

BHM 2021 Presentations*Decolonising the University (21 Oct)***Suki Haider & Shannon Martin:**

SUKI: All right. Welcome. The Reverend William Knibb, an abolitionist and missionary in Jamaica, symbolically buried slave shackles, a whip, and a collar in a coffin to mark the enactment of the abolition of Slavery Act In 1834.

He declared the monster is dead. The monster wasn't dead. Slavery continued long after in the British colonies under the name of indentured labour, forced labour. And as late as 1948, colonial officials privately acknowledged that domestic slavery existed in Ghana.

Abolitionists, in fact, never believed in racial equality. They believe that slavery was immoral, but they considered white people superior. The monster's offspring live on wherever we see the unequal distribution of power, privilege, and resources between whites and minorities racial groups.

And we know the monster's offspring. We've seen the monster's offspring. We've seen the monster's offspring in the racist Brexit campaign, in the disproportionate impact of COVID, in the disproportionate use of stop and search against Black male youth. And we've seen it in the universities UK report on tackling racial harassment in higher education.

Frantz Fanon, the West Indian psychiatrist political philosopher, and one of the most important anti-colonial writers said, the view of the world is white because no Black voice exists. We're going to talk about decolonising the University.

I'm going to start by looking at what we mean by this and what's the difference between a decolonised curriculum and an inclusive curriculum. And then I'm going to consider some of the difficulties that I've identified with decolonising the university. Then I'll hand over to Shannon, and she'll talk about her PhD.

And then I'll come in again and talk about some good practice that I've identified in the sector in terms of decolonising. And I'll also identify some opportunities that I've seen for the OU to

align with decolonising. And then we'll end the session with Shannon's research and an invitation for you to get involved.

So first of all, we'll introduce ourselves. I'm Suki. And I'm an AL in history. And I've also been working on the inclusive curriculum tool. I've been involved in leading conversations with students on decolonising the curriculum. And I've been doing that probably now for about two years. Shannon.

SHANNON: Hi. I'm Shannon. And I'm a first year PhD student based in FASS. I'm currently working on my research project, which is titled Decolonising the University, a case study of the Open University. And my undergraduate degree is in Sociology, and I have a master's degree in criminology. And my research interests revolve around topics of race, racism, decolonisation, and sexuality.

SUKI: Thanks. So, to begin with, what's the difference between inclusive, diverse, and decolonised curricula? All right. So, we know what inclusive curriculum is. It's about promoting the representation of different groups and celebrating diversity. It's about creating a sense of student belonging. And we're motivated to do this by the need to close the awarding gaps. At least, the Office of Students is motivating us to do this.

And it may include alerting students to the Eurocentric perspectives in the curriculum. On the other hand, decolonised curricula, and there's no agreed definition, as Shannon's going to pick up on, goes much further. It's anti-racist pedagogy that challenges the legacy of colonialism in discipline narratives by contextualizing knowledge within historical geographical and cultural frameworks.

The goal is not the reactionary abandonment of Western ideals as you might think from the right-wing press, but rather the creation of an equitable foundation of knowledge. So, to give you some examples, then, of the difference, first of all, looking at the areas of overlap.

So, both inclusive and decolonised curricula would say you need to recognize the BAME contribution to knowledge. So, you would recognize the contribution of Ramanujan, the Indian mathematician. But the difference with a decolonised curriculum is that it would address why Ramanujan has been absent for so long. Why has the BAME contribution been hidden? Why is African history not being taught? And crucially, how has Eurocentric knowledge contributed to racism?

So, I'll give you an example of Darwin. In an inclusive curriculum, Darwin would be provided. And we do understand that he contributed to our understanding of evolutionary biology. In the decolonised curriculum, we'd have that. But we'd also recognize that his belief in evolutionary

hierarchy placed white people above all others. And we'd follow the train of that belief. Similarly, James Watson's role in uncovering DNA would be highlighted as what his racist views.

So decolonising the curriculum is about what we teach, how we teach, and it's also about assessment. And individually, members of staff can work on their own spheres of influence, and actually, have impact, particularly, in conventional universities, where members of the module team can change their materials relatively easy. So, they can address the emissions and distortions in the knowledge canons.

And away in individual might do this is by destabilizing the Western notion of heritage and architecture by asking students to consider why the Daesh refugee camp can't attain World Heritage status. So, the Daesh refugee camp was established in 1949 as a temporary camp for 3,000 Palestinians expelled from villages by Jewish militia in the Arab Israeli war.

It, now, houses 15,000 in what's described as permanent temporary nest. So, students could consider why a refugee camp can't obtain UNESCO World Heritage status. And that's because only nation states can nominate what is regarded as heritage worthy of recognition. This is a Western system of defining what is worthy.

So, decolonising the curriculum to be effective needs to be accompanied by a much wider approach as Shannon is going to pick up on in more detail. Universities need to recognize and redress history, politics, and power structures. And universities need to make tough decisions about the priorities to support these curriculum revisions.

So, decolonising the University is about dismantling hierarchies of power and privilege that harm the minoritized throughout the university's sphere of influence. I think this quote from Birdie and Guizzo is a good one.

"The project of decolonisation is ultimately concerned with reparative racial justice in a world that has not yet fully dealt with the legacy of centuries of colonial subjugation. It is an important part of rectifying the intellectual, cultural, and social damage done by colonialism and its aftermath. But decolonisation with higher education will only be effective if it is informed by and connected to other global struggles outside the academy."

So, this decolonising the university requires commitment to dismantling the legacies of empire. This means asking difficult questions and being prepared for painful answers, such as how has this institution historically benefited from colonialism? How does this institution structures reflect the legacy of empire? How has the legacy of colonialism influenced the life

chances of its staff and students? And what is the institution doing to challenge white privilege?

And the approach needs to go further. The institution needs to consider how it's continuing to perpetuate the harms of colonialism in its curriculum, in its research. So, what's its relationship with the global South? Whose research is funded on what terms? And what research is published? And where does it invest its money? And how is the university responding to the climate emergency? Because as I'm going to be adding throughout to fix the climate crisis, we must face up to our imperial past.

So, turning to four difficulties that I've identified with decolonising the university. The first one is a tokenistic response can do more harm. South African scholars are dismayed that the UK has appropriated the decolonising project. So, the UK has colonized the decolonising, if you like.

Le Grange refers to decolonial washing to describe when a use of university gives the impression of decolonising when there's actually no evidence of structural or cultural change. Neoliberal universities are jumping on the decolonial bandwagon to attract staff and students with an interest in social justice. And they measure these decolonising projects to see if they provide value for money. That's not decolonising.

And this kind of tokenistic approach can lead to reputational damage. So, to show you what I'm thinking about here, I've got the example from Durham. So, Durham, this is their statement on decolonising, which fits perfectly well with everything that I've said so far.

By dismantling structures that reinforce and reproduce colonial values within Durham University, we do more than simply open the doors of this institution to those who were previously excluded. We embrace them, we make them feel welcome in a space, which is rightfully theirs. We do this by changing the culture. We investigate the university's recruiting policy, so that it is transparent for all.

We lobby for the recruitment of more staff of colour, so that every student is able to see their future in the academy here and now. We undertake a historical and structural analysis of the university's complicity with colonialism, acknowledge our universities and colleges practices that have their roots in colonial culture, and help them to change.

So clearly, Durham recognizes that the historical construction of race has an ongoing impact on learning and teaching, and on its workforce. That's the statement. However, staff and students have long raised concerns about its contracting its security services to Mitie. And there's an ongoing petition calling on the university to sever its relationship with Mitie.

So, what's wrong with Mitie? Mitie employs agency workers on a minimum wage, on zero-hour contracts. And as we know, these are likely to be disproportionately BAME. Mitie has a reputation for racism and poor treatment of staff. And crucially, Mitie is running immigration detention centres in which force migrants, displaced due to the legacies of colonialism, are subject to inadequate and unhygienic conditions.

And it's not just Durham and Mitie. Other universities are employing Serco and G4S in various contracting capacities. Serco runs the Yarl's Wood detention centre. And you can learn more about the conditions for forced migrants on the OU's research pages. The links are there.

So, the second difficulty that I'm thinking about with decolonising the university is that this is the territory of the culture wars. So, Kemi Badenoch, Westminster Equalities minister in the summer said, the phrase, "white privilege" should not be taught in schools because it's unnecessarily antagonistic.

And it's not difficult to find examples of what happens to institutions who do use it. So, here's what happened to the National Education Union when they published a report saying that decolonising education was urgent. The Daily Mail reported that that report was chilling.

Similarly, when Sheffield University colonised the teaching of Charles Darwin, it was also picked up by the Daily Mail and at risk of reputational damage. But what we know is that to decolonise the University, you have to name these problems. You have to use these words--colonialism, racism, white supremacy, white privilege. And you have to identify that the roots of the climate crisis are in the carbon-centric structures of Western colonisers.

David Olusoga recently said, we have a party in power who are not going to deliver these changes. I don't think even a different political party would change things because they will see that it has become so politicized and toxic. So, the problem that I'm identifying here is that does the institution have the resilience to deal with the opposition. And then turning to a related problem, do we, as individuals, have the resilience?

So, I'm asking this question because challenging how whiteness sustains its superiority is exhausting. And drawing from the developing stamina for decolonising higher education workbook by the University of British Columbia. So, Sharon Stein and her team have observed that staff can become confused, frustrated, or disillusioned in their attempts to expose colonial structures in the face of the denial of institutional racism.

And generally speaking, Stein continues, white people tend to underestimate just how deeply colonial patterns are embedded in minds and institutions. They assume good intentions are

enough for change to occur, but good intentions fail when white staff expect to feel comfortable and affirmed in conversations about decolonisation.

This need for comfort can cause them to neglect to challenge harmful colonial systems. Decolonising is an active anti-racism approach. And that action has the accompanying risk of burnout. It's all too easy for staff working on decolonising to be isolated from colleagues who don't understand what it is or why it is important.

And this is particularly a risk if the task is left to minoritised staff. And that's a diagram there from the workbook. And for colleagues who are working on decolonising, I'm sure that you recognize that deep trough, that feeling of despair. Why am I doing this? And I've put the link to OpenLearn there, where you can find more about the workbook that was run last year's Black History Month.

And finally, the difficulty that I've identified is we don't even know that decolonising the university is possible. UK universities are colonial institutions. Their white, patriarchal, ableist, heteronormative, top-down structures. Can you decolonial this with the master's tools within the master's house to use older laws metaphor.

Doctor Lwazi Lushaba of the University of Cape Town asks, how genuine is someone who speaks about decolonisation if they have accepted the rules? OK, so over to you, Shannon.

SHANNON: I'm sorry. I'm going to be discussing my research project, which is Decolonising of the University, a case study of the Open University. So, I thought that it would be important to, first, discuss decolonisation and how I'm defining decolonisation in relation to my project.

So as Suki has mentioned, the definition of the term decolonisation varies. And this is the result of a multitude of perspectives being formulated on the topic area and that originate from a variety of different geographical locations and across a time period of around 500 years. So, a variety of groups have a variety of different meanings and what decolonisation means.

So, for example, when we look at work produced by Tuck and Yang, decolonisation is not a metaphor. They discuss how from their perspective; the term decolonisation should not be utilized to refer to a wide range of social justice issues. And also, should not be used within the context of higher education. And if you use, the term should be applied cautiously to avoid it becoming a buzz word.

As when we are looking at the term decolonisation in the context of higher education, you can see there commonly refers to moves to decolonise the mind or knowledge, which are

extremely important to the movement, but promote ideas of settler in a sense, and are noted to not be the final step in decolonisation.

So these scholars state that regarding settler colonies, such as the Americas-- that regarding settler economies such as the Americas, adopting the term decolonisation without including the reparation of land and life to indigenous populations is incorrect.

However, when we look at research conducted by, for example, Dennis, 2018, they discussed how there's a strong link between global social justice and global epistemic justice. So here, we can see that global social justice issues are seen to interlinked with epistemic social justice and are part of the decolonisation project. So, we can see that those contrasting opinions on decolonisation.

And in the context of my research, I'm approaching the concept of decolonisation as relating to the colonial legacy and it's interlinked to the university today. So, when I'm discussing and thinking about decolonisation within my research, I'm drawing upon Latin American scholars of decolonial thoughts, such as Anibal Quijano and Walter Mignolo.

And I allow my thinking with them. And they discuss how the university has been and continues to be a historical site of reproduction of the colonial legacy, and how universities have been complicit historically in reproducing and producing ideologies of colonialism, such as race and racism. And this takes place for your centrism. And this refers to the continued centring of the West over the West. And can be seen through the continued use of Eurocentric knowledge systems and in the culture of the university.

And when we're discussing decolonisation of the university, it refers to the de-centring of the West universally, so undoing the legacies of colonialism and examining the ways in which the University reproduces colonial hierarchy structurally. And this can take place with what Walter Mignola terms as epistemic disobedience, which advocates for the inclusion of epistemically diverse knowledge systems. So, this is knowledge systems existing outside of the West and de-centring Western epistemology.

So, I think that it's important-- knowledge production is extremely important when we're discussing decolonising the university. And it is an element that I will definitely consider within my research, and it is a major part of the decolonial project. But I also think that taking an institutional approach when investigating decolonisation is necessary as focusing on decolonising just the curriculum.

It may not achieve decolonisation if we have not also examined how the university and the actors that are within it are conceptualizing decolonisation. And whether this

conceptualisation that exist within the institution align with the general mission of the university in its efforts to decolonise, as we can have a decolonised curriculum. But as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o says, decolonising our mind is also an important part of the process.

So, my research project is aiming to gain an understanding of the conceptualization of decolonisation within the Open University. And my research questions have been formulated to reflect the same. So, to do this, I will be adopting a qualitative approach. And we'll be utilizing methodological approaches such as focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and critical discourse analysis in the analysis of policy and initiatives that exist in the Open University.

I think that this is extremely important because it will provide an institutional understanding of decolonisation, where the University is at in relation to this. I will be conducting five focus groups for students and five focus groups with staff. And they will ask around 1 and 1/2 to two hours, and they will take place twice, so I'll be conducting 20 focus groups, overall.

And these focus groups will be aiming to gain an understanding of students and staff conceptualization of decolonisation, and also generate staff and student led ideas for decolonising the university. And to do this, visual methods, such as photo illustration and participatory methods will be implemented in the focus groups.

So, participants will be presented with photos of vice chancellors and thinkers from key disciplines, such as sociology, philosophy, and history to elicit conversation around decolonisation and representation. And a participatory method will be implemented within the research through presenting Ishikawa fishbone diagrams to create discussions on issues relating to decolonisation that exists within the institution.

Participants will then be asked to present ideas for change regarding the issues highlighted in the Ishikawa diagrams, leading to recommendations to decolonise. And then in the second focus group, participants will be presented with the transcript pertaining to the discussions on ideas for change suggested in the first focus group. And the aim is to get participants to collectively, thematically analyse the information presented to formulate a summary of recommendations for change relating to decolonising the university.

And this has a participatory element because it involves the participants in the process of examining issues relating to their own life, and also, gives them the chance to be a part of potential change. And then for the kind of other half of my research project, to gain an understanding of how policies and initiatives are formulated and disseminated and developed at the OU semi-structured interviews, critical discourse analysis of policy will take place.

So, I am aiming to conduct around 10 semi-structured interviews with staff involved in the decolonisation initiatives policies and work at the Open University. As I think it's extremely important to hear from the perspectives of the people who are involved in the work and to understand how policies are developed and implemented and whether conceptions of individuals creating policy or participating in decolonial work aligns with existing initiatives and policy at the OU.

So why the OU? Firstly, limited research has been conducted on decolonisation and racism as it relates to online education. And the small amount of research that has been conducted to the best of my knowledge focuses on on-campus universities, who have altered to online education because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

So, for example, in research conducted by Humamra, 2021, they examined the new from online-- from traditionally on-campus universities to online universities due to the COVID 19 pandemic and found that decolonisation occurred naturally within this situation.

And this is extremely interesting when we contrast this with kind of the Open University because it is an online education provider that has a social justice ethos of being open to people, places, and ideas. And so, it's alarming that when we examine the Open University, despite its social justice ethos and being online higher education institution, racial inequalities still pervade for students and staff.

So, for students, the presence of the awarding gap between what-- the students, there's a presence of an awarding gap between white and Black and minority ethnic students. And this refers to the gap of awarding of good degrees, commonly ranging between a two-one and a first classification.

And the OU's awarding gap exceeds the sector average and currently stands at 16.3%, which is a decrease from the 17.5% earlier in the year when I conducted the presentation in around-- I think, it was April, maybe. However, it's still higher than the sector average, which stands at 13%.

When we examined different racial groups, we can see that Black and white students have the largest gap, currently standing at 31% of the Open University. And this brings into mind the questions of what the Open University is doing differently from other higher education institutions that is resulting in increased racial disparities for students.

Now, this could be due to a multitude of reasons, such as the cohort of students that come into the institutions are more likely to be part time, being full time employment, and also, due

to structural inequalities that exist outside of the institution, such as Black students are more likely to be in lower socioeconomic statuses.

However, whilst acknowledging this, the gap does persist across the whole sector, even when a range of factors are considered such as age, gender, disability, prior attainment. And so, this points towards a higher education institution that is institutionally racist.

So when we examine the Open University and the higher education sector in general, we can see that a variety of structural inequalities pervade within the institution for Black and minority ethnic staff and students. And this can be seen through racial disparities in the employment of Black and minority ethnic staff, who are more likely to be in secure employment across the higher education sector and less likely to gain promotion and are commonly not found in senior positions.

With the social justice ethos that the Open University has, we need to continue to tackle the perceived barriers that are in place to provide an equitable institution, and also acknowledge the role that the colonial legacy continues to play in producing and reproducing inequalities for Black and minority ethnic students.

And so for the outcomes of my research, I'm hoping that this research will be able to provide a deeper understanding of how decolonisation is being understood and implemented and disseminated at the Open University. And then that this could hopefully lead to this information that is collected to inform future approaches to decolonising the university. Suki will now take over and discuss good practice.

SUKI: Thanks, Shannon. So yeah, talking about good practice, what I would suggest is the impact is more important than intention because we all know what paves the road to hell. So well-intentioned talk can lead to tokenism. And what's important is that we recognize understanding the harmful legacy of colonialism doesn't necessarily lead to change.

And Richard Hall and others have recently observed that decades of widening participation policies in UK higher education demonstrate that it's entirely possible, quantitatively, to improve BAME representation among students and staff without seriously undermining these harmful cultures of whiteness.

So, the first example that I've got of good practice is De Montfort University for their pioneering decolonising DMU project. So, this began in 2019. And their aim is to build an anti-racist university. What I find most striking about it is that it's top-down strategies are designed to devalue university hierarchies.

So, quoting from its position paper, they are committed "to deconstructing the university from the lived experience of those traditionally occupying second order or subordinated status." This process involves deep and empathetic listening. Decolonialising DMU does not describe an end goal, rather it presents a new way of working and knowing inside the institution.

So, this emphasis on deep and empathetic listening is really important. And DMU have got this podcast series that is publicly available. And on there, you hear interviews with the vice chancellor and senior members of staff who talk about their individual strands and what they are doing about it, they're doing to decolonise.

And this final line on the slide, it presents a new way of working and knowing. And they haven't presented this end goal. They recognize that it's a lifelong process. This is a movement away from the tokenistic gesture that is looking to measure progress against targets and value for money.

DMU wants to change by exposing structures that perpetuate racism. And I don't think we can underestimate the importance of the fact that staff and students are invited to identify how ethnic minorities are disadvantaged.

So, these are regularly advertised on the University pages. And the University is doing all it can as far as I can tell, anyway, as an outsider to create a safe space for discussion. This is how it can see the actions of white privilege in the institution.

All the universities who are naming the problems, I've picked up on Sheffield and Cambridge. Cambridge for its divest, disarm, and decolonial project, which is identifying how the University is investing money that is contributing to the technology of war and climate change.

And the quotation is from a member of staff at Sheffield. And she's reflecting on decolonising the university there. "I had never directly addressed how race operates in the classroom or in the University as an institution. I therefore applied the concept of decolonising by encouraging students to consider who was racialized and how and analysed white privilege and the effects of structural racism."

And so, turning to the next example that I've got of good practice, which is Glasgow. And I'm coming back to the quote that I provided earlier from Birdie and Guizzo. So, I've highlighted the bits that I think are significant. "The project of decolonisation is ultimately concerned with reparative racial justice." And that final section that "is informed by and connected to other global struggles outside the academy."

So, what is clear about the University of Glasgow is that it has committed itself to reparative justice. And this is its statement, "Our work in this area cannot change the slavery in the past, but we are committed to being open about what happened and to working with others to create a better future for everyone. By engaging with as many stakeholders as possible, our aim is to create a new generation of University of Glasgow world changers."

World changers, this is the ambition of Glasgow University. So, what they did was commission historians to research how the university benefited from enslavement. And in 2018, they reported that the institution's development was linked to the transatlantic slave trade through gifts and bequests. And that report led to the development of the reparative justice framework.

And the senior management group committed to fulfill all of the nine report recommendations by 2028. And what I've put on the slide there is the goals that have already been achieved. So they've already established partnership with the University of West Indies and they're collaborating to advance research in key fields of reparative justice.

They built a centre for the study of historical slavery and its legacies. And this centre is working with museums and schools and other public facing bodies. There's information on the campus about the University's links to slavery. They have developed and it's now running a masters in reparative justice.

And they've demonstrated their commitment to hearing voices, previously marginalized in history. And for this work, Glasgow was named University of the Year in 2020. Incidentally, Glasgow University was the first university in Europe to divest from fossil fuels. That was in 2014. And that was a result of student campaigning.

And what I want to move on to now is how the OU could align with decolonising. So far, 90 UK universities and two Irish have committed to divest from fossil fuels in some form. And those commitments cover an endowment wealth of over \$15 billion. There's currently a petition that's running to persuade the Open University Council to divest from fossil fuel. And I have provided the link there if you want to sign it.

There's also the COP26 campaign, Decarbonise and Decolonise 2030. So, this is a collaboration between the university and college union and student organizations. And this campaign draws attention to racism as a legacy of colonialism and the colonial roots of the climate crisis. So, it's highlighting the unequal racist impact of the climate emergency as a legacy of colonialism.

And what we know is that the Global North and South differ in their experience. The Global South is suffering far worse, and also due to the impact of colonialism. The Global South is less able to respond to the chaos of the climate crisis. And for some students, we need to recognize that this campaign is going to be their introduction to the legacy of empire.

And finally, turning to the Universities of Sanctuary as another way that the OU could align to decolonising values. So, the University of Sanctuary scheme is linked to the City of Sanctuary scheme that you may know about.

Universities of Sanctuary have committed to create a culture of welcome for forced migrants. And they provide scholarship funding allowing forced migrants to access higher education without paying international student fees, which, of course, are unattainable. And the list there at the bottom of the screen is the universities who are Universities of Sanctuary. And the OU is applying.

Force migrants are super vulnerable. They experience an intersection of disadvantages. And in my opinion, becoming a university is an important opportunity for the OU to support reparative justice. Professor Marie Gillespie and her team are leading the OU's application. In the next few months, so probably, November, to gain sanctuary status.

Marie has shared resources on OpenLearn for forced migrant students. And I also want to talk about the OU in Scotland because it's providing pioneering support to improve the life chances of forced migrants with it's open to people project. This is providing digital and study skills support in collaboration with two voluntary organizations working with communities in Glasgow. So that's British and the Scottish Refugee Council.

And in addition, there's a pilot planned to run an English for academic purposes summer school. So, if I can end my contribution on decolonising the university, which is something that brings very strongly for me, and how I climb out of that trough from the Stein diagram.

And I'm paraphrasing the award-winning Indian novelist and social justice activist Arundhati Roy. So, she has written, once you see something, you can't unsee it. And if you keep quiet, that's a political act.

SPEAKER 1: So, thank you very much to our presenters. You can unmute yourself and do live clapping or we can give them a virtual applause.