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RESEARCH PROGRAMME

## POLICY BRIEF

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### *Operationalising Decolonisation: A Human Development Approach for Higher Education Policy*

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## **Policy Brief**

This policy brief summarises the findings from a study conducted between 2021 and 2023, exploring student and staff perceptions of decolonisation across two diverse South African universities. The purpose was not to seek simple answers, but to empirically unpack divergent views to clarify what decolonisation means for those working and learning within universities. It surfaces on-the-ground narratives and concerns that are often overshadowed by rhetorical debates or managerial interpretations of decolonisation. These insights help identify new approaches and ideas for change in higher education, prompting a deeper examination of the impact of existing transformation policies. The research is important for academic developers, institutional managers, academics, and various stakeholders seeking to understand real, lived debates on decolonisation, not just theoretical ones. It provides an evidence base to inform policy responses to institutional decolonisation and to advance socially just transformation across the South African higher education sector.

## **Context**

After the first democratic elections in 1994, South Africa entered a new era of possibilities. Government policies such as the 1997 White Paper on Higher Education and the 2014 White Paper for Post-school Education and Training envisioned a system founded on equality, dignity, and redress. The post-apartheid policy frameworks sought to widen access, eliminate discrimination, and ensure fair chances of success for all students while addressing entrenched historical inequities. Yet, despite these ambitions, the transformation project has struggled to dismantle the deeper structural, cultural, and epistemic architecture inherited from colonialism and apartheid. The persistence of these legacies generated growing frustrations that ultimately culminated in the call for decolonisation, particularly in higher education. This call emerged not merely because transformation was incomplete, but because universities continued to operate as spaces where Eurocentric knowledge was treated as superior, where Global North epistemic standards served as unquestioned benchmarks of legitimacy, and where African voices, histories, and intellectual traditions remained marginal or selectively incorporated. Debates around decolonisation continue to provoke critical engagement, particularly in South African higher education, where its meaning, enactment, and assessment remain contested and policy sensitive. Universities frequently invoke it without defining it, fearing that any meaningful definition might require confronting uncomfortable truths about power, privilege, and institutional identity. As a result, the sector has produced a proliferation of discourses but no coherent plan of action. Institutions often oscillate between symbolic gestures and managerial defensiveness, unsure of what decolonisation entails, how it should be enacted, or how progress should be measured. The absence of a shared understanding, coupled with the lack of an operational framework, has left decolonisation suspended in ambiguity – demanded from below, resisted from above, and rhetorical everywhere in between.

These tensions underscore the pressing need for a conceptual and policy framework that transcends compliance and fosters a coherent, people-centred understanding of decolonisation.

## **Capability Approach: A Conceptual Frame for Decolonisation**

In advocating for a human development perspective to understand and unpack decolonisation, the study adopted Sen's capability approach as its framework. The capability approach, as developed by Amartya Sen, offers a powerful conceptual lens for exploring decolonisation, because it centres on the real freedoms that individuals have to do and be what they value. Applied to higher education, the approach invites us to shift our focus away from institutional claims towards the actual opportunities and constraints that shape how students and staff engage with their universities. Instead of asking whether decolonisation has been implemented at a policy level, the capability perspective asks whether individuals are genuinely able to participate in transformation, contribute to knowledge with confidence, be recognised and respected within their institutional communities, and shape the academic and cultural spaces they inhabit. The capability approach therefore provides a vocabulary through which participants can articulate forms of inequality that may be difficult to express through existing policy language. It allows decolonisation to be understood not merely as a structural reform project, but as a process of enhancing people's substantive freedoms, dignity, agency, and epistemic legitimacy. Crucially, the approach reframes decolonisation as a human development imperative: a process of expanding people's capabilities to speak, think, belong, create, and critique within systems that have historically excluded or diminished them. It provides not only a conceptual vocabulary but also a diagnostic tool for identifying the institutional constraints that suppress these freedoms.

## **Methods**

The research drew on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with forty-four students and staff evenly distributed across two South African universities situated at opposite ends of the historical and socioeconomic spectrum. The analysis was guided by the capability approach, enabling participants' experiences to be read through the values, constraints, and aspirations that inform their interpretations of decolonisation. The methodology illuminates not only what participants think, but also why they think it, and how their positionalities shape their encounters with institutional power.

## **Key Findings:**

Using the capability approach, this study illuminated how students and staff at two diverse South African institutions understood decolonisation as a complex process and articulated it through the freedoms they valued and the unfreedoms they sought to remove. The approach enabled a nuanced contextualisation of their perspectives, foregrounding the language through which participants expressed what decolonisation should expand and dismantle. Through the capability lens, this study brought to light that decolonisation of higher education has the potential to enhance student and staff opportunities and expand their valued capabilities and, therefore, their achievements. The capability approach offered a new analytical and normative framework for understanding decolonisation in higher education in South Africa to achieve more socially just and transformative universities. Understanding decolonisation in the context of higher education for the promotion of policy and action is an area that has received little attention. The study

demonstrates how the capability approach nuances our understanding of decolonisation through its focus on multiple dimensions of people’s well-being and by pointing to the kinds of freedoms that students and staff value, and what they want to *do* to decolonise universities.

Based on what the participants said and the analysis of the data, I extrapolated a set of capabilities that emerged as valuable to these students and staff in the context of decolonisation. The identified capabilities provide an evaluative starting point for understanding how social arrangements in the university can foster functionings that students and staff value in relation to a decolonised higher education:

**Valued capabilities for decolonised universities**

<b>Capability</b>	<b>Functionings</b>
Capability for participation in decolonisation processes	Participating in meetings with university management to raise concerns about decolonisation Taking action to promote decolonisation processes Participating in learning processes, curriculum development, and pedagogical activities
Capability to decolonise through competent and confident use of language	Being competent and confident to use the language of instruction; and fully comprehending the language of instruction
Capability for dialogue and public deliberation that facilitates decolonisation	Participating in interactive deliberation with university management to foster transformation and decolonisation
Capability for critical thinking through decolonisation	Being able to think critically and imaginatively Being able to identify and comprehend diverse views
Capability for recognition, respect, inclusion, and belonging in decolonised institutions	Being a respected and valued member of the university and society

Policy on transformation and decolonisation of higher education must, therefore, address the degree to which all six capabilities are either fostered or impeded within individuals and across various higher education institutions. Thus, this capability set serves as the foundation for a normative framework to understand what students and staff value in and through a decolonised university, guiding them in their pursuit to achieve a socially just, transformative higher education that considers the expansion of human freedoms beyond reductionist debates.

By applying the capability approach, this research advances a definition of decolonisation rooted not in abstract theory or bureaucratic performance, but in the substantive freedoms that individuals require to participate in shaping their academic worlds. A capability-informed perspective reveals that decolonisation is not a technical project to be managed from above, but a human development imperative that demands the redistribution of voice, power, epistemic legitimacy, and dignity.

Taking into consideration Sen's view on social justice, which emphasises freedoms as a means and end to human development, and informed by the data, the study proposes a capabilities-informed, working definition of decolonisation in the context of South African higher education:

Decolonisation is the process of eliminating the unfreedoms caused by discriminatory and exploitative colonial and apartheid legacies in universities, in order to expand student and staff capabilities to 1) participate meaningfully in university decision-making processes, engage in dialogue, public deliberation, and critical thinking; 2) use a valued range of languages and world views competently and confidently in these processes in order to 3) receive recognition and respect and experience inclusion that allows them above all, to 4) be epistemic contributors and agents of change to local and global bodies of knowledge.

Based on this proposed definition, the ultimate goal of decolonisation is to eliminate specific unfreedoms in order to move towards socially just higher education. Through the empirical data, certain impediments were identified that can assist in the evaluation of what must be eliminated so that students and staff can achieve their capabilities for decolonisation. All the views and perceptions of decolonisation, as well as the impediments identified in the data, informed the definition, drawing on the capability approach as a conceptual and analytical framework.

### **Policy Implications**

The policy implications of this study are clear and urgent. Current policies reward paperwork, not transformation. Compliance metrics allow universities to effect change while leaving power structures untouched, and they continue to favour historically advantaged institutions, while disadvantaged institutions remain burdened by inequalities that policy frameworks fail to address. Funding gaps worsen this, but the core problem is the policy's failure to confront the structural barriers that limit participation, belonging, and recognition. In this environment, decolonisation becomes a rhetorical tool rather than a catalyst for structural change.

Decolonisation must therefore be reconceptualised in policy terms as the expansion of human capabilities, not as a symbolic reform agenda. It cannot be understood merely as curricular revision or demographic change, but as the expansion of human capabilities: the freedom to participate, to belong, to be recognised, and to generate knowledge in ways that reflect the realities of African contexts. Policy must explicitly target participation inequalities, language hierarchies, epistemic exclusions, funding disparities, and the lack of meaningful agency for students and staff. Universities must be required to identify and eliminate the specific unfreedoms that limit people's ability to participate, belong, and contribute knowledge. Accountability mechanisms must shift away from checking boxes towards demonstrating capability expansion in measurable, lived terms. Funding and accreditation frameworks must reward institutions for structural transformation, not historical advantage. Moreover, transformation metrics cannot continue to be imposed from above: they must be co-created with those most affected by the legacies of exclusion, especially students and early-career staff. In short, decolonisation policy must confront the distribution of power head-on and must recognise that real transformation requires structural, epistemic, and relational change.

Without this shift, policy will keep endorsing symbolic reform while systemic inequalities persist.

## **Conclusion**

This study offers a reconceptualisation of decolonisation grounded in the capabilities that people need to shape their academic lives with freedom, dignity, and agency. It challenges universities to confront the gap between their rhetoric and their realities, and to recognise that symbolic transformation is not transformation at all. A capability-informed approach provides a route forward, one that centres the humanity of students and staff, attends to the structural and epistemic inequalities that shape higher education, and insists that decolonisation must be lived, not performed.

Unless institutions take seriously the need to redistribute epistemic power, cultivate authentic belonging, and create conditions in which individuals can contribute knowledge freely and confidently, the promise of decolonisation will remain deferred. Meaningful transformation demands that universities not only reform their structures, but also fundamentally reimagine their purpose, identity, and relationship to the African societies they serve.

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