Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Innovations in Education and Teaching International

ISSN: 1470-3297 (Print) 1470-3300 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/riie20

University teachers as agents in curriculum innovation: Experiences of decolonising curricula

Uta Papen & Dimitrinka Atanasova

To cite this article: Uta Papen & Dimitrinka Atanasova (09 Sep 2025): University teachers as agents in curriculum innovation: Experiences of decolonising curricula, Innovations in Education and Teaching International, DOI: 10.1080/14703297.2025.2558222

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2025.2558222

Published online: 09 Sep 2025.

INNOVATIONS IN EDUCATION AND TEACHING INTERNATIONAL
https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2025.2558222

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

University teachers as agents in curriculum innovation: Experiences of decolonising curricula

Uta Papen and Dimitrinka Atanasova

Linguistic and English Language, School of Social Sciences, Lancaster University, Bailrigg, Lancaster, UK

ABSTRACT

University teachers are key actors in efforts to decolonise higher education curricula. This paper presents findings from 34 interviews with academics from arts, humanities and social science disciplines at a university in the North West of England. We examine these academics' efforts to decolonise their curricula looking at their role as agents working towards curriculum change. Our findings reveal the dedication for decolonisation amongst university teachers, but also the challenges they face. While colleagues had agency within established practices for curriculum change, they experienced many challenges to what they were able to achieve. Amongst these were other colleagues' reluctance to engage and the institution's ambiguous response to the aim of decolonising curricula, specifically with regard to resources needed. A key finding was the perception that decolonising curricula, as a form of curriculum innovation, rested on the shoulders of individual colleagues' agency, with wider collective agency missing.

KEYWORDS

Innovations; curriculum; decolonising; university teachers; agency; collective agency

Introduction

Discussions about the role of colonialism and imperialism in higher education teaching and research have come to prominence in the mid to late 2000s, triggered by a wave of student protests asking why their curricula are 'white'. In Britain, the geographical focus of this paper, protest movements such as Black Lives Matter and a growing awareness of persistent racial inequalities in higher education have nourished these debates. BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic[1]) students continue to be disadvantaged in British universities, on average achieving lower degree outcomes than their White counterparts (Winter et al., 2024). At the same time, the goals of widening participation and the increasing internationalisation of the student population have added new dimensions to discussions about curriculum change to address inequalities (Schucan Bird & Pitman, 2020). Decolonising the curriculum is closely linked to such endeavours and to inclusive and anti-racist education (Arday et al., 2021; Hall et al., 2023). In Britain, the ongoing dominance of White European and Anglo-American sources of knowledge in HE curricula risks alienating not only the many international students but fails to reflect the culturally

CONTACT Uta Papen u.papen@lancaster.ac.uk Linguistics and English Language, School of Social Sciences, Lancaster University, County South, Bailrigg, Lancaster LA1 4YL, UK

and ethnically diverse British population (Arday et al., 2021). While our paper focuses on a British university, issues, such as the dominance of Western sources of knowledge in curricula are discussed in other countries too (see, for example, Daley et al., 2024; Homateni Julius et al., 2023; Laakso & Hallberg Adu, 2024).

In many British HE institutions, staff and students have developed initiatives to decolonise curricula (e.g. Keele University, n.d.; SOAS, 2018). The university that is the focus of our paper is also engaged in decolonisation efforts. It is a mid-sized university located in the NorthWest of England. Its Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences has an active decolonisation network, run by academic colleagues, which serves as a focal point for information sharing and debate. Some funding is available to support departmental activities such as workshops on decolonisation.

The present paper discusses findings from interviews with 34 academics teaching across arts, humanities and social science subjects. As programme (course) and module leaders, academics who design, deliver and assess modules are the primary actors who can decolonise curricula by changing what and how they teach. Hence, studies such as ours, capturing the views and experiences of university teachers from a range of disciplines, can inform our understanding of what drives curriculum innovation towards decolonisation. Effecting such innovation is, however, not straightforward. In this paper, we present university teachers' ambitions and actions to decolonise their curricula, and we discuss the challenges they faced in doing so. We discuss our findings drawing on prior work into curriculum innovation that considers specifically the role of academics as agents of change.

Defining decolonisation and decolonising the curriculum

Decolonisation can be understood as 'a way of thinking about the world which takes colonialism, empire and racism as its empirical and discursive objects of study', considering these to be 'key shaping forces of the contemporary world' (Bhambra et al., 2020, p. 2). Shain et al. (2021) talk about the 'Eurocentrism in shaping the knowledge and culture of institutions including higher education long after decolonisation or the dismantling of colonial administrations' (p. 922). Decolonisation seeks to disrupt the 'epistemic hegemony of Western knowledge' (Menon et al., 2021, p. 39; see also Choat, 2021).

Decolonisation is frequently referred to as a process, using the verb 'decolonising'. The curriculum is named as a core part of what universities should decolonise (Tight, 2023). For the purpose of this paper, decolonising the curriculum is understood to mean 'the process of recognising, challenging and dismantling the white western male-elite domination of knowledge taught in the academy' (University of Hull, n.d.). While changing the content is a core part of decolonising curricula, for many academics 'genuine decolonisation' (Banister, 2023, p. 169) also needs to include revising how we teach, i.e. changing pedagogies (Menon et al., 2021).

Curriculum innovation and academics' agency

Looking at the role of academics as agents in curriculum change and innovation is not a new topic (see Annala et al., 2023 for an overview of recent literature). We draw on this work to examine efforts by academics to decolonise HE curricula. Agency is understood to

be 'something that people do and enact' (Vähäsantanen et al., 2020, p. 2). Agency is neither given nor innate: it is realised in interactions and negotiations with structures (Annala et al., 2023; Ashwin, 2012). Our paper draws on Biesta and Tedder's understanding of agency:

> Actors always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment [so that] the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations'. (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137)

Using agency as a heuristic means looking at individuals as participants in social and institutional contexts (in our case the professional and institutional contexts of HE). Agency requires a level of autonomy. For university teachers, a degree of autonomy has traditionally been assumed (e.g. academic freedom; research-led teaching requiring curriculum change as new findings emerge) and was also reported by our participants. However, as we will see, this autonomy was interfacing with structures governing curriculum innovation.

Agency is linked to (self-)reflexivity, as highlighted in Adler and Lalonde's (2020) meta-analysis of research into academic identity and agency, where the capacity to reflect on oneself, one's knowledge, experience and views, can be seen as an important factor that enables and supports agency (Archer, 2003).

Following Biesta and Tedder, in this paper we look at agency in relation to the agent's environment and its elements as named in our participants' accounts of their experiences. These included the institutional environment of their department, faculty and university as well as wider societal factors, for example the university's position within the UK's marketised HE system. This environment covered practices, policies, guidance and their underlying assumptions that in one way or the other 'structure' or frame the work academics were doing to decolonise their curricula. In other words, we think of structure as a verb that interacts with agency, similar to what Ashwin has called 'structural agentive processes' (2012, p. 29). We concur with Vähäsantanen et al. (2020) in assuming that agency, mediated via structural agentive processes, plays a key role in curriculum change. We understand curriculum change or curriculum innovation to be 'an interactive social process' (Annala et al. 2023, p. 1311) that involves individual agents interfacing with university processes, practices and regulations. Curriculum change, happening at this interface, is creative but also constrained (Louvel, 2013). To further delve into the conditions and context that allow or impede academics' actions, we use the notion of 'progressive agency' which Annala et al. (2023) describe as academics' 'readiness to take responsibility for curriculum change' (p. 1316), supported by their general interest in teaching and learning and their belief that curriculum change, while challenging, is 'meaningful work for the academic community' (p. 1316).

University teachers' experiences of decolonising curricula

While there is nowadays much published research on decolonising HE curricula, most studies summarise individual teachers' (or co-teachers') reflections on their efforts to decolonise a specific course or module (see, for example, Matthews, 2021; Wernicke, 2021; Wilson, 2024). Other papers examine at a conceptual level what is required to

move towards decolonising HE pedagogies (Ahmed-Landeryou, 2023; Race et al., 2022; Zembylas, 2021). There is also research on curricula and reading lists. As part of Tamimi et al.'s study, a gap analysis of undergraduate modules found that in first- and second-year modules most readings were authored by men and non-BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) writers from the Global North. Schucan, Bird and Pitman's (2020) analysis of two module reading lists, one science and one social science, had similar results. Winter et al.'s (2024) survey of staff and students' views of decolonising activities at one UK institution showed that staff had significantly better perceptions of their own efforts to decolonise than students, specifically those from minority ethnic groups. Finally, Collins (2019) has examined the contribution Graduate Teaching Assistants can make to decolonial pedagogies.

The question of agency, while implicitly addressed in some of these studies, has not yet been used to analyse the opportunities and challenges university teachers experience. Yet, it seems clear from published studies that academics who seek to decolonise their curricula encounter both opportunities as well as barriers to their efforts. For example, that work towards decolonising curricula partly overlaps with anti-racism work is experienced as an opportunity (Tamimi et al., 2023). Amongst the challenges, researchers have identified their own underlying assumptions (e.g. about scientific research) as well as constraints related to the institution's rules for changes to teaching and assessment (Menon et al., 2021).

The role of institutional structures and practices that interface with academics' efforts to decolonise is discussed in several studies (e.g. Laakso & Hallberg Adu, 2024; Sathorar & Geduld, 2019; Shahjahan et al., 2022; Shaik & Kahn, 2021). Challenges affecting academics who seek to decolonise include institutional barriers (Hall et al., 2021, 2023; Shain et al., 2021) as well as wider societal issues, for example the ongoing linguistic hegemony of English in research, teaching and public life (Aman, 2017; Homateni Julius et al., 2023).

Our study includes 34 academics who discussed with us their practices and beliefs concerning decolonising curricula and how these interfaced with their university's structures and priorities. Based on what we learned from our research participants, at the core of this paper's contribution is a critical discussion of university teachers' reported experience of their agency in the project of transforming HE curricula to move towards decolonisation.

Methodology

This paper examines data from a qualitative research project looking at university teachers' views and experiences of their efforts to respond to student diversity, to develop inclusive pedagogies and to support decolonisation. Between July and December 2023, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 34 university teachers working at a university in the North West of England. All of them were members of departments belonging to the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Our participants held positions from lecturer to professor and included British nationals and colleagues from a range of other countries. We, two white European female academics, are members of the same Faculty. Interviews were held online, using Microsoft Teams and lasted between 50 and 90 min. They were recorded and transcribed using Teams' automated transcription. Shortly after each interview, the

interviewer worked carefully through the transcript to ensure correctness and readability. We recruited participants through prior contacts as well as snowballing. We invited colleagues who we believed to be interested in the topics of inclusivity and decolonisation, and we took care to approach staff from across the disciplines of the Faculty. We chose interviews because the informal and semi-structured intellectual space they offer is particularly suited to the sharing of in-depths reflections of ongoing or past experiences.

The interviews covered questions relating to the broad topics of student diversity and inclusive pedagogies, with questions about decolonising the curriculum making up about one-third of each interview. Comments on decolonisation were also included in the discussion of other topics relating to inclusive teaching and cultural diversity. In this paper, we focus on lecturers' experiences of decolonising their curricula. We discuss inclusive education in another paper (Atanasova & Papen, 2025).

We obtained ethics approval for our study from our faculty's research ethics committee. We have given all participants a pseudonym and, to the extent possible, we are not including in this paper information that could identify them. We discussed anonymity with each participant when initially seeking their consent and in some cases, we returned to them when writing this paper.

We coded interviews using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Each author independently read and coded three interviews noting down initial points of interest guided by our research focus. We then compared these initial codes and analysed three more interviews each, after which we compared codes and coding again. We repeated these steps until we had analysed 10 interviews each and were satisfied that our codes are exhaustive of the themes relevant to our study. At this stage, we entered the transcripts in NVivo and completed the coding of the full set of interviews, comparing our coding periodically, and analysing a mix of interviews conducted by each author.

When preparing the present paper, we re-read all codes and comments relating to decolonisation. At this stage, agency emerged as an overarching theme, which crystallised around the two sub-themes:

(1) Decolonising curricula: teachers' progressive agency
(2) The institution's position on decolonisation both supports and curtails teachers' agency.

In the following sections, we discuss each of these in turn.

Decolonising curricula: Teachers' progressive agency

Participants shared with us their ambitions about the work they were doing and the practical steps they had taken. For the academics we spoke to, the core aim of decolonising university curricula is to reconsider what and whose knowledge counts in academic research and teaching. Echoing views expressed by other academics (see Shain et al., 2021), Ellen explained that decolonising the curriculum means

> recognising that white male American people and to slightly lesser extent British people and European people have played a very powerful role and still play a really powerful role in constructing academic knowledge.

Eveline explained that her efforts to decolonise the curriculum focus on 'dismantling and unpacking [. . .] structures of privilege of knowledge'. Importantly, for her this includes how she delivers her teaching, specifically, she explained how to create 'opportunities for dialogue and learning from our students'.

The above views illustrate that our participants considered decolonising the curriculum to be an ambitious project, requiring, as Meera explained, a 'sea change in how we teach, not just what we teach'. For her, this also includes assessment and marking. Peter described decolonising curricula to be distinct from diversifying (see also Shain et al., 2021), requiring that academics fundamentally overhaul what theoretical perspectives and readings students are asked to engage with, and 'that you don't just tag those bits on at the end and say by the way, we've got a couple of African scholars tagged on at the end of the [reading] list'.

In line with these ambitions, participants undertook a range of activities to change their module content and teaching methods. Primarily this was work by individual academics or small groups of colleagues responsible for a specific module in their department. This work included seeking to find sources from outside the core centres of knowledge production (e.g. papers by authors from the Global South) and creating teaching methods that invite students' critical engagement with canonical theories and established sources of knowledge. The accounts that academics shared with us show that, in these local contexts, our participants had the agency to make changes: to reading lists, course content, seminar activities and, in some cases, assessment practices. Driven by their ambition and belief in the need for decolonisation (see Meera above), they exercised 'progressive agency' (Annala et al., 2023). While they recognised the scope and challenges of decolonising their curricula, they invested effort and time into this, for them, 'meaningful process' (Annala et al., 2023, p. 1316).

Reflexivity – to consider and question their own and their discipline's beliefs – was discussed by several participants. Matthew talked about having to be 'very self-reflexive about our own voices'. Natalie referred to her 'blind spots' which are due to her 'privileged white middle-class background'. The importance of reflexivity for curriculum change has been discussed in other studies. Academic staff interviewed by Tamimi et al. (2023) commented on the need to reflect on their own biases. Menon et al. (2021) too were conscious that they needed to 'decolonise our own ways of thinking' (p. 940). Shaik and Kahn (2021) refer to 'social and cultural solipsism' (pp. 980–981) in HE which can constrain reflexivity.

The above comments reveal the importance of reflexivity in relation to agency, which is manifest here as capacity and willingness to think beyond and outside familiar views and beliefs, seen in our participants' commitment to critically examine their own beliefs about knowledge and scientific methods.

The need to reflect on disciplinary values and expectations, as mentioned above, already points to the importance of different structures in the dynamics that drive or hinder colleagues' efforts to decolonise their curricula. This is the topic of our next section.

The institution's position on decolonisation both supports and curtails teachers' agency

The institution's position and actions were prominently commented upon in colleagues' discussions of their efforts to achieve curriculum change. Two key themes emerged, which we discuss in turn: *time, people and roles* and *the university and sector context*.

Time, people and roles

Time required to engage in decolonising activities was a common theme in the interviews. Hugo put it bluntly: 'time is the university's scarcest resource'. This, he continued, is 'the real problem'. Peter and Sophie also commented on how difficult it is to find the time to read as widely as is required (to decolonise their curricula). Workload as a factor hindering decolonisation efforts was also a concern for the academics in Tamimi et al.'s study (2023). Sophie acknowledged that the criteria for achieving promotion now include a question about work on decolonisation. But, she cautioned, colleagues were not being given time to do this work: there was no explicit recognition of decolonising work in the university's workload allocation systems.

Based on our participants' accounts, we can assume that workload allocation systems and workload as such acted as structures hindering curriculum change. These barriers require progressive agency that sees colleagues putting work into changing their modules even if this adds to what they are doing already and is not formally recognised. We can thus add to Annala et al.'s (2023) understanding of progressive agency by describing it as a form of agency that reveals the agent, believing in the benefits of acting, willing to act despite conditions that make these actions demanding or difficult.

Several of our participants commented on who (in their department and in the university) engages in decolonising. In Hugo's words, it is largely 'due to the initiative and generosity of a few colleagues' that decolonising work is taking place. Lakshmi and Ravindra talked about the danger in creating new roles such as the departmental representative on the faculty decolonisation network. Once a colleague has been appointed, it is easier for others to assume that the topic is covered and the work done, allowing them 'to sit back'. Astrid added that in her department decolonisation work is 'yoked to EDI in general', the effect being that the role of departmental chair of Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI, held by an academic), 'becomes an ever larger job'. We can see here how individual academics' agency is mediated by the university environment and its structures and practices.

Several participants talked about colleagues who were supportive of decolonising curricula but felt unable to engage in it due to their workload. Given the widely reported high workload of academics (see, for example, Kenny, 2018) this is not a surprise. While some colleaguesfor example, Hugo, were outspoken that 'we as educators need to act', 'assume responsibility' and 'provide leadership', other colleagues, Adam explained, felt unable to engage in the project of decolonising curricula. Workload pressures posed obstacles to their agency.

The situation that Hugo and Adam described appears to have had an undesirable consequence: as many academics did not engage in decolonising efforts, those who did, felt they carried a greater burden. They found that, as Jessica explained, curriculum

innovation towards decolonisation rested 'on the shoulders of people who already do it'. We can describe the situation in the following way: Individual academics who act to decolonise their curricula see their agency morphing into what they experience as 'a kind of burden that is placed onto a specific set of people' (Jessica's words) with the effect that others can carry on as usual. Paula explained that: 'the real danger is that decolonisation becomes an activity for one group of people, and they can carry the burden, they do the work'. This, no doubt, limits the overall scope of what can be achieved by way of decolonising the curricula of a department or faculty.

The above also suggests that the academics in our study had limited collaborative agency (Ashwin, 2012). Collaborative agency was limited to the joint endeavours of small groups of colleagues, often co-teaching a module, who worked together to decolonise their teaching. Frequent comments that 'it is always the same people' who engage (Ravindra) suggest that this group of 'decolonising agents' was small.

The university and sector context

The above discussion already points to the importance of the university's policies and practices as a factor mediating colleagues' agency. Participants expressed different views on their institution's position on decolonisation. Several commented positively on the 'little pots of money' (Emily) that departments had been able to obtain, signalling to colleagues that the faculty is behind their efforts to decolonise. Hugo too commented on the faculty's willingness to support decolonising work and Martha agreed that at faculty level decolonising work was 'taken very seriously'. Another participant talked about the funding that had allowed them to engage a PhD student to help with literature searches. For these colleagues, the institution, and specifically their faculty, was supportive of their agency.

But our participants also shared more critical views. Mia, with a discernible degree of exasperation, told us about the processes that regulate the creation of new modules. Two 'decolonising modules' had recently been introduced in her department. But, she stressed, it took 4 years from inception to being able to start teaching them, due to, amongst other factors, lengthy quality assurance processes. This is an example of structures interfacing with academics' agency, here, for Mia in a frustrating way, slowing down her and her colleagues' efforts.

Colleagues' efforts to decolonise their curricula were also experienced to be shaped in more indirect ways by the institution's ambiguous position vis-a-vis decolonisation. Julian shared the following:

> at the moment, the university sort of institutionalises something like that. Then it becomes probably kind of absorbed and muted in some respects.

Elias seemed to agree with Julian, when he cautioned that decolonisation should not follow in the steps of EDI work, which he believed to have become 'too neoliberal institutional'. This could, potentially, lead to what Shain et al. (2021, p. 921) described as 'institutional taming' of decolonisation. None of our participants talked about their institution directly or explicitly curtailing their agency with regard to decolonisation by, for example, deliberately opposing or interfering with work they were undertaking. But some of our participants talked about the scope of decolonisation. In addition to the

wide-ranging work of changing what and whose knowledge was to be taught, decolonisation requires universities to consider their hiring and promotion practices, as well as their efforts to build and extend campus branches overseas. These colleagues did not perceive the university to be actively engaging with decolonisation in this more comprehensive way. Rather, they believed the university to be responding to expediency – wider debates in society and amongst prospective students – and not wanting to 'fall behind'. Jessica perceived a risk that decolonising the curriculum could turn into a buzzword.

The above views reflect participants' scepticism towards their institution's position. For several of our participants this was reflected in the lack of wider institutional support for decolonisation. As a consequence, efforts were 'driven from the grassroots' (Lakshmi). Teaching staff, as Jessica put it, lacked 'allies from people in more powerful positions'. Peter added that:

> the thing that they [the University] can't do or won't do is commit serious resources because they haven't got it or don't want to spend it [. . .]. The Faculty is now actively supporting it, and I think it is growing, but that's also come alongside a lot of goodwill, grassroots work.

These comments reveal academics' reservations in the face of what to them seemed to be their institution's ambiguous position towards decolonisation. In the face of lack of clarity about the institution's commitment to decolonisation – where some parts of university management seemed to be more supportive than others – academics felt that their agency was both supported and curtailed. This situation may be related to what Shain et al. (2021) refer to as universities engaging in 'strategic advancement' (p. 931), defined as a 'proactive strategy driven by a need for the institution to be "seen to be" responsive in the face of wider pressures and social changes'. Such a strategy could be linked to the university's awareness that to support student recruitment it needs to be seen as engaging in decolonisation efforts.

But how did the university's position interface with academics' agency? Elias explained that 'strategic advancement' could bring with it opportunities, in the form of, for example the small pots of money from their faculty that participants could use to help with their curriculum work towards decolonisation. Looking at the range of conversations with academic we had, it seems though that the effect of 'serious resources' (Peter) missing, possibly a sign of the university's ambiguous views on decolonisation, was that academics' agency, while not actively suppressed, was curtailed by lack of time and relied on colleagues' 'goodwill'.

Discussion

Our main finding is that at the university where our project was located, the work of decolonising curricula by and large relied on individual academics' agency, based on their beliefs, values and dedication.

The academics who we interviewed were actively engaging in and seeking out opportunities to decolonise curricula in their subjects and departments. They exercised 'progressive agency' (Annala et al., 2023), taking responsibility for and engaging in curriculum change.

Academics' agency in support of decolonising curricula was, however, hampered by several factors, mostly to do with other colleagues and with the institutional

context they were working in. While their own faculty provided some financial support, a supportive forum and space for discussion (the faculty decolonisation network), the wider institution, in the experience of our interviewees, did not offer substantial practical measures to support their efforts. Workload was a prominent concern. While none of the participants explicitly put it this way, it seems that, to an extent, the university and its senior management were relying on colleagues' progressive agency. In that way, the faculty and the university benefitted from academics' willingness to invest time into finding new resources and developing new teaching practices despite high workloads.

It is important to note, though, that it was not just the institution or its senior management that was perceived to be lacking in their support for decolonisation. Notably, participants spoke about the limited engagement by other colleagues in decolonising curricula. While they weren't fully isolated, they operated in small groups of like-minded colleagues. In the face of little active commitment from others in their departments and faculty, they were not able to exercise collective agency. A major challenge in relation to developing curriculum change towards decolonisation, as one participant (Ravindra) summed up, was to 'really get people on board'.

Our study confirms the importance of considering academics' agency as a crucial factor in curriculum innovation, here, in relation to decolonisation. Our findings also confirm the relevance of conceptualising agency as a process that develops and plays out, as Biesta and Tedder (2007) have highlighted, through the interplay of various factors, social, structural and personal. The study confirms that while HE teachers have a degree of freedom, structural conditions impact on that freedom, and this can limit academics' ability to engage in curriculum change.

Disciplinary background played a role in participants' experience of their efforts to decolonise curricula. Some participants talked about issues specific to their discipline, for example, if the topic of a module was seen to be 'parochial', in the words of one participant, its scope limited to a narrow time period and cultural context. Others mentioned difficulties in areas of work where there is a strong (Western dominated) canon and where sourcing work from other perspectives was experienced to be particularly challenging. However, the more general concerns and limitations to their agency that participants discussed, in relation to workload, the university's position and the wider institutional context, were shared by colleagues from a range of disciplines.

The question that remains is why some academics invested in decolonising efforts, others not? Why did some exercise progressive agency, others not? We are mindful that our participants were self-selected. Participants' personal and professional identities, which Kusters et al. (2023) consider to be core parts of HE teachers' agency are likely to bear upon their views on decolonisation. Many of the participants had studied or worked in other countries, spoke two or more languages, and some had grown up in countries of the Global South. For others, their research focus and disciplinary background made decolonisation central to their work. These personal factors are likely to be relevant, but further research is needed to inquire into academics' background, their identities as academics and how these relate to their ability and willingness to engage in decolonising work.

Limitations

As a qualitative study located in one university, there are limitations to our findings. The study findings may be suggestive of the experiences of other academics at other institutions, but some of the insights are likely to be specific to this university. The participants are a non-representative group of academics. The invitation to take part is likely to have attracted academics who are invested in the study theme, inclusivity and decolonising, and thus we are missing the views of academics who may be sceptical of the goals of decolonisation.

Future research

Future research is needed to understand better how academics in other universities in the UK and beyond are able to work towards decolonising their curricula. Further research should seek to illuminate the role personal and professional identities play in academics' commitment to decolonisation. Studies located in a particular discipline or department could reveal disciplinary factors and contexts and thus increase our understanding of the specific factors that support or hinder decolonisation efforts in different disciplines.

Conclusions and suggestions

Our paper contributes to our knowledge of how decolonisation is understood and practised by academics in different disciplines. Published literature has focussed on individual scholars' experiences. Our study adds insights from a much wider group of university teachers. Analysing these experiences from the perspective of university teachers' agency reveals the complex interface of individual and institutional practices and cultures. The main structural element appeared to be institutional practices that offered academics some resources and support but which, by and large, were presented by participants as leaving the core work of decolonising to individual or small groups of colleagues relying on their willingness to act. These academics' engagement was limited by the lack of support and recognition from departmental colleagues and senior management. Looking at these findings, it seems that one of the tasks ahead is to lobby for decolonising amongst teaching academics. Decolonisation networks, such as by the faculty in our study, might be a good start, but we need to enthuse and work with wider groups of colleagues. This could include graduate teaching assistants (mentioned only once in our data), who, as Collins (2019) pointed out, may already be practising decolonial pedagogies. Such efforts could lead to stronger collective agency allowing for greater influence on university positions and policies with regard to, for example, resource allocations and workload recognition for work on decolonising curricula.

Note

1. This is the definition and acronym used by the university whose staff we interviewed. Other institutions use BME (Black and Minority Ethnic).

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the study participants for sharing their experiences and thoughts with us and for supporting this project by giving up time to be interviewed. We would also like to thank the reviewers of Innovations in Teaching and Education International for their very helpful comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Uta Papen's main area of research are literacy studies and literacy education. She is involved in her School and Faculty's EDI work, and this has triggered her interest in researching efforts to decolonise university curricula. https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/social-sciences/people/uta-papen

Dimitrinka Atanasova researches and teaches (about) the role of culture in communication - particularly, communication about health and science issues and, more recently, within higher education. https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/social-sciences/people/dimitrinka-atanasova

ORCID

Uta Papen http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8989-6365
Dimitrinka Atanasova http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3474-8909

References

Adler, C., & Lalonde, C. (2020). Identity, agency and institutional work in higher education: A qualitative meta-synthesis. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*, *15*(2), 121–144. https://doi.org/10.1108/QROM-11-2018-1696

Ahmed-Landeryou, M. (2023). Developing an evidence-informed decolonising curriculum wheel - a reflective piece. *Equity in Education & Society*, *2*(2), 157–180. https://doi.org/10.1177/27526461231154014

Aman, R. (2017). *Decolonising intercultural education: Colonial differences, the geopolitics of knowledge, and inter-epistemic dialogue*. Routledge.

Annala, J., Linden, J., Mäkinen, M., & Henriksson, J. (2023). Understanding academic agency in curriculum change in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *28*(6), 1310–1327. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1881772

Archer, M. (2003). *Structure, agency and the internal conversation*. University Press

Arday, J., Zoe Belluigi, D., Thomas, D, D., & Thomas, D. (2021). Attempting to break the chain: Reimaging inclusive pedagogy and decolonising the curriculum within the academy. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *53*(3), 298–313. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1773257

Ashwin, P. (2012). *Analysing teaching-learning interactions in higher education. Accounting for structure and agency*. Continuum.

Atanasova, D., & Papen, U. (2025). UK university teachers on inclusive education: Conceptualizations, practices, opportunities and challenges. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2025.2455431

Banister, C. (2023). Decolonizing business English: Exploring classroom ideologies. *ELT Journal*, *77*(2), 166–175. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccac043

Bhambra, G. K., Nişancıoğlu, K., & Gebrial, D. (2020). Decolonising the university in 2020. *Identities*, *27* (4), 509–516. https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2020.1753415

Biesta, G., & Tedder, M. (2007). Agency and learning in the lifecourse: Towards an ecological perspective. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *39*(2), 132–149. https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2007.11661545

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE.

Choat, S. (2021). Decolonising the political theory curriculum. *Politics*, *41*(3), 404–420. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395720957543

Collins, J. (2019). Towards postcolonial pedagogies: How graduate teaching assistants foster collectivism and transcultural classrooms. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *58*(2), 157–167. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2019.1702891

Daley, A., Neufeld, H., Skinner, K., Van Katwyk, T., Smoke, M. L., & Smoke, D. (2024). A relational approach towards decolonizing curriculum development within the colonial postsecondary institution. *Engaged Scholar Journal: Community-Engaged Research, Teaching, and Learning*, *10* (1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v10i1.70836

Keele University. (n.d.). *Decolonising the curriculum*. https://www.keele.ac.uk/equalitydiversity/equalityframeworksandactivities/decolonisingthecurriculum/#what-is-decolonising-the-curriculum?

Hall, R., Ansley, L., & Connolly, P. (2023). Decolonising or anti-racism? Exploring the limits of possibility in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *30*(2), 327–343. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2023.2201676

Hall, R., Ansley, L., Connolly, P., Loonat, S., Patel, K., & Whitham, B. (2021). Struggling for the anti-racist university: Learning from an institution-wide response to curriculum decolonisation. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *26*(7–8), 902–919. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1911987

Homateni Julius, L., McKenna, S., & Mgqwashu, E. (2023). The conflation of English competence and academic literacy: A case study of three Namibian universities. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *61*(5), 1016–1028. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2023.2251948

Kenny, J. (2018). Re-empowering academics in a corporate culture: An exploration of workload and performativity in a university. *Higher Education*, *75*(2), 365–380. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26449043

Kusters, M., van der Rijst, R., de Vetten, A., & Admiraal, W. (2023). University lecturers as change agents: How do they perceive their professional agency? *Teaching & Teacher Education*, *127*(127), 104097. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104097

Laakso, L., & Hallberg Adu, K. (2024). 'The unofficial curriculum is where the real teaching takes place': Faculty experiences of decolonising the curriculum in Africa. *Higher Education*, *87*(1), 185–200. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01000-4

Louvel, S. (2013). Understanding change in higher education as bricolage: How academics engage in curriculum change. *Higher Education*, *66*(6), 669–691. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9628-6

Matthews, S. (2021). Decolonising while white: Confronting race in a South African classroom. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *26*(7–8), 1113–1121. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1914571

Menon, S., Green, C., Charbonneau, I., Lehtomäki, E., & Mafi, B. (2021). Approaching global education development with a decolonial lens: Teachers' reflections. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *26*(7–8), 937–952. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1941845

Race, R., Ayling, P., Chetty, D., Hassan, N., McKinney, S. J., Boath, L., Riaz, N., & Salehjee, S. (2022). Decolonising curriculum in education: Continuing proclamations and provocations. *London Review of Education*, *20*(1). https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.20.1.12

Sathorar, H., & Geduld, D. (2019). Reflecting on lecturer dispositions to decolonise teacher education. *Journal of Education (University of KwaZulu-Natal)*, *76*, 108–127. https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i76a06

Schucan Bird, K., & Pitman, L. (2020). How diverse is your reading list? Exploring issues of representation and decolonisation in the UK. *Higher Education*, *79*(5), 903–920. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00446-9

Shahjahan, R. A., Estera, A. L., Surla, K. L., & Edwards, K. T. (2022). "Decolonizing" curriculum and pedagogy: A comparative review across disciplines and global higher education contexts. *Review of Educational Research*, *92*(1), 73–113. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543211042423

Shaik, A., & Kahn, P. (2021). Understanding the challenges entailed in decolonising a higher education institution: An organisational case study of a research-intensive South African university. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *26*(7–8), 969–985. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1928064

Shain, F., Yıldız, Ü. K., Poku, V., & Gokay, B. (2021). From silence to 'strategic advancement': Institutional responses to 'decolonising' in higher education in England. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *26*(7–8), 920–936. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1976749

SOAS. (2018). *Decolonising SOAS learning and teaching toolkit for programme and module convenors*. Decolonising SOAS Working Group. Retrieved September 9, 2024, from https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/decolonisingsoas/learning-teaching/toolkit-for-programme-and-module-convenors/

Tamimi, N., Khalawi, H., Jallow, M. A., Valencia, O. G. T., & Jumbo, E. (2023). Towards decolonising higher education: A case study from a UK university. *Higher Education*, *8*(3), 815–837. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01144-3

Tight, M. (2023). The curriculum in higher education research: A review of the research literature. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *61*(2), 315–328. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2023.2166560

University of Hull. (n.d.). *Decolonising the curriculum*. https://www.hull.ac.uk/choose-hull/university-and-region/key-documents/docs/quality/programme-development-and-management/decolonising-the-curriculum.pdf

Vähäsantanen, K., Paloniemi, S., Räikkönen, E., & Hökkä, P. (2020). Professional agency in a university context: Academic freedom and fetters. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, *89*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.103000

Wernicke, M. (2021). Four 'moments' of intercultural encountering. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *26*(7–8), 1130–1140. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1911988

Wilson, C. (2024). Engaging decolonization: Lessons toward a theory of change for transforming practice. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *29*(4), 1042–1057. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2022.2053672

Winter, J., Webb, O., & Turner, R. (2024). Decolonising the curriculum: A survey of current practice in a modern UK university. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *61*(1), 181–192. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2022.2121305

Zembylas, M. (2021). Refusal as affective and pedagogical practices in higher education decolonization: A modest proposal. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *26*(7–8), 953–968. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1900816