

Building change: understanding student and staff perceptions of and aspirations for decolonial and social justice work in higher education

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Prompted by events like the murder of George Floyd (James, Joseph-Salisbury and Gooden, 2022) and movements like Rhodes Must Fall (Elliot-Cooper, 2018), social movements advocating for social justice and decolonisation have surged. While universities re-evaluate their commitments to social justice, alignment between institutions and student bodies vary (Memon and Jivraj, 2020; Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancioğlu, 2018). We present preliminary findings from a university-wide study on student and staff understandings of decolonial work. Through the larger scale offered by a survey, we aim to understand participants' conceptualisations of decolonisation, perceptions of change agents, and aspirations for decolonial initiatives. Aligned with broader goals of establishing a culture that enables decolonial pedagogical research partnerships, we take decolonial relationality and partnership (Fraser and Usman, 2021; Yahlnaaw, 2019) as our theoretical and ethical framings to evaluate the findings and offer principles to inform social justice work in higher education settings.

Full paper

In this paper, we present preliminary findings from a university-wide survey on student and staff understandings of decolonial work, in which we aim to understand participants' conceptualisations of decolonisation, perceptions of change agents, and aspirations for decolonial initiatives. The research builds on our successful partnership project, Pedagogies for Social Justice (<https://blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj/>) in which students and staff co-design pedagogic and research tools that aim to move us toward social justice. We are situated in the Centre for Education and Teaching Innovation (CETI) at the University of Westminster, a highly diverse institution based in the heart of London. Our project, as well as our university's 15-point [Black Lives Matter commitment plan](#) (2020) and [Education Strategy](#)'s emphasis on decolonising, underscore the institution's proactive stance in addressing systemic inequities and advancing social justice within the higher education landscape.

Social justice issues within higher education (HE) have received renewed attention in recent years with researchers investigating different aspects including perceptions, commitment and attitudes toward inequality, racism and decolonisation (Wong et al., 2021; James, Joseph-Salisbury and Gooden, 2022; Koo et al., 2023; Winter, Webb and Turner, 2024). *Decolonising the curriculum* represents a key discourse within higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide and their attempts to challenge and transform entrenched Eurocentric perspectives pervasive within academic content, pedagogy, and institutional frameworks (Bhambra et al., 2018). This global movement recognises the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism on knowledge production,

acknowledging the marginalisation and erasure of diverse voices, epistemologies, and ways of knowing (Tuck and Yang, 2018).

The United Kingdom (UK) has a complex colonial history that continues to influence its higher education system, leaving lasting legacies such as entrenched Eurocentric biases within academic content and pedagogy, colonial power dynamics in the classroom, as well as institutional structures and practices (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancioğlu, 2018). Decolonising the curriculum in UK HE thus involves recognising and addressing contemporary forms of coloniality, as seen from the “Why is My Curriculum White?” campaign (UCL, 2014) and ‘Rhodes Must Fall, Oxford’ (RMFO). Although decolonial efforts differ across contexts and regions due to the unique historical and institutional dynamics, many have been inspired by and connected to initiatives across the Global South and Indigenous communities in the North (Jivraj et al., 2020; Asher and Ramamurthy, 2020). Despite this momentum, there is a notable gap between those actively engaged in decolonial work and other students and staff, particularly in terms of awareness and understanding of decolonisation and decolonial initiatives. Our research questions therefore emerge from the need to understand how strategies for decolonising the curriculum are perceived by both students and staff (Abu Moghli and Kadiwal, 2021). We examine the extent to which participants perceive existing efforts to decolonise the curriculum as important, inclusive and relevant to their higher education journeys. Additionally, we inquire about their aspirations for the future of decolonial work, including where they see potential for meaningful change and who they consider to be the “change agents” (Stein et al., 2020). In focusing on their aspirations and dreams for decolonisation, we uncover not only the practical changes they envision but also the underlying values and principles that guide their imaginings of a decolonised future (Bell et al., 2020; Stein, 2019).

Studies of social justice research typically emphasise the importance of balancing quantitative indicators with qualitative insights to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research subject (Cornelius and Harrington, 2014). For instance, surveys offer a structured approach to gather quantitative data while also providing opportunities for participants to express qualitative insights, helping to ensure a holistic understanding of complex social phenomena (De Vaus, 2013). By employing a survey in this study, we aimed to provide a platform for students and staff to voice their perceptions of decolonial work at our university. The survey was open to all members of the university community for a six-week period and included open-ended questions, allowing participants to share their experiences, perceptions, and aspirations regarding decolonisation efforts within the institution. Additionally, more quantitative measures were included to collect demographic information and to assess participants’ overall understandings of current decolonisation initiatives.

Our initial findings presented in this paper begin to unravel the complexities of how students and staff conceptualise decolonisation, articulate their aspirations for decolonial initiatives, and envision the potential of student-staff partnerships as catalysts for transformative social justice work within the university.

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