

Decolonising DMU: a working position

NB we are aware that terminology surrounding anti-racism, ethnicity and decolonising can be contentious, and amplify exclusions or further marginalisation. For instance, BAME does not include white ethnic minorities such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller of Irish Heritage groups. Instead we use the term Black and Ethnically-Minoritised (BEM). However, this term is not definitive and our use of it represents engagement in a shifting debate, led by those made marginal inside our societies.

Introduction: an intersecting critique

The symbolism and reality of decolonising¹ the University has a long and rich history, which is explicitly connected to post- and anti-colonialism, making visible subaltern or subordinate identities, black power and indigeneity, and critical race or anti-racist studies. Through these critical positions this work overflows into more recent critiques of education, including critical university studies and the abolition of the University, as well as staff-student protests like Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall. These movements stand for a new conception of the University, grounded in dignity and life, and in doing so they stand against dominant ideological positions that privilege particular voices.

Analysed collectively, these movements push beyond reimagining the curriculum and modes of assessment, although those are important components in decolonising. More particularly, they challenge educators, students and professional services' staff to interrogate the distinct-but-interconnected processes of colonisation and racialisation in their own practices and lives. The project of decolonising is both a critique of institutions and a critique of knowledge, and it questions the following.

- The purpose and idea of the University in an age of crisis.
- The role of the University in reproducing cultures and structures of privilege and power.
- The creation of relationships of inclusion and exclusion between staff and students, institutions and stakeholders, and institutions and society.
- The dominance of White, Male views of reality (ontology) and ways of producing knowledge about the world (epistemology) inside universities in the global North.
- The hegemonic (dominant and manufactured) position of knowledge generated in the global North in addressing crises.
- The value of alternative histories and conceptions of a meaningful education and life.
- The relationship between, first, economic value and value-for-money, and second, humane values and human flourishing.

A key point in decolonising is of our shared questioning of our position in relation to these issues, in order to venture beyond them. We do this by acknowledging their historical and ongoing effects, and working against: exploitative institutional practices and strategies;

¹ Here we use the word 'decolonising' to situate an activity or an unfolding process, which refuses the potential traps of words that force us to describe what a decolonised University would look like. How can we know inside a dialectical unfolding of the world that is historical and material? The decolonisation of the University, or the idea of the decolonised University, is required to have a plan or a blueprint for the process that will lead towards liberation. Generations of struggle highlight the impossibility and meaninglessness of this position. Instead, we must demand an unfolding that is alert to and critiques its material and historical entanglements.

silencing of certain bodies, identities, cultures and knowledges; and, imposing claims about the universality of the epistemological and ontological certainties of the global North.

A movement of decolonising generates a critique of the ways in which dominant ideas, knowledge and structures from the global North underpin changes to culture, society and political economy across the globe. It challenges the apparently universal and essential nature of these ideas, knowledge and structures, by illuminating how capitalism and colonialism constitute particular cultures. In this way it seeks to open new pathways for knowledge that are obscured by existing disciplinary hierarchies. It seeks to establish *both* a symbolic idea *and* a lived reality of the University that is *neither* unitary, universal, and/or linear, *nor* Eurocentric in its assumptions. It questions the assumed power of the status quo.

Decolonising DMU as a movement of dignity

The idea of Decolonising DMU is directed through dignity. It is centred around acts of dialogue and listening that seek to make sense of complex denials, exclusions and violences, which have been enmeshed with the idea of the University in the global North. In this way, it connects to histories, narratives, identities and ways of knowing the world that we hope will enable us to produce new knowledge in a time of socio-economic and socio-environmental crises that stands beyond mediations of the market, human capital, value-for-money, and so on.

In respecting the dignity of difference, Decolonising DMU pushes beyond diversity agendas that tend to offer equality of opportunity in contexts that are framed by privilege and status. Through these agendas, those who are successful tend to signify that such privilege and status has been overcome, rather than standing as outliers in the system. Against this, our work insists that we ask how power works inside the University and through the University in society, and how class, race, gender, sexuality, disability (and other markers of identity) are systemically enabling for some and marginalising for others. This includes the ways in which these markers are overlain, interact or intersect.

Thus, our work aims more humbly to understand and counter 'coloniality' in educational thinking and practice. It does this by creating spaces and capacities with which to name, learn about and critically discuss basic problems of privilege, inequality, division, exclusion, othering, exploitation, alienation, dehumanisation, and institutional and structural oppression. We recognise that this is a process of engaging in difficult, painful and genuinely risky conversations, in order for meaningful change to be possible.

Recognising the ongoing colonisation of certain bodies and identities by capitalist higher education in the global North, our work recognises that there are differential experiences of the University. Increasingly, evidence around the following is being made visible:

- student attainment gaps;
- post-university employability opportunities for BEM students;
- the lack of promotion of black women, including to professorships, deans and directors;
- the rise in reporting of racist, misogynist and trans-phobic hate crimes on university campuses;
- the experience of BEM women on precarious and casualised professional services and teaching contracts;
- the negative experience of BEM communities of institutional procedures, including academic practice, grievances, dignity at work and promotions;

- the negative experience of BEM communities of interlocking disciplinary procedures, for instance around Prevent, and what has been termed cops on campus and stop-and-search;
- the dominance of White canons of knowledge, and approaches to curriculum design and delivery;
- the higher student satisfaction ratings for White, Male academics; and
- higher expectations for BEM and women academics to undertake the activities of social reproduction (emotional labour of student support, estates' functions, professional services' functions) upon which privileged intellectual work rests.

These are often presented as emerging from individual belief systems and attitudes, rather than an ongoing process of coloniality. However, they represent structural and ingrained forms of privilege, which damage educational institutions because they reinforce inequality and the inability of some communities to see themselves reflected in their institutions. Moreover, these structural inequalities damage life chances for individuals, families and communities, because they echo beyond higher education into access to other resources in employment, healthcare, housing, welfare and so on. Structural inequalities in one area of life reflect and amplify those elsewhere.

What is 'coloniality'?

Colonialism is an historical relationship of exploitation and domination that began (in its European forms) in the 15th century with the colonisation of what were thereafter called the Americas.

Coloniality is a term for the ongoing relations of colonial injustice that continue to structure, permeate and pervade our lives today. It refers to the 'logic, culture and structure of the modern world-system' that was created through colonisation and that has been the foundation for modern social order during the 500+ years since. It – and 'modernity', from which coloniality cannot be separated – is based on various violent separations (of people from the earth, from each other, from other beings and from themselves) and interlocking hierarchies of 'sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial forms of domination and exploitation'. For more about these definitions, read Nelson Maldonado-Torres' (2017) '[On the coloniality of human rights](#)' Ramón Grosfoguel's (2008) '[Transmodernity, border thinking, and global coloniality](#)'.

To learn more about how the 'modern-colonial global imaginary' pervades higher education, see Stein and Andreotti's (2016) '[Higher Education and the Modern/Colonial Global Imaginary](#)'.

In response to this, Decolonising DMU is an insistent movement towards a pluralist experience of the University, so that each individual and her communities feel more at home there. It works against the reality that some staff and students feel that they are not able to fit in, because they are alienated by institutions that are structured by whiteness and white privilege. We wish to elevate and bring to the front alternative experiences, stories, narratives and relationships, such that those who engage with the University do not have to give up their own identities and subjectivities. Our work refuses the idea that some should have to develop a double consciousness (or the daily reality of having to reconcile one's own identity and heritage with the judgement of a dominant, Eurocentric identity), in order to survive in the institution.

This is a process of transformation or venturing beyond, which links strategy and action. It has a focus upon generating new knowledge about the University, its governance, internal regulation, management and organisation, technologies and information flows, and its relationships. In broad terms, the idea of Decolonising DMU challenges exploitation and dispossession, silencing, othering and marginalisation. These forms emerge from the interconnection between:

- institutional factors, in the form of cultures, management structures, governance, internal regulation and performance management, policies, and procedures;
- staff-related factors, including workloads, curriculum design, delivery and assessment, alongside the management and delivery of research and public engagement, approaches to professional development, the regulation of relationships with other staff and students, and crucially, the role of professional services' staff in the design and delivery of services; and
- student-related factors, including co-production of the curriculum, engagement with student support services, volunteering and public engagement, the role of students' unions and societies, and relationships developed on-campus.

Decolonising DMU is not about auditing diversity, rather it is a process of legitimating and making visible other views of the University, which have struggled against being labelled. For instance, the angry, physical black male or the emotional, hysterical woman, who fails to inhabit a specific mode of behaviour or who is forced to perform particular modes of behaviour. This is amplified through narratives of meritocracy, colour-blindness or the very idea that we have moved beyond race, and no longer need to address it beyond equality and diversity policies. From the research, we understand that this is how racism is looked over and reproduced.

Questioning the University

Decolonising DMU speaks from the connections across the spaces, cultures and languages that constitute the University. It is a complex, whole institution discussion about the tools, practices and visions for a modern university. It does not recognise a golden era of higher education or a utopian vision of the University. It is an ongoing negotiation about the ethics of modern knowledge, in relation to the need for the University to help shape meaningful futures for its staff, students and communities.

This work recognises that some people have been invisible or not recognised inside the institution. It recognises that some people have been excluded from decision-making, resources, networks, types of work, promotions, and so on. It challenges ideas of a false universalism that exists in higher education in the global North, rooted in established and dominant forms of knowledge. It recognises that this is a struggle to enable the range of voices to be valued. It does not simply add race or gender to an established organisation, as an addition to the White, Male privilege that dominates therein. It does not simply change our view of dominant structures and identities, rather it works to change those very structures and identities. Instead of being additional to the norm, it challenges and transforms that norm, and the conditions that structure and legitimise it.

In developing a new ethical epistemology and ontology, Decolonising DMU calls our attention to the thinking, histories, emotions and relationships of a range of others in the governance of the institution, its pedagogic practices and curricula, its research and scholarship, and its provision of professional services. This accept that different ways of life

are different ways of knowing the world, and that their validity questions the identity of the University. Once again it is important to emphasise that this is not about assimilation or co-optation, rather it is about active listening and working for another world.

In processing these ways of working with openness and dignity, we move the institution by asking questions of ourselves and our work, and listening with courage to the answers. We may begin by asking the following.

- What are BEM student and staff experiences of white privilege, whitewash and whiteness: in academic settings; with other students and staff; and in institutional structures? This might include how they see themselves and their identities.
- What are the impacts of institutional and disciplinary structures, cultures and practices on the lived experiences of BEM students and staff?
- What are BEM student and staff experiences of decoloniality and representation in academic settings, with other students and staff, and in institutional structures? Is there a subject-based layer to this?
- How are BEM student and staff experiences shaped in relation to academic and professional attainment?
- How are BEM student and staff experiences shaped in relation to racism and microaggressions, in both social and academic spaces?
- How do BEM student and staff lived experiences of academic life impact their mental and physical health?

By asking these questions, we commit to deconstructing the University from the lived experience of those occupying subaltern positions, or those traditionally occupying second-order or subordinated status. This demands empathy with the experiences of those made marginal or silenced. The first step in decolonising is deep and empathetic listening. Other steps will follow. We do not expect those occupying those positions to undertake this work for us, rather by questioning empathetically we commit to a shared movement of reinterpretation and reimagining through re-education. These questions are a mode of empowerment, and more importantly, an ethical and political effort to move the institution through an understanding of difference that engages other D-words:

- **D**iversify the syllabus, canon, curriculum, infrastructure and staff;
- **D**ecentre knowledge and knowledge production away from the global North;
- **D**evalue hierarchies and revalue relationality;
- **D**isinvest from power structures that reinforce metrics, citations and rankings; and
- **D**iminish some voices and opinions that have predominated, and magnify those that have been unheard.

Decolonising DMU does not describe an end goal, but is a new way of working and knowing inside the institution. Inside an emergent and negotiated institutional framework, this is a movement away from a totalising, corporate discourse towards recognition of a plurality of positions. In this process, there must be reflection on the possibilities for reoccupation or co-optation of particular knowledge, skills, capabilities and identities, which risk amplifying colonialization. Therefore, this re-emphasises that the project of decolonising is both a critique of institutions and a critique of knowledge, whilst focusing upon the ways in which particular cultures are prioritised and reinforced. In this process we state that another university is possible.

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