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Systemic decolonisation needs a pan-African approach

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 25 August 2022

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Mounting pressure for the decolonisation of higher education presents progressive opportunities for epistemic freedom and the emergence of universities that are authentic African universities, according to Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the chair in epistemologies of the Global South at the University of Bayreuth, Germany.

As part of the decolonisation process, he says, universities in Africa must enable their students to think for themselves in order to foster relevant knowledge and counter the widespread alienation and mental harm that stalk higher education on the continent.

To this end, a comprehensive review of what constitutes knowledge as this is taught and produced at universities should be undertaken, with particular reference to whether present ways of knowing are fit for purpose in addressing current challenges, he says.

Thus, Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues, “decolonisation would no longer represent a romantic nationalistic project but rather a set of practical actions with the goal of updating the approach to knowledge at a global level so that humanity can move forward”.

He identifies an activist role for himself in implementing this plan of action as part of a growing international network of “like-minded thinkers [seeking] to push forward the agenda of epistemological decolonisation”.

In his own academic practice, he says that he is seeking to “liberate” the field of African Studies from “colonial matrices of power”.

More broadly, he argues that “as the pressure for decolonisation mounts, Africans no longer need to be ashamed of who they are; and the university needs to reflect this”.

“[The university in Africa] should become a public good by serving Africans instead of taking us from our own histories, our own cultures and our own languages into somewhere else, a European space,” he says.

The alternative, he notes, is the continued pursuit of a colonial agenda for knowledge which has historically left African scholars bereft in the “academic or intellectual limbo of a constant search for identity and selfhood”.

Acknowledging different knowledge systems

Accordingly, Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues, “we should open up these spaces and make a case for their transformation – for our own good and for our own sanity”.

“At present, the onus is on the students to adapt to an alien system of higher education, rather than on the universities to meet the students’ needs,” he says.

“Rather than questioning the competency of the students, the teachers should question the content of their lessons.”

He decries what he sees as the irrelevance of some of what is taught: “... the broader issue of the inaccessibility of much of the content in some of the disciplines, such as accountancy, remains unaddressed.

“My response to this is to ask: If the content of a particular course is above everyone’s heads, then what is its purpose?”

And his view is that it is those who are the experts in their disciplines who have the responsibility for transforming the content of the curriculum, according to the standard of “relevance”.

“The point is that the experts in each discipline must seek to change the content of their curriculum so that it is relevant to the students. The examples and case studies need to be made accessible – they need to be relevant to the lived experiences of the students so that they can relate to them.”

Ndlovu-Gatsheni sees this concern as part of a larger problem of epistemic justice, stemming from the ways in which the higher education system on the continent has historically been shaped by colonial interests and, more recently, by neoliberal priorities.

“The processes of colonisation and neoliberalism resulted in the delegitimisation of other ways of knowing and other knowledge systems in order to disempower local people and in order to reproduce Africans as labourers,” he says.

“This process of delegitimisation was also accompanied by the theft of local knowledges which were then presented as aspects of the new, dominant knowledge system – as if these knowledges were an

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endogenous creation of civilisations and, therefore, a gift to the rest of the world population from Europeans and North Americans.”

In this context, Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that an important starting point in the quest for epistemic freedom is to oppose the idea that European knowledge is more absolute than other ways of knowing.

“In this regard, the terms of the debate seem to be that there are those academics who engage in objective non-political, non-situated, truthful, universal knowledge, and others who are caricatured as political, ideological and subjective in their thinking.

“Instead, it should be acknowledged that all knowledges are indigenous to somewhere,” he says.

“There is no single knowledge which is universal, while all the others are indigenous and local. In this regard, all humans are born into a particular valid and legitimate knowledge system.”

Knowledge for local understanding

Under this approach, Ndlovu-Gatsheni advises that the platform for pedagogy should be indigenous knowledge.

“Effective teaching should always move from the known to the unknown – from local or indigenous knowledge, which is the known, into other epistemes such as the European, which can be of significant use as long as it doesn’t displace local ways of knowing.”

In terms of knowledge production, the goal should be to strengthen local understanding rather than merely to valorise it.

“Indigenous knowledge should be seen as a point of departure and return – not as an end in itself, but as a site that can be replenished and made more effective,” he says.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni says the key to promoting this approach is for Africans “to take ourselves seriously”.

For the higher education institutions on the continent, this entails paying due regard to their national contexts. “Unless the institutions take seriously where they are located on the African continent, they cannot be considered ‘African universities’,” he says.

Similarly, he stresses that the curricula at these institutions need to be informed by “the concerns of the continent rather than intellectual fads”.

In relation to his own work on the epistemologies of the Global South, the drive for substantive change expresses itself in addressing the dominance of Eurocentric thought at many African Studies centres in Europe, under which “Africa is viewed as little more than a field of research, a kind of living laboratory”.

“My [aim] is to ensure that the work of Africa-based scholars is taken seriously and placed at the centre of African Studies.”

In this regard, Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that universities in Africa, which sit at the frontier between African and European thought, have a unique opportunity to be extremely agile – more so even than the universities in Europe which are bound by Eurocentric thinking.

“Being at the border, which they were pushed into, they can take advantage of their situation and produce what decolonial thinkers refer to as ‘border gnosis,’” he says.

He notes that South Africa, in particular, is well placed in this regard, given the presence of a large number of academics from other African countries at its universities who can share the benefits of their experience and understanding of the challenges facing the continent.

However, he fears that parochial issues are preventing such knowledge from flourishing on the continent, with the unfortunate outcome that the interests of the Global North are being served instead.

“Europe and North America are harvesting academics and intellectuals from Africa while, in Africa, we are degenerating into nativism and xenophobia to close each other out,” he says.

Decolonisation as a pan-African project

Against this background, Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues for an African university that is “solidly anchored in the African context and advances the African agendas of liberation, development and epistemic freedom”.

In this regard, he advises that there are a number of “competing visions” for the development of universities in Africa. These include “the colonial vision of civilising which is resilient and can come in many guises, including its emphasis on excellence and standards ... [which hides] dangerous colonial matrices of power, imperial designs and racial capitalist cognitive interests.

“Then there is the elitist vision, under which the university is only meant to cater to the elite, the talented 10% of the population.

“There is the African nationalist vision of a developmental university ... [which] can be problematic, given that many states are quite uncritical of their own drives to modernisation which can be shaped by neoliberalism.

“Then there is the resilient and popular vision, as embodied by the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements, which call for universal access and more relevant institutions that are not culturally alienating and that produce knowledge in the public interest rather than as a commodified product.”

A key issue for Ndlovu-Gatsheni is epistemic freedom and the need for

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local anchorage. This requires that local languages be taken seriously as languages of research, teaching and learning, and that disciplinary knowledges and curricula be revised and decolonised.

At the same time, he is wary of institution-specific initiatives and notes that, in the absence of change across the system, “the response of universities seeking transformation can only ever be reactionary – responding to the challenges in an *ad hoc* fashion, and seeking to pacify students in the meantime”.

The promotion of a piecemeal approach is also fundamentally insincere, he says.

In this context, he fears that “South Africa might have missed a great opportunity to leverage the momentum created under the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements to ask the bigger questions and identify what is fundamentally wrong with the country’s higher education system”.

He advocates for the importance of systemic rather than institutional decolonisation of the continent’s universities. “The epistemic revolution envisaged by decolonisation is not the kind of change that can be produced by two people sitting under a tree; it requires a national dialogue that should be conducted for the good of the country, the continent and the world.”

Strategically, Ndlovu-Gatsheni advises that decolonisation may be most effectively implemented by adopting a pan-African approach.

“I would advocate a return to the methods used in the 20th century, that is, to the establishment of regional and continental decolonial projects building on national decolonial initiatives,” he says.

This article is based on an interview conducted by Professor Lebo Moletsane for ‘The Imprint of Education’ project, which is being implemented by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. This project, which includes a series of critical engagements with experienced scholars and thought leaders on their reimaginings of higher education in Africa, investigates current and future challenges facing the sector, including best practices and innovations. Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher edited the transcript for focus and length.

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