

## Exploring Social Justice Issues That Inform the 21st-Century Curriculum in Higher Education: Lecturers' Voices and Experiences

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### ABSTRACT

Higher education systems across the globe have adopted policies to provide a curriculum which is underpinned by the fundamental values of equality, inclusivity, and diversity. However, owing to lack of transformation and the practical implementation of these policies, higher education is still significantly entrenched in Eurocentric epistemologies which expose students to a learning environment which does not represent their social identities. This has led to the intensification of discourses on decolonisation epistemologies. At the centre of these decolonisation epistemologies is their advocacy for the recognition of indigenous epistemologies and ontologies in the learning environment. Of importance to these discourses is social justice issues that influence the 21st-century curriculum. Guided by the Critical Theory of Education, this study explored social justice issues that inform the 21st-century curriculum from a lecturers' perspective. Data was collected from thirty-two purposefully selected lecturers from all universities in South Africa using a questionnaire with a Likert scale. The findings demonstrate that academic imperialism, language equity, equality, inclusivity, and diversity are the major issues of social justice that influence the 21st-century curriculum. To promote these social justice issues, this study advocates for radical transformation in language policies and pedagogical practices in higher education. The study further calls for the practical dismantling of the current dispensation in higher education which perpetuates social injustice and inequality. Educational policies need to respond purposefully to calls to decolonise the 21st-century curriculum holistically and create an education system which works for every student on these social justice issues.

### KEYWORDS

Social justice; 21st-century curriculum; higher education; decolonisation epistemologies.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The last two decades in higher education have been characterised and underpinned by radical calls and discourses for a more transformed and student oriented curriculum which speaks to the social identities and cultural contexts of students (Dawson 2020; Govender & Hugo, 2020; Hungwe & Ndofirepi; Liu, 2020; Letsekha, 2022; Lumadi, 2021; Manathunga, Singh & Bunda, 2021; Mahabeer, 2021; Mbembe, 2016; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Mdzanga & Moeng, 2021; Merisi, Pillay & Mgqwashu, 2022; Mgqwashu, 2019; Qi et al., 2021; Díaz, 2018; R'boul, 2022; Salmi & D'Addio, 2021; Scherman & Liebenberg, 2023; Timmis et al., 2022; Zembylas, 2018 Zimmerman, 2023). This has culminated in robust debates, dialogues, and discussions on the need for a decolonised curriculum and the subsequent decolonisation epistemologies in higher education to conform to a 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education student cohort.

Alismail and McGuire (2015) view the 21st-century curriculum as a curriculum which blends knowledge, innovation skills, thinking ability, information and communication technology, media and authentic real-life experiences within the context of mainstream academic subjects. The 21st-century curriculum by design seeks to emphasise the creation and construction of knowledge and encourage students to construct knowledge which is meaningful to them in order to acquire new skills and competencies. Furthermore, discourses on the 21st-century curriculum suggest that it is a curriculum that has been designed and developed to comprehensively resemble the real world, reflect the knowledge, skills and competencies required by students to succeed in their studies and chosen careers and position them to compete successfully in the global economy (Drew, 2013). Drawing from the above literature perspectives, this paper views the 21st-century curriculum as an all-inclusive technologically oriented curriculum which is not only based on core academic subjects, but which also seeks to empower students with the skills they need to play a meaningful role in their communities and realise their full potential in life.

At the core of these discourses are social justice issues that continue to shape, define, inspire, and influence the 21st-century curriculum in higher education whose radical transformation agenda seeks to appeal to and resonate with every student. Most importantly, these last two decades have witnessed increased public awareness and admission of the fact the higher education has been biased towards certain identities, cultures, languages, backgrounds, and epistemologies. This has significantly undermined and limited the ability of the marginalised students to enter and participate in the academic project and the global discourses and in higher education (Timmis, 2022). For instance, a recent study conducted by Timmis *et al.*, (2022) with student co-researchers described the higher education system as fundamentally colonial and found that coloniality keeps on shaping and informing the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education curriculum and disregards indigenous epistemologies and knowledge systems.

In support of the above prognosis, there is overwhelmingly conclusive and consistent evidence in literature, both nationally and globally which points to a very strong concurrence

among scholars on the need to deliver a decolonised curriculum in higher education as a matter of urgency (Letsekha, 2022; Lumadi, 2021; R'boul, 2022). In fact, a host of recent studies and scholarly work in higher education demonstrate an enduring strong interest and advocacy on redressing issues of social injustice which continue to exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education landscape (Hungwe & Ndofirepi, 2022; Letsekha, 2022; Lumadi, 2021; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Salmi & D'Addio, 2021; Scherman & Liebenberg, 2023; Zimmerman, 2023). Supporting the above school of thought, is a body of compelling evidence in literature to confidently submit that higher education is still entrenched in systemic practices that perpetuate and promote social injustice, the marginalisation and academic exclusion of students whose social identities are not recognised in the learning arena (Letsekha, 2022; Timmis et al., 2022; Scherman & Liebenberg, 2023; Zimmerman, 2023). This has been largely sustained by colonial inheritance of aspects such as inclusivity, diversity, and language equity that continue to define the in 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education curriculum. Sadly enough, despite the strong advocacy for a curriculum which thrives on the ethos of social justice, higher education remains procedurally and fundamentally hinged on a culture which disregards the social identities of students, thereby compromising their full participation in the academic project.

Juxtaposing the above assertions, Timmis, *et al* (2022) concur with Hungwe & Ndofirepi (2022), McCallen and Johnson (2020), Merisi et al. (2022) and Mgwashu (2019) that universities are a source and gatekeeper of social justice. Contrary to this, the reality is that the curriculum offered by these universities is parallel to the underlying principles of the ideals of social justice which seek to advance and promote the needs, social identities and local contexts of all students in higher education. But looking at the economic, social, psychological, and other forms of personal gains associated with higher education, Salmi & D'Addio (2021) contend that inclusive and equal access to higher education is necessary to realise social justice, equity, and economic freedom. This view has been well received and alluded to in literature perspectives. Merisi et al. (2022) and Timmis et al. (2022) argue that the demands of the current student population in the national and global higher education landscape call for the development of a 21st-century curriculum which is more relevant and appealing to the dynamic and everchanging student constituency. This paper argues that more than ever, the higher education landscape needs to be more inclusive to present an accurate demographic picture of the diverse student population it serves. The paper further submits that for the higher education curriculum to be regarded as transformed and inclusive, it needs to reflect a paradigm shift by disconnecting the 21st-century curriculum in higher education from any cultural biases and persuasions. For instance, the dominant use of English as the main legitimate language for academic discourse and scholarly engagements in most institutions of higher learning tends to alienate many students in higher education. There is compelling research evidence from previous studies which suggests that a lot of effort is required for one to think conceptually in another language (Kapp & Bangeni, 2017) other than their mother tongue.

Building on the above narrative, in trying to navigate and negotiate their academic journey in a higher education landscape whose curriculum does not represent them, the participants in a study conducted by Timmis, *et al* (2022), lamented that they had to change while the curriculum remained constant. This finding supports the views of Letsekha (2022) who highlight the systemic social injustice issues that continue to define and influence the 21st-century curriculum in higher education. Most recently, Scherman & Liebenberg (2023) and Zimmerman (2023) also raise these concerns in their scholarly work on academic literacy and access to education.

A study by Timmis, *et al* (2022) demonstrated the continued visibility and prevalence of the vestiges of colonialism in higher education and the students' desire for the 21st-century curriculum to acknowledge their own epistemologies. Another important finding from this study by Timmis, *et al* (2022) highlights the importance which students ascribe to their ability to relate to a 21st-century curriculum in higher education which resembles their own indigenous knowledge systems and experiences. This endorses the sentiments of Merisi, *et al* (2022) on the importance of including localised knowledge systems and indigenous ways of knowing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education curriculum. However, literature demonstrates that students do not experience this kind of a curriculum in higher education.

In trying to conceptualise the meaning of the word curriculum as an educational concept, the researcher subscribes to the sentiments of Zimmerman (2023) who cautions that there is a need to acknowledge the socio-cultural context in which students access the curriculum. In support of this view, the researcher argues that teaching and learning in higher education does not take place in a vacuum to a uniform body of students and must therefore be informed and defined by the students' socio-economic identities. The researcher acknowledges that owing to the diverse backgrounds that define and shape the personal identities of students in the learning environment, a one-size fits all approach will not work when dealing with social justice issues that inform the 21<sup>st</sup> century curriculum. The realisation of decolonisation epistemologies will make provision for this individual diversity of every student, thereby delivering social justice to them. A holistic approach to mitigate social justice issues that influence the 21st-century curriculum in higher education would provide every student wide access to higher education. This paper conceptualises the idea of widening participation in higher education as making the 21st-century curriculum accessible to citizens who would traditionally not have contemplated university while retaining those who are already in the education system and promoting their academic success.

The higher education landscape is a contested terrain in many societies across the globe, with equal access to higher education being at the centre of these contestations. With the students' socioeconomic status and proficiency in the language of instruction being widely used to predict educational opportunities, access to education and academic success (Zembylas, 2018 and Zimmerman, 2023), the need to explore social justice issues that inform and influence the 21<sup>st</sup> curriculum becomes highly important and relevant. This assertion finds expression and

affirmation in the views of Timmis et al (2022) who caution about the need to challenge the continued institutionalisation of dominant epistemologies in contexts that would be served better through developing and adopting concepts that are more compatible with those specific contexts.

While there has been a host of previous studies on social justice issues plaguing higher education, the recent evidence from the work of Scherman & Liebenberg (2023) and Zimmerman (2023) suggest that social issues of inequality, inclusivity, language equity and diversity continue to shape and influence the 21st-century curriculum. The issue of language is one of the most contested issues of social injustice in higher education. For Letsekha (2022), Mqgwashu (2019) and Zimmerman (2023), the language of instruction is a significant confounding variable on literacy levels and academic success. The study argues that the formalisation and adoption of a dominant language of instruction is exclusionary and challenging to the marginalised students whose social identities, local contexts and epistemologies are not represented in the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education learning environment. McCallen, and Johnson, (2020) argue that the current United States regards equal access to higher education as integral qualifier of social equity. From a South African perspective, as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, among others, the Bill of Rights guarantees and assures the democratic value of equality in its totality. Chapter two of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, which is dedicated to the Bill of Rights provides for the right of every individual to receive and access education in their official language or language of their preference. These constitutional values and rights are further reinforced and reaffirmed by the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996. To provide for a strong legislative foundation and justification for the above values and human rights, the Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for Accounting, grades 10-12 (2015), is founded on principles which are consistent with the provisions of the above-mentioned primary legislation. Evidence in support of this assertion is found on page 4 of the Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for Accounting, grades 10-12, 2015:4) which reads as follows:

*“Social transformation: ensuring that the educational imbalances of the past are redressed, and that equal educational opportunities are provided for all sections of the population and, Human rights, inclusivity, environmental and social justice: infusing the principles and practices of social and environmental justice and human rights as defined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. The National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12 is sensitive to issues of diversity such as poverty, inequality, race, gender, language, age, disability and other factors”.* The South African Council on Higher Education (2023) also echoes similar sentiments to the effect of the above.

Read in conjunction with the provisions and pronouncements of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the of Bill of Rights and the South African Schools Act 108 of 1996, the CAPS document for Accounting is very clear on the core issues of social justice, equality,

diversity, inclusivity, and social cohesion. While the point reference for this piece of secondary legislation is basic education, it formalises and institutionalises these fundamental values of social justice in higher education. Further to the above, each of the theoretical positions and provisions of both the primary and secondary legislation on education in South Africa and abroad provide a strong rationale to advocate for a transformed 21st-century curriculum in higher education which is all-inclusive.

### **Aim of the Study**

Given the above context, and the current pedagogical practices and tradition in higher education, the aim of this study was to explore the social justice issues that inform the 21<sup>st</sup> century curriculum in higher education. To obtain a holistic view of these social justice issues, the study was conducted from the perspectives of lecturers' voices and experiences in higher education.

### **Research Question**

To satisfy the above-mentioned aim and interrogate the major issues of social justice that continue to inform and define the 21st-century curriculum, the following research question was pursued in this study:

- What are the social justice issues that inform the 21st-century curriculum in higher education?

### **Conceptualisation of the curriculum**

Evidence from literature suggests that while the constructions and conceptualisations of a decolonised higher education 21st-century curriculum are generated and developed by individuals who may be influenced by their diverse experiences and backgrounds, there is a commonly shared view that this curriculum is grounded on the values and ethos of inclusivity, diversity, student participation and accessibility (Deng, 2017; Mulenga, 2018; Qassimi & Wade, 2021; Simpson & Jackson, 2003). Most importantly, this curriculum is collectively perceived to be underpinned by the students' social identities, social contexts, cultures, and epistemologies.

Progressing from the above position and looking at the declaration of education as a public and essential commodity worldwide, the conceived meaning of the word curriculum has evolved over the years and thus far, a commonly held definition has been very elusive (Deng, 2017; Maryanti, Nandiyanto, Hufad & Sunardi, 2021; Mulenga, 2018; Qassimi & Wade, 2021). Supporting this submission, the meaning of the word curriculum has been widely challenged and disputed. Consequently, the word curriculum has thus attracted a lot of research interest, in terms of its conceptualisation (Deng, 2017; Mulenga, 2018). As such, several discourses, both nationally and internationally continue to unfold (Mulenga, 2018) to arrive at a shared and collective definition of the curriculum. But these discourses have thus far not been successful in achieving this objective. The study attributes this failure to the constant discordant voices on the precise definition of the curriculum, largely because of the context and the angle from which it is defined. This study therefore suggests that instead of seeking precision in defining the

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curriculum, one should consider the overarching characteristics of what constitutes the curriculum and its fundamental imperatives.

An important view of the curriculum, which is deeply rooted in this study, and in exploring social justice issues that inform the 21st-century curriculum in higher education is submitted by Simpson & Jackson (2003). Accordingly, Simpson & Jackson (2003) maintain that the curriculum needs to be relevant to the lives of students. This view originates from earlier educational theorists such as John Dewey. Regrettably, this line of thought has been ignored in subsequent and recent conceptualisations of the curriculum since its submission. As such, the study argues that the conceptualisation of curriculum in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be both consistent with and compatible with the basic individual social identities and contexts of students for it to be relevant and appealing to them over and above that which it seeks to achieve. Therefore, the position taken by the study in conceptualising the curriculum, considering the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education landscape and the arguments above is that its definition needs to include “student-centred” as one of the fundamental defining characteristics of the curriculum.

This stance is also consistent with the major themes emerging from the recent discourses on a decolonised curriculum, decolonisation, and decolonisation epistemologies (Letsekha, 2022; Lumadi, 2021; Díaz, 2018; Merisi et al., 2022; Mgqwashu, 2019; R'boul, 2022; Scherman & Liebenberg, 2023; Timmis et al., 2022; Zimmerman, 2023). Nevertheless, it is still necessary to critically examine how other scholars have defined the curriculum. This is cardinal for this study to be able to arrive at a well-informed conceptualisation of the curriculum, which is relevant and applicable to the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education curriculum.

Consistent with the above, Maryanti, et al (2021) share similar views with Mulenga (2018) on the perception of curriculum as the embodiment of educational outcomes and as an educational programme. Most importantly, Mulenga (2018) asserts that the curriculum conveys the values, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, and skills, all of which are central to the agenda of education. On the other hand, Prideaux (2003) believes that the curriculum is the essence of schooling while Mulenga (2018) perceives it as that which is taught in educational institutions. Mulenga (2018) goes on to argue that within the context of higher education, curriculum refers to the outline of the course, the content or syllabus, which is a brief statement indicating what content must be taught in a learning area. However, Qassimi & Wade (2021) reject this definition of the curriculum because they believe that the curriculum is a culmination of the practices and ethos in the learning environment in conjunction with the specified learning objectives.

Su (2012) provides a very controversial yet critical view of the curriculum by arguing that curriculum refers to all the experiences of those who seek to access it in schools. Qassimi & Wade (2021) interpret these experiences referred to by Su (2012) in the learning environment to include learning areas, time allocated for specific learning areas, the lessons presented by teachers, learning objectives, teaching strategies, methods of assessment and other aspects

present in the teaching and learning environment. The study fully subscribes to this interpretation of the curriculum and applauds it for offering a holistic view of the conceptualisation of the curriculum, especially in the context of exploring social justice issues that continue to inform the 21<sup>st</sup> higher education curriculum.

On the other hand, a traditional view of curriculum defines it as a collection of individual subject content areas which culminates in a full body of content which needs to be taught (Deng, 2017, Maryanti, et al 2021 and Su, 2012). Mulenga (2018) explains that this content is obtained from the traditional academic fields of study. Another school of thought portrays curriculum as a combination of predetermined performance objectives, which is the competencies which students must demonstrate, satisfy, or achieve (Alvior, 2014 and Deng, 2017). Despite this, Qassimi & Wade (2021) argue that while the curriculum is generally regarded to as courses offered by a learning institution such as school or a university, the word curriculum is hardly ever used to convey such a meaning in those learning institutions. For Qassimi & Wade (2021) the curriculum is what students learn and go through to realise their fullest potential in life and to satisfy the universe's needs in the context of the dynamic and everchanging world.

Drawing from the above theoretical submissions and noting that there are multiple perspectives on the conceptualisation of the curriculum, this study interprets curriculum to refer to but not limited to the requirements of disciplinary knowledge, pedagogies, assessment regimes, induction, orientation, library, and technological systems in higher education, all of which by default should be informed and guided by the individual social identities of students and their local contexts. In addition to the above, curriculum is broadly perceived in this study as the decorum in higher education and the institutionalised academic practices defining the experiences of students in higher education which must be inclined to the needs and social identities of the students, but unfortunately not so as one explores the social justice issues that define the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education curriculum. Another important interpretation of the word curriculum is that it has been used in educational and political contexts to imply a formal and institutionally adopted programme of study or training which prospective candidates are exposed to over a given period. Upon successful completion this programme, one is declared competent in that specific area of study. It is however important to point out that despite these different views and interpretations of the curriculum, Mulenga (2018) cautions that its fundamental and distinctive dimensions and features must be captured in any definition to be accepted as valid.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK UNDERPINNING THE STUDY**

Based on its fundamental theoretical assumptions and prepositions, the critical theory of education was chosen as the most relevant and appealing theoretical framework to guide this study. In the expert views of Matthews (2020), McArthur (2022), Stache (2022) and Strunk & Betties (2019), the critical theory of education provides a very influential framework for studies that deal with social justice issues. The theoretical positions and assumptions of this theory



make an important contribution in enhancing humanity's understanding of social injustice issues and the serious disparities in higher education. The theory achieves this by exposing the evidence of exploitation, dominance, power and privilege where they exist (Hubbard Cheoua, 2021; McNaughton & Martimianakis, 2020; Payne, 2022).

Ideologically, the critical theory of education advances that labour, financial and economic issues are the major underlying factors that perpetuate social injustice, inequality, domination and oppression (Matthews, 2020; McArthur, 2022; Stache, 2022). Within the context of this study, this assumption implies that students whose epistemologies, methodologies, contexts, and social identities are marginalised and not recognised in higher education are denied meaningful participation in the academic project. Considering the above views, this implies that the privileged minority, whose epistemologies are dominant and institutionalised in higher education are in a more advantageous and superior position to access higher education and compete successfully. This paper argues that the continued segregation and disregard of the social identities of many students in higher education provides a sustainable ground for the breeding of issues of social injustice, inequality, and academic exclusion.

The critical theory of education provides a lens to explore the major issues that still define and inform the 21st-century curriculum in higher education by advocating for the plight of the marginalised students. By underscoring the issues of dominance, power, exploitation and privilege, this theory encourages a robust dialogue and conversation in which critical questions that challenge the status-quo are asked. Consequently, the study poses these thought provoking questions: If the higher education landscape has really been transformed to offer an inclusive 21st-century curriculum, in whose language and epistemologies is this curriculum presented? Whose interest does the current dispensation in higher education serve when delivering the 21st-century curriculum? Whose languages and epistemologies dominate higher education and why? If the curriculum is conceptualised as a concept which conveys the values, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, and skills, who makes decisions to this effect? By adopting and recognising a few dominant languages and epistemologies and institutionalising them, is higher education not perpetuating inequalities, academic exclusion and protect the privileges of those whose languages and epistemologies have been legitimatised for instruction, academic engagements, and scholarship? By not recognising the individual social identities and contexts of many students in the learning environment, does the 21st-century curriculum not make these students vulnerable to exploitation and set them for failure? The paper argues that a more generic response to these critical questions is that the current practice in higher education and the dispensation under which students access the 21st-century curriculum denies many students a curriculum which resonates with them, a curriculum which is relevant and meaningful to them. It perpetuates inequality, social injustice, domination, and oppression.

The above submission and synopsis are more relevant and appealing to this study in view of the sentiments of Strunk & Betties (2019) who maintain that the critical theory of education

is also concerned with social class-based struggle and economic oppression. Further to the above, the critical theory of education does not only deal with social injustice and the power relations that are perpetuated in higher education, but it also examines how such a cycle can be interrupted and mitigated. Therefore, it is compatible with the phenomena under investigation, especially on how the plight of students who are not fairly and accurately represented in the higher education arena where they access the 21st-century curriculum can be resolved (Strunk & Betties, 2019).

To resonate with the critical issues of social injustice in higher education, Payne (2022) argues that those who advocate and champion the critical theory of education calls for an equitable free education for all students. Concurring with the above submissions, Matthews, (2020) adds that those in favour of the ideologies of the critical theory of education argue that a democratic society cannot exist in the absence of education and that for this democracy to work, access to education for everyone is an imperative and that education is the key to democracy. Stache (2022) also subscribes to the critical theory of education school of thought by arguing that students need to be educated and well informed to be able to participate meaningfully, purposefully, and intelligently in the economic, social, and political life and become competent participants in a democratic society. By hinging this study on the theoretical assumptions of the critical theory of education, which clearly advocates for equal access to the 21st-century curriculum, equality, and social justice as they access this curriculum, it is envisaged that the study will add some voice to the calls for a more transformed and all-inclusive higher education which resembles the needs of its student community.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This section of the paper focuses on the research methodology variables of the study. These include the research paradigm, the sampling techniques, the data collection instrument, and the profile of the study participants.

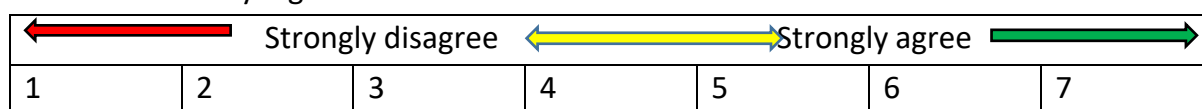
#### **Study Participants**

The sample of the study comprised of thirty-two lecturers who had more than ten years' experience in curriculum implementation in higher education. These participants were purposefully selected based on their lecturing experience and the envisaged value they would bring to the study. It was assumed that with more than ten years of lecturing experience, these lecturers would have gained enough experience to be able to respond to the questions on social justice issues that influence the 21st-century curriculum in higher education. These lecturers were from all the twenty-six universities based in all the provinces in the country where the study was conducted. This was meant to enhance an accurate and fair representation of the lecturers' views on the issues of social justice that continue to define the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education curriculum. Demographic information such as gender and age were assumed not to have a material effect on the scores of participants and was therefore not taken into consideration.

**Research paradigm and data collection instrument**

The critical theory of education, whose fundamental assumptions were used to interpret and bring to the fore the social justice issues which influence the 21st-century curriculum in higher education was found to be compatible with the research paradigm of phenomenology. Authorities on the phenomenological research paradigm (Creswell, 2013; Denscombe, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Johnson & Christensen 2014; Litchman, 2013; Nieuwenhuis, 2016) concur that this is a predominantly interpretivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) in which the study participants have to engage in some conscious and deliberate reflections of their lived experiences and encounters with the phenomena under investigation to be able to respond to the research questions accurately. In these conscious and deliberate reflections, it is argued that the study participants ascribe meaning to their experiences and can express this derived meaning either numerically or verbally (Nieuwenhuis, 2016; Creswell, 2013; Denscombe 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Johnson & Christensen 2014).

In line with the major precepts of phenomenology and informed by literature perspectives on social justice issues that influence the 21st-century curriculum (Dawson 2020; Govender & Hugo, 2020; Hungwe & Ndofirepi, 2022; Letsekha, 2022; Liu 2020; Lumadi, 2021; Manathunga, Singh & Bunda, 2021; Mbembe & Mahabeer, 2020; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Mdzanga & Moeng, 2021; Qi, *et al.* 2021; R'boul, 2022; Salmi & D'Addio, 2021; Scherman & Liebenberg, 2023; Zimmerman, 2023) this study developed a questionnaire with the Likert Scale (see below). After a careful and deliberate reflection on their lived experiences with each one of the issues of social justice listed below, the study participants had to rate them from 1, which meant that the participant strongly disagreed with the specific justice issue as being influential in informing the 21st-century curriculum in higher education to 7, which implied that the participant strongly agreed that the given social justice issue was indeed significantly influential in the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education curriculum.



**Results Analysis**

Being a predominantly quantitative study in nature, the presentation of data will be based on the measures of central tendency which emerged from the quantitative data analysis that was done using descriptive statics. By default, this was meant to indicate the distribution of the participants' scores on each one of the six statements that were posed to them. The presentation of data below shows how each one of the issues of social justice below was assumed to continue to inform the 21st-century curriculum. In rating each one of these social justice issues, the participants had to reflect on their lived experiences carefully and consciously with these issues of social justice in higher education and chose a rating which best described and captured these lived experiences. Table 1 represents the findings of the individual issues of

social justice and provides a holistic picture of all the measures of central tendency that emerged from the responses.

**Table 1.**

*Summary of Quantitative Findings on main issues of social justice that continue to influence the 21<sup>st</sup> century curriculum in higher education.*

Statement on Social Justice Issue	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation
1 The social justice issue of equal access to higher education continues to inform the 21st-century curriculum in higher education.	5.232	5.000	1.174
2 The social justice issue of language equity continues to inform the 21 <sup>st</sup> century in higher education.	5.132	4.569	1.248
3 The social justice issue of inclusivity continues to inform the 21 <sup>st</sup> curriculum in higher education.	4.985	5.264	1.412
4 The social justice issue of diversity continues to influence the 21st-century curriculum in higher education.	4.743	5.000	1.396
5 The social justice issue of inequality continues to influence the 21st-century curriculum in higher education.	3.816	4.000	1.358
6 The social justice issue of academic imperialism continues to influence the 21st-century curriculum in higher education.	3.486	4.829	1.416

### DISCUSSION of FINDINGS

In interpreting and discussing the quantitative findings above, the study relied on the expert views of Pietersen & Maree (2016). Accordingly, the highest mean indicates that the study participants experienced that specific issue of social justice the most and felt that it is one of the major issues that continue to influence the 21st-century curriculum in higher education. On the other hand, the social justice issue with the lowest mean was seldomly experienced and was perceived to be of less influence on the 21st-century curriculum in higher education. Based on the quantitative findings presented above, lecturers are unanimous that equal access to education is the most dominant issue that continues to shape and inform the 21<sup>st</sup> curriculum in higher education.

Responding to the overarching research question investigated in this study, on the social justice issues that inform the 21<sup>st</sup> century curriculum in higher education, the quantitative data convincingly demonstrates that equal access to higher education, language equity, inclusivity and diversity are at the top of these major social justice issues. With the highest mean of 5.2, the social justice phenomena of equal access to higher education emerged as a fundamental variable influencing and shaping the 21st-century curriculum in higher education. This finding

finds expression in a host of previous studies and current discourses on higher education, both nationally and internationally (Dawson 2020; Govender & Hugo, 2020; Hungwe & Ndofirepi, 2022; Horsthemke, 2017; Jansen, 2017; Letsekha, 2022; Liu 2020; Lumadi 2021; Manathunga, et al 2021; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Mdzanga & Moeng, 2021; Qi, et al 2021; R'boul, 2022; Salmi & D'Addio, 2021; Scherman & Liebenberg, 2023; Zimmerman, 2023).

From a South African perspective, scholars such as Letsekha (2022), Lumadi (2021); Scherman & Liebenberg (2023) and Zimmerman (2023) advocate for more improved equal access to higher education as one of the distinctive issues of social justice that should inform the 21st-century curriculum in higher education. The Council on Higher Education (2023), the Department of Higher Education (2023), Naidoo (2022) and the South African Human Rights Commission (2023) are unanimous on the huge influence which the call for equal access to higher education in South Africa has had in shaping the 21st-century curriculum in higher education. Similar calls are made in other global higher education systems. For instance, in Australia, where Qi, et al (2021) advocate for a more easily accessible 21st-century curriculum in higher education. Similarly, McCallen & Johnson (2020), echo similar sentiments in the United States where equal access to higher education is a significant qualifier of social equity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education curriculum.

A standard deviation of 1.2 demonstrates the overwhelming concurrence in the participants' ratings on equal access to higher education as a major social justice issue which has and continues to influence the 21st-century curriculum in higher education. This concurrence among the study participants is also supported by a plethora of literature verdicts which advocate for equal access to higher education (Dawson 2020; Díaz, 2018; Govender & Hugo, 2020; Hungwe & Ndofirepi, 2022; Letsekha, 2022; Liu 2020; Lumadi, 2021; Manathunga et al., 2021; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Mdzanga & Moeng, 2021; R'boul, 2022; Salmi & D'Addio, 2021; Scherman & Liebenberg, 2023; Zimmerman, 2023).

Consistent with the ongoing discourses on a decolonized curriculum and decolonization epistemologies and literature perspectives on higher education, the social justice issue of language equity has also emerged as one of the major issues of social justice which define and influence the 21st-century curriculum in higher education (Letsekha, 2022; R'boul, 2022; Zimmerman, 2023). The social justice issue of language equity in education and higher education in particular has been widely researched and robustly debated and ventilated, both nationally and globally (Díaz, 2018; Letsekha, 2022; Manathunga et al., 2021; Qi et al., 2021). True to its controversial nature, the social justice issue of language equity in higher education, which has manifested itself in calls for mother tongue instruction across the 21st-century curriculum, politicised and characterised by polarised debates (Lumadi, 2021; Mahabeer, 2020; Manathunga et al., 2021; Mdzanga & Moeng, 2021) has emerged as very influential in shaping the 21st-century curriculum.

Having achieved a mean of 5.1, which is the second highest, language equity as positioned itself as a social justice issue of influence and relevance in the 21st-century

curriculum in higher education. This is in harmony with findings from and arguments advanced by a host of previous studies on social justice issues, decolonization epistemologies and a decolonized 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education curriculum. Timmis, et al (2022) found language as one of the complex factors that frustrate many students in higher education because of its perceived impact on their ability to engage in problem solving and critical thinking as they access the 21st-century curriculum in higher education. The standard deviation of 1.2 on the scores on the statement regarding language equity attest to the collective and shared views of the study participants on this issue as one of the major variables influencing the 21st-century curriculum in higher education.

The finding on inclusivity and diversity as some of the social justice issues that influence the 21st-century curriculum vindicates the earlier sentiments of Mgqwashu (2019) and Timmis, et al (2022) who advocate for more diversity and recognition of other epistemologies in higher education. As a means to realise and enhance diversity and inclusivity, Timmis et al, (2022) recommend that institutions of higher learning need to value and acknowledge what individual students come along with into the academic terrain of higher education. To this end, Timmis et al (2022) subscribe to the views of Letsekha (2022) and Lumadi (2021) by calling for epistemic defiance. To achieve this, Timmis *et al* (2022) reiterate the sentiments of Lumadi (2021), Manathunga et al. (2021) and Qi et al. (2021) on the need to adopt a 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education curriculum which is localised and Afrocentric in nature.

An overall important finding emerging from this study which is consistent with verdicts from previous studies (McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Salmi & D'Addio, 2021), is that while several policies and legislative frameworks have been adopted and implemented to transform and democratise higher education, issues of inclusivity, inequality, access to higher education, academic imperialism, language equity, and diversity are the major issues of social justice that continue to influence the 21st-century curriculum. Further to the above, the study has produced compelling and overwhelming empirical evidence which demonstrate how the current decorum in higher education continues to perpetuate, institutionalise, and normalise these major issues of social justice. As demonstrated in the proceeding discussions, this finding is repeatedly expressed and underscored in several recent studies and theoretical discourses on the phenomena under investigation.

### **CONCLUSION and RECOMMENRATIONS**

With the renewed and intensified calls for a democratic, all-inclusive, and decolonised higher education curriculum across the globe, more liberal, democratic and student driven issues of social justice have become increasingly more influential in shaping and informing the 21st-century curriculum in higher education. At the forefront of these issues is equal access to higher education, language equity, inclusivity, diversity, inequality, and academic imperialism. There has been an enduring desire and advocacy among scholars, students, and academic practitioners for the 21st-century curriculum in higher education to acknowledge, appreciate and be informed by the cultural and local identities of students. Most importantly, literature

views and the findings of this study suggest that the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education curriculum needs to reflect the authentic attributes of those it intends to serve and resonate with their contexts, social identities, and epistemologies.

However, an inclusive 21st-century curriculum which is informed by the students' experiences remains elusive for many students in higher education. This can be largely attributed to the complexities, and dimensions of the higher education landscape, especially in terms of diversity complicate how these issues of social justice can be fairly expressed in the 21st-century curriculum to the satisfaction of every student. Nevertheless, there is an urgent need to dismantle the current dispensation in higher education which sustains and perpetuates social injustice and inequality. To this effect, it is imperative for educational policies, other regulatory frameworks, and instruments to respond purposefully and meaningfully to calls for a decolonised 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education curriculum which favours everyone on issues of social justice such as equal access to higher education, language equity, inclusivity, diversity and inequality and academic imperialism. Considering the above, it is recommended that future research be conducted in several countries, involving a much bigger sample and more stakeholders involved in higher education across many universities

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study involved a purposefully selected sample of thirty-two lecturers who had more than ten years of experience in higher education in one country. Being a quantitative study, this sample is not statistically convincing to generalise the study findings to a wider general population. In addition, the study provides a one-sided view of the lecturers' perspectives and ignore the views and perceptions of other stakeholders such as students, administrators, policy experts and university management. The input of these stakeholders could have added value to the study findings by providing an all-inclusive view of the important stakeholders on social justice issues that influence the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education curriculum. However, the insights provided by the study into social justice issues that inform the 21st-century curriculum remain largely undiminished and sustained. The findings can therefore still be used to get a picture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education landscape and the most dominant issues of social justice that influence the curriculum and underpin the decorum of academic and educational practice in higher education. Furthermore, the study provides a strong empirical based lens to explore and articulate issues that continue to characterise and define higher education such as calls for a decolonised curriculum and decolonial epistemologies.

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