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Abstract

The damaging colonial nature of neoliberal universities has been carefully concealed, allowing ethnic minorities to be systematically excluded from these institutions. This is due to the principles aligned with neoliberalism, such as market values, which frame such universities as neutral and non-discriminatory. This paper aims to challenge these claims by exposing the areas in which the United Kingdom's neoliberal university system can be seen to operate with colonial values – putting ethnic minorities at a disadvantage within universities and, by extension, within wider society. University curricula, staff and students will be analysed to uncover the ways in which each remain colonised, and methods will be suggested to decolonise these areas of universities. The difficulties of implementing such strategies due to the neoliberal structure of universities will also be discussed at length, with concluding remarks alluding to the idea that UK universities need major systematic change in order to decolonise and thus bring racial equity to these institutions.

Decolonisation of universities refers to a movement which is striving for the elimination of white, European knowledge being regarded as superior in academia, not only to make universities more equal and diverse but also to make their practices

more accurate, unbiased and unprejudiced (Demir, 2018). It also suggests that universities are institutionally racist (Sian, 2019), discriminating against ethnic minorities and reproducing racial hierarchies through their practices (DiAngelo, 2015; Demir, 2018). Although decolonisation of universities may be needed across the globe, this essay will be situated within the context of the United Kingdom (UK) university system as the UK has a university system where neoliberalism is greatly prevalent (Holmwood, 2018), and this will allow for a focused evaluation of these specific institutions. As UK universities are largely neoliberal institutions, supposedly unbiased marketized ideologies are used to disguise colonial practices in the university (Holmwood, 2018). The neoliberal structure of British universities will therefore be examined in depth to uncover ways in which this can impede decolonisation. This paper will cover three main features of universities which have been identified as needing major changes in order to decolonise. These include the university curriculum, the university staff and the university students. Each of these will be assessed in depth, looking at the ways in which universities are currently colonised and how the neoliberal aspects to universities make decolonising difficult. Additionally, the steps made by neoliberal universities towards decolonising will be considered. I will argue that these efforts are addressed in the wrong ways and only with market-driven intentions. I will ultimately conclude that the structure and histories of neoliberal universities will never allow for full decolonisation to take place and that a complete system change is needed to allow decolonisation of universities to occur fully.

Firstly, the ways that universities can be decolonised through the curriculum taught in such institutions will be discussed. The current curricula offered is judged to have a narrow view of the world (Demir, 2018), with the ideas of white European men overrepresented as the majority of what is taught (Sian, 2019). This lack of diverse knowledge is so prevalent in UK universities that the movement 'Why is My Curriculum White?' has been formed, demanding universities to decolonise their curricula (Andrews, 2018).

Current curricula create a Eurocentric view of the world (Demir, 2018; Icaza and Vazquez, 2018; Sian, 2019) which is problematic for several reasons. First, it can reproduce the racial hierarchies of intelligence constructed during colonialism, which leads to ignoring non-European and non-white knowledge (Demir, 2018). The

lack of inclusion of knowledge from other parts of world allows colonial ideologies to be indefinitely reproduced through curricula (Sian, 2019) and means a lack of representation is available, which can impact the ways in which BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) students view themselves and their histories (Demir, 2018). Secondly, current university curricula portray European knowledge as superior to that produced by other areas of the world (Demir, 2018; Sian, 2019). This encourages the reproduction of the first issue as it provides justification for ignoring non-European knowledge by presenting it as inferior and therefore not worth including in the curriculum (Sian, 2019). Thirdly, curricula ignore how colonialism has impacted the histories and knowledge of both Europe and non-Europe (Museum POLIN, 2018). This has played a key part of concealing Europe's extensive history of colonialism (Sian, 2019). The curriculum's concealment of the damaging affects imperialism, and the failure to label Europe itself as colonial, creates problems for accurately understanding global society and its complex history (Museum POLIN, 2018). Finally, the current state of the curriculum means that the knowledge taught is partial and incomplete due to consistent use of Eurocentric perspectives alone (Demir, 2018). The importance of decolonising the curriculum is not only about the inclusion of others and diversification of knowledge, but to make what is being taught accurate and just (Demir, 2018). This demonstrates how current university curricula is problematic as it encourages students to engage with knowledge which only considers the European perspective, meaning they are educated with knowledge which lacks historical truth and depth.

This analysis of current university curricula establishes how it can perpetuate knowledge about world history which is damaging and untrue. Therefore, a major part of decolonising the university system is through the decolonisation of the curricula (Demir, 2018). This means that current curricula need to change. However, this is not an entirely radical approach of completely eradicating all aspects of the current curricula. Though much of the curricula needs alteration, decolonising should be done by problematising some Eurocentric knowledge with alternative ideas and recognising that the work of European scholars is imperfect and may not be universal (Sian, 2019).

I will now discuss how the neoliberal university system, which is prominent in the UK (Holmwood, 2018), can impede decolonisation of the curriculum. Neoliberal

universities claim to operate under a meritocratic, colour-blind system, which supposedly functions through processes of equality (Holmwood, 2018; Sian, 2019). Under these principles, the best academic works should receive the most recognition, regardless of the ethnic background of theorists. However, as previously discussed, curricula demonstrate that this is not the case due to the high level of focus on European scholars who present a worldview where Western knowledge is superior (Demir, 2018; Sian 2019). This illustrates how the current approach in neoliberal higher education institutions can operate to undermine the idea that institutional racism exists within universities, and justifies the current Eurocentric curriculum (Sian, 2019), thus preventing decolonisation.

Furthermore, decolonisation of universities may be prevented by the neoliberal university system due to their marketized nature. Though neoliberal universities in the UK could be described as a beginning to move towards decolonisation, through actions such as the introduction of an undergraduate degree in Black Studies (Andrews, 2018), it has been argued that such movements are not done with the intent to bring about equity (Andrews, 2018; Sian, 2019). The movements towards decolonisation appear to be market-based, including changes to curricula that focus on non-European knowledges in order to carve out a niche and be distinct from other universities. Though this is an improvement, these changes to the curricula lack the structural changes needed for full and sustainable decolonisation, as it is uncertain whether the inclusion of non-European knowledge will remain financially profitable (Sian, 2019). This demonstrates how neoliberal universities are only willing to make changes towards decolonising the curriculum if the institution also benefits materially (Andrews, 2018). Consequently, it is clear that the decolonisation of university curricula is hindered by the neoliberal structure of higher education, preventing the university system as a whole from decolonising.

I will now discuss how universities can be decolonised through the university staff. In addition to the 'Why Is My Curriculum White' movement, 'Why Isn't My Professor Black' has also emerged, challenging universities on their institutional racism towards the representation of academic staff (Black, 2014; Lawton, 2018). Black people make up only 1.7% of academic staff at UK universities (Andrews, 2018). Additionally, most of the high-ranking job roles at universities are held by white people, with the representation of black academics decreasing at each stage when

moving up the hierarchy (Andrews, 2018; Bhopal, 2018). Research also shows that black members of staff are overrepresented in low and precarious contract positions (Bhopal, 2018), demonstrating alarming racial inequalities amongst academic staff and suggesting there may be anti-black discriminatory recruitment and promotion practices within universities (Sian, 2019). Only 85 professors out of 18,550 in the UK are black (0.5%), compared to black students making up 5.9% of the student population (Black, 2014). This unequal black student to black professor ratio is problematic as it suggests that although black people are going to university, there are obstacles preventing these students excelling in academia and becoming professors. The issue of university students' colonial experiences will be discussed in detail later in this essay.

The lack of black professors and other high-ranking academic staff (Bhopal, 2018) means that in addition to the curricula focusing largely on white theorists with a Eurocentric outlook (Sian, 2019), students are also expected to look up to the knowledge of mostly white, middle class academics within their universities. This indicates that the universities operate on colonial values. We can see that staff who are promoted to the high-ranking roles typically share the same characteristics as those whose knowledge was valued throughout colonialism and is represented within the curriculum (such as white, European men). This reinforces and reproduces the norms and values which allow institutional racism to occur (Sian, 2019).

Therefore, to decolonise the university, it is necessary to increase the proportion of ethnic minority academic staff, particularly black academic staff. This will reduce the "white-gaze" (Demir, 2018, p.11), also seen in the curricula, which shapes the perspectives of BAME history and culture (Demir, 2018), and may help the curricula to be shaped by black theorists and their research in the long term.

However, neoliberal universities appear to be structured in a way which prevents decolonisation. In addition to the lack of ethnic minority academic staff, these staff are also more likely to be paid less than their white colleagues (Jones, 2019; Sian, 2019). It is argued that this is an intentional inequality, along with gendered pay, with the aim to reduce staff costs (Jones, 2019). This demonstrates how the neoliberal structure of universities, which demands that costs be kept low in order to produce the highest possible profit, contributes to the colonial nature of UK universities by keeping BAME academics underpaid, overworked and unpromoted (Jones, 2019;

Sian 2019). The lack of BAME academics in higher positions (Black, 2014; Andrews; 2018; Bhopal, 2018) may also contribute to the reproduction of these issues because while the vast majority of the people in those positions of power are white, white privilege will continue to be protected and reinforced (Bhopal, 2018). This shows how the neoliberal university takes advantage of BAME academics by keeping them in disproportionately low-paid positions which lack the power to create mass change in terms of decolonisation, while keeping white people in power (Bhopal, 2018). This enables colonial ideologies to be systematically reproduced in universities, despite the fact they can appear as neutral institutions simply guided by market principles (Holmwood, 2018). Overall, this suggests that simply hiring more ethnic minorities is not in itself enough to decolonise the university staff. The structure of hiring and promotion practices needs to be changed (Sian, 2019). But this seems doubtful under the current system which claims to be neutrality while accommodating and encouraging discriminatory practices (Holmwood, 2018).

Having discussed how universities can be decolonised through both the curricula and the staff, I will now move on to how the university can be decolonised through the students. The Equality Act (2010) legally prevents universities from discriminating against students (or staff) on the basis of race, as well as other protected characteristics. However, it can be argued that this has actually increased inequalities for people of colour as the Equality Act (2010) grouped various types of marginalised people together, rather than having individual legislation which focused on each group. This has diminished the attention paid to the specific nature of racial inequalities (Bhopal, 2018), even though greater inequalities can be seen for ethnic minorities compared to other protected groups, particularly in higher education (Holmwood, 2018). Furthermore, it may be believed that the Equality Act (2010) has meant that a higher proportion of BAME groups have been able to secure a place at university where they had not been able to before, but this is not the case (Roxana Barbulescu, 2018). Ethnic minorities are proportionally more likely to attend university than white people, and this is not a new phenomenon (Roxana Barbulescu, 2018). The issue seems to lie with BAME students' time at university (Holmwood, 2018; Roxana Barbulescu, 2018), and the universities that they attend (Roxana Barbulescu, 2018). Ethnic minorities are less likely to attend more prestigious universities, such as those in the Russell group, and are more likely to

attend post-92 institutions (Andrews, 2018; Sian, 2019). Though this is important for their degree classification, what is more telling is the fact that there is an ethnic attainment gap within universities which differs from the attainment gaps found at GCSE and A Level (Holmwood, 2018; Roxana Barbulescu, 2018). GCSE and A Level results both feature differences by class as well as differences by ethnicity (Holmwood, 2018). However, when looking at students with similar entry grades, universities appear to eliminate the class attainment gap but retain the ethnicity attainment gap (Holmwood, 2018), and to a worse degree than in GCSE and A Level – black students are three times less likely than white students to be granted a first (Roxana Barbulescu, 2018).

This demonstrates the institutional racism that is rampant in neoliberal universities and indicates that changes to the structure of universities and the way universities treat ethnic minority students are needed in order to decolonise the university system. Universities need to recognise that the institutional racism within their establishments generates and reproduces structural disadvantages for ethnic minority students. Their ignorance of racial differences and how this can impact university experience needs to be tackled through initiatives including affirmative action and other similar schemes (Holmwood, 2018), which would aim to address the historical injustices and the disadvantages of ethnic minorities.

I will now examine how the structure of neoliberal universities impedes the change needed to decolonise universities through their students. The transformation of the UK university system from a public to private system inherently had racial implications (Holmwood, 2018). It occurred during a time when the rights of ethnic minorities were being limited, suggesting that it was preferable to limit the rights of all UK residents rather than to extend rights to people of colour and presented them as undeserving of higher education (Holmwood, 2018). This demonstrates how the current neoliberal university system was built to exclude ethnic minorities, explaining why universities have not yet implemented the strategies needed to achieve equity and decolonise the student body.

Furthermore, the ability of neoliberal universities to frame their admissions and other practices as meritocratic by simply being driven by competition allows them to claim that they offer equal opportunities and that race plays no part in the operation of the universities (Holmwood, 2018; Sian, 2019). However, this

conceptualises racial inequalities as insignificant (Sian, 2019) and prevents initiatives such as affirmative action from being used as these are actually presented as discriminatory due to running counter to market values of competition and meritocracy (Holmwood, 2018). This shows how the structure of neoliberal universities impedes the decolonisation of the university as the approaches needed to decolonise are presented in a negative way because they oppose neoliberal and marketized values.

Additionally, the neoliberal structure of universities constructs higher education as a personal responsibility (Holmwood, 2018), meaning the universities that ethnic minorities are accepted into and their experiences at university are seen as the fault and choice of the individual, rather than constructed by institutional mechanisms. Furthermore, the contrast that is seen between private, neoliberal intuitions and public intuitions can demonstrate that the ethnic differences in achievement, experiences and admissions is a structural issue rather than an individual one. For example, as discussed, when looking at the ethnic attainment gap for secondary school qualifications, which are generally state-run, public institutions, compared to the privatised neoliberal universities, we see that the secondary school attainment gap is smaller (Roxana Barbulescu, 2018). This indicates that the structure of neoliberal universities is a major cause for the colonised nature of the student body of universities, rather than the constructed notion that it is an individual issue (Holmwood, 2018).

Moreover, universities highlight that they believe diversity is important, with high numbers of international students who come to the UK for higher education (Holmwood, 2018). Universities are able to charge these students a higher rate than home students, meaning neoliberal universities focus on recruiting international students to acquire more income (Holmwood, 2018). The diversity seen in higher education institutions is therefore often fulfilled by these affluent students with privileged backgrounds from other areas of the world, rather than ethnic minorities from the UK (Holmwood, 2018). This demonstrates how neoliberal universities are structured to benefit their marketized goals by excluding ethnic minorities from their own country and promoting the idea of diversity, rather than working towards decolonisation. This ignores the racial issues that still exist despite some level of diversity within universities (Kimura, 2014). Overall, this shows how the structure of neoliberal universities impedes the decolonisation of higher education, using

marketized ideologies and priorities as an excuse for what ultimately allows and perpetuates racial inequalities and discrimination against ethnic minorities in the UK, rather than implementing methods which would decolonise the university.

These discussions of how universities can be decolonised through curricula, staff and students are all important arguments individually and are shown to play key roles in decolonising the university. However, to fully decolonise the university I argue that there needs to be substantial change in all these areas because, as discussed, there are a multitude of colonial issues within each of these sections of the university which need to be addressed. Additionally, each of these areas of the university can be seen to impact each other. For example, the undergraduate degree of Black Studies has taken so long to form because of the lack of academics who have the knowledge to teach this (Andrews, 2018), demonstrating how university staff can impact the curricula. I will now go on to discuss the steps UK universities have made towards decolonising, which could suggest an intent to bring equity to their institutions.

Despite the issues I have discussed regarding neoliberal higher education institutions, it appears that there has been progress in universities towards decolonisation and many universities have strategies implemented to help move towards decolonisation. Many universities now pride themselves on their commitment to achieving diversity and equality in their institutions (Kimura, 2014). The efforts of some universities have even been recognised and presented with an award for racial equality (Frankl, 2015), demonstrating that universities now celebrate diversity and difference (Frankl, 2015; Demir, 2018). Furthermore, specific diversity information about various universities is openly available (UCAS, 2020), which may have prompted universities to focus on improving their approach towards admissions and treatment of ethnic minorities to avoid criticism over lack of diversity and equality. These demonstrate some of the ways in which higher education institutions are making an effort towards achieving decolonisation, suggesting that in the future bigger steps could be made by universities which would have a greater impact on the colonial nature of neoliberal universities.

However, I argue that universities have so far addressed the issue of decolonisation in the wrong way. Rather than implementing strategies which aim to achieve

diversity and equality for ethical reasons, the small amount that is done can be accounted for through market-based approaches (Sian, 2019). Furthermore, diversity does not equal decolonisation. Although universities claim to be dedicated to making their institutions a space which lacks racism and encourages difference, this can actually worsen the situation (Kimura, 2014). By constantly claiming their institutions promote diversity and are anti-racist, it ignores the institutional issues which contribute to the colonisation of the university and can prevent students from achieving their best (Kimura, 2014). This demonstrates how universities need to recognise the issues within them rather than covering them up and acting as if they do not exist. Additionally, the focus on admissions of ethnic minority students ignores the need to alter their practices towards ethnic minorities within university life and removes focus from the lack of BAME academic staff (Kimura, 2014). Universities also need to recognise that decolonising the university and treating ethnic minorities equally is not simply about celebrating diversity, the focus should be on correcting the unjust historical frameworks which continue to impact institutions (Kimura, 2014; Demir, 2018). It is clear that what universities have done in the name of equality and diversity has really been done to benefit the institution, not people of colour. This suggests that the ideologies ingrained in UK universities need to drastically change so that procedures are not purely led by neoliberal and marketized values.

Looking at the issues discussed throughout this essay, it is clear that radical change is needed within the university system. The current structures could never support full decolonisation as the interests of ethnic minorities will only be supported if and when they also benefit the neoliberal institution (Andrews, 2018). The current university system has been built on racism, with knowledge produced that has justified racist practices (Andrews, 2018), and consistent exclusion of people of colour within these institutions continuing until the present (Holmwood, 2018). Though the institutional racism seen today is more concealed, hidden by neoliberal market values which present universities as unbiased and neutral institutions (Holmwood, 2018), it is clear from the discussion throughout this essay that ethnic minorities remain systematically excluded from the benefits of higher education. Since the higher education system is judged as institutionally racist in areas which majorly impact people of colour (Sian, 2019), it seems that a complete system change may be needed in order to decolonise. The strategies for decolonisation

explained earlier in the essay would help in decolonising universities, such as introducing a more diverse curriculum and hiring more ethnic minorities as academic staff in universities. However, the neoliberal ideologies prevalent in universities claim to be neutral which ignores the current issues and denies the need for change; therefore, the necessary changes may not be achievable under the current neoliberal university system (Kimura, 2014; Holmwood, 2018). This suggests that in order to decolonise, we need to abandon the neoliberal structure that universities currently abide by. By removing neoliberalism from universities and reorganising the way they are run, the idea of higher education as a personal responsibility will also be removed. This will let us challenge the currently racialised systems in place (Holmwood, 2018), therefore allowing a decolonised university system to materialise.

Decolonised education systems do currently exist in the form of summer schools (Sian, 2019). These offer a pool of knowledge from different subjects to assess racism and Eurocentrism on a global scale and outside of the traditional dominant academic structures (Sian, 2019). In addition to alternative curricula, these summer schools also use different methods of learning, such as working together rather than working for individual gain (Sian, 2019). This demonstrates that decolonised education is possible and provides insight into what a decolonised higher education system might look like. A similar structure could replace the current neoliberal university system in the UK.

In conclusion, this essay has explained how to decolonise the current UK universities which operate under a marketized and neoliberal system. The three key areas of higher education institutions (the curricula, the staff and the students) have been individually analysed to uncover the aspects which currently operate with colonial characteristics and methods for how to decolonise each of these have been suggested. The difficulties of implementing these strategies to neoliberal universities have been discussed., It is clear that it is the neoliberal structure itself which makes decolonising the university so difficult and has prevented decolonisation from happening earlier. The neoliberal structure of the university system needs to be displaced to allow the necessary changes for decolonisation. The question is, what should this new higher education system look like? The decolonial summer schools can provide some outline – exploring global histories and knowledges, critiquing Eurocentric ideas and focusing on collaborative learning (Sian, 2019). A return to a

free public higher education system which extends the idea of education as a social right for all citizens of the UK, which the previous public education system failed to do adequately (Holmwood, 2018), may also be ideal as the current arrangement which requires universities to aggressively compete is not sustainable long term (Jones, 2019). Overall, this paper has provided both smaller-scale approaches to altering the current system, the practical limitations to making these changes within the neoliberal context, and a more idealistic approach to decolonisation which requires the current neoliberal university system to be abandoned and replaced with a decolonised higher education system. Though large-scale change may not yet be possible with the current UK government, if racial equality is to be achieved in the higher education system, a number of these strategies needs to be implemented.

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