – L4.

Epistemology as the focal interest of decolonisation

> I understand decolonisation as a political and an epistemological challenge, which is what is salient in the recent wave about the challenge, control, hegemony, and arrogance of European, Global North and white scholarship, knowledge production and the role of the English language. Students were trying to say we want to see ourselves and who we are in the curriculum. So, they were talking about identity issues, lived experience, institutional culture, relevance, the kinds of things that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was talking about way back in the 80s' – R4.

> I think a very fundamental question of decolonisation is about knowledge production – what do we teach and research in a university? From what perspective? … it has been historically Eurocentric. And the problem with Eurocentrism is that African knowledges and people are often characterised in negative and stereotypical ways and as less valuable or unimportant. To decolonise is really to change that mind-set because that type of Eurocentric colonial knowledge remained, and it permeates all our disciplines - R2.

Decolonisation's meaning in the first sub-theme depicted that it is a broad subject and at one level constitutes changing ontologies and ideologies. Decolonising is "a way of being and a way of becoming" (L3); it involves dismantling universities' old ways of being and rethinking new ideas and purposes of a university and its attendant cultures and epistemological traditions. Decolonising in this sense will ask questions about the foundations and traditions of a university: what is driving change in the university, whose ideas are relevant, and whose body is unfit for a university? Thus, '"at the end of the decolonizing (sic) process, we will no longer have a university. We will have a pluriversity" (Mbembe, 2016: 36). This view of decolonisation is related to "change of the system" in social transformation theory (Fomunyam, 2018: 1535).

Secondly, decolonisation's point of departure is coloniality, including Enlightenment ideology - qua cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am). This ideology, the 'need' to spread civilisation, and racism legitimised colonisation (Narayanaswamy, 2021). It obliterated African knowledges and ways of being and considered Africans to be primitive, inferior, and lacking, including in education (Zembylas, 2018). Consequently, African knowledges, ways of knowing, imaginations, and being came to be characterised in stereotyped inferior ways and were classified unworthy of presence in an ivory tower. This led to the popularisation of Western thoughts and Eurocentrism in HEIs in Africa (Heleta, 2016; Muraina & Mlambo, 2022). Thus, decolonisation takes coloniality and its unwanted history as a departure point and seeks to undo its violence, to recentre Africa vis-à-vis diverse institutional cultures, knowledge production, ontologies and epistemologies, curriculum contents and pedagogies, and languages, and consequently to (re)create African universities.

Scholarship's argument about several decolonisation waves in Africa was affirmed in the third sub-theme. The 1960s political processes that culminated in the independence of many African states was political decolonisation, similar to that in 1994 South Africa (Oyedemi, 2021). Furthermore, there was an affirmation of coloniality of knowledge and how it permeates processes of knowledge production, epistemological traditions, and academic teaching in HEIs (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

Despite the majority presence of Africans in African scholarship spaces, universities and scholarships in Africa are implicated and complicit in Africa's epistemicide and linguicide (le Grange, 2016). The findings further corroborate arguments in the literature that HEIs' and DHET goals are bound to modernisation and internationalisation (Spreen & Vally, 2010). As a result, university access, and student retention and success are based on capital (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017). Hence, decolonisation seeks to recentre Africa in the university and across disciplines, rethinking of the curriculum, proper historicisation of Africa (ns), adapting African indigenous languages - create bilingual and multilingual African universities (Kaya & Seleti, 2014). The six "elements of decolonisation" (le Grange, 2016: 3) are relevant in thinking about epistemology as a focal interest of decolonisation.

Institutional change in universities in South Africa

The last theme depicts how participants recognised transformation and decolonisation as having the capacity to affect post-apartheid HE required changes, since current change efforts have been slow, limited, and failing.

Broad and deep transformation

> I don't think that everything that the students have put on the table [is] equally important, in the sense of long lasting for the change of the university, I think that there [is] sort of a moment, a feeling of an opportunistic thing. Right now, decolonisation has become the word that the students use to critique the political settlement that was based on transformation, as if decolonisation was a much more radical approach than transformation. I think transformation is more encompassing. And I see decolonisation as one element of transformation – A3.

> I think the value of the term transformation is an acknowledgment that university is constantly changing, it's a very broad term. So, it's not really necessarily ideological, like decolonisation is, but that could probably be a limitation. I think transformation should be about decolonising the curriculum, should be about decolonising research.… But I think when we talk about decolonisation, most people think about it in terms of broader questions of knowledge – R2.

The literature has argued that while agitating against feelings of Black pain and alienation (Ndelu, 2017), the #MustFall movement was homogenised by some student populations, became oppressive, and also caused alienation against some groups of students (Ndelu, 2017; Nyamnjoh, 2017). Thus, specific excesses of the protests, such as the radical demand for free decolonised education and court cases emanating from it, were labelled as opportunistic feelings in the findings. Also, this sub-theme reported that transformation is a broad concept and encompasses decolonisation – of the university, research, and curriculum. Participants argued that transformation dialogues should see the university as a constantly changing space, beyond demographic profiles. Hence, if decolonisation takes coloniality as departure point in seeking to recentre Africa and recognise multiple knowledge production systems and languages, this can be translated as transformation. This view is similar to notions that see transformation as going beyond demographic profiles to advanced processes of institutional change and a vision for a new university and country (Ngubane & Makua, 2021), and the promotion of nation-building (Fomunyam, 2017).

Preference for decolonisation

> Whereas decolonisation is anchored in history, people's lives, ontologies and epistemologies, transformation language is more readily used, palatable to those who

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are in the institutions of higher learning, and less radical, it's general, it's not anchored in the same way that I believe decolonisation is; and has a superficial reality and allows … those who are in power to completely redefine the agenda, there's a lot more laissez faire. I do think that decolonisation includes aspects of transformation. But it is a very specific project. And I would argue that in South Africa, the priority from the point of view of the oppressed is decolonisation – L4.

I think transformation is a term that most people in SA and most people in institutions like higher education are quite comfortable with, because it has been around for a long time. And it hasn't been particularly threatening, to the status quo and it turned into this kind of box-ticking exercise, rather than the fundamental rethinking of power and privilege. Whereas decolonisation worries a lot of people, particularly people who have privilege, because there's this sort of fear that somehow decolonisation is going to turn everything around. I think decolonisation is a more useful term because it encompasses more, it's doing the work that the term transformation probably set out to do, but it's doing it at a different level – A1.

When they thought each faculty needs to have a transformation committee, and each unit needs to have a transformation committee… I guess at the time, people might have been afraid to call it decolonial committee… I can't see a reason why we can't call them decolonial committees – A1.

From the foregoing, our findings have affirmed that decolonisation of the university is a specific orientation and ideology that is anchored in coloniality. It seeks to redress histories of oppression, subjugation, dehumanisation, and depersonalisation, and to affirm the "being" of oppressed people (Muraina & Mlambo, 2022). L4 substantiated that "If we are going to address the particularities of our past, in the present inch, and imagine the future", then an ideal decolonisation should be embraced. Participants' voices were clear that the HE transformation agenda has failed, and that decolonisation encompasses it and should take over as the HE 'transformation' agenda. These participants argued that racial diversity is embedded in decolonisation. Moreover, having more Black professors and additional access for marginalised students would not lead to changes in HE institutional culture, academic language, and capitalistic methods because "Western education in Africa … is designed to proselytise blacks" (Heleta, 2016: 6).

Figure 1 shows that transformation is a term that can be thrown around and manipulated to suit socio-political agendas because of its laissez faire configuration (Keet *et al.*, 2017). This notion is buttressed by previous findings (Fomunyam, 2018; Ngubane & Makua, 2021). These studies conceptualised transformation linguistically as a vision of HE and South African society, and hence transformation can be manipulated liberally and extended to mean changes in HE structures, culture, and knowledge make-up. However, this transformation is without an ideology or a clear meaning of an ideally transformed HE (van Schalkwyk *et al.*, 2022), unlike decolonisation, which is

anchored in histories of oppression and has a Pan-Africanism objective, which some participants described as '"ideological" in Figure 2. Therefore, some of the participants were vocal that universities' 'transformation committees' should change their identification to decolonisation.
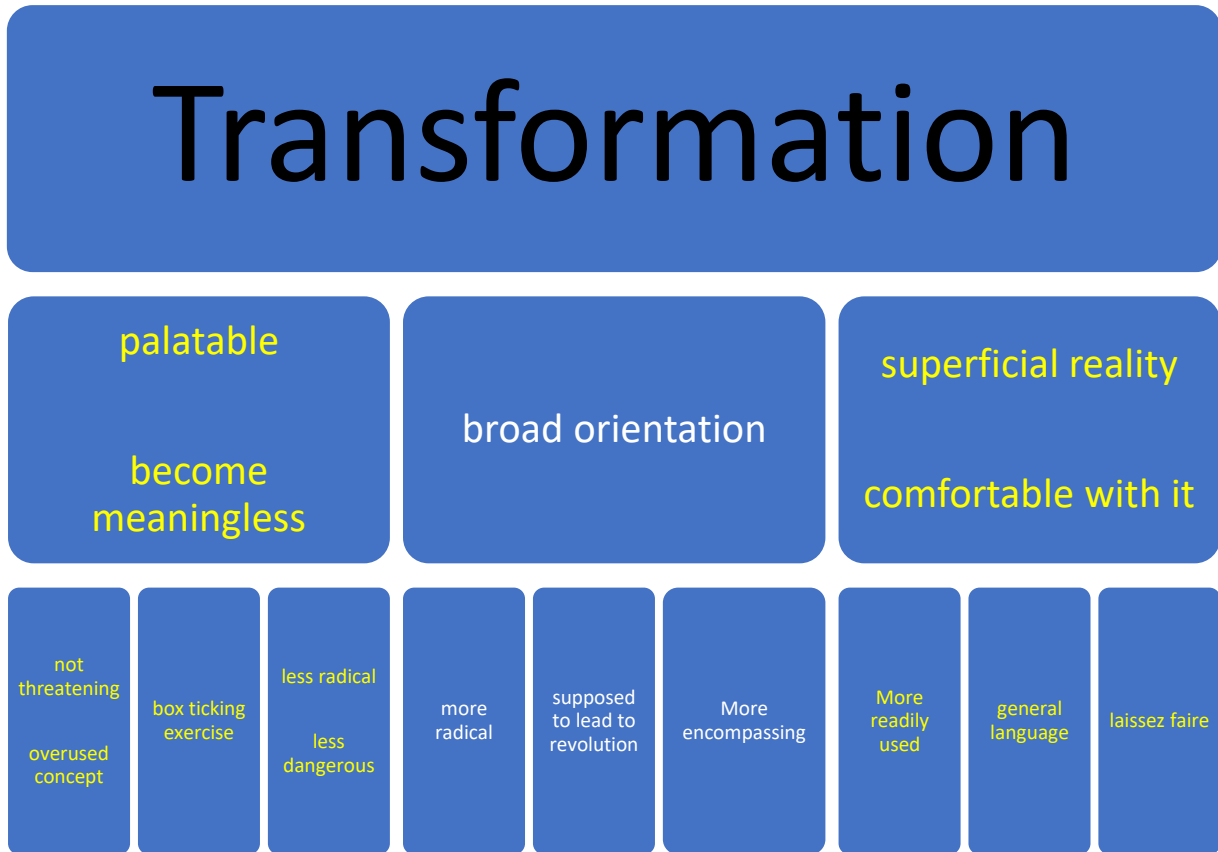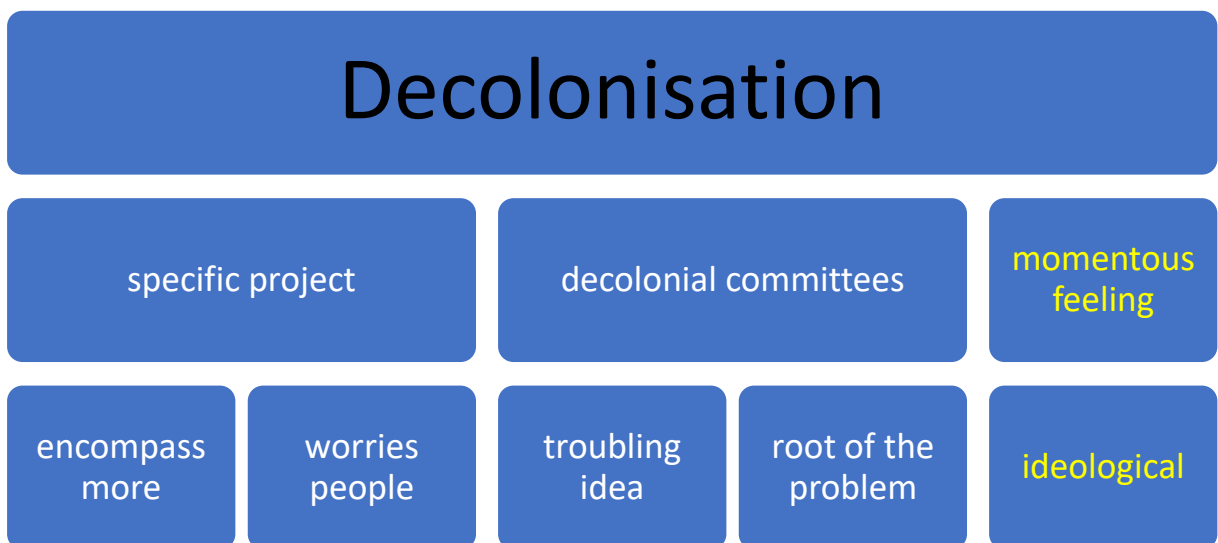
Figure 1: Participants' descriptions of transformation[4]

Figure 2: Participants' descriptions of decolonisation

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[4] Descriptions in white and yellow signify, respectively, positive and negative narrations from participants in figure 1 and 2.

Action matters more than agenda naming

> I don't think the focus is so much about terminology, that just because you use decolonisation instead of transformation, then things change. It's simply about what you do, you can keep using decolonisation, but not do anything – L2.

> What's going to bring about the real change is what needs to be foregrounded. Transformation is a step in the right direction, but it's insufficient. So, as we continue to promote transformation, we also need to also promote decolonisation itself as a term and we must not be fearful in promoting it – A2.

The findings show participants' opinions that a transformation versus decolonisation HE-change agenda would not lead to required changes; rather, provocative conversations, actions, and critical reflections are needed (Mbembe, 2016). Clearly, transformation based on racial equality and representation in universities is insufficient change; hence, a provocative (broad and deep) transformation would match elaborated and multidimensional transformation views (Nzimande, 2015; Fomunyam, 2018; Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Furthermore, findings show that some opinions were that the two should speak to each other and not necessarily replace each other. Consequent research and policy questions would be how each concept is managed in HE, for example, would transformation deal with numbers and diversity issues, while issues of knowledge production, language, and Africanness are termed decolonisation?

Synthesis of key issues

HE transformation is primarily seen in the form of racial diversity in universities (Fomunyam, 2017). The nature of transformation also means that it can be thrown around liberally to mean different things and to serve personal and political agendas. This explains the conceptualisation of 'transformation as large-scale changes', and of participants who see transformation as more encompassing and radical than decolonisation, and a supposed revolution (Figure I). Meanwhile, decolonisation is anchored in histories of oppression of Black people. Despite the controversies concerning the #MustFall protests' demands for a decolonial turn in HE, decolonisation is specific about its achievements, ranging from recentring Africa in university epistemologies, and others. For decolonisation to change the system and achieve a socially transformed HE, it requires dismantling and rethinking ideas of a university, knowledge, teaching and learning, curriculum, etc.; hence, a total 'way of being and becoming'.

Meanwhile, some authors have argued that, despite decolonisation's all-encompassing critique of white, male, urban, and Western hegemony, decolonisation based on lip service, tokenism, and

political 'rightness' would only lead to decolonisation as an "empty rhetoric" (Zembylas, 2018: 4), similar to transformation. The idea of a decolonisation rhetoric is also expressed in the findings, as A1 feared decolonial fatigue, described as "when there's a lot of interest and understanding, and there's a lot of momentum around a particular movement, and then suddenly, that starts to slow down" (Muraina, 2022: 45). A decolonisation rhetoric and related fatigue would not challenge white supremacy and HE hegemonic structures (Zembylas, 2018).

Limitations of decolonisation include that it is limited in its conception to epistemology and knowledge co(creation) spaces. Transformation, meanwhile, is limited by the laissez faire way the term can be divisively used, as well as its 'less radical' and 'middle ground' stance, as described by many participants in Figure I. In another sense, decolonisation is conceived as of radical and 'turning everything around'. Hence, it is threatening and troubling to some sections of HE and the entire society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that there is divergence amongst participants in their preferences for decolonisation and transformation for HE institutional change. Findings showed that transformation is a democratic South African driven concept and is less threatening; however, decolonisation is far reaching and has a clear sense of Africanness in its agenda.

For policy and political/administration purposes, it is imperative that HE stakeholders resist current failed and neoliberal transformational change and embrace decolonisation. Furthermore, they must create conversations that will specify and manage transformation and decolonisation and their intentions. This requires having the political will to redress colonial injustice, critical self-reflection, and thinking beyond one's privileges and power in Eurocentric HEIs. Despite decolonisation's specificity and location in colonial histories, it might yet be stifled by neoliberal policies (Magoqwana *et al.*, 2020) and resisted, according to the social transformation theory (Fomunyam, 2018). This might cause 'decolonial fatigue' and make decolonisation an ordinary rhetoric like transformation, "not because it does not have the capacity or provide a socially just alternative vision, but because the social structure of the academy will disallow it to become a productive reference point" (Keet *et al.*, 2017: 4; Muraina, 2022).

Future studies should conduct a systematic review of South African HE transformation and decolonisation and endeavour to understand how they have been defined and interpreted in theory and practice. By implication, this study and future reviews of the subject matter would contribute to academic theorising and practical teasing out of the differences, contextual usage, and clarification (with nuances) of the transformation and decolonisation concepts.

Dedication

We would like to dedicate this research paper to our fellow brother and co-author, Siviwe Cingo, who ultimately lost his life at a tender age on June 2, 2023, since when the article has been reviewed and accepted for publication. South Africa and the African continent lost a young and promising emerging scholar in Siviwe Cingo, and as co-authors, we mourn his loss and wish his family peace and tranquillity. While unconnected to Siviwe's death, this study highlights the need for the political will to restructure South African universities, specifically, the HE 'Black pain' and white institutional culture (Ndelu, 2017), including debilitating issues for students such as lack of funding, mental health problems, and high drop-out rates.

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