

Research Proposal

Decolonising Higher Education

UGlobe Consultancy 2020

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Summary

Objective: This document aims to contribute to the understanding of decolonisation in the context of higher education. The authors have developed a framework, which can be applied to higher education institutions to evaluate their progress in decolonising education.

Approach: The framework consists of three categories: student involvement, curriculum and pedagogy, and governance. Within each category, three indicators are employed: diversity in narrative, awareness of decolonisation, and willingness to decolonise.

Student involvement will be evaluated by means of a case study. In this proposal, an example of a possible case study is presented by looking at the collaborative online learning platform iKudu. The approach in this case would be to analyse the strategies linked to the decolonisation of knowledge and the types of narratives that are being passed on to students. Furthermore, the way in which student involvement is affected by initiatives like the iKudu platform can be investigated through a survey and possibly through interviews as well.

Curriculum and pedagogy are to be evaluated through both analysis of the syllabi of a sample of courses that represent the most popular programmes of the higher education institution and a survey directed to the teachers of these courses. The syllabi will be taken together as one narrative and analysis will focus on who is mentioned in the articles, who has written the articles, how the topic is constructed through the course, eurocentrism, and parochialism. The closed, online survey will measure the pedagogical views of teachers concerning decolonisation.

The decolonisation of higher education cannot find footing without support at the level of governance. To assess backing at the level of governance, this proposal advocates a document analysis on organisational documents and critical background analysis of governance personnel. First, organisational documents, including for example an educational vision, integrity code and annual reports should be analysed to evaluate the openness to decolonisation in the institutional culture. Second, a critical background analysis on the professionals of the Executive Board, a Board of Trustees (or Supervisory Board) and a General Council should be conducted, examining the professional, academic, and personal experiences of these members with decolonisation and global inclusive learning.

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Introduction

Decolonisation in the context of higher education is still a relatively new topic, but the high potential for social transformation is undeniable. This project proposal strives to make decolonisation assessable and researchable through the exploration of a methodological approach for a future case study. A clear measure that can be used to evaluate the specific situation regarding decolonisation in higher education institutions does not yet exist. The project aims to fill this void by creating a framework that can be used to assess where a university stands in terms of decolonisation. Therefore, the main research question is:

How can the process of decolonisation in higher education be evaluated?

The sub-questions to be answered are the following:

What does decolonisation in the context of higher education entail?

What categories construe the process of decolonisation in higher education?

How can the process of decolonisation in higher education be evaluated in a case study considering the established categories and the framework?

Answering these questions could prove valuable for a variety of higher education institutions that might want to assess their standing with regards to the decolonisation process. A process that will undoubtedly become more relevant in the future of education. In this proposal, a framework is developed that could fuel the discussion of the decolonisation process amongst higher education institutions and universities, and cause these bodies to become more critical of their own position in this regard, ultimately aimed at advancement.

The layout of this document is as follows. First, a definition has been formulated which will act as the basis for application of the framework. Second, the developed framework will be explained. This will be done by presenting the different categories within which decolonisation can take place and the indicators assigned to each of these categories. In addition, examples will be given on how to apply the framework in practice.

Defining Decolonisation

The definition of decolonisation has been heavily contested and usually different degrees or levels of decolonisation are distinguished. For example, a distinction is made between decolonisation as a historical process and decolonisation as a social process, which can take place in the educational system. For the purposes of this project, it was necessary to develop one leading definition of decolonisation, and to specify what it means in the context of higher education. Through literature research and discussion the following definition was set up:

“Decolonisation is the normative process of acknowledging and reflecting on the dark history of colonisation and the subsequent socio-economic impacts on the societies of both the coloniser and the colonised. Higher education curriculum and policy should be transformed from a Western dominant perspective towards a more collaborative perspective. This means, dismantling the dominance of the western perspective/paradigm through the integration of ideas from people that are not recognized by this perspective and considering the needs of these marginalized communities to dissolve the hierarchies of one above another.”

This three-part definition first explains what decolonisation entails in general, then what its aim is in the context of higher education, and finally what this means in practice. Separate definitions of the key terms present in this definition can be found in [Appendix I](#).

Framework

In order for the framework to sketch a holistic image of decolonisation, the typical higher education institution has been divided into three different categories. The first category is that of student involvement. This will describe the perspectives of the students. The second category is that of teaching and learning, which will be subdivided into curriculum and pedagogy. Curriculum is the content that is taught, whereas pedagogy is the way in which this content is taught. The third category is that of governance. In this category, the highest organisational structure of an institution will be analysed. The use of these three categories aims at highlighting different perspectives on different organisational levels. In this way, those of students, teachers, and board members will be included.

Within each of these categories, three indicators are employed: diversity in narrative, awareness of decolonisation, and willingness to decolonise. Per category, two team members have developed relevant and practical measurements of these indicators. The overall approach per category and indicator is depicted in the table below. In the following sections, each of the categories is first introduced in the context of decolonisation and then it is explained how they can be applied.

	Diversity in narrative	Awareness of decolonisation	Willingness to decolonise
Student Involvement	Case study	Student survey/interviews	Student survey/interviews
Curriculum & Pedagogy	Syllabus analysis	Teacher survey	Teacher survey
Governance & Management	Critical background analysis	Critical background analysis	Document analysis

Student Involvement

Since the end of the oppressive and racist apartheid system in 1994, epistemologies and knowledge systems at most South African universities have not considerably changed; they remain rooted in colonial, apartheid and Western worldviews and epistemological traditions (Heleta, 2016). Western knowledge has been imposed on colonised communities resulting in the loss of many pre-modern indigenous ontologies (Akena, 2012). Politics, military control, religion and education played a role in this gradual removal on indigenous perspectives (Akena, 2012). Moreover, religion in particular played a large role in removing concepts such as nature worship and being together with nature. Biblical knowledge was aimed at liberating Africans from their traditions and spirituality. These concepts are returning into prominence in Western science as different attitudes towards nature (De Groot, 2010). Examples of how the narrative of Western science transformed Egyptian and Chinese institutions are provided in Elshakry (2010). It is important to give place to knowledge as a whole and break down this dichotomy of 'Western' and 'non-Western' knowledge creation. Through this process, we can bring together different views on key socio-political and socio-economic issues and bridge the gap between communities across the world. Moreover, if knowledge of indigenous societies is acknowledged by the global academic society, the process becomes one of true universal knowledge creation. In this regard, higher education institutions in the West can collaborate with those in the Global South to assist in the creation of knowledge and bring more perspectives from that part of the world into the academic setting.

Global citizenship, internationalisation and intercultural communication are three key features in the iKudu project. The iKudu collaborative online learning (COIL) platform is one of the hallmark strategies initiated by a number of European universities in an attempt to decolonise and foster intercultural communication between Europe and South Africa.

The European nations involved in this project are:

1. Belgium (University of Antwerp),
2. Italy (University of Sienna),
3. the Netherlands (University of Amsterdam and The Hague University of Applied Sciences)
4. the U.K. (Coventry University).

The South African Universities involved are:

1. Central University of Technology, South Africa
2. Durban University of Technology, South Africa
3. University of Limpopo, South Africa
4. University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa (Project Leads)
5. University of Venda, South Africa

This programme involves cross-national sharing of knowledge, intercultural communication and integration of indigenous knowledge into the curriculum. 'Curriculum decolonisation is understood as a central aspect of curriculum transformation. COIL virtual exchanges will provide an alternative to physical mobility, which cannot be implemented on a broad basis in SA, due to the country's socioeconomic realities.' (University of the Free State, n.d.). Based on a study by Clifford & Montgomery (2014), the concept of global citizenship has roots in Western discourse and is a departure from the traditional mode

of educating students to succeed in the modern market-based economy. According to this paper, the concept of global citizenship doesn't fit within this narrative, especially in a university setting where change is slow. In short, this study is critical of the concept of global citizenship contributing towards decolonisation. 'But this is sustained by the fact that Africans, like Asians and Latin Americans, continue to attend the NAFSA and European Association for International Education conferences in larger numbers than their own conferences. And they keep copying the concepts, strategies and policies developed by their Western counterparts without developing their own innovative ideas about how to internationalise their higher education systems. Innovation and change is needed, and needs to come most particularly from Africa and other emerging economies in the South.' (De Wit, 2012).

By investigating the iKudu programme, at the heart of which 'is staff capacity development, as it will produce a group of trained teaching staff who will have access to an international and local pool of knowledge, skills, and expertise in the relevant areas.' (University of the Free State, n.d.), it could be investigated in what aspects the iKudu programme contributes towards decolonisation according to the views of the students.

We will dive into the details of the iKudu programme to evaluate the strategies which are linked to the decolonisation of knowledge and see if this programme fits the criteria indicated in our definition above. It would be interesting to find out what narratives are being passed on to the students and to investigate how the collaboration impacts both the Dutch and South African students. This would help to establish diversity in narrative and awareness of decolonisation. Furthermore, we intend to investigate what subjects are involved in this programme and how the knowledge generated is being implemented and valued in the Dutch and South African societies. In addition, the power structure of this programme will be looked into, to answer the questions of 'Who makes the key decisions?' and 'Who benefits the most from this programme?' In addition, it would be valuable to determine how the cultures view each other and to understand whether the students and organisers see this programme as an extra burden or they enjoy this intercultural exchange of new perspectives and knowledge generation. This contributes to understanding their willingness to decolonise. Our methods would include using questionnaires and interviews directed at both Dutch and South African participants. By investigating the iKudu programme, its discourse can be compared to the results of Clifford & Montgomery (2014).

The presence of the iKudu program allows us to follow an experimental approach to dig deep into understanding the decolonisation dilemma. While there is not much experimental literature about decolonisation itself we can relate the subject to some interesting popular studies:

- *Fershtman and Gneezy (2001). Discrimination in a Segmented Society: An Experimental Approach.* It highlights many aspects like shared prejudice, and self-discrimination by having students play trust games in Israel.
- *Steele and Aronson (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans.* In the experiment black and white students took a test. In the first group all were told the test was a problem-solving task. In the second group they were told that the test was to measure their intellectual ability. Black students did just as well as the white students in the first, but much worse in the second.
- *Hoff and Pandey (2005). Belief Systems and Durable Inequalities: An Experimental Investigation of Indian Caste.* Students were first taught how to solve mazes, then offered rewards based on the

number of mazes they solved. In the control, caste was not discussed, and boys from lower and upper castes solved an equal number of mazes. But when the researchers casually revealed the boys' caste identity in public, by reading out their full name before the game started, lower caste boys solved 23 percent fewer mazes than higher caste boys.

- Furthermore, we find it useful to rely on the Implicit Association Tests, a method developed by psychologists (Greenwald, Banaji, & Nosek, n.d.). This computer based test relies on the assumption that a participant who highly associates two concepts, will accomplish a categorization task quicker. It detects an automatic association (implicit stereotype) by comparing response latency for different pairs of concepts. Applying the implicit association technique could be very useful in studying the effect of for example the race of a tutor on the quality of the students' work.

Curriculum & Pedagogy

The syllabus of a course is the foundation of building the knowledge of a student. While in the classroom the teacher has an influence on the production of knowledge, the syllabus comes into contact with the student in an unsupervised environment. This unsupervised environment can form a challenge for academia as the articles have to challenge and compete with the student's own imagination and previously built knowledge. Epistemological foundations that a student has been influenced by are now building bridges with the course material. The syllabus, therefore, forms part of how a student experiences the subject. It is important thereby to acknowledge that a syllabus builds up an own narrative. In this process, the narrative can change the previously built up knowledge, or just be absorbed in it. The syllabus has, therefore, its own agency that actively takes part in the production of knowledge. These narratives can be in the perspective of decolonisation being Eurocentric and parochial (Kanu, 2003). It is therefore crucial to put those under scrutiny if we consider the decolonisation in European universities.

Besides curriculum, the process of teaching and learning consists of pedagogy, or the way in which the curriculum is delivered to the students. It is important to analyse this as well, in order to sketch an accurate picture of decolonisation. Within this pedagogy, we find aspects of the implicit or hidden curriculum. Social expectations, language, behaviour, norms and values are all taught together with the actual subject matter, whether this is intentional or unintentional. Therefore, the pedagogical approach used in teaching students could be rooted in the dominant Western perspective as opposed to a more collaborative perspective.

To measure the three indicators in this category, both syllabi and pedagogical views of teachers should be analysed. First, the research should be aimed at finding out if the syllabi of the higher education institution build a colonised narrative, and if so, why we can still find these narratives. For this purpose, the syllabi of specific courses that represent the most popular programmes of the institution should be analysed by applying the three indicators. The syllabi will thereby be bound together as one narrative, which builds up the program as an own discourse. The analysis would lay a focus on who is mentioned in the articles, who has written the articles, how the topic is constructed throughout the course, eurocentrism and parochialism.

Awareness of decolonisation and the willingness to decolonise amongst teachers concerning both curriculum and pedagogy, would be measured by means of an online, closed survey. This would preferably be sent to teachers of the same courses of which the syllabi would be analysed. A blueprint for this survey is included in [Appendix II](#). The survey consists of four sections: general information, awareness of decolonisation in the curriculum, awareness of decolonisation in pedagogy, and willingness to decolonise. The general information necessary will of course differ per institution and it needs to be ensured that the information asked for is not traceable to individuals. Respondents should be able to answer anonymously, but if possible, they should fill out their teaching department, in order for the researchers to relate the results of the survey to those of the syllabus analysis. The sections on awareness of decolonisation in the curriculum and pedagogy consist of statement items based on a scale for diversity inclusivity (Laird, 2011) and questions from a toolkit aimed at decolonising higher education courses (SOAS, 2018). The statement items in the section on the willingness of teachers to decolonise are based on a selection of determinants from the *measurement instrument for determinants of innovation* (MIDI) (Fleuren, Paulussen, Van Dommelen, & Van Buuren, 2014), as a potential implementation of decolonisation (policy) can be considered an innovation. Therefore, it is important to find out what potential barriers to decolonisation

exist amongst teachers, which will in turn determine their willingness to put in effort to decolonise their teaching practices. Answers to the statement items are to be given on a 5-point Likert scale, which enables the researcher to create a score per section for each respondent. It is important to note that the blueprint has not been tested on reliability. The researcher(s) should evaluate what items are suitable for the case to be studied, and adjust, add, or exclude items where necessary. It is advised that the resulting survey is then tested on reliability with a preliminary set of data. It would also be possible to conduct a factor analysis, which could result in the survey consisting of better fitting variables than the ones discussed before. Then, the survey can be adjusted again until the quality of the instrument is at a level appropriate enough to apply it in practical research.

Analysis of the data could offer valuable insights in what aspects of decolonisation are already present amongst teachers, what aspects they could improve on, and if they are able and willing to improve. Comparing the results of the survey to the results of analysis of the syllabi could show whether or not there is a discrepancy between what teachers are teaching and what they think they are teaching.

Governance & Management

The third category that we propose to analyse is institutional governance and management. This category is highly significant as the locus of power, to implement change and promote decolonisation initiatives, resides within the higher level decision-making bodies of the institution. Within educational systems, this higher level is generally made up of an Executive Board, a Board of Directors, and/or a Supervisory Board, and often a General Council. The governance and management of Universities of Applied Sciences and Universities - in The Netherlands Hogeschool and Universiteit, in Germany, Fachhochschule and Universität, in France Les Universités and Grandes Écoles - falls under the responsibility of these bodies. The decolonisation of higher education will most likely fail to find footing without support at the level of governance, i.e. without support of these bodies.

As such, the question that needs answering first is: What is governance? The term governance applies to 'the exercise of power in a variety of institutional contexts, the objective of which is to direct, control and regulate activities in the interests of people as citizens, voters and workers' (Kuper, 2013, p. 347 - in the social science encyclopedia). The decision-making bodies at Universities of Applied Sciences and Universities exercise this power to direct, control and regulate with a vision that either acknowledges the decolonisation process or not. In the process of decolonising education, at the level of governance and management two factors are particularly important: (1) a facilitating institutional culture and (2) practical policy implementation (Dale, 2005). Clifford and Montgomery (2014, p. 38) who examined the promotion of global citizenship in Western higher education, identified 'institutional resistance to change' as one of the primary challenges for the decolonisation in the context of higher education. Findings indicate that institutions and senior management are generally heavily invested in the *status quo*, resulting in the inability to swiftly implement change. Additionally, Clifford and Montgomery (2014) established that higher education institutions adopt and support market-driven agendas, in which maximising financial returns might be the higher policy priority.

This project proposal advocates the evaluation of the category of governance and management for a case study, because of the locus of power relevance identified in the literature. The methodological approach to study this will be twofold. First, we propose to examine a selection of organisation documents provided by the higher education institution. A document analysis is suggested, because it will allow the researcher to reflect on whether the institutional culture (in publicly presented narratives) appears to be open to decolonisation initiatives. In selecting relevant organisation documents the researcher should look for documents featuring educational vision and integrity codes. In conducting the document analysis what should one working with this proposal look for? The established indicators are particularly relevant here: do the documents mention or in any way support (1) diversity in narrative, (2) awareness of decolonisation, and/or (3) willingness to decolonise. Do these documents mention global and inclusive learning? Do these documents acknowledge social hierarchies and the dominance of the Western paradigm? These indicators might be mentioned explicitly, or they might be hinted at indirectly. To give an example, a higher education institution might explicitly mention that they want to 'promote diversity' or that they want 'education to be inclusive', they might recognise that in our 'complex and global society not everyone is given the same opportunities', or they might more implicitly mention the importance of internationalisation. By looking out for the established indicators, attention will be paid to the elements of the identified definition of decolonisation. As a result, this document analysis will provide insights into the facilitating nature of the institutional culture for the decolonisation process at the level of governance.

In turn, it is valuable to compare this institutional culture with practical policy implications aimed at decolonisation. By analysing annual reports (or other accessible documents that indicate actual changes in policy) one could gain insight into actual decolonisation initiatives: are there actual policy changes that promote the decolonisation of education? Were finances allocated to decolonisation initiatives? In short, if the institutional culture is facilitating and policy was implemented with regards to the decolonisation of education, it can be concluded that the higher education institution is doing well in the decolonisation process at the level of governance.

Secondly, we propose to conduct a critical background analysis of the professionals embodying an Executive Board, a Board of Directors, Supervisory Board, and/or a General Council. Such a critical background analysis is relevant, because it allows one to assess the level of experience with and knowledge of decolonisation. Duku and Salami (2017) conclude that for an institutional body to be able to foster the decolonisation of education it is recommended there should be a Recognized Knowledgeable Individual (RKI) providing valuable knowledge on the decolonisation process when and where needed. It is important to establish whether there is a RKI that specialises in decolonisation (i.e. has professional, academic, and/or personal experience with decolonisation) in a Board or Council or if one is available for the board members to consult. Having a RKI will evidently and significantly advance the decolonisation process. The critical background analysis entails examining the professional, academic, and personal experiences the members of these entities have had with decolonisation and global inclusive learning. Factors that play a role in this are whether their education was in any way linked to decolonisation, whether they had a job that involved decolonisation initiatives, or whether they took the effort to learn more about what decolonisation entails. To gain insights into the background of a professional one could look at a variety of platforms: personal pages, institutional pages introducing the professional, LinkedIn pages, etc. Additionally, personal experience with decolonisation is valuable. Given this is more difficult to assess through the aforementioned pages, it would be ideal to ask professionals about their (personal) experience. However, one should be realistic about whether this is feasible. In short, the critical background analysis will allow one to assess whether the necessary (professional and personal) experience with and knowledge of decolonisation processes is present at the level of governance, in order to successfully move forward with the decolonisation of education.

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Appendix I - Definition of key terms

Socio-economic impacts - Impacts related to social and economic aspects of life, such as on education, prosperity, quality of life, demographics, land use, etc.

The coloniser and the colonised - With 'coloniser' the country that took power and ruled over another country is meant. This often went violently and without consent of the country that was the target of colonisation by the coloniser. The country that was taken power over is meant with 'the colonised'.

Higher education - Education institutions offering courses to students that have at least completed secondary education. In the Netherlands, this would include both universities of applied sciences and research universities.

Western perspective - The epistemological view of what is 'right' or 'wrong' according to what is expected from Western rules. For example, development is framed by looking at economic activity and higher education is the production of superior knowledge from the Western position of higher privilege.

Marginalised communities - Communities that are confined to the lower or peripheral edge of society. Such groups are denied involvement in mainstream economic, political, cultural, and social activities because of their living conditions or lifestyles (IGI Global, n.d.).

Hierarchies – 'Hierarchy is an organization in grades or orders or ranks of descending power, authority or prestige.' (Kuper, 2013, p. 361, 362). In modern sociology and anthropology; social stratification; 'when we talk of social stratification we draw attention to the unequal positions occupied by individuals in society. (...) inequalities between groups or categories of persons with a definite or at least a recognizable identity.' (Kuper, 2013, p. 847).

Appendix II - Survey for teachers

[Insert explanation of the objective of the survey.]

Your participation is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any moment. Filling out the survey will take 2 to 5 minutes. The data of this survey will be processed anonymously and confidentially. Identifying information will only be seen by the consultants analysing the data, and will not be shared with third parties.

By participating in this survey you indicate that you have read the above statement and agree with the terms as described.

General information

1. What is your sex?

- Male
- Female
- Would rather not say

2. How long have you been teaching at [educational institution]?

3. At what department did you teach during [past semester]?

4. What course(s) did you teach during [past semester]?

Curriculum and pedagogy

You will now be presented with a few statements. These statements all concern the specific course(s) you have taught in the [past semester]. Please indicate to what extent you agree with each statement.

[Scale: (1) strongly disagree (2) disagree (3) neither agree nor disagree (4) agree (5) strongly agree]

[Items in *cursive* need to be reverse-coded.]

[Awareness of decolonisation in the curriculum]

5. The course content emphasizes contributions to the field by people from multiple cultures.
6. The course covers topics from multiple theoretical perspectives.
7. The course content allows students to understand the origins and purposes of the field of study in its historical context.
8. My syllabus encourages a critical approach to reading texts.
9. *The demographic profile of authors on the syllabus reflects a mainly Western background.*

10. My students develop skills necessary to work effectively with people from various cultural backgrounds.

[Awareness of decolonisation in pedagogy]

11. I am aware of what might constitute racist behaviour in a learning context.
12. My pedagogy is transparent in terms of what students are expected to learn.
13. My students' own challenges and aspirations are factored into my teaching.
14. All my students feel comfortable vocalizing their own opinions during my classes.
15. *My students are given little opportunities in their learning to widen their circles of contact or experience.*
16. My classes engage students who have been discouraged to actively participate in academic work as a result of discrimination.
17. I try to learn about student characteristics in order to improve class instruction.
18. I work on creating a classroom atmosphere that encourages active participation of all students.
19. I try to empower students through their class participation.
20. *I evaluate student learning using mostly one specific technique.*
21. I adjust pace, content, and assignments in the course based on student learning needs.
22. I take specific measures to avoid assessment bias when assessing students' work
23. I explore my own cultural and intellectual limitations as part of class preparation.
24. I address my potential biases about course-related issues during class.

Before answering the following questions, a brief explanation of the concept of decolonisation will be given.

Decolonisation policies are given increased attention in higher education institutions. Decolonisation is defined as the normative process of acknowledging and reflecting on the history of colonisation and the impacts it has on today's society. In higher education, this means transforming from a Western dominant perspective towards a more collaborative perspective. This can be done through the integration of ideas from people that are not recognized by the dominant perspective.

The following statements concern your opinion on decolonisation. Please indicate to what extent you agree with each statement.

[Scale: (1) strongly disagree (2) disagree (3) neither agree nor disagree (4) agree (5) strongly agree]

[Items in *cursive* need to be reverse-coded.]

[Willingness to decolonise]

25. I would be able to implement decolonisation successfully in my courses.
26. Decolonising my courses would be beneficial for my students.
27. Decolonising my courses would improve my relationship with my students.
28. *To implement decolonisation in my courses, I would have to invest a lot of time and effort.*
29. I believe it is a part of my job to decolonise my courses.

- 30. I would support my institution implementing a decolonisation policy.
- 31. If I wanted to decolonise my courses, my direct colleagues would support me.
- 32. I expect that decolonising my courses would have a positive impact on my students.
- 33. If I wanted to decolonise my courses, the management of my institution would support me.
- 34. If I wanted to decolonise my courses, the opinions of my direct colleagues would influence my decision.

- 35. If you have any other comments or suggestions to offer, feel free to leave them down below.
