

Internationalization and Decolonization in UK Higher Education: Are We There Yet?

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Discourses around internationalization are largely centered on student mobility and mainly economically oriented. Scholarly engagement is thus mostly framed around marketized narratives and ensuing criticism of the neoliberalist turn of international higher education. At the national level, international education organizations from Western countries are missing opportunities to move away from the “westernized, largely Anglo-Saxon, and predominantly English-speaking paradigm” (see de Wit and Jones, “A Missed Opportunity and Limited Vision for Internationalization,” in *IHE* # 109). At the university level, recent research in the US context suggests that internationalization policies may be disconnected from the racialized lived experiences of students, faculty, and administrators. Resonating with recent scholarship in internationalization studies, our article examines racialization and decoloniality in relation to internationalization.

Problematizing the Current World Order

The unresolved and persisting problematic legacy of colonization on the current world order, including in academia, have been brought to the forefront on a global scale by the #Black Lives Matter movement and the Rhodes Must Fall protests. This has reenergized calls for decolonization in universities that acknowledge the hegemonic positioning of Western epistemologies, and consequent loss and marginalization of bodies of knowledge. In this sense, it is argued that decolonization is “an on-going process of becoming, unlearning, and relearning regarding who we are.” We consider that this process of unlearning and relearning forms a basis for dialectic scholarly engagement that recognizes historical and current power dynamics in attempts to “decolonize the university.”

In this piece, we examine interpretations and contestations around internationalization and decolonization in UK universities, in strategy and policy, teaching practice, and research collaborations. We put forward suggestions about what needs to happen for these two processes to work hand-in-hand, and about the complexities involved.

Reframing Our Institutional Strategies

Using the United Kingdom as a case study, we can trace how universities’ international strategies have evolved over time and more recently are often described as “global engagement strategies.” On the surface, these are outward facing. They are about building long-term relationships and making a positive global contribution. But how different are they really? With whom are these “engagement” strategies actually engaging? And do the relationships that are envisaged still place the UK institution in the driving seat?

Headline findings from a research study exploring the current and future role of global engagement in UK university strategies indicate that, while rhetoric has become more values-led, measures selected to evaluate success have changed little. Most relate to institutional profile, reach, or income. Western, Anglocentric conceptualizations of internationalization are rarely challenged. Decolonization is barely mentioned.

Embracing the International Classroom

The recent and renewed interest in decolonization within UK higher education seeks to understand what decolonizing research and the curriculum actually looks like. Academics and students alike have challenged the reluctance to “decolonize the academy” through tactical interventions such as “Why is my curriculum white?” and to criticize why courses (and the staff who teach them) are lacking representation from nonwhite scholars.

Abstract

Different interpretations and contestations related to internationalization and decolonization in universities result in a contradictory picture. Even where Western institutions ostensibly embrace the drive for decolonization, their Anglocentric, colonial interpretations of internationalization are often at odds with this effort—in the areas of strategy and policy, as well as teaching practice and research. Changes in approach are needed in order for these two processes to work hand-in-hand within a complex conceptual and operating context.

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Furthermore, OECD data shows that over 40 percent of the 6.1 million internationally mobile students are studying in only four host English-speaking countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. This has implications for teaching practice and for students learning in a second language.

The convergence of diverse cultures and languages in an internationalized classroom can provide a space for critical and uncomfortable dialogues from different perspectives. This suggests that internationalization can potentially afford a space for decolonization in higher education. But this will involve a recognition that diversity creates an opportunity for learning and teaching, for everyone. However, there persists an academic deficit perception of international students in internationalization discourses. This deficit narrative has been described as neoimperialist. In other words, Western frames of knowing remain the dominant conceptualization of internationalization. This, therefore, begs the question: Can internationalization be decolonized in our teaching practice?

Reconceptualizing Research Collaboration

A 2020 Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) debate paper made several recommendations to ensure that decolonization in UK higher education focuses on increasing funding for BAME (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic) scholars. The recommendations included increasing research support and scholarships, addressing deficiencies in curricula, creating departmental roles to address decoloniality, and working toward rectifying misunderstandings of the terms and processes. Key research funders such as UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and the Wellcome Trust have also sought to address issues related to decoloniality in research. For instance, the Wellcome Trust published a resource to inform anti-racist practice in its organization and research.

Counterarguments point out that the scope of these reflections remains Eurocentric, focusing more on “self-improvement” on the part of UK funders and universities. In contrast, efforts led by African universities establish measures to address decolonization through holistic measures to improve curricula, research objectives, and international collaborations. Furthermore, a recent consensus statement set forth guidelines for researchers to promote equitable authorship in research partnerships between low- and low-middle-income countries (LMIC) and high-income countries (HIC). As some Global South universities are dependent on Western funding to support their research programs, particularly in the areas of health and development, more work needs to be done to center the needs of southern institutions to divest from ongoing legacies of coloniality in higher education and promote meaningful collaboration.

Embedding Decoloniality in Internationalization

There is little evidence that the university internationalization agenda is explicitly invested in decolonization. This answers the rhetorical question posed in our heading. It also prompts another question: Where do we go from here?

Although a few universities place valuing other cultures and perspectives at the heart of internationalization, there is still a long way to go when it comes to opening up the debate on the decolonization of internationalization. Universities are at different stages of this complex and complicated process. Many have not even started.

Moving forward with a decolonial internationalization agenda will require institutions to truly welcome diversity of knowledge and confront the persisting hegemonic structures that constrain knowing through an expanded lens. Thus, all stakeholders in different global contexts need to challenge the rhetoric of “global engagement” that seemingly presents a nonpoliticized and nonracialized outlook. The voices of erstwhile marginalized stakeholders reaffirm the need to redress the enduring legacies of colonialization embedded in the structures of higher education institutions, globally. Strategies for decolonialization of internationalization must be supported by tangible policy changes that reflect the lived experiences of students and staff. The current main manifestation of internationalization as affording intercultural connections offers a potential way to re-envision internationalization, first by embracing the international classroom as a site of diverse perspectives that can drive decolonization of curricula and pedagogy.

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Next, we need to reconceptualize research collaboration so that marginalized partners are prioritized through the centering of subaltern voices in this process. In sum, internationalization policy must explicitly dismantle the legacy of coloniality, using the current manifestations of internationalization as a starting point in this complicated but necessary process. ▲