

The politics of university curriculum decolonising in neoliberalised higher education: a semi-systematic literature review

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ABSTRACT

This article critically reports insights from my semi-systematic review of university curriculum decolonising (UCD) literature conducted in English and Portuguese between 2023 and 2026. The semi-systematic approach allowed to combine systematic search of the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), Scopus, and Web of Science Core Collection (WoS) databases, with purposive search to further trace specific themes. The analysis adopted a *politics of UCD* approach, drawing from two strands of thought: *geopolitics of knowledge* and *politics of education*. Thus framed, two broad themes are discussed: globally shared theoretico-conceptual referents of UCD and particular, marginalised themes and contestations; and differently scaled options, actorness and constraints in/for UCD praxis generated by individuals' and universities' embeddedness within the global structure of coloniality, reinforced by the neoliberalisation of higher education. The conclusion elicits elements in/for future scholar-activist UCD research and praxis.

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Introduction

Since the 2015/2016 *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall* protests in South Africa, higher education decolonisation has become a rapidly growing field of study across disciplines worldwide (Adefila et al. 2022; Shahjahan et al. 2022). In this, centring marginalised knowledges through university curriculum decolonising (UCD) is considered pivotal, as *one* (and only one) strategically critical moment or site in decolonising the (neoliberalised) academy, societies and knowledges at large. Curriculum in this context refers to the formal curriculum, and the importance attached to it in the UCD literature rests on the premise that the curriculum is political, a 'mechanism of power' (Adefila et al. 2022, 270) that seemingly objectively establishes and legitimates what is deemed valid, relevant, and authoritative knowledge. Thus, the curriculum is central in social and epistemic reproduction, specifically the reproduction of knowledge hierarchies, i.e. the subordination and marginalisation (or not) of non-Western knowledges (Crilly, Panesar, and Suka-Bill 2020; Dei 2016). Curriculum decolonising then 'relates to what and whose knowledge and ways of being are included in education programmes' (Le Grange et al. 2020, 29).

This article critically reports insights from a 'semi-systematic' (Snyder 2019) review of UCD literature which I conducted in English and Portuguese between 2023 and 2026. The analysis adopted

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(what I term) a *politics of UCD* lens, which draws from two strands of thought: ‘geopolitics of knowledge’ and ‘politics of education’. *Geopolitics of knowledge*, on the one hand, expresses the relationship between knowledge production, power and geography in the sense that certain places produce more influential knowledges than others and that knowledge is always situated; that is, it is generated and disseminated from a particular place (context) and positionality (Dussel, Haraway, in Grosfoguel 2007, 213). By asking who generates what knowledge where, when, for what purpose and in whose interest (Mignolo 2011, 119; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 492), a geopolitics of knowledge lens makes visible the global racialised economic and epistemic hierarchical structuring or core/periphery relations generated through ‘colonial difference’ (Othering, Whiteness), i.e. the (especially Anglo-Euro/American) North/West’s self-positioning as a producer and centre of authoritative, modern universal knowledge and valuable credentials while culturally, epistemically and linguistically inferiorising those deemed uncivilised, backward, or underdeveloped (Grosfoguel 2007; Mignolo 2011). The university curriculum, as Shahjahan (2021) notes, is one element in the geopolitics of knowledge, integral to globalised ‘policy templates stemming from Euro-American contexts and encompassing neoliberal logic and secular notions of progress/development’ (698).

Politics of education, on the other hand, asks at what spatial scale, by whom (what state and non-state actors) and in whose interest education politics and practices are determined, carried out, problematised and governed (Dale and Robertson 2009; Robertson 2010; Robertson and Dale 2015). While it is beyond the scope here to re-visit the contested discussions of the human geography concept of scale (see, inter alia, and in relation to higher education, Martin 2017; Muhr 2016; Robertson 2010), two assumptions are key: that scales and scalar configurations, like other spatialities such as ‘place’, ‘network’, ‘territory’ and ‘positionality’, are socially constructed, i.e. scales are not pre-given and fixed but permanently (re)constructed through social action, including knowledge production (Soja in Martin 2017, 7; Robertson 2010, 24); and that relatively stable scalar structures and hierarchies, as outcomes of political projects and struggle, can be disrupted through strategic rescaling practices and processes (‘bypassing’ of scales or ‘scale jumping’), for instance via alliance-building between groups and places across higher education disciplines and institutions (Martin 2017, 11–12; Muhr 2021, 17–18). A politics of education lens on the problematic underscores that individual and collective UCD praxis is profoundly embedded within – enabled and/or constrained by – other scales of the regime of global coloniality, defined as ‘the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations, produced by colonial cultures and structures in the modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system’ (Grosfoguel 2007, 219). Methodologically, a politics of UCD approach allows categorising and analysing actors, relations and processes at and across multiple scales, which with respect to UCD includes: the body and individual; the classroom; university faculties, departments, research centres and programmes; the university as an administrative unit; and national, international, transnational and global scales produced by neoliberal higher education commodification, including policy-making and managerial, regulatory, accreditation and auditing regimes.

As an approach to decolonising knowledge or disrupting the hegemonic Anglo-centric geopolitics of knowledge production, this bilingual, cross-disciplinary study heeds Shahjahan et al.’s (2022, 101) call for improving linguistic plurality (beyond English) in higher education literature review. It extends previous reviews engaging with UCD (Adefila et al. 2022; Chikoko 2021; Guzmán Valenzuela 2021; Kester et al. 2021; Regmi 2025; Ruta et al. 2022; Shahjahan et al. 2022; Tight 2024) by developing the politics of UCD framework so as to transcend mere descriptive mapping, synthesising and reporting, whilst aiming to conscientise and provoke decolonial action. The research process started with the following two broad exploratory review questions (RQs):

RQ1: To what extent is UCD an emerging global field of study and where do what discussions take place?

RQ2: How is UCD theoretically and conceptually framed?

The next section explains my literature gathering and analysis method and procedure. The subsequent sections systematise two major themes: *Politics of UCD I* develops as a critical dialogue between globally-shared theoretico-conceptual referents and particular, less visible or marginalised themes and contestations; *Politics of UCD II* explores differentially scaled options, actorness and constraints in UCD praxis generated by individuals' and universities' embeddedness within the global structure of coloniality, reinforced by the neoliberalising of higher education. On this basis, the conclusion elicits elements in/for future scholar-activist UCD research and praxis.

Methodology

While *systematic*, positivist literature reviews typically synthesise findings from research reports in a particular field (e.g. health/medicine) for problem-solving-based decision-making (Page et al. 2021), Snyder's (2019) 'semi-systematic' approach is exploratory and interdisciplinary to generate an overview of a defined topic, conceptually map a knowledge field, and substantiate research agendas for further primary research. While the strict protocol of systematic reviews impedes extending the original sample, the semi-systematic approach allows integrating different types of literature (e.g. empirical, theoretical, reviews) and complementing systematic with purposive search to trace specific, relevant themes (Snyder 2019, 337). No claim to objectivity is made, however a transparent research strategy and protocol seek to ensure trustworthiness. Thematic analysis has precedence over comparing (Snyder 2019, 337). In contrast to conventional positivist reporting that separates findings from discussion, I develop a thematically structured reflexive 'analytic narrative' (Braun and Clarke 2022, 130–132).

Literature search and analysis

The Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection (WOS) databases were systematically searched in English and Portuguese. In the context I am writing from, English and Portuguese are the official academic languages, and Scopus and WOS are the most authoritative indexes. Including the Brazil-based SciELO enabled me to increase the chances of identifying articles in Portuguese beyond the Anglo-centric Scopus and WOS. Searches were conducted in February 2023 using a single Boolean string for all three databases:

(universi* OR "higher education" OR "tertiary education" OR "educação superior" OR "educação terciária")
AND (decoloni* OR descoloni*) AND (curricul* OR currícul*)

Truncation broadened the search and allowed for variations in both languages. For example, *universi** captures English *university/ies* and *universitarian* as well as Portuguese *universidade/s* and *universitário/a*. All searches were limited to title, abstract and keywords.

Figure 1 depicts the process through which the 952 records generated through the systematic search were reduced to a corpus of 87 highly relevant publications. The creation of *Database A* included systematisation of bibliographic information (see S1, supplemental online material) for quantitative analysis (re RQ1). This quantitative analysis confirms (see Adefila et al. 2022; Shahjahan et al. 2022) that UCD has become a rapidly growing (Figure 2) and global cross-disciplinary, albeit geographically unevenly distributed field of study, with concentrations of studies on South Africa (215 articles), the UK (51), and Australia (34) (see S2, supplemental online material). The 463 *Database B* texts were retrieved or obtained on request from the author/s. The 87 highly relevant or particularly meaningful *Database C* publications (for a full list, see S3, supplemental online material) provide the base for this and related analyses. The applied inclusion criteria were: (i) journal article or book chapter in (ii) English or Portuguese (iii) definitively published up to 2022 inclusive (no start date was set) (iv) focusing on university education; and (b) meaningfully engaging with the *university/curriculum/decolonising* nexus, i.e. not merely cursory engagement, which I manually checked using the search function in the electronic versions of all accessed full texts. Thematic

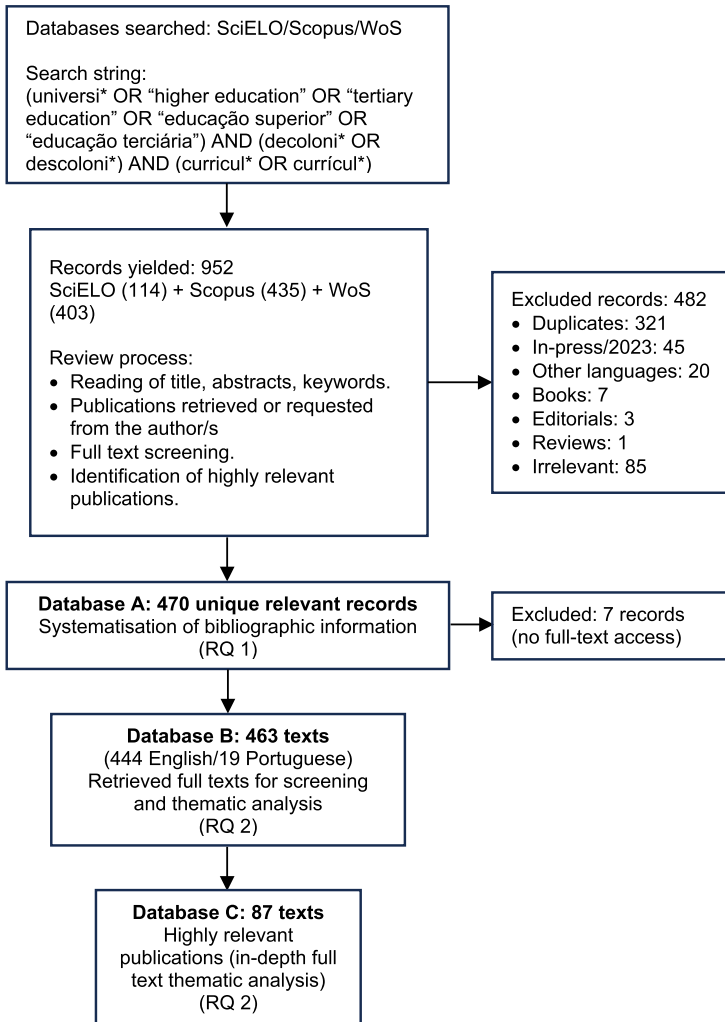


Figure 1. Systematic literature search and selection process.

Scopus/WoS/SciELO Indexed Articles and Book Chapters (n = 470)

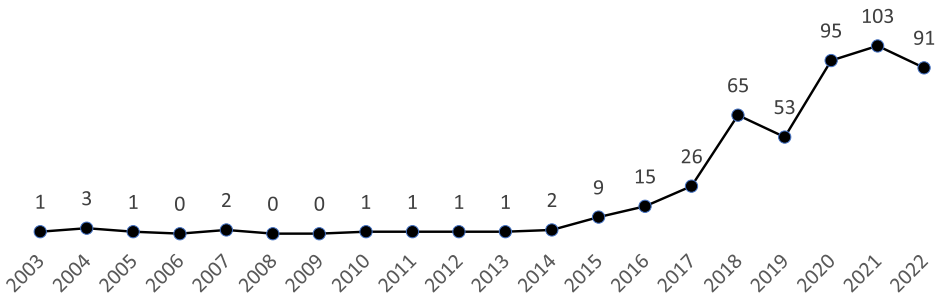


Figure 2. UCD publications increase over time (2003–2022).

analysis involved excerpting key statements from each text and systematising these in separate Word documents to identify patterns. Purposive literature search throughout this process (e.g. checking of references; key words-based search) followed the same eligibility criteria as the systematic search, except for the restriction of the publishing year.

Eight relevant literature reviews surfaced, five from the systematic (Chikoko 2021; Guzmán Valenzuela 2021; Kester et al. 2021; Ruta et al. 2022; Shahjahan et al. 2022) and three from the purposive search (Adefila et al. 2022; Regmi 2025; Tight 2024). That all were published since 2021 underscores the growing prominence of UCD as a knowledge field. Inspired by what Grant and Booth (2009) term ‘umbrella’ or ‘overarching’ reviews, the first part of the following section synthesises globally-shared theoretico-conceptual referents of UCD (re RQ 2) aggregated from these reviews as a basis for visibilising and centring particular theoretico-conceptual themes and contestations.

The politics of UCD I: theoretico-conceptual framings

The global decolonising movement challenges the structural intertwinedness of knowledge with the university and colonialism/imperialism, arguing that the historical exclusion and the liberal ideology’s binarising othering (inferiorising, dehumanising, subalternising) of non-Western knowledges, cultures and people are perpetuated through neoliberal higher education governance and internationalisation practices (rankings, accreditation, standardisation). While empirically meanings and actualisations of higher education decolonisation are place-dependent (Adefila et al. 2022, 262; Chikoko 2021, 22; Shahjahan et al. 2022, 82–83), key universally shared referents include: (a) post-1945 de/post-colonial notions of *neo-colonialism* (Kwame Nkrumah), *Africanisation vs decolonisation* (Frantz Fanon), *Orientalism/Orientalising* and *cultural imperialism* (Edward Said), *Eurocentrism* (Samir Amin), and *decolonising the mind* (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o); (b) dependency theory and world systems analysis (Immanuel Wallerstein); (c) the Latin American modernity/coloniality/decoloniality network’s *coloniality of power* or *regime of global coloniality* (Aníbal Quijano, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Ramón Grosfoguel, Enrique Dussel, Walter Mignolo); (d) liberation pedagogy (Paulo Freire, bell hooks); (e) *intellectual imperialism* (Syed Hussein Alatas) and *academic dependency* (Syed Farid Alatas); (f) *epistemicide* (Boaventura de Sousa Santos); (g) *Indigenous methodologies* (Linda Tuhiwai Smith); and (h) contemporaries like Gurminder K. Bhambra, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. Caution, however, should be exercised with attributing concepts/ideas to names as some prominent decolonialists themselves, often well-positioned in Western universities, have been accused of ‘extractive colonialism’ by appropriating South ‘epistemic raw materials’ (intellectual contributions) without acknowledging the original thinkers (Regmi 2025, 777).

Fundamental to understanding the calls for UCD is the distinction between *decolonisation* as formal national liberation from juridical-political and territorial colonisation, and *decoloniality* as disrupting coloniality: the latter referring to the perpetuation of (neo)colonial structures and cultures in/through the modern racial capitalist global system established over the past 500 years, involving states and governments, international institutions (e.g. IMF, NATO, World Bank), and non-state actors (e.g. trans-/multinational corporations, NGOs). This regime of global coloniality is a pluri-scalar historical structure of co-constitutive, intersectional oppressions, injustices and exploitations – cultural, economic, epistemic, gendered, geographical, linguistic, military, patriarchal, political, racial, sexual, spiritual, territorial. Much of the UCD literature subsumes this intersectionality as class/gender/race dialectic, and decolonising then is associated with struggles for global social and cognitive justice (Adefila et al. 2022; Chikoko 2021; Kester et al. 2021).

Against this general backdrop, I now turn to particular theoretico-conceptual themes and contestations marginalised within the field of UCD. First, frequently intersectionality, especially in empirical work, is reduced to the categories of race/sex/gender. Here, my analysis coincides with Harris and Patton’s (2019) findings of most of the higher education research literature using intersectionality

as a ‘buzzword’, disconnecting identity from socio-historical systems/structures and tending to eliminate class from the analysis. Class, however, as manifested in cost-driven exclusion, has been central to the South African protests from the outset, as expressed in the 2015/2016 demand for ‘Free, quality, decolonised education’ (Matthews 2020, 321). Rarely discussed in the UCD literature, Van Jaarsveldt, De Vries, and Kroukamp (2019) make the inseparability of the material (political-economic) and cultural (identity) dimensions explicit (which to me is the essential contribution of the intersectionality approach) in the South African higher education decolonising struggles, where in 2015 university workers and students united in anti-privatisation protests.

Second, the inextricability of social and epistemic injustices is manifested in the so-called *attainment, achievement* or *awarding gap*. Mostly by reference to the UK, a case for UCD is made on the basis of research showing that a white-centric, non-diversified curriculum is an important factor in driving under-achievement and drop-out, and in creating barriers to career progression of ethnically under-represented students and academics (e.g. Crilly, Panesar, and Suka-Bill 2020; Laing 2021). With respect to Canada, Ruta et al. (2022) argue that UCD, in combination with positive Indigenous professional role models, enhances the recruitment and retention of Indigenous engineering students, and again in the UK context Hall et al.’s (2021) argument for UCD draws attention also to attainment gaps between groups of home and international students. Quite uniquely, Lockett’s (2016) inquiry into UCD and the persistently high failure rates of Black higher education students in South Africa transcends race reductionism by also considering class in terms of material, social and cultural capital. The attainment gap ‘narratives’, however, are also rejected for their underlying individualistic “‘deficit” presumptions’ that downplay systemic/structural oppressions and may ‘perpetuate racialisation rather than address it’ (Raza Memon and Jivraj 2020, 475–476).

Third, the oft-cited assertion that decolonising is not a ‘metaphor’ for ‘civil and human rights-based social justice projects’ (Tuck and Yang cited in Stanek 2019, 6) is ‘at a certain tension’ with the broader intersectional framing of decoloniality (Stanek 2019, 6). It is highlighted that Tuck and Yang speak from a distinct USA settler *decolonisation* positionality concerned with land (rather than conscientisation and decolonising the mind), whereas a *decoloniality* lens would (have to) consider intersectional oppressions and injustices, depending on context and particularity (Dei 2016, 28; Hall et al. 2021, 903; Stanek 2019, 6). While these critiques do not undermine the importance of land in/for decolonisation especially in settler colonial contexts, rather than roundly dismissing social justice and inclusivity agendas, for Dei (2016) a more urgent task is to think about how *critical* approaches to these may contribute to fighting the liberal co-option of decolonisation as it is becoming ‘mainstreamed’ (27).

Fourth, critical theory, however, is critiqued for its rooting in Western Enlightenment’s ‘epistemic universalisms and exclusions’ (Walsh in Stanek 2019, 5). Ideas like *emancipation*, used in liberal and Marxist theories alike, should be replaced by ‘liberation’ (Mignolo 2007, 454–457). The 2016 *#LiberateMyDegree* campaign in the UK echoes this, viewing UCD as a continuation of the ‘liberation from the legacy of colonialism’ since the 1950s (Adefila et al. 2022, 267), as do calls for ‘curriculum liberation’ (Crilly, Panesar, and Suka-Bill 2020, 4) and ‘liberatory knowledge systems’ (Kessi, Marks, and Ramugondo 2021, 1). While critical pedagogies and associated ideas of conscientisation, critical consciousness and empowerment for social transformation through liberation from internalised oppressions are part and parcel of decolonial thought and praxis (Chikoko 2021; Kester et al. 2021; Laing 2021; Shahjahan et al. 2022), the terms *critical pedagogy* and *decolonial pedagogy* should not be used interchangeably (Zembylas 2018). Accordingly, *decolonising pedagogies* transcend critical pedagogies by explicitly confronting, disrupting and ‘dis-orienting’ (Leonardo 2018) Eurocentric knowledge and curricula, by actively dismantling colonising practices, structures and orderings (Kester et al. 2021; Mogstad and Tse 2018; Walsh in Stanek 2019; Zembylas 2018).

Fifth, the widely referenced notion of *epistemicide* as the colonial erasure of non-Western knowledges and ideas has been contested. Kumalo (2020), speaking from/for South Africa, rejects this ‘claim’ to a ‘complete annihilation’ of Indigenous/Black knowledge systems for exacerbating ‘epistemic harms’ and ‘erasure and self-negation’ (28). Hlatshwayo (2022), by reference to Kumalo,

reiterates that ‘our knowledges were (and to some extent still are) largely hidden/silenced/marginalised/oppressed/Othered, *but* they are still there – they exist; we know them, and we need to recentre them and reprioritise them in our curriculum design/imaginings’ (11, emphasis in original). Throughout the UCD literature, *recentring*, to which Hlatshwayo points, usually conjoins with *decentring*, suggesting that decentring the supposedly neutral and universal Western epistemic traditions and recentring marginalised ones are one and the same process (a kind of zero-sum game). Sibanda (2021), however, differentiates *recentring* as an inversion of knowledge hierarchies (centring peripheral knowledges thus marginalising Western, hegemonic knowledges) from *decentring* as destabilising or disrupting the coloniality of knowledge, ‘until there is no specific centre of enunciation’ in a plurality of knowledges (185). This differentiated view inherently associates decentring with a *multiplicity, ecology, plurality or parity* of knowledges as key premises and objectives of UCD.

Sixth, the fact that UCD entails a lifelong process of *unlearning/relearning*, of (re)becoming or reconstructing subjectivity, resonates throughout the literature, attributing this idea to contemporary decolonialists, if referenced at all. Unacknowledged is the historical-philosophical depth of unlearning/relearning and the neoliberal usurpation of *unlearning* (Papastephanou and Drousioti 2024), as well as its actualisation in/through/for decolonial praxis, as in the Amawtay Wasi Cross-Cultural University in Ecuador (Universidad Intercultural Amawtay Wasi 2004) and at the state scale in Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution (Muhr and Verger 2006, 176). At the scale of the body, for Asher (2010), speaking as a ‘woman academic of colour’, such ‘reworking of the self is also the process of emerging from dehumanisation, unlearning repression ... that the self unlearns the internalisation of the oppressor’ (397, 398) – a process of ‘psychological liberation’ (Rasool and Harms-Smith 2021, 65). Integral to a decolonial pedagogy, unlearning as ‘transformational learning experience’ involves deconstructing binary thinking (e.g. primitivism/modernism) in the construction of ‘ontological pluralism’ (Bullen and Flavell 2017, 588). From educators this requires ‘the courage to undertake critical reflection and embrace vulnerability’ (Gatwiri 2018, 183), ‘to seriously and earnestly examine our own blind spots, biases and exclusions’ (Mogstad and Tse 2018, 60). Thus, un-/relearning is an ‘individual responsibility ... from which no one is exempt because even those leading the decolonial project take in coloniality on a daily basis’ (Le Grange 2021, abstract). What these discussions add up to is that UCD implies ‘decolonising the self’ (Wimpenny et al. 2022, 2502), ‘intellectual, emotional, spiritual re-existence’ (Raza Memon and Jivraj 2020, 478), and/or ‘individual liberation’ (Le Grange 2021, 6), which may require educators to ‘“delink” from unhelpful knowledge systems and practices and creatively reimagine how modules might look’ (Rasool and Harms-Smith 2021, 61, 67).

Politics of UCD II: scaled options, actorness and constraints

This second theme emerged from the wide acknowledgement of universities’ and individuals’ embeddedness within the global neoliberal structure of coloniality, and the tensions, conflicts and constraints this generates for individual and collective UCD action. Scaled manifestations and mechanisms of coloniality in terms of cultural political economic structures and discourses in higher education (cf. Robertson and Dale 2015, 156) include the association of quality and relevance in the competitive-corporate university with Western knowledge, skills and competences for global marketing and individual employability (Hlatshwayo 2022); the shift to a ‘digital economy’ that prioritises Western knowledge deemed of ‘utilitarian value’ to global capitalism (‘innovation’), rendering Indigenous knowledges irrelevant (Koopman and Koopman 2021); and neoliberal internationalisation, which advances ‘neo-colonial interests’ through curriculum standardisation with the standards (‘excellence’) set by Western elite (so-called ‘world-class’) universities (Gyamera and Burke 2018).

Options for and practices of UCD within this structure are often framed by Stein and Andreotti’s (in, inter alia, Abu Moghli and Kadiwal 2021; Chikoko 2021; Shain et al. 2021; Zembylas 2018) pluri-scalar categorisation of approaches to university decolonising: a *diversity-enhancing*

individualistic approach, through isolated interventions, especially affirmative action (increasing minority representation; targeted scholarships) and inclusion of decolonial literature, topics, or modules in existing curricula, termed an ‘add-on’ approach; an *institutional approach* which selectively addresses aspects of oppressive practices (e.g. integrated curriculum decolonising; renaming of buildings; ethical investment); and a *systemic approach* where the university becomes a place from where to drive its decolonisation and the transformation of the inherently violent and unsustainable colonial-capitalist structures (e.g. using university resources for transformation-seeking projects). The following sub-sections discuss three sub-themes regarding scaled options, actorness and constraints in UCD praxis: the add-on approach; individual academic agency; and universities’ responses to calls for UCD.

The add-on approach

The UCD literature, irrespective of place, advocates for institutional and systemic transformation, adamantly opposing the add-on approach as quick-fix bad practice: simply inserting non-Western authors and/or decolonial topics and readings into existing curricula, commonly at the end of a course or as isolated, elective stand-alones (sometimes referred to as ‘ghettoisation’), leaves the hegemonic mode of knowledge (re)production, colonialist value-system and oppressive power structures in place. As Le Grange et al. (2020) note, ‘adding African authors to modules or reading lists does not necessarily equate to decolonisation since it does not decentre western knowledge’ (38). Two related discussions are most salient here. First, the perceived add-on perversion of UCD is found to emanate from the liberal conceptions of *diversity* and *inclusion*, which avoid specifically naming and addressing racism and colonisation, and function to stave off structural transformation. Critiques highlight that liberal diversity purports ‘pluralistic harmony’, however ‘diversity is tolerated only as long as it does not challenge the dominant cultural norms and social order’ (Le Grange 2018, 11); that ‘diversity’ has become part of neoliberal university branding, ‘but only if this multicultural difference is predictable, packageable, tamed and marketable and allows for continuing the processes of division, hierarchy and classification’ (Vlachou and Tlostanova 2023, 218). By contrast, an ‘ethic of difference’ would be attentive to the fact that multicultural difference is the product of historical asymmetrical power relations (coloniality), while a ‘politics of difference’ approach would facilitate dialogical interrogation and negotiation of competing values, meanings and representations (Rizvi and Walsh cited in Le Grange 2018, 11). Consonantly, Watt (2016) alerts us to the fact that liberal ‘inclusion’ merely means inclusion of ‘the tolerated sub-altern’ into the culture of ‘the tolerant normal’, thus perpetuating othering while reinforcing the hegemonic normative order (14–15). A critical decolonial reading of ‘inclusion’ would mean constructing new spaces through a ‘multiplicity of views, ideas, knowledge and practice’; after all, how could ‘an existing problem’ be addressed ‘by simply adding to what already exists when what already exists is the source of the problem to begin with?’ (Dei 2016, 36).

Consequently, second, UCD is associated with an *integrated* curriculum; one that embraces an organic, transversal approach as a means of fundamentally re-constituting and re-articulating of all curricular components across modules, disciplinary canons and the entire university. An integrated curriculum pursues ‘co-existent representations of knowledge’ (Nurse-Bray cited in Laing 2021, 14), ‘a rethinking of the theories that frame the curriculum’ (Le Grange et al. 2020, 38), and ‘thinks from within those ways of being that challenge Western conceptions’ (Kester et al. 2021, 156–157). To this end, decoloniality needs ‘to be embedded in the curriculum from the first year’ (Laing 2021, 13). Subsequently, the integrated curriculum is relational, and *dialogical*: rather than replacing one knowledge system by another, decolonising as decentring seeks to generate critical dialogue between Eurocentric, Western-canonical and othered knowledges (thinkers, ideas, theories, epistemes, methodologies), which is integral to unlearning/relearning processes and constructing a pluriversal knowledge system. Certainly, proponents of delinking, such as Ntloedibe (2019), speaking from South Africa, insist on UCD as ‘utter rejection’ and ‘replacement’ of Western knowledge/s.

However, powerful arguments support the dialogical approach so as to ‘critically examine the cultural and historical process in which certain texts and authors are canonised, while other contributions are deemed insignificant or altogether silenced’ (Mogstad and Tse 2018, 57). Assimilating Western knowledge is viewed as desirable ‘to be able to interrogate it’ (Leonardo 2018, 14), to read Western canons “‘against the grain’; to challenge and expand them’ (Lockett 2016, 424). Crucially, the ‘knowledge of the powerful’ needs to be made accessible ‘to all people’ as withholding this from the colonised ultimately disempowers them (Vorster and Quinn 2017, 39). Thus, the dialogical approach also counters binarising romanticising/demonising, of *Indigenous knowledges = good/Western knowledges = bad*. Such a holistic, organic approach to UCD not only exposes the add-on approach as undialogical but also challenges its inherent individualising tendency to shift the sole responsibility for UCD to the individual teacher. As Leibowitz insists (Leibowitz 2017), UCD ‘cannot happen in a piecemeal fashion, where one or two individuals tinker with their module frameworks – rather, it requires all role players to become involved’ (94).

The individual scale: academic agency

The structural position of the decolonising academic can be highly conflictual and psychologically straining: a ‘struggle with self and against the colonising effects of a neoliberal order’ in which the academic is both ‘a victim and a perpetrator’ (Le Grange 2021, 16); an ‘existential dilemma of trying to defeat, transform, or change a system within which one is deeply embedded, and toward which one has an ambivalent attitude’ (Ackah 2021, 193). The experience-based UCD literature reveals a set of mutually reinforcing dynamics and mechanisms the individual has to navigate in the globally neoliberalised university, independent of geographical place: (a) Individual dispositions (principles, commitments), often related to academics’ own class and cultural positions (privileged or not) (Leibowitz 2017, 95–96), which influence the willingness or capacity to engage in critical self-reflection, unlearning/relearning, and challenge power structures – a process widely viewed as involving frustration, demotivation, distress and anger. This can generate resistance (e.g. on ideological grounds or simply laziness), or inertia or apathy caused by uncertainties (e.g. unfamiliarity with or inaccessibility of othered knowledges) and cognitive barriers, such as the sincere conviction that established canons and onto-epistemologies (such as positivism, Macedo de Lucas et al. 2026) are the true and only relevant knowledge and ways of knowledge generation; (b) precarious employment, which undermines self-confidence and autonomy/authority in curriculum (re)design and long-term commitment to the taught course, as well as collaboration and alliance-building; (c) competition and power asymmetries among academics, which may take the form of disciplinary disciplining (using the idea of the established canon to block decolonising initiatives); (d) lack of time due to workload; (e) administrative/managerial barriers, such as fixed timetables, determined assessment and accreditation schemes, and an unsupportive institutional context (e.g. absence of supportive leadership); and (f) direct student resistance, on emotional grounds as decolonial contents and pedagogies may be confrontational or unsettling, especially among students of the dominant culture, but also cognitive resistance driven by concerns about future employability in the global capitalist labour market (insistence on instrumentalist skills and hegemonic canons). Anger, denial, distress and frustration among students can drive hostility against teachers. These challenges are aggravated by large-group and online teaching and generate fear of negative student evaluations. Within such (con)straining contexts, the otherwise discredited add-on approach actually can offer ‘an opportunity for faculty ... who might lack the time, institutional support, or expertise to develop a more broadly infused course’ (Ward 2007, 111).

The university scale: institutional responses

How universities respond to calls for UCD is receiving growing attention, although much of this knowledge is scattered throughout more experience-based rather than research-based publications.

However, it was possible to identify two systematic empirical studies that directly address the issue in South Africa (Le Grange et al.'s 2020) and England (Shain et al. 2021), involving four and nine universities, respectively. Generally, while institutional 'inertia' has been observed (Hall et al. 2021, 912–913), three broad categories of universities' proactive tactics and strategies in response to UCD-demands emerged. These may be deployed simultaneously, and apparently irrespective of socio-geographical location, which I interpret as illustrating the universally deep embeddedness and complicity of the neoliberalised university in the regime of global coloniality: (a) *Dismissal*, through active non-engagement (ignoring), denial and refusal (e.g. UCD is not necessary or already ongoing) (Ackah 2021; Hall et al. 2021; Le Grange et al. 2020; Shain et al. 2021); (b) *containment*, through 'performative gestures' (Ahmed cited in Ackah 2021, 199) including tokenistic or cosmetic changes (e.g. renaming of buildings without structural changes; add-on approach); 'muting' and 'side-lining' (Rasool and Harms-Smith 2021) and 'divide and rule' tactics (e.g. stigmatising decolonial student activists) (Shain et al. 2021); and delaying tactics (e.g. providing budgets for seminar series without further commitments) to diffuse protest, pacify and avoid reputation (income) loss (Ackah 2021; Shain et al. 2021); (c) *neoliberal co-option*, as an opportunistic, imposed senior management-led strategy for marketing and (re)branding in the struggle over comparative advantages in competitive global academic capitalism, undermining decolonisation's 'revolutionary impulse' (Le Grange et al. 2020) by mainstreaming decolonising campaigns into the established neoliberal diversity, inclusion, multiculturalism and internationalisation discourses and practices (Abu Moghli and Kadiwal 2021; Estermann, Tavares, and Gomes 2017; Hall et al. 2021; Laing 2021; Morreira et al. 2020; Raza Memon and Jivraj 2020; Shain et al. 2021).

Neoliberal co-option appears as the emerging scenario, in which the responsibility for UCD is being individualised – that is, imposed on the individual academic. For example, in South Africa 'transformation and decoloniality have become institutionalised as key performance indicators within the contours of neoliberal accountability, surveillance and performance regimes' (Maistry 2022, 3–4). Likewise, in the UK, initiatives like the celebrated *Diversity Mark Award* (diversification of reading lists and library collections) (Adewumi et al. 2022), technically based on the add-on approach, pave the way for another neoliberal 'tick-box' staff performance indicator (Shain et al. 2021, 928) within the 'quality metrics' (e.g. number of Indigenous authors on a reading list) (Bullen and Flavell 2017, 586) and customer satisfaction rationales (Crilly, Panesar, and Suka-Bill 2020, 13–14).

Conclusion

The politics of UCD help to methodologically grasp why even in South Africa and the UK, where calls for UCD have been most persistent and militant, UCD efforts 'often result in piecemeal outcomes' (Ackah 2021, 198) and why real structural/systemic change has not materialised (Le Grange et al. 2020; Rasool and Harms-Smith 2021; Shain et al. 2021). Instead, neoliberal co-option of UCD perverts a liberatory call into a further tool in/for the 'repressive accountability and surveillance machinery' (Maistry 2022, 11). While the principal or sole responsibility for UCD is imposed on the individual teacher, UCD as an 'ethical imperative' (Morreira et al. 2020, 5) is outrightly dismissed as UCD is turned into a value-adding ('quality') factor in universities' struggle for comparative advantage in globally competitive academic capitalism.

The literature analysed in this review points to two, to date only incipiently engaged with directions in/for future scholar-activist UCD research and praxis. On the one hand, at the scale of the body, which concerns the question of *how* to decolonise oneself. Two approaches identified in my review provide distinct entry points; Le Grange's (2021) autoethnographic method, and Wimpeny et al.'s (2022) collaborative analytics methodology. On the other hand, more systematic research into universities' responses to calls for UCD would be desirable, particularly regarding neoliberal co-option and potentially accompanying institutional oppression of UCD activism (of

individuals, programmes and departments, see Dei 2016, 35; Shain et al. 2021, 929). In this respect, pluri-scalar analyses may contribute to conceiving counter-co-option strategies (cf. Muhr 2021) beyond isolated institution-based action, for constructing ‘a decolonial space for resistance as re-existence’ (Raza Memon and Jivraj 2020) or ‘a new geopolitics of knowledge’ (Estermann, Tavares, and Gomes 2017, 25). To this end, Shahjahan et al. (2022) propose transnational and intersectional alliances-building via global scholarly ‘communicating or theorising with each other’ (104). Others, in stronger recognition that UCD merely is one moment within a larger decolonial struggle, and that the fundamental systemic transformation sought requires transcending academia and rescaling action (from the individual and intra-institutional to inter-institutional, national, inter- and transnational and global scales), advocate for ‘Pan-African transnationalism’ and alliances with ‘progressive’ governments that have been promoting (higher) education decolonisation, such as the Cuban (Grenon 2025) and the Venezuelan (Domené-Painenao et al. 2026), in the context of South-South cooperation, ‘to increase South–South partnership for more equitable knowledge production’ (Abu Moghli and Kadiwal 2021, 12).

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