

# The Complex Interplay Between International Accreditation and the Decolonisation of Business Schools in South Africa: A Delphi Analysis

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**Abstract.** This study investigates the interplay between international accreditation and the decolonisation of business schools in South Africa. Using a Delphi methodology, the research explores the perspectives of 15 experts to understand the tensions between accreditation standards, often rooted in Eurocentric epistemologies, and the push to centre African knowledge systems. Findings reveal a significant tension between the reputational benefits of international accreditation and the imperative to decolonise. However, experts expressed moderate optimism that a dynamic equilibrium is achievable. The study identifies six key principles for balancing these demands, such as re-centring African epistemologies while maintaining global relevance. For international business education, this highlights the need for a glocalised approach, adapting global standards to local contexts. The paper concludes with practical implications for curriculum designers and administrators and specifically outlines teaching strategies for integrating these findings into international business courses..

**Keywords:** African epistemologies, Delphi study, South Africa, teaching implications.

## 1. Introduction

African business schools increasingly seek international accreditation from bodies like AACSB, EQUIS, and AMBA to enhance global reputation and educational quality (Darley & Luethge, 2018). In South Africa, however, the pursuit of global legitimacy coincides with powerful calls to decolonise higher education, which challenge the Western norms embedded in these accreditation frameworks (Le Grange, 2016). The resulting conflict creates a complex tension: schools must meet global standards for competitiveness while addressing local demands to prioritise African epistemologies and historical inequalities.

This study explores this tension through the perspectives of experts in South African business education, addressing a gap in the literature by empirically investigating the intersection of international accreditation and decolonisation

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(Sayed, 2025). The paper is structured as follows: first, a review of relevant literature on global higher education trends, accreditation, and decolonisation is provided. Next, the Delphi methodology is outlined, followed by the presentation of findings on expert consensus regarding the challenges and potential for equilibrium. The discussion then interprets these findings through the lens of glocalisation and institutional theory. Finally, the paper concludes with implications for policy and a dedicated section on teaching implications for international business educators.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **Global Trends in Higher Education**

Higher education has expanded significantly in recent decades, driven by technological advances, shifting demographics, and increased global competition (Evans, Rees, Taylor & Fox, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic further catalysed digitalisation and datafication within the sector, prompting a rapid shift to online learning platforms and the reconfiguration of teaching practices (Komljenovic et al., 2024; Williamson, 2024; Rana et al., 2002; Zhang et al., 2002). The rise of Large Language Models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT, has also begun reshaping assessment, curriculum design, and the competencies required of faculty (Sok & Heng, 2024). At the same time, universities face increasing pressure to address skills gaps and align education with evolving labour market demands (Accenture, 2020; Benhayoun & Lang, 2021; Mayer, 2024; Zouhaier, 2023).

Globally, higher education has been expanding at an annual growth rate of around 7% since the 1980s, with over 80 million students and 3.5 million academic staff worldwide (Accenture, 2020; Karodia, 2019). Heightened competition, international rankings, and quality assurance regimes have encouraged universities to expand into emerging markets, often via international partnerships or satellite campuses (EDUCAUSE Horizon Report, 2024; Hart & Rodgers, 2024). Yet, such moves frequently raise concerns about epistemological imperialism and the reproduction of colonial knowledge hierarchies (Bamberger & Morris, 2024; Heleta & Chasi, 2023). Furthermore, the decline in public funding, rising tuition fees, and the erosion of academic tenure have led to increased precarity and intensified debates about access, equity, and institutional purpose (Jim, Nfere & Nver, 2023; Webb, 2015; Busch, 2023).

In South Africa, the legacies of colonialism and apartheid continue to shape higher education. The post-1994 policy agenda has prioritised transformation, equity, and access, resulting in the expansion of enrolments across 26 public and 123 private institutions (DHET, 2022). African students now account for 80.7% of enrolments, and women comprise 62.1% of the student body (DHET, 2022). However, massification has created quality challenges, with racial disparities persisting and resource constraints intensifying (Bajinath, 2018; Nhati & Bich,

2017). Public universities remain heavily reliant on state funding and tuition fees, while the introduction of free education for disadvantaged students has sparked recurrent financial crises and student protests (Muposhi et al., 2019; Adetiba, 2019; Mavunga, 2019). Movements such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall (Pennington et al., 2017) have amplified calls for affordable, decolonised, and contextually relevant higher education (Mbembe, 2016; Daniel & Platzky Miller, 2024). These broader trends in higher education, particularly the increasing global competition and the persistent calls for decolonisation in contexts like South Africa, directly influence the landscape of business education and the role of international accreditation within it.

### **International Accreditation in Business Schools**

Business schools, as key players in human capital development, have been central to economic modernisation strategies. They aim to equip students with management skills that match corporate needs (Carrington Crisp Report, 2018; Miles et al., 2016). In pursuit of global legitimacy and prestige, many institutions seek international accreditation, particularly from agencies such as AACSB, AMBA, and EQUIS. Accreditation functions not only as a quality assurance mechanism but also as a strategic tool to attract global talent, funding, and partnerships (Alstete, 2007; Durand & McGuire, 2015; Paccioni, Sicotte & Champagne, 2008). The typical path involves achieving national accreditation before pursuing international status (MBA Today, 2017).

South African business schools have not been immune to these global pressures. Historically restricted to white students under apartheid (Stewart & Pepper, 2011; Singh et al., 2004), business education expanded rapidly post-1994. By 2019, 22 business schools were accredited to offer MBAs, with most operating within public universities (Muposhi et al., 2019). Others, such as the Gordon Institute of Business Science, operate privately and build distinct institutional brands. However, the drive for accreditation and international rankings has often diverted resources from teaching quality and local responsiveness (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2013; Morgeson & Nahrgang, 2008). Accreditation frameworks, predominantly Western in origin, frequently privilege Eurocentric standards and values, thereby marginalising indigenous pedagogies and contextual relevance (Heleta, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

### **Decolonisation in Higher Education**

The call for decolonisation of higher education must be understood as a response to both epistemic and material inequalities. As Maldonado-Torres (2007) argues, decolonisation is not merely the removal of colonial symbols or the addition of marginalised voices. Rather, it is a challenge to coloniality, the enduring power structures that persist beyond formal colonial rule, shaping knowledge, identity, labour, and governance. This 'colonial matrix of power' (Mignolo, 2007)

pervades global education systems, particularly in postcolonial societies like South Africa.

Quijano (2013) highlights that coloniality operates through racial hierarchies and capitalist exploitation. Colonial epistemologies have historically excluded indigenous and non-Western knowledge systems, reinforcing Western dominance through curriculum design, institutional norms, and accreditation criteria. Mignolo (2007; 2010) and Grosfoguel (2010) stress that modernity, capitalism, and coloniality are mutually reinforcing forces. Therefore, to decolonise education is to delink from Eurocentric worldviews and re-centre marginalised ontologies.

In this context, decolonising business schools becomes particularly complex. Molefe (2016) critiques South African business schools for perpetuating neoliberal logics and failing to question the ideological underpinnings of global capitalism. Despite increased access for black students, the epistemic foundations remain largely unchanged. Institutions continue to measure success through Western metrics—rankings, employability, and international prestige—often sidelining the local socio-economic context (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). As a result, international accreditation mechanisms may unintentionally function as instruments of epistemic imperialism, validating curricula and pedagogies that align with global (Western) norms while discounting African knowledge systems (Heleta, 2018).

Escobar (2010) outlines how coloniality manifests in three forms: the coloniality of power (structuring global labour and race), the coloniality of being (imposing identities), and Eurocentrism (privileging European histories as universal). In South Africa, movements like #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall have foregrounded these critiques, challenging the university's role in reproducing colonial values and advocating for epistemic freedom (Mbembe, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). These movements underscore that decolonisation must go beyond curriculum reform to involve a structural reimaging of the university—its governance, assessment models, partnerships, and philosophical underpinnings (Letseha, 2013; Torres, 2007).

### **3. Investigating the Intersection of International Accreditation and Decolonisation**

In a scoping review by Sayed (2025), the author searched for literature at the intersection of international accreditation and decolonisation in South African business schools. The scoping review did not find any articles that directly explored this intersection. This absence of integrated scholarship underscored a significant gap in academic discourse and pointed to the need for a more nuanced