RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Theorising the Voices of Senior Academics on Decolonising the University Curriculum in an Open Distance E-Learning Institution in South Africa

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Received: 16 September 2024 | **Revised:** 13 January 2025 | **Published:** 27 February 2025

Reviewing Editor: Dr. Gita Mistri, Durban University of Technology

Abstract

In 2015 and 2016, respectively, South Africans witnessed an unprecedented emergence of the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall national protests in the South African higher education, with students and progressive academics lamenting the slow pace of transformation in the sector. While there is a plethora of literature post the fallist movements focusing on students, Black academics and government responses to the protests, the voices of senior, tenured academics at an open distance e-Learning institution in South Africa remain under-researched, particularly on how they conceptually understand the calls for decolonising the university curricula. In this paper, we attempt to explore and theorise the voices of senior academics on decolonising the university curriculum at an open distance e-Learning institution in South Africa. Through a qualitative case study, we purposively recruited sixteen (16) senior academics at the main campus of the institution in Gauteng province in South Africa and elicited data through an online qualitative questionnaire administered in line with the institutional COVID 19 and post COVID 19 protocols. Nancy Fraser's social justice framework was employed to frame data analysis. The findings revealed that senior academics understood the calls for decolonising curricula as responding to the two key challenges: 1) confronting the deeply rooted coloniality of the mind, and 2), the need to challenge the unequal, hierarchical power relations between academics and students. We conclude that when stakeholder minds are decolonised, third spaces are created in which they partake in reflexive conversations which promote parity of participation to accommodate African content and knowledges as equally relevant ways of knowing and doing.

Keywords: *coloniality; curriculum; decolonisation; open distance; senior academics*

Introduction

Since the emergence of the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustfall national student protest movements that shut down South African higher education institutions, issues such as epistemic access, rethinking curricula and the need to interrogate institutional cultures, particularly in historically white universities (Hlatshwayo, 2021; Nyamnjoh, 2016) have taken centre stage in scholarship and decolonial discourse. Since then, various national and institutional interventions have been proposed across the South African higher education sector to respond to the imperatives of the transformation of the curricula, with varying degrees of success. It is however important to highlight from the outset that decolonisation in open-distance higher education institutions is lacking in the literature. What is largely missing in the literature are the narratives of senior scholars who work in open distance e-learning institutions, on how they conceptually understand the emergent calls for the decolonisation of curricula in South African higher education. In this paper, we attempt to fill that gap by foregrounding and theorising senior academics' voices on the decolonisation of curriculum at an open distance eLearning (ODeL) institution in South Africa. Their voices matter in this study as they already had experience in the decolonial discourses in higher education prior to the student protest movements and afterwards. Next, we outline the emergent literature on the decolonial discourse.

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Decolonial Struggles in Higher Education

The role of curriculum and its decolonisation is a conversation which has prompted a lot of interrogation. Motivated by this concern, we explored some contemporary engagements and discourses on the decolonisation of higher education and their impact on those who were involved, to provide a broader context in which the senior academics who participated in the study operated. Academics in South African higher education operate in spaces where new frameworks have been promulgated to address equity, equality and transformation (Department of Education, 2002; Ramrathan, 2016). Nonetheless, epistemological models have not been changed much (Jansen, 2017; Vandeyar, 2019). To map the way forward, different scholars have come up with different points of view on how to shift from Eurocentric to African-centred ontological and epistemological models. In their writing, Mbembe (2015) and Adonis and Silinda (2021) propose the demythologising of Eurocentric views as the objective reality. In their study, Stein and Andreotti (2017) identify myths entrenched in Western knowledge systems. An example is the myth that indigenous knowledges of the marginalised groups cannot be fitted into any of the ways of Western knowing. The idea of demythologising knowledge is extended by Gumbo (2019) who asserts that only when the subalterns exercise disobedience from universalising Western or global North philosophies as ultimate reality about the world, is only then that they could begin to build on to the realities of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) and develop them as equally valid intellectual knowledge for teaching, learning and research. In this paper, we challenge the mythologised Eurocentric belief systems and emphasise that such orientations need to be deconstructed as a step towards embracing diversity in the knowledge systems of the world.

A lot of IKS scholarship is emerging as a methodology which seeks to interrogate the prevalence of coloniality within higher education in the global South (Chilisa, 2012; 2017; Hlatshwayo *et al*., 2020; Smith, 1999). It is from such a vintage point that progressive scholars from the global South, including those from Africa, Latin America and Asia, continue to search for the means to end the epistemic apartheid by de-parochialising Western thoughts and worldviews (Heleta, 2016; 2018; Mbembe, 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Progressive academics subscribe to the imperative of decolonising the mind as a prerogative to the effective decolonisation of higher education in the global South (Fanon, 1963; Grosfoguel, 2007; Munyaradzi, 2022; waThiongo, 1994). Such academics feel challenged to adapt to epistemological access in critical ways which allow the "othered" in the existing colonial matrix of power to belong (Grant *et al*., 2018). On the other hand, there are some scholars who view decolonising higher education as entailing renaming of buildings or physical structures, public spaces, colonial structures and practices at universities (Chilisa 2012). However, drawing from the works of Biko (2004), Le Grange *et al*. (2020) and Mathebane and Sekudu (2019), we underscore that renaming structures and buildings may be mere tokenism, a superficial pluralism in which the shift from exclusion to inclusion of marginalised people accomplishes only illusions of progress. The essence of name changing could become more meaningful if, for example, the narratives of those whose names are used to rename buildings become part of the complicated decolonial conversations in the teaching and learning processes (Le Grange *et al*., 2020: 42). Adopting such pedagogical approaches could enhance the hidden curriculum and institutional cultures in more positive and productive ways. We, therefore, argue that effective and sustainable decolonisation of curriculum requires all stakeholders to be wary of the possible signs of aesthetic changes which may not contribute to curriculum transformation.

Literature reveals that the South African education system is deeply entrenched in the logic of the apartheid era (Kumalo, 2020; Mbembe, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The apartheid policies divided higher education institutions based on race, ethnic and linguistic groups (Council for Higher Education, 2013) each of which was allocated different ideological, social and economic functions in society (Dhunpath and Subbaye, 2018). Those differentiated groupings had conditions regarding knowledge production, curricula, student access, geographical location and quality (Le Grange, 2017). As an apartheid flag post, the South African universities operate in contexts in which they are subtly shaped to de-contextualise the historical and political past under the guise of democracy. As a result, those who teach students grapple with a lot of issues. More often than not, they lack progressive decolonised frameworks which could lobby for an end to curricula marred by exclusion and epistemic injustices. The million-dollar question is whether the higher education policies in postcolonial settings such as South Africa can succeed to raise the African IKS against the neoliberal odds which control government decisions. There are scholars who are grounded in the belief that the best way to deal with curricula injustices is to resist epistemic violence associated with the coloniality of being, knowledge and knowledge creation (Heleta, 2016; Heleta and Chasi, 2023; Hlatshwayo, 2022; Le Grange, 2017; Walton, 2018). The beauty of such logic is that it aims to restore, reclaim and re-centre the lost voice of the marginalised knowledge creators and people. The validation of the

provincialised IKS sets the roadmap to the attainment and promotion of social and cognitive justice in teaching, learning and research.

Literature further reveals the dynamic and complex nature of the concept of decolonisation. Some scholars understand decolonisation of the curriculum as the interrogation of the relationship between curriculum and power (Grosfoguel, 2007; Mbembe, 2015). This view illuminates the role of those in powerful positions in the various faculties and management levels in the academy. Thus, to a larger extent, such people have the power to determine what is taught and how it should be taught. However, the problem of viewing curriculum as revolving around the powerful ones and content is that it excludes the students, who are consumers of the curriculum, the less powerful lecturers, staff and other stakeholders. We underscore the importance of a tripartite relationship for the creation and implementation of a balanced curriculum. The relationship among the teacher, student and curriculum content should not be disturbed if decolonisation of curriculum is to bear fruits (Vandeyar, 2019). The voices of these stakeholders are necessary for a wholesome perspective and conceptualisation of decolonisation of curriculum to be developed. We argue that changing the content alone without interrogating the belief systems and orientations of academics and students may result in the decolonisation project being mere rhetoric. Conservative scholars regard decolonisation as a pipe dream from the beginning, whether or not all stakeholders are involved (Jansen, 2017). Stein and Andreotti's (2017) study reveals that the academic staff, especially at historically white institutions, received Westernised epistemological orientations in their pedagogical practices. It is that privilege which leads such academics to be reluctant to change the structural and cultural conditions which perpetuate inequalities. Similar sentiments were also articulated by decolonial scholars such as Mignolo (2009; 2011), Maldonado-Torres (2007) and Grosfoguel (2007). As a follow up on the complexities which surround the decolonial agenda in African university settings as well as internationally, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), Nyoni (2019) and Quinn (2019) caution that if academics resist decoloniality, implementing a decolonised curriculum will remain a pipe dream. The discourse of transformation needs to be replaced by stronger discourses of change.

Having provided a literature context as discussed above, it is important to note that the discussion was largely centred on scholarly work by academics and researchers from various higher education institutions in Africa and beyond. What is conspicuous lacking is research work on decolonisation of education informed by open distance teaching and learning. That paucity compelled us to explore the voices of some senior academics at an ODeL institution in South Africa on decolonising the curriculum. Equally important in this paper is an overview of the history of open distance education. It enriches the context of the study.

The Evolution of Open Distance Education

Some clarification about the concept of open distance education is quite important. Open distance education refers to the openness and flexibility where students have autonomy over their studies, and where access restrictions have been removed (Bozkurt, 2019; Amini and Oluyide, 2016). In other words, it also means the educational processes of teaching and learning whereby what is taught and what is learnt are removed in time and space (Manyike, 2017; UNESCO, 2002). In essence, open distance learning provides autonomy to students to choose the media of instruction, place and pace of study whereby students make their choices about which courses they want to take and how they want to conduct their learning in ways suitable to their needs (Letseka *et al*., 2018). The separation in terms of place and time has been bridged by the availability and use of digital technologies which have seen open distance learning evolving into ODeL, which can be categorised into asynchronous and synchronous learning (Amini and Oluyide, 2016). In asynchronous distance education, learning is based on interactions between teacher and students at different times, and this is facilitated by such media as learning material in print, and pre-recorded tutorials and recorded lectures that could be watched or listened to at the student's convenience, respectively (Pregowska *et al*., 2021). On the other hand, in synchronous distance learning, the interactions take place in real time, for example, live online lectures on such platforms as Google classrooms, Microsoft Teams or zoom, depending on which platforms are acceptable by each institution. Central to the success of every open distance learning institution are the support services provided to students (Amini and Oluyide, 2016).

Distance education has been in existence for centuries with the United States of America (USA), Europe and Australia as pioneers (Manyike, 2017). While distance education through correspondence in Poland began in 1776, a correspondence school called '*The Society to Encourage Studies at Home*' only started in Massachusetts in the USA in 1873. The distance education idea spread to Canada in 1889 with the agenda of helping rural teachers in the country to get degree opportunities, and in 1974, the University of Athabasca was established (Manyike, 2017; Bozkurt, 2019). By 1965, distance education had evolved and expanded from Poland to include other European

countries such as Hungary, Romania, Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, United Kingdom (UK) and Khazakhastan (Bozkurt, 2019; Pregowska *et al*., 2021). Germany established open distance education in 1974 (Manyike 2017). Programmes offered by the Canadian and Germany open distance education were for mid-career students who wanted to conduct research on improving their work performance. In 1969, the University of London offered master's and doctoral programmes to students through open distance education (Manyike, 2017).

In Asian countries such as Korea and China, distance education was established in the 1970s as correspondence education through the medium of postal communication, radio and television recordings (Aoki, 2012). Currently they have moved to online teaching and learning, using the internet as the main medium of teaching and learning (Aoki, 2012). To date, the essence of institutionalising distance education in the two countries is to make higher education accessible for lifelong education especially to people who enter university after starting their careers (Panda and Garg, 2019). India correspondence education started in the 1960s after the country attained independence from British rule. Media such as radio, television and video series were used to provide supplementary learning resources to students (Panda and Garg, 2019). After responding to international pressure, India established the Indira Gandhi National Open University in 1985 and to date; the country has fourteen (14) public open universities (Panda and Garg, 2019).

In the South African context, distance education is synonymous with the University of South Africa (UNISA), which evolved in three phases, and is the largest ODeL institution in the continent. It was established in 1873 as the University of the Cape of Good Hope, with the core responsibility of being an examination body (Prinsloo, 2017). In 1946, UNISA developed into a correspondence institution. Because of apartheid's segregatory policies, from 1959, black indigenous students were systematically denied access to established universities (Glennie and Mays, 2019). It was UNISA's distance education model which enabled the racially marginalised groups to access education. The marginalised groups included young indigenous African school leavers who could not enrol in conventional universities as well as those adults who sought their first attempt at tertiary education (Glennie and Mays, 2019). During the colonial era, a few Africans across the continent also enrolled with overseas correspondence colleges and received course materials and sent assignments through the post office. After gaining independence, countries such as Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Namibia, Botswana and Nigeria adopted the open distance education model, guided by the pioneering ODeL institutions such as the Open University in the UK and UNISA.

ODeL plays an important role in promoting an increase in participation among students, and participation between students and their lecturers, free from barriers of space and time (Mashile *et al*., 2020; Prinsloo, 2017). In many African countries, higher education ministries face challenges in funding institutions of higher learning such as universities. Such limitations have resulted in universities being unable to enrol as many prospective students as they might have wished (Amini and Oluyide, 2016; Mashile *et al*., 2020). Access to university education, especially at traditionally face-to-face teaching institutions, is limited (Yeboah *et al*., 2014). Most of those students who fail to enroll in public universities would then enroll at open distance education institutions. A key role of open distance education is to widen access to education and contribute towards optimal use of information communication technologies (Prinsloo, 2017). However, one limiting factor is that online distance education increases the digital divide, thus increasing inequality of access. In developing countries such as those in Africa, many people come from disadvantaged backgrounds and may not afford to purchase the technological gadgets to use in their distance learning. Some of those students may eventually drop out of the system before they complete their study programmes.

Academics at ODeL institutions, just like those in conventional institutions, are responsible for teaching and learning, research, community engagement and academic citizenship. Thus, ODeL institutions are also guided by the policy frameworks promulgated by the higher education ministry. In South Africa, for example, universities are required to undergo a transformation process which includes, among other things, decolonising the curricula. UNISA has responded by developing frameworks which guide how the institution designs and implements a decolonised curriculum (Moropa, 2021; UNISA 2018; UNISA, 2019). The ODeL institution is committed to continuous curriculum transformation and pedagogical innovation through use of digital facilities which promote student centredness (Letseka *et al*., 2018; Letseka, 2016; Mendy and Madiope, 2020). Although literature confirms decolonisation projects being undertaken at UNISA, there is scanty research on the voices of the academics on the decolonisation of education at ODeL institutions.

Methodological Decisions

We adopted a qualitative interpretivist case study design (Merriam, 2002) to provide an in-depth exploration of the voices of senior academics on the decolonisation of the university curriculum at an ODeL institution in South Africa. We purposively selected a sample of eight female and eight male senior academics at the institution's main campus in the Gauteng province. To protect their anonymity, we used pseudonyms to refer to them. We based the sample on their seniority, their roles as material developers and/or supervisors of postgraduate students and also their work experience at the institution from before the 2015-2016 student protests to the present. Seniority in the institution, role as module developers and the capacity as postgraduate student research supervisors allowed for an engagement with participants who had rich, deep knowledge of the evolving curricula issues at the institution, before and after the fallist student protest movements. We employed an online qualitative questionnaire to gather data from the sixteen (16) participants through email and the institution's official portal of communication. The online qualitative questionnaire was a preferred method for these senior academics over any other due to the participants' hectic schedules. The online qualitative questionnaire was also opted for as a COVID-19 compliant data gathering method because the data was collected during the COVID 19 pandemic period. The qualitative questionnaire which consisted of ten open-ended questions aimed to elicit data from the sixteen (16) senior academics on their perceptions, comments, opinions and suggestions (Eckerdal and Hagstrom, 2017) about the decolonisation of the curriculum at the institution where they worked.

The ten open-ended questions on the online qualitative questionnaire were developed, being guided by the research aim, which was to explore and theorise the voices of senior academics at the ODeL institution on decolonising the university curriculum. We engaged three qualitative research experts to examine the questions we had formulated and provide feedback on how to improve the questionnaire. After improving the questions following suggestions from the independent panel of the three qualitative researchers, we refined the questions and distributed the online questionnaire to each of the sixteen (16) senior academics. Permission for the sixteen (16) senior academics to participate was obtained from the institution's Research Permission Subcommittee. Consent was also sought from each of the sixteen (16) participating academics, and they confirmed by filling in consent forms which they emailed back to us. The qualitative questionnaire was administered during the semester break as all the sixteen (16) academics indicated that it was the best time for them to respond to it as they would have ample time while students were on vacation. The qualitative questionnaire included an instruction for each participant to write responses under each question in as many words as they wished to express themselves. Some follow-up individual telephonic interviews were conducted for further clarity, where necessary.

To analyse the data, we adopted the six phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) which are: gaining familiarity with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes from coded data, reviewing themes, defining and naming of themes and presentation and discussion of findings. To familiarise with the data, we transcribed the data from online qualitative questionnaire verbatim, read and re-read responses provided by the sixteen (16) senior academics to grasp the exact meaning of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006) as intended by the senior academics who responded to the questionnaire. Secondly, we manually generated codes which identified outstanding features and characteristics through systematically working through all the data. In the third phase, we arranged the created codes into potential themes through inductive thematic analysis. The fourth phase included the refinement of the themes that we had identified in phase three by making sure that themes that had been coded differently yet meaning one thing were brought together under one theme (Clarke and Braun, 2013). Continued refinement of themes proceeded into phase five. Then, finally, the sixth phase involved the analysis of themes into presentation (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In the last phase, the analysis of the themes culminated into a write-up which included description, interpretation, explanation and weaving in of Nancy Fraser's social justice theoretical lens and a discussion of literature, which were interwoven with the findings.

Needless to say, the multi-method strategies such as credibility, audit trail, member checking and dependability demonstrated trustworthiness. For audit trail, chronological detail of the research processes was recorded in the research journal and securely stored for cross referencing purposes and the demonstration of the study's dependability (Anney, 2014; Gray, 2014). The credibility of the study was established through the use of quotes from the online qualitative questionnaire responses from the sixteen (16) senior academics. Credibility and trustworthiness of data were also enhanced through follow up emails sent to each senior academic from whom more clarification concerning their online qualitative questionnaire responses was needed to verify the data thereby eliminating researchers' bias during the interpretation and analysis of the data (Gray, 2014). We acknowledge that

only sixteen (16) senior academics at the institution were represented. Such a sample is characteristic of exploratory qualitative research which seeks depth and not breadth, hence the findings from this study may not be generalised to other institutions. We now turn to the theoretical lens which we adopted to frame the data analysis for this paper.

Theoretical Perspectives: Fraser's Social Justice

In the book, *"Scales of justice: Re-imagining the Political Space in a Globalizing World"*, the American philosopher Nancy Fraser (2009a) argues that our conception of justice needs to include what she calls the *"parity of participation"*. For Fraser, this is a radical re-conception of the idea of justice where j*ustice* only becomes true, meaningful and real when everyone is able to participate as equals in society. There are obstacles that hinder justice at the economic and cultural levels. Fraser later added another obstacle that operates at the political level (Fraser, 2000; 2009a; 2009b). The economic level, is where citizens may not be able to fully participate in society because they do not have access to resources, resulting in distributive injustice or maladministration. Put differently, students in higher education who continue to struggle to afford the high costs of higher education, with some experiencing financial exclusion, homelessness and food insecurity, experience distributive injustice (Fraser 2000; 2009a; 2009b). Another form of structural obstacle that prevents people from participatory parity concerns the institutionalised and hierarchised hegemonic cultural values that render people as space invaders and bodies out of place. This misrecognition, where the subalterns cannot speak because they do not have a valid and legitimate voice, is best captured in Khunou *et al*. (2019) *"Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience."* Here, Black academics in a research-intensive university in South Africa reflect on the painful structural marginality, harassment and a colonising institutional culture that refuses to recognise their humanity. It was largely at this cultural level that the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall students rose up in 2015-2016 to demand an overhaul of the curricula that was/is being offered in the South African higher education institutions and the re-centring and re-prioritising the often ignored and silenced alternative voices (Le Grange *et al*., 2020; Hlatshwayo, 2022). The third dimension that talks to the obstacles which prevent participatory parity in society is the political aspect, where some representation or misrepresentations are used as tools for marking belongingness and/or non-belongingness, inclusion or exclusion practices (Fraser, 2009b). In this paper, we rely on Fraser's participatory framework in general and the cultural dimension in particular to explore and theorise senior academics' voices on decolonising the curricula at an ODeL institution. Next are the findings and discussion.

Findings and Discussion

Some interrelated, broad themes emerged from the data analysis, namely; challenging coloniality of being, and the unequal hierarchical power relations between academics and students. We presented the themes in the context of the decolonisation of the curricula at an ODeL institution where the study was conducted.

Challenging the coloniality of being

The academics who participated in the study asserted that there was need for the university staff to decolonise their mindsets as a precursor to meaningful decolonisation processes they argued for this approach on the premise that most academics had developed Western, European ways of thinking and knowing as a result of the typically Eurocentric education, training and worldviews they had acquired over the years. The participants considered the decolonisation of the mind as playing a pivotal role in the decolonial project by further asserting that if an academic's mind was ready to appreciate that Eurocentric canons of knowledge were not the only legitimate knowledges, they would begin to accept other diverse knowledges as equally valid as well. The participants clarified that decolonising the mind referred to an interrogation of their cognition, beliefs, values, worldviews and perceptions as academics. This would enable an examination of whether they were not exclusively assimilated to Western ways of thinking and knowing at the expense of other knowledge systems. The participants articulated that if they were, then the reversal of the stereotyping would become a goal. Mudau and Dlamini made the following comments:

> *Then, the question is whose mind should be decolonised? In answering I think the minds of academics, lecturers, management, and every stakeholder who clings on to a mythologised 'truth" that there is only one window through which the world can be understood, which is Eurocentrism. It's high time that we acknowledge the philosophical thoughts and views of Latin America, Africa or marginalised peoples (Mudau).*

> *Don't you think it's imperative for us as academics, to interrogate our own mentalities and consciousness? We should ask ourselves if we are not alienated from our true identities. That has to be done before anything else (Dlamini).*

In the same vein, Mavis, pointed out:

> *We should go beyond that and consider various perspectives then create the spaces to think of its value to us as an institution, as individuals, as academics in the classrooms, not forgetting the values of others, of course (Mavis).*

Divergent views were also expressed thus:

> *It is regrettable that sometimes evidence of the decolonisation of the minds may merely be in print, not practically. There are global imperatives which are unfortunately inescapable (Mzilikazi).*

> *In such a huge ODeL institution like this, it could take a lifetime to determine that all academics, lecturers, researchers, buy into the logic of decolonisation (Eliza).*

The above comments by Mzilikazi and Eliza echo scholarly voices, which argue that effective decolonisation can only be realised when academics whose minds are still colonised accept that reality and then proceed to unlearn in order to learn anew (Nyoni, 2019; Stein and Andreotti, 2017; Tuck and Yang, 2018; waThiongo, 1994; 2016). The decolonisation process requires stakeholders to critique their minds in relation to their different knowledge systems, identities, curriculum design and delivery demands (Chaka *et al*., 2018; Fomunyam, 2017; Heleta, 2024; Maldonaldo-Torres 2017; Mamdani 2018). That would lead to a point whereby stakeholders conceptualise decolonisation as a continuous process of becoming, unlearning and relearning, thus practicing Mignolo's disobedience and borderline thinking in the complicated conversation with the curriculum (Mignolo, 2009; 2011; Grosfoguel, 2007). Those complicated conversations help to disentangle the hidden curriculum in which, as expressed by Hlatshwayo (2022: 49), the curriculum stakeholders' "taken-for granted ideologies" are imposed on our curricula. Thus, we believe that it is relevant to explore alternative ways on how additional knowledge bases from the global South could fit in the curriculum gap so as to promote cognitive justice and quality practice, not only through the traditionally face-to-face encounters, but also through ODeL models where teaching and learning are virtual realities.

Embedded in the responses of Mzilikazi and Eliza above, is some kind of defeatist attitude concerning the possibility of effective decolonisation in postcolonial universities in Africa. Such an attitude corroborates arguments by some scholars that it is disconcerting that the disruption of asymmetrical power relations could remain a pipedream in the neoliberal higher education contexts where the global North trends permeate into theory and practice in the curriculum to create logics which marginalise students from the global South (Hlatshwayo, 2022; Mbembe, 2015; Munyaradzi, 2022). Furthermore, Eliza's response alludes to the challenges encountered by academics who work in large ODeL institutions in their endeavours to meet the demands for the decolonisation of the curriculum as promulgated in policy documents at national and institutional levels. Eliza's observation that the decolonisation agenda is not an overnight project is confirmed in the literature which asserts that despite the ODeL institution being entrenched in decolonial approaches, it remains an ideal yet to be realised (Nyoni 2019). Another cause for the rhetoric of decolonisation as advanced by Connell (2016) is how the reductionism of modernity plays against the decolonisation ideal through the tension between geographies of staff and students in a global context in which the marginalised views are usurped as Eurocentric thought. We argue that, currently, most ODeL institutions, especially in the global South, do not have capacity to meet the decolonisation of the curricula agenda in massified contexts. Effective decolonisation could become more meaningful when stakeholders go beyond check-listing and other cosmetic changes to making personal commitments to put decolonial theory into practice.

We now turn to the second theme, centred on the need to dismantle the power relations between academics and students.

Dismantling the Unequal Power Relations between Academics and Students

The participants expressed that decolonised pedagogical practices should entail power sharing between academics and students in the teaching and learning processes. The findings revealed that one way of doing that was through unpacking and a deconstruction of the asymmetrical power relations between supervisors and their

postgraduate students in ways that embrace students' views as valid. Thus, the participants accepted the need to build more positive relationships with their students on the various online and distance teaching and learning engagements they had, for example, at both master's and doctoral levels. Doing that means applying some decolonial ways of thinking such as being critical and self-reflexive about their approaches in planning and delivering content or feedback to students (Du Plessis, 2021). When academics engage themselves in personal, complicated conversations as a way of deconstructing the master-servant relationships between themselves and students, they become enablers of decolonised relationships in teaching and learning, which helps to simultaneously dismantle coloniality of power and knowledge. The ways in which power relations could be improved between academics and students were proposed as follows:

> *We should be ready to disrupt the master-servant dichotomy in our online teaching and research supervision by centring student engagements (Jeanett).*
>
> *There is need to ask myself if I accommodate students as my partners in engagements with them. I should allow spaces for students to frame their research on relevant non-Western theoretical frameworks (Thuli).*
>
> *When I allow students to frame their research on African philosophical underpinnings, I empower them (Marylin).*

The comments from Jeanett, Thuli and Marylin above are in tandem with studies by Jackson (2016), Martinez-Vergas (2020) and Nyamnjoh (2016) which advocate for collegiality and unity among students and academics in universities. At the ODeL institution where the study was conducted, positive relationships between supervisors and students were promoted through online platforms, discussion forums and closed Facebook groups; virtual communities of students and staff where the students shared, learnt and discussed their problems in their research journeys (Letseka *et al*., 2018; Manyike, 2017; Setlhodi, 2021). However, other studies confirm that supervisors and students usually bring different expectations to the supervision relationship which may create conflict, especially if the supervisor clings on to old Eurocentric views of decontextualising students as tabula rasa in the teaching- learning setting instead of promoting them as co- creators of the knowledge (Heeralal, 2015; Manyike 2017). We concur that facilitation of learning through online engagements which includes students and their supervisors as partners in the learning processes is testament to bridging the gap in access and promoting unity between students and their research supervisors (Setlhodi, 2021; Mendy and Madiope, 2020). However, we underscore the hardships encountered by students who learn through ODeL (Manyike, 2017; Manathunga, 2012), especially where socio-economic factors prevent students from less resourced backgrounds from purchasing ICT gadgets and accessing the internet.

The disruption of the Western myth of positioning the supervisor as the 'all-knower' in research supervision discourse facilitates the reawakening of those who still hold on to dominant Eurocentric ways so that they could be accorded an opportunity to reflect upon and grasp what it is like to be regarded as a 'non- knower' in the learning processes, which in turn, would promote the relinquishing of unnecessary power on the part of communities of postgraduate research supervisors. We therefore advocate for ontological and epistemological frameworks which serve to bring in social justice in teaching and learning. We also contend that postgraduate student supervision could be a means to understand students who grapple with theories and epistemologies foreign to their cultural orientations (Msila and Gumbo, 2016). Whenever possible and reasonable, the use of global South theoretical/philosophical orientations could be appreciated as an endeavour to make the pedagogical practices better for both students and their supervisors. We now turn to theorising the findings.

Returning to Social Justice…

In order for us to achieve Fraser's participatory parity in the ODeL public university in South Africa, we need to do three things. Firstly, we need to trouble the unequal, colonising power relations between students and academics. These unequal power relations socially construct and produce the misframing and misrecognition of students as non-beings who ought to be passive consumers of curriculum knowledge in the academy. In this (colonial) moment, students are not recognised as valued and legitimate beings, what the late anticolonial thinker Aime Cesaire (1955) had called the *"thingi-fication"* of Black people. Often hidden in social justice thinking, the thingi-fication of students results in the control and knowledge capture of what counts as valid and legitimate knowledge in the university. Fraser's (2009) idea of participatory parity plays a relevant role in this context as it provides opportunities for both

the academics and students to act as social actors who should "participate as equal peers" (Khan, 2022: 2) in the teaching, learning and supervision engagements.

Secondly, achieving participatory parity ought to be an existential and dialectical process, one rooted in academics who reflect on how they continue to produce, reproduce and maintain coloniality, leading to their mapping of a feasible way forward to deconstruct the colonised mentalities in teaching and supervision. As the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall students correctly diagnosed, academics have an ethical responsibility to stand in the gap and rethink thinking itself and trouble their role in perpetuating institutional racism, oppression and marginality. Lastly, achieving parity in higher education calls for a systemic rejection of the rise of the neoliberal university in South Africa. We cannot speak or write about decolonising the university without critiquing the performance management instruments, bureaucratisation and ratings that reconstruct students as fee-paying clients and academics as service providers of education. Trapped in this public marketplace of corporate logics and colonising interests, we need to rethink the public university beyond the marketplace, towards more democratic and inclusive ideological interests.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

Post the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall protests, universities in South Africa continue to struggle to respond to the emergent calls for transformation and decolonisation. Literature discusses a plethora of academics and students' experiences and conceptions of decolonising the university emanating from historically White and historically Black and research-intensive universities. However, under-researched in the field have been the narratives of senior academics working in ODeL institutions and the complex struggles that they have to navigate in pursuit of the decolonisation agenda. In this paper, we relied on Fraser's social justice framework to attempt to theorise the complex and rich experiences of senior academics in an ODeL context in South Africa and how they appreciated the notion of decolonising the university. The need to dismantle the coloniality of being and challenge the unequal power relations between academics and students was central to the narratives of the participants. The findings revealed the need to dismantle the coloniality of being, especially amongst those who taught in the higher education sector to guarantee sustainable teaching and learning environments in which there is parity of participation for both the academics and students. If the stakeholder minds are decolonised, then third spaces are created in which both academics, lecturers; students and other stakeholders partake in the reflexive, complicated curriculum conversations which promote parity of participation to accommodate African content and knowledges as relevant and equal to the Westernised ways of knowing and knowledge sharing. Epistemic justice in teaching, learning and research in higher education could be achieved if policy makers and implementers at national and institutional levels, both at ODeL and other universities in South Africa and the global South in general, progressively design and deliver university curricula centred on local content and pedagogical methods alongside any other relevant knowledge systems.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary scope: The article demonstrates an interdisciplinary scope by integrating insights from decoloniality, educational research and social justice perspectives to analyse the voices of senior academics on decolonising the university curriculum in an e-learning institution in South Africa.

Author Contributions: Conseptualisation (Munyaradzi and Hlatshwayo); literature review (Munyaradzi and Hlatshwayo); methodology (Munyaradzi and Hlatshwayo); analysis (Munyaradzi and Hlatshwayo); investigation (Munyaradzi and Hlatshwayo): drafting and preparation (Munyaradzi and Hlatshwayo); review and editing (Munyaradzi and Hlatshwayo). All authors have read and approved the published version of article.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding: The authors did not receive financial support for the publication.

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