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# Locating academic development within the decolonial turn in higher education: The affordances of systems thinking for decolonial practice

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**Abstract**:
The student protests of 2015 and 2016 (re)surfaced the call to decolonise South African higher education (HE), highlighting the alienation experienced by black students within historically white institutions. This article describes how an academic development unit at one such institution responds as part of its reconceptualisation process. We consider the interplay between policy, structure, and practice within our context, and the extent to which these enable decolonial work. We also show how approaches to decolonisation within HE work to reinscribe coloniality and argue that these must be holistic and intentional to transform exclusionary institutional practices and the structures that sustain them. Drawing on the area of support services, which is typically designed around individualistic approaches to help-seeking, we illustrate, through a case study, how systems thinking principles enable productive decolonial work within colonial structures, and their affordances to inform policy for an integrated and responsive student support system.

**Keywords**: academic development, decolonisation, higher education, inclusivity, support services, systems thinking

## Introduction

The concept of decolonisation has been (re)surfaced by the student protests which swept across South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in 2015 and 2016, with ripple effects in other contexts such as Oxford University (Chaudari, 2016). Captured in the hashtags #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, the protests foregrounded the socio-economic challenges faced by black, mostly first-generation, students (Sader, 2020), including their dissatisfaction with the colonial symbols which reflect a white institutional culture within South African HEIs (Mbembe, 2015; Swartz, et al., 2018; Webb, 2016). Alongside teaching and learning related issues at the level of curriculum (Morreira, 2017; Shahjahan, 2023), the protests pointed to an overwhelming sense of alienation that is experienced by first-generation black students within historically white universities (Davids, 2020; Strydom, et al., 2016). Significantly, scholars such as Letseka, et al. (2010), have shown how some of this alienation can be attributed to challenges with navigating

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institutional support structures. The ways in which students are expected to navigate institutional support structures assumes forms of social and cultural capital that many students have yet to acquire (Bourdieu,1997; Sithaldeen & Van Pletzen, 2022). This can lead to a help-seeking experience for students that is often overwhelming, frustrating and which has been reported to lead to drop out (Letseka, et al., 2010). These spaces can never be accepted as neutral and thus work to enact what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) terms the coloniality of power, which serves to delegitimise the ways of being of particularly first-generation black students.

While HEIs grapple with the issues foregrounded by the student protests, scholars working in the area of decolonisation contend that these efforts are dampened by the colonial nature of the structures within which these decolonial efforts are happening (Behari-Leak, 2019; Luckett & Shay, 2020; Mbembe, 2016; Morreira, et al. 2021; Nyoni, 2019; Vorster & Quinn, 2017). The field of academic development, at least in South Africa, has evolved to address issues of transformation and redress (Boughey, 2008, 2010; Scott, 2009; Volbrecht & Boughey, 2004). This tension thus means that academic developers need to reflect on the extent to which their practice meaningfully responds to the imperative to enable equity of outcomes for black students, especially those marginalised by their socio-economic backgrounds (see Vorster & Quinn, 2017, who have considered this within the area of academic staff development).

This article provides a reflective account of how an academic development unit at one such institution engages with the call to decolonise Higher Education (HE) as part of a process of reconceptualisation, which entails exploring approaches to decolonisation to emerge with a definition that reflects the direction we would like to take. To do this, we consider the interplay between policy, structure, and practice within our context, and the extent to which these enable decolonial work. We draw on Stein and Andreotti's (2016) work which outlines dominant approaches to decolonisation within HE institutions. Noting the critiques which work against these essentialist and reductionist approaches to decolonisation, we argue that a progressive definition must encompass a holistic approach for the transformation of exclusionary institutional practices and the structures that serve to sustain them. Drawing on the area of support services which is typically designed around individualistic and hierarchical approaches to help-seeking, we illustrate, through a case study, how the principles and methodologies informing systems thinking can be harnessed to enable productive decolonial work within colonial structures. The case study illustrates how a systems approach to student support enables decolonial practices therein and provides a foundation for the formulation of a policy for an integrated student support system that is reflective of the approaches within our academic development work.

## Locating academic development within the decolonial turn in HE

The academic development terrain has changed significantly in SA since it was first introduced in the 1980s as a way to support marginalised black students in largely white institutions (Scott, 2009; Volbrecht & Boughey, 2004). Then known as academic support, the focus of this work was to enable black students from so-called 'disadvantaged' educational backgrounds to succeed in the existing system. At historically black institutions, however, it was recognised that this support

was needed by all students as a majority had been disadvantaged by the inferior schooling of apartheid. This majority, rather than minority, approach which started to appear in the 1990s became known as academic development (Boughey, 2008). While this was a significant change in thinking, the underlying principle remained that black students needed to be taught how to conform to established expectations of excellence (Boughey, 2010). Post the student protests, academic development is consciously challenging the deficit stigma attached to education development programmes by revisiting its degree structures to allow for greater flexibility in terms of 'entry points, pathways and exit points' and thus cater for a diversity of needs (Luckett & Shay, 2017). In doing this it is reviewing its offerings to interrogate the colonial modernising discourse that endures (Boughey, 2022) and exploring possibilities for socially-just curricula (Ashwin, 2022).

The South African University (SAU), which is a pseudonym for an individual university in South Africa, is a historically white institution with high admission requirements, with throughput rates pointing to the persistence of a racialised achievement gap in student performance (SAU Teaching and Learning Report, 2020).The notion of equity of access and outcomes as it applies within an HE setting is a contested one, with significant disagreement about what constitutes a fair system (McCowan, 2016: 645). Striving for equity of access and outcomes requires that academic development programmes adopt approaches which are responsive to racialised achievement gaps in data sets such as the one in Figure 1. Steyn, et al. (2014) take a holistic view of racialised achievement gaps, maintaining that it is important to consider the differentiated performance of certain groups in relation to the social, educational, cultural, and economic factors which shape black working-class students' lives.

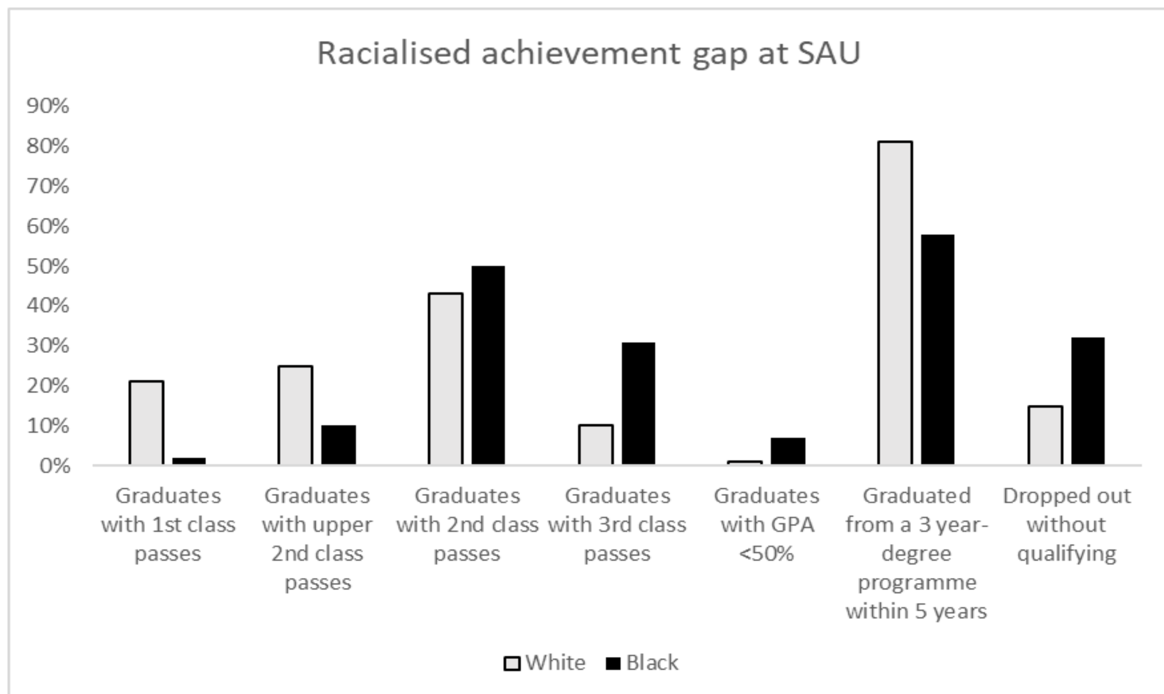


**Figure 1**: Graduation data on the 2013 cohort as reported in the 2018 Senate Teaching and Learning report

Figure 1 points to how White students outperform Black students at SAU, achieving first and second class passes at a much higher rate than Black students while the majority of Black students graduate with third class passes. Similarly, while almost 90% of White students graduate in minimum time, this is true for only 60% of Black students. A much higher percentage of Black students also drop out without qualifying than White students. A reconceptualisation of the Academic Development Programme at the institution is presently being formulated to better address this inequity. This necessitates a critical interrogation of the programme to understand the interplay between policy, structure, and practice in determining outcomes within the higher education system. Meaningfully interrogating current practice requires that we reflect on the changes in the broader higher education system, our student profile, and the extent to which the policies and structures informing our practices enable decolonial work. Consequently, the concept of decolonisation, with which we have engaged marginally in our scholarship, has edged its way to the centre of strategic discussions within our department, mirroring its trajectory within the institution and beyond. This has required that we consider decolonial efforts and approaches within higher education institutions to inform a definition that is reflective of the direction we would like to take.

The reconceptualisation process has also necessitated that we consider the debate around whether white scholars should be engaging with decolonisation. While we write from the position of educational developers who are classified as people of colour, we do not believe that decolonisation work should be assigned solely to scholars who identify as such. Instead, we believe that all scholars working in this area, irrespective of their race, need to approach this work from a highly reflexive position that goes beyond race to a consideration of their identities as educational developers working within a changing HE landscape. This resonates with Sally Matthews' (2021) sentiment in her article 'Decolonising while white: confronting race in a South African classroom' where she notes the importance of an intentional addressing of the ambivalences that come with one's positionality. While she writes this from the perspective of a white scholar doing decolonial work, we believe that this would be of benefit to all scholars, irrespective of race, as that would give academics the opportunity to find constructive ways to relate with diverse cohorts of students. In the next section we engage with the concept of decolonisation to understand its multiple dimensions and its treatment within HE globally.

## Engaging with the concept of decolonisation

The concept of decolonisation was advanced by Latin-American scholars such as Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2011) and Walter Mignolo (2009) and taken up by African scholars such as Mbembe (2016), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) and Ali Abdi (2012). A review of seminal literature on decolonisation yielded terms such as 'inclusivity', 'reform', 'transformation', 'disrupting', 'self-reflection', 'critique', 'compassion' and the interlinked concepts of 'tensions and contradictions'.

Several scholars have noted how the various definitions attached to the concept of decolonisation reflect the multiplicity of agendas for which the concept is utilised, resulting in different definitions for different contexts (Bhambra, et al., 2018; Nyoni, 2019; Stein & Andreotti,

2016; Zembylas, 2018). Fanon's (2008) seminal text *Black skin, white masks,* for example, approaches decolonisation largely from a psychological perspective, noting the impact of colonialism on the psychological and mental psyche of the black race (Nyoni, 2019). Ngugi wa Thiong'o considers the need for mental emancipation from the perspective of linguistic oppression, noting the effects of the hegemony of the English language on the status and use of African languages within African communities. In the 1980s, Ngugi's book *Decolonising the mind* offered valuable conceptual tools to depict how coloniality as a mentality endured despite African nations' liberation from the yoke of Western colonisation. Other scholars such as Said (1978), Spivak (1988) and Bhabha (1994) have engaged in similar discussions within postcolonial studies. Across these context-specific conceptualisations of decolonisation, there is consensus that the interlinked themes of resistance and redress provide a unifying thread, namely, resisting Eurocentrism in all its forms and righting the wrongs that came with colonial domination (Zembylas, 2019: 2).

In the next section, we narrow our exploration of decolonisation to the higher education context. We draw on Stein and Andreotti's (2016) outline of the different critical approaches to decolonisation to consider the treatment of the concept within this space, noting coherences in meaning as well as critiques. In doing so, we draw on the concepts of transformation and inclusivity as entry points into the broad concept of decolonisation, illustrating reductionist tendencies in conceptualisation and practice. The critiques then enable us to emerge with a working definition of the concept, which we consider in relation to a site of practice within our academic development work.

## *Decolonisation within HE*

Critiques of decolonisation propose that concepts associated with decoloniality, such as inclusivity, transformation, and equity of access and outcomes may need to be redefined within educational institutions because, while universities exhibit a commitment to social inclusion and to the transformation of colonial practices, the reductive approaches to decolonisation within which these concepts are used can actually work to reproduce social exclusion (Mampaey, 2017). We thus focus on the phenomenon of reductionism within approaches to decolonisation in HE.

### *Addressing reductionism in decolonial efforts within HE*

While important to the transformation needed in HE, many argue that some approaches to decoloniality are inherently reductive and can even be unproductive. Stein and Andreotti (2016) provide a helpful summary of approaches to decoloniality. While they write from the Global North, the approaches evident within their HEIs correspond to those within South African institutions. They reduce these to three main approaches which we outline below.

Stein et al. (2020) maintain that the first category of approaches enacts inclusivity via a focus on increasing the numbers of underrepresented individuals (students and staff) within institutions. They term this attempt at transformation as 'soft reform', an approach to decolonisation which perceives the resistance of coloniality to mean the uncritical wholesale

replacement of symbols of whiteness and epistemologies with Afro-centric ones (see also Mgqwashu, 2016; Van Reenen, 2019). These scholars further add that this notion of inclusion is characterised by what they term 'a benevolent gift' for which people of colour are expected to be grateful. Importantly for the argument we present, Stein and Andreotti maintain that the focus on engaging with difference at the level of the individual leaves the measures of success and structures of power unquestioned and unchallenged. In a similar vein, Nyoni (2019) cautions against the danger of emerging on the other end of decolonial efforts with cosmetic changes or what Zembylas (2018: 4) terms 'empty rhetoric' which lacks a truly transformative element.

Echoing Stein et al. (2020), Nyoni's (2019) productive conceptualisation of inclusivity maintains that its success lies in the visible effects of decolonial efforts, rather than in the 'legislative prescripts of inclusivity as it relates to numbers' (see also Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017). This sentiment has been echoed more recently by Davids (2020) who notes the increasing alienation felt by students in South African HEIs. Centering the notion of inclusivity, she maintains that the tendency to measure transformation in terms of increased enrolments of black students fails to account for the anger and frustration displayed in student protests and how this is borne out of the persisting alienation that they experience. These authors all point to the need to be intentional about being inclusive, which requires problematising the effects of structures of power and their material effects and offering practical strategies of addressing these to facilitate inclusivity. Nyoni (2019) maintains that, at a practical level, inclusivity must entail facilitating the ability of individuals to access facilities and information.

Tabensky and Matthews (2015), who write from the context of a historically white South African university similar to SAU, explore transformation within the concept of institutional culture within historically white universities. These authors note that the untransformed institutional cultures within historically white HEIs can be traced to institutional cultures being '… highly nebulous things that are extremely difficult to pin down' (2015: 2). Here, institutional culture constitutes a colonial structure that hampers decolonial efforts. The consequence of this is that the concept of transformation is typically used abstractly without concrete practical strategies for how it can be achieved (Tabensky & Matthews, 2015).

The second category of approaches, which Stein and Andreotti (2016) term as radical reform, reflects characteristics of being progressive in that they acknowledge the role and power of institutional structures and their effects on access to material and intellectual resources. This results in some positive outcomes such as the establishment of ethnic studies and free tuition for indigenous students. Stein and Andreotti (2016) note, however, that they fail to address the intersecting nature of vehicles of oppression such as colonialism, capitalism, racism, and patriarchy, resulting in some problematic areas being addressed at the expense of others. While this approach does succeed in facilitating access to capital and symbolic goods, like the first set of approaches, it does work to reproduce some of the hierarchical colonial structures within institutions.

The third set of approaches put forward by Stein and Andreotti (2016) seeks to address the root cause of inequality and colonial violence within institutions and questions the ongoing

reliance on the colonial system that serves to regulate them. Consequently, their responses seek to use institutional resources for radical projects that address social injustice, which they refer to as 'hacking the university', an enterprising strategy that appropriates the institutions' practices and structures for the benefit of the marginalised. In supporting these approaches, these authors maintain that any attempts at decolonising which overlook the structures within which colonisation resides work to reproduce it, 'and decolonization itself becomes weaponized as an alibi to continue colonial business as usual' (2016: 44). In articulating this viewpoint, Stein, et al. (2020: 45) suggest that foregrounding and productively working 'with the discomforts, challenges, and contradictions' that characterise efforts to decolonise allows for multiple interpretations of decolonial theory and practice, 'in particular its ecological, cognitive, affective, and economic dimensions'. Viewing decolonisation in this way calls for holistic approaches to addressing inequity of outcomes within the student journey and to locate possible entry points for the enactment of decolonial practices.

### *Emerging with a holistic definition of decolonisation*

The above review of the literature reflects how higher education in South Africa in many ways retains the social relations and values of colonial and apartheid times (Zembylas, 2018) making universities unwelcoming places for black students. Noting the critiques of responses to decolonisation which point to essentialist and reductionist approaches which work to reinscribe coloniality (Behari-Leak, 2019; Moosavi, 2020), we argue that a progressive definition of decolonisation needs to encompass a holistic approach that addresses the multifaceted aspects of the student journey, acknowledging the need to transform exclusionary institutional practices and the structures that serve to sustain them. Similar to the third set of responses presented by Stein and Andreotti (2016) that we outline above, we frame our critique of decolonisation as commonly applied to HE within a question posed by renowned Somali sociologist and educationist, Ali A. Abdi. In a discussion on decolonising higher education with Logan Cochrane, Abdi asks: 'To what extent can we actually do [decolonising in practice] within systems and within organisations that are not designed to do that work'? (Cochrane & Abdi, 2020). This question suggests that there is a need for extending working definitions of decolonisation to address systemic constraints that continue to impact decolonial efforts. It is thus instructive for us as we argue that any definition of decolonisation must acknowledge the student journey as a whole and that an effective enactment of student agency and student voice is adversely impacted by a reductive approach to decolonisation which fails to address the constraining effects of institutional structures. In engaging with these critiques, the working definition with which we emerge characterises decolonisation as entailing a holistic approach to student support that is intentional about being inclusive through establishing agile and adaptive structures for transformative practice(s).

To work meaningfully towards decolonised outcomes also requires that we acknowledge that there are a number of interconnecting components that work together to create the conditions that students experience as colonial, alienating, and hostile. One area in which this is

evident is the design of our systems of student support that do much to amplify this hostility (Letseka, et al. 2010). We look to systems thinking (ST), and argue that it can, at a practical level, be used to mitigate some of the effects of colonial structures in the area of student support and advising.

## Student support practices as exclusionary

Student support in HE is often experienced by students as exclusionary as they are faced with messages that glorify independence and an ability to help oneself (Van Antwerpen, 2015; Yasin, 2023). Indeed, South African university students report a fear of intellectual inferiority when asking for help (Swartz, et al., 2018). This may be attributed to the fact that student support at HEIs is often designed with the underlying assumption that students will assimilate and in good time be able to access support they need, when they need it. As such, support is often structured to recapitulate the journey of the 'average student' emphasising a normative understanding of who students are and what they should be able to do. In reality, support services are inaccessible to students for many reasons, for example, they may only be available at certain hours when some students have responsibilities, or they are designed without cultural awareness or sensitivity and do not effectively address the unique challenges faced by students from different backgrounds. Some support services might assume a certain level of prior knowledge or familiarity with academic and institutional processes, alienating students who might not possess this assumed knowledge. Students at SAU, commenting on the institution's advising and support services, mentioned how 'they felt overwhelmed by high volumes of e-mail', asked for 'the inclusion of pre-enrolment information in the first communication they received from the university, such as letters of acceptance', and further recommended 'the inclusion of a glossary of terms (such as "curriculum" and "credits")'. They argued that such information 'would have facilitated their first academic encounters' (Van Pletzen, et al., 2021: 37). The marketing of these services as being 'for at-risk students', coupled with their inefficiency and unresponsiveness, has the effect of stigmatising and further alienating students. The combined effect of these practices goes much deeper than student frustration at not being able to access help. It has the potential to significantly affect a student's sense of belonging in higher education (Swartz, et al., 2018) and negatively impact their willingness to seek help again (Sithaldeen & Van Pletzen, 2022). The next section illustrates how the principles of inclusivity, transformation, intentionality and adaptability, enacted through progressive approaches to decolonisation as advanced by Stein and Andreotti (2020), are evident within a systems thinking approach and when applied to the design and implementation of student support can shift the ways in which support is perceived and received.

## Applying systems thinking towards the decolonisation of practice in HE

There are few guiding frameworks to help institutions manage multifaceted projects that work towards a particular goal (Tinto & Pusser, 2006) such as decolonisation. Systems thinking is one approach that may provide us with a framework to do this practically (Sithaldeen & Van Pletzen, 2022). A system refers to a collection of interconnected and interdependent components or

elements that work together to achieve a specific purpose or function or produce a particular output or outcome (Colchester, 2016). How well the components work together to achieve this is determined by the level of integration within the system. The components of the system could be physical, conceptual, or abstract in nature, and they interact with each other through various relationships and processes (Bridgen, 2017; Colchester, 2016; Musser, 2006). A good system will also allow for feedback between components, which allows for corrective measures that improve outputs.

The system's thinking approach is not new to higher education and has been applied at many levels. In its 1997 White paper, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) calls for the transformation of higher education in SA and proposes that we must apply the principles of systems thinking to achieve this. Even though Scott (2018) argues that, 20 years later, we have yet to achieve the full intended outcomes of the 1997 paper, he still contends that systems thinking remains an appropriate strategy to get there. This is likely due to the integrative nature of education, in that it is a system where each component influences and is influenced by the other (Nicolescu, 2017). Even within an individual institution there are many interacting policies, structures and practices that cumulatively determine the student experience. The systems approach, though often linked to solving challenges of efficiency in the workplace, is also very useful for unpacking such complexity (Gershenson, 2013). Policy, structure, and practice are the components of any HE system that work together to create the conditions within which higher education practitioners must work to achieve certain outcomes.

Stewart and Ayres (2001: 80), in considering the affordances of adopting a systemic approach to policy development, reflect on how systems thinking has moved away from the hard approach which characterised systems thinking in the 1970s, which did not address the contested nature of policy values and processes, to what they term 'soft' systems methods. In doing so they note how this soft approach foregrounds 'the self-organising and adaptive capacities of appropriately designed systems', making systems approaches a useful way of conceptualising the relationship between policy action and its targets. Importantly for our argument, these authors note how a systems perspective makes it possible to address the structures around which policies should be developed, countering the tendency for policy makers to focus on one aspect of a system without addressing its interconnectedness to other parts of the system.

The application of systems thinking therefore goes beyond the identification of existing structures and their organisation. This approach also allows us to focus on the kind of transactions which occur between components, the relationships between structures and where the levers of influence are that can create desired outcomes (Tukey, 1996). In this way, systems thinking provides us with a framework for unpacking complexity (Gershenson, 2013) and identifying the impediments and enablers to achieving our purpose or function. In the next section, we present a case study of how the application of systems principles towards improving a student support service, coupled with intentionality, can increase efficiency through decolonial practices.

### *The case study*

The functions of support in higher education are often decentralised and not always integrated (Bridgen, 2017; Achieving the dream, 2018; Tyton Planning, 2017), with minimal central coordination. An article by Sithaldeen and van Pletzen. (2022) clearly illustrates that this is the case for SAU. These authors make the case that if support structures more closely approximate an integrated system, SAU could increase the efficiency of student support and reduce student frustration in help-seeking. To do this would require setting very clear goals for student support, having some level of central coordination, mechanisms for feedback to ensure that the system is producing the desired outcomes, and tools for communication between structures. Here, we argue that to work towards the goal of the decolonisation of the student experience, there must also be greater intentionality built into the system. This implies that, while we are aiming to improve efficiencies through being agile and adaptable (Abdi, 2012), we must also make a commitment to un-marginalising the marginalised, and value and accommodate student differences (Braxton, 2000; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendón, et al., 2000). These attempts at inclusivity imply not only problematising the effects of structures of power but also having practical strategies to address challenges to inclusivity such as facilitating individuals' access to facilities and information (Nyoni, 2019; Bazana and Mogotsi, 2017; Davids, 2020).

### *Improving efficiency through an integrative approach to student support: Designing for decolonial outcomes*

During COVID, SAU needed a simple way for students to be able to communicate with the institution and a new central help desk was created. Prior understandings of the level of decentralisation within SAU and the need to improve efficiencies in student support (Sithaldeen and van Pletzen, 2022), suggested that a central helpdesk, designed as a point of integration between components of student support, would be the ideal mechanism to address this challenge. It would act as a central coordinating mechanism through which student queries could move. It also served as a mechanism for information and data between components of the system. Data suggest that the application of systems principles did improve efficiencies, communication across the system and data sharing for improvement of service. Evidence to support this is presented in Table 1.

Student support services such as housing services for residence placement, financial aid to assist with financial support, and wellness to assist students with health issues, are largely designed with functionality in mind. At SAU there is no policy or framework that outlines a purpose, intentionality, or directive for the implementation of such services and there are no tools or platforms that enable them to work together well. This autonomy set up by this level of decentralisation, can and often does, lead to institutional resistance to doing things differently. However, due to the urgencies resulting from the onset of the Covid pandemic, there was a common understanding that we would need to do things differently and the approach was widely welcomed. The help desk that was established made no assumptions about the knowledge or

**Table 1**: Results of applying systems principles to student query handling at SAU

| | |
|---|---|
| **Evidence for adding capacity to the system as a whole** | Over five thousand student queries were handled from August 2020-March 2023 |
| **Evidence of being a channel of communication between the support services** | Referral was made to thirty-seven departments across the institution |
| **Evidence of being an efficient point of integration for students** | Fifty-seven categories of queries were managed by the service. One case shows how by using this service, one student was able to bypass the 9 calls and emails it took to get to the information they needed to graduate in December 'so that they can start job seeking'. A help desk agent called the student to get a complete picture of the student's concerns and they were 'very appreciative to get a call'. The agent then worked on the student's behalf to find the information they needed. Of particular relevance to our argument is that the student was living in a rural area with limited cell phone coverage and could only make a phone call by standing on the branch of a tree. Therefore, having to make numerous calls would have been a significant barrier to accessing help. |
| **Evidence of data sharing and communication for as a feedback mechanism for effecting change** | The help desk centralised and aggregated student query data. This was then reported into decision making structures such as the teaching online task team headed up by the DVC teaching and learning. In the SAU report for 2021 it was noted that 'All the operational infrastructure developed by 'the helpdesk' was invaluable in 2021; not only in helping individual students, but – from a management point of view – in developing an accurate view of the needs and problems to which the university had to respond' (SAU Teaching and Learning report, 2021:12). Examples of such cases included assisting the institution to communicate with students in need of laptops and helping lecturers locate and communicate with students who had stopped engaging with the online learning platform many of whom had simply run out of data or lived in marginalised communities with limited connectivity. |

capital that students could access to ask for help. Instead, it was designed as a generalised service, a 'one-stop shop' for any query where queries could be logged at any time, thereby eliminating the need for students to know how to navigate a complex support network. To reduce some of the fear of asking for help, the helpdesk was resourced by peer advisors who were explicitly trained to provide a care-driven and student-centred service while being supported by senior staff. Agility was also built into the tool, recognising that students might require assistance in articulating their challenges accurately and that services provided might need to be adapted in line with students' actual needs.

Data sharing and feedback between components are essential to systems integration. By setting up effective, routine data capture and analysis, the help desk was able to report into governing structures that were centrally co-ordinating student support during COVID. This ensured that the voices of the marginalised and the socio-material challenges that they faced could be surfaced and addressed at a practical level (Nyoni, 2019). Figure 2 illustrates how helpdesk data were routinely reported to explicate the experiences of students living off-campus during COVID. This was used for consideration in institutional responses. For example, when the helpdesk increasingly received student concerns of having a poor. At home, learning environment, this data, reported to an emergency governance structure, along with other evidence sources, was used to support the "return to campus" initiative.  A corrective measure that sought to limit interrupted progress for affected students.

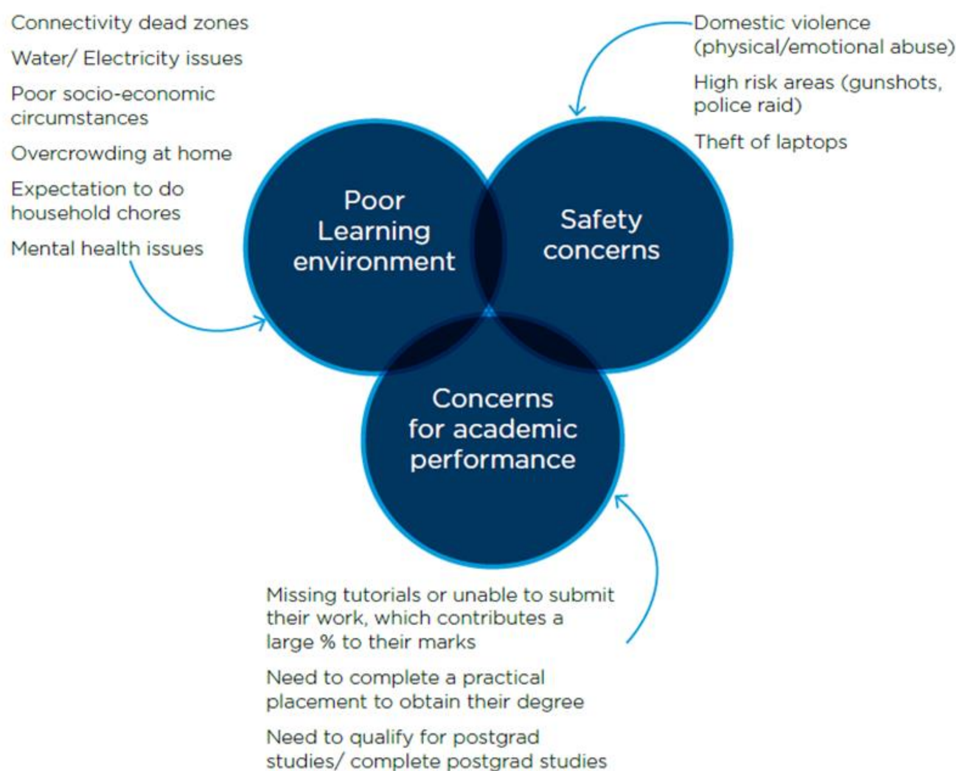


**Figure 2**: A graphic illustration of the data reflecting students' experiences of living off-campus during COVID (Figure 22, SAU Teaching and Learning Report, 2020: 85)

Data were collected through the helpdesk and aggregated into three categories of concern as represented by the larger circles. We provide annotations to the circles as examples of the specific details that students describe in their emails.

## Discussion

We return to the important question Abdi asks about the extent to which decolonial work can be effected within systems and within organisations that are not designed to do that work (Cochrane & Abdi, 2020). In response to this question, we argue that applying a systems thinking approach is one strategy that can achieve decolonial outcomes in practice despite a lingering coloniality in the policies and structures with which they interact. For our decolonial efforts to be meaningful and impactful they must work at a practical level that makes a real difference to the lived experiences of students (Nyoni, 2019). Our case study illustrates how an integrated approach to student support practices can achieve these outcomes. We have illustrated how the application of systems thinking goes beyond a mechanistic improvement on efficiency and redundancy; it also allows us to serve the vulnerability of marginal students through improved agility and adaptability and by considering the whole system in which the student engages. By aggregating data for reporting, we gave students a powerful voice in the decision-making process and a way to leverage their agency and help-seeking behaviour in influencing institutional responses. The case study also illustrated how the concept of inclusivity is addressed within a systems approach. These outcomes show how a systems approach, if applied with deeper intentionality, has the potential to help us materialise the decolonial culture we seek to create in higher education. The integrated approach deployed within the case study, and by extension within systems thinking, assists in surfacing the various issues that contribute to students' alienation (Davids, 2020).

We have argued that the alienation experienced by students in HE results from the interaction of policies, structures, and practices. In our discussion of student support at SAU we refer to the hierarchical structures informing student support and the impact these have on practices on the ground. The absence of a policy or framework that provides guidance for the purpose, implementation and intended outcomes of student support is reflected in the lack of integration at the level of structure, resulting in exclusionary practices. Guided by Stewart and Ayres' (2001) thinking, we argue that the formulation of a well-informed policy is crucial as without it we cannot achieve the desired efficiencies of a truly integrated system. A policy or framework that is designed around systems principles would not only provide a commonly understood *purpose* for student support at SAU, framed around applicable analytical and implementation strategies (Stewart & Ayres, 2001:91), but would also act as a central coordinating mechanism that allows us to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the system.

At the start of the article, we outlined the changes in the conceptualisations of academic development work in South African institutions. We showed how the shifts in education development approaches have mirrored socio-political changes. These are evident in the initial focus on social justice and redress as a response to the exclusionary policies of the apartheid

government, to approaches which straddle the prevailing need for social justice and equity of access alongside the need to extend support to all students. This undertaking has required that we explore approaches to decolonisation within HE and the implications of these definitions for the educational development work we undertake in various contexts. In our quest to find a definition of decolonisation that mirrors our thinking we assert that we must acknowledge the student journey from a holistic perspective. This allows for multiple points of entry to decolonise the student experience such as student support structures. Accessing complex student support can be an act of gatekeeping, and it is often a students' social connectedness that determines if they will get the help they need. Sithaldeen and Van Pletzen (2022) maintain that inefficiency functions as an unintended barrier to access. In many cases complexity and inefficiency are attributed to poor communication across structures and limited resource availability. We illustrated, through the above case study, how applying systems thinking principles can increase communication across structures through integration and efficiency and reduce redundancy and waste. This allows us to help more students in a more transparent manner which can serve to normalise the act of help seeking. The provision of student support is not a neutral practice and designing for inclusivity requires intentionality. In the context of our argument, intentionality implies that our institution is aware of who the users are and what their needs are, and designs with that in mind. Intentionality in an integrated student support system would mean that each student's needs would be addressed in a customised way through a mobilisation of the relevant mechanisms within that system. We found that by applying the principles of integration we enabled student access regardless of their institutional knowledge or confidence to approach staff.

Zembylas (2018:1) considers decolonisation from the perspective of articulating the links between humanising pedagogy, a form of critical pedagogy focusing on the 'pursuit of one's full humanity' and the theoretical concepts emerging from decolonial theories. While we have always considered our work to be decolonial in that it carries with it the objectives of redress and widening access in several contexts within the institution, engaging with this process enables a close exploration of contemporary intellectual debates within the area of decolonisation as reflected in the body of decolonial literature. The definition with which we emerge illustrates for us the ways, and extent to which our practices engage with the principles which characterise progressive forms of decolonisation. The principle of inclusivity and how this applies in our work is considered from the perspective of the importance of extending our support to all students and recognising that objective in how we respond to institutional imperatives.

A truly transformative agenda entails the decolonisation of the university and the higher education landscape in its entirety, and not just the curriculum (Tran, 2021: 18). Indeed, any attempt at decolonising that does not address the structures within which colonisation resides allows for colonial business to continue as usual (Stein & Andreotti, 2016). As we have illustrated via the case study we present, student success is not simply a function of providing support services. Providing services that are not without appropriate support is, for many, not a meaningful opportunity to succeed in the university (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). We extend this

thinking to our work broadly within the programme, and in conceptualising how we work decolonially, addressing students' challenges holistically.

Hayes, et al. (2021: 889) assist us in extending our insights on decolonisation to the different dimensions from which decolonial work can be approached. These include, but are not limited to, 'theoretical development, national policy, institutional policy and culture, an academic discipline, programme, course, classroom, their students and the self'.

Thinking differently, as our process of reconceptualisation our work motivates us to do, has enabled us to think critically about the merits of combining approaches in providing support that addresses the whole individual. In presenting this argument, we look to Andreotti, et al. (2020: 48) whose characterisation of decolonisation as a journey points to the need 'to stay with the trouble' and, at times, to experiment, without attachment to 'successful' outcomes (2020: 63). Our work requires that we adopt an amalgamation of approaches that allow for the deep self-reflexivity that decolonial work calls for alongside complementary approaches that work on the ground to address challenges related to accessing resources practically and timeously.

## Conclusion: Some thoughts on systems thinking and moving towards a decolonial future

This article argues that a systems thinking approach provides an entry point to imagining a decolonial future. Through the case study we present, we show that, adopting a systematic approach to understand how and why certain structures work against our decolonial efforts, we can make strategic changes that can shift the whole system closer towards inclusivity and belonging. Our case study went even further to show how embedding intentionality into the design of our structure facilitates voice and agency for students who are in vulnerable positions. Through the critiques of decolonisation which we outlined in this article, we emerged with a set of guiding principles that have and will continue to guide our understanding of the concept of decolonisation. What this implies for our practice is captured in the following statements: If coloniality is understood as a system of policies and structures that affirm western excellence, decoloniality must be a system of policies, structures and practices that diversifies the conceptualisation of excellence in ways that enable agency and voice. If coloniality, in validating particular forms of social and cultural capital at the expense of others, functions as a gate-keeping mechanism, decoloniality must foreground inclusivity by intentionally acknowledging diverse forms of doing and being. If coloniality serves to reduce success to an act of individualism and meritocracy which negates the idea of systemic injustice as barriers to success, decoloniality must uphold the ideas of working together and helping each other towards success; the humanising pedagogy to which Zembylas (2018) refers. Finally, if coloniality creates a sense of displacement and alienation, decoloniality must create belonging.

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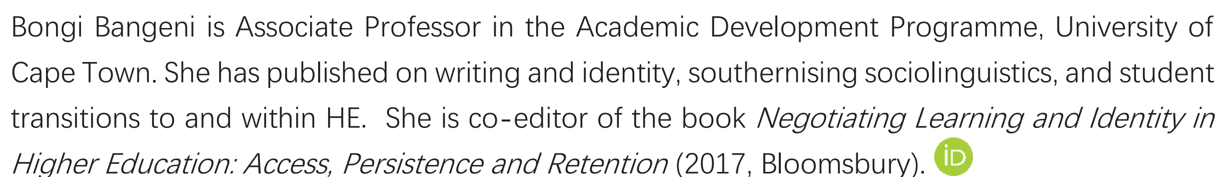

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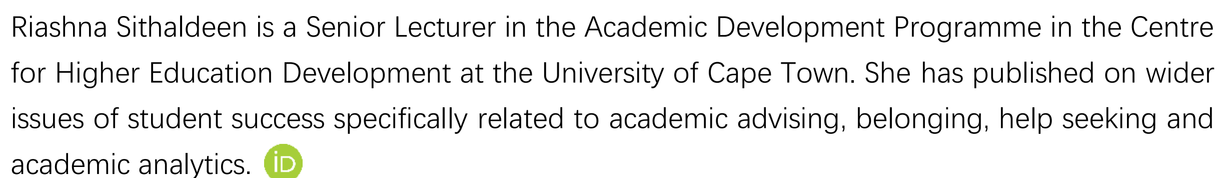

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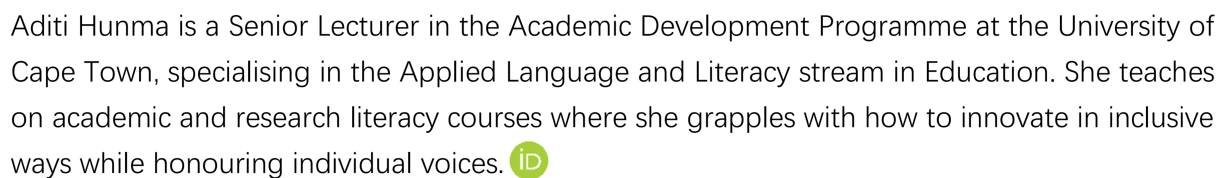

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