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Interrogating the Historical Baggage of Decolonisation: Indications for Transformative Policy and Academic Discourse in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract
The persistent influence of coloniality continues to shape academic discourse, affecting programs, systems, decision-making processes, and research practices, while frequently marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems. This study employed a desktop review approach to examine the enduring impact of coloniality and decolonial initiatives within Sub-Saharan African higher education systems. A central tension in existing literature is the fragmented and often disconnected analysis of coloniality and decoloniality, which hinders a cohesive understanding of their interplay within higher education contexts and their implications for policy and institutional transformation. Literature published between January 2015 and December 2025 was retrieved from academic databases, supplemented by searches of formal documents and websites from organizations such as UNESCO, the African Union, UNICEF, and CODESRIA. The study specifically targeted Sub-Saharan African higher education contexts to avoid overgeneralizing findings across the diverse educational landscapes of the African continent. The initial search yielded 312 sources, which were screened according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. After removing duplicates and conducting an initial review of titles and abstracts, 56 articles were selected for full-text assessment. Ultimately, 42 peer-reviewed journal articles and authoritative institutional publications, all published in English, were included in the thematic and narrative analysis. Key search terms included "coloniality," "decolonization," "Africanization," "knowledge systems," and "curriculum reform" to ensure the relevance of the selected literature. The report highlights the persistent dominance of colonial models in educational discourse, even as decolonial strategies demonstrate potential. However, the emphasis on tangible outcomes is undermined by ambiguous prospects, inconsistent policies, and reforms that are only partially implemented. The study concludes that achieving meaningful transformation demands conceptual clarity, institutional commitment, epistemic justice, and coherent policy frameworks. It further recommends the integration of African knowledge systems into curricula, reform of governance

structures, restructuring of research evaluation mechanisms, fostering intellectual engagement in indigenous languages, and establishing monitoring frameworks to ensure sustainable and transformative outcomes.

Introduction

Discussions surrounding decolonisation in African contexts are often marked by uncertainty and compounded by historical complexities (Zhou & Liao, 2025). Proposals intended to drive change frequently fall short, constrained by misguided interpretations and overly optimistic expectations. Moreover, ideas presented as catalysts for transformation often fail to deliver, hindered by flawed assumptions and impractical aspirations. Rather than advancing decolonisation, these obstacles impede progress, as demonstrated by Hungwe and Ndofirepi (2022).

In a 2020 interview on decolonisation in Africa, Gatsheni-Ndlovu, in conversation with Omanga, argues that contemporary debates often begin from the unresolved legacies of colonialism. He clarifies the distinctions between "colonisation" as a historical event, "colonialism" as an active system of domination, and "coloniality" as the enduring, subtle mechanisms of power that continue to shape knowledge production. Central to this ongoing discourse is the challenge of addressing the inherited frameworks that still underpin African knowledge systems, institutional structures, and educational practices (Gatsheni-Ndlovu, 2020).

Moreover, the term decolonisation at the outset referred to the political unshackling of African nations from European colonial rule; it has since then been reinstated and reconfigured to address the deeper, more stealthy remnants of coloniality in the theory of knowledge, power relations, and modes of policy-making (Gatsheni-Ndlovu, 2020; Fosu, 2024). However, despite its increasing public approval, the term remains overloaded and disintegrated. Decolonial efforts vary across institutional settings, involving changes to the program of study, teaching and learning methods, and meaningful presentations (Govender & Naidoo, 2023).

This study explores the evolution and impact of decolonisation on academic discourse. It examines prevailing uncertainties, the disconnect between theory and practice, and insights from recent initiatives, aiming to propose a framework for sustainable, innovative decolonial systems in educational contexts.

The objectives are twofold: first, to critically assess how historical and conceptual ambiguities surrounding the term "decolonisation" continue to influence—and at times obscure—the persistence of coloniality in contemporary academic and policy debates across Africa; second, to analyse how these ambiguities affect the formulation and execution of transformative educational policies in African institutions.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in decolonial theory and epistemic justice within Sub-Saharan African higher education networks, offering a critical lens for analysing the production, validation, and dissemination of knowledge in these systems. These frameworks are particularly relevant for understanding how colonial legacies continue to shape epistemic hierarchies, institutional norms, and knowledge governance across universities and research environments (Maldonado-Torres, 2016; Mbembe, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

Decolonial theory (through the concepts of the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being) explains how colonial influence persists beyond formal independence, continuing to structure contemporary educational and scholarly systems. This persistence is evident in the ongoing dominance of Western

epistemologies, the marginalisation of African knowledge systems, and the perpetuation of global knowledge inequalities that position Western knowledge as universal and superior. In higher education, these dynamics manifest in curriculum design, research methodologies, language policies, and institutional governance, often reinforcing dependency rather than fostering genuine epistemic autonomy (Maldonado-Torres, 2016; Fosu, 2024; Pietersen et al., 2025).

The concept of epistemic justice underscores the ethical and political dimensions of knowledge production, recognition, inclusion, and validation of diverse epistemologies. Epistemic injustice occurs when certain knowledge systems are systematically excluded, dismissed, or rendered invisible within dominant academic frameworks (Lebakeng, 2022; Omodan, 2023). In African contexts, this injustice is evident in the underrepresentation of indigenous knowledge systems, the limited use of African languages in scholarly communication, and the dominance of Western paradigms in research evaluation and funding structures (Ndofirepi & Gwaravanda, 2018; Kaur et al., 2023).

Recent scholarship further demonstrates that epistemic injustice is not merely conceptual but also institutional and structural. Universities in Sub-Saharan Africa struggle to reconcile global academic standards with local epistemic relevance, often resulting in superficial or symbolic decolonisation rather than substantive transformation (Govender & Naidoo, 2023; Woldegiorgis, 2025). Language-in-education policies and knowledge dissemination systems frequently reinforce epistemic erasure by privileging colonial languages and sidelining indigenous languages and intellectual traditions (Mthombeni & Ogunnubi, 2021; Nhongo & Tshotsho, 2020).

African-rooted epistemologies offer a transformative counterpoint by advocating for epistemic pluralism, intellectual justice, and the re-centring of African perspectives in knowledge production. Scholars such as Adebanwi (2016), Afolabi (2020), and Akinmolayan et al. (2024) argue that African knowledge systems are not merely cultural artefacts but active intellectual frameworks that continue to shape contemporary education and research.

Indigenous African knowledge systems are embedded in relational ontologies that emphasise harmony between humans, nature, and the environment. However, colonial and globalised development models have disrupted these systems, contributing to ecological degradation and unsustainable resource exploitation. Emerging research links the exclusion of indigenous conservation knowledge to environmental crises in the Global South, asserting that decolonial approaches must incorporate ecological epistemologies into educational and policy frameworks (Noutchie, 2025; Reed et al., 2021; Zhou & Liao, 2025).

Coloniality and Its Persistent Impact on African Knowledge Systems

The persistence of colonial theories of knowledge within contemporary African education systems remains a central concern for scholars and policymakers dedicated to advancing epistemic justice and transforming knowledge production. Colonial modes of thought continue to permeate Sub-Saharan Africa, posing a significant challenge for those advocating for equity in knowledge systems and for determining what constitutes "truth". Coloniality is not merely a relic of the past; rather, it persists as an enduring framework—a historical system of power and knowledge that continues to shape educational institutions, influence curricula, and dictate what is recognised as valid knowledge.

This colonial legacy is particularly evident in language policies and curriculum development. As Akinmolayan, Hingston, Akpan, and Arise observe, South Africa's education system remains heavily influenced by Western paradigms, thereby marginalising African communities and relegating indigenous knowledge to the periphery.

Drives for Indigenous Knowledge Restoration

Scholars are advocating not merely for symbolic recognition of indigenous knowledge, but for its integration at the core of academic discourse. This call extends beyond performative gestures; it demands the meaningful incorporation of African epistemologies across all disciplines, affording them the rigour and prominence they warrant.

Central to this movement is the pursuit of epistemic justice: the principle that all knowledge systems deserve equal respect and that the historical marginalisation of African ways of knowing represents a form of systemic exclusion. Maldonado-Torres and Smith directly link this issue to enduring colonial power structures, questioning why Western frameworks continue to dominate academic spaces. Epistemic justice, however, does not entail rejecting scientific inquiry; rather, it seeks to establish an equitable platform where African perspectives are genuinely valued in scholarly conversations. True justice requires acknowledging African intellectual contributions – not as substitutes for established knowledge, but as essential components of a broader, more inclusive academic dialogue.

Epistemic injustices are perpetuated by language policies, assessment frameworks, and institutional practices that systematically privilege Western knowledge systems over African epistemologies within Sub-Saharan African higher education. Sewpaul, Theophilus, and Sentane's research on child-protection services in South Africa reveals that dominant language practices and standardised assessment tools fail to capture the lived realities of at-risk families. This oversight not only undermines community-based knowledge but also perpetuates critical injustices.

Kaur, Grama, Roy Chaudhuri, and Recalde-Vela's examination of research ethics in the Global South further demonstrates how Western-centric knowledge and ethical frameworks (particularly in human rights research) exclude local voices and entrench inequality.

In response, scholars are not merely theorising but actively proposing concrete measures to reform university policies regarding hiring, funding, and program design, all aimed at centring Indigenous knowledge within academia. They advocate for language policies that enable research and evaluation in African languages, dismantling the hierarchical barriers that elevate one linguistic tradition above others. Additionally, Reed et al. argue for research assessment models that extend beyond citation metrics to include contextual relevance and community accessibility. Their framework prioritises local impact, community engagement, and practical applications, urging funders to recognise research for its societal contributions alongside academic rigour.

However, implementation faces significant obstacles, including resource constraints, entrenched academic traditions, and persistent international pressures, which often stall progress. Scholars also warn against the romanticisation of "indigenisation," which risks essentializing cultures as static relics of the past. Genuine transformation requires integrating Indigenous knowledge with universal scientific standards, pursuing substantive equity in knowledge valuation rather than superficial terminology or performative gestures. For this shift to be meaningful, it must prioritise authentic integration and substantive justice over mere formalism.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is derived from the interplay between coloniality, epistemic injustice, decolonial shifts, and African-centred epistemologies within higher education and knowledge production systems. Drawing on decolonial theory and perspectives on epistemic justice, this framework examines how knowledge systems are constructed, sustained, and contested in African academic contexts (Maldonado-Torres, 2016; Mbembe, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

Central to this framework is the concept of the coloniality of knowledge, which refers to the enduring influence of Eurocentric epistemologies in shaping curricula, research methodologies, language policies, and institutional governance in Sub-Saharan African educational settings. This coloniality manifests in the privileging of Western knowledge systems and the marginalisation of indigenous African epistemologies, thereby perpetuating foundational epistemic dependence (Fosu, 2024; Pietersen et al., 2025).

Closely linked to this is the notion of epistemic injustice, which describes the mechanisms through which African and indigenous knowledge systems are excluded, discredited, or rendered invisible in academic discourse (Lebakeng, 2022; Omodan, 2023). Epistemic injustice functions as the intermediary process between colonial structures and educational outcomes, particularly through language hierarchies, research evaluation criteria, and publication systems that favour Western epistemic norms (Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda, 2018; Kaur et al., 2023). This dynamic often results in what scholars term superficial decolonisation rather than substantive epistemic transformation (Govender and Naidoo, 2023; Woldegiorgis, 2025).

In addition to these intersecting forces, the framework incorporates decolonial initiatives and African-centred epistemologies as pathways for transformation. African-centred epistemologies position African knowledge systems not as peripheral cultural artefacts but as legitimate, dynamic intellectual traditions capable of shaping contemporary education and research (Adebanwi, 2016; Afolabi, 2020; Akinmolayan et al., 2024).

Furthermore, this conceptual framework extends beyond a historical critique of coloniality by analysing its ongoing reproduction within present-day Sub-Saharan African higher education systems. It offers an analytical foundation for understanding why, despite numerous reform efforts between 2015 and 2025, colonial epistemic frameworks persist due to institutional inertia, globalised knowledge standards, and entrenched validation systems that continue to privilege Eurocentric ways of knowing.

Method

Track Down Strategy and Databases

A systematic desktop search was conducted across multiple scholarly databases to identify articles relevant to the study. The search was restricted to publications released between January 2015 and December 2025. This study employed a desktop review as the primary data collection method, encompassing the identification, screening, and synthesis of existing literature. The analysis of selected studies was guided by decolonial theory and epistemic justice, which served as the theoretical lenses for examining the data and interpreting patterns of coloniality and transformation in African higher education. The review focused specifically on Sub-Saharan African higher education contexts, with the selected studies representing scholarship from the region.

The databases searched included Google Scholar, Scopus, and JSTOR, with additional searches performed on other academic platforms to ensure comprehensive coverage. Supplementary searches were also conducted through institutional archives and websites to retrieve relevant policy documents and reports from organisations such as UNESCO, the African Union, UNICEF, and CODESRIA.

The initial search yielded 312 records, which were subsequently filtered using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. After removing duplicates and conducting an initial screening of titles and abstracts, 56 articles were retained for full-text review. Ultimately, 42 articles were included in the thematic and narrative synthesis because they fully aligned with the research's conceptual and

investigative focus. The reduction from 56 to 42 articles reflects the final eligibility assessment based on thematic relevance and methodological alignment with the study objectives.

The search terms employed combinations of keywords and Boolean operators, including:

("coloniality" OR "colonial matrix of power" OR "epistemic violence") AND ("Africa" OR "African"), as well as ("decolonisation" OR "decolonisation" OR "Africanisation") AND ("knowledge systems" OR "epistemic justice" OR "curriculum reform").

These search strings facilitated the identification of literature that critically examines the persistent impact of coloniality on African epistemic and educational frameworks.

Inclusion and Exclusion Guidelines

The study employed specific inclusion and exclusion criteria for article selection. Works that directly addressed the study's core themes were included, with a focus on Sub-Saharan African higher education contexts, knowledge production, broader intellectual systems, and policy reports on curriculum reform, epistemic transformation, and educational policy restructuring.

Exclusion criteria comprised studies that focused exclusively on historical colonial events without linking them to contemporary African education. Non-credible sources, such as opinion-based online commentary and unverified blogs, were also excluded. Additionally, studies from non-African contexts were omitted unless they offered theoretical insights relevant to African discussions on knowledge and decoloniality.

Screening Process

The screening process consisted of three distinct phases. Initially, all retrieved titles and abstracts were examined to remove irrelevant or duplicate records. Next, the remaining documents underwent a full-text assessment to evaluate their alignment with the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Finally, both backwards and forward citation chaining were applied to identify additional foundational works frequently referenced in decolonial literature and to incorporate recent contemporary studies.

This process is visualised in a PRISMA flow diagram presented in Figure 1, which clearly outlines the stages of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion in the review.

To maintain quality and academic rigour, only peer-reviewed journal articles or credible institutional publications indexed in recognised databases such as Scopus and Web of Science were considered. Each of the final 42 studies included in the synthesis underwent a rigorous quality appraisal, assessing conceptual relevance, methodological robustness, and alignment with the study objectives.

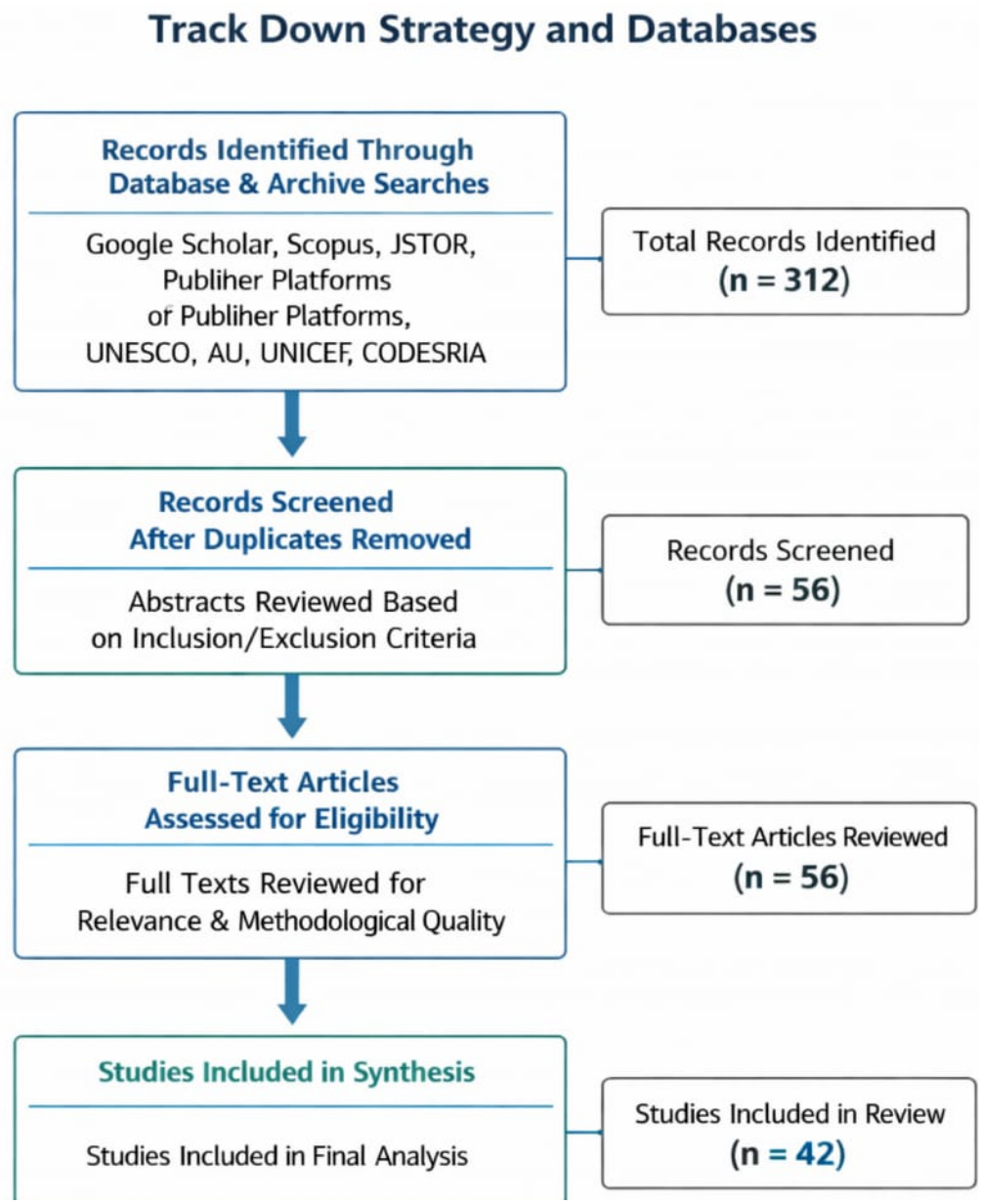


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the study selection process (January 2015– December 2025)

Data Extraction and Integration

Data extraction from the included materials followed a structured approach, capturing bibliographic details, publication type, geographical focus, conceptual frameworks, methodological approaches, and key arguments pertinent to the research questions. The synthesis process combined thematic and narrative analysis and was further interpreted through the analytical frameworks of decolonial theory and epistemic justice. These frameworks guided the coding and thematic categorisation of the extracted data, facilitating the identification of patterns related to epistemic dominance, marginalisation, and decolonial alternatives within Sub-Saharan African higher education contexts.

Following a detailed examination of the texts, the data were organised into key themes, including the historical legacy of coloniality, the conceptual evolution of knowledge in Africa, epistemic dominance and knowledge hierarchies, indigenous knowledge systems and epistemic justice, curriculum transformation in Sub-Saharan African higher education, and policy or institutional responses to epistemic colonialism.

Ethics Concerns

Since the research relied entirely on online databases and articles, with no human involvement, ethical clearance was not required. However, ethical scholarship was upheld by correctly citing sources, faithfully presenting authors' viewpoints, and avoiding distortion.

Limitations

This study is subject to certain limitations. Primarily, it relies on existing literature, which may reflect regional biases or disparities in research output across African countries. Additionally, the desktop review method does not account for the lived experiences of students or academics. Despite these constraints, the study upheld ethical standards by accurately citing all sources, faithfully representing authors' arguments, and ensuring interpretations remained true to the original texts.

Results

Summary of Growing Themes

The study revealed several motifs: the persistent influence of colonialism on African education systems; the marginalisation of local knowledge; the role of curricula and institutions in perpetuating these dynamics; and the emergence of new approaches aimed at transforming the system.

The Sublime Echoes of Coloniality

The enduring resonance of coloniality permeates academic literature, with its traces evident throughout scholarly discourse. Maldonado-Torres (2025) argues that coloniality underpins contemporary systems and frameworks of thought, while Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) illustrates how it operates as an unspoken yet persistent force that privileges Western knowledge and relegates African epistemologies to the periphery. Despite political independence, these colonial structures and ideologies persist, manifesting in various forms across the continent.

The reviewed studies reveal that African universities perpetuate these hierarchies through their curricula, research priorities, and evaluation criteria. Mbembe (2016) characterises African universities as "Western-influenced institutions," a designation supported by Afolabi (2020), who observes that academic programmes continue to foreground Western texts and ideas. Consequently, universities inadvertently reinforce Western dominance, marginalising local perspectives. Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda (2018) demonstrate how epistemic injustice further sidelines African scholarship, while Lebakeng (2022) asserts that achieving epistemic justice is essential for the equitable integration of knowledge production.

African Knowledge and Marginalisation

Omodan's (2023, 2025) principle of epistemic injustice, though often marginalised in broader discussions, is central to this review, underscoring the significance of African scholars and local knowledge traditions. Research by Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda (2018) and Ishida (2023) presents a nuanced perspective, revealing that African students and researchers are increasingly recognised for embracing indigenous knowledge systems, while local knowledge is being reintegrated into traditional curricula—a development that challenges the dominant narrative.

Language policy, once perceived as an obstacle to the use of non-colonial languages in education, is undergoing transformation. The unquestioned dominance of English, French, and Portuguese is now

being contested. A growing number of African scholars are publishing in their native languages, a shift that, as Lebakeng (2022) observes, fosters a culture that genuinely values local knowledge.

Institutional and Curricular Practices

The literature indicates that institutional and curricular practices are the primary mechanisms by which coloniality is sustained. Western knowledge continues to dominate course content, reading lists, and research processes, often treating African knowledge as an object of study rather than a valid epistemological foundation, as Govender and Naidoo (2023) argue. Furthermore, the language of instruction remains a significant barrier. Institutions that rely exclusively on English, French, or Portuguese marginalise African languages and constrain engagement with locally grounded research (Lebakeng, 2022). Additionally, selection, promotion, and funding practices perpetuate this hierarchy by privileging educational initiatives aligned with Western paradigms (Altbach, 2016; Mbembe, 2016).

Emerging Pathways for Transformation

The academic papers reveal persistent obstacles while simultaneously delineating pathways for progression. Many researchers advocate for the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems into educational programs, the valuation of diverse research methodologies, and the development of institutional frameworks that ensure the equitable treatment of all epistemological traditions. Oukouomi Noutchie (2025) emphasises this point. Govender and Naidoo (2023) contend that superficial inclusion of African perspectives is insufficient; rather, educational institutions must deeply integrate African epistemologies into the core curriculum.

Discussion

Addressing epistemic justice is essential for rectifying historical imbalances in knowledge production. Failure to prioritise this focus may compromise the integrity and equity of intellectual innovation. Adebanwi (2016), for example, advocates adopting indigenous research methodologies to enable the reclamation of African intellectual sovereignty. Furthermore, Hungwe and Ndofirepi (2022) critique African institutions for adopting international certification systems, arguing that such practices perpetuate colonial power structures and traditions.

The internationalisation of higher education often reinforces, rather than transforms, existing power imbalances, as affirmed by Stein, Andreotti, Bruce, and Suša (2016). Altbach (2016) and Altbach, Reisberg, and de Wit (2017) note that global academic capitalism shapes higher education systems worldwide, including in Africa, thereby consolidating Western standards. Consequently, scholars such as Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda (2019), Govender and Naidoo (2023), and Aroge, Makalela, and Merisi (2024) emphasise the necessity of a systemic shift that prioritises African research and knowledge systems. Genuine educational reform requires more than the superficial inclusion of African perspectives; it demands their centralisation and authentic recognition. This shift aims to create an academic environment that reflects a broader range of human experiences.

Maldonado-Torres (2016) and de Sousa Santos (2018) examine the root of these issues, illustrating how coloniality continues to shape epistemological frameworks. They advocate for epistemologies of the South, which create space for diverse ways of knowing, fostering a more inclusive and equitable academic landscape. Institutional regulations play a critical role in maintaining coloniality, which Maldonado-Torres (2016) argues structures modern academia as a whole. De Sousa Santos (2018) characterises this system as a cognitive empire that sustains Western dominance. While Govender and Naidoo (2023) call for substantive curriculum reform over symbolic adjustments, Stein et al. (2016) maintain that internationalisation efforts often exacerbate power disparities.

Proposed interventions include developing language policies that facilitate academic research in African languages, revising research-assessment benchmarks to prioritise local impact, and promoting South–South academic networks (Lebakeng, 2022). Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda (2019) further highlight the need for inclusive research evaluation that recognises publications in indigenous languages.

The literature cautions against a reductive version of Africanisation that risks commodifying tradition; instead, scholars advocate for nuanced approaches that mediate between indigenous knowledge, global science, and local requirements (Maldonado-Torres, 2016; de Sousa Santos, 2018). While these concepts are beginning to influence policy documents and institutional initiatives—such as decolonial assignments and curriculum review committees—Altbach (2016) and UNESCO (2022) note that empirical evidence regarding their long-term efficacy remains limited. Ultimately, Mbembe (2016) asserts the need for universities to move beyond merely questioning Western paradigms and actively centralise African frameworks. This transformative agenda seeks to establish an academic world where multiple knowledge systems coexist equitably.

Conclusion

The historical baggage of decolonisation continues to shape African knowledge networks and higher education systems, supporting Eurocentric ideas of knowledge while marginalising indigenous knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). This implementation is also clear in school learning components and research blueprints that reproduce foreign-influenced classifications, as noted by Govender et al. (2023) and Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda (2018). Also, language policies and assessment practices continue to inform prevailing discussions, as highlighted by Sewpaul et al. (2025) and Kaur et al. (2023).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) and Govender et al. (2023) note that the outcomes of decolonial interventions remain under-researched, revealing the need for more studies to examine their influence on teaching, learning, research shifts, and school adjustment. Moreover, epistemic justice can be enhanced by integrating indigenous knowledge, creating unbiased learning programs, and adopting all-encompassing school strategies (Oukouomi Noutchie, 2025; Nhongo & Tshotsho, 2020).

In line with the need to move beyond symbolic gestures to the implementation of decolonial policies, this study acknowledges that institutional accountability mechanisms are vital to ensure that decolonial improvements translate into accessible, foundational change. Such a process may include curriculum inspection systems, institutional conformity-supervision guidelines, research impact-monitoring tools, and policy-implementation assessment units within higher-education management structures.

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