

# **DECOLONIZATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF A CONTEMPORARY CONCERN, POLICY AND THEORY**

## **Abstract**

Decolonization of higher education policy and practice has become an increasing concern and interest in recent years. This article provides a critical review of the application of decolonization to higher education. It discusses what its proponents mean by the term and how they seek to apply it in practice. It identifies outstanding issues with its usage and considers what the direction ahead may be.

**Keywords:** decolonization, higher education, policy, practice, research

## **Introduction**

In contemporary discussions of higher education policy and practice (as well as in broader discussions of social and economic policy) decolonization has assumed a greater and greater importance. Conceived as being concerned with the removal of colonial elements and influences from all aspects of higher education, decolonization has spread across much of the globe.

The resentment and resolve felt by many of those living and working in former and current colonies in what is sometimes referred to as the Global South has been compounded by the guilt and drive of some of those living in the Global North and/or West. This has resulted in a collective effort to address past and continuing injustices and prejudices as they exist in higher education.

This article provides a critical review of the application of decolonization to higher education. It discusses what its proponents mean by the term and how they seek to apply it in practice. It identifies outstanding issues with its usage and considers what the direction ahead may be. The overall aim of the article is to offer a guide to current thinking on this issue as it is expressed in higher education research publications.

## **Methodology**

The article makes use of the techniques of systematic review (Jesson, Matheson and Lacey 2011, Tight 2020, Torgerson 2003). Databases – Google Scholar, Scopus and Web of Science – were searched using keywords to identify potentially relevant articles and reports that had been published on the topic. Those identified were then downloaded and examined, and retained for further analysis if they proved to be relevant. The reference lists in these articles and reports were checked for other potentially relevant sources to follow up.

No date limitations were placed on the searches, but they were confined to English language publications. While English may be thought of increasingly as the *lingua franca* of higher education, and higher education researchers worldwide aspire to publish their work in the leading English language journals, this does place some limitations on the review. Spanish (and Portuguese) language publication remains important in Latin America, as does French language publication in parts of Africa, and these literatures have been largely ignored by the present study. Nevertheless, the study does have a global reach, as articles were identified by authors based in over 100 countries.

For example, a search using Scopus (carried out on 27/9/22) for articles with the words 'decolonization', 'higher' and 'education' in their titles – which may be taken to indicate a likely focus on the topic of interest - found 35 articles (the same search using Google Scholar found 58), and 385 articles with the words in their titles, abstracts or keywords. Another search on Scopus, using the words 'decolonization' and 'university' also identified 35 articles (Google Scholar found 75), and 921 with the words in their titles, abstracts or keywords.

Of the latter total, 197 (21.4%) had first authors based in South Africa, with 176 (19.1%) based in the USA, 135 (14.7%) in the UK, 86 (9.3%) in Canada and 61 (6.6%) in Australia. While authors from South Africa appear to be out ahead, this is a relatively recent phenomenon (the earliest article identified with a South African first author identified was only published in 2009). The major English-speaking nations (for English language publications) of the USA, the UK, Canada and Australia between them accounted for half of all the articles identified in this search, confirming the strong interest in the topic in the developed world. In all, first authors based in 84 different countries on all continents were included in this particular search, confirming a global interest in the topic.

It is difficult, of course, to provide a succinct review of so many articles. The approach taken, therefore, was to access as many of the articles identified as possible (the great majority) through my own institution's library and other sources (notably Google Scholar itself), and then to select from these those that were most relevant to the review, in terms of their originality, representativeness and quality. This process was supported through discussion with colleagues.

The remainder of the article is based on analyses of the 56 articles identified as being centrally relevant to this study, which are identified by asterisks (\*) in the references list. In summarizing and exemplifying the content and argument of these articles, quotations will be widely used. This may mean that the main body of this review appears to be more descriptive than critical, though this should be remedied by the discussion that concludes the study.

## **Origins and Meaning**

The origins and meaning(s) of decolonization seem, on the face of it, to be obvious and self-explanatory. Linguistically, it is a clear opposite or antidote to colonization and related terms and practices such as re-colonization and neo-colonialism; but closely connected to terms such as anti-colonialism and post-colonization. Historically, it refers to the gradual independence of the former colonies of European and other powers:

Conceptually, decolonization gained traction and grew in nuance after 1945. During this period, decolonization referred to independence of nation-states from their former colonial empires, most pronounced after World War II. However, some refer to these former independences as the second wave of decolonization, arguing that the first wave occurred much earlier and took place in the Americas, led by Mestizo/Creole and/or Black actors. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the decolonization discourse gained momentum with the forced withdrawal of former imperial powers (e.g., French, British, Dutch, and the United States) in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. (Shahjahan et al 2022, pp. 81-2)

Note the reference to the United States, making it clear that colonization/decolonization is a spectrum, and that former colonies could themselves become colonizers. Note also that colonization has not ended, as former major colonial powers like Britain, France and the United States still hold on to small colonial territories (e.g. Bermuda, Guadeloupe and Puerto Rico (see Collado-Schwarz 2012)); while other countries not normally thought of as colonizers, such as China and Russia, have arguably done little in the way of decolonization.

Yet, decolonization at a political or governmental level did not necessarily bring decolonization in higher education (or other areas). Thus, Dawson (2020) identifies 'two shifts that have occurred within higher education globally since World War Two that are most closely linked with global neo-colonialism, namely the establishment of knowledge hierarchies and entrenchment of epistemic hegemonies and internationalization' (p. 85). Neo-colonialism within higher education could in this way effectively retain the prior colonial patterns and relationships; as is confirmed by contemporary global movements of students, staff and funding, and international rankings of higher education institutions.

As Dawson indicates, there are close links between decolonization and related terms or topics such as internationalization (Hopkins 2017, Tight 2021), to which we might add globalization, nation building, neoliberalism (Tight 2019), elitism (Amuzu 2019), social justice and indigenous movements. All of these terms have a global purchase and reflect continuing power struggles which are far away from a resolution that is acceptable to the majority.

But an understanding of decolonization is not, of course, as simple as that, as it rarely is with matters involving the social world and the social sciences. Le Grange (2019) sets out four qualifications or clarifications:

First, there is no single meaning to decolonisation. Second, decolonisation does not have to mean or involve destruction. Third, decolonisation is a process, not an event – what has been decolonized

has the potential to produce colonizing effects and vice versa. Fourth, decolonisation does not necessarily mean turning back the clock to a time when the world was a different place – it needs to speak to challenges faced in a contemporary world. (pp. 31-32)

This places decolonization as a moveable process which is much more about addressing contemporary challenges than it is about acknowledging and redressing past wrongs. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2019) effectively equates contemporary globalization with continuing colonialism, arguing that decolonization is about fundamentally rethinking the ways in which we do things:

Besides identifying modernity/colonialism as the fundamental problem, decolonization/decoloniality challenges the present globalization and its pretensions of universalism, which hides the reality of the Europeanization and Americanization of the modern world... What is emerging poignantly today is that decolonization is a much more profound activity and process than simply obtaining political independence; it is a condition of possibility to start a new thinking and doing aimed at a re-humanized world. (p. 3)

How, then, does this effect and impact upon the university, the modern version of which was created in the colonial heartlands of Europe and America, and then exported globally? For higher education:

decolonisation... means the exposure of the material, intellectual and symbolic colonialism that abounds in the university system, the 'home of the coloniser'... Decolonisation requires a critical historical lens and a transformative approach to knowledge building in order to expose and dismantle the presence of colonial and imperial practices within the university as they pertain to current divisions of race, gender, sexuality, and disability. (Saini and Begum 2019, p. 218)

Saini and Begum also link this to what they see as the far safer diversity project, through which higher education institutions typically claim that they are tackling all forms of discrimination and opening themselves up to include all disadvantaged groups within society.

Decolonization, then, can be seen as a beneficial and essential strategy or process, designed to redress previous omissions and poor practices, while adding the learnings and knowledges of other cultures to the undoubted strengths of the international research-led university model.

## **Application and Practice**

As already indicated, interest in, or concern for, decolonization in higher education is global. Whereas much of the published research literature in the English language comes from the main English-speaking nations – i.e. Australia (Rangan 2022, Seats 2022), Canada (Kennedy, McGowan and El-Hussein 2020, McGowan et al 2020), New Zealand (Kidman 2020), the United Kingdom (Gopal 2021, Hall et al 2021) and the United States (Parker 2009) – and South African authors are also particularly well represented in the contemporary literature (e.g. Albertus 2019, Calitz 2018, Chasi and Rodny-Gumede 2019, Fomunyan and Teferra 2017, Hendricks 2018, Higgs 2016, Hungwe and Ndofirepi 2022, Mheta, Lungu and Govender 2018, Motala, Sayed and de Kock 2021, Mzileni and Mkhize 2019, Naidoo et al 2020, Perold-Bull 2020, Shaik and Kahn 2021, Zawada 2020, Zembylas 2018, Zwane 2019), relevant articles have been published by authors based in many other countries and all continents.

Thus, examples have been identified from nations and systems as varied as Colombia (De Carvalho and Flórez-Flórez 2014), Germany (Khoo et al 2020), Hong Kong (Law 1997), Hungary (Brooks, Clark and Rostas 2022), India (Kaktikar 2020), Iran (Zeiny 2019), Palestine (Hamamra, Alawi and Daragmeh 2021), Swaziland (Dlamini and Kamwendo 2018) and Zimbabwe (Kgari-Masondo and Chimbunde 2021). While most articles have focused on particular countries, and usually on particular institutions or programmes within those countries, there have also been articles that have considered the position across whole continents, such as Africa (Mamdani 2016) or Latin America (De Carvalho and Flórez-Flórez 2014, Rodriguez 2022). Others have focused on how decolonization has impacted on particular social groups, such as the Romani (Brooks, Clark and Rostas 2022), or on particular areas of the curriculum, such as dance (Kaktikar 2020), or have taken a historical perspective (Burton 2020). There have also, unsurprisingly, been a number of books devoted to the topic (e.g. Bhabra, Gebrial and Nişancioğlu 2018, Jansen 2019).

There have been some previous reviews of the literature on decolonization and higher education. Most recently, Adefila et al (2022) carried out a bibliometric analysis of articles published in the period 1985 to 2020, asking the questions 'Whose voices shape the discourse of decolonisation? Where are they geographically located and why does this matter?' (p. 4). Their study, like the present one, was confined to English language publications.

They identified 134 relevant articles and six major themes: grassroots movements (e.g. #FeesMustFall, #RhodesMustFall); that the majority of voices were located in former colonies; that women made a major contribution to the debate; that the debate was concentrated in particular, especially education, journals; that the focus of the content was on transformative learning experiences; and decolonization/decolonisation was used alongside native or indigenous terms like Ubuntu.

Adefila et al conclude that 'the centre of debate is in the colonised continents, where the countries at the periphery of global capitalism are located... the majority of the authors and institutions are located in the African continent' (p. 271). While agreeing with the former point, the current analysis, however, casts doubt over the latter. Thus, of the 921 articles identified in the Scopus search with the words 'decolonization' and 'university' in their titles, abstracts or keywords, while the highest proportion, 197 (21.4%) were authored from South Africa, only a further 37 (4.0%) were authored from 15 other African countries, meaning that only one-quarter of first authors were 'located in the African continent'.

The majority of published studies of decolonization and higher education have focused on the decolonization of the curriculum. Le Grange (2019), writing from a South African perspective, sees this as needed for five related reasons:

decolonisation of the curriculum is necessary for at least the following mutually inclusive reasons:

- colonisation resulted in the decimation of the knowledges of the colonised and therefore cognitive justice should be sought;
- the illusion that Eurocentric knowledge is universal needs to be debunked;
- colonisation reduced the knowledges of the Global South to culture and this needs to be corrected;
- the need for psychosocial transformation of the colonised;
- South African universities are based on Western models of academic organization. (pp. 32-33)

While Le Grange identifies five reasons, to me there seem to be three key drivers in here: that European/Western knowledge is not supreme; that, conversely, the value of other knowledges needs to be recognized; and that the imported/implanted Western model of the university is, therefore, no longer universally appropriate.

Also writing from a South African context, Naidoo et al (2020) suggest what decolonization of the curriculum means in practice:

Content matters, in particular when a European-centred curriculum continues to dominate and define what counts as worthwhile knowledge and legitimate authority in South African texts and teaching; it matters in the context of the inherited curriculum, informed by apartheid and colonialism, in which only the more readily observable, offensive racism has been skimmed off the top. (p. 974)

However, interest in decolonizing the curriculum is global. In another review article, Shahjahan et al (2022) provide a critical review of 207

articles, identifying variations in the meanings, actualization and challenges of what they term 'decolonizing curriculum and pedagogy' or DCP:

While decolonization meant recognizing constraints, disrupting, and/or accommodating alternatives, how the latter manifested varied depending on context. Furthermore, actualizing DCP took four forms: (a) probing the positionality of knowledge, (b) constructing an inclusive curriculum, (c) relational teaching and learning, or (d) bridging higher education institutions with community and/or sociopolitical movements. Yet we found that these manifestations were nuanced across geography, discipline, and stakeholders. Finally, we observed some common challenges, ranging from student resistance, to systematic/structural barriers, to the complexities forging relationships between decolonizing practices and the local/Indigenous communities. (pp. 99-100)

The meaning of decolonizing the curriculum varies a great deal, therefore, depending on where you are, the subject or topic of the curriculum involved, and your own personal perspective. It may be as simple as adding readings and exemplars to an established curriculum, or as far-reaching and demanding as a complete transformation of the curriculum at a national and/or institutional level.

While decolonization of the curriculum is the primary focus of the literature examined, some authors take different but related perspectives. Thus, Keet (2014) talks of the decolonisation of knowledge, while Tobi (2020) discusses epistemic decolonization and Masaka (2019) uses the term epistemic justice. Maitra and Guo (2019) focus on the decolonization of lifelong learning. Agyekum (2018) refer to language decolonization, through which the process whereby 'a language with limited instrumental utility to catch up with modernisation and globalisation is replaced with the one that serves the current needs of the people' is reversed (p.101).

In short, whether it is decolonization of the curriculum, knowledge, epistemology, learning or language that is centre stage, the focus is on what is taught and how it is taught. Items may be both taken away from and added to the curriculum – in itself a problematic process, as the curriculum is essentially a zero-sum game (i.e. it only has so much space), and cannot be overloaded – while teaching approaches may be varied and localized.

### **Issues and Critique**

The key issue about decolonization in higher education is, of course, how to do it. Lockett and Shay (2020), writing from a South African context,



argue that curricular change needs to be transformative rather than incremental:

A transformative approach demands a 'reframing' of the curriculum. This involves adjusting the scale of the problem, interrogating assumptions informing the norms of the curriculum, questioning current boundaries between 'mainstream' and 'other' students and reviewing the fitness of the curriculum for a pluralist society. (p. 50)

What this might mean in practice is indicated by another South African scholar, Zembylas (2018), who argues that:

Decolonial pedagogies, as theorised and explicated in this article, challenge some aspects of Freirean approaches such as humanising pedagogies. Thus, I envision that efforts toward the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa will lead to the development of intellectual and pedagogical spaces in which different strategies may be taken up as a form of hacking. (p. 8)

This hacking would involve the interrogation of 'the pedagogical practices emerging from Eurocentric knowledge approaches by drawing on and twisting these very practices. These efforts can provide spaces to enact decolonial pedagogies that reclaim colonised practices' (ibid). However, this sounds like a long-term and incremental approach, as opposed to the transformation demanded by Lockett and Shay, though it might be more practical and the end results might be similar. In later writing, Zembylas (2021, 2022) identifies the particular roles that can be played by pedagogies of refusal, affective disinvestment and decolonizing solidarity in delivering effective decolonization, but he is clearly in it for the long haul.

From a UK perspective, Moosavi (2020) argues for what he terms intellectual decolonization, and provides some guidance on what this should and should not involve:

intellectual decolonisation should be pursued in a reflexive manner in order to avoid a superficial and poorly theorised project... while there is some excellent decolonial scholarship being produced in both the Global South and the Global North, there may also be some who have 'jumped on the decolonial bandwagon'... My recommendations to those who are interested in intellectual decolonisation are that we ensure that we do the following: (1) engage with decolonial theory from the Global South so as to avoid decolonisation without decolonising, (2) recognise that intellectual decolonisation requires momentous effort and may not even be possible, (3) avoid essentialising or appropriating the Global South, (4) explore the complex ways in which coloniality produces multiple forms of marginalisation, (5) avoid 'nativist decolonisation', and (6) avoid

'tokenistic decolonisation'. If we are not alert to these six dangers then we may find that our efforts to promote intellectual decolonisation are not only wasted, but that we may even reproduce intellectual colonisation. (p. 350)

Clearly, intellectual decolonization is far from being a straightforward undertaking, but will involve a great deal of collaborative thought and effort. Even then it may fail if some of those involved are merely, in Moosavi's words, jumping on the bandwagon or making tokenistic efforts; which is, after all, highly likely given the number and variety of demands being made on higher education and its curriculum.

Another UK-based author, Gopal (2021) stresses the importance of recognizing other knowledges than the Western knowledge that dominates higher education worldwide, and of putting these knowledges in dialogue with each other to encourage epistemic diversity:

Thinking through the possibility (or otherwise) of 'decolonisation' in the metropolitan university involves a set of challenges. The first is to think about the constitution of 'Europe' in the crucible of its imperial projects... The second is to undertake an intellectual audit of what is often presented as 'European' or 'Western' knowledge and to assess the multiple lines of influence in its making. A related task is to assess what valuable insights and perspectives have been occluded or marginalised by dominant disciplinary formations in universities... decolonisation is not a matter of relativising these alongside received knowledge but of putting them in dialogue. The substantial challenge here is to identify and undo the ways in which forms of knowledge have been undermined, marginalised, dismissed or appropriated without segregating epistemological resources into a series of alternatives in the name of epistemic diversity. (p. 895)

Dialogue between related knowledges is not, however, a common feature in our universities and colleges, where most knowledge is taken as established and debate focuses chiefly on new areas of research and new ideas. This is seen clearly, for example, in the continuing debates over the critical importance, yet under-development, of multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches in higher education (e.g. Davies, Devlin and Tight 2010).

In a particularly interesting analysis, Law (1997) discusses the Hong Kong case, which he argues went through successive processes of decolonization, neo-colonization and re-colonization in the 15-year period between 1982 and 1997. This was the period of negotiation during which Hong Kong was prepared for self-rule by the United Kingdom and then handed back to the Chinese state:

three related colonial transition processes - decolonisation, neocolonisation and recolonisation - co-existed in Hong Kong higher education within the framework of 'one country, two systems'. These processes can be seen as resistance to each other... They are further complicated by the spectra of their accommodation and resistance by the three major actors [the incoming Chinese government, the British/Hong Kong government and local groups]. On different occasions, the local government and groups played different or even contradictory roles as decolonising, neocolonising or recolonising agents. They selectively participated in the three processes so as to create facilitating conditions for and obstacles to the control of higher education by the incoming ruling power in the post-1997 era. (p. 187)

Hong Kong is undoubtedly an unusual case, but it does make it clear that decolonization is not necessarily a one-way and irreversible process.

What all of these authors and analyses make clear is the strong desire for decolonization on the part of its advocates, the strength of the entrenched structures they seek to change, and thus the enormous task facing them.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

What the advocates of decolonization of higher education are seeking, therefore, is to reverse centuries of influence in which particular (Western) knowledge hierarchies and epistemic hegemonies (Dawson 2020) have become entrenched. It is important to recognize that this process would be expected to take place not only in the former (and current) colonies, but also in the colonizing countries.

The advocates of decolonization believe that this can be achieved through a transformation not just of the curriculum of higher education, but of other elements as well (most notably the role of the English language as the current *lingua franca* of higher education). This will not mean a rejection of Western knowledge(s) but a recognition of the validity of other knowledges, with which Western knowledges will be placed in dialogue (Gopal 2021).

That this is an enormous task is generally accepted, but it is less often asked whether it is a necessary or feasible one. It would require commitment at national and international levels. Higher education institutions would also need to commit to introducing change across the whole institution, and not take tokenistic approaches as they have been accused of doing in other areas, notably regarding the diversification of the student body (Moosavi 2020, Saini and Begum 2019).

It is when we get down to the disciplinary or departmental level that the problems with implementing decolonization throughout higher education

worldwide really become apparent. In the social sciences, for example, it is not so difficult to see how decolonization could work. Social scientists study society in all its diversity, and those who study non-western societies have experience of adapting their ways of thinking where necessary. Ways of thinking from other societies have already impacted upon western researchers (e.g. Smith 2012). Similarly, in the arts and humanities, the achievements of non-western cultures have long been recognized and studied internationally.

This is not to say, however, that a greater and more widespread shift in thinking in these disciplines would not be called for. Many working in the social sciences, arts and humanities are comfortable with their existing traditions, practices and curricula, which chiefly emphasize the achievements of western thinkers and researchers. Most would probably rather not have to invest the huge amount of time and re-thinking that would be involved in a genuine decolonization of their higher education practices.

In the so-called STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects – the top of the western epistemic hegemony – it is not so easy, however, to see how decolonization would work. Historically, of course, many ideas that have become part of the core of western scientific knowledge have been adopted from non-western sources, notably the ancient civilisations that inhabited China, the Indian subcontinent and what is now termed the Middle East. In particular societal/disciplinary 'niches', western and non-western knowledges can sit alongside and debate with each other more or less on equal terms: e.g. departments of Chinese medicine in Chinese universities or of Islamic knowledge in Muslim universities.

In general, however, the positivist, observational, experimental and quantitative methodology underlying western science has been so demonstrably successful that it is extremely difficult to see these approaches being downgraded and viewed as a mere alternative to other knowledges. Much more could be done, of course, to recognize the contributions of non-western scientists, in the same way that recent decades have witnessed efforts to acknowledge the contributions of non-male scientists. Beyond this, however, serious attempts to decolonize departments of, for example, computing, engineering, mathematics or physics are likely to encounter determined resistance and would risk undermining western scientific (and economic) achievements.

But where does this leave non-western higher education? Mostly, this remains closely linked – arguably more closely linked than ever – to western higher education, through staff and student exchanges, transnational higher education (i.e. the provision of higher education in non-western countries by western universities) and joint research initiatives. There may

be a need and desire to more closely involve indigenous peoples, and to add particular specialisms and departments to the standard mix, but non-western higher education is likely to remain looking pretty much like western higher education. Indeed, the aspirations in non-western higher education systems typically involve aping and competing with western higher education through establishing so-called world-class universities on the pattern of western research-intensive institutions (Mohrman, Ma and Baker 2008).

Underlying all of this we could, of course, identify the forces of globalization and neoliberalism allying with or creating neocolonialism:

There are robust continuities between the liberal education that was tied to the interests of European imperial/colonial/settler nation-states and the neoliberal knowledge economy that is driven by the geopolitical and commercial interests of present-day governments and corporatist university administrations. (Rangan 2022, p. 68)

In this context it is hard to see a comprehensive decolonization of higher education being either attempted or achieved. Much more likely is a focus on limited or incremental changes and accommodations – such as the removal of colonial statues from campuses and the addition of local or indigenous thinkers to reading lists – with the underlying structures and soft power (Lo 2022) of the world-class research-led universities and systems remaining essentially intact. The scope for changes in teaching-focused universities and colleges lower down the institutional hierarchy is probably greater, but in these cases is likely to be limited by the lower pressures and felt needs. There is simply too much built-in resistance and conservatism, and so many other conflicting demands on higher education institutions and systems for them to transform in the name of decolonization.

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