



‘The unofficial curriculum is where the real teaching takes place’: faculty experiences of decolonising the curriculum in Africa

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Abstract

This paper analyses faculty experiences tackling global knowledge asymmetries by examining the decolonisation of higher education in Africa in the aftermath of the 2015 ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ student uprising. An overview of the literature reveals a rich debate on defining ‘decolonisation’, starting from a critique of Eurocentrism to propositions of alternate epistemologies. These debates are dominated by the Global North and South Africa and their experiences of curriculum reform. Our focus is on the experiences of political scientists in Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. These countries share the same Anglophone political science traditions but represent different political trajectories that constitute a significant condition for the discipline. The 26 political scientists we interviewed acted toward increasing local content and perspectives in their teaching, as promoted in the official strategies of the universities. They noted that what was happening in lecture halls was most important. The academic decolonisation debate appeared overambitious or even as patronising to them in their own political context. National politics affected the thematic focus of the discipline both as far as research topics and students’ employment opportunities were concerned. Although university bureaucracies were slow to respond to proposed curricula changes, new programmes were approved if there was a market-based demand for them. International programs tended to be approved fastest. Political economy of higher education plays a role: dependency on foreign funding, limited national resources to conduct research and produce publications vis-à-vis international competition, and national quality assurance standards appeared to be most critical constraints for decolonising the curriculum.

Keywords Decolonisation, curriculum · Political science · Africa · Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Zimbabwe

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Introduction

The ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ student uprising in 2015 in South Africa created a momentum whereby decolonisation became a central concept for seeking social justice in higher education (Godsell & Chikane, 2016). Curriculum reform (Shay & Peseta, 2016) and tackling knowledge production asymmetries in Africa (Booyesen, 2016; Le Grange, 2016) soon became a key part of this momentum. In this paper, we approach curriculum reform through the experiences of political scientists in Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. These countries are united by their British colonial heritage and academic traditions including the English language used in university education but diverge in their political developments—an essential context for the discipline of political science. Together they can shed light on a variety of challenges inherent in decolonisation.

The epistemology of political science has been dominated by Western ideas of politics and democracy (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012; Grosfoguel, 2017; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Non-Western perspectives are underrepresented, stereotypes abound, and empirical research demonstrates a geographic bias conceptualised as Eurocentrism by Amin (2009), all of which affect both the form and content of teaching (Carrozza & Sandnes, 2021; Subedi, 2013). For example, students at British universities are not only reading primarily White authors but are also not asked to consider the possible racism in the thinking of these authors (Choat, 2021). In the syllabi and reading lists of ‘African politics’ in North American universities, authors appear to be primarily Westerners (Zimbalist, 2020; Smith, 2007). In the public administration sub-discipline, fewer than ten per cent of articles in its top four journals discuss lower-income countries (Bertelli et al., 2020). And the share of articles by Africa-based researchers in the top African politics journals declined from an already low level of 25 per cent in 1993 to 15 per cent in 2013—not due to lower submissions, but to lower acceptance rates (Briggs & Weathers, 2016, pp. 466, 474). Jeater describes the obstacles faced by Zimbabwean scholars as an undervaluation of their research orientation in the prevailing hegemonic standards of academic publications (2018). And indeed, much of the policy-relevant political science research conducted in African universities attracts only local publishers (Laakso & Kariuki, 2022, pp. 6–9). Furthermore, the fact that research work in African universities depends on funding received from foreign donors (ISSC, IDS, and UNESCO, 2016; Mouton, 2010) replicates North–South power asymmetries, breeding clientelism rather than academic collegiality (Olukoshi, 2006).

The African conversation on decolonising political science is not new and continues to be diverse. Ake suggested already in the 1970s that the way forward was to abandon seemingly-objective Western research methods (1974, 1982). Mkandawire called for local publishing (1999), and Jinadu for intellectual activism (2002). Waghid emphasised social distribution (2002) and Okolie African traditions in the generation of knowledge (2003), while Ramphele and Nyamnjoh focused on retaining and valuing African creativity (Nyamnjoh, 2012; Ramphele, 2004)—just to mention a few. In the aftermath of the 2015 student uprising, Ndlovu-Gatseni and Zondi conceptualised the aim as decentring what is now Eurocentric and replacing universality with pluriversality (2016). The objective is to respond to students’ experiences outside the classroom (Fomunyan & Teferra, 2017; Sloam, 2008; Subedi, 2013) and challenge conventional pedagogical tools (Dei, 2009).

The practical experiences of academic staff in decolonising the curriculum have received less attention. Even in post-apartheid South Africa, interest in the roles of scholars either as reform activists or practitioners was only generated after 2015 (see Badat, 2009, p. 465). Elsewhere in Africa, the topic has been even less discussed.

Before describing our method and analysing the themes emerging in our interviews with scholars in Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, and Zimbabwe, we review the literature on decolonising the curriculum and political science in Africa.

Overview of literature

The content of decolonising has been a matter of spirited debate. According to Quijano, the task is ‘to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, as the basis of another rationality’ (2007, p. 177). Mamdani refers to epistemology which is ‘intimately tied to our notions of what is human, what is particular and what is universal’ (2016, p. 79). Decolonisation does not only contest the hegemony of Western thinking, but also poses questions about institutions of higher education. Nyamnjoh calls for inclusion over the logic of exclusion, ‘convivial scholarship’ that brings scholarship and learning outside the boundaries of the classroom and traditional institutional spaces (2020). After 2015, these debates have intensified.¹ ‘The world-class imperative’ (Gyamera & Burke, 2018, p. 456), favouring the academic traditions of the West (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2021), results in an unlevel playing field for those outside the West. Mbembe has spoken explicitly about the ‘whiteness’ of African academia as an entrenched privilege which can only be countered with ‘an entirely different regime of desire, new approaches in the constitution of material, aesthetic and symbolic capital, another discourse on value, on what matters and why’ (2015). African scholars and universities compete for prestige in international rankings just as their counterparts worldwide—including American Ivy League universities like Harvard University with an endowment comparable to the GDP of many African countries (Kamola, 2014). Hountondji has characterised African science as ‘extroverted’, not cognate with local systems of knowledge and resulting in underdevelopment just as its externally oriented economic activity (1990, p. 7). In the quest for world recognition, African universities orient to the sources, theories, and methodologies of their former colonisers and turn away from African problems (Hountondji, 1995). Degree programmes, for instance, continue to be based on inherited disciplines, in spite of debates about their unsuitability to societal realities on the ground (Ensor, 2004).

Binaries of Western versus African knowledge systems have also been questioned, however. Morreira notes ‘the complex entanglements’ (2017, p. 292) as the leading African universities and their scholars have close links to the West, often crucial for African academics to conduct critical work (Laakso, 2020). Táíwò has even argued that the demands of decolonisation when conflating modernity with coloniality are harmful for scholarship in Africa (2022).

Choat has summarised the content of decolonising the curriculum as follows:

[It] acknowledges and calls for discussion of the colonial contexts within which concepts, arguments, and theories have been developed and advanced; recognises that there are alternatives to Eurocentric knowledges, epistemologies, and pedagogies that were suppressed by colonial domination; and includes study of and readings by non-White and women thinkers, figures, and authors. (2021, p. 3)

¹ A search query on the Web of Science database with a topic *decoloni** yielded 10,994 journal articles, the first one from 1959. Only 2113 were published before 2016, but since then the growth in publications has been exponential.

Analysis of practical decolonising efforts demonstrates the wide spectrum of issues. Worth mentioning are a special issue of the journal *Politics* on Africa in international studies (Gallagher et al., 2016) and a special issue of *Teaching in Higher Education* on decolonising the curriculum (Hayes et al., 2021). The former discusses whether the pedagogy of critical thinking can tackle Africa's often pejorative representation by 'outsiders' (Matthews, 2016), the assumption that Western actors can 'solve' Africa's problems (Routley, 2016), and African universities' opportunity to generate new perspectives on international studies as a whole (Niang, 2016). The latter collection emphasises the experiences of students (Motala et al., 2021; Menon et al., 2021; Shaik & Kahn, 2021).

The *Politikon* (2018) special issue on the theme of 'decolonization after democracy' includes Pillay's description of the content of his course on political violence where he presents an African genealogy of the modern state (Pillay, 2018), as well as Matthews' analysis of the importance of introducing both the dominant literature and its critics to students (Matthews, 2018). Two years later, Matthews published a comprehensive analysis of political science decolonisation in South Africa with an overview of the content of 61 undergraduate course outlines. Black lecturers were the majority of teachers, although still under-represented relative to their share of the population. Africa and South Africa received attention, but the texts assigned to students continued to be mostly written by White men from Europe or North America (2020, pp. 331–335).

While most of the literature testifies to the dominance of South Africa in the discussions in Africa,² the 2018 *Politikon* collection included an article on the political science curriculum at the Federal University of East Africa. There, too, the authors emphasised pedagogy that was sensitive to the local cultures (Mngomezulu & Hadebe, 2018, p. 77). Outside South Africa, a significant example is also Gyamera's and Burke's (2018) review of university curricula in Ghana. They criticised the vocational approach putting more weight on job markets than independent thinking. Furthermore, Gukurume compared sociology teachers' responses to the calls for decolonisation in South Africa and Zimbabwe. His findings in Zimbabwe guide our analysis. University management quality control appeared to be factor behind the persistence of Western thinkers in reading lists, while decolonisation of curriculum and engaging with local realities were neither a new nor postcolonial phenomenon in Zimbabwe. Gukurume quotes a lecturer:

If you look at our courses and topics, you will see that we have already sort of decolonized. Yes, we talk of the founding fathers of the discipline of sociology like Comte, Durkheim, Marx and Weber as the canon of sociological theory when teaching introduction to sociology at first year, but we also have courses like gender studies and topics such as feminism in many courses which enable students to critique patriarchy in sociology, so for me we have decolonized way back. (Gukurume, 2022)

Last but not least, as much of the discussion on decolonisation points to the need to reform the overall university institution, it is useful to pay attention to its national contexts. After independence, the primary task of African universities was in the education of civil servants for the expanding public sector (Mouton, 2010). But governments also had ambitions of development and self-determination. Political science was to support the ideology of the new leaders, e.g. Pan-Africanism in Nkrumah's Ghana, humanism in Kaunda's

² Our Web of Science search query of journal articles with a topic decoloni* showed that between 2015 and 2022 from the total output (1236) from African countries 79.2% (979) were from South Africa, 2.3% (28) from Zimbabwe, 2.0% (25) from Ghana, 1.9% (23) from Kenya, and 1.0% (12) from Botswana.

Zambia, and socialist Ujamaa in Nyerere's Tanzania. The post-war economic boom ended in the mid-1970s, however, and political science faced 'suspicious ambivalence or in many cases outright hostility' (Jinadu, 2002, p. 3).

Neoliberal structural adjustment programmes targeting the higher education sector and popular protests in the early 1990s demanding democratisation intensified tensions further. As noted by Zeleza, cutbacks in public education, the privatisation of universities, and technological transformations eroded the old systems (2009). However, despite changing, even contradictory views on the relevance of political science, political science departments grew in size. If nothing else, as an easily scalable discipline, political science education has been a cost-effective way to increase student intake given rapidly growing demand (Aye & Gyekye-Jandoh, 2014).

In these circumstances, the course material or the students' experiences outside the classroom represent issues where the approach, actions, and concrete space to manoeuvre of individual teachers matter. Yet faculty are seldom central to these debates, except as heads to be counted among the teaching staff or authors of textbooks. This gap in the literature justifies our study.

Interviews and selection of cases

The premises of decolonial theory inform our approach and methodological choices. Our focus is on the experiences, space, and role of individual scholars, but we are also interested in the colonial asymmetries of knowledge production stemming from the structures of higher education and institutional strategies responding to these asymmetries.

We interviewed political scientists in Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, and Zimbabwe between June 2019 and December 2020. The countries share the experience of British colonial power and education system, and English as the language of higher education, making use of the dominant British and American literature a convenient choice for them. All of these countries have multiparty democracy, and this has been central to the institutionalisation of the political science discipline. The countries differ, however, in terms of their political and economic development. Botswana, although dominated by one party, is one of the most stable democracies in Africa. Ghana's post-independence democratic rule was interspersed with military until 1992 and Kenya's with a market-oriented one-party system until 1991. Zimbabwe, in turn, has implemented a formal multiparty system already under Rhodesian white minority rule, and after independence under an ideologically socialist and more recently market-oriented authoritarian rule. We hypothesised that the different national political trajectories and past occurrences have implications for the design and teaching of political science, while decolonisation challenges are similar across our samples. Our aim was to find generalisations applicable to the whole continent.

We identified our interviewees by their profiles in the universities' web pages and by a snowball method. We were interested in scholars who had done research on the political developments in their countries and taught about these issues. The group of 26 scholars (six in Botswana, five in Ghana, seven in Kenya, and eight in Zimbabwe), who responded positively to our invitations, is diverse, including both lecturers and professors. They represent the discipline in a broad sense covering political theory, comparative politics, public administration, and political sociology (Laitin, 1998, 431) as well as different methodological and theoretical approaches. Only seven of them are women, reflecting the patriarchal structures of the academic environment in Africa and elsewhere. We also conducted

additional interviews, but they did not add to the meanings connected to decolonisation, confirming a saturation point in our data collection (Saunders et al., 2018, p. 1896).

All interviewees allowed the interviews to be recorded, and all were anonymised unless the interviewee requested that their names be used. We acknowledge that anonymity makes the interviewees invisible and in that way continues the hierarchical relationships between Westerners and Africans, but we also recognize the importance of creating a space where interviewees can safely criticise their superiors. We handled the subsequent imbalance in our material by attributing quotations that would not put scholars in danger.

As the interviews were conducted within a research project ‘The Space and Role of Political Science in the Evolving Democratic Transformation in Africa’ (Nordic Africa Institute, 2019–2021), our interest was in the overall profile of the political science discipline. Decolonisation emerged as an important theme for the discipline and its developments. The semi-structured interview method served the purpose of letting the interviewees speak in their own words. How were they able to influence the content of teaching, degree programmes, and literature lists? What were the external and internal factors influencing them? We approached these interviews as discussions, where both parties shared their experiences of university work. We coded the transcripts for references to colonial and curriculum, and traced the structure of meanings connected to them (Alasutari, 1995; Silverman, 2009). Our analysis is based on the answers the interviewees gave to our questions, reflecting the perceptions they were prepared to share with us.

Ethical implications of our research relate firstly to the sensitivity of issues affecting the working conditions of our interviewees and their safety. Anonymisation of the interviews does not hide emerging issues. It hides only their connection to individual interviewees. Criticism towards national level decision-making or university management, for instance, can lead to collective labelling or punishment of faculty. To that end, we discussed academic freedom with our interviewees and ensured that in none of the cases we researched did the scholars feel that their freedom to express political opinions or to criticise university authorities in professional forums, such as in an academic papers like ours, was limited.

That, however, had not always been the case. In Kenya in the 1970s and 1980s, political science was banned, but, according to a professor, under the rubric of government and public administration, it had been possible to give ‘the impression that you are training civil servants that will hold positions in government, but you are not teaching some radical political revolutionary theories’. Quite in the same tone, to make political science relevant for independent Zimbabwe, the discipline had been renamed ‘administration’. In Ghana, a professor reported that in the 1980s after criticising the government, he had been warned to ‘be careful’. The experiences in Botswana have not been as drastic, but even there, the perception of our interviewees was that freedom had increased. In the 1990s, we were told, a combination of political science and sociology, for instance, was not allowed out of fear of radical opposition politics.

Another ethical consideration of our research design relates to the assumption that African scholars and institutions where they were working suffered because of a problem, i.e. colonialism, victimising African academia (Táíwò, 2022). With an emphasis on the role of the scholars themselves, we try here to highlight their agency and empowerment strategies.

The interviews, which all lasted about an hour, meant that the interviewees were giving not only their working time but also their thoughts and ideas for research. The end result is once again an academic output in a Western journal written by two scholars working in the privileged and dominant Western academia. While acknowledging our own positionality (Holmes, 2020), we did our best to level asymmetries by sharing our critical experiences in Finnish and Swedish higher education, e.g. connected to the dominance of English

language, competition in international university rankings and the new managerialism (Deem, 2020).

Key findings

Our most important findings were, first, that scholars regarded addressing colonialism in university curricula as important. While courses on national political systems and the regional context had brought local issues to the curricula, courses like ‘political theory’ concentrated on the Western ‘founding fathers’ of the discipline, renewing the dichotomy between Western theoretical thinking and applied local research. All universities we investigated wanted to increase the share of African texts in their reading lists. At the University of Zimbabwe, the goal was as much as 50 per cent. A professor in Botswana, however, recalled that when an external reviewer of their curriculum had found it to be too Eurocentric, faculty at the department had agreed though very little had changed:

It is easier said than done. 90 per cent of our literature are books by North American and British authors. What makes me sad is that they are writing about us, not for us. They are writing about us for their own audience. Yet we have our own people, who can write about us for us.

A lecturer in Ghana said that he had asked his students to identify 20 top-cited political scientists and their universities or home countries. ‘They made a list: Oxford, Cambridge, US, Canada, Sweden, Germany, Netherlands. Not a single one from Africa’. Another Ghanaian lecturer told about discussions among faculty members that they had no course on Nkrumah ‘even though we are in political science and Nkrumah has contributed a lot to political developments both in Ghana and in Africa’. Our interviewees, however, emphasised what was happening in the lecture room. According to a lecturer in Botswana: ‘we are still teaching the same old Max Weber we have been teaching for twenty-four years’. But she continued: ‘it is up to us to bring it down and say, “look even though Max Weber was saying that society is transformed like this, in your own village this is what is happening”’. Other examples of decolonial teaching in the class room included conceptualisation of liberation struggles, not as rebellions, but as social movements, or questioning the suitability of mainstream political science categories like parliamentarism versus presidentialism to the local political systems. A lecturer in Kenya described teaching in the following way:

We usually have what we call the official curriculum and the unofficial part of it. A lot of that decolonisation takes place at the unofficial curriculum level, which is where the real teaching takes place. It is not something very explicit. You will not see it in the course outline. This academic exposition, most of it, takes place in the classroom.

Secondly, our interviewees testified that there were important achievements, too. References were made to critical political economy analysis of racial inequalities that African scholars had advanced early on, and more recently to the use of participatory methods in the research of public policy in order to make it relevant to the local communities. Important initiatives in this regard were the African Association of Political Science (AAPS) and Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) founded in the early 1970s. Ibbo Mandaza, Executive Chairman of the Southern African Political

Economy Series (SAPES) in Zimbabwe, recalled that when he was teaching at the University of Dar es Salaam in the 1970s, they had a bibliography of African scholars. And as a concrete example of Africanisation, Mandaza mentioned Zimbabwean research on history so that ‘we now know the nature of Zimbabwe society from 400 BC’ and that colonial history writing of tribes ‘has changed, it has gone, finished, we changed all that’. What Mandaza called for was a recognition of African scholarship as a major intervention in African studies: ‘Africanists have got most of their methodology from African scholars’.

Mandaza’s opinion of the post-2015 decolonisation discussion, however, was that ‘it has been taken to a ridiculous end, even trying to change the concepts. Even the concept of education has to be changed because all education is colonial. Now, is that possible?’ In the same vein, a professor at the University of Zimbabwe stated:

That is all nonsense. I can understand where they are coming from. But at the end of the day, I say to myself, what else have you said which Frantz Fanon did not say in *The Wretched of the Earth*, for example... First, you are decrying the colonisation of the mind, and colonisation of education. And then you would publish a book on that with Routledge. Now, where is Routledge? So, what is the point?

Furthermore, the international character of teaching was also seen as a strength. Another professor from Zimbabwe explained that ‘the joy of the University of Zimbabwe’ was that teachers trained abroad and teachers trained locally were bringing different perspectives to teaching: ‘so there is an amalgamation... to make sure that we do not become isolated insular institutions’.

Njoki Wamai, assistant professor at the United States International University in Kenya, summarised this critical attitude to the discussion of decolonisation:

It is a very Western, Eurocentric, patronising attitude and standpoint, almost thinking: ‘Now we finally discovered we need to decolonise,’ and then everyone is getting funding to decolonise themselves and others. No, this is not our decolonial moment. Maybe Rhodes fell in South Africa. That was their decolonial moment. But the rest of Africa has been decolonising right after independence. The West should come and learn from us, the question is not, ‘Are you decolonising?’ it is, ‘How did you do it in 1963?’, go to the University of Ghana, ‘How did you do it in 1957?’

Our fourth key findings related to the official university strategies emphasising local and African content in teaching. At the University of Ghana, there was a semester-long course called ‘African Humanities and Social Sciences’ to develop methodologies to examine Africa’s contributions to world knowledge among others (IAS website, ias.ug.gh). The University of Zimbabwe, in turn, had introduced national heritage modules in all degrees. A lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe recalled the Minister of Education saying that the purpose was to prevent brain drain: ‘Japan produces what they called Japan engineers. So we want Zimbabwe engineers, engineering that is grounded in the Zimbabwean culture’. The opinion of the lecturer, however, was that brain drain was ‘a result of the socio-economic environment’ not the colonial content of education.

Although universities were responsible for their strategies, national-level quality assurance bodies appeared to be more important controllers of curriculum development than university management. Our interviewees made references to the Kenyan Commission of University Education (CUE) established in 1985, the National Accreditation Board of Ghana in 1993 (from 2020 part of the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission, Gtec), the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) in 2006, and the Botswana Qualification Authority in 2013. In addition to scrutinising the degree programmes, they compared

the universities' resources and performance to each other. Thus, the universities 'would not want to present something that will be rejected' in the words of a lecturer in Kenya.

These bodies were organised under governments but operated as 'somehow semi-independent' authorities according to a lecturer from Botswana. Their role was also transnational. The African Union's 'African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Higher Education' (2019) stipulated their role to be to enhance comparability and recognition of learning across national borders (Alemu, 2019; Nabaho et al., 2020) much like the European Union's Bologna actions did for their European counterparts. According to the Parliament Act of ZIMCHE, for example, ZIMCHE was 'to act as a regulator in the determination and maintenance of standards of teaching, examinations, academic qualifications and research in institutions of higher education'. A Zimbabwean scholar although defending the role of ZIMCHE noted that 'for many years we pride ourselves of being of higher standard than rest of Southern Africa, but that is not the case anymore, unfortunately'.

Whether the national authorities and university managements like it or not, universal quality standards and their measurements demonstrate African universities' performance in the regional and international university rankings raising questions of their colonial implications. 'Are they redefining the role of a university and in what way? Who decides what quality is?' asked a lecturer from Botswana.

Challenges

Many of the challenges of decolonisation our interviewees brought up related to the differing and contradictory pressures of the need to prove both the market value and relevance of the course content. A professor from the University of Botswana doubted if the course 'Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa' was still running, because the topic did not excite local students unlike the students in the USA, where he had also taught. Yet he recalled that already in the early 1990s students went on strike due to the lack of local content in their textbooks: 'here we are in Botswana, why are you giving us examples from the United States or UK?' A University in Ghana had launched a course in Asante history only to test the market, because its popularity was uncertain. According to a lecturer, 'If you say "Asante history", "No." If you say "International history", you have many more people applying to that programme'.

Another puzzling question for the teachers was how to combine decolonial ambitions to train 'people who will think outside the box' in the words of a lecturer in Ghana to the demands of the labour markets. A lecturer in Kenya stated:

It kind of breaks my heart, because in my own view, university education does not need just to serve that function of preparing somebody to become a cog in the economic wheel or country. Why are students at the university? To prepare them as workers in the factory or the job market? There is a whole lot of confusion about why they are there. Like how will they understand their own social, political, economic world if they did not have that questioning and enquiring mind?

A lecturer from Botswana referred to 'the policing of disciplines':

By the time a student starts to do political science, I should already be proving to the market that when the student finishes political science, they will have the attributes that the market demands. I cannot teach a student political science, as political science, I must teach political science as a skill that can be applied. If they are called

for an interview, they could answer the question: ‘what skills are you bringing to our institution?’

The graduate employability strategy of the University of Botswana with a reference to the government strategy to move from a ‘resource-based economy’ to a ‘knowledge-based economy’ even suggested employers’ participation in curriculum design (see Rudhumbu et al., 2016). In Zimbabwe, the criterion of relevance was articulated in the government’s Education 5.0 for Zimbabwe’s Development (2020), adding innovation and industrialisation to the three ‘old’ tasks of education, research, and community service of the universities. A frustrated professor asked: ‘What does a political science innovate and industrialise?’.

In practice, curriculum reform was often hampered or delayed by the universities’ internal bureaucracy. Although teachers were expected to incorporate new issues in their courses, international comparisons and debates about ‘the moving trends’ in the discipline, as a lecturer in Zimbabwe explained, prevented radical change. A lecturer in Botswana recalled occasional faculty divisions: ‘with some members of the department wanting to protect the, I suppose, disciplinary integrity’. The scholars in Ghana and Kenya referred to red tape that did not interfere in the content of the courses, but added significant effort to change compared to retaining the status quo. The processes could be ‘very laborious, very difficult, very time-consuming’ in the words of a professor in Ghana. According to a lecturer in Kenya, the last curriculum development revisit to their courses had taken place in 2014, but in 2020 was still not adopted. Another Kenyan lecturer explained this by the organisational culture and the importance of seniority in it:

There is a lot of bureaucracy especially when it comes to age. I do not see myself as young but they think I am a young person, someone they taught. So you cannot bring them new ideas. It is very serious here.

Initiation of new programmes with Western partner universities seemed to be an exception, however. A professor in Kenya gave an example of a quick launch of such collaboration: ‘it is a very lucrative programme at the Master’s level. Its fee is almost double of what other regular Master’s students pay’.

The fact that African universities are focused on teaching means that the teaching load of individual teachers does not facilitate concentration on research, writing, and production of original course material. A lecturer in Kenya said: ‘because of less staff, the teaching workload is too much. It is very hard to publish’. And a lecturer in Botswana said: ‘although we are trying to focus more on research, we still find ourselves doing a lot of teaching’. Some of the most easily marketed programmes like the ones attracting students from working life were undertaken in a manner that was putting extra strain on the lecturers. A Ghanaian professor lamented:

we just finished the regular program, finished marking, and then they [sandwich programs] started from the middle of June. This will run to the first week of August and in August we are starting the regular program. A university must be based on research but we spend much of our time teaching.

Funding for research was another critical stumbling block. National research funds were small or non-existent. Instead of investing in research universities, in the view of our interviewees, governments had expanded the university network and increased student intake. ‘That rapid expansion means need for increased infrastructure and need to hire enough manpower which we are struggling with’ said a professor in Kenya. Thus, there is

continuing dependence on foreign research funding which often comes with its own development assistance logic and strings attached. A Ghanaian professor commented that they used to have funding for research on elections, but that had ceased ‘because now the funding agencies are saying that Ghana is no longer part of those [least developed] countries which receives funding for research’.

Hence, the double standard, in the opinion of a professor in Kenya, that while publications are a requisite for promotion in the university, ‘the institution does not even pay lip service to research’. With regard to course material, a further problem was the few incentives for the faculty to compile textbooks. As in the international competitive academic world, these were not valued in career promotion. And what was missing in Africa were the markets. A professor in Botswana mentioned that he was working on a textbook on decolonisation, but has not found a publisher ‘because the instinctive reaction of publishers is that there is no market’. A lecturer in the same university told about book projects on the transformation of African society and Botswana society that had ‘died natural deaths’ after a blunt response from potential publishers: ‘The market is not there. Who is going to buy the book?’.

Lack of local markets meant that monographs were published in hardcover by international publishing houses, and were not available for students. A professor said, ‘I am happy that the book will be in the United States Library of Congress, but our people in Botswana do not even know about it’. A lecturer in Kenya told about his experience of searching for a book published in the USA by an African scholar: ‘these African scholars, I go to the university library, their books are not there’.

A lecturer from Ghana described the publication culture as difficult and scholars so frustrated ‘they might decide to just sit back and watch’. Racism was also identified as a factor. According to one Kenyan lecturer:

It is not easy for an African to publish in high impact journals. The publication channels are controlled from the West. The way they prioritise things to be written automatically eliminates a majority of Africans.

Analyses

Scholars in the four countries had similar views of the colonial dominance in higher education, and all were aware of strategies to tackle that dominance. The post-2015 decolonial debates, however, raised little enthusiasm. Since the major changes in the higher education sector had occurred at independence, the content of teaching and research had already for decades been constantly rethought. Interviewees also criticised the debate as being South African, reflecting the uneasiness of Africans outside of South Africa, with its regional superiority and tendency to speak on behalf of the rest of the continent.

The fact that the evolution and status of political science discipline was connected to national politics, to the consolidation or struggles for multiparty democracy, made domestic power structures central for critical thinking. The epistemological dimension of decolonisation was not a major issue, apart from notions that mainstream concepts of political science had to be contextualised to local political systems in teaching. It was also significant that our interviewees did not discuss decolonising perspectives outside of Africa, for instance South American or Asian perspectives. This is not to say that global power structures had gone unnoticed in political science teaching. Quite the contrary, our interviewees

identified political economy as a field where African academics had made important theoretical contributions.

For scholars, the most problematic colonial implications for their work was in the demands of quality, relevance, and marketisation of their teaching, which meant that faculty had to show internationally peer-reviewed excellence, worry about their graduates' employability, and make their teaching attractive to the students. High teaching loads, large classes, unavailable national funding for research, and volatile international funding constrained the ability of scholars to concentrate on research and to transform their research into high impact publications or textbooks. Another concerning issue was the employability of students, as the public sector that used to absorb political science graduates had been shrinking so it had become increasingly difficult for the simultaneously growing numbers of graduates to find work corresponding to their education. Official university strategies' emphasis on national or African content in teaching had resulted in compulsory study modules. But an elective course in Asante political history in Ghana, for instance, was introduced only to test its popularity, as students have preconceived, often colonially-informed, notions of what higher education should be.

In many cases, the hierarchical university bureaucracy prevented or delayed curriculum reforms. However, the differential approach to accepting programmes with Western partners obviously had colonial implications whether this was due to the assumed quality, financial support brought by these partners, or increased income from student fees.

Our interviewees brought up issues of identity and racism in hegemonic academic publication structures, but not so much as themes in teaching. Unlike in South Africa or the Global North, racial imbalance among the students and academic staff was not an issue in their universities. Interviewees did not emphasise pedagogy in general as a tool to decolonise the curriculum, perhaps because the implementation of alternative participatory teaching methods highlighted in the literature was not realistic due to large class sizes. Contrary to the literature, in our interviews, students did not feature as a major force behind curriculum decolonising, except as one more example of its long history as students had protested against the Eurocentrism of their reading lists decades earlier.

We also observed differences between countries. The small size of the academic market was an especially burning problem for the scholars in Botswana with a population of only 2.3 million. In Kenya, inadequate national research funding was explained by the government's decisions to establish new universities as part of its policy of ethno-regional balancing. Efforts to solve the problem of brain drain by decolonising education came up only in Zimbabwe where that problem, too, was very acute because of the economic decline since the early 2000s. Scholars in Ghana appeared to be most concerned about the withering away of foreign support based on development aid.

Conclusions

The decolonisation experiences of political science faculty in Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, and Zimbabwe included success stories of creating new courses and revising reading lists. Unlike in the Global North and South Africa, the primary problems were not epistemological but related to scarcity of resources for research and opportunities to publish the research results for the benefit of further research and learning alike. Challenges included difficulties to find and produce textbooks with locally relevant perspectives and also bureaucratic obstacles to the acceptance of new course content. The faculty bypassed such obstacles by

tailoring their teaching to local contexts and examples in the lecture hall as Gukurume had observed on the decolonisation of sociology in Zimbabwe (Gukurume, 2022). Such practical level aspects of teachers' various attempts to decolonize the curriculum in the lecture room and their actual effects require further research.

The prevailing hegemonic structures of global academia and the subordinate position of African universities in it were evident in the tensions between differing demands of relevance and excellence that marketisation with its measurements, rankings, and competition had brought to university teaching. Quality assurance processes, although national in nature, affected curriculum review, sometimes in the direction of keeping the status quo, but also in pressing faculty to be more competitive, develop international collaboration, and publish internationally. The colonial or decolonial impact of quality assurance standards is another important topic for further research.

The task of teachers in African universities is to celebrate knowledge produced in Africa, not dismiss African university education as colonised education. That is why Mkandawire's (1999) recommendations of strengthening African political science discourse and research through continental platforms, journals, associations, and support for research co-operation have obvious momentum and deserve to be promoted inside and outside of Africa.

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Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study is stored on Uppsala University's file server. It is not openly available due to the sensitive nature of the interviews. Further information and conditions for access upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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