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How to cite this article

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Decolonising the curriculum beyond the surge: Conceptualisation, positionality and conduct

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been increased interest in, and work towards, decolonising the curriculum in higher education institutions in the UK. There are various initiatives to review university syllabuses and identify alternative literature. However, there is an increasing risk of turning 'decolonisation' into a buzz term tied to a trend. We fear that decolonisation within academia is becoming an empty term, diluted and depoliticised, allowing for superficial representations that fail to address racial, political and socio-economic intersectionalities. In this article, we examine several initiatives to decolonise the curriculum with a focus on the field of education as a discipline and medium. Based on our analysis, we engage with three main themes: *conceptualisation*, *positionality* and *conduct*. The article concludes that decolonisation cannot happen in a vacuum, or as an aim disconnected from the rest of the structure of the university, which leads to diluting a wider movement and turns into a box-ticking exercise. We argue that there needs to be a deconstruction of asymmetrical power relationships within academic spaces to allow for meaningful decolonisation in practice. This requires a real political will, a change in the structure, and in the hearts and minds of those in decision-making positions, and a shift in the practices of knowledge production.

Keywords: decolonising the curriculum; higher education reform; knowledge production; positionality

Introduction

Decolonisation is a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, heterogeneous and multi-generational process. It builds on decades of work by scholars, activists and people from all walks of life who have been struggling for freedom and breaking structures of oppression. In recent years, there has been increased interest in, and work towards, decolonising the curriculum (DtC) in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK. There are student- and academic-led initiatives to review university syllabuses, identify alternative literature and highlight the importance of knowledge(s) produced by academics of colour, and feminists from the Global South. These efforts include acknowledging the importance of alternative resources such as artistic expressions, which are increasingly considered valid sources of knowledge to be referenced within academic work. However, there is an increasing risk of turning 'decolonisation' into a buzz term tied to a trend. We fear that decolonisation within academia, in UK HEIs, is becoming an empty term, diluted and depoliticised, allowing for superficial representations that fail to address racial, political and socio-economic intersectionalities.

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In this article, we examine several initiatives to decolonise the curriculum with a focus on the field of education as a discipline and medium. The article is based on a thorough literature review and empirical research. This is done over three stages. First, critically examining literature related to the contemporary origins of the DtC movement and its current adoption across HEIs in the UK. Second, reviewing material available about four DtC initiatives at UCL by examining their DtC-related online spaces and educational material. Third, interviewing scholars and students at UCL who are involved in DtC work.

The literature and data generated were thematically analysed. The analysis produced three categories: *conceptualisation*, *positionality* and *conduct*. Within these three categories, this article highlights if and how 'decolonisation' is being used as a hook to strengthen the grip of colonial thought and to recolonise intellectual territories. We also use the different articulations of decolonisation by de Oliveira Andreotti et al. (2015) to position the initiatives we studied on a spectrum between 'soft' and 'radical' reform(s). Understanding conceptualisations, positionalities and conducts of institutions, scholars and students (using UCL as a case study) enables us to show that most decolonisation initiatives are limited to soft reform. Additionally, utilising this schema and the three categories we produced through the data analysis, we are able to show that activist scholars are working towards radical reform; however, there are numerous institutional hurdles that limit their ability to reach that level. We argue that what needs to be done is the decolonisation of the institution as a whole that goes 'beyond reform'. DtC cannot happen in a vacuum, or be disconnected from the rest of the structure of HEIs, which leads to diluting a wider movement and turns it into a box-ticking exercise. There needs to be a deconstruction of asymmetrical power relationships within academic spaces to allow for meaningful decolonisation in practice. This requires a real political will, change in the structure, and in the hearts and minds of those in decision-making positions, and a shift in the practices of knowledge production.

Literature review: Context and debates of decolonisation in the UK

Student and staff movements in the UK in solidarity with Black activists and the global civil rights movements against war and imperialism have a long history (Morreira et al., 2020). However, it is only recently that reassessment of curricula in UK HEIs has been linked to the broader movement to decolonise universities (Andrews, 2018). The contemporary surge of interest in DtC and university practices among students and academics on UK campuses has been inspired by, and connected to, other movements, particularly the 2015 student movement Rhodes Must Fall. This began with protest action at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in March 2015 and quickly spread to other campuses in South Africa (Doharty et al., 2021; Nyamnjoh, 2016):

> As the statue was driven off, the SRC [Student Representative Council] vice-president of external affairs Zizipho Pae said moving it was paving the way for the 'real work' of transforming UCT to begin. Other students concurred, waving banners that read 'We have only just started'. (Nyamnjoh, 2016: 146)

These words reached far across continents, and echoed in Oxford, UK, where Cecil Rhodes had endowed many buildings and scholarships, leading to the protest RMF Oxford. It also inspired Leopold Must Fall at Queen Mary University of London, Galton

Must Fall at UCL, and Gladstone Must Fall at the University of Liverpool (Doharty et al., 2021). Similarly, student protests have led to initiatives such as #LiberateMyDegree (Bhambra et al., 2018), Why Isn't My Professor Black? and Why Is My Curriculum White? Many centres, courses and student–staff bodies have launched initiatives to broaden the range of their reading lists, such as the Alternative Reading List Project (Schucan Bird and Pitman, 2019). The movement took various shapes and modes, from changing reading lists to efforts to decolonise entire disciplines. There are continuing efforts by students and academics in the UK to decolonise the curriculum and diversify the canon 'by ending the domination of Western epistemological traditions, histories and figures' (Molefe, 2016: 32).

Although the focus on decolonisation of the curricula in UK HEIs is relatively recent, demands for decolonisation of education have a long and broader history (see Morreira et al., 2020 for a helpful review). Since before the 1940s, and especially after the 1960s, many scholars, activists, feminists and anti-colonial educators have contributed to developing the discourse of 'decolonisation' that encouraged moving away from the economic, cultural and political models of colonial grand theories of modernisation, education and development. They argued that the colonial and apartheid educational system was not meant to suit the colonised, but rather the colonisers' interests of creating and maintaining slave and master relations (Rodney, 1973). At the turn of the twenty-first century, decolonial scholarship emerged, as a group of Latin American scholars such as Dussel (2002), Mignolo (2011) and Maldonado-Torres (2011) delineated an epistemological and political project to counter the imperialism of global capitalism, which Quijano (2000) identified as 'coloniality'. The key concept of 'modernity/coloniality' (Mignolo, 2011) holds that colonialism is modernity's 'darker side', which has served the agendas of White/Europeans through imperial control of lands, racism and 'epistemic violence' through geopolitics of knowledge production (Maldonado-Torres, 2011; Quijano, 2000).

Against this backdrop, we examined the existing literature that focuses on the UK around the three themes that emerged from our findings: conceptualisation, positionality and conduct.

Conceptualisation

The central debates in decolonial scholarship in the UK revolve around the Whiteness of the curriculum, the dominance of Eurocentric and Western-centric thought, the issue of diversity of perspectives in the curriculum and the representation of Black and minority ethnic (BME) staff (Bhambra et al., 2020; Jivraj, 2020). Much of university knowledge production is viewed in decolonial debates as 'governed by the West for the West' (Bhambra et al., 2018: 6). Mbembe (2017: 25) argues that 'it permits only some people to be seen as rational, and dehumanises large populations in the world as being deficient in culture, intellect and values'. The existing Eurocentric curriculum in this sense reproduces paternalistic, stereotypical and barbaric views of 'other' people, cultures and nations. Morreira et al. (2020: 4) state that anti-colonial visions reject not only imperialism, but also patriarchy, the gaze of the 'old White male' who imposes a certain 'way of seeing, knowing, and structuring the world'. There is also the issue of gendered and racial structural impediments. In 2016, there were only 110 Black professors in UK HEIs out of 18,425 professors (0.6 per cent), and of these, only 25 were Black female professors (Equality Challenge Unit, 2017, cited in Doharty et al., 2021: 3). Thus, decolonisation has to address more than the curriculum to destabilise what bell hooks (2012: 4) calls 'imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy'. The legacies of exclusions and distorted representations also marginalise diverse students' interests,

histories and perspectives, as well as their sense of belonging, learning, engagement, attainment and participation in higher education (Schucan Bird and Pitman, 2019). In this sense, decoloniality in HEIs is a call to assess the legacies and continuation of colonialism in production of knowledge and in education systems, examining values, rationality, and ways of knowing and being, and their relationship to society (De Lissovoy, 2010).

Positionality

Positionality involves reflecting on one's location in the geopolitics of knowledge production, and its implications. In this view of positionality, knowledge is seen not as objective and universal, but as political and historically contingent. Students explore the situatedness and geo-genealogy of knowledge, instead of regurgitating the canon assuming 'an abstract position of universality, of objectivity' (Bhambra et al., 2018: 119). A decolonial positionality also invites reflection on one's complicity, preconceived notions, and countering norms, behaviour, values, ideologies, language and policies that dehumanise marginalised populations (Andreotti, 2016). It also challenges the tendency for the paternalistic saving of those in the Global South, as it reframes the question of marginalisation as an issue of global political accountability for doing justice (Andreotti et al., 2018). Practising such positionality has positive implications for students and universities, as it makes diverse students feel included, affirmed and healed. The positionality of the students itself 'becomes a tool for enriching the learning experience of all' (Bhambra et al., 2018: 120).

Accordingly, several decolonial curriculum initiatives in the UK claim to adopt a pluriversal and intersectional stance. For instance, Kaneva et al. (2020) redesigned childhood studies, moving away from the normative approach of teaching childhood as 'heteronormative, cis-gendered and able-bodied', to an approach that appreciates 'global childhoods'. The course values difference, and unpacks the impact of colonisation, capitalism and mainstream development agendas on shaping dominant norms of childhood. It also challenges ableism, and includes alternate ways of thinking about gender. Similarly, the curriculum development efforts of authors such as Nakata et al. (2012) and Begum and Saini (2019) engage 'students as co-producers' in teaching, and employ an intersectional perspective from those at the margin in the UK, such as Black and Asian minorities, those described as disabled, LGBTQ+, women and mature students. These efforts of inclusion are usually framed as ways to challenge the dominant knowledge produced by elites, and to enable the voice, representation and humanity of those who have been dehumanised.

Conduct

While intellectual proposals of decolonisation and anti-colonial oppression are gaining some traction, the actual practice of decolonisation (conduct) is sporadic and in its early stages. A recent collection by Morriera et al. (2020: 6) set out explicitly to understand 'what is enabled, in practice, when academics set out to operationalise the decolonial turn in their teaching spaces?': 'While debates on decoloniality and decolonisation have proliferated at abstract and rhetorical levels, work on operationalising them within the academy is only just beginning' (Morriera et al., 2020: 6). In their study of scholarship on reading lists at a prestigious UK university, Schucan Bird and Pitman (2019: 903) concluded that university curricula predominantly included 'white, male and Eurocentric authors, with some exceptions'. Decolonial efforts have also thrown up questions of recolonisation. These include the rise of new forms of 'epistemic injustice' by more privileged academics who exploit, appropriate and repackage indigenous

knowledge to advance their own careers (Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda, 2019). Cruz and Luke (2020) highlight the gap between theory and practice leading to academic extraction. The structural power imbalances also show up in recognition and reward for those groups outside the academy that co-produce knowledge (Morreira et al., 2020). The labour to address race equity work often falls on BME staff, who have to persuade against the overpowering White supremacist structure (Doharty et al., 2021). The neoliberal ideological climate and profit-seeking has also increasingly frustrated the role of higher education as a 'public good' (McGregor and Park, 2019). Wage relations and precarious academic contracts often make BME academics complicit in the colonial structure (Jivraj, 2020). Certain ethno-cultural assumptions embedded in decolonial efforts can also deepen coloniality (Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2019). Moreover, the broader state, nostalgia and neoliberal ideology remains imperial (Dorling et al., 2019). These broader structures intersect with HEIs, which continue to produce predominantly White supremacist research.

Theoretical lens

As our analytical lens, we use de Oliveira Andreotti et al.'s (2015) four 'spaces of enunciations' in relation to decolonisation in HEIs. The first space is where there is no recognition of decolonisation as a desirable project because 'Everything is awesome', hence no decolonising practices are required (de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015: 24). This space considers scientific and technological advancements within a notion of linear progress and time, and sees humanity as 'happier, healthier, or wealthier' than ever (de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015: 25). Those who fall behind merely need to catch up to be part of this 'awesome' space. Education in this view serves as a tool for the social engineering of society. The other three spaces are different critiques of the first position. De Oliveira Andreotti et al. (2015) identify these as: the 'soft-reform' space, the 'radical-reform' space and the 'beyond-reform' space. The 'soft-reform' space takes the values of the existing system for granted. Difference is recognised, but it needs to be tamed within the terms of those 'doing the including', without challenging existing power relations, structural disparities and subjectivities (de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015: 26). This space assumes that rational dialogue, and neoliberal entrepreneurialism, is sufficient to address the issue. In HEIs, it is interpreted to mean increasing access by providing additional resources to indigenous, racialised, low-income and first-generation students, to equip them with knowledge, skills and cultural capital to excel according to existing institutional standards. The first and the second spaces dismiss efforts to disrupt structures of power as violent and unhelpful. The third space is 'radical reform', where there is a recognition of epistemological dominance. Once this recognition is present, de Oliveira Andreotti et al. (2015) argue that marginalised groups are centred and empowered, and redistribution and reappropriation of material resources take place. The final space is 'beyond reform', which perceives the modern system as 'inherently violent, exploitative, and unsustainable' (de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015: 27). It contends that remaining within the framework of 'equity, access, voice, recognition, representation, or redistribution' does not address the inherent violence of modernity. The role of education in this space is, thus, to subvert the system entirely.

Methodology

Recent studies have called for examining student and staff experiences and perceptions, and for the understanding of existing tools for, and obstacles to, decolonising curricula

in UK HEIs (Schucan Bird and Pitman, 2019). To conduct this examination and reach this understanding, we chose to focus on a number of student- and academic-led initiatives at UCL as our case study. The body of data we are utilising is based on the work and narratives of BME students and staff collected online, in addition to a thorough review of related literature. This helped us draw a picture of what academics and students of colour think of these initiatives, and the extent of their involvement on individual and collective levels. We also highlight their understanding and views of the impact of these initiatives.

Sampling

UCL played a historical role in colonisation. This role has continued to be reflected in a series of controversial secret events organised by senior academics associated with the university in recent years. There was a backlash against these secret events, which led UCL to issue a statement stating that it is totally committed to combating racism and sexism on campus and beyond (UCL, 2018). This historical and contemporary context of the university makes it a significant site for our decolonial inquiry.

The insights shared in this paper emerged from examining: (1) the content of the Liberating the Curriculum working group web page; (2) a talk by an academic during a DtC panel which was part of the university's global citizenship course in 2020; (3) the content of a student-led workshop on decolonising curricula, which was part of the global citizenship course in 2019; (4) an individual interview with a PhD student who initiated a DtC reading group at UCL; and (5) a focus group that included seven PhD students and academics from UCL interested in decolonising their curriculum and research, especially in the field of education. The initiatives were selected to present a range of institutionalised and independent approaches, and the interviewees were selected to represent different levels of teaching, research and curriculum development experiences.

Data analysis

The examination of the literature and the analysis of the data produced three themes: *conceptualisation*, *positionality* and *conduct*. Conceptualisation includes how different initiatives, academics and students understand and convey the decolonisation of the curriculum, and how they critique it. Positionality refers to how students and academics involved in the movement perceive the reasons behind their involvement. Conduct focuses on challenges, opportunities and models. Once the data were analysed under the three themes, the inferences reached helped us to categorise the different initiatives and approaches under the schema devised by de Oliveira Andreotti et al. (2015).

To conduct the analysis, we worked as a team, immersing ourselves in the data, discussing themes and developing codes. We coded the data based on the research and interview questions using an Excel sheet. We conducted the analysis using a deductive and iterative approach, where we categorised and re-categorised the data under each of the guiding questions and three overarching themes until repetitive trends emerged. We then aligned the main themes that emerged to highlight the nature of the efforts to decolonise the curriculum according to space, meaning and practice under de Oliveira Andreotti et al.'s (2015) 'spaces of enunciations'.

Limitations and ethics

We identified two limitations of this research. First, there was a relatively small number of participants in the interviews, as not all potential participants that we contacted

responded to our request in time, leading to a smaller sample than envisaged. Second, there was limited coverage of institutional and independent initiatives. Nonetheless, this research is original in its focus and scope. It provides rich insights into issues of positionality, challenges and opportunities linked to the personal and institutional motivations to be involved in a larger decolonisation movement of higher education. It also provides various conceptualisations and critiques of what decolonisation of the curriculum means from diverse perspectives, and how it impacts practice. We believe that although the scope and the sample of this research are limited, it lays the foundation for further research on more impactful, relevant and sustainable approaches to real decolonisation, not only of the curriculum, but also of higher education teaching, learning and research globally.

Discussion and findings

The three identified broad interrelated themes: conceptualisation, positionality and conduct are utilised to understand the nature of the work related to decolonising the curriculum, to identify opportunities and challenges, and to shed light on the practices within these efforts, and their level of contribution to the movement as a whole.

Conceptualising the decolonisation of the curriculum

'Diversity' and 'inclusion' are two terms used frequently to conceptualise work for the decolonisation of the curriculum. These efforts fell on a spectrum from 'soft reforms' to 'radical reforms', depending on the actors involved, their commitment and limitations. While the two terms, 'diversity' and 'inclusion', were mentioned in all the initiatives analysed, there was a difference in their meaning and in conduct. In institutionalised initiatives, diversity and inclusion focus on incorporating ideas from feminist researchers, critical race theorists, queer scholars and disability researchers into the mainstream (for example, Liberating the Curriculum (UCL, 2016)), thus, as Andreotti et al. (2015: 34) suggest, having the commitment to 'radical reform' that aspires to 'centre and empower marginalized groups'. However, the idea of 'the mainstream' was problematised by those who led independent initiatives, as it still assumes decolonisation from the perspective of White supremacy and Eurocentrism embedded within HEIs (Ono-George, 2019). Radwa, a PhD candidate who initiated a decoloniality reading group focusing on the philosophy of education, said:

> The way the majority of the initiatives are framed, comes from the perspective of colonial thought and positioning. What needs to be done is questioning the domination of the canon and decentring the assumed mainstream.

Radwa's point was supported by Sami, an academic at the university, who said:

> Centring the decolonisation from a European perspective removes it from its historical context, and the work becomes watered down.

In their research on DtC in South Africa, Luckett et al. (2019: 30) include a quotation from a Black non-South African male interviewee who commented on what he saw happening as a result of calls to decolonise:

> You remember how in feminism they would say 'add a little gender and stir', and you have your gender perspective? You could also say 'add a

little blackness and stir', and then you have your new curriculum. So, most efforts now are laughable because it's more like a knee-jerk reaction.

Based on our research focusing on UK HEIs, we make the same observation and argument. We argue that the efforts to decolonise the curriculum by tinkering with reading lists, adding Black and brown scholars, and opening the space for discussions of diversity without radical engagement with pedagogy, for example, are perhaps strategic. The existing practices of diversity and inclusion only add to existing structures in Western institutions, where knowledge and truth are masked as universalism, defined by 'scholarly' knowledge representative of only 12 per cent of the world's population (Schultz et al., 2018). This can result in the conflation of decolonial practice with measures seeking to diversify universities and their courses (Liyanage, 2020). These efforts provide little or no insight into changes to pedagogical practice beyond the content of modules (Ono-George, 2019). They may be perceived to be safer and more palatable than discussions of institutional racism, White supremacy and anti-racism (Gilroy, 1990). According to Ono-George (2019), the changes to reading lists, and the increasing institutional efforts to have more people of colour within the institution, will not necessarily address racism or White supremacy. What needs to be done is to encourage the willingness to engage with a more radical transformational approach that alters the structures of the institution itself; we must consider anti-racist pedagogical practices beyond the content of the curriculum. These practices will not be possible without a change in the culture of the institution. This resonates with the Rhodes Must Fall list of long-term goals (RMF, 2015), which begins with calls for shifts in the material and institutional culture of the university, before moving to the curriculum (Luckett et al., 2019: 28). Our research participants alluded to the need for this 'radical reform'. Kholoud, who led the efforts to decolonise the curriculum in the Anthropology Department, stated:

> Students should lead the decolonisation efforts, there needs to be safe and sustainable spaces for questioning within the institution, in the classroom and in research work. Decolonisation should not only tackle reading lists but structural issues.

The question of structure speaks directly to the colonial and White supremacist logic that lies at the root of the creation of many UK HEIs, academic disciplines, research and aid practice (Noxolo, 2017; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2019). The decolonial project asks not just for tokenistic gestures, but, as reflected in the Rhodes Must Fall movement, a transformative change that includes: greater representation of staff and students racialised as the 'other', removal of financial barriers to access, and insourcing and making secure precarious jobs, in which Black men and women are overrepresented. In this sense, decolonisation is about addressing interrelated systems of hegemonic control, such as patriarchy, racism, knowledge, political control and the economy, all of which are concepts that underpin colonial institutional structures (Mignolo, 2011). It requires taking into account the intersectional nature of decolonial struggles that run across economic, political, historical, social and educational violence and inequities. Radwa asserted these ideas by stating:

> We need to highlight the issue that there is no one colonisation. There are various colonisations depending on the history, time, location and those involved. For example, the Philippines was colonised by the Spanish like Latin America, but the experience(s) and the impact are very different.

We argue that any decolonising effort needs to disrupt Western-centric epistemology as part of the larger colonial project, introducing multiplicity and 'pluriversality', rather than focusing on superficial diversity and inclusion. Diversity should be linked to the process of knowledge production and alternative epistemologies (Mignolo, 2006). We need to take the epistemic traditions of the Global South seriously, and to begin to shift the direction and decolonise 'institutions appropriated by Eurocentred modernity' (Grosfoguel, 2013: 88).

Decolonisation work in HEIs should tackle power dynamics and the system of privileges. However, power dynamics and disparities are unlikely to be tackled as long as the decolonisation is framed within apolitical/ahistorical approaches (Al-Hardan, 2013). Unrecognised power dynamics create conditions of 'human hierarchy' (Love, 2019: 47), where those assuming privilege pose hurdles to dismantle oppressive structures (Smith, 2005).

Reflecting on positionality

The question of positionality is central to decolonisation debates. Positionality enables us to problematise the claims of the objective, singular, universal and natural description of the world, and to question issues related to hierarchy and power. Being aware of our positionality is vital to being able to interrogate how Eurocentric thought, knowledge and power structures dominate present societies, and how that thought and knowledge have consistently underpinned the exploitation of colonised people and their losses (Brayboy, 2005). Masking the unique characteristics of the various contexts reflects the presence of a power dynamic that is not tackled by the current decolonising curriculum initiatives. This power flattens the knowledge of colonised contexts by producing unrepresentative abstracts, which reinforce long-standing misconceptions of other peoples, cultures and institutions (Said, 1981).

The participants' positionality fell on the spectrum from 'radical reform' to 'beyond reform'. Many of them valued the ideas of 'pluriversality', 'epistemic diversity', 'cognitive justice' and 'crossing borders', which suggests an orientation to 'beyond-reform' space. There was also a positive appreciation of difference, and an intersectional approach to understanding marginalisation that challenges reproduction of inequalities and hegemonic representations (Bhambra et al., 2018: 120). For instance, Radwa exemplified what Said (1981) stated. She mentioned an incident that took place in her department, when a supervisor informed a student working in a country in the Global South that 'there is a limited number of non-English language references that can be used when writing the dissertation'. This instruction limited the ability of the student to use and reflect on knowledge(s) produced from that particular context. The student briefly questioned this statement, but followed the instruction without checking. The reaction of the student comes from a sense of hierarchy of power, where the supervisor is at the top, and is assumed to know better. This adherence to a colonial instruction meant the silencing and dismissal of colonised/marginalised knowledge(s), in addition to undermining their value. Another student mentioned a similar situation, when her supervisor stated that: 'non-English language resources/references rarely meet UK academic standards, and so they will weaken the quality of [her] work'. These two incidents show that focusing on changing reading lists does not mean that the attitudes and conduct of academics, who in many cases consider themselves progressive, and colour-blind (Love, 2019), will achieve change and decolonisation. In some cases it may be harmful.

Carlos, a participant in the focus group said:

> What we go through at the university impacts the way we consider our life, work and aims from our work, and how we perceive coloniality. We carry

the trauma and burden of decolonisation while enduring microaggressions in the work and studying space.

We need to be careful with the adoption of decolonising discourse, as its superficial and uncritical use will turn decolonisation into a metaphor, rather than a strategy, a politics and a practice that exposes and dismantles coloniality (Tuck and Yang, 2012). Decoloniality is a subversion and transformation effort to produce knowledge *with* and *from* rather than *about* (Schultz et al., 2018). Producing knowledge only *about*, and disregarding the *with* and *from*, leads to substantial harm. Sami highlighted the importance of knowledge *with* and *from*, especially when academic work is focused on contexts where people experience and struggle against discrimination, injustices and violence daily:

> Awareness of one's positionality compels us towards an ethical responsibility to minimise the potential harms that result when researching and writing about violent contexts, including objectification and violence normalisation.

Objectification involves reducing someone to the status of an object or generalised category, or representing people without appreciation for their agency or voice (Nussbaum, 1995; Papadaki, 2010; Said, 1978). Violence normalisation occurs when violence is treated as an immutable, normal or unchangeable part of life, or when violence is depicted without considering the consequences for people most impacted by it, silencing marginalised voices. Silencing voices often occurs when alternative viewpoints are sidelined to maintain universalist hegemonic representations of context or phenomena (Abdelnour and Abu Moghli, forthcoming). According to Bhambra et al. (2018), to avoid this, a constant reflection on our positionality is needed in order to be critically aware of the specific location from where we are sharing and co-generating knowledge. Otherwise, we are complicit in the colonial project and processes. Students and academics should be able to reflect on their situated, historical, social and political intersectional histories, which shape their ways of looking at the world, opinion, practice and prejudices. The question that we need to keep asking is: what is our academic work serving – 'knowledge for what?' (Bhambra et al., 2018: 117).

When asked about the purpose of producing knowledge, and sharing it, Sami raised an important point:

> Taking a view to political reflexivity would lead us to examine our role in these processes [of knowledge production], and seek ways to support a broad, intersectional decolonisation agenda. Our understanding(s) of reflexivity need to be broadened to include ethical and political aspects of positionality and privilege.

In order to ensure the broad intersectional position to decolonisation, we need to ensure that the labour of the decolonisation agenda is not left solely to BME scholar activists and students, particularly women of colour, who have historically and unfairly carried this burden, often without acknowledgement, professional progression or remuneration (Arday, 2018). While the student movements led by BME students are bringing to the fore the awareness of the modern/colonial positionality of sanctioned knowledge(s), and the recognition of universities' own participation in the modern/colonial order (Bhambra et al., 2018), these students still feel at a disadvantage, and question their ability to penetrate the system. Radwa reflected on this by saying:

> I hesitate before I engage in a conversation about decolonising the university. I keep my focus on a small initiative related to the curriculum within my field of study. Maybe because I spent most of my life outside of the UK, I don't feel that I am in a position to critique the system or the curriculum at university level.

When discussing positionality, the majority of the literature in the UK, and a majority of the interviewees, highlighted aspects of hegemonic Western epistemologies, and the lack of reflexivity on power dynamics and hierarchies where the balance is tipped to the benefit of Western academics and thought. Vickers (2020: 170) challenges this approach, positing that 'non-Western forms of colonialism are almost entirely ignored'. Only one of the interviewees mentioned the need to consider hegemony and colonialism from a global perspective, tackling authoritarianism imposed and practised by global powers such as China. Azam, a first-year student, experienced silencing when he and his colleagues had a display stand at the university to raise awareness of violations committed by Chinese authorities in Hong Kong. He said that 'the repression of the Chinese authorities was felt on campus', as they were forced to remove the stand by the university administration under the pretext of security. Azam continues:

> We need to discuss these issues, they are hardly ever mentioned or raised in decolonisation discussions and actions. The repression of these governments trickles down to the university, they [the university administration] are scared of losing students, their source of income, at the cost of our freedom of expression.

The voices of Azam and his colleagues were doubly marginalised, and their positionality as part of the institution doubly threatened, once by an authoritative government and once by an HEI that claims to respect and nurture freedom of expression.

Conduct: How is it done?

Our data show that, in practice, claims by HEIs to decolonise remain within 'soft reform', while independent and student-led work aims towards 'radical reform'. The decolonisation initiatives of HEIs do not disrupt the inherent violence of modernity. HEIs have two strategies. First, a diversification of the curriculum, which in practice often means: the tagging of Black or brown authors on the reading list – sometimes as core texts, but most often not; perhaps the invitation to BME scholars to speak to the class, often unpaid; the introduction of modules ostensibly about Black or brown experiences; or making it compulsory for history students to take at least one 'non-British or European module', which translates as Black or Asian history (Bhambra et al., 2018: 120). The second strategy is to widen participation and introduce some changes to the hiring and promotion of staff (Albayrak, 2018; Doharty et al., 2021). However, more substantive issues of structural transformation remain neglected. The impact of lack of structural reform needed to decolonise HEIs becomes more clear as universities tighten their budgets. The recent surge of decolonial debates is likely to be squashed by the leadership of universities under the pretext of dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic itself has further exacerbated the inequities and exclusions in HEIs. BME staff are typically found in the most junior positions, often on fixed-term contracts, which also places them in the most vulnerable positions when institutions have to cut back (Morgan, 2020).

In UK HEIs, the practice of decolonisation has meant increased access through inclusion by providing additional resources to indigenous, racialised, low-income and

first-generation students, to equip them with knowledge, skills and cultural capital to excel according to existing institutional standards. This level exists in UK HEIs through the introduction of maintenance grants for students with low-income parents and scholarships, for example (Kottmann et al., 2019; Universities UK and NUS, 2019). However, with budgets tightening, these soft reforms are unsustainable. HEIs have not reached the stage of 'radical reform', where there is a recognition of epistemological dominance.

Radwa raised the issue of HEI partnerships, and how they exacerbate their colonial missions with a complete lack of centring of the voices and institutions of marginalised groups:

> It's important for UK HEIs to enter into partnerships of greater parity with institutions in the rest of the world. The partners in the West enter the conversation coming from the assumption of lack of parity. We are the great university, and we have lots of knowledge and funding, and you are the university that needs help. A starting point would be to change this attitude, and that needs mental and paradigm shifts.

What Radwa highlighted reflects a UK government policy. In 2015, the government created a new five-year, £1.5 billion Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) to procure research that will 'contribute to realising the UK aid strategy'; this is to be done through forming 'high-quality', 'equitable' partnerships with academic staff in the Global South to create a 'global community of researchers', who together can tackle global development challenges (BEIS, 2017: 3, 6, 7). This strategy aims to direct all foreign aid to serve UK 'national security and foreign policy interests', such as controlling migration triggered by the Syrian conflict (HM Teasury, 2015: 3). These types of partnerships deliberately produce underdeveloped populations to serve the colonisers (Fanon, 1963). Hence, the academic partnership agenda is a politicised strategy, far from the decolonisation 'efforts' of universities.

Considering this context, and with the increased dependency of UK HEIs on this type of funding, the paradigm shift is not dependent on the will of the leadership or academics of UK HEIs. Our interviewees asserted that conversations are increasingly happening in HEIs in the Global South to increase South–South partnership for more equitable knowledge production. For the reasons discussed, the charge to decolonise, even if only the curriculum, remains challenging, because despite concerted efforts by educators and activists, the curriculum is to a large extent inextricably intertwined with aspects of Empire and institutional racism within society and the academy. Given that the latter remains largely White and Eurocentric, current institutional cultures and structures are not conducive to substantial curriculum reform and destabilising the centrality of a dominant Eurocentric canon (Shay, 2016, cited in Arday, 2018). Our interviewees contended that although supported and pushed by many students and academics of colour and their allies, the DtC movement and the available initiatives remain piecemeal and short-lived, and have limited impact on the colonial education approach embodied in HEIs. The current DtC models provide a basis to show how asymmetrical power relationships within academic spaces may not allow for meaningful decolonisation in practice.

Decolonisation needs to have a vision to tackle all aspects of the academy: curriculum, pedagogy, research, projects and partnerships. While this might seem to be an unachievable utopia, it is important to remember that the real work is on many levels: personal, emotional, spiritual and communal (Love, 2019: 51).

Conclusion

This article is inspired by the struggles and tireless efforts of academics, activists and students to decolonise their spaces of work, teaching, learning and knowledge production. While we realise that the scope and sample of this research are limited, we believe that we were able to lay the groundwork for further investigation and research for more impactful, relevant and sustainable approaches to decolonisation within HEIs in the UK and beyond. Building on the achievements towards decolonising HEIs, particularly in the UK, no matter how substantial or limited, we have sought to provide rich insights into issues of conceptualisation, positionality and conduct linked to decolonisation initiatives. This article provides various critiques of what decolonisation of the curriculum means from diverse perspectives, and how that impacts practice. DtC as a concept and a movement is gaining traction. However, it should not happen in a vacuum, or as an aim disconnected from the rest of the structure of HEIs, which leads to diluting a wider movement, and turns it into a box-ticking exercise that does not go beyond 'soft reforms'. To move to 'beyond reform', there needs to be a deconstruction of asymmetrical power relationships within academic spaces to allow for meaningful decolonisation in practice, and a recognition of plurality of histories, knowledge and epistemic traditions and experiences. This requires a real political will, and a change in the structure, and in the hearts and minds of those in decision-making positions, and a shift in the practices of knowledge production on all levels. Once this is achieved, academics and students within HEIs will not be apologetic when using knowledge(s) that prioritise the interests and voices of marginalised groups, and which relate to wider concerns of social justice (Tikly and Bond, 2013) for fear that they will be excluded and their work dismissed.

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Declaration and conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work.

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