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# Decolonising initial teacher education in South African universities: More than an event

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## Abstract

Calls for the decolonisation of university curricula have been central to the demands of the South African student movements since they first gained prominence during 2015. In this paper, we examine this debate by examining teacher education at universities as a way of understanding what future school teachers are exposed to and consequently learners. Defining decolonisation as a process of expanding imaginations, and drawing on a metaanalysis of teacher education curricula, and interviews with teacher education lecturers, at five South African universities, the paper examines the kinds of intellectuals and intellectual debates to which student teachers are being exposed, how teacher educators understand the factors underlying their curriculum decisions, and the broader institutional and policy dynamics that impact on efforts to rethink curricula.

## Introduction

There is a debate unfolding globally, and in South Africa in particular, about what universities teach and whether their curricula are relevant to today's students. Students in South Africa have recently re-energised this debate through collective political action across the country, organising initially around decolonising university curricula and academic culture, thereafter calling for the in-sourcing of workers, and subsequently demanding free university education and an end to a rape culture at the institutions (Naicker,

2016). In this paper we mainly focus on issues of curriculum as it relates to teacher education.<sup>1</sup>

Decolonisation of academic curricula has been a key aspect of student demands and other sectors including academics. For example, the UCT RhodesMustFall manifesto, for instance, asserts that one of its long-term goals is to “[i]mplement a curriculum which critically centres Africa and the subaltern. By this we mean treating African discourses as the point of departure – through addressing not only content, but languages and methodologies of education and learning – and only examining western traditions in so far as they are relevant to our own experience” (UCT RhodesMustFall, 2015, p.8).

This critical approach to ‘western traditions’ – here understood to refer especially, although not exclusively so, to the kinds of theoretical and empirical scholarship dominant in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom – and for an African-centred academic curriculum is said to be rooted in a particular understanding of colonial education, characterised as one in which “[t]o be a radical African intellectual[,] is to challenge, on fundamentally personal, institutional and societal levels, this form of alienation that colonial education encourages” (Gamedze and Gamedze, 2015, p.1). As Mafeje has argued, “[t]o evolve lasting meanings . . . we must be ‘rooted’ in something” (Mafeje, 2000, p.66), and that ‘something’ is specifically African conditions, discourses and experiences.

For the moment, student movements and others have been more concerned about calling for decolonisation, and experimenting with different ways of thinking and organising, than about prescribing the particular shape that decolonised curricula should take. In this regard, Naidoo (2016) characterises the student movements as “. . . clarifying the untenable status

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<sup>1</sup> While the relationship between these various demands is subject to internal contestation and debate, it is argued that they are different aspects of colonial institutions (see, for instance, the mission statement of RhodesMustFall, 2015). They claim that settler colonialism relied on and strengthened specific forms of racialised patriarchy; that it sought to define access to the public sphere on racial and gender terms; that it relied on the exploitation of black workers; and that the knowledges that it produced were raced and gendered in particular ways. Consequently, issues such as sexual violence, worker rights and the marketisation of public goods are unified under the conceptual rubric of decolonisation. This paper, however, focuses on only one of these issues: the curriculum as it relates to teacher education in university settings.

quo of the present by forcing an awareness of a time when things are not this way. They have seen things many have yet to see. They have been experimenting with hallucinating a new time.” In this sense, the call to decolonise the curriculum can be understood as a challenge to give expression to an imaginary beyond existing thought and institutions that have become normalised as unchanging and unchangeable.

Scholars (Mama, 2015; Pillay, 2015) have emphasised that South Africa’s intellectual community is beginning a conversation that others have been having for a long time, stretching from Edward Blyden in Liberia in the nineteenth century (Blyden, 1872) to intellectuals’ struggles in the postindependence years at African universities such as Cheikh Anta Diop (Bathily, Diouf and Mbodj, 1995), Ahmadu Bello (Mustapha, 1995), Ibadan (Ake, 1982), Dar es Salaam (Shivji, 1993) and Makerere (Mamdani, 1990). These conversations teach us that there are different ideas of what decolonisation means, in part because there are different historical and institutional contexts with different intellectual actors at work. The meaning of decolonisation therefore cannot be taken for granted, but must instead be subject to public deliberation and reflection.

This paper, drawing on the student movements’ intellectual work, offers one such reflection: decolonisation is here characterised as a process of expanding imaginations. Among other things, this involves rethinking what counts as relevant and rigorous scholarship. First, there is scientometric evidence that suggest that the rules of scholastic excellence are inherently biased along the lines of race and gender (Milkman, Akinola and Chugh, 2012), language (González-Alcaide, Valderrama-Zurián and Aleixandre-Benavent, 2012) and geographic location (Mazlounian, Helbing, Lozano, Light, and Börner, 2012). Reworking these rules is therefore not only a question of “epistemic justice” (Fricker, 2007), but also a question of improving scholastic excellence. Second, there is compelling historical evidence of the ways in which colonial regimes and post-independence developments, such as structural adjustment programmes, have acted to limit the knowledge contributions of Africans (Diouf and Mamdani, 1994; Zeleza and Olukoshi, 2004; Mkandwire, 2005; Tilley, 2011). It is therefore important for Africans, and South Africans, to cultivate the capacity to theorise their own conditions. This implies a concomitant responsibility to pay careful empirical attention to lived realities and the multiple histories underlying them (Mafeje, 1971), although the focus of this paper is on knowledge and the curriculum. Third, there is bibliometric evidence that the South African intellectual community is

often isolated from broader intellectual currents on the rest of the continent and across the global South more generally (Schubert and Sooryamoorthy, 2010; Boshoff, 2010). There is thus clearly much to be gained from expanding our intellectual horizons beyond the narrow confines of South Africa (see, for instance, Amin, 1988; Hountondji, 1990; Imam and Mama, 1994; Sow, 1997; Mamdani, 1998; wa Thiong'o, 2005; Nyamnjuh, Nkwi and Konings, 2012; Mama, 2015; Mbembe, 2015; Pillay, 2015; Diagne, 2016; Bwa Mwesigire, 2016). Our starting point in this paper is to acknowledge our relative ignorance of these debates from which our country has been isolated for so long, without over-specifying a concept that requires extensive contextualisation and public deliberation.

One implication of this conceptualisation of decolonisation is that we also need to consider the silences in current discourses, particularly the silence about teacher education at universities and their role in decolonising schools.<sup>2</sup> As Mamdani (2007, p.213) argues:

Higher education is where teachers are trained and curricula developed. Without research in higher education to develop curricula for the entire system of education, all curricula will be as an off-the-shelf imported facility, with little relevance to the lived circumstances of both student and society. If our object is to transform general education, we need to begin with higher education. Higher education is the strategic heart – indeed head – of education.

To reflect on decolonisation in part requires breaking the silence about teacher education, and asking: what does it mean to decolonise the curriculum as it relates to initial teacher education, and what sort of processes will this require? This also provides a way of thinking about education as a unified system, since teacher education links schools and universities together.

The paper is divided into four main sections. The first section outlines the methodology of the study. The second section presents the results from a meta-analysis of teacher education curricula at five South African universities, concentrating on the kinds of intellectuals and intellectual debates to which student teachers are being exposed. The third section draws

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<sup>2</sup> Student movements have paid little attention to the link between basic and higher education through attempts to understand initial teacher education preparation programmes offered by higher education institutions. For instance, the special edition of the *Johannesburg Salon* devoted to the UCT RhodesMustFall campaign makes no reference to teachers and teacher education, and mentions schools just ten times in a document of 222 pages (Rhodes Must Fall, 2015).

on interviews with teacher educators at these universities and explores how they understand the factors underlying their curriculum decisions. The fourth section considers the institutional and policy dynamics that enable and constrain lecturers' approaches to the curriculum. The final section concludes the paper by considering emerging issues and debates that warrant further reflection.

## Methodology

The meta-analysis on which this paper draws was conducted in 2016 at five selected universities. They were comprised of two historically black universities, two historically white universities, and one university that merged to combine these two institutional types. Of these five universities, two of them are in the Eastern Cape, and three are in the Western Cape. The meta-analysis provides a snapshot of the curricula for final-year initial teacher education students in the year following the rise of the South African student movements and the call for the decolonisation of university curricula. The timing of the meta-analysis was deliberate, in that it sought to explore the extent to which the intellectual demands of students might be reflected in teacher education curricula. The term 'curriculum' is here narrowly understood to refer to the written literature and topics that lecturers formally cover in their modules, and in this instance the core modules for the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) and the Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree. These modules invariably include educational theory, philosophy and sociology as well as other 'foundations of education' such as history of education and educational psychology. We selected these modules as they are core modules which all students enrolled in a teacher education programme are expected to take and are regarded as foundational modules for teachers in training. The selection of the institutions and courses therefore enables us to illuminate and explore the intellectual content and debates that student teachers are exposed to. As such, they provide markers about what decolonisation of the curriculum of higher education might entail.

Bibliographic data from reading lists and course outlines for each module was coded with the following information: the biographical profiles of authors (institutional affiliation, gender and race, with 'black' coded as encompassing the apartheid categories of 'African', 'coloured' and 'Indian'); publication details of texts (publisher, year and place of publication); text types

(academic, government or popular); and text formats (book, journal article, textbook, report, working paper, newspaper article or website); and key words were generated from the titles of each text as well as from the topics in each course outline. Semi-structured interviews with teacher education lecturers (including one black female, two black males, one white female and one white male) then explored lecturers' understandings of various factors – from their personal intellectual backgrounds through their institutional contexts to national policy requirements – that influence their curriculum decisions. There are several limitations to this exploratory study. First, it is restricted to just five universities in two provinces in South Africa. Second, it considers only the core modules in the initial teacher education programmes and not these programmes in their entirety. It also does not reflect on students' extracurricular readings, their engagements with their lecturers, or lecturers' teaching approaches in the classroom. Third, the interview sample is limited to a purposive selection of lecturers at only three of the five institutions. This study therefore does not aim to provide generalisable findings. Instead, it explores how tensions and contradictions in current curricula speak back to the demands of the student movements, and how lecturers make curriculum decisions within complex and changing institutional contexts.

## Intellectual trends in the curricula

This section explores the kinds of intellectuals and intellectual debates to which student teachers are introduced, and the ways in which teacher education curricula across different universities connect to intellectual thought on the African continent, thereby expanding the imaginations of student teachers.

Across the five institutions, black authors constituted a minority in teacher education curricula: out of a total of 108 authors in the database, only 18 (17%) were black while 82 (76%) were white (Figure 1). However, the number of readings varied substantially between universities (see Figure 2).

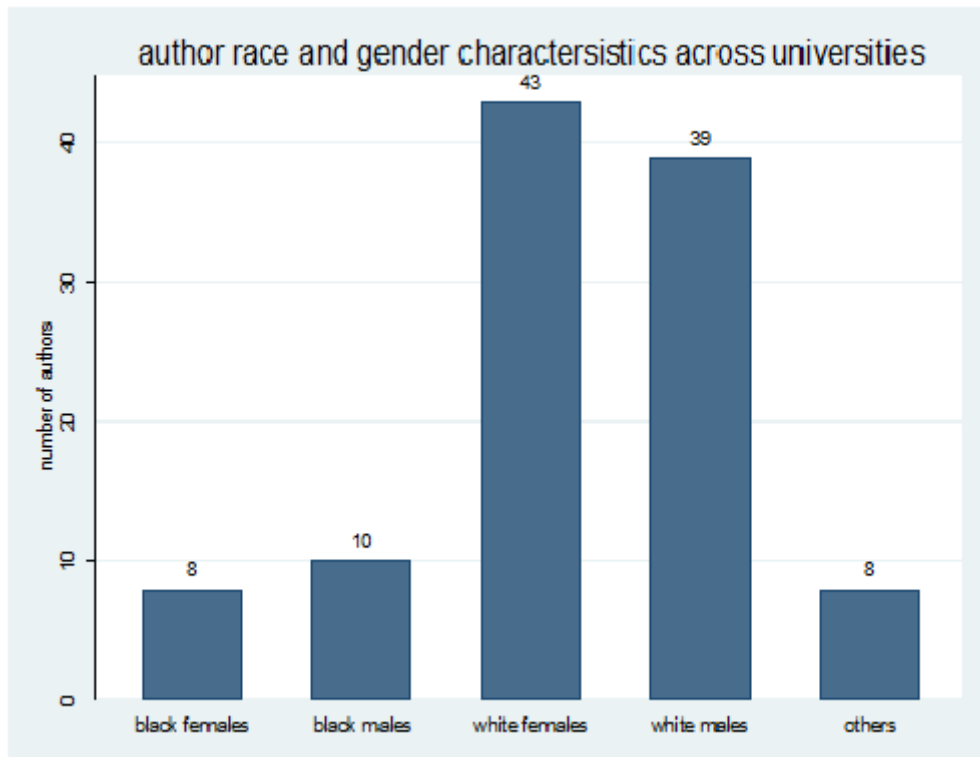


Figure 1: Author race and gender characteristics

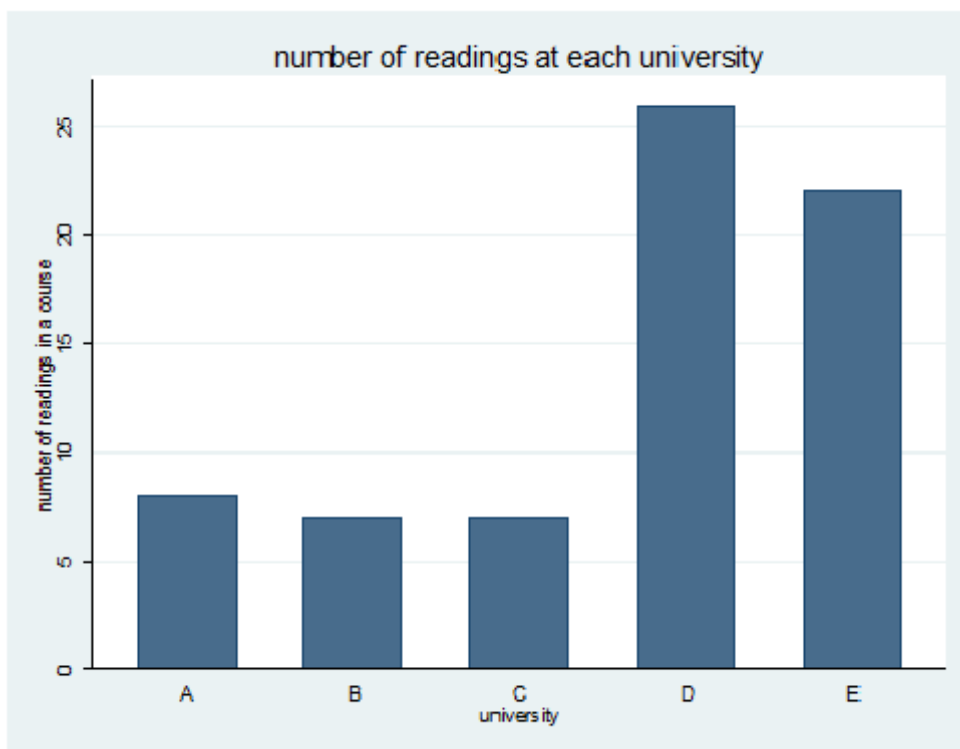


Figure 2: Number of readings at each university



Thus, in order to provide a common basis of comparison, author profiles were normalised by considering their percentage contributions to the total number of readings for each module, as shown in Figure 3. While black authors were a minority across programmes, there were important differences across institutional types. At historically black universities, black female authors and white male authors contributed equally to the readings (33% each), followed by white female authors (25%) and black male authors (8%). At historically white universities, white male authors make the largest contribution (49%), followed by white female authors (24%) and black male authors (8%). At the university that had merged, the majority of authors were white females (53%), followed by white males (29%); black female and male authors each contributed only a small amount (5% each).

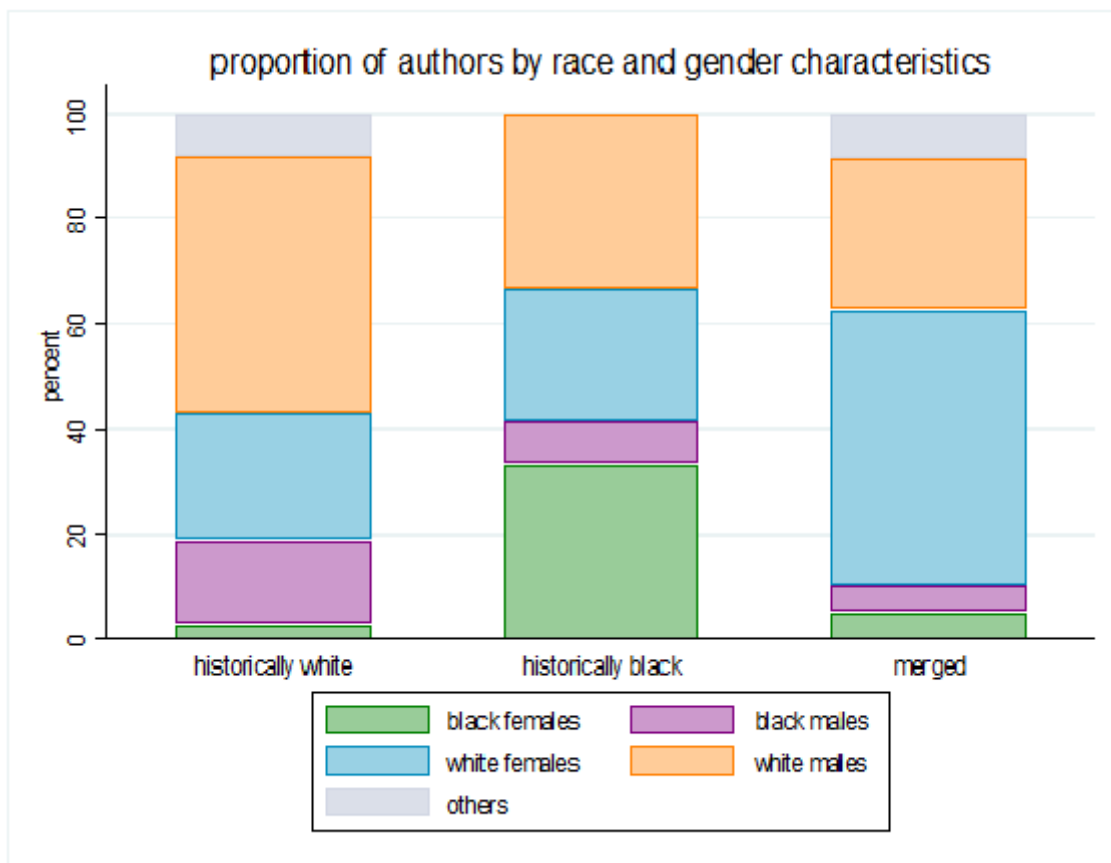


Figure 3: Proportion of authors by race and gender across university types

**Table 1: Frequency of appearance of first names of authors**

Expression	Expression count	Frequency
Sally	3	3.1%
Pete	3	3.1%
Richard	3	3.1%
Donald	3	3.1%
John	3	3.1%
Emmarentia	3	3.1%
Norma	2	2.1%
Linda	2	2.1%
Deidre	2	2.1%
Sindiswa	2	2.1%
Jonathan	2	2.1%
David	2	2.1%
Sue	2	2.1%
Maurianne	2	2.1%
Paolo	2	2.1%

The bibliographic data also reflects a specific geographic pattern. Figure 4 summarises the geographic locations of authors, as indicated by their institutional affiliations. Across sampled universities, there was a strong emphasis on authors based at South African institutions. At historically black universities, over 90% of authors were based in South Africa, while at historically white universities and at the merged university, nearly 60% of authors were based in South Africa. There were few authors from other African countries amongst the curricula of historically white universities, while they contributed only 9% at historically black universities and just over 3% at the merged institution. Authors from South America and Asia were almost wholly absent from the five universities' curricula. In contrast, authors based in western countries contributed just over 40% of the written material at historically white and merged universities, but were completely absent from historically black universities.

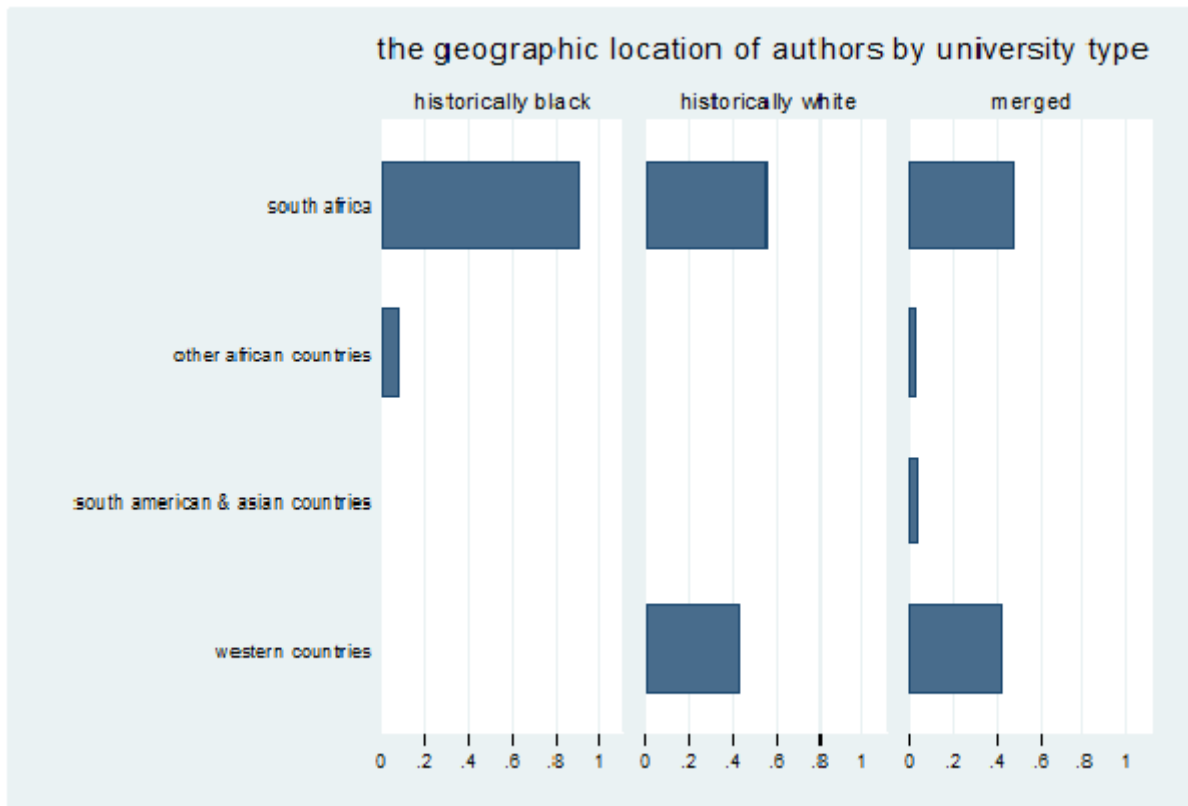


Figure 4: Geographic locations of authors by university type

The presence or absence of authors in the curricula suggests a particular ‘geography of reason’ (Gordon, 2011) centred, in this instance, primarily in South Africa and to a lesser extent in western countries. In turn this indicates that students are mostly isolated from intellectual debates in African scholarship and across the global South more generally, despite the fact that countries in these regions typically share certain experiences of colonisation and education characteristics (Tabulawa, 2013). These countries include several with much higher research productivity than that of South Africa (Jeenah and Pouris, 2008), which shows that an absence of scholarship or its lack of relevance does not explain why scholarship from these regions seems to be omitted from South African university curricula.

In addition to a ‘geography of reason’, the bibliographic data reveals a ‘time of reason’. Figure 5 indicates the distribution of authors over time.

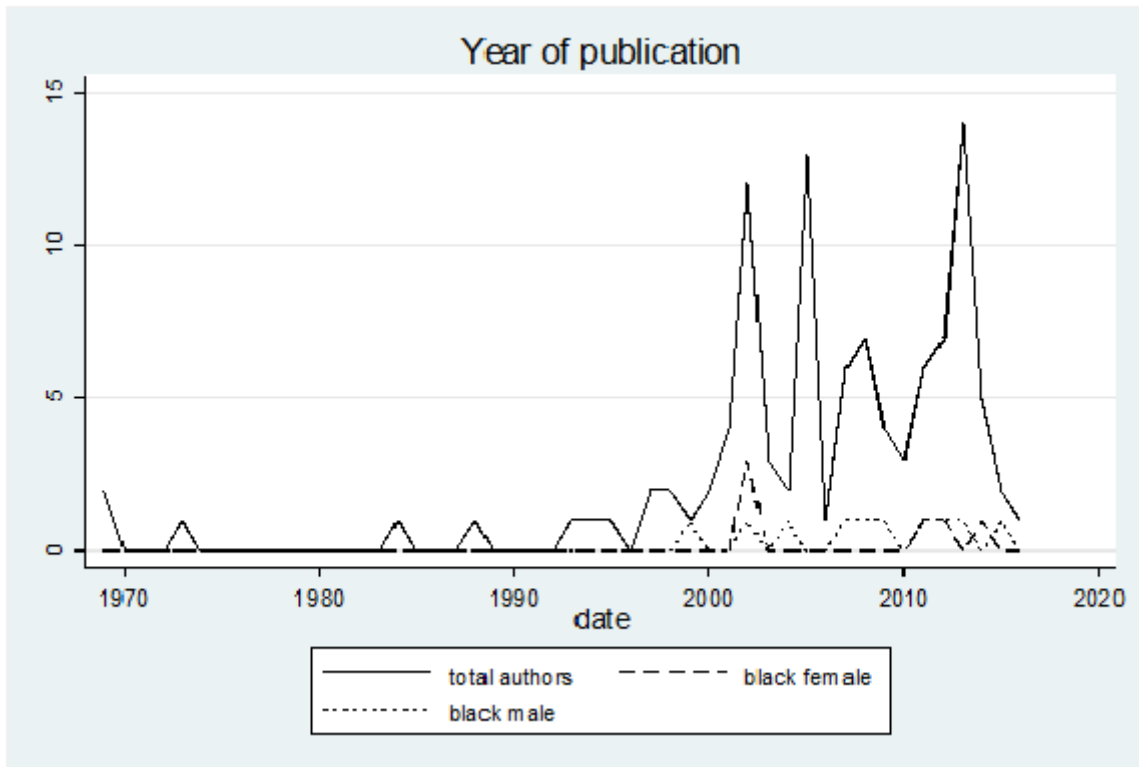


Figure 5: Distribution of authors by year of publication

There is a strong emphasis on the present and immediate past, with the majority of texts cited having been published between 2010 and 2014. The earliest text cited was one published in 1969; the earliest black male author to be cited was published in 1999, and the earliest black female author in 2003. Yet African intellectual history and written records, let alone those of the global North, stretch back at least a millennium in Islamic Africa and the horn of Africa (Diagne, 2016), and even within southern Africa there is a substantial written archive of intellectual work on the histories and roles of different education systems stemming from the mid-nineteenth century (Ndletyana, 2008).

A content analysis of article titles and course topics reveals a similar trend. The word ‘Africa’, for instance, always appeared in the term “South Africa”, with just one exception. No reference was made to other countries in Africa or the global South (see Tables 2a and 2b). Moreover, Socrates and, to a lesser extent, Paulo Freire, were the intellectuals most often referred to; there was no reference in article titles or course topics to any African intellectuals.

**Table 2a: Frequency of words in article titles**

<b>Word</b>	<b>Occurrences</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Africa	12	3.3%	1
South	11	3%	2
Education	11	3%	2
Teaching	10	2.7%	3
Learning	9	2.4%	4
Pedagogy	8	2.2%	5
Educational	7	1.9%	6
Social	7	1.9%	6
Socratic	6	1.6%	7
Context	5	1.4%	8

**Table 2b: Frequency of two-word phrases in article titles**

Expression	Expression count	Frequency	Prominence
South Africa	11	1.52.10%	44.9
In south	6	1.2%	24.7
Teaching and	5	1%	70.4
Educational psychology	4	0.8%	50
Pedagogy of	4	0.8%	74
Learning a	4	0.8%	89.4
Education in	3	0.6%	47.5
In secondary	3	0.6%	58.5
Southern Africa	3	0.6%	64.2
In southern	3	0.6%	64.4
Applications in	3	0.6%	64.6
Ecosystemic applications	3	0.6%	64.8
Context ecosystemic	3	0.6%	65
Social context	3	0.6%	65.2
In social	3	0.6%	65.4
Psychology in	3	0.6%	65.6
And learning	3	0.6%	74.2
Africa perspective	3	0.6%	93.2
A south	3	0.6%	93.6
To learning	3	0.6%	94
Barriers to	3	0.6%	94.2
Addressing barriers	3	0.6%	94.4
Africa	2	0.4%	11.1
And practice	2	0.4%	25.7
Socratic pedagogy	2	0.4%	33.8
Matric results	2	0.4%	34.1
Education the	2	0.4%	36.4
Educational	2	0.4%	52.3
Secondary schools	2	0.4%	56.2
Teaching in	2	0.4%	59.4
Of education	2	0.4%	60.5
And social	2	0.4%	66.1
Diversity and	2	0.4%	66.3
For diversity	2	0.4%	34.1
Reflective teaching	2	0.4%	36.4
Critical pedagogy	2	0.4%	52.3
Secondary schools	2	0.4%	56.2

Teaching in	2	0.4%	59.4
Of education	2	0.4%	60.5
And social	2	0.4%	66.1
Diversity and	2	0.4%	66.3
For diversity	2	0.4%	66.5
Reflective teaching	2	0.4%	67.3
Critical pedagogy	2	0.4%	67.9
Paulo Freire	2	0.4%	72.5
Learning in	2	0.4%	72.8
Teaching for	2	0.4%	75.4
Social justice	2	0.4%	75.7
Edition addressing	2	0.4%	94

While the content analysis suggests that considerable attention is paid to the history of apartheid, across sampled universities there seems to be limited coverage of the colonial and missionary roots of the education system, let alone of other kinds of education systems such as initiation schools (Matoba, Makatsa and Obioha, 2009), Islamic schools (Chohan, 1988) and schools started by the descendants of slaves (Williams, 2016). Nevertheless, at one university a week is set aside for oral discussion of indigenous knowledge systems (although no references are provided for this), and at a second university a week is set aside for discussions of the relationship between the philosophy of ubuntu and that of existentialism. This suggests a (very) slowly expanding imagination of what counts as important intellectual work.

The analysis reveals that there is a strong emphasis on authors based at South African institutions in the sample. One might argue that this is an example of decolonisation already at work, since student teachers are exposed to local authors who reference local issues and contexts. However, we contend, a focus on local authors to the *exclusion* of authors from the rest of Africa and the global South may reinforce a kind of parochialism that reinscribes apartheid narratives of South African exceptionalism. This is because the omission of intellectual work north of the Limpopo implies a history of education and intellectual work that seems to begin and end with South Africa, so that African knowledge appears as though it is exhausted in the South African narrative, or that South Africa is located outside of Africa. Furthermore, this is a parochialism not only of place, but also of time, since student teachers' exposure to intellectual debates is limited to discussions of the present and very recent past. This suggests that Africans' intellectual

capacities are dependent on the colonial encounter, so that colonialism appears not only as though it is the pivot upon which history turns, as Mamdani (1998) suggests, but also as though it is the point at which Africans become thinkers and teachers .

Such parochialism is, as Pillay (2015) argues, a defining character of settler colonialism in general, and apartheid in particular, since it equips “us excellently to be ignorant of most of the world and arrogant about our ignorance.” The practical consequence of such parochialism is that there is little scope for students to pose, in an informed way, questions such as: *How do education systems in other African countries operate? What can we learn from other education systems in the global South? Or, how have different African intellectuals conceptualised their schooling systems in relation to pre-existing forms of education, and how has this changed over time?* By narrowing the questions that student teachers can ask in an informed way, the curriculum limits student teachers’ ability to expand their imaginations beyond the conceptual boundaries that colonialism has normalised into a form of common sense. This in turn limits their future capacity as teachers to influence the bodies of knowledge and imaginaries to which South African children are exposed (Sayed and Novelli, 2016).

## Lecturers’ curriculum approaches and understandings

This section focuses on lecturers’ own education histories, their different conceptualisations of what it means to decolonise the curriculum and their understandings of the expectations of learners relative to the demands of the university. Lecturers’ curriculum decisions are arguably shaped in part by their own intellectual biographies, and much of this is a product of their own higher education, which plays a strong role in moulding their intellectual outlooks and the bodies of knowledge with which they are most familiar. However, the influence of one’s intellectual community is not always direct or obvious. As one interviewee pointed out, when he moved to South Africa to pursue his doctoral studies he was exposed to a university that is

a centre of western knowledge in an African context. There’s nothing really speaking about the African heritage, unless you go to a small unit in the library on African academic material, where people who really write from an African perspective – many of them . . . are white people who have steeped themselves in African thought, they have studied African philosophies, African knowledge forms, and they have something to say about it . . . [That



got me thinking] why don't we have more of that kind of ethos in our faculty of education? (Lecturer C2, 2016).

In this sense, the influence was one of critique, of thinking about how not to do things. For another interviewee, his influences were those that were considered subversive when he was a graduate student, although they may have now become more mainstream. He explained:

My main interest, and it has remained my main interest, has been unequal performance. And that's the way in fact I shape these sociology courses – how do we explain these differences between groups of kids – the black-white scenario here, in other countries the class scenario. And at that time in the late '80s the neo-Marxists had finally reached South Africa. I say that jestingly, but up until 1994, anything with the word 'Marxist' in it was banned. You simply weren't allowed to read, teach, do anything with it. Maybe belatedly, but people I worked with then, and in a more contemporary way still do, would be neo-Marxist theories about educational reproduction . . . So what I try to do is take [students] back to the classics, and . . . obviously we've moved on and taken them to the more contemporary interpretations, but [still] to say, 'in order to understand x you need to begin with y' . . . so my theorists [are] kind of post-Bowles and Gintis, post-Althusser, post-Bourdieu ... But overarchingly, I run a functionalist story (Lecturer B2, 2016).

In some instances, the influence of particular theorists was strong enough for interviewees to cast their identity in terms of their theories. Thus one interviewee described himself by saying,

Broadly speaking, I'm a social constructivist . . . So . . . Freire, and some of the other traditional psychologists, such as Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, those kinds of guys. But I am also a bit pragmatic, and to a certain extent, eclectic, because I think one can learn from a wide array of theories. But essentially I'm a constructivist (Lecturer E5, 2016).

The notion of an intellectual identity was a recurring motif in lecturers' understandings of what it means to decolonise the curriculum. While there seemed to be no consensus about the details of what decolonisation entails – some emphasised the use of African languages as a medium of instruction, others emphasised a more South African focused set of references – there was a common acknowledgement amongst all interviewees that decolonisation involves a transformation of one's intellectual worldview and ways of understanding. As one interviewee argued:

So I think until maybe South Africa and other countries on the African continent and other developing parts of the world, until they start looking at themselves through a different lens, which says we are part of the world, we are different from other parts of the world, this is what we have to offer the world, this is what is unique about us, and these are the unique contributions that our cultural development, our cultural expressions, our heritage can contribute to the rest of the world, unless we do that I don't think we can seriously talk about decolonising anything (Lecturer C2, 2016).

Similarly, another interviewee argued that decolonisation involved growing self-knowledge:

decolonising means for people to begin to grasp their own identities as teachers . . . You are beginning to learn a new way of operating in the world, and it's not just about you and the classroom, it's about you and the world . . . In [that] sense . . . I'm not placed to dictate that to anybody, that you can only become as you understand who you are and to move in that space (Lecturer B2, 2016).

However, precisely because it involves fundamental questions about individuals' intellectual identities, a number of lecturers characterised the process of decolonising the curriculum as bound up in one's struggle with the self. An interviewee at a historically white university described the process as follows:

fundamentally, what would be happening is that the understanding of self as an academic is being challenged. But it is also so, I think, as you'll see in any university, a particular cadre of staff trained in a particular tradition – it's why schools are so difficult to change – trained in a particular way and you're asking them to shift completely. And for some it's very, very difficult, impossible almost, just like teachers with OBE and child-centred learning. It threatens their identity, it threatens their knowledge base, it threatens all kinds of things. So it may be a generational thing that younger academics coming in would have access to very different traditions, maybe (Lecturer B2, 2016).

What emerged powerfully from the interviews was pessimism about the dominance about western curriculum and ways of knowing . As one put it:

So the curriculum that we have is a curriculum that comes largely from the west and the knowledge forms that we use. We can't run away from that. The more globalised the world becomes the more privileged western thought becomes, western ways of knowing become. So that is what we teach, we can't run away from that (Lecturer C2, 2016).

Another interviewee described the process of decolonising the curriculum as the attempt to accommodate local understandings within an overarching western canon:

Here's a particular western traditional way of seeing things, and whether you like it or not it's a dominant, overarching hegemony of ideas. Are there ways in which we can respond to that, that derive from our own understandings of the world? (Lecturer B2, 2016).

This strong awareness of the hegemony of western knowledge often informed lecturers' understandings of decolonisation as a process of struggle, not only with the self but with one's broader historical context:

this is perhaps how I would conceptualise [decolonising the curriculum], with the Foucauldian statement that we need to recognise our historical constraints, but to work with ourselves in the recognition of how that history hinders us simultaneously (Lecturer B2, 2016).

Indeed, the notion of struggle was a central theme in the interviews. Lecturers' understandings of knowledge and their attempts to re-shape curricula in particular ways were often articulated in terms of being buffeted by multiple layers of struggle, of which struggle with the self was but one form. In this regard, one lecturer explained how even fairly 'cosmetic' changes within teacher education were strongly resisted by colleagues:

At least you have white students learning basic isiXhosa, greeting words, black students learning a bit of basic Afrikaans. But . . . it's not a big shift in thinking about knowledge, its forms and its purposes. And even those more cosmetic changes have been resisted because this country is coming out of a very complicated past and people still look at any change suspiciously. I think that goes for most of us. People are quite afraid of change and transformation. When I first arrived here there were only two other black lecturers on the whole campus, I was the third one. The faculty is becoming blacker and more coloured, and that just in itself has created some – I wouldn't want to call it animosity as such – but some suspicion and some discomfort and sort of a bad vibe . . . [it is] quite toxic . . . People are highly suspicious about where the faculty is going and what the curriculum changes and staffing changes are leading to. So within such a climate as that it becomes quite self-defeating really to expect any, to try and effect any sort of meaningful fundamental curricula changes (Lecturer C2, 2016).

Lecturers' made little mention of formal discussions about these issues within their faculties; and their reflections also took place in a context of limited engagement with the student movements with regard to decolonising the curriculum. Indeed, several argued that student teachers were reluctant to engage in student politics due to financial pressures. Furthermore, the student movements themselves were said to be unclear about the nature of their demands regarding decolonisation:

[T]he question has been asked [by academics]: what concretely could that [i.e. decolonising the curriculum] mean beyond putting a few more African writers in the reading list? [We need to try to] . . . concretise what that might mean. People are very unclear about all of that . . . The parameters have never been awfully clear, and I doubt whether they ever will be. The minute you put a parameter on it then it's: why this boundary, why not that boundary? You know how that goes. Whether that's obfuscating, or ducking and weaving, or genuine intellectual concern, it's a mixture of all of those things (Lecturer B2, 2016).

While echoing these sentiments, another interviewee pointed out that academics' own relative lack of engagement with the student movements may contribute to students' lack of understanding about the movements' goals:

“And so, maybe there’s no coherent message, and maybe it’s our fault and we should get involved more with what students are doing, I don’t know” (Lecturer E5, 2016). This lack of engagement, coupled with a sense that the movements’ goals were shifting and developing over time, perhaps help explain why no single interviewee planned to change her or his curriculum in response to student activism.

Interviewees made frequent mention of their students, their backgrounds and their investment in their teacher education programmes. For some, the issue was not principally about content or about whether African intellectuals were present in or absent from the curriculum. Instead, it was about getting their students to read academic literature and engage in independent study. One lecturer characterised it as follows:

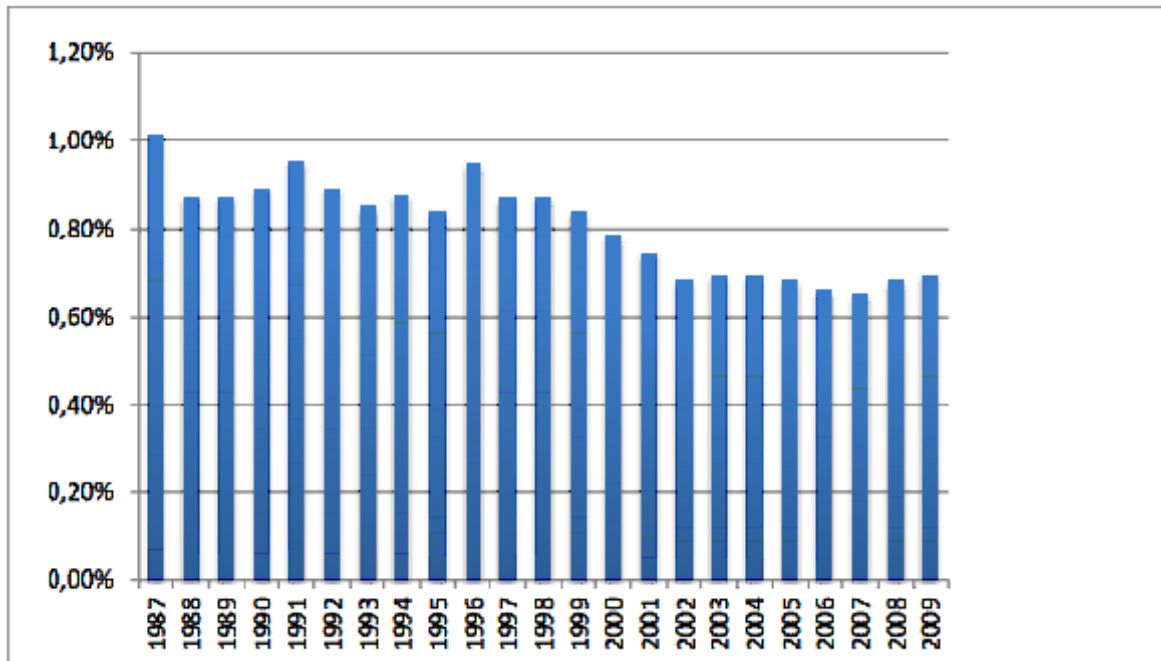
[our] students are mostly from disadvantaged backgrounds and lower middle class and working class backgrounds, so they have to work themselves. Many of them do have part-time jobs and they struggle to find time to really sit and do their own thinking, their own reflection, their own learning, which is why they pressurise us to just give them what will assist them . . . They resist even being given a list of references to follow up at the library. They want notes that have been prepared by the lecturer . . . So one has to understand that . . . probably it’s the pressure of having to work [part-time] (Lecturer C2, 2016).

The process of decolonising the curriculum thus cannot be disconnected from the intellectual frames and biographies of lecturers and their everyday struggles and concerns. While lecturers were cognisant of hegemonic forms of knowledge, the picture that emerged was one of multi-layered struggles, between lecturers and themselves, their students and hegemonic forms of knowledge, as they reflect on the nature of the theoretical knowledge canon of initial teacher education.

## The broader institutional context

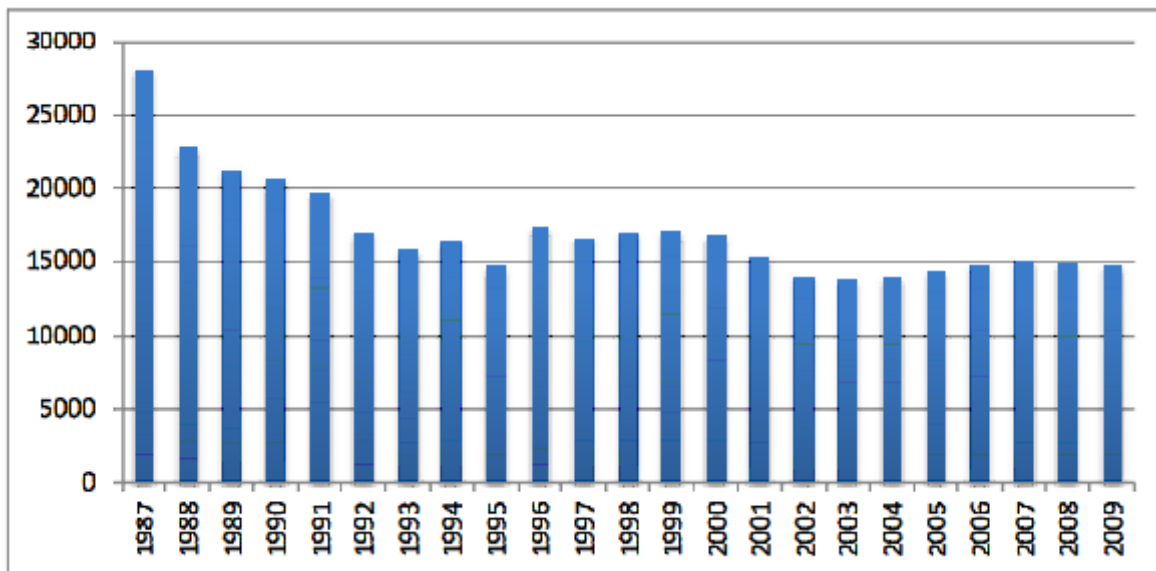
Lecturers’ abilities to rethink curricula were found in addition to be linked to their broader institutional contexts, which are marked by two features in particular: first, declining public investment in higher education, and second, a lack of coordinating mechanisms for lecturers and students collectively to think more about curricula.

Funding for higher education in South Africa has decreased steadily in real terms since 1987. Government expenditure on higher education (including now-defunct colleges of education and recently expanded Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges) decreased from just over 1% of GDP in 1987 to 0.67% of GDP in 2009 (Figure 6a). While the enrolment rate of students has been variable over this period (albeit gradually increasing over time), government expenditure per student has decreased in real terms from just over R27,000 per student in 1987 to just under R15,000 per student in 2009 (Figure 6b). A corollary of the decrease in government funding has been a substantial increase in student fees and, therefore, student indebtedness (Le Roux and Breier, 2012).



Source: Le Roux and Breier, 2012.

Figure 6a: Estimated actual government expenditure on higher education as percentage of GDP, 1987–2009.



Source: Le Roux and Breier, 2012.

Figure 6b: Government expenditure per tertiary student, in Rands, 1987–2009

This reduction in government support has been accompanied by a funding formula that inadvertently rewards historically white universities and incentivises them to focus on enrolling wealthier students from private and historically white public schools (Le Roux and Breier, 2012). This is the case for three reasons. First, a large proportion of government funding is now allocated to research outputs, which historically white universities are better placed to achieve than historically black universities, given state-mandated advantages received in the past (Habib and Morrow, 2007). Second, relative to programmes in teacher education, languages and the humanities, the funding formula allocates 3.5 times more subsidy to students who complete programmes in the physical and medical sciences and 2.5 times more subsidy to those who complete engineering and mathematics programmes (Welch and Gultig, 2002). Moreover, given a highly inequitable school sector, wealthy students who were taught at private or historically white public schools are much more likely to qualify for and complete these latter programmes (Le Roux and Breier, 2012). Whilst various efforts have been expended to equitably fund higher education, these have not, as the recent protests show, been adequate to achieve equity and redress.

Third, rising levels of student indebtedness have been accompanied by cash-strapped university efforts to exclude students or not to graduate them unless they pay outstanding fees. This means that even academically competent poor and lower-middle class black students at all institutions may be forced to exit university prematurely. However, since middle-class black students often migrate to historically white institutions, historically black universities face a funding formula that penalises them for admitting poor black students; and they also have a disproportionate number of National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)-funded students, and are therefore more financially constrained due to government underfunding (CHE, 2016). One implication of this is that while all teacher education programmes are under enormous financial pressure, those at historically black universities are under even greater pressure because their research outputs and student completion rates are often lower than those of historically white universities.

The negative impact of declining funding on teaching and learning was a theme that emerged strongly in interviews with all lecturers. One lecturer explained:

The universities are run like businesses . . . they're getting less and less subsidies from government. So they are under immense pressure to survive financially. So that's why

there's a massification of access . . . In the PGCE, for example, there's over 190 students. And so you've got to try, in one semester, with one of your modules, to try and do a reasonable job, because with 190 students it does affect your pedagogy, it does affect what you can do in terms of trying to get individuals to work. I, for example, give self-study tasks. But if they don't do it there's nothing that can be done, because I don't have the time to mark six or seven self-study tasks in a semester (Lecturer E5, 2016).

Some universities responded to the reduction in funding by cutting programmes and removing posts. According to one lecturer, "cutting all those bursaries, and . . . in-service staff, never mind pre-service, killed us. I mean, our B.Eds went from 200 to 40" (Lecturer B2, 2016).

As a consequence, the B.Ed programme was shut down, a number of staff left and were not replaced, and modules in the history, psychology and philosophy of education also fell away. "And that meant immediately, because of time constraints, a restriction on the amount of time given to topic areas . . . So now we're down to, in my view, a very constrained curriculum". Overall, interviewees argued that declining funding has not only increased workloads and decreased teaching support for academics, but also directly impacted the curriculum.

Furthermore, reductions in funding may also limit the potential for innovation in the curriculum. For instance, one lecturer's faculty had discussed the development of open source textbooks so as to make sure that poor students can access materials, but the "immense pressures in terms of staffing, in terms of capacity", mean that "you are not given the space to really interrogate an issue, and really work it through. So, for example, let's talk about designing our own open-source textbooks. I don't know how we're going to get the time . . . I know, it sounds depressing" (Lecturer E5, 2016).

Lecturers often seemed to be simply trying to survive amidst these financial pressures, which have since increased under the impact of student demands. One lecturer explained that the consequences of meeting student demands for insourcing workers meant that

the original money that was saved by outsourcing, which funded student bursaries, then got lost, and that then meant – and that's where I think things started to get very complex and emotional – is that what in effect it meant is that all academics have had to take a salary cut this year. We've lost two professorial posts, and likely to lose more posts. At this university there's academic posts being lost to try and retain the student bursaries and [also] have the insourcing. So now those who were championing the students' rights are not so happy as they were a year ago . . . I think by the end we were all so completely exhausted that the thought of re-curriculating the whole thing, and trying to understand what the heck we were



doing, just became too much; let's just survive this year and we'll see how we go from there (Lecturer B2, 2016).

The evidence suggests, then, that declining public investment in higher education has narrowed the scope for lecturers to design and teach rich and meaningful curricula, and decreased the time and resources they may have to engage in collective deliberations about innovations in the curriculum, not least the question of how to decolonise the curriculum and what this means.

Within this institutional context of mounting pressures and multiple struggles, a number of interviewees spoke of the need to find space to think through curriculum decisions. Such collective deliberation between students and staff requires some kind of coordinating mechanism, of which there was little evidence.

One potential coordinating mechanism could be the student movements themselves. However, lecturers did not indicate any form of sustained engagement with the movements. Furthermore, like any form of collective action, these movements are heterogeneous and subject to contestation (Badat, 2015). The consequence of this seems to be that, while the student movements have substantially influenced public discourse, they have had a very limited ability to provide a unified coordinating mechanism for rethinking our universities in general, and teacher education curricula in particular.

When asked about whether their university had collaborated with other universities in thinking through their teacher training curricula, all interviewees indicated that there were no such communities of practice, particularly for the theoretical components of their programmes. One interviewee who had been deeply involved in redesigning the curriculum in response to government's Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2015), which were first introduced in 2011, stated flatly that they had worked in isolation: "Our re-curriculumation was done solely by us within the faculty. I don't even remember us bringing in any experts from outside, from the other universities in the country. So it was purely done internally here" (Lecturer C2, 2016). Another lecturer reflected that there had been some attempts at coordination across universities in the Western Cape in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but then, "with the restructuring of the universities,

the amalgamations [i.e. mergers], that impetus just fell away completely, if there had been an impetus at all” (Lecturer B2, 2016).

Moreover, interviewees noted that, in their experience, none of the teacher unions has been involved in facilitating discussions around curricula, nor has the professional body of teachers, the South African Council for Educators (SACE). As one interviewee put it, “[t]eacher unions and SACE are non-existent in higher education from my experience . . . What happens is they may be invited to come and give presentations to our senior students about what’s expected of them in terms of SACE’s requirements. But there’s no real working together” (Lecturer E5, 2016).

In this situation then, government policy on teacher education curricula might have provided the space for collective reflection. However, one interviewee saw policies such as the MRTEQ as specifying “graduate attributes [that] are nice to put on some template when you have to do a presentation. But I’m not sure how much of it is really focused in a regular basis in your teaching and learning” (Lecturer E5, 2016). For this respondent, the MRTEQ was not a framework which enables collective reflection on curricula, but instead an additional bureaucratic burden on already over-worked and resource constrained staff.

This problem about spaces for discussion seems inherent in current teacher education policies. The MRTEQ emphasises the development of a mix of knowledge and skills appropriate for student teachers studying towards particular teacher education qualifications, but it is remarkably silent on curriculum content (Sayed and Novelli, 2016). This lack of specification about curriculum content may be understandable in an approach which seeks to protect academic freedom and autonomy, but it leaves open the issue of coordination, which even the Teacher Education Programme Accreditation and Qualifications Committee (TEPAQ) – a technical committee of the Department of Basic Education, the South African Council for Educators, the Council on Higher Education and the Skills Education and Training Authorities – does not fill, despite it seeking to align teacher education programmes with policy requirements for teacher education qualifications (interview with government official, 2015, in Sayed and Novelli, 2016). As a consequence, specification of content is left to the discretion of teacher education providers who may or may not collaborate with other universities, let alone students. Nevertheless, the recent Teaching and Learning Development Capacity Improvement Project seems to have picked up the

challenge of forming communities of practice – in Foundation Phase literacy and numeracy – to deliberate upon and reach voluntary consensus on what should constitute key subject and pedagogical content knowledge in their respective domains (DHET, 2016). If encouraged by policy and supported by institutions, such communities of practice could respond to the call to decolonise the curriculum by creating spaces for deliberative discussion and consensus building, which in turn could make possible the collective development of initial teacher education curricula which provide student teachers with common learning and knowledge experiences whilst recognising differing academic traditions and institutional histories.

Overall, the picture that emerges is an absence of robust coordinating mechanisms for collective deliberation between staff, students and practising teachers on what decolonising the curriculum might mean and how to go about doing it. This is compounded by the financial pressures on, and dwindling resources of, universities, which hinder attempts at reflection about what decolonised academic curricula could look like in initial teacher education.

### By way of conclusion: emerging issues

From the preceding analysis, there are several emerging issues and debates that warrant reflection. First, the meta-analysis suggests that curricula are all-too-slowly moving towards a more expansive imagination of who counts as an intellectual and what counts as important intellectual work. However, across universities, it remains the case that student teachers have extremely limited exposure to multiple understandings of Africa and its complex education histories, and are largely isolated from broader southern debates.

Second, lecturers' curriculum decisions are shaped in multiple ways. Lecturers characterised the process of decolonising the curriculum as a form of struggle with the self, one which involves coming to terms with the brokenness of our knowledge, and requires us to cultivate the virtues of epistemic tentativeness, humility and courage. However, while lecturers engage in this personal struggle, they must also grapple with an institutional context of dwindling resources and increasing workloads. Furthermore, there is a generational dimension to this narrative (Naidoo, 2016), as lecturers seek to understand and negotiate the demands of their own students and the student

movements. Taken together, these indicate that lecturers often occupy a difficult space as mediators of teaching and learning; while they seek to negotiate and traverse institutional imperatives in stringent financial circumstances, they do so marked by their own biographies and histories.

Third, a key theme emerging from the analysis is the tension in efforts to decolonise initial teacher education curricula content. On the one hand, it is evident that decolonisation consists of more than including African writers in modules and reading lists. On the other hand, lecturers often seemed unable to articulate in concrete terms what a curriculum might look like outside of hegemonic forms of understanding and knowing. This dialectic between hegemonic forms of knowing and challenges speaks to the incompleteness, fragility and contested nature of knowledge making as a collective enterprise. This is particularly relevant to decolonisation debates, which can be understood in terms of the pursuit of expanded imaginations, where the very terms of this pursuit require space for competing imaginations. It follows from this that decolonisation of the curriculum is not an event that can easily be achieved, but is rather a process of continuous negotiation and struggle with the self, with institutions and with others.

However, the analysis suggests that lecturers' different understandings of decolonisation were often privately-held views, which were not subject to public deliberation and reflection, and therefore not subject to contestation or collective endorsement. Related to this, there were different understandings of what constitutes curriculum content in initial teacher education programmes, and hence a differentiated student teacher experience across institutions. The picture that emerged was of a community that is often fragmented and isolated from itself with regard to deliberations on curricula, in the sense that there is little coordination between different universities, and limited engagement with unions and professional bodies. One reason for this may be the absence of coordinating mechanisms for collective deliberation, particularly in the form of communities of practice. This limits opportunities to develop shared understandings about curricula content and to deepen the community's thinking on what decolonisation of the curriculum might mean. However, this does not mean that the conditions for the creation of such communities of practice are simply absent. For instance, for the first time, the 2015 specification of MRTEQ (DHET, 2015) requires all final year BEd and PGCE students to engage in research at an introductory level. This presents an opportunity for lecturers to develop research programmes on curriculum decolonisation, particularly across historically black and white universities,

and thereby to establish communities of practice between academic staff and students.

This exploratory study suggests that decolonisation of the curriculum in initial teacher education is a multi-layered process and requires attention to

lecturers' different understandings and intellectual biographies, their institutional contexts and their relationships with student teachers. Conceptualising decolonisation as an expansion of imaginations means that questions about how to change the curriculum, and what this change should entail, are inherently subject to contestation. Since decolonisation is not an event, but a process of collective deliberation marked by multiple struggles, there is a need to provide intellectual fora for different actors to come together and think deeply and regularly about the meanings and processes which saturate their worlds.

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