

# **Exploring the Internationalisation of Zimbabwe's Higher Education Institutions Through a Decolonial Lens: Postcolonial Continuities and Disruptions**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Looking through the history of higher education in Zimbabwe, we argue that the concept of internationalisation of higher education is not new to Zimbabwe. Understandings, manifestations and processes of the phenomenon over time are examined to reveal the nuances of the internationalisation process in its current mode of occurrence, in an attempt to not only understand it in its colonial and postcolonial manifestation, but to situate it within a wider decolonial project. Using a decolonial lens, this paper explores various processes of internationalisation in Zimbabwe's HEIs, viewing them either as continuities or disruptions. In so doing, we argue that for internationalisation in Zimbabwe's HEIs to fully deliver on its promises, it needs to not only engage with the issues of colonial(ism/ity), but also to understand its particular specificity in the Zimbabwean society, and the effects that this continues to have on internationalisation attempts.

**KEYWORDS:** Internationalisation, Zimbabwe, Higher Education Institutions, Decolonial, Coloniality, Africa.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The leading authors in the field of the internationalisation of higher education have long stressed that there is no simple, all-encompassing definition of internationalisation. Rather, different definitions of internationalisation embody diverse emphases and various approaches (e.g., Knight & de Wit, 1995; Buckner & Stein, 2019). The literature also stresses the need to recognise this diversity through contextual studies and there is increasing publication of non-metropolitan cases (e.g., Caruana, 2010; Mertkan et al., 2016). This article adds to the growing literature looking at what emerges when discourses and practices of internationalisation are considered through a coloniality lens (e.g., Mok, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; Heleta, 2016; Majee & Ress, 2018). Majee & Ress (2018) argue that the Decoloniality Framework is a useful tool for challenging longstanding claims of Euro-American internationalisation templates.

We look specifically at the case of Zimbabwean higher education institutions (HEIs). In so doing, we note that internationalisation is not new to Zimbabwe and that current manifestations inevitably are grounded in this proto-internationalised history. Crucially, this history cannot be separated from a colonial experience and legacy. Majee and Ress (2018) have attempted to conceptualise internationalisation efforts in the context of historical particularities of the postcolonial condition, looking at the case of South Africa and Brazil; they argue that internationalisation of higher education pays less attention to how legacies of colonial expansion impose unique demands on universities.

To situate this article, we begin by reflecting on Zimbabwe's colonial history and in particular its impact on higher education. This leads us to a discussion of notions of coloniality and how this is distinct from colonialism. Using the coloniality lens, we then draw on interviews with Zimbabwean HEI staff to ask questions about the Zimbabwean internationalisation project that are distinct from the usual ones precisely because of this different lens. Thus, we shed a critical light on the process in order to reveal the nuances of internationalisation in Zimbabwe. Through this we raise relevant questions to provoke debate about the nature of internationalisation in contexts, that are most squarely situated within what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) refers to as an existing 'global colonial matrix of power'.

## **BACKGROUND**

The British colonised Zimbabwe from 1890 to 1980. Developed first by missionaries and then expanded by the colonial state, education in colonial Zimbabwe was designed to maintain the 'necessary' separation of different racial groups in a settler economy. Education was deliberately unequal, with blacks practically, rather than legally, excluded from higher education. Colonial education was meant to provide colonialism with the local support staff it needed to achieve its purpose. This largely reduced African education to getting the indigenous populations to be able to be communicated to by the colonial state (Adebisi 2016). Even the white settler-oriented university education in Zimbabwe was designed to meet the needs of the colony for manpower to generate exports of minerals and agricultural products. Hence, the focus was on agriculture, veterinary medicine and mining engineering, as well as the production of health and education professionals necessary to produce and maintain human capital (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011).

As colonialism was grounded in extraction of surpluses from the colonised territories, investments in education were taken on reluctantly by the Colonial Office and it was only in 1955 that the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (UCRN) was established to cover what is now Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi (Gelfand, 1978). With independence in those neighbouring countries and then the attempt at a compromise to protect white privilege in Rhodesia, the institution was renamed the University of Rhodesia and the University of Zimbabwe-Rhodesia before finally becoming the University of Zimbabwe at independence in 1980. Before this date, the student body had remained predominantly white. However, by the 1960s, increasing (though still very small) numbers of black students were going to institutions such as Fort Hare in South Africa, with a handful also studying in Britain, America, etc. (Hapanyengwi, 2013). During the liberation war, it became increasingly common for Zimbabweans to receive higher education in Socialist countries as well.

UCRN was part of a British colonial model of internationalisation. Its status as a university college meant that key competencies, such as curriculum development and quality assurance, were regulated by the University of London (and the University of Birmingham for Medicine). Indeed, many of the staff were themselves expatriates, often London-trained. Thus, the regulations, culture and practices of the institution were triply shaped by the overall effects of

colonialism, the regulatory oversight of English universities and the dominant position of expatriate academics and administrators.

At independence, educational reforms were introduced at all levels (Zvobgo, 1994). However, these were mostly muted at the University. There was some 'Africanisation' of the staff and student bodies (though with significant white participation still) and a greater emphasis on African languages and history, mirroring earlier experiences in many other African countries (Mbembe, 2016). As the University of Zimbabwe flourished in the 1980s, it continued links with British universities, especially around quality assurance. Its relatively high quality and the overall strength and stability of the Zimbabwean economy encouraged considerable inflows of staff and students from the rest of Africa. Sanctions were lifted, resulting in an increase in international support for university teaching and research projects; staff development schemes; student exchange programmes, etc. In addition, many black graduates who had studied abroad returned and joined the University as academics and management. They brought with them international practices from their exposure to various higher education systems. Whilst some staff came from Eastern Europe (either as expatriates or returnees), the bulk of those entering the University from abroad had been educated in some form of the Western university.

By the 1990s, new universities (public and private) began to emerge, initially in a filial relationship (for the public universities) to the University of Zimbabwe akin to the university college model, reinforcing dynamics of power and knowledge. Private universities attracted staff largely from state universities and were modelled along similar lines, requiring to be registered, accredited and quality assured by the national quality assurance agency, the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE). This higher education expansion took place at the point when the post-independence optimism began to fade. Economic downturn and political contestations resulted in mass emigration. By 2010, more than 4 million Zimbabwean nationals were estimated to be living in the diaspora (UNDP, 2010). Fewer international staff and students entered the country and suspension from the Commonwealth and sanctions by the EU and US increased Zimbabwe's higher education isolation. This impacted quality education provision resulting in increased outward mobility as parents sought a better education for their children beyond Zimbabwe's borders, not only in the North but also East, and South Africa (Makombe, 2009). In the latest UNESCO Institute of Statistics data (UIS, 2017) Zimbabwe ranks 5<sup>th</sup> of African 'senders'. The crisis also impacted research

(Hwami, 2010) by limiting access to research funding and capacity to publish in reputable journals. To counter the impact Zimbabwe adopted a 'look East policy' towards East-Asian countries, particularly China (Chingono, 2010). Though anecdotal, it is argued that the look East policy has contributed to a significant growth in outbound student mobility to Asia.

At home, Zimbabwe continued to expand its higher education with the numbers of universities rising to 24 public (14) and private (10), as well as over 100 degree awarding public and private institutions (Garwe and Thondhlana, 2019). ZIMCHE was established and mandated to promote and harmonise quality higher education.

## **THE COLONIALITY LENS**

Internationalisation presupposes some kind of level playing field. Because of coloniality, this simply is not the case. Zimbabwe's internationalisation, and its HEIs, are linked to a historical colonial past and many activities continue to be influenced by major Northern universities. These have always dominated academic knowledge production and distribution, with weaker, poorer institutions following in their wake (Altbach, 2004). Universities in countries like Zimbabwe, struggle to compete favourably given financial constraints, exacerbated by coloniality, which shape the modern global cartography of power.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) explains that coloniality refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism. It is a system that defines the organisation and dissemination of epistemic material and aesthetic resources in ways that reproduce modernity's imperial project (Quijano, 2000). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) propounds that an understanding of the coloniality of knowledge enables us to focus on teasing out epistemological issues, the politics of knowledge generation, and questions of who generates which knowledge and for what purpose. Decolonial thinkers argue that modernity is predicated upon coloniality and that one such product of modernity has been the creation of what counts as legitimate knowledge (Morreira, 2017). Therefore, the geopolitics of knowledge production is argued to be a component of modernity (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Coloniality thus survives colonialism and exists in all postcolonial societies in various shapes and forms despite repeated post-independence attempts to reverse its multiple legacies. Discussing internationalisation in Zimbabwe's HEIs must therefore recognise the ways this history of colonialism feeds into what exists currently and what can be imagined.

Coloniality is also a system of management that affects the ways people are able to 'be' in the world, and just by that understanding, the wider applicability of this line of argument sheds critical light on the issues faced by Africans and African institutions attempting to internationalise. They often have to contend with various issues including poor rankings and funding, political sanctions and immigration requirements. These not only disadvantage them from the start, but often serve to maintain their place in the existing world order, meaning they constantly have to play catch-up in the internationalisation game. By legitimating particular forms of knowledge and ontologies, universities are deeply implicated in coloniality. They were part and parcel of the colonial project (Heleta, 2016). Mbembe (2016) adds that African universities are local instantiations of a dominant academic model based on a Eurocentric epistemic canon. This has become hegemonic and actively represses anything that is actually articulated, thought and envisioned from outside this frame.

Arguing that the University of Zimbabwe's experiences up to independence is profoundly shaped by an internationalisation that cannot be separated from colonialism, its post-independence experiences and those of the expanded Zimbabwean higher education system regarding internationalisation must therefore be read in the light of this legacy. Thinking through Zimbabwe's historical past and the ways in which they featured elements of current identifiable attributes of internationalisation allows for a problematisation of internationalisation as it exists in order to understand it within and beyond its current context. This requires paying attention to colonialities of power and knowledge, which Walton (2018) argues are mutually reinforcing. Majee and Ress (2018) observe that internationalisation of higher education rests on a history *longue durée* of colonial expropriation and exploitation. Thus, the project of internationalising higher education (within a globalising world) runs the risks of both of reinforcing past and present inequalities and knowledge hierarchies, and creating new ones. If we follow Yang (2002) in seeing universities as key sites of cultural and epistemological invasion, then we can also look at them as key sites of different struggles including those resulting from internationalisation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This article has its origins in a collaboration between the University of Nottingham (with a team led by a Zimbabwean) and ZIMCHE. This was originally part of a larger Pan-African project looking at research cultures and capacities in African higher education systems. From that study, it became clear that internationalisation was an important issue for Zimbabwean higher education and so a further project was initiated. In 2016-17 (i.e., in the last year of the Mugabe regime), members of the team conducted 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 4 key management personnel (including the Vice Chancellor, the Registrar, an internationalisation officer and one dean) and 1 academic at a sample of 6 registered universities (4 state and 2 private). The researchers developed the sample frame and interview topic guide using cloud-based document management, face-to-face and online meetings. The sample reflected differences in institutional size, mandate, years in existence, public/private status and specialism/comprehensiveness whilst the staff sample reflected the different ranks and responsibilities for/awareness of internationalization/decolonisation issues. However, the intention was not to stratify the sample to test for differences across institution and level. Many Zimbabwean academics have studied and worked in different universities and exhibit a strong sectoral identity that minimises the variance of perceptions across institutions (McGrath, Thondhlana and Garwe, 2019).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed and the data coded initially for internationalisation themes. Subsequent workshops with ZIMCHE staff and vice-chancellors (the latter a week after the change of government) allowed the team to explore their interpretations further.

For the purposes of this article, the data was reanalysed, in keeping with the literature on coloniality (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). Attention was also paid to what was present and absent, especially in relations to the interconnected issues of coloniality of power, knowledge and being as constitutive elements of global coloniality as a power structure (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). This generated four themes reflecting continuities and disruptions: collaboration, knowledge sharing and research; student mobility; internationalisation of the curriculum; and national and international factors. We engage with these below.

## **UNDERSTANDING ZIMBABWEAN INTERNATIONALISATION**



In this section we consider different understandings of the internationalisation process in Zimbabwe's HEIs and their forms of occurrence in order to understand what is distinctive here. In particular, we consider the ways in which the evidence from the data reflects a continuity of the existing features of Zimbabwean internationalisation (as a colonial legacy), or serves as a disruption and therefore acts as a potential tool of, and for, decolonisation.

### **Collaboration, knowledge sharing and research**

While findings revealed that respondents' understandings of internationalisation were in keeping with trends elsewhere (e.g., Maringe and Foskett, 2010), they still bore features of several colonial continuities. Our respondents saw collaboration as a key tool of internationalisation, which was linked to mainly knowledge sharing (through, for example, staff/student exchanges and diverse meetings) and knowledge production (research). As one registrar reflected:

*... if you look at the word university coming from, as a derivative from the word universe, it means knowledge without borders, and that knowledge should be shared across borders by many activities, some of which can be staff exchange, student exchange, research collaborations, contact visits, and many such activities, which make knowledge to be shared among universities, because universities belong to what we call the knowledge society.*

While this focus on collaboration in knowledge sharing and production is a key feature of what internationalisation is understood to be amongst the different respondents, it appears unreflexive regarding whose knowledge was being shared and what other knowledges are being subjugated through this process. Even in the understandings of internationalisation as a particular form of external engagement and an example of collaborative effects and knowledge sharing, which honours the traditional purpose of the university; there is still an allusion to the general 'look North' nature of the whole internationalisation process which bears elements of craving external recognition and going to learn 'how to know' from the Global North, as a respondent said:

*We live in a global village, and you need to tap new ideas from other countries, or other professionals that are not in Zimbabwe.... Vice-Chancellors and the Minister were on a trip worldwide, where they were learning how other*

*universities are using their research to industrialise their countries. And you can only do that when you learn from others, and these others are not in Zimbabwe.*

Our participants saw research collaborations as enabling academics to access funding for research so that they would be able to publish in reputable international journals. As one academic mused:

*We need to also do relevant international research, research with an international appeal and be able to publish in high impact international journals. Politically, our country is on sanctions, and that has its own drawbacks. There are so many organisations that fund research, but they turn their backs to countries that are not recognised politically with their masters, backers or funders.*

The findings evidence the lingering colonial legacy in the belief that publishing in Western journals legitimises African scholarship. As argued by Kovach (2009), academic research and publication has traditionally privileged Western knowledges, value systems, and institutions while marginalizing non-Western ones. Again here, our respondents are unreflexive of the hegemonic relations resulting from dependency on funds from the North for their research which gives the funder the power to dictate what is researched. For example, in our search for local research we noted that while there was potential for the production of much needed ground-breaking research around indigenous knowledges, indications are that this important area rarely gets funded and any research output in that field is often considered non-publishable in internationally-refereed journals. This is a vestige of colonialism.

The above (arguably) says something about the way that coloniality still operates on African beings and subjectivities as formerly colonised people, the ways that this continues to affect many Africans as modern subjectivities and even its role on ontologies. Maldonado-Torres (2011) propounds that coloniality is maintained not only in our self-image as people but also in aspirations of self and criteria for academic performance. However, we also observed that, as in the above excerpt, there is an attempt to ‘look East’ particularly in the context of continuing sanctions which limit engagement with the preferred North, which, in part, is an interesting example of seeking to break at least partially from the colonial legacy. In this bid to ‘look East’, however, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, p. 181) warns that the current global power transformations which have enabled the re-emergence of a Sinocentric economic power and de-Westernisation processes do not mean that the modern world system has now undergone

genuine decolonisation and deimperialisation to the extent of being amenable to the creation of other futures.

### **Student mobility**

Another recognised colonial continuity which keeps with wider global trends is that of internationalisation having a lot to do with both inward and outward mobility. Whilst the limited scope of international student migration to Zimbabwe was widely acknowledged, there was a strong interest in attracting international students. One respondent spoke of this aspect first when making sense of internationalisation:

*In the department I think we have students from Swaziland, Botswana, Namibia, Rwanda, so that's how I would basically understand internationalisation.*

Other respondents from all sampled universities emphasised the importance of recruiting international students based on financial and quality improvement reasons. The presence of international students was viewed as a key factor in raising the profile of the institutions. One respondent indicated that:

*We accept any student who qualifies irrespective of their nationality. This way our university is viewed as a global institution.*

What becomes apparent is the demographics of the international students that Zimbabwe's HEIs attract, which reveals the regional nature of the process and in many ways also alludes to this feature of internationalisation as constituting both a continuity and a postcolonial disruption, in as much as it appears to be a change from the historical pattern of student mobility into Zimbabwe, in its intensity and the way that it displays agency and regional harmonisation. Cognisant that the concept of regionalisation is both complex and contested in the context of internationalisation discourses, we adopt Schoole and De Wit's (2014: 223) working definition of regionalisation "... as a subset of internationalisation" and Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2018) "horizontal first" approach. In this regard if internationalisation is now about regional harmonisation, then it makes sense that Zimbabwe's HEIs build on their historical roots, strengths and opportunities as inheritors of what is regarded regionally as a strong educational legacy, and 'look sideways' since it's not always possible to 'look north' for international students. The Vice Chancellors interviewed acknowledged this issue whilst talking in terms of seeking a diverse groups of international students. This supports the argument put forward by

Sehoole and De Wit (2014) that HEIs both react to internationalisation efforts, and act upon its forces through diverse strategies. It appears that, for Zimbabwe, concentrating on attracting international students regionally could be the best way forward, especially since sanctions and other existing socio-economic and political conditions make attracting international students globally very difficult. Majee and Ress (2018) state that inbound mobility of regional students serves the instrumental purpose of holding together different conflicting imperatives especially in the ways that they can intersect with national efforts to reform higher education. However, they caution that the presence of regional students in such postcolonial contexts can give the impression that universities are undertaking internationalisation and addressing racial justice, while masking several other ways that marginalised groups could be further disadvantaged by it.

The extent to which the Zimbabwean process of regionalisation represents a form that is distinct from the overall internationalisation project is a key issue here. In so far as regionalisation privileges regional ways of knowing and being, then clearly it represents a different practice. Going further, it appears that there is some sense in the interview data of discourses that emphasise the importance of finding local solutions to local community problems. Such a possibility needs to be seen as an inherent tension with internationalisation because it contains both the arguments of the IHE scholars about its potential to contribute to increasing cultural homogenisation and mutual understanding (e.g., de Wit, 2002), and its tendency towards being a tool for political, economic and epistemic domination (e.g., Maringe, 2010).

The student mobility aspect of internationalisation (especially for a context like Zimbabwe) thus becomes one of its most important features, similar to what exists in the global North, which is also heavily about student mobility. However, Sehoole and De Wit (2014) warn that such contexts cannot copy what happens in the global North and must instead build on their roots and on other opportunities. Thus, on-going key internationalisation of higher education activities in Zimbabwe's HEIs include the recruitment of international students, though with a regional twist.

There is an awareness amongst many Zimbabwean academics that the current interest in internationalisation is also about economic benefits. In a pragmatic vein, one VC noted that the

current interest in internationalisation had little to do with the wider benefits, though he believed in them. Rather, he suggested:

*Internationalising at this point in time is for economic benefits. Students who come here pay much higher fees than our students, so our institutions benefit, we are able to equip our classrooms and buy equipment that we wouldn't otherwise have been able to buy.*

However, international student recruitment is not without its practical obstacles. Zimbabwe has kept A Level entry from its colonial past, which puts it a year more advanced in its requirements than the rest of the region. This was understood to limit the recruitment of students from countries. One respondent said:

*The challenge has to do with the misalignment of our programmes and our regional qualification systems. That poses a big problem for us, because we are surrounded by countries who do not offer 'A' Levels, and yet we say we want 'A' Level as a prerequisite for joining the university.*

Zimbabwe's entrance requirement, because it is heavily modelled on the English system, puts it *out of sync* with its neighbours, which highlights how much the system in general is still highly influenced by coloniality and its colonial past and reveals the complicated nature of this legacy – sometimes acting as an advantage, other times a barrier.

A subsequent workshop with ZIMCHE noted the increase in student outward mobility to 'more advanced' countries (in the North, the East, and South Africa) following Zimbabwe's socio-economic crisis. This is striking in the face of reports of a cocktail of risks including discrimination, abuse and trafficking the students encounter (United States Department of State, 2018). This pattern symbolises a continuing colonial mentality of thinking that foreign is better. As noted by one ZIMCHE official:

*It would appear that in their quest for a "better education," parents are putting their children at risk by sending them abroad without proper risk assessment in the assumption that they will get a better degree than here in Zimbabwe. ZIMCHE's role extends to ensuring the safety of our children in foreign universities as well as taking the necessary risk and quality assessments of foreign institutions.*

### **‘Internationalisation’ of the curriculum**

In many countries in the Global South, the western origins of internationalisation are often misconstrued to imply that 'internationalisation of the curriculum' is necessarily a unidirectional importation of foreign bodies of knowledge, skills, values, and attributes into the receiving higher education system. This has resulted in complexities and contestations brought about by the lingering western influence in the approach to internationalisation of the curriculum in contexts such as Africa. Cognisant that higher education institutions ought to design curricula that respond to both local challenges and wider societal needs, there is therefore need to apply a de-colonial lens to strike a balance between local anchorage and global relevance.

While our respondents saw internationalisation as a useful tool for growth, they noted the critical need to create curricula that cater for national and/or regional needs whilst simultaneously having an international appeal so as to attract international students and internationalise local students. For example, one English lecturer explained how this could be achieved, emphasising the need for inclusivity and diversity:

*When I was at school, A Level, things were prescribed, Shakespeare and major authors. Although we are still doing Shakespeare, it is one course among several. We also have our African literature, we have the Zimbabwean literature and then we have European literature. So, I'm saying that our inclusivity is mostly hinged on the curriculum because the curriculum reaches everyone. Our inclusivity is also connected in the learning outcomes, because they are important for every student that graduates from the institution.*

With the above observation, there is a clear emergence of internationalisation as a decolonial tool and also as constituting a disruption from what existed before in Zimbabwe. On the decolonising effect of internationalisation, one academic observed:

*Although we got our independence in 1980, we have residual effects of colonialism. Because you know what colonialism does, acculturation, indoctrination, all those things. In the systems you have elements of colonialism perpetuating. If we look at the whole education system, it's still heavily impacted by the Anglophone approach. It will take time to eradicate this but now with this Afrocentric view, that 'No, we need to appreciate what is good about us as*

*Zimbabweans.', or as black people, or as indigenous people we are now talking about indigenous knowledge systems in our curriculum, we are talking about ethno-maths, we are talking about ethno-science in our curriculum. It means that we are now emerging as a people from the clashes of colonialism. It's a process.*

This shows not only an awareness of the possibilities that internationalisation presents as a decolonisation tool but also of the colonality of being, the enduring impact of colonialism on African minds and subjectivities and the ongoing journey towards mental liberation. The colonisation/decolonisation of the mind concept and its dehumanisation effect alluded to by our respondents has been much debated within the African context (e.g. Fanon 2008; wa Thiong'o, 1998; Oelofsen, 2015). Fanon (2008) argues that the ways in which colonial practices were entrenched/etched in the colonised's individual and collective psyches and identities, defining how they think of themselves (as inferior) and the colonisers (as superior) cannot be eliminated through political change alone. By beginning to consciously and productively engage with the effects of colonialism, asking questions about 'being' and making strategic adjustments such as curriculum transformations, it appears that Zimbabwean HEIs are embarking on a (re)humanisation journey of through the much-debated humanising pedagogy (e.g. Freire, 2003; Oelofsen, 2015).

Participants also noted the need for a mind/paradigm shift on a number of issues including some discipline-specific ones and others more generic. For example, it was noted that colonial education was highly theoretical and also tended to box graduates into an employment-seeking mindset, as one vice-chancellor related:

*Education for blacks was meant to create a workforce to serve white interests, or white capital, and not necessarily to create someone who'd create their own enterprise.*

As a way forward, participants across levels highlighted the need to move from employment to entrepreneurship through curriculum transformation, one saying:

*by decolonising our higher education system, we have moved now, or if we have not already moved we are in the process of moving, from a curriculum that creates employees to a curriculum that creates job-creators, entrepreneurs, and enterprise-creators. So, the new content is one that encourages idea creation,*

*and encourages entrepreneurship. It's a different curriculum altogether, it's a curriculum that frees the mind, to roam and wander and create.*

In this regard, participants strongly saw curriculum transformation as an ongoing process meant to meet the transformational aspirations of the nation and its people, and heavily linked with this transformation was the opportunity to decolonise and indigenise Zimbabwean education. This is the strongest indication of internationalisation as a tool for decolonisation, which is coming through in the development of relevant programmes, buttressed by one Vice Chancellor, who said:

*I think at this level now, it's crafting the curriculum which speaks to your developmental objectives. It's no longer getting a curriculum on the silver platter, a curriculum that's developed in London or developed elsewhere. It's sitting down and saying 'What is the nature of the economy that we have? What are the programmes that will deliver the kind of knowledge which will pursue our economic imperatives?'*

### **National and international factors**

There are however international, national, and local level factors that hamper internationalisation efforts in Zimbabwe's HEIs. Zimbabwe's higher education has been shaped over the years by its changing geopolitical and economic position in Africa. It has moved from being a relatively wealthy and stable attractor of African academics to an increasing exporter of academics worldwide. These changing circumstances have resulted in several of the issues which make it difficult for Zimbabwean HEIs to increase their competitiveness both locally and internationally.

At a systemic level, this can include the effects of political sanctions, particularly on collaborative efforts. Hwami (2010) attributes Zimbabwe's higher education challenges to the West and its project of domination of countries in the South. The political climate in Zimbabwe is considered to be unsupportive of internationalisation, largely due to the demonisation of Zimbabwe in the international media. Hwami however also mentions another side to this, recognising the problems in Zimbabwe's HEIs as being manufactured and perpetrated by Mugabe's government and its self-aggrandisement policies, with governance being at the centre of Zimbabwe's crisis.



Respondents explained that:

*When we started this university, we had some white, some British who were lecturing. When they perceived that the political environment had become rather unfriendly, they left and never came back.*

*Currently, Zimbabwe has a problem of getting partners to research because we are not part of the Commonwealth. We also have sanctions imposed on us by the European Union.*

Knight (2013) warns that internationalisation as economic competition can undermine the democratic and intercultural possibilities of internationalisation as a positive phenomenon, noting that this results in the marketing and commercialisation of internationalisation predominating and in the rise of the phenomenon of international rankings. As earlier mentioned, universities are rated internationally using standards which many African countries have not contributed to, but to which they must subject themselves due to their position in the global matrices of power and knowledge. Knight adds that it is an incorrect assumption that the purpose of a university's internationalisation effort is to improve global brand or standing. This supports the earlier warning by Altbach (2004) that the world of globalised higher education is highly unequal, and when focusing on developing countries and smaller academic systems, the spectre of this inequality is immediately raised. While in many ways, internationalisation can open access and make things easier, in other ways, existing inequalities can be reinforced and new ones created.

The increased importance of, and the inability to compete with regard to, rankings were seen in Zimbabwe as constraining the internationalisation process, as a respondent expressed:

*Suppose you are a university and you don't have any international lecturer, from outside the borders, your ranking will always be affected. You don't have a student population from Botswana, from South Africa, your ranking will always be affected. These are some of the impediments.*

Despite the perceived high quality education provided by HEIs in Zimbabwe, these institutions do not feature much in the world rankings, with the University of Zimbabwe the only institution

in the top 100 in Africa. Global university ranking is largely perceived as the ultimate indicator of the level of institutional internationalisation and provides a vital resource that helps prospective students, to make decisions on where to study (McAleer et al, 2019). The interaction of these two parameters is succinctly elaborated by Hauptman Komotar (2019). Zimbabwe has only recently started talking about introducing a national ranking system to help develop competitiveness. This issue that Zimbabwe faces is not dissimilar to those experienced in other developing contexts, and reinforces the arguments put forward by Altbach (2004) and Tikly (2004) of this unequal nature of globalised higher education. There is a real existence of structural dependency at all levels of African higher education institutions.

## **CONCLUSION**

What is clear is that amongst the respondents, internationalisation is understood to be not just about knowledge sharing and collaboration. It is also about student and staff mobility and regional harmonisation to allow Zimbabwean higher education to be more competitive and attract students from other parts of Africa. Importantly, however, the internationalisation agenda is seen to also contain a transformational element, hence making it have some decolonising effects, especially with curriculum redesign and indigenisation. And this is the greatest strength and possibility that internationalisation presents when viewed as a decolonial project, a task which is not easy because the role of many African universities in the global knowledge economy is precarious at best. In addition to the many structural and systemic challenges that they have to deal with, they also must contend with the other complexities of internationalisation. These include a competitive knowledge society of global higher education, in which African universities not only have to participate but are disadvantaged by structural and historic imbalances to be efficiently competitive. Such concerns make internationalising higher education in places like Zimbabwe challenging despite its promises. The constraints also return us to the uneven and unequal terrain of internationalising within a globalising world, and buttress the need to pay attention to deeper specificities of different internationalisation contexts, barriers to internationalisation, coloniality within education and social systems and how they reinforce existing world orders.

Leading internationalisation scholars have always insisted that internationalisation necessarily means different things in different contexts. Yet there has been a tendency, both in practice and in theorising, to forget such care and to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach. Here we try to nudge

the debate forward by suggesting that the lens of coloniality provides a further tool in resisting a homogenised account of internationalisation. Through its critical stance regarding the whole process of internationalisation as Northern-dominated, it helps complicate some of the ways internationalisation has been instantiated. For those countries who experienced colonialism, its effects on higher education systems cannot be ignored. The coloniality lens reminds us that these effects did not go away with independence, and that internationalisation in such contexts is understood and experienced in ways shaped by coloniality. The forms of knowledge and power that currently exist in the higher education sector and those that can be imagined are not neutral.

By casting a decolonial light on the existing practices of internationalisation in Zimbabwe's HEIs, it is the hope that we provoke a conversation about the deeper nature of what might really be happening. This article does not seek to provide answers but to point to the need for the internationalisation of higher education debate to engage with the spectre of coloniality and its effects on our ontologies, epistemologies and subjectivities. It is unclear whether or how easily higher education can be used as a tool of decolonisation given what we know about its colonial and colonialising epistemology. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) asks that we think about decoloniality as an unfinished project, an essential precondition of new thinking and possibilities, but a very challenging one to advance.

With this in mind, it is important for those committed to decolonisation to consider the ways in which internationalisation may serve to further the decolonial project and other ways in which it further entrenches coloniality. Perhaps then we can achieve an internationalisation of African higher education that takes into cognisance African realities.

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