

# Miseducation: decolonising curricula, culture and pedagogy in UK universities

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Debate Paper 23

## **About the author**

Mia Liyanage is a Master's student in US History at Balliol College, Oxford and graduated with a BA in History from Balliol in 2019. Her research specialism is queer history. She has held a variety of access roles and was previously Co-Chair of Common Ground Oxford, a student movement challenging institutional racism and classism and advocating for decolonisation. She is deeply interested in tackling educational inequality and aspires to follow that interest in her career.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Foreword

### **Professor Iyiola Solanke, Chair in EU Law and Social Justice, University of Leeds and founder of the Black Female Professors Forum**

<https://blackfemaleprofessorsforum.org/>

It is hard to pinpoint a date or time when it became possible to speak of 'decolonisation of higher education' without being met with raised eyebrows and blank or quizzical stares. It would be insulting to assert that the change came suddenly. That would belie the many years of lonely and persistent work by campaigners who have pushed this agenda before it became popular, so popular that it now seems fully integrated into the higher education equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agenda.

Like everything, this has advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, it means that decolonisation campaigners like author Mia Liyanage are no longer dismissed by decision makers in higher education, marginalised as radicals. The decolonisation agenda is on its way to becoming embedded into institutional goals. The killing of George Floyd and the global response to this led by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement have created a juncture where this agenda may be able to make significant structural change to higher education.

On the negative side, however, incorporation into the 'EDI agenda' might simply be co-option. The diversity discourse is so ubiquitous that, as Atiba Ellis argues, it may appear 'meaningless and amorphous' - he describes it as being in

<sup>1</sup>Atiba Ellis, 'When Diversity is at the Bottom of the List' Race and the Law Prof Blog, 12 March 2019 [https://lawprofessors.typepad.com/racelawprof/2019/03/when-diversity-is-at-the-bottom-of-the-list-1.html?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+RaceAndTheLaw+%28Race+and+the+Law+Prof+Blog%29](https://lawprofessors.typepad.com/racelawprof/2019/03/when-diversity-is-at-the-bottom-of-the-list-1.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+RaceAndTheLaw+%28Race+and+the+Law+Prof+Blog%29)

the 'midst of an existential crisis'.<sup>1</sup> One key problem is that the EDI agenda promotes a hyper-individualism that overlooks structural change and the protection of democracy. If set within this discourse, the specificity of the decolonisation agenda might disappear into the morass that has become EDI.

Like anti-discrimination law, decolonisation of higher education is inextricably linked to democracy and democratic institutions. Reducing Euro-centrism in the curriculum, in management and leadership and in pedagogy is not for the sake of individuals or even individual institutions. Decolonisation is a matter of democracy; it does not promote diversification for its own sake but for the sake of society as a whole. Homogeneity in the content of higher education – from the scholarship studied to the scholars themselves – results in homogenous social institutions, which all too easily become hosts of practices and policies that contribute to enduring racism. As racial homogeneity in educational institutions does not serve democracy or make society better, pursuit of the decolonisation agenda is therefore something more – it is the key to a stronger democracy.

The higher education sector and all therein have a leading role to play in ensuring a strong democracy. As set out in this important report, adoption of the decolonisation agenda must embrace all aspects of higher education – including pedagogy – so that key social and political institutions, such as the police, can in all aspects be reflective of the population that they serve. An outdated Euro-centrism, that no longer reflects the world in which graduates will live and work, must not be allowed to dominate in our classrooms or in the country.



## List of respondents

- **Beth Davies-Kumadiro** – University of Oxford graduate, former Rhodes Must Fall activist & Common Ground Oxford co-founder (*she/her*)
- **'Caroline'** – Vice Chancellor of a UK university (*she/her*)
- **'Eli'** – University of Oxford graduate & former Common Ground Oxford activist (*he/him*)
- **Dr Eloise Moss** – Lecturer in Modern British History, University of Manchester (*she/her*)
- **'Evan'** – former sabbatical officer at a UK university students' union (*he/him*)
- **Fope Olaleye** – Black Students' Officer, the National Union of Students (*they/them*)
- **Dr Hussein Omar** – Lecturer in Modern Global History, University College Dublin; formerly Junior Research Fellow, University of Oxford (*he/him*)
- **'Kate'** – policy adviser to universities on access & equality, diversity and inclusion (*she/her*)
- **Dr Kerry Pimblott** – Lecturer in International History, the University of Manchester (*she/her*)
- **'Layla'** – University of Oxford student & Common Ground Oxford activist (*she/her*)
- **Professor Margot Finn** – President of the Royal Historical Society and Chair in Modern British History, UCL (*she/her*)

- **'Nicole'** – Senior Lecturer in Academic Development at a UK university (*she/her*)
- **Sara Khan** – Liberation and Access Officer, University of Manchester Students' Union (*they/them*)
- **Dr Shahmima Akhtar** – Past & Present Fellow: Race, Ethnicity & Equality in History, Royal Historical Society and the Institute of Historical Research (*she/her*)
- **'Theo'** – Professor of African History at a Russell Group university (*he/him*)
- **'William'** – Chair of a Humanities department at a Russell Group university (*he/him*)



## Executive summary

This report establishes that the decolonisation of UK universities is vital for the improvement of:

- course curricula;
- pedagogical practice;
- staff wellbeing; and
- the student experience.

This report puts forward five key policy recommendations based on the testimony of 16 respondents. Some recommendations were suggested by a majority, while some are based on one particular idea.

The recommendations are not wholly financial – for example, some are focused on attitude change. Just as decolonisation is a broader issue than that of curricula, these recommendations reflect that solutions lie as much in changing how we see the issue as they do in how we allocate funding. Indeed, the latter follows the former.

The recommendations are:

### **1. Get educated about decolonisation and end its conflation with equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives**

- Decolonisation is an ongoing process of fundamentally reassessing and restructuring higher education.
- Decolonisation is often put under the umbrella of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives – which, although valuable, are designed to add to existing structures.

- This can result in the conflation of decolonial practice with measures seeking to diversify universities and their courses.

## **2. Reprioritise: decolonisation is both pedagogically necessary and academically rigorous**

Respondents identify widely held assumptions in the sector:

- that decolonisation is a tokenistic or politically motivated project;
- that it would result in a reduction in academic rigour; and
- that it only benefits students of colour.

Instead, decolonisation:

- reasserts academic rigour by introducing new and challenging perspectives; and
- asks pedagogical questions that are chronically under-addressed.

## **3. Fund BAME research**

- There is currently little funding available for BAME scholars. This is partly owing to limited understanding in English, Scottish and Welsh universities of the legal framework that allows BAME-only studentships and scholarships.
- The UK has not instituted or funded a British form of Black Studies, which is creating a dearth of decolonised research in our institutions.
- Investment from institutions and government is necessary to bridge this gap.

#### **4. Tackle discrimination, hostility and unconscious bias**

- Respondents report that they have experienced both overt and covert discrimination because of their work.
- Staff are concerned about the impact on their careers and the quality of their teaching.
- Students of colour feel silenced within institutions and are concerned about unconscious bias in marking.
- This shows the necessity of reassessing university structures, as well as curricula, as part of decolonisation.

#### **5. Institutionalise decolonisation: create departmental roles and engage students**

- Current stasis around decolonisation is fuelled by a lack of training and institutional memory, and increased staff workload.
- Universities' hostility to activists means that they are missing out on valuable input.
- Departments should hire at least one staff member per department to work specifically on issues pertaining to the decolonisation of their department; and establish channels for discussion between students and faculty – for example, through working groups or student internships.
- Institutionalising decolonising research and processes will help to ensure sustained, meaningful change.

The report concludes that the current state of affairs is unacceptable academically, pedagogically and pastorally. Universities should be providing an enriching, rigorous

education that engages critically with the issues at stake in the modern world – and this should be delivered in conditions that allow students and staff of colour to thrive. As such, decolonisation forms a vital part of universities' future.

## Introduction

*I know this is right; I'm going to say it until I die. But where does it get me? ... How do I actually change the situation? And what am I happy with accepting as change, and what am I not happy with?*

– Beth Davies-Kumadiro, activist

*The transformation of the university is what we're hoping for.*

– Kerry Pimblott, lecturer

Decolonisation is rapidly becoming a familiar term in our higher education institutions. As universities set goals to produce global citizens and retain their international character following Brexit, decolonisation is appearing in many of the sector's biggest conversations. Universities are invested in widening participation and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives, under whose remit decolonisation is seen to fall. This shift has also been the result of increased student interest and, sometimes, pressure on the issue. A sector facing increasing marketisation is ever more interested in its students' perception of the value of their education – both within and beyond the classroom. Meanwhile, students' unions and activist groups have organised to move decolonisation onto the national agenda. Calls for decolonisation have been louder than ever in recent weeks, as protests in response to the murder of George Floyd in the USA have galvanised the global Black Lives Matter movement.

Despite its newfound ubiquity, however, there is still substantial disagreement and misunderstanding about what

'decolonisation' actually entails. As a result, institutions and students have clashed over both its meaning and its validity. Some of these debates have been public – sparked most famously in response to the Rhodes Must Fall movement in Oxford in 2015 and now in 2020, and at the occupation at Goldsmiths, University of London in 2019 – but many more have occurred in private. In lectures and seminars, but also in board meetings and students' union cafés, people at every level of the university are grappling with both the potential and the implications of decolonisation.

This report does not intend to contribute yet another set of arguments to the discussion about whether universities ought to decolonise. Instead, it aims to move past a debate which, in the words of many of the people I have spoken with over the past few months, has become 'toxic'. These conversations have shown clearly that decolonisation is morally necessary; academically rigorous; and essential for the betterment of both the student and staff experience. To that end, this paper addresses the common misconceptions surrounding decolonisation and recommends practical steps towards its implementation.

What does decolonisation look like? My respondents argue that decolonisation entails a fundamental re-evaluation of the existing forms of teaching, learning and pastoral support in higher education. It is about acknowledging the ways in which our institutions reproduce unequal social structures – so it is a larger project than simply the diversification of courses, for example. Therefore, meaningful engagement with decolonisation requires reassessing curricula, attainment and representation concurrently.<sup>1</sup>

This report follows others, such as the Royal Historical Society's 2018 report on racial and ethnic inequalities in History departments, which have prompted further enquiries and rich discussion in the sector.<sup>2</sup> There has been academic work on this issue too, and there has been activism, but there have been limited policy papers on the specific issue of decolonisation as separate to diversity. This deficit has left institutions ignorant of the issue and activists and decolonial practitioners frustrated at their inaction – hardly a conducive landscape for change.

I have taken a different approach, drawing on the experiences of activists, academics and policymakers – three groups who all have a stake in decolonisation, and different and valuable approaches, but who rarely get to interact in a productive way, for reasons ranging from time constraints to inter-group tensions. I interviewed 16 people. Some have activist backgrounds, some are scholars and some work externally with universities or on decolonial curriculum design. All are experts on the issue of decolonisation. I also spoke with leaders of departments and institutions to get their insight into the barriers facing decolonisation efforts.

Throughout this paper, I use the term 'activist' to describe those – usually students – who actively campaign for the decolonisation of universities. Some groups favour direct action, while others use events or publications to promote the issue. Some activists go on to policy positions in students' unions. Student activism is the largest form of decolonial advocacy, but some academics I interviewed were former student activists or viewed themselves as part of the landscape of decolonial activism, if not on its front lines. This work has had a head start in Oxford, hence the larger proportion of my respondents who are, or used to be, involved in decolonisation

discussions at the University of Oxford. However, they appear alongside others from a variety of UK institutions. This, together with the fact that many have now moved on from Oxford to other institutions or fields, demonstrates the expanding remit and resonance of decolonisation.

Most of the respondents whose testimony underpins this report asked to remain anonymous. Many of them reported racism or hostility as they went about their studies or their work. As an ex-student said of their experience: 'Of course students of colour feel the brunt of it every day; they can see it more quickly because it happens to them, and it has happened to them their whole lives.'<sup>3</sup> Respondents regularly worry about the impact of advocating for decolonial methods on their marks or their future job prospects – and they have personal experiences to substantiate their concerns. Other respondents were shocked and surprised that such things could, let alone did, go on in their institutions. This shows that the effects of colonial structures in universities cannot be solved by non-racist individuals alone, no matter how good their intentions. The inescapable fact is that institutional problems require institutional solutions.

My own experience with this issue ostensibly began during my second year as an undergraduate at the University of Oxford when I joined Common Ground Oxford, an activist movement challenging institutional racism, classism and colonialism in both the University and the city of Oxford.<sup>4</sup> In reality, as an LGBTQ woman of colour, these interactions began much earlier. Although my experiences – and some of my interviews – are rooted in Oxford, the broader understanding of decolonisation in this paper is relevant to pedagogical practice everywhere. During my time with Common Ground, I have found the most



success in collaborating with fellow students and academics – all had previously felt isolated, with no idea that many of our aims were the same. Similarly, most people I spoke to testified that conversations are not happening where, or in the ways, they need to be.

As the testimony and recommendations in this report demonstrate, decolonising higher education would go far beyond the reassessment of curricula alone. Similarly, the decolonisation of curricula must go far beyond that of the Humanities, as the majority of respondents acknowledge. It is hoped, however, that this report – which focuses on the decolonisation of curricula in the Humanities – will spark further research into other aspects of decolonisation. This report raises the central question: what are our universities for? It is a necessary question, and this report shows that decolonisation forms a necessary part of the answer.



## **1. Get educated about decolonisation and end its conflation with equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives**

*Decolonisation is very sexy, but the understanding of it is very limited ... people seem to think that we only care about the reading list and not the wider context of what education should be. That is a bridge we need to cross at some point.*

*– Fope Olaleye, NUS Black Students' Officer*

*What is happening right now?*

Despite decolonisation's rising profile, my interviewees testified that misconceptions about decolonisation are prevalent, and have created a subsequent knowledge gap in the sector that impedes progress. According to Evan, a former students' union sabbatical officer, 'the biggest problem facing efforts to decolonise the curriculum is the fact that it's not clear what the success criteria are'.

'There isn't really a very articulate debate about it', said William, chair of a Russell Group Humanities department. He finds conversations about decolonisation difficult because they lack direction: 'You hear the term "decolonisation of the curriculum" without knowing necessarily exactly what that entails'. As a result, he said, 'What we have never done at any stage is sit down and confront the question of, "what does decolonisation mean? Do we think we should do it or not?"'

Kate, a policy adviser to universities on decolonised and

inclusive practices, observes this confusion in the sector regularly:

*A lot of people on the ground are not aware of how big an issue and how big a debate this is in terms of its implications, but also in terms of its scope ... I think there's a lot of misunderstanding, a lot of gaps in people's knowledge.*

Kate identified that leaders in institutions are also anxious about the subject of decolonisation because of its controversy and perceived radicalism:

*There is a fear, there is a reaction. There are people consciously bristling because they don't know what this thing is. It's the relationship with the activism – in many spaces that immediately makes people worried.*

Indeed, in William's case, this concern is a barrier to starting discussions at all. He said: 'You can't necessarily agree on what's important, so you don't necessarily ask those questions.' The idea that a world-leading department is unable to ask itself such fundamental pedagogical questions is a concerning one, as Evan pointed out:

*[Universities] do not address head on questions of curriculum design because they don't need to ... [but] I think that's a fundamental question ... I do very strongly believe that we should know what we want to do and that that would guide what we actually do.*

Added to this is the widespread perception that decolonisation is about the substitution of non-Western content for existing content, and therefore poses a threat to established academics.

For instance, William said:

*[There is] a kind of unstated but implicit view, which I'd have a lot of sympathy with, that European histories and British histories are important histories, particularly for us located where we are in the world. So, we would want to protect those even if we don't necessarily want to privilege them. Or if we don't necessarily want to assume their importance, we might want to argue their importance.*

Although William is not opposed to decolonisation in principle, his impression of it invokes anxieties which naturally make him less likely to be an advocate.

Indeed, in some cases, even those consciously enacting decolonial policies try to avoid the term 'decolonisation'. Caroline, the Vice Chancellor of a prestigious university, praised the principles of decolonisation:

*[I like] the fact that it takes on board the notion that the curriculum has frequently been constructed in a way that reflects the attitudes and the dominant social mores of what may be regarded as a past generation, and therefore is open to challenge. I think the curriculum always needs to be challenged, and therefore to approach from a decolonising perspective is very valuable.*

However, she went on to say that she preferred not to use the term decolonisation because 'it sounds like you're taking something out, and in my mind, it doesn't fully do justice to the potential richness that you might be putting in'. Despite her policies – such as hiring students of colour to help evaluate curricula and hosting decolonial scholars – Caroline prefers the term 'diverse curriculum'.

Finally, decolonisation is often raised in the same sentence as widening participation (WP), access and equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives (EDI). This leads to policies such as more inclusive reading lists and the narrowing of BAME awarding gaps, which are thought to suit the agendas of both decolonisation and diversification.

'I also find it interesting that when we start a conversation talking about decolonisation it very quickly gets translated into, "this is a discussion about the BAME [Black, Asian & Minority Ethnic] attainment gap"' Kate said. Preferring the term awarding gap, to reflect that the problem is one of implicit bias rather than student performance, she acknowledged that a full conversation about race equality in universities demands an examination of 'how an institution has historically been constructed for certain students and not others', which is pertinent to decolonisation. But, she said, 'flipping that and saying decolonisation is about the awarding gap – that's limiting'.

The example of reading lists was raised by every respondent, who frequently heard proposals to add scholars of colour to reading lists being classed as decolonising. Kate and Eloise, a lecturer in Modern British History, both described it as 'a classic' example of a small, and therefore limiting, change. Eloise continued, 'People are using the word decolonisation to virtue signal when nothing's going on, but they want to be seen to be on board with it'.

### *What needs to change?*

All but two respondents identified universities' conflation of decolonisation with widening participation and EDI as the most damaging misconception about decolonisation, arguing

this allowed tokenistic or unrelated measures to be rebranded as decolonial.

Caroline said of her approach, 'I don't see the use of widening access terminology as in any way being something caveated or less ambitious than decolonising ... I think that diversity is a radical term'. However, according to Sara Khan, Liberation and Access Officer at Manchester University Students' Union, many in the sector do not share Caroline's view: 'When I hear the word decolonisation, 95% of the time what it actually means is *diversify* the curriculum. And of course the two are completely, completely different'. Sara explained that by conflating the two, 'you're stripping it of its power; of its radical energy; of its teeth, which is incredibly frustrating'.

On the focus on awarding gaps, Layla, a History student at the University of Oxford and Common Ground activist, echoed Kate when describing awarding gaps discussions as 'limiting ... [it's] not going back and revisiting what's already being taught and why it's being taught'. Fope, Black Students' Officer at the National Union of Students (NUS), said:

*People don't seem to understand what we're talking about. There's that quote, 'when we are talking about decolonisation we are simply dreaming of a better tomorrow'. 'Dreaming of a better tomorrow' isn't closing up the shitty gaps that exist today! People are like, 'if it got rid of racism, would you be happy?' And I'm like, no!*

For Fope, the closing of awarding gaps unaccompanied by curricula decolonisation would represent little else than forced

assimilation into curricula steeped in whiteness. Their view was echoed by Sara:

*I'm thinking – ‘universities fully think that if they close the Black attainment gaps they've dealt with racism! That's really dangerous ... it's essentially saying: you've taught Black students how to succeed in the white liberal institution and to, like, assimilate.*

For most people I interviewed, the conflation of decolonisation with EDI creates an impression of decolonisation as a collection of surface-level changes rather than a deep re-evaluation. As Margot Finn, President of the Royal Historical Society (RHS) put it: 'This is not only about diversity and inclusion, it's about: must we, should we, can we rethink the structures of knowledge? And that's where decolonisation is different than diversification.'

Theo, a Professor of African History, argued that this perception is a fundamental misunderstanding of the decolonisation project: 'This is not a question of censorship or closing things down. It's rather the opposite of that!'

Beth Davies-Kumadiro, a graduate of the University of Oxford and former Rhodes Must Fall member who later founded the Common Ground movement, said:

*People are never erasing people from the curriculum; they're just saying let's broaden it out and they're saying let's include other things ... I think when people hear 'decolonising the curriculum', they're like, 'Oh my gosh, we're not going to do Shakespeare anymore. Oh God. We won't study all these old white men philosophers, that's a disaster!' No one's actually saying that.*



Kate, too, argued that decolonisation is about addition rather than subtraction:

*It's not this tearing down. It's not 'we're going to get rid of all the dead white men on the reading list.' It's contextualising them. It's putting them in their place. What you're tearing down is who is privileged, and assumptions of whose voice is the norm.*

Sara was equally clear that diversity was not the way to fix syllabuses: 'I don't think that a few Brown faces on a reading list is liberation'.

*How do we change?*

Given that the sector cannot act effectively without a solid grasp of what decolonisation is, how might universities go about filling the gaps in their knowledge?

First, institutions must begin to regard decolonisation as a project as important as, but distinct from, existing widening participation and equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives. This is as much an attitude shift as a practical one. A number of respondents advocated that, as Margot Finn said: 'We have to always think of "both and", not "either or"'. Indeed, Theo repeated the 'both and' maxim verbatim. Put simply, decolonisation should be considered a separate category requiring its own policy action.

Secondly, academics and policymakers can engage with both existing resources and upcoming ones. The recent book *Decolonising the University* is available online. It offers a variety of articles tackling decolonisation both in theory and in practice, and expands on many of the themes raised

in this paper. Also available are recent reports from the Royal Historical Society (RHS) and the Centre for Labour and Social Studies (CLASS).<sup>5</sup> These reports focus on decolonisation case studies and make practical recommendations. The University of Brighton has started a journal, *Decolonising the Curriculum: Teaching and Learning about Race Equality*, which is now on its second issue.<sup>6</sup> In addition, at the RHS, Shahmima Akhtar, Past and Present Fellow: Race, Ethnicity and Equality, has launched a blog called 'Race Updates' on the RHS website, which is a fortnightly digest on subjects related to race, ethnicity and equality in UK History Higher Education aimed at those actively engaged in race equality work – for example, postgraduate students, professional services staff and academics.<sup>8</sup>

Thirdly, many advocates of decolonisation emphasise that a less defensive approach from universities is crucial, as exemplified by the success of SOAS' approach to the issue. Decolonising our universities is a large project, but as Margot pointed out, it must start with 'getting a toe wet ... small insertions can make for radical changes.'

## **2. Reprioritise: decolonisation is both pedagogically necessary and academically rigorous**

*One of the central functions of higher education for me – as a former student and now a lecturer – is to better understand the world we live in so that we can transform it; make it more just and equitable. The decolonise movement speaks to that imperative in critical ways.*

*– Kerry Pimblott, lecturer*

*What is happening right now?*

Respondents observed that one of the primary barriers against change is the widespread belief in the sector that decolonising is, for a variety of reasons, simply not a priority.

William, for example, said that while his department has not had ‘a direct discussion’ about its priorities:

*The sorts of things that we can agree about as [academics] is that we want people to be doing good work which is intellectually interesting, and creative, and is going to change the agenda. And relatively few, probably, of the body of [academics in my department] as a whole would want to say, ‘that’s all very well, but over and above that we ought to have a decolonisation priority.’*

There is, of course, no need to juxtapose decolonisation and intellectual rigour. For decolonial activists and practitioners, this is a false dichotomy: as Kate told me, ‘It makes me immensely sad and frustrated that on a regular basis I’m still having a conversation about diversity versus excellence.’

Respondents also testified that current debates about decolonisation, because they are linked so heavily to EDI, often revolve around the benefit to BAME students. In the course of Beth's time as an activist, she observed that 'people see this work being led by students of colour and they see it as a race issue'. Beth acknowledged the obvious relevance of race, but said: 'Can we just look at the world around us? ... There are so many issues here that are of relevance. Of course it's not just about students of colour.' Kate agreed:

*[We're] not talking just about how you change yourselves and the curriculum to benefit different groups, but talking about how all students benefit ... about diversity competence: this concept that the students will leave being better, more aware, more critical academics and members of society than they were when they arrived.*

Indeed, Beth felt that current curricula fail to prepare students for life in the modern world through a misguided set of priorities:

*If you think about all the problems with identity and globalisation now – we could be studying things that show us how to deal with these new problems that are emerging in the world. You need Humanities and Arts and Ethics, and people who think in that way, to be able to tackle them. If you keep studying witchcraft only, it's not going to be that applicable is it?*

The small number of spaces available on courses that, if not decolonial, have more non-Western content, is also an issue, as William said: 'People are coming here and seeing a rich array of courses and then find that they can't necessarily do the ones they want to'. Again, the department has not directly tackled

this issue of demand, but this prompted William to wonder, 'Are we doing enough to tap the intellectual impulses of the students?'

Respondents noticed that such questions were being left unasked in institutions, as Evan said: 'It's easy to fall into a rut'. William agreed, also raising concerns he feels unable to voice:

*Some of the things I was saying about radically changing the way we teach – I mean, I do, I think about that kind of thing all the time. [I've] never sat down seriously and thought how to start a conversation about that with my colleagues. Partly because of the pressure of what you actually have to do, and partly calculating what's easier to deliver. So I think it's important in a sense, to keep pressure on universities around decolonisation otherwise – even though there's a lot of good will out there – they won't necessarily prioritise what are inevitably difficult conversations.*

This testimony is striking, but the issues William raised are familiar to Kate:

*It doesn't surprise me that people are like, 'well, we're not sure about this.' Because they don't have that critical mass pressure to do this now ... But there's also not that critical safety in numbers ... it's this risk aversion.*

Finally, every respondent identified the scarcity of resources as a key point in discussions about decolonisation. William described his department's budget as 'relatively inelastic'. Though they are trying to think more strategically about post-holders and investing in access initiatives, he said, large-scale investment in decolonisation is not on the horizon.

## *What needs to change?*

Respondents were keen to bust the myth that decolonisation decreases academic rigour. On the contrary, they emphasised that decolonisation mandates a reassessment of courses and pedagogy that would actually raise academic standards. Evan described decolonisation as ‘one of the questions that you would address if you had a clear view of curriculum design and what it is that you wanted to do with your curriculum’. In other words, decolonisation plays a vital part in formulating curricula with purpose. As Fope explained:

*How do we educate people to the best of their abilities? How do we make sure that everyone sees themselves in their education? I think most importantly, how do you make every single student feel like they have some sort of ownership over the knowledge that we are giving them? I'm going to answer the question. Marketisation doesn't work with that. Having courses specifically dedicated to white European history doesn't work with that. Having curricula that is really isolating ... just doesn't work with that.*

Many students and academics felt that curricula were failing on multiple levels. Beth voiced the desire for curricula that:

*Understood the tensions and frustrations that exist in our societies, and that are increasingly having an impact in many different places in the world. And yet hardly anyone's thinking about it. It's honestly scary to me that we don't have people thinking about this kind of new social contract and thinking about race in this political way.*

Kate, who graduated from university several years ago, raised the gaps in her own learning:

*I know how absolutely livid I am about how limited my [Social Science] degree studies were. Like, how angry I am on a personal level that there was stuff I missed out on; stuff that was hidden for me.*

Given the centrality of decolonisation to producing good teaching, many respondents felt that arguments against decolonisation that are grounded in resources become weak in the face of pedagogical imperative. Evan said, 'This *is* what we need to be doing. It's not additional, it's core'. Beth asked:

*In what other world would it cut it to be like, 'Oh yeah, we just don't have the money?' We're like, 'Start looking at your finances and work out where the money is and how you're going to redirect it!'*

Academics, too, regarded decolonisation as essential, despite concerns about their workload. Eloise said, '[People say] we're already exploited, so how do we do this "additional labour"? Which it's not; it's not additional labour, but it's *shifting* your labour, and it's part of your job'. Hussein Omar, now a lecturer in Modern Global History at University College Dublin, agreed that this was about reprioritisation. Referring to his previous institution, the University of Oxford, he said:

*It's just a question of the right amount of willpower. The attempted curricular overhaul that they made in the last few years was a complete farce because [the changes] were really just cosmetic. But they made some very serious curriculum reform; they did change the structure of the curriculum, but not where it actually mattered. So I just*

*don't buy this claim that these are logistical problems. Then why are they able to change some things but not others?*

For advocates of decolonisation, the debate about its merits has long since ended – Eloise said, 'It never was a debate; it's the right thing to do, it's a moral obligation'. Beth expressed frustration at the lack of progress: 'If they took an objective, critical look at the curriculum, they could so easily identify the gaps. But they haven't really done that'.

Finally, respondents raised that decolonisation should be viewed as beneficial to all – especially because the demand for decolonisation is there among white students. Nicole, a curriculum developer, said, 'When I did my research at [my previous university], all the participants were white, and they were really actively trying to push decolonising the curriculum'. For Nicole, protestations that students are not interested in decolonising their universities 'provide the veil of white fragility for academics to not engage [with decolonisation]'.

Shahmima felt the same:

*The idea that students aren't interested – that's just a complete fallacy ... these modules are massively oversubscribed when they are presented. And essentially what that hides is that the white academics don't want to go to the trouble of researching these 'foreign' areas. They don't want to go out of their comfort zone, so they reproduce the same kind of modules.*

Ultimately, respondents argued that decolonisation is central to a rounded, fulfilling and rigorous university education.



## *How do we change?*

First, advocates for decolonisation stress the importance of reprioritisation in order to centre decolonisation in an institution's aims. Such attitude change requires strong leadership. Caroline led this at her university, which has recently reoriented its mission statement: 'If you want to get culture change, you have to show that you are prepared to give leadership and show how that develops.'

Kate suggested that motivation could also be found in existing aims. She pointed out institutions' need for 'a truly global, reflective, inclusive British education' in the wake of Brexit, and also said:

*Most universities have now got mission statements or are looking at graduate attributes – things like, 'our students will be global citizens' or 'our students will be competitive on the global marketplace'. So ... if your students are not getting the richest curriculum if they are seeing things from only a UK history [perspective] with its selective amnesia and so forth, then they're not going to be able to interact in the world.*

Secondly, activists recognised the funding issue, but suggested that universities see it as an opportunity rather than a constraint. Beth said:

*I think universities have had to change significantly because of the way that the funding structure has changed. And they're struggling with that. But then that also presents an opportunity to change with that. It means that we're in a febrile time. So I would say, 'Okay, so we have a lot more international students. How are*

*the curricula reflecting that? What are we doing with that money?'*

Thirdly, respondents talked of decolonisation beyond demand: the importance of instituting policies with the genuine motivation to improve pedagogy, rather than simply to respond to demand and improve public relations, to ensure that changes are not tokenistic.

Fourthly, institute evaluation practices in a manageable way. Margot suggested doing so departmentally, motivating academics to evaluate their own disciplines through a sense of ownership:

*We're saying, 'okay, this is the thing you can change. You may not be able to change the entire structure of the university, but you own your curriculum'. I think there's power there. And also when people are really pressed for time, they're willing to do something that matters to them, and their own curriculum matters to them.*

Theo testified to the huge benefits of decolonising in his own discipline:

*[It's] been energetic and important and challenging. I wouldn't be doing the intellectual work I'm doing in the way I'm doing it now if it wasn't for decolonising the curriculum ... we've opened a good set of chaotic, difficult to answer questions about what historical teaching and writing and research involves. That means it is feeding through in positive ways into historical work.*

Finally, Kate encouraged institutions to do their re-evaluating work with transparency:

*The number of universities I've worked with who are doing really deep work; having really difficult conversations; staff who are incredibly committed to social justice and really making the change. But the uni as a beast, um, doesn't want to show its workings until it's got it right ... [decolonisation] is not something you get to, it's something you continue to do. So if that is true, when are you getting there? If you're waiting for that 'get there' point, it's not going to happen.*

Thus, only both open and genuine commitment to decolonisation from institutions can ensure the 'constant learning and unlearning' that the process entails.



### 3. Fund BAME research

*They use the excuse that 'we haven't got any money', and that a lot of universities 'don't realise' that they can impose positive action. But they don't do it because they don't really want more scholars of colour in the faculty. Because deep down they don't value that knowledge and they don't value those types of people. That's the bottom line.*

*Nicole, lecturer*

*What is happening right now?*

Respondents said a key element of decolonisation is the instituting of something akin to Black Studies in the Humanities; and better funding of both decolonised research and BAME scholars. William identified 'Black British History as a priority area that we think we really do need somebody in ... it's an area of growing historical importance, and it's an area a lot of the students want to study'. For Kerry, a Lecturer in International History, training outside the UK was necessary to carry out the work she does now:

*That is the reason I went to train in the US too, because there was a robust critical race and Black Studies tradition in higher education.*

Kerry also pointed out the lack of funding available for BAME PhD candidates: 'The numbers are terrible ... they should also be paid attention to.'<sup>7</sup> Beyond financial help, Kerry is also

concerned about the lack of BAME research in the UK forming a vicious cycle with a lack of mentorship for young scholars:

*I just find for my students, if you don't coincidentally have one good instructor that's working in that field, it is extraordinarily difficult to get the kind of mentorship that you can get in some parts of the US system. And this is intimately connected to the failure of UK institutions to invest in hiring scholars with relevant expertise, and scholars of colour in general regardless of research area.*

Kerry is optimistic about the 'growing number of young scholars, who are doing really great work', but feels that a lot more needs to be done by UK institutions.

Margot, Shahmima, Nicole and Kerry all say that, where BAME-specific scholarships are concerned, part of the problem lies in confusion and anxiety over the implementation of the Equality Act 2010. All confirmed that scholarships are different to employment, and while positive discrimination in employment is prohibited, minority-specific scholarships are legal. Referring to workshops the Royal Historical Society ran as part of the writing of their report on race in History teaching, Margot said:

*One of the things that we found in workshopping that has been most important is the number of people who do not know that legally they can offer BAME-only fellowships, at Master's and PhD [level].*

Even where hiring is concerned, universities' perceived lack of interest in BAME and decolonised research – which stems from their inaction on funding such research – is making them less attractive to those who are already doing the work. Hussein, referring to his time at Oxford, said:

*The excuse that they often give when making these hiring decisions is, 'Oh, the applicant pool wasn't diverse. There's nothing we could do because we didn't get the right kind of applicants.' And of course that's an absurd thing because the question that should be asked is, 'Why are all these brilliant South Asianists and Middle East historians and African historians not applying for these jobs? Why are non-white people not applying to top universities at the job level?'*

*What needs to change?*

Respondents argued that Black Studies in Britain across the Humanities needs investment: Beth asserted that a school of Black Studies would add an 'extra line of thought' to academia, contributing to decolonisation in a broader sense. Kerry agreed, describing the benefits of this shift in the US as 'having significantly advanced knowledge and understanding of African diaspora experience and the ongoing import of race and racism in contemporary society'.

Currently, although research is happening, it is not being represented in undergraduate courses – which, again, makes it more difficult for students to become interested in decolonised history. Beth said:

*The point of university is to produce new knowledge. Why isn't that coming through undergraduate level? Why hasn't there been a change over the past – however long – to reflect what's going on at the research level?*

In addition, curricula decolonisation would both empower BAME students, and arm students with the knowledge they need to progress to further decolonial study. Eli, a graduate of

the University of Oxford and former Common Ground activist, put this link simply: 'It's not a decolonised university if you have a wide range of curricula but taught by a completely unrepresentative staff to a completely unrepresentative student body'. Layla explained that this was part of decolonising the whole sector:

*I don't think you can decolonise the curriculum in isolation from decolonising other practices within the university, whether that's the relationship with staff that exists at all levels of the university; hiring practices when it comes to BAME staff; that kind of thing.*

Fope emphasised the importance of using funding to help decolonise the university as a space:

*Talking about the tuition fees, talking about who is allowed to go to [university] and who isn't, is a really, really necessary step, because there's no point in talking about decolonisation if we can't even like talk about who's allowed to get into university. Who can afford to be in these spaces?*

Kerry agreed, picking up on the imposter syndrome experienced by scholars from marginalised groups:

*In addition to the very real institutional barriers, I think there can be a sense of conflict about being in the sector for people from working class families and people of colour, like, 'Should I be in here?' But we need people from those backgrounds in this institution to change it ... [and] there's got to be a transformation of the space for people to be able to stay here; to thrive here; to change it.*



## *How do we change?*

First, the sector must make funding BAME scholars a priority. Given that we know this lack of investment is already making UK universities less desirable to such scholars, this shift should be implemented as soon as possible. As Margot put it:

*I think we should look at what the Equality Act 2010 allows us to do ... And they should be doing that. That's my personal view ... It's legal, and I say we desperately need that.*

Secondly, while finding money for scholarships will be possible at many institutions through reprioritisation, where it is not, respondents unanimously called for national funding. Eloise suspected that such backing would ease reluctance and anxiety in the sector:

*We need the national institutions to go, 'This is what you will use this money for'. And then to slap a bit of prestige on it and say, 'You're going to give it to BAME students and away you go' – there would be no actual objection to it.*

Kerry echoed this need for national investment:

*I would like to see real commitment by government, universities and philanthropic organisations to investing real funding into students of colour coming into particular disciplines where they are under-represented, and providing mentorship and support at the institutional level, so that universities would have to buy in the whole way through their education – from undergrad all the way through to PhD.*

Thirdly, respondents stressed the need to build a decolonised

and British-specific Black Studies from the ground up. Kerry flagged important initiatives already underway in this area, including the Black Studies degree programme at Birmingham City University and the new MA programme in Black British History at Goldsmiths, University of London:

*Black in the British context is a more freighted term with a distinct history, but I strongly believe we need programmes that critically examine people of colour's experiences from their perspectives and worldview and standpoint.*

Finally, Kerry spoke to the need for people of colour to be supported in taking the lead in this undertaking: 'Hiring people of colour to lead that work, to create new paradigms, approaches and methods of study ... I mean, that simply has to happen.'<sup>9</sup>

## **4. Tackle discrimination, hostility and unconscious bias**

*I think there needs to be a recognition there that these environments are violent, really, and that people need to be able to go through university in a way that allows them to think rather than shuts them down from the outset.*

*– Beth Davies-Kumadiro, activist*

*What is happening right now?*

Respondents testified that decolonisation and its proponents are treated with animosity. Such discrimination is often veiled from white colleagues, but is shown to its full extent here. Beth said:

*I think decolonisation generally is both kind of belittled and mocked, and really hated on quite a deep level ... just the experience that students have at these institutions can be really like awful.*

Nicole, speaking from the staff perspective, agreed:

*There's just this real resistance in the sector, and that is ingrained and embedded in whiteness. And it's the imperial views and attitudes which are stopping this work.*

Staff of colour said that their approach has been met with outright hostility. Nicole, a Black woman, described an incident at her previous university:

*I delivered a developing cultural competence workshop and it was really negative – some of the comments were just downright rude. The session wasn't great; I felt like it*

*was a very hostile environment. So a lot of the work I do, I'm [now] having to co-deliver with a white member of staff. So there is this real tension in my practices of how my work is perceived as a woman of colour.*

Nicole is not alone in receiving this treatment. Kate, who is white, said:

*We're always very conscious about, wherever possible, having a team of a white presenter and presenter of colour. Because we're conscious of the backlash that the presenter of colour does and can have in those spaces.*

Despite her expertise, Nicole feels routinely patronised and underestimated:

*I get that triple jeopardy – I'm a woman of colour, and I've actually got a lot more experience than most of the people I train. And then there's the added layer; I haven't got my doctorate. I don't even think having a doctorate will actually make a scrap of difference. They'll still treat me the same.*

Furthermore, staff feared job insecurity because of the reputation of decolonising work. Kerry pointed to the 'heavy burden borne by staff actively working on this front, particularly staff of colour, who often do so without institutional support or recognition'. Nicole had personal experience:

*I've missed out on job opportunities because of the work that I do. When you turn up to the interview and you talk about the work, you see the colour drain from their faces, and I've been to quite a few interviews where it's like, 'We're not interested in that.' So it does get quite alienating.*

Speaking about experiences like Nicole's, Layla said, 'It always will be women of colour, typically Black women, who are going to be demonised the most when they're trying to make the case.'

Activists spoke about the toll this work takes on students of colour. Fope said, 'I didn't realise how exhausting it was until I got into university where I was constantly critiquing the way [white people] acted'. Beth articulated the frustration and alienation that many activists testified to:

*Only so long can you protest a very racist statue, very racist people, telling you they're not racist. Ignoring you, disrespecting you. Not listening to any of your concerns. Literally giving you so much disrespect. It's from all angles ... And you'll have people saying stuff literally to your face.*

Finally, students had anecdotal evidence that students who write critically about race or other decolonial topics do less well in exams. This has prompted a narrative of caution among people of colour in universities. Beth said:

*I'd heard a lot of students from ACS [African & Caribbean Society] and just students in the year above being like, 'Don't talk about race in exams, Black things get marked worse' and stuff like this. And I was always a bit sceptical because you know, it's blind marked, it's double marked. You know, who's going to know? And then I was facing it [saying], 'Well, yeah, it would have an effect, because it makes it really hard to answer questions in a way that's different from other students, who might just go along with it more easily.'*

Sara explained that universities are rarely aware of the subtleties of unconscious bias:

*Loads of universities think that anonymous marking solves racism. But of course it doesn't, because what you are describing is writing critical pieces on race, on gender, on trans issues and then getting marked down by someone who doesn't know that you wrote it. They are reading that you were writing something radical. That is what's getting you marked down.*

This issue is tied to the fact that marking criteria are rarely interrogated or included in institutions' vision for decolonisation. William said of his own department:

*I think our grade descriptors are quite weak, actually. I think we could have better criteria both for markers and for students ... I don't think we've ever really sat down and [asked] 'What are we asking students to do? What is good and useful in the way that we teach, and in the exercises we ask students to do, and what is just traditional?' ... I think universities could tear up a lot of what they do actually.*

Evan felt that complacency was blocking these changes: 'No, it doesn't surprise me at all that they've never looked at marking for finals – because it would be a faff for them'.

*What needs to change?*

Many respondents linked unconscious bias in marking criteria to the BAME awarding gap and found institutions' lack of action on the issue frustrating. For Sara, this exposes the fallacy of narrow definitions of decolonisation: 'They somehow think

that we can put a Band Aid on a bullet wound by putting Toni Morrison on the reading list! And it's just not going to happen.

Beth explained the decision students of colour are being forced to make between their academic integrity and their results:

*I genuinely don't know how to go into this exam and answer the questions in a way that isn't just blatantly racist. The entire framework is kind of racist. So do you completely reject all the historiography, and therefore have nothing really to fall back on ... or just go along with it, you know?*

Sara expressed this too:

*If I, a non-binary lesbian of colour, am going to write something really critiquing whiteness, or gender, or talking about trans history – if I'm going to do that, which is something I really want to do ... What guarantee do I have that it isn't going to ruin my life?*

Such feelings of alienation drastically affect student potential and student wellbeing. As Beth said:

*It's exactly that feeling when you just feel so deflated, you're like, 'What's the fucking point?' ... Like it takes a lot, and people were really crushed by that, a lot of people were really crushed.*

The bias that staff experience is causing similar levels of alienation. As Nicole said: 'The burden is down to academics

of colour, they get burnt out, and there's a lot of bullying in the sector attached to this work'. Kate agreed:

*I've also seen the immense, immense, palpable frustration of a lot of staff, particularly staff of colour who are saying, 'The time for conversation has been and gone, and been and gone, and been and gone'. Everyone is just at their wits end.*

Almost all respondents testified that a hostile environment exists for people of colour in their institutions. Beth described her old Oxford college, for example, as 'a space of horror for people, especially when you don't really have that one Black student in each college'.

However, both staff and students feel unable to raise these issues, despite the fact that a hostile environment is now written into the definition of harassment in many universities' harassment policies. Hussein said:

*People who have been the victims of this kind of thing have just not felt like they had the right to raise this as an issue, or felt that this would be completely futile, which it probably would have been.*

Sara, who has acted as an advocate for students in this position as part of their role, agreed:

*I think students are completely justified in feeling like, 'Maybe I don't want to do this because I won't be able to graduate' ... Say my lecturer's been racist to me. I won't be able to say anything because I won't have a future after that.*

*How do we change?*

First, these experiences show that the decolonisation of institutions has become an imperative for the safety and



wellbeing of people of colour. But the level of bias and hostility is too great to be tackled through the well-meaning actions of a few individuals, and instead requires a structural shift. Respondents recommended that institutions face this head-on; as Eli said: 'Even though you might call yourself anti-racist, you still exist in a space in which, unless you're actively challenging it, all the structures of society will naturally reoccur'.

Institutions must centre student and staff experience – and people of colour themselves – in their decolonisation efforts in order to avoid inadvertently implementing biased or tokenistic policies. New projects must have people of colour as leads who are supported by white staff: 'white members of staff need to use their privilege to intervene and speak up', Kate recommended.

Nicole stressed the importance of interrogating staff and students' positionality before even approaching curricula:

*The first step is about training on what decolonising the curriculum [is], and offering some critical reflexive activities to get them to think about whiteness, and privilege, and the damaging effects of colonialism within their subject area.*

For students and staff feeling isolated, Kerry recommended the building up of cross-institutional networks: 'The foundation to sustain the human beings that will be able to implement change across the sector'.

Finally, staff alienation is not only distressing, it is unproductive: we need such staff to show us how to improve our institutions. Universities must engage fully with experts on issues such as unconscious bias, and interrogate both their harassment

procedures and their marking criteria along these lines. Only with an approach to decolonisation that reaches beyond curricula can universities face their structural issues and, eventually, enable people of colour to thrive.

## **5. Institutionalise decolonisation: create departmental roles and engage students**

*Whether anyone will admit it or not, activism is effective, because these conversations would not be happening if these movements didn't exist. I mean, this is an entirely student-led initiative and now, no matter how many times faculties try to claim ownership over this, they are very much the latecomers to these debates.*

*– Hussein Omar, lecturer*

*What is happening right now?*

As respondents' testimony has made clear, decolonising efforts in institutions – and especially within departments – are rarely institutionalised. One of the major issues is a lack of training and direction, which results in a lack of action. Nicole explained: 'There are a lot of disciplinary experts, but they're not educational developers, and that's why there are problems.'

Kerry, an academic herself, agreed:

*We are often very uneducated on these issues too, because most of us don't research in the area of pedagogy. We don't research in the area of the university that we work in ... there's zero training, and it's a really big issue.*

This vacuum of staff equipped to lead decolonisation means that the process is often underestimated by universities, as Nicole explained:

*There are complexities around university structures that inhibit some of this work as well. You can't just*

*design a curriculum like that, you have to go through certain quality assurance processes that are quite time consuming.*

Furthermore, departmental staff lack the time to make significant changes. William said of his department: 'We need more time to do better ... that would free up people's intellectual impulses as well as their actual time'. From her position as a student and activist, Layla agreed:

*If you have lecturers who are being pressured to publish in a certain way and who are overstretched, they can't be redesigning curricula and they can't be exploring diverse thought.*

Kate, too, observed this in her work:

*They are saying, 'I'm really, I'm absolutely sold. I want to do this. I really do. [But] there is no time. I have no time to stop and think. I have no time to go back and look and enhance and develop my materials. I do not have time, or the confidence to take a risk in changing how I teach.'*

In addition, the subsequent lack of opportunities for young scholars to learn decolonial practices is leaving students shut out of the pedagogical process. Where students and faculty members are able to come together and discuss common aims, Eloise said, the encounters are 'often very, very short and contained and it's really hard to maintain a legacy or a momentum'.

*What needs to change?*

Academics feel strongly that student input into pedagogical decisions is crucial. Hussein said: 'I think there's a very sharp

divide between what faculty debates around the question [of decolonisation] look like and what student debates look like, and was keen to bring student expertise into departmental conversations. Nicole found students an invaluable part of her work: 'You can't just use a toolkit, it's not just a tick-box exercise, you've got to use the students as collaborators'.

Institutional fear around activism translates into reluctance to involve students, but activists' responses displayed their investment in the issue and their willingness to be involved in decolonisation in a meaningful way. Beth, for example, said:

*I feel like a big question for me, maybe because of the way that Rhodes Must Fall was shut down [in 2015], is if we're putting all of this effort in, who are we speaking to? How is it going to work? How is it going to have an impact? What is the impact? What is the legacy? Where are the changes? How do we quantify it?*

Kerry felt that activists' knowledge was significantly ahead of that of departments, and therefore valuable:

*I think the activists are in a really unique position, and they challenge us and make us critically reflect upon the conditions of our labour and the institutions we're a part of.*

Universities' converse lack of experience is halting progress on decolonisation. Nicole linked this to a consequent lack of inclination to change: 'They don't really have the resources, so it does really need a commitment. And the last place I worked at didn't have that commitment'. Hussein agreed: 'I think the problem is that they're unwilling to admit that they don't have the expertise'. This situation is exacerbated by high leadership

turnover and poor institutional memory. Nicole said, 'You can only see real curriculum change when someone is in office for more than a year, and that's problematic because course leadership is usually only one or two years'.

*How do we change?*

First, departments should hire at least one staff member to work specifically on issues pertaining to the decolonisation of their department. This role should be filled by someone who is trained in decolonial pedagogy and could also be a position for an early career scholar. Theo said:

*What I would think about doing is hiring someone on a one- or two-year contract within the department to look at particular areas ... someone that can act as an expert reference point for academics adjusting reading lists or adjusting syllabuses.*

Caroline testified to the transformative power of such intervention:

*I'm a great believer in getting influential people along and asking them to challenge the institutions. I think sometimes it's the only way you get that sense that you've got to do things differently if you really want to see change.*

The establishment of roles like this would not only institutionalise decolonisation in universities and help the careers of young decolonial scholars, who may well be people of colour, but would also take time pressure off other academics who are already struggling with their workloads.

Secondly, universities should institutionalise engagement with students. This could take multiple forms. William said: 'I think

creating fora for dialogues with students is another good idea ... that hardly ever happens'. Eli suggested paying a group of students to work on decolonised reading lists and resources – something that Caroline's university is already doing.

Most importantly, respondents stressed the benefit to the quality of both courses and academic discussion from involving students. Nicole testified to the utility of a coalition with students in decolonising work:

*I really enjoyed working with students in the department. The students, their comments and critiques, they surprised me, and maybe it was ignorant of me to think that white students – I suppose I was getting carried away by the mentality that they wouldn't be interested. And so they surprised me ... They made some really good suggestions. And they were so interested in it. And some of them were even willing to work with me after they'd left university.*

Caroline, after a conversation with two leading women in her university's African and Caribbean Society (ACS), realised the impact that engaging students in their curricula could have:

*[One of them] said, 'I suddenly realised what a difference it made when a member of staff actually seemed to be actively interested in my experience as a person of colour in a way that was an issue within the curriculum. I felt that it gave me a voice which I haven't had in other modules, and I hadn't realised how important it was to me to have that voice. That voice gave me a kind of confidence, which I felt I could then take over into my experience more broadly' ... That was, for me, a really important moment.*

Finally, an experience of Shahmima's underlines the transformative potential of student empowerment through decolonised and representative teaching. Shahmima, who is Brown, was approached by a Brown student of hers:

*He was like, 'I can't look at you right now because I cannot tell you what you teaching me, made me feel'. And I was shocked, I had no idea ... 'Seeing you teach History made me realise I don't have to do a Science degree. I can go full History now. You look like my sister, and I could be you'. And we just didn't look at each other because he was almost tearing up.*

This has fundamentally changed how Shahmima involves students in her teaching:

*I say to my students now when I start my module – because I mainly teach on the British Empire and I mainly teach white males – that I am coming at this from my positionality of a Brown woman. And so, in the first seminar, I get them to reflect on their knowledge and their teaching up to that point. But I would not have done that if this hadn't happened.*

Margot summed up the power of this experience to Shahmima simply: 'Well, you were there. And that made a foundational difference to him'.



## Conclusion

*I think a lot of the work we're doing isn't even for us, it's for in ten or fifteen years; maybe two generations. So that someone who has the exact same story as me has an easier time; has a more realised time at university. And that will be better.*

*– Fope Olaleye, NUS Black Students' Officer*

The effects of systemic racism – whether in the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on communities of colour, or in continued police brutality – have recently sent shockwaves through the political landscape. As movements across the world have argued, this current moment demands decolonisation, and active anti-racism in our universities, more than ever. In addition, the UK's higher education sector is facing myriad uncertainties. From the impact of the Covid-19 crisis to the fallout from Brexit, universities are under more pressure than ever to maintain themselves and to deliver on their core aims. These issues may make that of decolonisation seem a lesser priority; something to be tackled later, not now. What the testimony in this report has proven above all, however, is that decolonisation strikes right at the heart of the core aims of a university education.

What is university for? The answer must strike a balance between idealism and pragmatism, but the process of re-evaluating our courses and interrogating our institutional structures is as much a practical necessity as an intellectual one. For too long, fuelled by anxiety, ignorance and unfounded prejudice, the UK higher education sector has refused to engage sufficiently with decolonisation or its proponents,

even when they come from an institution's own staff or student body. As we have seen, this is thoroughly to its detriment.

The testimony collated in this paper shows a silent crisis is going on in our institutions: a crisis of student and staff wellbeing; of course rigour; and of academic expression. Innovative ideas are not being heard, and UK universities are lagging behind as a result. However, the only thing keeping this crisis silent is the rarity with which the voices heard in this report are able to voice their opinions and come to collective solutions.

Decolonising holds the potential to revamp tired courses, inspire disillusioned staff and equip students with the knowledge they need to face the modern world. This is not a pipe dream. With genuine commitment, it can become a reality. The recommendations of this report are a mixture of discrete policy proposals and broader calls for attitude change. The former may seem outnumbered by the latter, but my respondents emphasised the high impact of a small number of significant changes. In addition, recognising both the stakes and the necessity of decolonisation is a crucial step in itself.

The central aim of this report is to publish candid conversations with academics, activists and policymakers alongside each other, in order to show the transformative power they can wield in discourse about decolonisation. My respondents raised far more topics than could be included here; from the decolonisation of the Sciences to that of LGBTQ spaces. It is my hope that this report prompts further research into these equally important areas. My more fervent hope, however, is that the UK higher education sector will instigate more conversations like the one facilitated here. As the passionate

resurgence of anti-racist movements in Britain in 2020 has shown, engaging in such conversations is vital to the progress of both our society and its higher education institutions. Oriel College, Oxford's recent vote to remove its statue of Cecil Rhodes is a symbolic victory for the movement to decolonise universities – but we must view it as only the first step towards meaningful change in our universities. Only then can we begin to ask the questions that decolonisation demands of us.



## Endnotes

- 1 A more detailed exposition of decolonisation is given in Keele University's Manifesto for decolonising the curriculum; see <https://www.keele.ac.uk/equalitydiversity/equalityawards/raceequalitycharter/keeledecolonisingthecurriculumnetwork/#keele-manifesto-fordecolonisingthe-curriculum>
- 2 Hannah Atkinson et al., *Race, Ethnicity & Equality in UK History: A Report and Resource for Change*, The Royal Historical Society, 2018 [https://files.royalhistsoc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/17205337/RHS\\_race\\_report\\_EMBARGO\\_0001\\_18Oct.pdf](https://files.royalhistsoc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/17205337/RHS_race_report_EMBARGO_0001_18Oct.pdf)
- 3 Beth Davies-Kumadiro, University of Oxford graduate and co-founder of Common Ground Oxford.
- 4 See <https://commonground-oxford.com>
- 5 Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nisancıoglu (eds.), *Decolonising the University*, 2018; Various authors, *A New Vision for Further and Higher Education: Essay Collection*, the Centre for Labour and Social Studies (CLASS), 2019. Also see: Remi Joseph-Salisbury, Stephen Ashe, Claire Alexander & Karis Champion, *Race and Ethnicity in British Sociology*, British Sociological Association, forthcoming, accessible at [https://es.britisoc.co.uk/bsaCommentary/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/BSA\\_race\\_and\\_ethnicity\\_in\\_british\\_sociology\\_report\\_pre\\_publication\\_version.pdf](https://es.britisoc.co.uk/bsaCommentary/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/BSA_race_and_ethnicity_in_british_sociology_report_pre_publication_version.pdf)
- 6 Marlon Moncrieffe et al. (eds.), *Decolonising the Curriculum: Teaching and Learning about Race Equality*, University of Brighton, Issue 1, July 2019 and Issue 2, December 2019.
- 7 The RHS Race Update is accessible at <https://blog.royalhistsoc.org/race-update/>
- 8 While BAME entry rates are rising, there are still significant barriers to BAME progression to PhD. See <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/bme-students-more-likely-do-masters-not-research> and <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/sep/12/look-at-how-white-the-academy-is-why-bame-students-arent-doing-phds>; Paulette

Williams, Sukhi Bath, Jason Arday & Chantelle Lewis, *The Broken Pipeline: Barriers to Black PhD Students Accessing Research Council Funding*, Leading Routes Report, September 2019.

- 9 The Race Equality Charter Mark, and its limitations, also has a part to play in resolving the issues raised in this section. The Race Equality Charter Mark is discussed in depth in Kalwant Bhopal, *Race matters: Addressing competing inequalities in higher education*, in Hugo Dale-Rivas (ed), *The white elephant in the room: ideas for reducing racial inequalities in higher education*, HEPI, 2019 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-white-elephant-in-the-room-ideas-for-reducing-racial-inequalities-in-higher-education.pdf>.

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Decolonisation is rapidly becoming a familiar term in our higher education institutions. Students and activist groups have helped decolonisation move onto the national agenda, backed by recent worldwide events surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement. Despite its newfound popularity, there is still substantial disagreement and misunderstanding about what 'decolonisation' actually entails.

Using testimony from 16 interview respondents across academia, activism and policy, this report addresses the common misconceptions about decolonisation and recommends a series of practical steps towards its implementation.

The findings of *Miseducation* demonstrate that decolonisation is both a vital and a beneficial next step for our universities.

HEPI was established in 2002 to influence the higher education debate with evidence.

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