05Academic Agency through Ubuntu: A Pathway to Decolonising South African Universities

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Abstract

This study interrogates how Ubuntu, cast as a relational ethical framework, intersects with academic agency and decolonisation within South African universities, drawing on 25 publicly accessible documents published between 2015 and 2025. By exploring that intersection, the article contributes to a praxis-oriented understanding of decolonisation that moves beyond rhetoric to institutionalise practice within higher education in South Africa and comparable contexts. Through a thematic synthesis of scholarly discussions, the study finds four recurring strands in how Ubuntu-inspired relational practices appear in academic discourse as facilitators or constraints of student and staff agency in the co-creation of knowledge and democratic participation in curricula and governance: (a) relational, dialogic pedagogies and co-production of knowledge; (b) governance and policy discourses that gesture towards shared decision-making and student-staff partnerships; (c) diversification of epistemologies and inclusion of local knowledge systems; and (d) tensions, critiques, and risks for practice. The discussion situates these patterns within literatures on decolonial approaches and agency, arguing that Ubuntu, when analytically grounded in relational reciprocity and communal responsibility, offers a capacious normative and practical framework for reconfiguring power dynamics and advancing epistemic justice in higher education, thereby increasing student and staff agency. The article concludes with implications for policy and practice aimed at institutionalising agency in the decolonisation of education through Ubuntu.

Keywords: agency; decolonisation; epistemic justice; higher education; Ubuntu

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Introduction

South African universities have long engaged in transformation projects intended to contest colonial and apartheid legacies that structured knowledge production and its governance (Bergsteedt and Du Plessis 2026; Gaio et al. 2024; Luckett 2025; Woldegiorgis 2025). Policy rhetoric in South Africa since 1994 has foregrounded transformation and decolonisation, yet critics note persistent epistemic hierarchies privileging Western knowledges and pedagogies (Heleta and Dilraj 2024; Modisane 2025). In this context, agency, the capacity of students and lecturers to take part critically and authorship-wise in learning, knowledge production, and curricular governance, appears unevenly distributed across institutions and disciplines (Kotze 2025; Luescher et al. 2023). Ubuntu, a relational ethic rooted in humanness, reciprocity, and communal responsibility, offers a conceptual resource for recasting agency as a collectively orientated, participatory, and morally attuned enterprise (Brás 2024; Khohliso, Mphuthi, and Mpindo 2025; Tavernaro-Haidarian 2018). The crux of this article is how Ubuntu can foster agency in academic staff and students in South African universities engaged in decolonisation. The study makes the case that decolonisation in higher education is possible if academics and students have agency, which they can attain through the deployment of Ubuntu values. Two central questions guide the study:

1. How is Ubuntu operationalised in scholarly discourse as a basis for agency?
2. How can an Ubuntu-driven agency advance the decolonisation of education in South African universities?

By analysing publicly accessible documents across multiple databases, the article traces discursive and material manifestations of Ubuntu in education, thereby contributing to a praxis-oriented understanding of decolonisation that moves beyond rhetoric to institutionalise practice within higher education in South Africa and comparable contexts.

Literature Review

Decolonisation in Higher Education

The decolonisation of education in South African higher education institutions has been theorised as a multidimensional project that seeks to contest Eurocentric knowledges, reconfigure curricula, and democratise governance structures (Du Plessis 2021). Since the birth of democracy in 1994, the decolonisation of education has evolved through policy development, curriculum reform, and epistemic justice efforts. Several policies, backed by the Constitution and the narrative of a “rainbow nation”, were crafted. As seen by Adonis and Silinda (2021), a flurry of policy development took centre stage in the aftermath of the fall of apartheid, though their achievements are still unremarkable. Among the policy documents that provide a transformation foundation that the government of South Africa availed itself of was the White Paper 3. While the paper

gave directions for transformation, its implementation was slow (Menon et al. 2025; Munyaradzi and Hlatshwayo 2025).

The pace at which transformation was taking place in universities ignited the #RhodesMustFall movement and related student protests across the country (Chimbunde and Brown 2026; Luescher et al. 2023). The student movements underscored the need to identify, dismantle, and discard the dehumanising and marginalising aspects of the universities and the Eurocentric epistemologies by activating and promoting African knowledge systems (Chimbunde and Brown 2026; Ndlovu and Woldegiorgis 2024). While curriculum reform involves integrating African epistemologies and promoting critical thinking, epistemic justice requires recognising diverse knowledge systems, promoting African-centred knowledge production, and challenging the dominance of Western ways of knowing, or what Munyaradzi and Hlatshwayo (2025, 2) describe as exercising "disobedience from universalising Western or global North philosophies as ultimate reality about the world". Decolonial theory foregrounds that knowledge production is entangled with power relations and that genuine transformation requires shifts in both curricular and material practices (Botes 2025; Ndlovu and Woldegiorgis 2024; Zembylas 2025). Decolonial approaches contend that power structures, especially those resulting from colonial legacies, are entwined with knowledge, which is not neutral. To achieve true educational transformation, these power relations must be challenged by altering both the curriculum and the teaching method, eschewing the prevailing, often Eurocentric viewpoint, and embracing a variety of knowledge sources. Within this perspective, Ubuntu offers a frame for fostering agency, which, in turn, emerges as a central metric of the decolonisation of education—wherein students and staff mobilise voice, authorship, and collaborative authority to shape what counts as knowledge and how it is taught, assessed, and governed (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2017; Boyle et al. 2024; O'Reilly and O'Grady 2024). The use of Ubuntu to build agency in the decolonisation of education can help in shaping the character of education in South African universities and other similar contexts.

Agency

Considering the numerous challenges and demands confronting the education sector, the notion of agency has risen in prominence over recent decades, becoming a crucial part in discussions about educational reform and transformation (Hendriksen et al. 2025; Wang and Li 2025). Agency involves deliberate teaching strategies where educators reflect on their earlier experiences, evaluate the current situation, and contemplate future possibilities (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015). The concept of agency, according to Molla and Nolan (2020, in Reyes-Rojas et al. 2025), is a professional quality that enables educators to behave independently in challenging pedagogical situations and from a professional standpoint. However, "agency" is a notion that is used in multiple fields and so has numerous definitions. There are three traditions or perspectives on agency today: a) the social cognitive approach, b) the sociocultural approach, and c) the ecological approach (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015). The social cognitive approach highlights the intentionality of activities, which includes foresight (future-

directed planning), self-reactivity, and self-reflectiveness (Hendriksen et al. 2025; Molla and Nolan 2020). The sociocultural approach emphasises the importance of the environment in teacher agency, which is further separated into object-oriented and subject-oriented interpretations. The object-oriented interpretation considers agency as relational and diffused across social groupings, collective tools, and objects, while the subject-oriented interpretations regard agency as shaped by individuals (Molla and Nolan 2020; Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015). Then, lastly, is the ecological perspective, wherein individuals exert agency based on their past experiences, current contextual opportunities and restrictions, and future orientations (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015; Wang and Li 2025). While agency is a concept that is approached through various disciplines and has many definitions, the current study adopts the ecological approach as part of its theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frame integrates Ubuntu as an ethical-epistemic principle with the ecological perspective of agency. Ubuntu is conceptualised as relational personhood, an ethical-political core that defines individual flourishing through social embeddedness and reciprocity. Initially from Bantu-speaking communities in Africa, Ubuntu philosophy encapsulates compassion, working together, and believing that knowledge is co-created (Gade 2011) and is characterised by the ethos “I am because we are”. As explained by Mpofu and Sefotho (2024, 129), “it emphasises the importance of community, cooperation and collaboration in fostering a sense of belonging and social cohesion”. Ubuntu promotes treating one another with love, respect, and dignity because it acknowledges the intrinsic value and worth of every human. Based on the premise that “I am because we are”, this framing contends that agency appears not merely as individual autonomy but as participatory capacities enacted within relational contexts, including classrooms, curricula, and governance bodies. The framework draws on the notion that agency is realised through practices of dialogue, co-creation, mutual mentoring, and shared decision-making that reconfigure power asymmetries within higher education (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2017; Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015; Reyes-Rojas et al. 2025). Although Ubuntu is a useful philosophical concept that promotes community spirit, interconnectedness, and humanity, its implementation in complex modern societies faces various critiques. First, it has been found to lack specificity or precision as it is highly abstract (Zhakata and Zireva 2026). Because of its abstractness, Ubuntu may be used inconsistently to promote different and even conflicting objectives. In addition, Ubuntu may promote the suppression of individuals as it puts the common good ahead of individual interests, resulting in individual rights, uniqueness, and freedom being suppressed. As a result, Ubuntu does not recognise the importance of individual freedom. Apart from these problems, Ubuntu is tailored for traditional, rural, and tightly knit communities, making it difficult to apply to large-scale, impersonal modern societies (Metz 2011).

In this study, we also consider the ecological approach that builds on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) temporal model of agency, which explains "that individuals exert their agency informed by past experiences, current contextual possibilities and constraints, and their future orientations" (Hendriksen et al. 2025, 1165). The perspective is appropriate for this study because it has three iterative dimensions that relate and align with the decolonisation context in South African universities and other comparable settings. It pertains to past experiences (colonisation), current contextual constraints and possibilities (colonial legacies and decolonialisation), and future orientations (decolonised education). Hence, the "projective dimension or future perspective enables us to understand present pedagogical actions regarding our long- and short-term intentions" (Reyes-Rojas et al. 2025, 3). Deploying the ecological perspective on agency provides us with a better understanding of the pervasiveness of the remnants of colonisation in the education system in South Africa, sheds light on the aspects that constrain and impede the decolonisation project, and hints at what we intend to achieve. As Ashton (2022, 4) argues, "enacting agency in practice within an ecological perspective involves a process of teachers reflecting on their past experiences, setting future goals and plans, and evaluating these to identify appropriate courses of action". We argue that agency should be regarded as a configuration of historical influences, future orientations, and involvement with the present (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2017), implying that all three play a role. This suggests that factors from the past, present, and future may have an impact on how and to what extent academics and students acquire agency in the ever-changing and distinctive environments in which they work.

Methodology

This study adopts a document-analysis approach to synthesise scholarly documents rather than primary field data (Morgan 2022). The corpus includes publicly accessible documents published between 2015 and 2025 that engage with Ubuntu, decolonisation, agency, and related pedagogies in higher education.

Search Strategy

Documents were selected through targeted searches of databases that were deemed to be sources of educational discourses on Ubuntu and decolonisation, namely Scopus, Google Scholar, the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), EBSCOhost, Web of Science, and publishers' open-access platforms, and cross-referenced with domain-relevant keywords: "Ubuntu", "decolonisation", "agency", "higher education", "pedagogy", "epistemic justice", and "participatory governance". Search terms were developed to capture the key concepts such as agency, Ubuntu, decolonisation, South Africa, and universities. The Boolean search string included ("Academic" OR "Lecturer" OR "university teacher") AND ("agency") AND ("Ubuntu") AND ("Decolonising" OR "decolonisation" OR "Africanising" OR "Africanisation") AND ("South Africa" OR "Post apartheid") AND ("universities" OR "higher education institutions" OR "colleges"). Synonyms and variations ("faculty", "epistemic justice",

"higher education") were included to ensure wide-ranging coverage. To find more pertinent sources, manual searches of the reference lists from the included research and important publications were added to the electronic search. Our search yielded 297 peer-reviewed documents published between 2015 and 2025, which were then screened using the criteria described hereunder.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria required that documents (a) explicitly address Ubuntu or closely related relational ethics in an educational context, (b) engage with agency, curriculum, pedagogy, or governance, (c) be publicly accessible in full text, and (d) be written in English and published between 2015 and 2025. Editorials, position papers, and theoretical pieces were included if they provided substantial engagement with empirical or practice-oriented implications for agency and decolonisation but were weighed against methodological rigour. Even though our focus was on the local context, comparative studies from other African countries were included to highlight regional patterns. Studies were excluded based on the subsequent criteria: those focusing solely on decolonisation of education without referring to the application of Ubuntu or its cognate values, those not focusing on university education, those studies not written in English, and those from continents other than Africa. From an initial 297 entries, 272 documents were filtered using these criteria and were excluded because they were not primarily aligned with the focus of the study. Data were then curated from the remaining 25 articles.

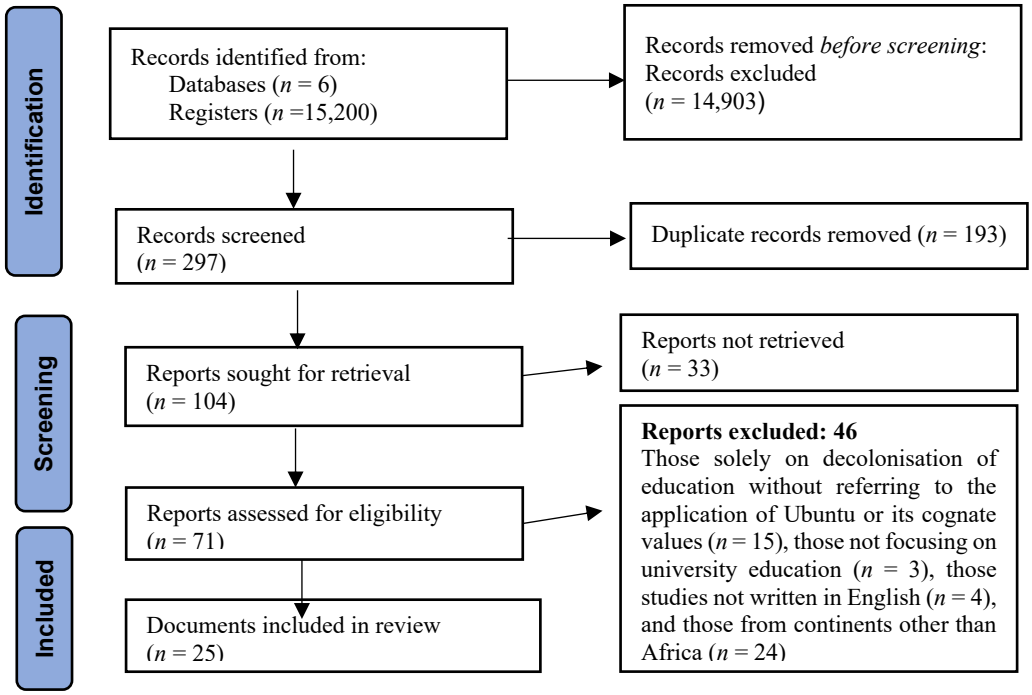


Figure 1: PRISMA flow chart on the selection of documents

Contexts and Sampling

Considering the literature-based nature of this study, the sampling strategy was purposive and theory-driven. We aimed to capture a diversity of contexts, including South African universities and comparable settings in Africa where Ubuntu-informed discourse appeared in the literature, to illuminate cross-contextual patterns and divergences. Sources span multiple disciplines and institutional settings, including undergraduate and postgraduate education, teacher education, and higher education policy. Publication years cluster around midpoints (2015–2020) and more recent discussions (2021–2025) to reflect evolving debates and policy environments. There were three steps in the selection process. Initially, two reviewers separately screened titles and abstracts according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Disagreements were settled by discussion or consultation with a third reviewer. Second, full-text evaluations were carried out on eligible sources to verify their relevance and data availability. Third, citations were tracked, and duplicates were eliminated using reference management software (Mendeley).

Data Collection and Analysis

The analysis proceeded in two interrelated phases. First, a systematic reading identified passages and concepts signalling Ubuntu-inspired relational ethics and agency-oriented practices. Second, these passages were coded into a thematic matrix aligned with dimensions of agency (voice, authorship, decision-making, co-production, governance involvement) and Ubuntu principles (relationality, reciprocity, communal responsibility). Coding was iterative, with constant comparison across sources to distil convergent themes and notable divergences (Braun and Clarke 2006). The six-step approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to thematically examine the generated data. To become comfortable with the generated data, we first transcribed it, then read it several times, and took notes on any emerging themes that were pertinent to the focus of the study. Both authors worked on the selection of papers. In case of disagreement, help was sought from a third reviewer who was an expert in the field. During the second stage, initial codes were created by organising the coding of significant data elements throughout the entire data. Finding themes was the third stage, which entailed organising codes into potential themes and gathering all the data relevant to each of these themes. After dividing up broad concepts and combining particular themes, the process's fourth step comprised reviewing themes. Themes unrelated to the research focus were excluded during this stage. In stage five, we identified and clarified the themes. The emergent ideas were continuously refined at that naming and defining stage. In step six, the research report was finally produced.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

To ensure trustworthiness in a literature-based synthesis, the analysis employed methodological triangulation across studies with assorted designs and contexts, a transparent coding system, and an audit trail of decisions (Nowell et al. 2017).

Reflexivity was maintained by documenting the researchers' interpretive lenses and explicitly acknowledging potential biases in selecting and interpreting sources.

Ethical Considerations

As a narrative review, no primary data collection involving human participants was required; therefore, ethical approval was not required. However, ethical considerations included ensuring the accurate representation of study findings, acknowledging limitations, and avoiding bias in study selection or interpretation. All sources were appropriately cited to respect intellectual property rights.

Findings

Hereunder are the two research questions together with the analysed themes and their sources.

Table 1: Research questions, themes, and sources

Research question	**Themes**	**Sources**
1. How is Ubuntu operationalised in scholarly discourse as a basis for agency?	a) Ubuntu-informed relational pedagogy and agency	Dzinoreva (2025); Strydom and Loots (2020); Choane (2025); Mpofu and Sefotho (2024); Omodan (2023); Mutanga (2025); Ngubane and Makua (2021); Ukpokodu (2016); Tavernaro-Haidarian (2018)
	b) Governance, policy, and the distribution of agency	Dzinoreva (2025); Mpofu and Sefotho (2024); Omodan (2023); Strydom and Loots (2020); Choane (2025)
	c) Epistemic justice, inclusion of diverse knowledges	Matahela and Ngwenya (2025); Mutanga (2025); Ngubane and Makua (2021); Ukpokodu (2016); Luckett (2025); Matahela (2025)

	d) Tensions, critiques, and risks for practice	Banda (2019); Mutanga (2025); Anofuechi and Klaasen (2024); Eliastam (2015); Magezi and Khlopa (2021); Masipa et al. (2024); Udah et al. (2025); Van Norren (2022)
2. How can an Ubuntu-driven agency advance the decolonisation of education in South African universities?	a) How can an Ubuntu-driven agency advance decolonisation in South African universities	Ikpeh and Federico Awi (2025); Zhakata and Zireva (2025); Ndhlovu (2024); Matahela and Ngwenya (2025); Walton (2018); Khohliso, Mphuthi, and Mpindo (2025); Maphalala and Nkosi (2025)

Ubuntu-Informed Relational Pedagogy and Agency

Across the reviewed studies, Ubuntu-oriented pedagogy is described as fostering student voice (Dzinoreva 2025; Strydom and Loots 2020), dialogic exchange, and co-creation of knowledge (Choane 2025; Mpofu and Sefotho 2024). According to Omodan (2023, 34), "knowledge that is constructed through social interaction in dialogic pedagogy recognises that learning is a collaborative and interactive process", which is embedded in the Ubuntu philosophy that celebrates mutual respect and cooperation. Through the Ubuntu approach, students are empowered to contribute to their learning by shaping content, setting goals, and deciding on assessment criteria. This affirms their agency as active participants in the learning process rather than passive recipients of information from the lecturers. As argued by Strydom and Loots (2020, 26), "[T]he idea of students as partners places students as co-creators of institutional strategy; positioning students as change agents implies that they need to be actively engaged in the processes of change." However, for students and academic staff to have agency, they must understand the context, the available resources, and the structural factors of the universities in which they are enrolled. According to Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2017), agency as a state can be attained through the interaction of individual efforts, resources at hand, and structural and contextual elements as they come together in specific and, in a sense, always unique circumstances. This means that academic staff and students need to understand these institutional factors and then recalibrate how they can navigate the decolonisation of education, given the constraints imposed by their institutions. When lost in their direction to decolonise education, they may refer to the Ubuntu principles—dialogue, collaboration, respect, reciprocity, sharing, and so forth.

In several studies, authors trace explicit links between relational pedagogy and increased student empowerment, including opportunities to critique proven disciplinary boundaries and to foreground local or community knowledge within curricula (Mutanga 2025; Ngubane and Makua 2021; Ukpokodu 2016). These studies show that relational

pedagogy empowers students by fostering trust and creating a supportive environment where they can critique traditional boundaries and incorporate local knowledge into their learning. Such an approach emphasises meaningful relationships between students and academic staff, treating them as co-constructors of knowledge rather than just consumers. This shift helps students develop a sense of agency, voice, and inclusion, leading to greater engagement and academic success. For example, Tavernaro-Haidarian (2018, 113) lauded the Ubuntu-based approaches to education where "students learn consultatively and where strategies are explored that translate into individuals being active in the process of their own education, contributing ideas, taking initiative, and articulating their needs and problems, while asserting their autonomy". This affirms what Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2017) describe as agency when they argue that it is both a temporal and a relational phenomenon, something that occurs over time and concerns the relations between actors and the environments in and through which they act. Taken together, dialogic teaching, collaborative learning spaces, and participatory curriculum design recur as mechanisms through which students become agents by contributing to learning goals, content choice, and assessment criteria. We argue that the Ubuntu model, founded on key values such as collectivism, solidarity, communitarianism, teamwork, participatory decision-making, a sense of belonging, and the sharing of duties and problems, builds student and academic staff agency. Furthermore, when the ideas of collaboration, communication, and dialogue are employed to decolonise education, they generate a sense of involvement, empowerment, and emancipation among students and academic staff. Ubuntu opposes the Western idea of education as an individualistic endeavour and promotes a more group-oriented strategy in which students are urged to cooperate, help one another, and contribute to the welfare of the group (Choane 2025; Mpofu and Sefotho 2024).

Taken together, the synthesis of 25 sources suggests that Ubuntu, as a relational ethics and epistemic framework, can function as both a normative compass and a design principle for the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa. In pedagogy, Ubuntu-informed practices foster spaces for dialogue, mutual accountability, and co-production, aligning with the ecological perspective of agency that conceives students and academic staff as active agents co-constructing knowledge that aligns with their aspirations as South Africans. Ashton (2022), following Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015), explains that cultural aspects comprising identity, values, and beliefs; social structure such as relationships, roles, and power dynamics; materials including resources and the physical environment; and emotions can all impact the achievement of agency by students and academic staff. It is important to note that the accomplishment of agency should be understood as a configuration of influences from the past, orientations towards the future, and engagement with the present (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2017; Wang and Li 2025).

Governance, Policy, and the Distribution of Agency

A substantial subset of studies discusses governance and policy discourses that promote or challenge student and staff participation in curricular decision-making, governance committees, and reform efforts (Dzinoreva 2025; Mpofu and Sefotho 2024; Omodan 2023; Strydom and Loots 2020). These studies report that Ubuntu advocates for a more inclusive and community-focused approach to governance and curriculum reform in South African institutions by highlighting shared responsibility, empathy, and joint decision-making. Dzinoreva (2025) explains that the intersection of student representation and higher education governance means that student representatives must be actively involved in the creation, formulation, and execution of policies and functions. Giving students a voice in matters that impact them fosters a sense of pride in the universities they attend.

Similarly, Strydom and Loots (2020, 26) illustrate that "in South Africa, the Higher Education Act includes students as participants in all governance structures, up to the highest Councils". Including students as participants in governance structures also provides opportunities to contribute to quality in the form of transformation of the South African higher education system (Bergsteedt and Du Plessis 2026). Allowing students to take part in university governance in South Africa is testimony to the Ubuntu philosophy that respects contributions from all members of the community regardless of their status, foregrounded in the ethos "I am because we are", and rejects the individualism that was upheld by Eurocentrism. By promoting the Ubuntu principles of cooperation and communitarianism, the approach fosters agency for both academic staff and students, driving the decolonisation agenda by dismantling individualism, class, or "race" markers that defined university governance during colonisation and apartheid in South Africa. In this way, Ubuntu philosophy can challenge colonial structures by pushing against individualistic, Eurocentric models and sometimes requiring a fundamental shift in how power and accountability are understood.

Dzinoreva (2025) argues that students' voices are an essential element in reshaping African universities, as they articulate students' needs and expectations of the universities they are enrolled in. Providing a conducive environment in which students can voice their concerns is essential to developing a generation that co-owns and co-creates the goals and aims of the university. Researchers often articulate that such practices support agency by elevating students from passive recipients to co-designers, authors, and evaluators of their learning journeys (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2017; Choane 2025; Mpofu and Sefotho 2024). As Dzinoreva (2025, 104) argues, "a truly transformative African university must decolonise traditional higher education governance processes and systems by fostering inclusive dialogue, prioritising student voices, and embedding them at the core of decision-making processes". This suggests that student and staff agency becomes pivotal in the decolonisation of education in universities in the Global South, which is built on the tenets of Ubuntu that call for inclusivity, cooperation, and interdependence. In concurrence, Choane (2025, 6–7)

argues that many studies have reported the importance of the Ubuntu-aligned approach in the "decolonisation and transformation of education settings and processes, and this has become louder, stronger, and clearer along with this growth of Ubuntu, an African philosophy that underpins strategies of learning centredness, caring, inclusiveness, and flexibility". We argue that when research describes governance structures that institutionalise student representation, co-design mechanisms, and participatory policy development, these configurations are tangible embodiments of relational ethics and agency to decolonise universities in South Africa. We argue, along with Strydom and Loots (2020), that regardless of whether they influence pedagogy, governance, activism, or institutional reforms, all forms of inclusion and voice help to improve the quality of education.

However, studies also highlight tensions between governance ideals and accountability regimes, resource constraints, and standardisation pressures that can compromise authentic participation (Ehren and Hwa 2025). The literature often notes that without deliberate resource provision and explicit procedural protections, participatory reforms risk tokenism or superficial adoption, suggesting that forethought is necessary for agency—individuals must plan, rearrange their priorities, and organise the participatory reforms in the decolonisation process.

Epistemic Justice and the Inclusion of Diverse Knowledges

A common thread, gleaned from document analysis, which resonates with the values of Ubuntu, is the call for epistemic diversification, incorporating indigenous, local, and non-Western knowledges into curricula and assessment (Luckett 2025; Matahela and Ngwenya 2025; Matahela 2025; Mutanga 2025; Ngubane and Makua 2021; Ukpokodu 2016). Ngubane and Makua (2021) argue that Ubuntu provides a culturally resonant frame for legitimising diverse epistemologies and for reconfiguring what counts as legitimate knowledge. This is foregrounded on the basis that epistemic diversification, or including indigenous and non-Western knowledge in education, aligns with the Ubuntu philosophy of interconnectedness and collective well-being. The core of Ubuntu is the belief that "I am because we are", accentuating the collective humanity and reciprocal dependence among students and staff. Integrating diverse knowledges is a practical application of this principle, recognising that knowledge itself is a collective, human enterprise that Western-centric perspectives have historically controlled.

By incorporating a broader range of knowledge systems, the Ubuntu approach in education can help build students' and lecturers' agentic capital and assist them to reconnect with their heritage, foster social justice, promote inclusion, and create a more holistic and culturally relevant educational experience, making students agents of decolonisation. Ngubane and Makua (2021, 4) argue that "Ubuntu pedagogy seeks to weaken the Eurocentric methodologies that draw from Euroscepticism, individualism and exclusivity", suggesting that Ubuntu pedagogy has the potential not only to reconnect students with their indigenous values, heritage, and cultures but is also seen as an alternative to create more equitable and decolonial educational systems that reflect

the diversity of the students and the broader community. That alone challenges the Eurocentric views that are founded on individualistic approaches. As Ukpokodu (2016, 155) explains, this creates "a learner-centred pedagogical approach that promotes democratic atmospheres where students feel respected, cared for and have the freedom to co-learn in an environment where power relations are grounded in humanism". We argue that epistemic diversification is a tool for social justice because it challenges the dominance of Western knowledge systems, which have often marginalised and excluded non-Western perspectives. Similarly, Mutanga (2025, 4) argues that "Ubuntu philosophy moves beyond the rigid dichotomy, and such a shift is vital in postcolonial contexts, where the legacies of colonial education, economic inequality, and global market forces continue to shape access to knowledge and opportunity". This suggests that insights from Ubuntu foster agency for both students and academic staff as they navigate the decolonisation journey.

We argue that in the past, higher education in South Africa was divided using markers such as "race", class, and gender, and the current situation in many ways remains unchanged (Tewolde 2024). Yet, in the future higher education is expected to be completely democratised. These factors drive the agentic capital of academic staff and students. We further argue that epistemic justice appears when curricula legitimately integrate diverse knowledges and community voices, challenging Eurocentric hegemony and opening space for locally situated knowledges (Akabor and Phasha 2025; Woldegiorgis 2025). One critical observation from the analysis is the issue of epistemic diversity and the need to respect all members in university governance and the teaching-learning process, regardless of class or origin. These principles are embedded in Ubuntu philosophy, showing a shift from the single narrative that valid knowledge only originates in the West. We further argue that Ubuntu is a seedbed for decolonisation, as the application of Ubuntu values provides the foundational space for decolonial approaches.

Tensions, Critiques, and Risks for Practice

While the literature reviewed laud Ubuntu philosophy for its role in building agency among academic staff and students, some studies caution against the tokenistic or superficial deployment of Ubuntu rhetoric (Banda 2019; Mutanga 2025). Scholars critique Ubuntu for being vague, overly idealistic, and sometimes appropriated as a romanticised notion that does not easily translate into actionable ethics or governance models, especially in contemporary, urbanised contexts (Anofuechi and Klaasen 2024; Eliastam 2015; Magezi and Khlopa 2021). Everyday tensions include the potential instrumentalisation of Ubuntu to meet policy targets without corresponding changes in pedagogy or assessment, inadequate resources for sustaining participatory activities, and misalignment between Ubuntu ideals and centralised curricula and performance metrics (Banda 2019; Eliastam 2015). Some sources critique the universalising of Ubuntu without attention to local variation, arguing that context matters for how relational reciprocity works in classrooms and governance forums (Anofuechi and

Klaasen 2024; Mutanga 2025). These critiques point to the need for reflexive implementation strategies and robust evaluation frameworks. One challenge that is clear in the literature is the Ubuntu rhetoric that often emphasises community interconnectedness, mutual respect, and collective well-being as foundational to human identity and moral agency (Masipa et al. 2024; Udah et al. 2025; Van Norren 2022). However, tensions arise when this discourse confronts practical constraints such as individualism, patriarchal structures, and modern socio-economic pressures. This disjunction points to the challenge of moving beyond Ubuntu as a discursive ideal to something that concretely informs agency and decision-making within structural realities of the decolonisation agenda, which is marked by inequality and diversity.

We make a case that such tensions in practice can be mitigated by deploying the Ubuntu pedagogy, which perfectly aligns with and complements the decolonial pedagogy. Decolonial approaches provide the historical and political lens for analysing how knowledge hierarchies are reproduced or challenged through curricular and institutional arrangements (Bhambra 2021). At the core of decolonial approaches, as explained by Zembylas (2025, 476), the focus is "on rethinking curricula, pedagogical practices, and institutional structures to foreground Indigenous and non-Western knowledges, unsettle colonial power dynamics, and create spaces for epistemic, affective, and material justice". Ubuntu complements these insights by offering a culturally resonant ethical orientation that motivates collective responsibility for knowledge creation and dissemination. Within this frame, mechanisms linking Ubuntu to agency include participatory curriculum design, dialogic teaching practices, inclusive assessment that recognises diverse epistemologies, and governance structures that invite student and staff participation in decision-making processes. The agency is informed by colonial legacies, the present context of the universities in South Africa or comparable contexts, and the future intentions. This is clearly elaborated by Ashton (2022) and Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015), who concur that putting agency into practice within an ecological view encompasses a process of students and academic staff looking back at their past experiences, setting future goals and plans, and evaluating these to identify appropriate courses of action. The triad of agency is acted out in the present status of the education system, but is informed by historical experiences and inspired by a desire for equality for all through decolonisation. However, we caution that translating Ubuntu from discourse into durable practice requires careful attention to governance design, resource allocation, and evaluation. Tokenistic adoption—where Ubuntu language stands in for substantive change—is still a recurrent risk, as are tensions that arise when centralised accountability and standardisation collide with participatory, locally grounded reforms (Anofuechi and Klaasen 2024; Eliastam 2015). And then, if there are no workable options or if the only course of action is to persist with routine or habitual practices in South African universities, the agency of academic staff and students is impossible to exercise or is profoundly limited.

How an Ubuntu-Driven Agency Can Advance Decolonisation in South African Universities

Considering the tokenistic or superficial deployment of Ubuntu rhetoric (Banda 2019; Mutanga 2025), making agency more than a discursive ideal means addressing the socio-political and economic constraints that limit Ubuntu's practical applicability, such as patriarchy, class, and neoliberal individualism, while preserving its core ethical commitments to relationship and care (Ndhlovu 2024; Udah et al. 2025). This involves cultivating institutional designs and everyday practices that reflect Ubuntu's normative values in tangible ways, and fostering environments where collective agency and individual empowerment coexist. This entails a dynamic, context-sensitive praxis that moves Ubuntu beyond abstraction to concrete modes of social engagement, where agency is enacted through community-based solidarity and ethical responsibility rather than mere rhetoric. Making agency more than a discursive ideal, in relation to Ubuntu and the decolonisation of education in South African universities, involves grounding abstract philosophical principles in practical educational frameworks.

Ubuntu—as a philosophy emphasising relationality, community, and mutual care—contrasts with dominant Western paradigms of individualism prevalent in university settings (Matahela and Ngwenya 2025). To move beyond rhetoric, universities must operationalise Ubuntu by creating spaces for collective knowledge-making that enhance the democratic participation of students and staff in shaping curricula and institutional culture. As argued by Faye and Sow (2025), this approach fosters a sense of agency rooted not in individual competition but in shared responsibility and co-creation of knowledge, advancing decolonial goals by prioritising indigenous epistemologies and relational ethics. This means embedding Ubuntu values in pedagogical methods such as collaborative learning, community engagement, and service-learning programmes that reflect the interconnectedness of knowing and being. By so doing, the approaches resist colonial legacies of education that marginalise African knowledge systems and instead affirm diverse ways of knowing that support students' development as socially responsible agents.

Conclusion

We conclude that research converges on a vision of Ubuntu as a relational ethics and epistemic framework that can inform agency and decolonisation in higher education. The literature shows that when Ubuntu principles are translated into concrete pedagogical practices, inclusive curricula, and participatory governance, agency—defined as voice, authorship, and meaningful decision-making—can be enhanced, and diverse knowledges can gain legitimacy within university life. Yet, the literature also emphasises that genuine transformation requires deliberate organisational design, sustained resources, and ongoing reflexivity to avoid tokenism and superficial adoption. For South African universities and comparable contexts seeking epistemic justice and decolonised education, Ubuntu-informed documentable practices provide a promising pathway—one that requires aligning policy rhetoric with actionable design, robust

university structures, and sustained professional development to realise lasting institutional change. Overall, the literature portrays Ubuntu as offering both a normative guide and a practical toolkit for advancing decolonisation and epistemic justice in higher education. When relational ethics are operationalised through co-produced curricula, participatory assessment, and inclusive governance, there is evidence of more accentuated student and staff agency and a broader legitimisation of diverse knowledges. The literature also underscores that decolonisation is a long-term, context-sensitive project that requires alignment among pedagogy, governance, and policy instruments, supported by adequate resources and institutional will. A limitation of a literature-based study is that it reflects published voices and theoretical-empirical syntheses rather than primary data about lived practices in education. Future work could triangulate this study with empirical data to confirm how Ubuntu-informed agency translates into enactment. Another limitation of the study is the reliance on 25 sources, many of which were published in the same 2025 journal issues; for example, Choane (2025), Dzinoreva (2025), and Khohliso, Mphuthi, and Mpindo (2025) present a risk of a narrow evidentiary base.

Recommendations

Given the tensions, critiques, and risks for practice evident in building agency through Ubuntu among academic staff and students when they attempt to decolonise education, we argue that these tensions illuminate pathways for reinterpreting agency in ways that incorporate collective values without erasing individual autonomy or enabling groupthink (Ikpeh and Federico Awi 2025; Zhakata and Zireva 2025). While Ubuntu's emphasis on social harmony and interconnectedness may seem to prioritise communal obligations over personal freedoms, the practical challenge is to integrate these values into frameworks that empower individuals as moral agents capable of negotiation, contestation, and dialogue. Such reinterpretation requires critical engagement with both tradition and modernity to ensure Ubuntu becomes a living ethic grounded in societal structures that support justice, inclusion, and transformative agency. From the findings presented in this study, we submit that one critical challenge is to negotiate power imbalances in university spaces, avoiding paternalistic or tokenistic applications of Ubuntu that silence dissent and individual freedoms. We argue that in this case, agency is enacted through dialogical processes that recognise the historical and socio-political contexts of education and cultivate pluralistic identities through Ubuntu-informed praxis (Maphalala and Nkosi 2025). Further, Walton (2018) supports that decolonising education with Ubuntu entails institutional reforms that address systemic barriers to inclusion and representation in knowledge production. The institutional reforms need to address systemic barriers by promoting inclusion and representation through centring community values and locally relevant knowledge. Policies promoting the inclusion of African languages, indigenous knowledge, and community histories in university curricula are also crucial in operationalising Ubuntu's ethos of connectedness and respect for diverse human experiences. Such an institutional commitment empowers marginalised groups by confirming their epistemic contributions and enabling authentic

participation in shaping the university's knowledge landscape. These structural changes can then pave the way for an agency that is not merely aspirational but actualised through transformative educational practices that resist coloniality and foster epistemic justice within South African higher education.

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