

South Africa's Policy Framework for Higher Education Internationalisation: A Decolonial Perspective



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Abstract

This article critically discusses the Policy Framework for Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa, as adopted by the South African government in late 2020. Using a decolonial lens, it adds a critical voice to public discourse on the country's first national policy for higher education internationalisation. The article argues that the Policy Framework needs to engage

more vigorously with decolonisation as one of the most pertinent issues affecting higher education in South Africa today. It offers perspectives on what shifting the geography and biography of knowledge means in the context of the Policy Framework, thus opening up the possibility of moving South Africa from being primarily a receiver to a creator of internationalisation knowledge and practice.

Introduction

In November 2020, the South African Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation formally announced that the *Policy Framework for Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa* had been ratified. Up to that point, the country's higher education institutions (HEIs) had dealt with internationalisation mostly in their individual institutional capacities since the end of apartheid in 1994 (Chasi and Quinlan, 2021). The International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA) recognised the need for a national internationalisation policy as early as 2003 (Jooste and Hagenmeier, 2018) and was a major driving force in its development. More recently, Universities South Africa (USAf) identified lobbying the South African government 'to develop and implement an internationalisation policy framework' as a priority area in its *Strategic Framework, 2015–2019*, (USAf, 2014: 11), noting that '[a]lthough South Africa's universities are internationalising to improve their scholarship, research and innovation efforts; the absence of a national macro policy framework limits their growth potential in this regard' (ibid.).

Not surprisingly under these circumstances, the adoption of the first national internationalisation policy represents an important milestone for the advancement of higher education internationalisation in South Africa. As such, it is an opportune moment to reflect on internationalisation from a South African perspective, particularly in the context of other significant issues affecting higher education in the country, key among them decolonisation.

Before discussing decolonisation in more detail, it is important to note that it is inextricably linked to the concepts of *coloniality* and *decoloniality*. On the one hand, coloniality 'refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 13). On the other hand, decoloniality is concerned with the 'dismantling of relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and the geo-political hierarchies' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 14).

At its core, a decolonial approach is concerned with the 'agenda of shifting the geography and biography of knowledge', addressing the question of 'who generates knowledge and from where' (Ndlovu-

Gatsheni, 2013: 15). This involves the idea that rigorous knowledge is not generated by 'adhering to questions, concepts, and standards on the basis of the views or needs of only one region of the world, and even less of a region that has been characterized by either colonizing or ignoring other regions' (Maldonado-Torres, 2011: 10).

Using a decolonial lens, this article adds a critical voice to public discourse on the Policy Framework. It explores what shifting the geography and biography of knowledge could mean in the context of South Africa's Policy Framework on higher education internationalisation. It argues that the Policy missed an opportunity to systematically and overtly address internationalisation in the context of decolonisation and that future iterations need to engage much more vigorously with decolonisation as an opportunity to not only reflect critically on dominant trends of higher education internationalisation in South Africa, but also to imagine internationalisation differently from the perspective of the Global South. Doing so will open up the possibility for South Africa to be an active and self-determined contributor and partner in the global field of internationalisation of higher education.

South Africa's Internationalisation Policy Framework

The objective of the Policy Framework of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) was, fundamentally, to understand why South Africa should internationalise its higher education sector (Stacey, 2020). In this context, internationalisation is defined as 'an intentional or steered process to incorporate intercultural, international and/or global dimensions into higher education in order to advance the goals, functions and delivery of higher education and thus to enhance the quality of education and research' (DHET, 2019: 9). Adopting a comprehensive approach to higher education internationalisation in South Africa, the Policy specifically addresses key internationalisation dimensions such as student and staff mobility, research collaboration, cross-border and collaborative programmes, as well as Internationalisation at Home (IaH) initiatives (DHET, 2019). It notes that rationales for internationalisation include the positioning of South Africa's higher

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education sector to be competitive in a globalised world, the advancing of higher education quality as well as the benefiting of society at large and enhancing opportunities for higher education to contribute to the public good (DHET, 2019).

Overall, the DHET’s Policy Framework, which was developed through a process of consultations with local and international stakeholders, has been well received by the South African higher education community. It is generally considered an important milestone for higher education internationalisation in the country (Jooste and Hagenmeier, 2020; Stacey, 2020). As a first of its kind, the Policy provides legitimacy for and guidance on internationalisation of higher education, including for those universities that had been forging ahead with internationalisation activities in the absence of national guidance (Stacey, 2020). It has been noted that ‘the South African system can have a sigh of relief that the Policy is now available’ (Jooste and Hagenmeier, 2020), particularly because more than three years had passed since the Policy Framework was initially published as a draft in April 2017.

In terms of more specific sector responses, the Policy Framework has, on the one hand, been praised as an innovative document that is ‘conceptually on the cutting edge of international discourse and integrates the thinking of several leading experts in the field’ (Jooste and Hagenmeier, 2020). As such, it is also understood as having ‘the potential to elevate South Africa’s higher education system to a leading position

when it comes to advancing internationalisation in the developing world’ (ibid.).

On the other hand, the Policy Framework has been criticised for not explicitly linking internationalisation to developments relating to the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), information and communication technology (ICT), and virtualisation in the higher education environment (Rodny-Gumede, 2020). What is missing, for example, are ‘guidelines for ICT in advancing internationalisation and support for the development of new collaborative platforms for research, teaching and learning’ (Rodny-Gumede, 2020). In that sense, the Policy could have done more to highlight opportunities and provide national guidance on ICT-related innovation and virtual internationalisation strategies, which are specifically important in resource constrained environments such as the South African higher education sector (Rodny-Gumede, 2020). The importance of and need for such focus and guidance is arguably even more relevant in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has seen the rise of virtual internationalisation activities, including virtual conferences, virtual student and staff exchanges as well as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL).

This article addresses another significant shortcoming of the Policy Framework, focusing on if and how it responds to issues of decolonisation of higher education, a question which arises poignantly in the context of the main process of the Policy’s development. While lobbying for a national internationalisation policy began in the early 2000s, the DHET only formally initiated the development process of the Policy in 2015 (Jooste and Hagenmeier, 2020). In the same year, a decolonial student movement was formed in South Africa, petitioning that ‘the statue of Cecil John Rhodes be removed from the campus of the University of Cape Town, as the first step towards decolonisation of the university as a whole’ (The Rhodes Must Fall Movement, n.d.).

In the coming years, decolonisation of higher education gained prominence in academic and public domains. When the DHET published its draft Policy Framework for public comment in 2017, South African HEIs had lived through a period of considerable instability in the wake of national student protests, which peaked in 2015 and 2016. Under the banners

of 'Rhodes Must Fall' and 'Fees Must Fall', students around the country called higher education in South Africa into question, most notably regarding issues of relevance, quality and affordability, framed more broadly in a decolonisation discourse. The student protest movements, which gathered momentum in South Africa and elsewhere, highlighted the complexities of colonial legacies in higher education. In South Africa, they spoke specifically to a variety of dimensions that 'urgently require transformation, including statues, symbols and names but also, more broadly, issues of access, financing and relevance, with a particular focus on institutional racism, white privilege and black pain' (Chasi, 2021: 43). Such issues received increasing attention at the same time as work on the development of the Policy Framework was ongoing. It therefore seems reasonable to ask how decolonisation, which has arguably become one of the most pertinent issues affecting higher education in South Africa today, is being addressed in the Policy.

The Policy Framework and Decolonisation

The DHET's Policy Framework does not appear to make a direct and obvious link between internationalisation and decolonisation of higher education in so far as the term *decolonisation* has not entered its vocabulary. It is neither mentioned in the draft version of 2017 nor in the final version adopted in 2020. This does not mean, however, that the Policy is totally void of issues that are relevant to a discussion of decolonisation. In the sections that follow, two such issues are elaborated in more detail, pertaining to transformation, which provides the broader context in which decolonisation is embedded, and Africanisation, which is at the heart of decolonisation on the African continent.

As far as South Africa's transformation agenda is concerned, the Policy Framework recognises, referring to the country's Education White Paper 3 of 1997, the important role that higher education plays in contributing to national growth and social transformation through human capital development. It acknowledges past legacies of an 'unequally differentiated higher education system' (DHET, 2019: 21), which manifest in an uneven advancement of internationalisation across the sector and translate into the need to focus internationalisation efforts specifically on historically disadvantaged institutions

(HDIs). As noted in that regard, more than 20 years after the end of apartheid, HDIs need to be prioritised, as they 'still have very low levels of international relations and are not yet, therefore, benefiting from internationalisation to the degree that they could' (DHET, 2019: 21).

The Policy Framework further recognises that both transformation and internationalisation are key objectives for South African HEIs. Regarding their interconnectedness, it is pointed out, for example, that 'internationalisation of the curriculum must not negate curriculum transformation imperatives that higher education institutions in South Africa have an obligation to fulfil; the two can be carried out together successfully' (DHET, 2019: 45). Generally, transformation and internationalisation goals need to be balanced against each other. To illustrate this, while it is in the country's interest 'to appoint the best possible people in academic positions in its higher education institutions, including talented and qualified scientists and scholars from elsewhere in the world', such recruitment 'must be balanced with addressing race and gender transformation through creating opportunities for black and women South African citizens' (DHET, 2019: 33). In cases of conflict, it is suggested that transformation goals should prevail. For example, recruitment of international talent must not be to the 'detriment of job opportunities for equally qualified and experienced South African citizens' (DHET, 2019: 25). In other words, there can be 'no justification for any South African institution prioritising and preferring foreign nationals to South Africans who qualify equally for the same post' (DHET, 2019: 33). As far as students are concerned, international enrolments must not be 'at the expense of access to higher education for South African citizens' (DHET, 2019: 30).

Apart from such illustration of how internationalisation and transformation intertwine, the Policy Framework embeds internationalisation in South Africa in a broader continental context, with reference to African development, the African Renaissance and intra-Africa collaboration (DHET, 2019). More specifically, it gives expression to 'an Afro-centric preferential approach to the SADC region students and staff' (Stacey, 2020), particularly regarding the SADC Protocol on Education and Training of 1997, which is considered 'an early position on the internationalisation of higher

education by the South African government' (DHET, 2019: 13).

A regional and continental orientation is particularly evident in the Policy's priority focus, which states that South African HEIs must design internationalisation activities relating to all their core functions in such a way that priority is, first and foremost, given to South Africa's interests. Following that, 'where possible and relevant, the following order of priority focus should be observed in terms of interests: the SADC states; the rest of the African continent; BRICS; the global South and emerging economies; and the world beyond' (DHET, 2019: 22).

Putting South Africa's interests first might be considered an implicit way of expressing a core theme of decolonisation, which focuses on centring Africa. For the Policy Framework, this implies moving the *centre*, which is generally understood as a synonym for Euro-America or the West, to South Africa. To illustrate this further, it is worth noting that there is a strong correlation between the DHET's priority focus for higher education internationalisation and the organising principle used for the restructuring of the Literature Department at the University of Nairobi in the late 1960s. As described in his book *Decolonising the Mind*, Wa Thiong'o notes that this new organising principle revolved around moving away from a focus on English literature to 'a study of Kenyan and East African literature, African literature, third world literature and literature from the rest of the world' (1987: 94). In doing so, it expressed a determination to 'establish the centrality of Africa in the department', based on education being 'a means of knowledge about ourselves. Therefore, after we have examined ourselves, we radiate outwards and discover peoples and worlds around us' (ibid.).

The University of Nairobi's organising principle, as described here, cannot be easily and directly compared to the DHET's Policy Framework, as the former is a matter of ideology, while the latter is an example of a national policy. However, it is interesting to note that the two are underpinned by a shared motivation to centre Africa, in so far as both start by bringing attention to the local dimension first, represented by Kenya and South Africa, respectively. From there, they move outwards, starting with the regions that are closest to home, represented by

East Africa and Southern Africa, respectively. After that, their spheres of engagement broadly overlap, extending to the African continent, the Global South and, ultimately, the world beyond.

While it is not mentioned as an explicit example, the DHET's priority focus for higher education internationalisation in South Africa gives some expression to the centrality of Africa as a key theme of decolonisation of higher education on the continent. As Wa Thiong'o points out, there is a 'need to move the centre from its assumed location in the West to a multiplicity of spheres in all the cultures of the world' (1993: 16). Moving South Africa to the centre of attention and engagement, highlighting that its interests need to be prioritised, is very meaningful in the context of international higher education, where universities' internationalisation efforts tend to benefit Northern institutions more than their Southern counterparts, particularly regarding such dimensions as student mobility and research partnerships.

What the Policy Framework does not do, however, is to engage with decolonisation more deliberately, openly, systematically and deeply from the perspective of South Africa as a postcolonial, post-apartheid society in transformation. The following sections address this shortcoming and offer some critical reflections on what shifting the geography and biography of reason could mean in the context of South Africa's Policy Framework on higher education internationalisation.

Taking a Deeper Look

As mentioned earlier, a key objective of decolonisation is to shift the 'geography and biography of knowledge' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 15). To illustrate how this relates to South Africa's national internationalisation policy, three key concepts will be briefly referred to: criticality, positionality, and pluriversality.

In the first instance, shifting the geography and biography of knowledge entails criticality. It provides an opportunity to question 'methodologies as well as the present asymmetrical world order' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 11). In that sense, a critical engagement with higher education internationalisation must recognise that current internationalisation practices are predominantly informed by 'hegemonic/neoliberal/capitalist/commercial globalisation' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni,

2021: 93). Furthermore, internationalisation is 'a global phenomenon, but one that is dominated by Northern perspectives in terms of its definitions, concepts and practices' (Chasi, 2020: 8). The importance and relevance of such definitions, concepts and practices in a Global South context needs to be deliberately interrogated and contextualised in response to local needs and realities.

Secondly, shifting the geography and biography of knowledge requires a careful positioning of South Africa as an 'ex-colonised epistemic site' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 13), which must entail an explicit acknowledgement of the significance of decolonisation in South African higher education, as it continues to be shaped by colonial legacies. This includes, for example, a critical engagement with the role of colonial languages in Africa, which forms an integral part of the decolonisation project. In that regard, a Policy statement on the 'globalisation of English as the *lingua franca* [original emphasis] of higher education, which has opened up national higher education systems to globally mobile students and academics' (DHET, 2019: 36) cannot be simply accepted as a fact. When adopting a decolonial approach, the dominance of English as a medium of instruction and scholarship in universities across the continent must be critically discussed, and such a discussion must be linked to efforts to counteract the marginalisation of local and indigenous languages and knowledge systems in universities in (South) Africa.

Thirdly, decolonisation allows for a pluriversal approach to internationalisation, as it is premised on the 'recognition of the diverse ways through which different people view and make sense of the world' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021: 79). To illustrate all this with an example, internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC), a key dimension of higher education internationalisation, is defined in the Policy Framework as 'the incorporation of intercultural, international and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as into learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods and support services of a programme of study' (DHET, 2019: 9). This definition reflects well-known definitions developed by Northern scholars and an understanding of internationalisation that is essentially Euro-American. However, accepting such a definition as universally

valid and applying it uncritically to the South African context bears the risk of falling victim to 'externally generated knowledges that are not informed by geo- and biographical contextual understanding of the African condition' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 14).

For a contextual understanding of IoC in South Africa, it is important to recognise that the country's HEIs have colonial origins and that university curricula remain, in the main, Euro-centric in orientation and character (Heleta, 2016). However, when applying a decolonial lens, curriculum internationalisation can be approached differently, from an African perspective. In this regard, an internationalised curriculum can be understood as a curriculum that centres Africa and 'situates the notion of Africanness as a key lever for engaging with the global world in solving its developmental challenges and in seeking to position itself as a competitive entity in the globally competitive higher education context' (Wits, 2014: 11). This meaning of IoC is Afro-centric and highlights the importance of the notion of Africanness. It is rooted in a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of internationalisation, which includes '[p]rocesses which seek to embed and elevate an Afro-Global Scholarship as an authentic global episteme equal and competing with other globally recognised epistememes' (Wits, 2014: 8).

Having highlighted the relevance of criticality, positionality and pluriversality for a decolonial perspective on internationalisation, it is important to note that shifting the geography and biography

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of knowledge also relates to an appreciation for decoloniality 'as a liberatory thought that gestures towards the possibility of another world and knowledge' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 15). In this regard, decolonisation creates opportunities to re-imagine higher education internationalisation from the vantage point of South Africa. Such re-imagining must further elaborate on and give substance to one of the main rationales for internationalisation of higher education included in the Policy Framework, which is 'to benefit society and enhance opportunities for higher education to contribute to the public good' (DHET, 2019: 20). As highlighted by IEASA in the context of lessons learnt from the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, 'internationalisation efforts of universities should be permeated by an agenda that focuses on inclusion and social justice' (IEASA, 2020: 4). In the broader context of higher education internationalisation, this is linked to how international engagements can contribute to the 'creation of a better world by addressing its challenges' (DHET, 2019: 23). Ultimately, internationalisation must be a 'liberatory and rehumanising project engaging with colonialism and dislocating it' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021: 94). This is relevant for higher education as much as for other spheres, for South Africa as much as for other countries and regions of the world.

Conclusions

With the development and adoption of the *Policy Framework for Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa* the South African government has, for the first time, addressed higher education internationalisation formally and substantively at the national level. The first edition of the national internationalisation policy is therefore undoubtedly a landmark for higher education in South Africa and, more specifically, for the advancement of internationalisation in the sector.

While the Policy Framework implicitly speaks to decolonisation, one of the most pertinent issues affecting higher education in South Africa today, it does not engage with decolonisation systematically and deeply. In that sense, the Policy missed an important opportunity to be truly reflective of and responsive to its location in place and time. In the immediate term, this gap can be addressed through robust sector engagement at the institutional level. The flexibility and autonomy provided for in the Policy allows South African

HEIs, where internationalisation primarily happens, to take pertinent issues such as decolonisation into account when developing their institutional internationalisation policies and strategies or aligning existing ones to the new national framework. However, as an issue of national importance, decolonisation should also be discussed collectively across the sector. For example, it could be addressed in the form of a national dialogue facilitated by the DHET in collaboration with key national stakeholders such as IEASA and USAf.

A collective engagement should touch on a variety of issues emerging from this reflection on the relevance of decolonisation in the context of higher education internationalisation. It should aim to develop much more explicit guidance on how universities can bring decolonisation and internationalisation agendas into conversation, based on the recognition that using a decolonial lens presents an opportunity to shape a uniquely South African approach to internationalisation. Such an approach must include a critical discussion of currently dominant internationalisation concepts and practices, particularly regarding power and knowledge dependencies, as well as an assessment of their relevance in and value to South African higher education. As a starting point, the very definition of internationalisation, as cited earlier, should be carefully critiqued and adapted to the specific South African context, with consideration for its philosophical underpinnings and lived socio-economic realities.

A contextualised understanding of internationalisation – one that is responsive to local needs, interests, and aspirations – opens up the possibility of re-imagining internationalisation of higher education in South Africa in fundamental ways. It creates spaces for South African HEIs to explore how they can deliberately and confidently participate in and contribute to the global higher education environment from an African base. Ultimately, in this way, decolonisation can help bring about positive change in the dominant internationalisation narrative, focusing on how Southern institutions can be active creators and players in this field rather than being seen primarily as receivers of internationalisation knowledge and practices.

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