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Exploring student perspectives and challenges in engaging with decolonization in a private higher education institution in South Africa

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Abstract

Decolonisation has gained significant attention within South African public higher education, fuelled greatly by the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movements of 2015 and 2016, with many institutions looking to address historical biases and promote a more inclusive curriculum. This pilot study explores student perceptions of decolonisation in an Interior Design programme within a private higher education institution (PHEI) in South Africa. While much research on decolonisation in higher education has focused on public institutions, little is known about its implications and potential differences in the context of private institutions. The research context is a for-profit PHEI that aims to be inclusive. The institution has incorporated decolonisation as one of the key themes in its centrally designed curricula. However, the extent to which students and lecturers engage with decolonisation and their understanding of its significance and impact within the field of Interior Design, remains unclear. This study aims to address this gap by exploring student perspectives and experiences regarding decolonisation in Interior Design education. The research design involves a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data is collected through the review of third-year theory teaching and assessment content, and a questionnaire survey issued to a sample of third-year students within the interior design programme. The courseware review explores what contexts students are engaging with while the questionnaire elicits participants' understanding of decolonisation and their experiences and challenges in incorporating decolonisation into design projects. The study finds that students define decolonisation as political independence and freedom from colonial influence, as well as challenging colonial ideologies and injustices. However, many students do not consider decolonisation relevant to their programme or their capstone projects. Reasons include a lack of interest or relevance, a focus on alternative topics, and limited knowledge or understanding. The need for continued meaningful conversations and engagement with decolonisation within the classroom is vital if interior design education is truly to be decolonised, resulting in teaching and learning practices that are more inclusive and equitable. This paper leans into the conference sub-theme of learning, investigating challenges and opportunities that arise in decolonising interior design education.

Keywords: Curriculum design, decolonisation, interior design education, private higher education in South Africa.

Introduction

The 2017 DEFSA conference titled #Decolonise!, hosted by Tshwane University of Technology and Inscape Education Group, was an opportunity for authors to consider “curriculum design, pedagogy and assessment as well as the broader role and objectives of higher education structures and systems” (Giloï & Botes 2017). The conference allowed for insight into who is grappling with decolonisation within the design education realm and what about decolonisation is currently being researched. Of the 26 published papers found in the conference proceedings, only two papers from staff members affiliated with a South African private higher education institution can be found. This is not conclusive but rather an indication of the private higher education institutions (PHEIs) participation in the decolonisation conversation.

The various South African research outputs with regard to decolonisation within higher education speak mostly to public higher education and little research has been conducted to investigate what decolonisation could look like in South African PHEIs and if it should it be different. This paper investigates what student perceptions of decolonisation are in an Interior Design programme within a private higher education institution in South Africa.

Interior design is concerned with producing spaces that engage with history’s impact on spaces and reflect the current times in both 2D and 3D. Spanjers (2013, p. 87-100) states that “the main task of the interior designer is to [...] design with complete affinity for human beings and their social and organisational behaviour, as active mediators between humans and their environment, between users and their everyday surroundings”. The production of current interior design artefacts can be said to be “physically located on the continent but epistemologically situated in Europe and America” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). The geographical and physical location of interior design education and practice, in contrast to Western-based epistemology, can create tension between preserving, celebrating, and generating contextually relevant interior design artefacts and catering to Western approval.

Private higher design education in South Africa: Institutional context and structure

The research context is at a for-profit, private higher education institution (PHEI). The lecturing body of the PHEI comprises predominantly of industry professionals teaching allocated sessions and more recently a shift to more permanent, full-time staff taking on the greater teaching load. The curricula are centrally designed and distributed to lecturers and students on multiple campuses. Lecturers are not directly involved in generating the academic content that is shared across all campuses but are relied upon to follow the supplied curriculum and to be a close link to industry, bringing the voice of industry into the classroom. Feedback from lecturers regarding the supplied curriculum is submitted through internal moderation and subject feedback reports. Unless a lecturer is actively engaging in industry with decolonisation or prompted by institutional training, decolonisation may not be something that they are familiar with or engage with deeply.

The current lecturing and student demographic is predominantly white, although the institution has in recent years actively sought to be more diverse and inclusive. These institutional objectives have now trickled into the designed curriculum, which incorporates the following themes;

1. Circular Economy
2. Decolonization
3. Human-Centred Design

4. Imagined Futures
5. Subcultures
6. Sustainable Design

For this centralised, supplied curriculum, a myriad of selection and quality assurance processes happen at each stage and the criteria for inclusion are informed by councils and bodies such as the CHE, industry requirements that affect employability and the filter through which a faculty Dean is reviewing the developed course content. Although some criteria are objective, there is still a level of subjectivity when it comes to more polarising concerns such as decolonisation. This study serves as a pilot investigation, aiming to initially explore student perceptions of decolonisation in an Interior Design programme within a private higher education institution in South Africa, with the next phase planned to investigate lecturers' perceptions of decolonisation at the PHEI.

Background of the study

The pilot study focuses on two programmes currently running at the PHEI, namely the Bachelor of Design specialising in Interior Design (BDes ID) and the Bachelor of Design specialising in Environmental Design (BDes ED).

The BDes ID programme at the PHEI focuses on planning environments that cater to the psychological, emotional, and physical needs of people. Students learn about emerging technologies, products, and services, as well as the latest software used in the field. The programme aims to develop graduates who can create interior design solutions for various industries such as retail, hospitality, domestic, exhibition, services, corporate, and specialist sectors.

The BDes ED programme is centred around designing for the interior environment and considering the future needs of the world. Sustainability and Green Design are key aspects of the programme. Students learn about designing sustainable buildings, planning green spaces, and implementing the latest technologies and materials.

The structure of the three-year programmes incorporates a generic first year, providing students with a comprehensive foundation for exploring the multifaceted nature of design. The subsequent second and third years offer opportunities for specialisation and in-depth focus within specific design disciplines.

The subject of concern in this article, Visual Communication, which is integrated across disciplines throughout the three-year programme, serves as a theoretical framework to cultivate essential critical skills in visual communication and design practices. Its primary objective is to equip students with the necessary tools to navigate the complexities of the visual world and actively participate in meaningful interactions within a dynamically evolving design sector.

The pilot study will make use of this subject as a source of quantitative information on student engagement with decolonisation as a context. The subject at third-year levels asks students to engage critically with media, images, power, and cultural production, to name a few.

Decolonization efforts at the PHEI

“Continued discussion on decolonisation is considered relevant in facilitating the process of ‘unlearning’ and ‘unthinking’ “(Muchie, Lukele-Olorunju & Demissie 2014, p. v, as cited in Newport 2018). Monchalin (2016) cites Michael Yellow Bird as defining decolonisation as “restoration of cultural practices, thinking, beliefs, and values”. When we consider current students in PHEIs, their

cultural practices, thinking, beliefs and values that are imparted, taught and learned in various contexts, the need to unlearn and unthink becomes vital, especially in spaces such as PHEIs, that may cater to a more privileged student and lecturing body. Efforts to decolonise the curriculum at the institution have remained in the content of the subjects taught. The content of key theoretical subjects that deal with constructs has provided an avenue to include the topic of decolonisation. Although this is a start, it is critical that there is a cohesive and continued deliberate mission to decolonise. The institution engages with lecturers in regular training sessions that allow the facilitator to address various topics within teaching and learning, decolonisation being part of this. In these sessions, lecturers engage in discussion with one another and the facilitator about how the various training topic informs their teaching practice.

The article 'The "decolonial turn": what does it mean for academic staff development' by Jo-Anne Vorster and Lynn Quin (2017) was key in raising questions regarding programme content development, the status of decolonisation, what the implementation of decolonisation would look like and how one could enable and support lecturers to teach a decolonised curriculum. Glatthorn et al. (2012) outline that there are various types of curricula, namely the recommended curriculum, written curriculum, supported curriculum, taught curriculum, tested curriculum and the learned curriculum. It is imperative to consider from an institutional perspective if the various types of curricula continue to be the "apparatus that is perceived to support and continue a colonial legacy" (Council on Higher Education 2017) as "the master's tools of colonisation will not work to decolonise what the master built" (Smith 2012). The conversation on decolonisation within higher education in South African context cannot leave out the impact of the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movements of 2015 and 2016, which were pivotal in turning the decolonisation conversation into action. The movements "sought to challenge a colonised education system" (Nengwani 2021).

In the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) 2023 report on the progress of transformation in South Africa's Public Universities, no private institutions are reviewed. Although transformation is conflated with decolonisation or erroneously used interchangeably, the lack of the DHET's engagement with private institutions in the area of transformation is concerning. While reviewing the latest DHET annual report, data shows that in 2021 there were 124 DHET registered PHEIs with enrolment figures steadily on the rise, having grown from 103 036 students in 2011 to 232 915 in 2021, when looking at 2020 and 2021 PHEIs enrolment had increased by 6.3% (DHET 2023, p. 30). These enrolment numbers cannot continue to be ignored, as every number represents a student engaging with a written curriculum. Whether or not the respective institution considers decolonisation as something worth engaging in is a mystery. Vital in this conversation of the curriculum and the decolonisation of it is the student. Le Grange et al. (2020, p. 44) state that "a complicated conversation about decolonising the university curriculum cannot take place without the input of students". This is echoed by Hlatshwayo et al. (2022, p. 3) who state that "a knowledge-building approach is crucial for responding to the call to decolonise".

Research methodology

The pilot study makes use of a mixed methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches, to investigate student perceptions of decolonisation in interior design education. Quantitative data was gathered by initially reviewing the shared third-year theory subject courseware and identifying a project that allowed students to engage and select a research context from a predefined list. In this project, students are asked to write an argumentative essay of 2000 – 2500 words on one of the contexts listed:

1. Circular Economy
2. Decolonization
3. Human-Centred Design
4. Imagined Futures
5. Subcultures
6. Sustainable Design

The argumentative essay is meant to persuade the reader that the chosen context is crucial when recognising and addressing a design problem. The contexts selected from the project tell of what is considered significant for these future designers.

The listed contexts are expounded upon in the courseware content provided with links and resources that students can engage with. A review of student submissions made in 2023 and the chosen contexts provide data on what students are engaging with.

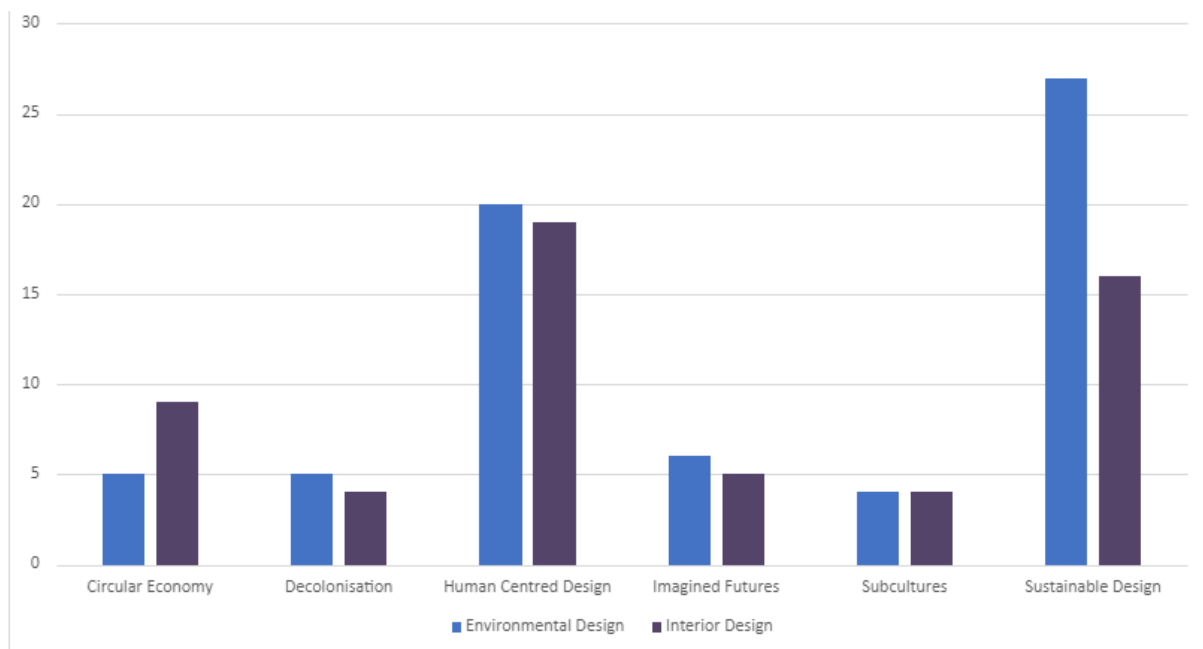


Figure 1: Context selection overview across in both BDes ED and BDes ID programmes

In Figure 1, it is evident that the Bdes ED students exhibit a strong inclination towards the sustainability context, with 40.3% of students selecting it as their preferred context. Conversely, subcultures received the lowest percentage of 5.9%. The substantial proportion of students opting for sustainable design aligns with expectations, considering their engagement with sustainability as a focal point in their specialisation over the past year and a half, indicating their familiarity with the subject.

Regarding the BDes ID students, the highest level of interest is observed in human-centred design, with 33.3% of students choosing it as their context of choice. Conversely, the lowest percentage for the chosen context in this programme is evenly distributed between subcultures and decolonisation.

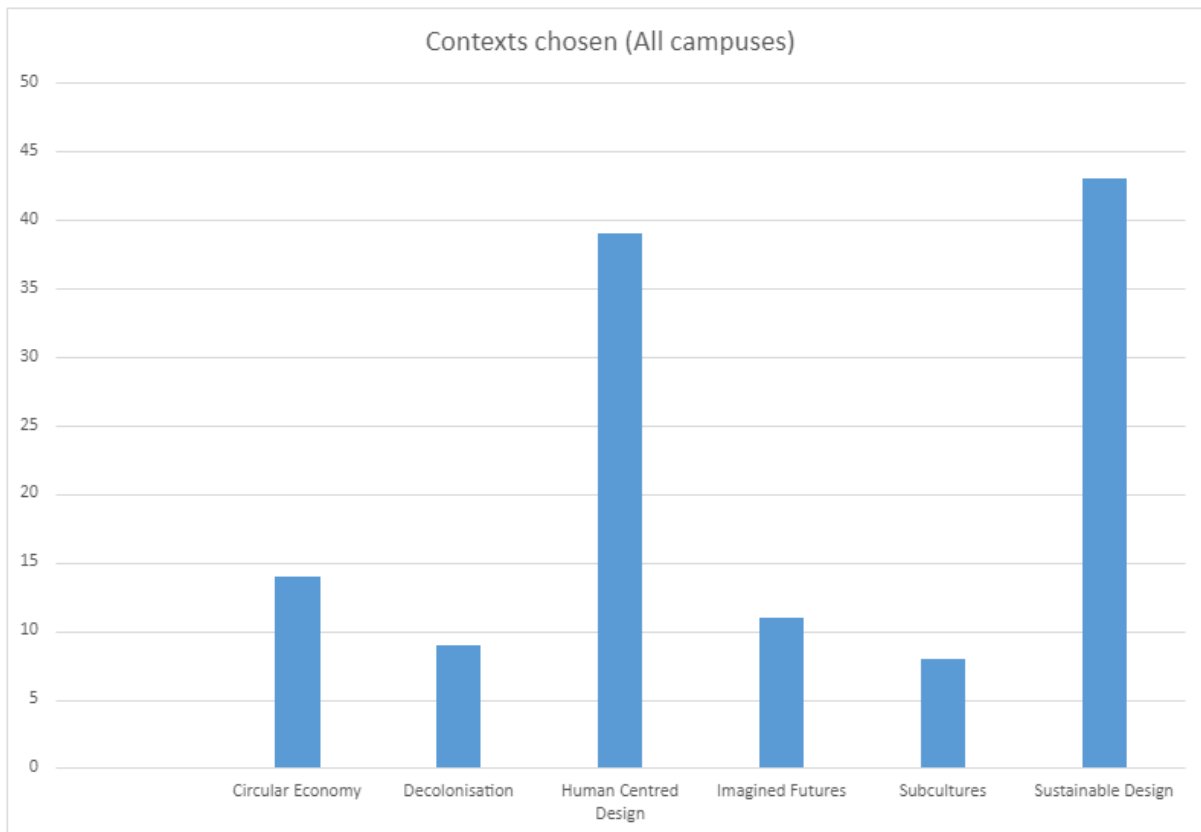


Figure 2: Contexts chosen across both programmes on all campuses

Among the 124 student submissions surveyed, the distribution of chosen contexts is as follows:

- Circular Economy: 14 students (11.3%)
- Decolonization: 9 students (7.3%)
- Human-Centred Design: 39 students (31.5%)
- Imagined Futures: 11 students (8.9%)
- Subcultures: 8 students (6.5%)
- Sustainable Design: 43 students (34.7%)

In reviewing the selected contexts among the student submissions, Sustainable Design emerges as the most selected context, with a significant percentage of 34.7%. Conversely, Subcultures stands as the least selected context, 6.5%. Notably, Decolonisation closely follows Subcultures, with 7.3%. This low uptake warrants further attention and analysis.

A second step in gathering quantitative data was issuing a questionnaire to third-year interior design and environmental design students. The questionnaire was comprised of a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions. It aimed to elicit participants' insights regarding their understanding of decolonisation in interior design and experiences of incorporating decolonisation in design projects. The quantitative approach provided data, enabling numerical and thematic analysis.

The questionnaire asked students to indicate the context chosen in the theory project. There were 22 students who responded, with varying numbers of students selecting different contexts. Among the choices, Sustainable Design and Human-Centered Design were the most popular, with seven students

each, while Decolonisation, Imagined Futures, and Circular Economy were selected by 2, 4, and 2 students, respectively.

When asked how they would define decolonisation in their own words, a number of students either offered a copy-paste response that already exists without citing it or paraphrased a definition that they had come across in their course content. The themes that emerge from the student responses are:

Political independence and freedom from colonial influence

In this theme, students referred to phrases such as “independent of the colonising country”, “Decolonisation is the process through which colonies gain independence from their colonial countries. The action of decolonisation was predominantly defined as a process which echoes Gatsheni’s work, which refers to decolonisation as “a historical process [...] redemptive and liberatory” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, p. 13).

Challenging colonial ideologies and injustices

In this theme, students offered definitions that spoke to “dismantling colonial systems, structures, and institutions”, “addressing the historical injustices”, “creating a world more inclusive”.

In the larger definition, students used the term ‘process’ as a present participle, speaking to the students’ understanding that decolonisation is not an event but rather a series of events not only in the past but also continuous actions related to decolonisation.

When asked about the relevance of decolonisation to their programme, out of the total respondents, 54.5% answered “no” and 45.5% answered “yes”. This question was followed up by querying if the student plans to engage with decolonisation for their third-year capstone project. Out of the total 22 students, 86.4% answered “no” and 13.6% answered “yes”. Students who responded “no” were asked to share why they would not consider decolonisation as a context for their capstone project. Based on the responses given, the following themes emerge.

Lack of interest or relevance

“I do not find the topic interesting or relevant enough”,

“I find that it has nothing to do with my degree”,

“I am not disregarding decolonisation; however, I personally feel that contexts such as Sustainable design, circular economy have more importance to me in the designing of buildings and spaces”.

The lack of interest is understandable but not understanding the relevance of decolonisation within Interior Design is concerning.

Focus on alternative topics

“I want to focus more on designing a green, sustainable building by implementing something more unique”,

“I have chosen to focus on imagined futures and UX design”.

Limited knowledge or understanding

"I have not researched it enough", "I don't understand it well enough", "I am not confident in my knowledge about decolonisation to now create my final project around that subject – where I will choose a topic I know about and have a lot more information about".

"As someone who's White, it's a difficult topic to approach as it can come off as a colonial trying to dictate what decolonisation should look like".

"No, I feel I was not educated enough on this topic. And don't want to talk about a political issue".

Students additionally spoke about complexity and multiple variables that decolonisation deals with and the lack of confidence in dealing with this.

The response rate for the questionnaire distributed to 132 currently enrolled students across both programmes was disappointingly low, even for a pilot study. Only 25 students (19%) provided their input. Out of the 25 students who completed the questionnaire, five students expressed their willingness to participate in the focus groups. However, during the process of contacting and arranging the focus groups, one student withdrew their participation, while three students did not respond or engage further. As a result, only one student actively participated in the subsequent semi-structured interview.

The intention for the focus group, which consisted of students who had indicated they intended to explore the decolonisation context, was to make use of semi-structured interviews to encourage students to further describe their experiences and perspectives on decolonisation. Due to the limited number of participants willing to participate in the semi-structured interview, specifically only one student, the available data was insufficient for comprehensive analysis within the scope of this research article. The lack of participants in the pilot study indicates that the approach may need to be reconsidered when conducting further research.

Reflection on findings

The findings from the pilot study on student perceptions of decolonisation have several implications for both the curriculum and the broader conversation on decolonisation in the field of interior design. The lack of interest, limited knowledge, and perceived irrelevance of decolonisation among some students highlight the need to incorporate decolonisation as not only a central theme in interior design education but as something inherently fundamental to the curriculum.

The curricula being developed need to consider decolonial perspectives, theories, and practices associated with colonial legacies in design. In challenging the dominant design and specifically interior design narratives, a more inclusive and culturally diverse design practice could be promoted. The integration of case studies and guest lectures would assist in exposing the students to real-world examples of the relevance and impact that decolonisation has in interior design.

Of vital importance in the complicated and sensitive conversations regarding decolonisation is the lectures' role in creating a safe and inclusive learning environment that encourages open dialogue, self-reflection, and understanding of diverse perspectives. These conversations can empower students to challenge colonial ideologies and design alternative futures that prioritise diversity, equity, and decolonial perspectives within the field.

Conclusion

The analysis of student perceptions of decolonisation revealed various themes that shed light on their understanding, views, and attitudes. The students express awareness of the complexity of engaging with decolonisation but are unable to integrate decolonisation into the projects they are working on due to a lack of understanding of decolonisation and confidence in engaging with it. Understandably, not all students would be interested in grappling with decolonisation in interior design projects, but students not finding the relevance of decolonisation in interior design is concerning. It is essential to address students' limited knowledge and understanding while fostering a deeper awareness of the relevance and implications of decolonisation within the field of interior design.

As a pilot study, the findings have limited application and generalisability, and as mentioned previously, adjustments to a full research study may be necessary. The limited response rate of the questionnaire and participation in the focus groups and interviews not only posed challenges in obtaining a comprehensive understanding of student perceptions but raised questions regarding students' willingness to engage with decolonisation. These findings emphasise the need for further exploration and education on decolonisation within the academic programme. The institution currently follows a centralised approach to curriculum design, which could be experienced to be a top-down approach by lecturers and, ultimately, students in integrating decolonisation within what is taught and how it is assessed. Engaging students in complicated conversations regarding decolonisation would allow for a more consultative approach, where they are engaging in the development of the curriculum rather than passively having the curriculum enacted upon them.

The pilot study has revealed some challenges in engaging students in the conversation of decolonisation, should any further data collection take place, the researcher would need to reconsider the research methodology and tools in order to elicit a greater number of responses and richer engagement. Although strides have been made in decolonising the interior design programme curricula at the PHEI, it is apparent that the relevance of it is still not understood.

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