



# Decolonisation of the Curriculum: An Evaluation of Higher Education Qualifications Registered on the National Qualifications Framework

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**Abstract:** The notion of decolonising the curriculum started in 2015/2016 when the #FeesMustfall movement started and has been at the center of higher education discourse in South Africa. Research papers interrogate conceptions of decolonisation, inclusive curriculum and the decolonisation of the curriculum. Numerous challenges were highlighted by these researchers in developing a more inclusive curriculum to address the decolonisation of the curriculum. The challenges relating to a decolonised inclusive curriculum includes what should be taught, who should teach, who is taught, and the relevance of the curriculum to the world of work that should include prescribed learning, culture and values. An analysis of qualifications registered on the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework provides

insights whether higher education institutions address the decolonisation of the curriculum. All higher education institutions are required to submit their programmes for accreditation to the Council on Higher Education who, as the Quality Council for higher education qualifications, recommends the qualifications for registration on the National Qualifications Framework. This paper provides an analysis of whether qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework address the concept of decolonisation of the curriculum.

**Keywords:** Decolonisation, curriculum, qualifications, Africanisation. Afrocentric

## 1 Introduction

The decolonisation of the curriculum started in 2015/2016 when the #FeesMustfall movement started which has since been at the center of higher education discourse in South Africa. Research papers (Mbembe, 2016; Heleta, 2016; Connell, 2016; Koopman & du Toit, 2017; Council on Higher Education, 2017; Almeida & Kumalo, 2018; Betts, 2019; Schutte, 2019; Olivier, 2019; Sibanda, 2021; Fomunyan, 2023) interrogate conceptions of decolonisation, inclusive curriculum and the decolonisation of the curriculum. These researchers highlighted challenges in developing a more inclusive curriculum to address the decolonisation of the curriculum. The challenges relating to a decolonised inclusive curriculum includes what should be taught, who should teach, who is taught, and the relevance of the

curriculum to the world of work that should include prescribed learning, culture and values, and this should reflect in the qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

The purpose of this presentation is to explore (i) the concept of decolonisation and how this is reflected in qualifications registered in the NQF, and (ii) to analyse if qualifications registered on the NQF support the concepts of decolonisation, Africanisation or the advancement of indigenous knowledge.

## **2 The Concept of Decolonisation**

It is not uncommon to find research articles about “decolonisation”, “inclusive curriculum” and “Africanisation” after the #FeesMustfall movement in 2015. Researchers (Mbembe, 2016; Heleta, 2016; Connell, 2016; Koopman & du Toit 2017; Council on Higher Education, 2017; Almeida & Kumalo, 2018; Betts, 2018; Schutte, 2019; Olivier, 2019; Sibanda, 2021; Fomunyam, 2023) widely interrogate conceptions of decolonisation, inclusive curriculum and the decolonisation of the curriculum. South African universities focused on changing the curriculum to be more Afrocentric, changing staff and student demographics as well as renaming public spaces. How will we know if real changes took place? We first need to consider concepts relating to decolonisation and the decolonisation of the curriculum before we can explore if qualifications

registered on the National Qualifications Framework contribute to the decolonisation of the curriculum.

The term “decolonisation” needs a “*rigorous definition*”, but it is difficult as there are many debates about the precise meaning of the term (Von Bismarck, 2012). Tuck & Young (2012) noticed how easily the language of decolonisation has been adopted into education without a clear understanding of what decolonisation is and indicated that to understand “decolonisation”, one needs to understand “colonisation”. Laenui (2006), Tuck & Yang (2012) and von Bismarck (2012) discuss the concepts of colonisation and decolonisation. The researchers differentiate between “*external colonialism*” and “*internal colonialism*”. *External colonialism* refers to the exploitation of the indigenous world (minerals, materials, people) to build the wealth and health of the colonizer (Tuck & Young, 2012; von Bismarck, 2012; Mbembe, 2016; Heleta, 2016). *Internal colonisation* relates to the setting up of structures to manage the indigenous world to suit the colonizer, also referring to the naming of buildings, parks and statues. However, *internal colonisation* is also about developing the indigenous people to be low wage labour such as elementary workers and to allow the colonizer to study for higher paid occupations. Non-white schools in the Apartheid era were also deprived of resources, financial and teaching, to allow for the development of indigenous knowledge and Black scholars were refrained from knowledge production “*through continuously being made to occupy the role of apprentice to western knowers ...*” (Almeida & Kumalo,

2018). The Black population also did not participate in the economy through “*systematic under qualification of the majority Black population*” (Heleta, 2016).

Tuck & Young (2012) Almeida & Kumalo (2018) and Schutte (2019) state that decolonisation is not the substitution of one system with another. The focus should be on redesigning the curriculum from Eurocentric, where Europe is put at the center of all knowledge creation based on European traditions, to Afrocentric, where Africa is put at the center of knowledge creation based on African traditions. The decolonised curriculum should allow the learner to enter the marketplace as well as to allow learners to change the status quo in society and the economy (Heleta, 2016).

Gaztambide-Fernandez (2012) in Schutte (2019) states that the curriculum is “... *about the knowledge [an] individual should have, or skills needed, or about personal interpretation of experiences that shape the learners’ perspective ...*”. The focus of *decolonisation* in higher education should therefore be about changing the curriculum to be inclusive to allow for diversity of content (for knowledge and skills acquisition), material, ideas and methods of assessment, which should be used as a vehicle to ensure decolonisation in higher education. Koopman & du Toit (2017) state that the decolonisation of the curriculum is about (i) what should be taught and why, (ii) who should teach the curriculum, and (iii) the ***relevance of the curriculum to the world of work*** (own emphasis). The curriculum should

make use of African case studies focusing on African social and economic realities that will become relevant teaching material that will assist further in the development of local knowledge (Schutte, 2019).

Le Grange (2016) differentiates between the explicit and hidden curriculum, whereas the explicit curriculum is what students are provided with such as *module frameworks* (own emphasis), prescribed readings, assessment guidelines, etc. The hidden curriculum is what students learn about the dominant culture of a university such as iconography, and the naming of buildings and public spaces. According to Mbembe (2016), culture change refers not only to staff and student demographics, but also to the renaming of buildings, lecture theatres and public spaces, and the removal of statues (iconography).

Mbembe (2016) also indicates that decolonisation is inseparable from access where it is about the wide opening of the doors of higher learning to all South Africans, and the provisioning of the means to complete learning. According to Mbembe, the Government must invest in its universities to allow access. Government expenditure on education total (% of GDP) in South Africa was reported at 6.604 % in 2023 (Trading Economics, 2024).

Decolonisation of the curriculum should not be about vengeance, but about social justice. Hytten & Bettez (2011) state that social justice is the “*full and equal participation of all groups in a society*” to allow students to take an

*“active role in their own education and to support teachers in creating empowering, democratic, and critical educational environments”.*

It is important to consider the socio-economic context of South Africa before evaluating qualifications registered on the NQF and how they contribute or do not contribute to the decolonisation of the curriculum.

### **3 The South African Context**

To understand the context of qualification development (curriculum design) in the South African context, it is important to understand the socio-economic challenges in South Africa. Despite having natural wealth, South Africa faces various challenges such as poverty, a large number of people living in rural areas, high levels of unemployment, and unskilled labour (du Toit, 2024).

The World Bank reports that ten percent of the population possesses 80 percent of the wealth, thus access to funding for students is problematic. Close to 18.9 million (31.7% of the total population) of South Africa’s population live in rural areas in 2024 (Macrotrends, 2024). Challenges for learners in higher education relate to access to electricity, long distances and reliable transport, limited availability of post-school institutions, and limited employment opportunities.

The official unemployment rate in the first quarter of 2024, was 32.9% (Statistics South Africa, 2023). This increases to 41.9% if discouraged workers are included, equating to 8.2 million and 11.2 unemployed people respectively. Du Toit (2024) states that a correlation exists between higher education levels and employment. Graduate unemployment is at 9.6% with those with less than a matric qualification having an unemployment rate of 38.6%.

The unemployment rates for youth were 59.7% for the 15-24 years old group, and 30.7% for the 25-34 years old group (Statistics South Africa, 2023). According to Du Toit (2024), these are the years when young individuals are typically participating in education and training, entering the labour market, and trying to establish a career trajectory. Du Toit (2024) states that the relevance of curricula is cited in equipping students for post-school education, training, and the workforce.

The South African economy favours highly qualified workers leaving an oversupply of unskilled or low-level skilled workers which is a major contributor to unemployment. Du Toit (2024) points out that the educational and qualification mismatches revolve around whether the skills imparted by higher education are aligned with job demands.

#### **4 The National Qualifications Framework**



The first education legislation passed by the democratically elected government was the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act, Act 58 of 1995, that allows SAQA to establish the NQF. An eight-level NQF was established that provides for the registration of qualifications (NSB Regulations, 1998). The NQF was subjected to ongoing reviews which eventually led to the implementation of the NQF Act, Act 67 of 2008 that replaced the SAQA Act. The eight-level NQF was replaced with the ten-level NQF.

The NQF is a comprehensive system for the classification, registration, publication, and articulation of quality-assured national qualifications, describing the types of qualifications and their levels and credits within three co-ordinated qualifications sub-frameworks – Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) and the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF).

The objectives of the NQF are to (i) create a single integrated national framework for learning achievements, (ii) facilitate **access, mobility and progression within education, training and the career paths**, (iii) enhance the quality of education and training, (iv) accelerate redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities (SAQA Act, 58 of 1995).

## 5 Decolonisation and qualification development

Le Grange (2014) argues that higher education institutions are responsible to create knowledge, and are dependent on indigenous communities, industry and other role players in designing the curriculum (for the purpose of this discussion, we will refer to “qualifications”). Higher education institutions should, according to Heleta (2016), reorientate themselves away from colonial systems, and must completely rethink, reframe and reconstruct qualifications.

The discussion about “decolonisation” touched on inter alia, on the relevance of the curriculum to the world of work (low paid vs higher paid), as well as to module frameworks (to allow for Africanisation).

In this context, higher education institutions are responsible for the development of programmes that lead to qualifications registered on the NQF. These qualifications need to provide information about the purpose and rationale of the qualification (*relevance of the curriculum to the world of work*), the rules of combination (*module framework*), expected outcomes and assessment as well as how the qualification compares with other international qualifications.

The discussion below will explore whether qualifications submitted by higher education institutions for registration on the NQF contribute to the

decolonisation of the curriculum with relevance to the world of work, module frameworks and recognition of qualifications from other African Countries.

The following questions guided the evaluation of registered qualifications:

1. Is the focus of registered qualifications on providing access to learners to redress past unfair discrimination?
2. Is the focus of registered qualifications on Africanisation?
3. Do the modules relate to indigenous knowledge, promoting Africanisation?
4. Are qualifications from African Countries considered in the international comparability?

There are 8082 registered qualifications on the NQF, 1% within the GFETQSF from level 1 to 4, 9% within the OQSF and 90% within the HEQSF. Although 90% of qualifications are within the HEQSF, it remains unclear how many of these programmes (qualifications) actively contribute to decolonisation by incorporating African indigenous knowledge and addressing past inequalities.

The objectives of the NQF are to create a single integrated system for learning achievements as well as to facilitate **access, mobility and progression** within and between qualifications registered on the OQSF and the HEQSF. The qualifications per level within the OQSF are provided in Table 1. The breakdown of qualifications within the HEQSF is provided in

Table 2. This information helps in understanding the distribution of qualifications across different levels and how they align with decolonisation goals.

**Table 1:** Qualifications as per the OQSF

NQF Level	# of Occupational Qualifications	Percentage (%)
1	7	1
2	117	15
3	120	16
4	250	33
5	159	21
6	63	8
7	28	4
8	12	2
Total	756	100

This discussion is about the decolonisation of curriculum in higher education however it is of interest that most qualifications in the OQSF are at NQF level 4 (33%) with 21% at NQF level 5, which may provide access into qualifications on the HEQSF. The SAQA Policy and Criteria on the Registration of Qualifications and Part-Qualifications on the NQF (2022) states that all possible entry into a qualification should be considered. This is to allow access to learners to higher education. Nearly all undergraduate qualifications on the HEQSF require a National Senior Certificate at NQF

level 4. Learners within the rural areas have access to skills development providers, obtaining qualifications at NQF levels 4 and 5, but these OQSF qualifications are not considered as entry into undergraduate qualifications within the HEQSF.

**Table 2:** Qualifications as per the HEQSF

NQF Level	Qualification Type	Number of qualifications	Percentage %
5	Higher Certificate	425	6
6	Advanced Certificate (86 – 12%) Diploma (630 – 88%)	1378	19
7	Advanced Diploma (423 – 31%) Bachelor (360 Credits) (905 – 66%) Postgraduate Certificate (50 – 3%)	1378	19
8	Postgraduate Diploma (703 – 33%) Bachelor’s Honours (1211 – 55%) Bachelor (480 credits) (271 – 12%)	2185	30
9	Masters	1979	27
10	Doctoral	631	8
Total		7314	100

From the table above, most qualifications are registered at NQF level 8 (out of a total of 2185, Postgraduate Diplomas are 33% with Bachelor’s Honours at 55%). The table indicates that provision in higher education is mainly for postgraduate students as nearly 61% of qualifications within higher education are at postgraduate level.

Out of the 7314 qualifications within the HEQSF, only six qualifications refer to Indigenous Knowledge (0.08%). There is one Bachelor of Arts in Indigenous Knowledge Systems, two Bachelor of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, one Master of Arts in Indigenous Knowledge Systems, one Master of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and one Postgraduate Diploma in African Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

The following was found when searching the words “colonisation”, “decolonisation”, “indigenous” and “Africanisation” on the NQF. The findings are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Qualifications on the HEQSF relating to Decolonisation

<b>Item</b>	<b>Colonisation</b>	<b>Decolonisation</b>	<b>Indigenous</b>	<b>Africanisation</b>
<b># of Quals</b>	7	1	220	25
<b>%</b>	0.07	0.01	3	0.34
<b># of Undergraduate</b>	1		88	11
<b># of Postgraduate</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>14</b>

Mbembe (2016) referred to access to higher education, all other researchers refer to the Africanisation of the curriculum, providing module frameworks, career paths and recognition of African qualifications.

The analysis showed that only 3,54% of qualifications on the HEQSF relate to the decolonisation of the curriculum with 61% postgraduate qualifications. There is no evidence based on the analysis that qualifications registered on the HEQSF promotes the decolonisation of the curriculum.

Qualifications on the HEQSF consider only the National Senior Certificate as access to qualifications, excluding many learners/students in the rural areas. The focus of qualifications registered on the NQF is still Eurocentric as there is no evidence that registered HEQSF qualifications promote Africanisation. In evaluating qualifications, most qualifications are compared against qualifications from Europe, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America, hence showing that higher education is still disconnected from African realities.

## **6. Challenges in the Decolonisation of the Curriculum**

A study conducted by the Vaal University of Technology (2020), investigated the challenges higher education institutions face in the attempt to decolonise the curriculum. IN a literature review and through structured interviews with academics in higher education, Senekal and Lentz (2020) identified four areas that focused on challenges concerning curriculum decolonisation, namely (i) lack of content and authorities, (ii) time, (iii) the perception that Western knowledge is superior, and (iv) resistance to change.

In a similar study, Du Plessis (2021) identified five similar themes, and “reluctance to change” featured second only to “no knowledge of decolonisation”. Du Plessis suggests that decolonisation requires more than a change in curriculum. It is dependent on how knowledge is taught, and the lecturers’ attitude to the process. This suggests that the attention to change is positive, but who and how information is relayed is just as important. Other challenges revealed in the study are (i) no connection with the realities of students, (ii) problem with white perspective, and (iii) lack of dialogue.

A challenge based on the evaluation of the registered qualifications, is also how the decolonisation will and should reflect in qualifications. The rules of combination in qualifications do not reflect content relating to decolonisation, exit level outcomes and associated assessment criteria do not reflect the decolonisation of the curriculum and international comparability is still against western based qualifications.

## **7. Conclusion**

Researchers interrogated conceptions of decolonisation, inclusive curriculum and the decolonisation of the curriculum. It is expected that these concepts found their way in the development and registration of qualifications on the NQF.

The analysis of qualifications registered on the HEQSF shows that it is still based on Eurocentric principles. Qualifications are still requiring a NSC for



access to higher education, not considering all possible entry into the qualification, International Comparison is also still against European based qualifications and not considering qualifications from African countries. To truly move from a Eurocentric approach to an Afrocentric approach, qualifications should be developed that promotes the decolonisation of the curriculum.

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