

SoTL in the South – Full Paper for Review

What does an (South) African economics look like?

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Abstract

Demands for the ‘decolonisation’ of universities and curricula in South Africa raise important questions as to how economics should be taught in South African economics departments. Internationally, other student movements have called for an overhaul of economics curricula, particularly after the Financial Crisis of 2009. The objective of the paper is to examine what decolonisation might mean for the South African economics curriculum. Five dimensions of decolonisation are identified and provide the backdrop for the analysis. It is critical to understand the status quo of the discipline in South Africa in order to establish where decolonisation critiques are most pertinent and why that is the case. This requires consideration not only of the curriculum, but also academic staffing and research. The overall diagnosis is that the South African economic curriculum aspires to be a standard neoclassical one, largely based on North American content, but often falls short even in that narrower objective. One notable problem is that the expanding use of quantitative methods and content is not necessarily matched by corresponding competence among faculty or students. With that in mind, the paper then considers alternatives. I reject suggestions that the solution is to merely replace ‘orthodox’ (neoclassical) economics with ‘heterodox’ economics; instead I argue for a pluralist approach that incorporates both. As a cautionary aside, I note that various, valuable, topics which have been proposed for inclusion in a decolonised curriculum would not satisfy narrow conceptions of decolonisation. A very brief outline is provided of what an ideal curriculum might look like. Various practical obstacles to development and implementation are then considered. Given the significant disjuncture between the ideal and the possible, the priority – once there is some agreement on an ideal curriculum – is to come to a consensus on second- or third-best alternatives.

DECOLONISATION AND ECONOMICS

The ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ (RMF) and ‘Fees Must Fall’ (FMF) movements that originated in South African universities have presented a number of challenges to the higher education system. One of the explicit challenges raised as part of both movements has been ‘decolonisation of the curriculum’. My objective here is to make a first attempt at a substantive response to this challenge as regards the economics curriculum in South African universities. Although there have been some general contributions on this topic (Le Grange, 2016) and substantive contributions on other disciplines, such as philosophy (Allais, 2016; Wolff, 2016), there have not yet been any that specifically address economics.

The challenge of decolonization has merit and should be taken seriously. However, there are many important nuances to the high-level problems that the call for decolonisation identifies that need to be recognized and addressed if the process is to be a constructive one that leads to real improvements. As will become clear in the analysis that follows, the broad stance of the paper is that we should not be overly preoccupied with the specific narrative surrounding decolonizing curricula per se; rather, we ought to focus on the plethora of specific issues that

the call for decolonization raises and that academic economists need to address. With that said, we should first reflect on what ‘decolonisation’ might mean in a pragmatic sense, and how this meaning, or its implications, vary across academic disciplines. (There exist substantial analyses of the intellectual and historical origins and dimensions of decolonization in many other disciplines, and I will not delve into those here). I briefly list some of the key pragmatic issues raised by the decolonization narrative, with some very simple illustrative examples.

First, *content* of the curriculum; for instance, does the curriculum include analysis of the negative effect of taxation on firms but not the benefits of social grants? Second, the *framing* of content; for example, how does one interpret evidence of African countries having disproportionately low per capita gross domestic product? Third, *contextualisation* of the content; how do theoretical results, or empirical findings reflect the local context and history – if at all? Do curricula dealing with unemployment reflect on the role of South Africa’s migrant labour system? Fourth, *relevance*; is the material relevant to current economic concerns and the relevant country’s history? Fifth, *accessibility*; is the way the material is taught, including who teaches it, such that it is equally accessible to students of different social and cultural backgrounds? Are all the examples from the United States and all the instructors conservative white males? These five dimensions are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, but provide a useful reference point for what follows.

Where, one might ask, is the ‘colonisation’ aspect? The answer is implicit in the above: curricula that are ‘colonial’ in nature – that have been developed based on supposed superiority of one culture/society/race/group over another, imposition of foreign knowledge without regard to local contributions or circumstances, ahistorical analysis of current phenomena, are taught in a way that portrays some cultures/societies/races/groups as inherently superior to others and/or without regard for the experiences of groups that have suffered discrimination, and lack relevance to the problems and interests of local communities – will fall foul of an analysis across these dimensions. I suggest that the importance of, and answers to, these questions will vary significantly across disciplines. It is *not* coherent to act, or argue, as if the challenge relating to content applies as much to mathematics as it does to anthropology. Down that path lies various harms and absurdities. But it is also important not to casually dismiss the possibility that there may be legitimate issues in relation to the accessibility, relevance and contextualization (Brodie, 2016) of some of the material in mathematics curricula.

Economics is a particularly problematic discipline in this respect, because while many areas of the discipline deal with questions that are social in nature many economists like to see themselves as engaged in ‘science’. This is, indeed, one of the primary markers of the ‘neoclassical economics’ that began to emerge in the early 20th century – the founders of which sought to create a ‘social physics’. Despite ample evidence to the contrary, many economists – especially those who are imitative of the neoclassical mainstream – consider themselves exempt from questions of bias and positionality that afflict other social science disciplines (sociology, anthropology, etc). Some leading academic economists lay claim to scientific status, while others are disparaging of the merits of methodology and philosophy of economics, or critical study of the history of economic thought. That very denialism, amplified by South Africa’s own unique history of colonialism and apartheid, means that economics is likely to be among the worst culprits along the dimensions outlined above.

In this respect, however, the various student movements also face a challenge they are unable to surmount on their own: they may be able to correctly identify basic flaws and omissions in what they are taught, but they typically do not have the knowledge or training to dissect those and propose substantive solutions. RMF and FMF are no different to their international counterparts in this regard; student movements in countries like the United States, United

Kingdom and France have railed against the dominance of conservative, neoclassical thinking but have rarely been able to propose solutions other than simplistic gesturing at ‘heterodox economics’. There is no satisfactory definition of ‘heterodox’ here and its most common usage implies merely being in opposition to, or excluded from, the orthodox/mainstream neoclassical literature and curriculum. There are many problems with that definition, one of which is that neoclassical economics is subject to rapid change and has in some instances integrated sub-disciplines (such as ‘experimental economics’) that were once considered by some to be more aligned to heterodox thinking. Below I argue that the idea of resolving the decolonization challenge by abandoning ‘orthodox’ economics for ‘heterodox’ economics is a poorly defined proposal and a misguided one at that. Instead, I argue for ‘pluralism’ of content and approach; the curriculum should be more broadly representative of different views, within the ‘mainstream’ and outside of it.

Because of the obstacles faced by students in this regard, it has ultimately been initiatives led by either advanced graduate students, or academics themselves, that have constructed proposals that could plausibly begin to change dominant approaches. I briefly discuss some international initiatives at the end of the paper. There have been a small number of more substantive contributions by graduate students in the South African case (Bassier, 2016; Chelwa, 2016; Aboobaker, 2016), which generated some responses from young academics (Fourie, 2016; Muller, 2016a; Muller, 2016b) but notably no public responses or contributions from more senior scholars. (As an aside: it is somewhat concerning, that all the above contributors are male). It is therefore important, and appropriate, that academics reflect on, and debate, the issues and possible solutions.

THE STATUS QUO

In order to ascertain the extent to which the above criticisms are relevant to the South African case, and identify paths for improvement, it is necessary to have some appreciation of the status quo. A full and thorough analysis is well beyond the scope of the present paper, not least because it would require a critical, historical analysis of South African economics departments that does not exist at present. (Incidentally, I believe such an analysis would be invaluable for this and other reasons). Nevertheless, a good deal can be said even based only on the author’s experience. In addition, a small number of clearly structured studies (Luiz, 2003; Luiz, 2009; Yu, Kasongo, & Moses, 2017) have been conducted on the state and ‘performance’ of South African economics departments. There are various limitations to these given that they tend to focus on quantifiable measures and adopt definitions of quality that are low by international standards but also uncritically reflect the current, aspirational thinking in the local academy. Nevertheless, they provide some valuable information and I draw on them where possible.

The curriculum

It is natural to begin an analysis of the status quo by considering what is taught, though – as we will see – there is no neat separation between this and other factors. In relation to the two main pillars of the discipline, microeconomics and macroeconomics, most South African economics departments follow a standard neoclassical economics syllabus from 1st year through to Master’s level. What has historically tended to distinguish ‘stronger’ departments from others is the prevalence and sophistication of mathematical theory (Luiz, 2009). This is now beginning to change, at least in form, with more departments basing their core courses on relatively quantitative material. It remains an open question as to whether this material is substantively engaged with, given the comparatively limited training of many staff in quantitative methods and the well-known problems with mathematics in the South African education system (Wittenberg, 2017).

The third pillar of economics is now recognised to be econometrics – the methods by which the vast majority of economists (and all within the ‘mainstream’) conduct empirical analysis. Such methods can be used to cloak ideological biases, and one could argue that mainstream economists exhibit over-reliance on these methods and overemphasise the definitiveness of the associated findings. Nevertheless, knowledge of econometrics is essential for accessing, understanding and indeed critiquing empirical work in the discipline across the ideological spectrum. Yu, Kasongo, & Moses (2017) note that by the time of their study, all departments offered econometrics at the Honours level, but its availability at undergraduate level was limited and largely restricted to the final year. The problem this points to is that most students are only being trained to access modern empirical work at the end of their undergraduate degrees, which in turn implies that the majority – who do not go onto further study – never meaningfully engage with such work.

The key problem that arises is as follows. The vast majority of students who study economics – in the sense of doing at least one course in the subject – do not proceed beyond second year. First and second year undergraduate courses consist of large classes, that are often taught by junior or contract academics using conservative, neoclassical textbooks with American authors that rely almost solely on examples from the United States. Very few departments offer courses at the undergraduate level in economic history or the history of economic thought (Yu, Kasongo, & Moses, 2017) and those that did tended to offer these courses later in the undergraduate degree (mostly in third year). It is therefore not an exaggeration to say that undergraduate students may be ‘indoctrinated’ with conservative, free-market notions of how economies and societies function, even if that indoctrination occurs as the result of a variety of different dynamics and incentives rather than explicit, deliberate intent on the part of institutions.

An often-cited example, which is certainly relevant to the South African context where a R3,500 national minimum wage has recently been agreed upon, is the teaching of the effect of a minimum wage on employment. Taught with a conservative neoclassical textbook, many students will emerge from their economics training (‘Economics 101’) believing that minimum wages cause unemployment as a matter of scientific fact. In fact, this has long been contested in the academic domain and remains a contested issue. Some textbooks now acknowledge this, while others continue to downplay the fact that at least two decades of empirical research (Card & Krueger, 2015) provides mixed evidence in relation to the above assertion. One should note, however, that while the promulgators of the original claim were Western economists (either by origin or location), many recent critics are as well. This gestures at a broader point, namely that crude notions of ‘decolonisation’ – as meaning that all knowledge generated in Western societies should be disregarded – are often unhelpful.

Development economics, labour economics and public economics are among the more common undergraduate electives; these in principle provide scope for addressing issues of context and relevance, but whether they play that role in practice would require further investigation.

Wittenberg (2017) provides a useful discussion of quantitative content and methods in economics with reference to the South African case, from which a number of points are worth noting. First, that mathematical pre-requisites for economics are relatively high, and there is a possible tension here with efforts to improve access. Second, that students devote most of their effort to trying to understand technical details and in doing so lose sight of the insights that mathematical models supposedly provide. Third, that introducing more ‘realistic’ models of economic phenomena is likely to require *greater* proficiency in mathematics rather than less.

Each of these observations is extremely important in conceiving possible responses to the decolonisation challenge.

A recent study (McKenzie & Paffhausen, 2015) by authors at the World Bank sought to examine the content of development economics curricula in developing country economics departments. It found, somewhat ironically, that they were more heavily dominated by theory than comparable courses in the United States. The theory in question is almost entirely drawn from the neoclassical literature and cannot be in any meaningful way be said to reflect African contributions or concerns. While the 'international' (US-based) literature is increasingly empirical in nature, this was mostly absent from developing country curricula. The study has its shortfalls, notably in presuming that 'better' curricula are those that are closer to the dominant curriculum structure and content at US departments. In the vast majority of South African cases it would, however, be disingenuous to dismiss the negative findings on this basis. One cannot base curricula on imitating a foreign paradigm and then claim local exceptionalism when one falls short. As noted earlier, it is this author's observation that very often such curricula are simply a decade or two behind the current mainstream.

Composition of faculty

One issue that has come-up explicitly in the broader RMF and FMF movements is the composition of faculty, mostly in relation to race but also in relation to gender. The overall picture for South African higher education (CHE, 2016) shows significant progress, especially at lower levels of seniority (lecturers and senior lecturers), but still significantly skewed demographics, especially in the professoriate. In principle it should be straightforward to access such information for each discipline via the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS), but I am unaware of any published reports of this kind. Luiz (2009) notes that there had been significant improvements in representation since his earlier study (Luiz, 2003), but nevertheless the dominant demographic characteristics was still white and male (Luiz, 2009, p. 593). Anecdotal observation by this author suggests that progress may have continued in this regard, but unfortunately, the study by Yu, Kasongo, & Moses (2017) does not provide more recent figures.

To the extent that the faculty composition continues to differ significantly from population demographics, this would emphasise the need for even more heightened awareness of the dimension of decolonisation that deals with 'accessibility'. Unlike others, including within the student movement, I am disinclined to wholly conflate race or gender with recognition of the other dimensions. In other words, I suggest that we should not take it as given that a black academic will be less likely than a white academic to (problematically) frame slow economic development in Africa as a result of the continent's 'backward traditions'. While there may be correlations between demographic characteristics and such a 'colonial mindset', the latter merits an analysis of its own rather than being crudely sublimated to racial identity. Indeed, I would argue that such attitudes can often be demonstrably more strongly associated with the social background and training individual academics have received than their demographic characteristics per se. Transformation at the faculty level is a worthy objective in its own right. Nevertheless, while it may serve certain interests to do so, demographic transformation should not be assumed to address the many other issues decolonisation raises. If these issues are conflated, transformation solely concerned with demographics may in fact entrench failures on other dimensions

No less important than demographic composition, is faculty composition by ideological views and postgraduate training. Yu, Kasongo, & Moses (2017) show that the percentage of lecturing staff members with doctorates ranges from 0% to 80% across departments, with most clustering between 40% and 70%. There is no information on where these were obtained but my

impression is that the majority are from local institutions and many academics have not been exposed to foreign study.

No survey, that I am aware of, has yet been conducted on the ideological positions or political views of academic economists in South Africa. However, while there is certainly some variation, one can reasonably confidently classify the modal South African academic economist as politically and socially conservative. The modal academic also subscribes to a fairly uncritical view of the neoclassical mainstream, regardless of whether or not they have the capabilities to fully engage with it. There are a small number of heterodox and/ or 'radical' economists, scattered across various departments and with often quite differing views on what might be the best alternative to neoclassical economics.

Research

The views, skills and beliefs of academic staff bring us to the issue of research. While there is a natural inclination to focus on curricula when issues of decolonisation are raised, that is problematic. What academics teach is partly a function of what they themselves have been taught, what they are familiar with and able to understand, and what they research or have otherwise contributed to. It is, therefore, important to understand what the state of affairs is as regards economic research.

The studies that have been done of South African academic economics focus particularly on research output. In his reviews of South African economics departments, Luiz (2003; 2009) lays bare the fact that despite improvements between the two surveys, "the gap between South African economics departments and their international counterparts remains large" (2009, p. 602). For example, at top international economics departments a rough rule-of-thumb for tenure is five publications in the highest-ranked journals. In each of Luiz's survey periods, only a single South African economist had published an article in one of those journals. Furthermore, the second review found that between 2004 and 2007, the top economics department (the University of Cape Town) published only three papers per annum in the top 150 ISI-listed economics journals (ranked by total citations).

There are various caveats to these findings, given the much higher obstacles academics on the periphery face in relation to research time, assistance, funding and networks. Nevertheless, the extent of the gap between the standards for publication at international departments and local research output is such that even when accounting for such factors the picture remains stark. One could, furthermore, note that the top-ranked local journal in economics, the South African Journal of Economics, was ranked only 291 out of 333 economics journals on the ISI Journal Citation Reports in 2015. The distance from the proverbial frontier is due, in part, to the limited high-quality quantitative analysis that is required for publications in top economics journals. As Wittenberg (2017) notes:

Indeed at present it is not clear that for many South African economists the level of rigour is even strictly required. Very few South African economists work at the cutting edge of either economic theory or the application of new mathematical and statistical techniques to applied problems. (p. 12)

Those academics who have the ability and inclination to engage with the mainstream literature at a competent level more often replicate empirical work done elsewhere, using already-developed theories; original criticism of, or substantively new contributions to, the neoclassical mainstream are extremely rare. The most highly 'ranked' academic economists in South Africa tend to be those who have a solid grasp of modern techniques, can absorb the current literature and apply both to the South African context using local data. That is unproblematic, and even highly desirable, if the relevant methods and associated inferences are correct and locally appropriate, but who is in a position to determine that?

In all respects, the implied conclusion is an uncomfortable one: South African departments aspire to the standards of the neoclassical mainstream, but there remains a large gulf between reality and aspiration. This has concomitant implications for what takes place in terms of teaching and learning at present, as well as what may or not be possible in future.

WHAT IS THE ‘AFRICAN ALTERNATIVE’ TO THE (WESTERN-DOMINATED) NEOCLASSICAL MAINSTREAM?

The brief characterisation of the status quo given above should make clear that any critique of the typical South African economics curriculum is essentially a critique of an aspirant neoclassical curriculum. A narrow neoclassical curriculum centred on developed countries would be problematic enough. But the point Wittenberg (2017) alludes to is that whatever merits neoclassical economics has, if faculty and students struggle to engage with the quantitative methods and content, then little valuable learning or insight is likely to take place. Students will regurgitate mathematical results without understanding them, and absorb ideologically-informed positions without having a substantive appreciation for their basis.

Crude Substitution of Orthodoxy with Heterodoxy is Not the Answer

Given this, one obvious response from proponents of decolonisation may be: get rid of the neoclassical curriculum. That demand will, in most cases, be supported by self-identified heterodox and radical economists. This would be a fatal error.

There are at least three reasons to ensure that students in developing countries are familiar with the content of the mainstream curriculum and each of these can be supported by particular examples. The first is practical: most economists and international policymakers with whom graduates subsequently engage will have been trained in neoclassical economics; the scope for constructive dialogue is limited if developing country economists cannot speak the dominant ‘language’ of the discipline. The second reason is that the mainstream literature does contain useful methods and valuable insights in various places. For instance, there is little basis for abandoning the wealth of econometric and theoretical tools developed to analyse poverty, inequality and labour markets. What one infers from such analyses, and how one locates associated empirical results within a local context, is a different matter that can be addressed without abandoning the tools themselves. Finally, one cannot get students to appreciate substantive critiques of dominant narratives without them actually understanding those narratives. Teaching students heterodox critiques of neoclassical economics, without actually teaching them neoclassical economics, requires the same passive acceptance of contested authority that exists in the status quo.

An additional point bears mentioning. Just because something is currently excluded from the curriculum does not mean that its inclusion fits narrower definitions of ‘decolonisation’. Many heterodox theories are associated with specific academics at European or North American institutions. Some adherents of a narrow definition of decolonisation, reject the work of Marx as colonialist. Relatedly, some topics – such as Islamic finance – are not associated with European colonialism, but may have historical roots in other forms of domination. Since I have already argued that we should not be overly preoccupied with the term decolonisation per se, these tensions are not problematic for what I propose. They would be, however, for those who argue the extreme position that decolonisation means relying on material that has been generated by Africans, on the continent, without material external influence.

What does an ideal alternative look like?

Within the limits of the space available, consider the following as an *ideal* (i.e. disregarding practicalities). The curriculum would continue to have many components of current

neoclassical curricula, including quantitative material, but with examples and empirical results reflecting the local (country or regional) context. Around this would be built a much richer body of material that can be separated into three main categories: methodology and philosophy of economics, including various internal and external critiques of the discipline; economic history (with a particular emphasis on local economic history and policies); and, alternative/heterodox theories on key questions. Courses or material on history of economic thought, and economic history, should be introduced in first year, and empirical methods should also be taught from first year.

Two of the five dimensions not directly addressed by the above are ‘framing’ and ‘accessibility’. Both are more complex than curriculum development. To give an example, there has been a marked revival in South African economic history; an important development in light of the critical role of that subject in an alternative curriculum. However, as things stand this emergence is characterised by a fairly conservative, North American framing of economic history. Some such work (Fogel & Engerman, 1974) argues that slavery was economically efficient and that slaves were not treated as badly as is often supposed. Whatever the academic merits of such assertions, they should be a shot over the bow for those who think that the introduction of certain *topics* necessarily implies the introduction of a broader range of (ideological or other) perspectives.

What the above should also make clear is that the ideal critical, and locally-informed, economics curriculum is substantially *more*, rather than less, challenging for students and lecturers. Ideally it requires similar quantitative skills to those expected in top international programmes, as well as much greater capacity to think critically, across disciplinary boundaries and using non-quantitative methods. Under this version of a ‘decolonised’ curriculum, lowering of standards – the defensive response of many opponents to decolonisation – is the least of our problems.

Faculty, Institutions and Students Are Ill-equipped to Meet the Challenge

The primary problem with demands to decolonise the economics curriculum and the kind of ideal I suggest above, is that scholars currently based on the African continent, and their institutions, are typically woefully ill-equipped to do this in various respects. Furthermore, a good number of such scholars – having been trained in neoclassical methods and absorbed very conservative positions on content and the discipline as a whole – may well be actively hostile to such ideas. As noted already, the notion that African scholars (however broadly or narrowly defined) are inherently well-equipped to construct an African curriculum that meaningfully addresses the challenges posed by decolonisation is crude and wrongheaded.

Even on topics that adherents to the narrow definition of decolonisation would cite as meriting inclusion in a ‘South African economics curriculum’, much of the substantive work is being done elsewhere. One obvious example is the empirical analysis of the effect of colonisation on institutions in African countries, work on which has won many prizes for a handful of North American scholars. Another example relates to community saving schemes (‘*stokvels*’), which have been studied by a number of European and North American scholars within the broader, rapidly growing, literature on microfinance and collective insurance schemes. Scholars from developing countries have made sizeable contributions to some of these fields of study, although very few are from the African continent and even fewer remain here. Questions also arise in that regard as to whether the ‘global South’ is sufficiently homogenous that content from other developing countries is deemed acceptable to those demanding decolonisation, or whether heterogeneity in that regard is also important. Unfortunately, wholly local work on such topics is almost always heavily derived from work elsewhere and/or is of lower quality.

On a more positive note, outside of neoclassical economics, there are *some* notable historical contributions that rarely appear in economics curricula but certainly deserve to do so. Some examples are: Francis Wilson on labour in the South African gold mines (Wilson, 1972), Walter Rodney on the effect of colonialism on underdevelopment of African countries (Rodney, 1972), Arthur Lewis – the only black winner to date of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics – on economic planning and development planning (Lewis, 1951; Lewis, 1966), and Bernard Magubane on the political economy of race and class in South Africa (Magubane, 1979). Some modern contributions are Seekings and Natrass on class, race and inequality (Seekings & Natrass, 2005), and Terblanche’s history of inequality (Terreblanche, 2002). So at least in some respects, there is material to work with.

The problems relating to scholars themselves are reflected in many of the continent’s formal economic research institutions (or that have significant economic research dimensions), such as the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC), the African Development Bank (AfDB), the African Econometric Society (AES), Economics Research Southern Africa (ERSA) and the Economic Society of South Africa (ESSA). A cursory examination of the research funded, published or otherwise produced by AERC, AfDB and ERSA reflects a primary aspiration of reproducing the neoclassical mainstream. Worse, at least for decolonisation, is that the state aspired to is arguably one that is sometimes a version that is lagged by a decade or two, and the prevailing ideological slant is *more* stereotypically conservative than the ‘Western mainstream’, rather than less. There are various reasons for this, but a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Somewhat related issues arise concerning formal accreditation of economics courses and degrees by relevant regulatory authorities.¹ In South Africa: what role have institutions such as the South African Qualifications Authority and Council on Higher Education played in cementing mindlessly-replicated, homogenous curricula that have limited engagement with local context? Are such institutions likely to be obstacles to, or enablers of, attempts to address such limitations? And even more challenging: are they capable of exercising the complex judgement required to distinguish between high quality, substantive decolonised curricula and those that conceal mediocrity beneath a veneer of decolonisation?

Compounding all the above problems are the stark realities of the South African education system as a whole. The basic education system does not yield a high proportion of well-educated young adults, and within that mathematics and advanced literacy are notable areas of weakness. At the same time, there is a strong push, usually with the best of intentions, for ever-greater access to higher education. The result is large undergraduate class sizes and learners that are often under-prepared (CHE, 2016) even for the current curriculum. (And incidentally that means junior or contract academics teaching those classes who have not yet had the opportunity to develop their own expertise). This means that the kind of curriculum described above may be completely unrealistic for the vast majority of South African students of economics, especially at the undergraduate level.

What is the Way Forward?

This is a rather gloomy picture, but that does not mean progress is impossible. The present paper has fleshed-out what decolonisation might mean for economics in South Africa, identified misconceptions, sketched the skeleton of an ideal alternative curriculum and then considered practical obstacles. Each of these needs to be the subject of further discussion and debate. The ideal curriculum, in particular, should be fleshed-out in much greater detail – to

¹ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this additional dimension.

serve as a reference point, if nothing else. With sufficient consensus, preferably on a national level, but at least in some departments, gradual progress can then be made in selected areas.

Provided one does not subscribe to the narrowest definitions of decolonisation, there are international initiatives that could be leveraged by local scholars. Among these are *The CORE Project* ('Curriculum Open-access Resources in Economics'), which has produced an alternative undergraduate economics e-book integrating economic history, differing perspectives (to conservative neoclassical positions) and – to a lesser extent – history of economic thought. A related, more heterodox, initiative that has begun to establish local 'chapters' is *Rethinking Economics*. On the research side, there is the *Institute for New Economic Thinking (INET)*, which also has within it a *Young Scholars Initiative*. On the continent, the *Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA)* has for some time provided a forum for radical and heterodox African economists. None of these are without problems, but they at least provide something to work with beyond the norm.

Finally, it is important to pre-empt possible contention, or misunderstanding, around the extent of change required. Heleta (2016), citing Garuba (2015), argues that 'adding new items to curricula' is promoted "by those who want to maintain the status quo", whereas what substantive decolonisation requires 'rethinking the object of study and how it is constituted'. I suggest this binary is problematic in as much as it fails to recognise the institutional and intellectual dynamics of the decolonisation process. Reconceptualising entire disciplines is no small matter, not least with the limited resources available on the continent; adding new items to curricula may be a perfectly acceptable approach at the earlier stages of a lengthier, and more ambitious, process.

The decolonisation movements, while often anarchic and without clear alternative proposals, have nevertheless drawn attention to a critical issue for post-apartheid South African higher education. There are many dimensions of this challenge that economics certainly needs to address. The extent to which academic economists will be able to do so depends, however, on broader systemic improvements, including in the calibre and knowledge of faculty. Nevertheless, there is no appealing alternative and therefore we must, in economics parlance, establish what second- and third-best decolonised worlds are feasible. The sooner the better.

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