

134 UK universities' responsiveness to local migrants and ethnic minorities? Exploring the hidden curriculum of evasion and race unconsciousness in the Northern Irish academy

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Significant changes to the local demographics of Northern Ireland have been under-studied within that contexts' research-intensive universities. This paper explores how the academics who have undertaken such marginalised research have experienced negotiating the socio-cultural influences, enablements and constraints of that local research ecology. It is informed by a mixed method study of published research outputs and interviews with academic authors, members of a non-academic partner organisation and research developers. A hidden curriculum of evasion of controversial local topics, groups and dynamics emerged; not unlike insider-research phenomena observed during the height of the contexts' conflict period. Questions are raised about the conditions of race unconsciousness and coloniality shaping academic citizenry within in that context.

Full paper

Migration, race/ethnicity and majority-minority dynamics are established areas of academic enquiry in many contexts around the world, including the United Kingdom. However, they have been under-studied within Northern Ireland's research-intensive universities, despite significant local socio-demographic change. This has included increases in those not locally-born, from 1.09% to 6.53%; those racialised as other-than-'white', from 0.8% to 3.4%, and those other-than-Christian, from 0.4% in 2001 to 1.5% (according to Census data of 1991 and 2021).

The study's triangulated findings were informed by (a) a critical systematic analysis of research outputs from 1994-2022 (n=209) (Moynihan and Belluigi, 2022); (b) a critical discourse analysis of primary data generated from questionnaire responses and semi-structured interviews undertaken with the participation of academic authors (n=32 of 247); (c) report-and-respond discussions with members of non-academic partnering organisations (n=3) and with research developers (n=2) of a and b. These provided insights into how academic research practice is shaped by, resists and/or negotiates influences in local research ecologies. The paper focuses on evasion and race unconsciousness in the Northern Irish academy.

Participating authors' accounts function as counter-narratives to the dominant priorities within NI, where their academic agency and critical consciousness was developed exogenous to its universities. Many distinguished themselves as outlier academic citizens; and from the topics, discourses and interests valued as salient by research funders. This sense of academic practice in isolation and against the grain, was not unsurprising considering there were only 209 outputs in this area of enquiry out of >120K recorded on the institutional repositories. Many also saw themselves as illegitimate researchers in the area: that it was not their primary area of enquiry or interest (indeed, the majority published only 1 output, most often in the form of a report); that they lacked lived experience or shared identities with those studied. When positioning was analysed in relation to authorship, very few academics of colour were attributed as lead or sole author role, and very few of the authors of colour were locally born. However, many of the authors self-identified as (internal or external) migrants themselves; and despite NI having the lowest representation of women in UK academic staffing, a sizable portion of the authors (60%) were women.

In the 1980's, it was found that NI-born academics avoided engagement with controversial phenomena in their midst (Taylor, 1988), with a dearth of local research about The Troubles. Migrant academics served the function of stabilising the local staff cohort. Paradoxically, enquiry about the conflict and its legacies has since developed to such an extent, that many participant authors articulated how the related academic capitalism and omni-present sectarianism (Vietaen and Murphy, 2021) effectively overshadowed, whitewashed and dulled academics' ethical

obligations to deliberate the various 'other' social conflicts, injustices and hate crimes endured locally. Some articulated how it silenced migrant academics' contributions to local debates.

Observations, about prior research on NI research (Campbell, 1993; Gilligan, 2022; Irwin, 2005; Knox, 2001; Schubotz, 2005; Taylor, 1988) and racialised local knowledge production in other post-colonial contexts (such as Jansen and Walters, 2020), are drawn upon to interpret the state of this area of enquiry. When situated within tenuous peace or divisiveness, public institutions (including universities and local-born academics) may continue to err with safety, illusions of objectivity and discourses salient to those in power, in a bid to re-establish legitimacy. Such conditions are exacerbated by technocratic pressures for 'rightness' and short-term efficacy, which subordinate the value of engagement with complexity, truth and justice (Peters 2020). Dynamics such as these may explain why discussion of the ethical dilemmas, the politics of representation or the positionality of the researchers were omitted from the vast majority (95%) of published outputs.

Unacknowledged is the whiteness and coloniality underpinning the hidden curriculum of academic knowledge production. The political intention of prior identifications with contexts where peace necessitates deracialisation (USA, South Africa, Palestine), has indeed not had the politically progressive consequences for racialised Others on the island, as Peatling (2005) once warned. Neither has it informed local academe's commitments to racial justice in their locality. The recent discourse wave of decolonisation barely featured (Belluigi et al., 2023; Weerawardhana, 2018). The burden of knowledge-making is placed on non-academic individuals or groups; or on those academics positioned outside of/to the locality.

This paper raises concerns about the politics of participation and representation in knowledge generation in a post-conflict, post-colonial context.

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