

From management meetings to meaningful change: risks of institutional capture in the decolonisation of UK higher education and recommendations for delivering structural change

*As there are growing calls from below, alongside expanding formal initiatives, to decolonise universities, **Dr Rima Saini** outlines what decolonisation means in the higher education context. She highlights that it is a radical project of institutional transformation that lies in exposing and upturning the colonial underpinnings of our universities. Given the immensity of this task, Saini explores the risks of institutional capture – that structural change will be absorbed into management strategies- and offers recommendations for meaningful change.*

The anti-racist protests that followed the killing of George Floyd in May have brought longstanding issues of structural racism into sharp focus. In many UK universities, this has resulted in a nascent or renewed sense of commitment to the decolonisation of the curriculum – in a number of cases coming from senior university management. Indeed, in recent months, despite the tumult of the COVID-19 pandemic and the retreat of our in-person spaces of action to predominantly online fora, conversations around decolonisation have continued and in places flourished. For those of us living with, and/or researching, racial marginality and Whiteness in a higher education system that has long been problematic or inactive on matters of race, however, efforts from ‘above’ have been met with a healthy dose of scepticism.

What is decolonisation in Higher Education?

Decolonisation in higher education is primarily concerned with the [unacknowledged coloniality of academic knowledge and practice](#). It entails a structural and cultural change in the way universities think about the representation and the uplift of historically silenced voices. This is particularly relevant to the treatment of racially marginalised staff and students, and the way in which our pedagogy – across all disciplines – acknowledges the legitimacy of, and sufficiently reflects, frameworks of thought beyond the Western canon. Decolonisation thus cannot be applied singularly to the curriculum or to the attainment gap. It feeds into, amongst other things, the very structure of the university, the experiences of students, staff and wider publics, knowledge creation and outputs, and stymied institutional cultures and mind-sets.

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Given the immensity of this undertaking, however, discussions and initiatives that have taken place under the banner of decolonisation have regularly fallen short of addressing the structural and cultural roots of coloniality in higher education. One example is the subsumption of decolonial praxis into the considerably tamer and less weighty ‘equality and diversity’ discourse. There have also been longstanding issues with, [as I stated earlier this year in Political Quarterly](#), encouraging colleagues and managers to discuss – with appropriate rigour – the meaning and relevance of decolonisation in relation to their own positionalities and practice. As a result, institutional capture – the process by which demands for structural change get absorbed into already existing management policies-of the decolonisation framework, is a reality.

As conversations around decolonisation in universities are being afforded greater urgency, some key risks of this institutional capture or inertia to wider decolonisation efforts are outlined below:



Institutional capture: risks and recommendations

Risk 1. 'Diversity' supplanting 'decolonisation'

The language of decolonisation seems, in recent years but especially at this moment, to have proliferated in network meetings, steering groups, and task forces, platforms where the realities of White supremacy, [privilege](#) and fragility have been rarely touched upon. This might be cause for celebration, but this mainstreaming of decolonisation runs the risk of diluting and indeed capturing decolonisation within Eurocentric boundary making practices. Unspecific and un-actioned expressions of anti-racist support re-shifts the onus for curriculum overhaul, for example, onto predominantly non-White scholar activists. This reproduces racial hierarchies by placing the burden of proof and labour onto those who suffer most from institutional racism. Decolonisation which becomes redefined and redeployed through a non-threatening white gaze also serves to side-line the often more meaningful and impactful grassroots efforts of longstanding staff and student networks within universities to generate sorely needed funding and recognition.

Risk 2. Ideological pacification

Many current institutional approaches to equality, diversity and inclusion lack a framework for genuine transformation. They tend to pay lip service to social difference or 'diversities' within higher education institutions, largely for the profit-centred means of attracting international student recruitment. They often fail to link these explicitly to a critical reimagining of current higher education systems that is genuinely inclusive, with a focus on those who are acutely marginalised and silenced. At the very least, a 'diverse' student body requires a commitment to ensuring equal attainment across students from different backgrounds, and an adequate representation of minority staff. However, [data from the Higher Education Statistics Authority states that as of 2018/2019 less than 1 per cent of university employees at professorial or senior academic level are Black \(compared to just over 3 per cent as a percentage of the population at large as of the 2011 census\)](#), alongside the existence of a [persistent attainment gap between Black and White students particularly](#). As Tom Conford stated in a blog post last year on [anti-racism in theatre studies](#), '*the diversity of 'diverse' categories begins to suggest that everyone could be considered in some way 'diverse', which obscures rather than exposes inequalities*'.

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Recommendation 1. Embracing discomfort

As alluded to thus far, decolonisation is inherently disruptive, destabilising and non-linear. Efforts to streamline and formalise the process more often than not prove reductive. Facing discomfort with an open mind and encouraging others to do the same through humility and active listening is key. Seminal postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously asked 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' but noted that perhaps less crucial than 'who will speak' is 'who will listen'. Maintaining firm lines on minimum expected institutional efforts – whether a university-wide re-haul of inherently racialised recruitment and promotion practices or substantial investment and innovation in training beyond 'unconscious bias' sessions – is difficult when [institutions have a history of maintaining the status quo](#) through either largescale silencing or the means of ideological pacification discussed earlier.

Recommendation 2. Trying to move beyond the curriculum

Most university staff looking towards decolonisation would acknowledge that a quantitative approach to diversifying reading list is, in and of itself, insufficient in addressing the historical misrepresentation and side-lining of non-Western and non-White theoretical and methodological traditions. However, this does little to preclude the fact that such changes are seen as more 'do-able' and regularly become the first port of call in decolonisation efforts. It is important then, that decolonising the curriculum does not become *the* aim for decolonial efforts in HE, at the expense of the more profound pedagogical efforts needed to decolonise our classrooms. Frank, open and often uncomfortable conversations about the realities of racial and postcolonial trauma inside and outside the walls of the institution go a long way to destabilising institutional hierarchies beyond the scope of the reading list. Creating spaces of intellectual autonomy and recognition for those with marginalised histories, all while fostering a sense of '[engaged pedagogy](#)' that values, as bell hooks advocates, care and mutual respect, is as important as other curriculum-orientated modes of decolonisation work.

Conclusion

The mainstreaming of discussions around decolonising the university represents a potential turning point in UK Higher Education. However, if decolonisation is to avoid becoming a new [buzzword](#), space needs to be made for difficult conversations to be aired. For those of us living with, and/or researching, racial marginality and Whiteness in the higher education system, this requires a strong dose of caution in order that easy solutions or quick-fixes don't capture the promise of the present moment.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below

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