179

Decolonisation and [higher education] curriculum transformation: from theory to practice

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

In the current higher education landscape, scholarly work, activism, and an ever-growing assortment of 'toolkits' frame decolonisation discourses. Despite its visibility, contestations remain around what decolonisation means and how it can be interwoven into existing higher education learning and teaching, and research. Based on research and extant literature, this paper posits that structural, onto-epistemological, and accessibility challenges around the idea of decolonisation can hinder efforts to connect theoretical approaches to policy and pedagogical practice. It is emphasised that connecting theory and practice and leadership buy-in are crucial for meaningful decolonisation work. Recognising the complexities and understanding the challenges provide a pathway for integrating decolonisation in the curriculum transformation project at a large UK university. Our presentation aims to share the holistic, inclusive, and systematic approach undertaken towards mainstreaming decolonisation in the curriculum as part of a University-wide project, and the implications for experiential learning, course development and quality assurance.

Full paper

Decolonisation is not a new conversation topic in higher education. The idea of decolonisation reemerges during critical points, historically and presently, in response to campaigns that represent activism and resistance to the status quo, the theme of the SRHE conference 2024. The well-discussed multiplicities of perspectives about decolonisation attributes to its long political history spanning 5 centuries (Bhambra et al., 2018). In recent times, the decolonisation movement was spurred on by the 2015 student protests in South Africa and later in the UK demanding a decolonised curriculum. Unsurprisingly, there is a preponderance of university statements and 'toolkits' on decolonisation, pointing to increasing visibility of the subject matter aiming to address the hegemonic construction of knowledge through a Western lens and consequent effects on curricula, pedagogy and institutional cultures. However, decolonisation efforts are criticised by scholars and academics as tokenistic. These contestations range from how discomfort with the term stifles critical engagement (Morreira, 2020) to a lack of explicit recognition of the continuing impact on minoritised staff, especially emerging career researchers (Begum and Saini, 2018), and students. The lack of consensus on approaches to undergird decolonisation efforts hinders a systematic approach towards embedding decolonisation in the teaching, research and service functions of higher education institutions (HEIs). Hence, despite its high

visibility, there remains little understanding of how decolonisation can be integrated into higher education core pedagogical processes (Fakunle et al., 2022).

To address an identified gap, this paper discusses the development journey of a large UK institution towards decolonising the curriculum as part of an institution-wide curriculum transformation project. Based on research and extant literature, the paper highlights three main interconnected challenges in decolonising the curriculum centring around structural, onto-epistemological, and accessibility issues. The paper points to the need for connectivity and leadership buy-in to address the identified challenges.

Structural issues point to fundamental questions about how educational systems are set up. As a starting point, any attempt to decolonise curricula must first examine the extent to which the existing higher education (HE) structure creates affordances or constraints for the idea of decolonisation in the curriculum to develop. This requires input from all actors involved in the educational enterprise, including leaders, staff, students, higher education research organisations, and funders.

Onto-epistemology is central to any decolonisation attempt. Onto-epistemology foundational premise centres around the nature of knowledge and how knowledge is valued and validated. In other words, what knowledge is privileged? To address the onto-epistemological question, there first needs to be an acknowledgement and understanding that colonialism privileges Eurocentric knowledge, as a singular truth. By so doing, other forms/types of knowledges are discarded. This ensures a lack of visibility of the work of non-white scholars and non-western knowledges, perpetuating inequalities. This begs the question about what value is placed on plurality of knowledges in the academe, and how is this integrated into pedagogy and practice in the university?

Accessibility is a major, yet under reported issue in decolonial efforts in higher education. Generations of scholarly work, mainly in the humanities, continue to provide astounding breadth and depth of knowledge and theories on decolonisation. But there remains a disconnect between theory and practice. This lack of connectivity is hugely consequential as it extends to policy makers and leaders who are positioned to drive change.

Knowledge gap is not an excuse for inaction. Hence, leadership-buy-in is important for decolonisation efforts to stand a chance in any institutional setting.

At a UK HEI, leadership buy-in was instrumental in including decolonisation within the architecture of a major institutional curriculum transformation project, with attendant implications for experiential learning, course development and approval processes, and quality assurance.

Decolonisation work is complex and the issues are multifaceted and complicated. Our presentation will discuss how tackling the aforementioned key challenges provides a systematic pathway for ongoing decolonisation efforts. This hinges on recognising the place of scholarly knowledge and activism in higher education, and the need to connect the theory to the practical implementation through a curriculum transformation.

References

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