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Struggling for the anti-racist university: learning from an institution-wide response to curriculum decolonisation

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, institutions are amplifying work on race equality, in order to engage with movements for Black lives and decolonising. This brings universities into relations with individual and communal issues of whiteness, white fragility and privilege, double and false consciousness, and behavioural code switching. Inside formal structures, built upon cultures and practices that have historical and material legitimacy, engaging with such issues is challenging. The tendency is to engage in formal accreditation, managed through engagement with established methodologies, risk management practices and data reporting. However, this article argues that the dominant articulation of the institution, which has its own inertia, which reinforces whiteness and dissipates radical energy, needs to be re-addressed in projects of decolonising. This situates the communal work of the institution against the development of authentic relationships as a movement of dignity.

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Introduction: an intersecting critique

Decolonising the University has a long and rich history, which is explicitly connected to post- and anti-colonialism, making visible subaltern or subordinate identities, Black¹ power and indigeneity, and critical race or anti-racist studies (see, for instance, Andreotti et al. 2015; Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nisancioglu 2018; Gabriel and Tate 2017; Heleta 2016; Pimblott 2019; Tuhiwai Smith, Tuck, and Yang 2018). This work overflows into more recent critiques of education, including critical university studies and the abolition of the University, as well as staff–student protests like Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall (Meyerhoff 2019). These movements argue for a new conception of the University, grounded in dignity and life, and challenge dominant ideological positions that privilege particular voices.

Collectively, these analyses and struggles push beyond reimagining the curriculum and modes of assessment. They challenge educators, students and professional services'

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staff to interrogate the distinct-but-interconnected processes of colonisation and racialisation in their own practices and lives. The project of decolonising is both a critique of institutions and a critique of knowledge, and it questions the following.

- The role of the University in reproducing cultures and structures of privilege and power.
- The creation of relationships of inclusion and exclusion between staff and students, institutions and stakeholders, and institutions and society.
- The dominance of white, male views of reality (ontology) and ways of producing knowledge about the world (epistemology).
- The hegemonic (dominant and manufactured) position of knowledge generated in the global North in addressing crises.
- The value of alternative histories and conceptions of a meaningful education and life.
- The relationship between, first, economic value and value-for-money, and second, humane values and human flourishing.

A key point raised in movements of decolonising is a shared questioning of human positionality in relation to these issues, in order to venture beyond them. Here, French, Sanchez, and Ullom (2020) argue for ‘composting’ as a metaphor that centres humanity and feelings, stories, histories, relationships, cultures and lands, and enables positions to be recycled or reimagined through a deep engagement with truth-telling. Yet this focus on place and land has been negatively critiqued by Garba and Sorentino (2020) in their analysis of Tuck and Yang’s (2012) seminal *decolonization is not a metaphor*. Garba and Sorentino (2020, np) push questions of the symbolism and material reality of a range of Black, anti-Black, Indigenous and settler-colonial positions, in particular in relation to ‘slavery’s role in rendering the emerging conceptions of God, globality, humanity, politics, history, and economy coherent for the purposes of capitalism and conquest.’

These are very difficult critiques with which universities must grapple. Is it possible for their senior management teams, staff, students, partner organisations and stakeholders, alongside their funders, governors and regulators, to acknowledge the historical and ongoing effects of: exploitative institutional practices and strategies; silencing of certain bodies, identities, cultures and knowledges; and, imposing claims about the universality of the epistemological and ontological certainties of the global North? Such questioning seeks to open new pathways for knowing, doing and being in the world, which are currently obscured by existing hierarchical and disciplinary separations between individuals and disciplines, reinforced through managerialism and performance management.

The slow rate of institutional change has run up against an increasingly dynamic, horizontal movement erupting at the level of society. The global Black Lives Matter struggle impacts universities through its educational projects, and student-led movements, such as UCL’s ‘Why is my curriculum white?’ and the University of Cape Town’s #Rhodes-MustFall campaigns, challenge dominant, institutional positions. In response, and as an extension of their equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agendas, many Universities have set up core groups to focus on the process of decolonising or to explore how to capitalise upon formal accreditation routes like the Race Equality Charter (REC). Other

institutional challenges have been tabled, for instance: the attainment gap between individuals and groups who have been labelled Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and white, home students (Advance HE 2019); and, the gap in understanding *both* the experiences of international students and their place in strategic EDI objectives (Tannock 2018), *and* the attainment gap between international and home students (Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) 2015).

Such initiatives tend to amplify a disconnection between grassroots, identity-based struggles and formal, regulated institutions. As Ahmed (2012) notes, institutional work is notoriously hierarchical, and tends to make judgements about who might be included based upon idealised notions of who is deserving, and collapses equality into ideas of meritocracy governed by equality of opportunity. Ahmed (2004, np) highlights what she calls the ‘politics of admissions,’ whereby the institution simply admitting to bad practice is seen to define the appropriate horizon for the anti-racist University. Instead, she argues that such admissions need to be ‘taken up,’ which Moosavi (2020) also highlights through his descriptions of how some universities have jumped on the *decolonial bandwagon* without understanding or addressing the risks of the work becoming tokenistic.

The work of decolonising, or building a culture of decoloniality, carries *both* a symbolic idea *and* a lived reality of the University that is *neither* unitary, universal, and/or linear, *nor* Eurocentric in its assumptions. The focus upon Eurocentrism is important in revealing the perceived superiority implicit in the structures, cultures and practices of global North institutions. As a result, it reproduces marginalisation through domination revealed in the power of particular epistemologies, ontologies and voices. This reinforces modes of coloniality that are historical and material (Santos 2017), and questions the assumed power of the status quo as an ongoing unfolding of decolonial practices as a method for challenging the University.

In part, this is why specific discourses are taking on a more politicised flavour in the global North, including: mental health support and stigma for Black students and students of colour (Kam, Mendoza, and Masuda 2018); the lack of promotion for Black women within HE (Rollock 2019); the rise of reported, racist hate crimes on campuses (Kayali and Walters 2021); linguistic racism (Dobinson and Mercieca 2020); the differential impacts of Covid-19 (Harper 2020); and, the negative experiences of institutional procedures for communities made marginal (Glasener, Martell, and Posselt 2019). It also underpins the work of some Australian institutions in indigenising the curriculum (Walter and Guerzoni 2020), and in work on the impact of HE on Indigenous people across Latin America and Mexico (University of Bath 2020).

This article emerges from the convergence of these analyses of the lived experiences of the University and the limits of institutional possibility for developing emancipatory cultures and practices, inside national HE systems that themselves need to respond to political and economic directives. It takes as its starting point a discussion of one United Kingdom (UK)-based, institution-wide experiment, Decolonising DMU (De Montfort University). Decolonising DMU is an ongoing critique of the idea of the University, and its structures, cultures and practices, which looks to build the anti-racist University through a dialogue grounded in dignity. It recognises that this is a process of engaging in difficult, painful and genuinely risky conversations, in order for meaningful change to unfold.

In articulating the horizon of possibility for such work, this article will describe and analyse struggles in relation to: first, how the Decolonising DMU approach is situated against *both* decolonial and indigenous critiques of the University, *and*, the project's emergent relationship to the institution; second, the impacts of dominant cultures which reinforce whiteness; third, how established structures dissipate radical energy and militate against change; and fourth, institutional practices that have high inertia. The article will close by discussing the implications of these material realities for change, in order to question how decolonisation affects the idea and practices of the University.

Decolonising DMU: a critique of the University

Decolonising DMU (2021a) was initiated in November 2019 as the next step in building the anti-racist University, predicated upon structures, cultures and practices of equality. It moved beyond DMU's attainment-focused, Freedom to Achieve intervention (Ansley 2018), which was part of a collaborative, two-year, Higher Education Funding Council for England, and then Office for Students' *Catalyst* project, led by Kingston University (McDuff et al. 2020). Whilst the significant difference in the percentage of Black/of colour students awarded a good honours degree is a sector-wide issue, Decolonising DMU situated longitudinal outcomes for students upon their short-and medium-term engagement with the institution as a whole.

Moving beyond the attainment gap is central to addressing the reductionist position of individual deficits that can be overcome through personal resilience and tenacity to engage with a system that delivers a methodologically framed student experience (Arday, Belluigi, and Thomas 2020; Hall 2020). In so doing, it built explicitly upon the outcomes of Freedom to Achieve, which had worked with 40 programmes across the institution, and sought to stitch this into other EDI work, including on the REC (Advance HE n.d.).

These outcomes highlighted that attainment for Black and of colour students is structured by factors that are immanent to each other, and that emerge inside and outside the classroom.² During 2018–2019, surveys with students ($n = 233$), staff ($n = 44$), and participation in co-creation events with students and staff ($n = 142$) generated six themes (Ansley 2018; Ansley and Hall 2019).

- The importance of trusting and authentic relationships on campus.
- A feeling of not belonging leading to exclusion.
- Developing approaches to teaching and learning with which students can connect.
- The creation of safe and pluralistic communities on campus.
- Developing cultures that enable personal development.
- Supporting diverse needs in relation to employability and post-University life.

Within these themes there were differences for groups of international students, and also for some home students. For example, students of Pakistani, Caribbean and 'Other White' heritage were most likely to feel unrepresented within their learning experience. There were also differences across each of the institution's four faculties, including in terms of changes to staff practices in the classroom, which tended to focus upon

in-class teaching, revisions to assignment styles, changes to curriculum content or changes to personal tutoring.

Reshaping this project beyond the attainment gap reveals the power dynamics in an institution-driven, rather than student-instigated, decolonising initiative. The class positionality and concomitant social, cultural, and economic capital configuration of students impacts modes of political activism within universities. The complex, demographic backgrounds of DMU's students affects their ability to make demands for decolonising. Consequently, the decolonising initiative at DMU was taken by the institution itself, including activist scholars. At its core it is striving to develop a more co-created, student-led approach that is governed by the University's EDI Strategy, and its Executive Board. In this, the operational team includes professional services' staff, academics and students working as champions on particular, cross-institutional themes. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that a 'top-down' or corporate institutional dynamic is *both* a limitation on the work of decentring power, *and* also sharpens the project's ambitions to devalue hierarchies and magnify the diversity of voices.

The first year of Decolonising DMU developed priorities around: institutional structures, cultures and practices (effectively aligned with the REC, and including work on University policies); staff development (including developing communities of practice and a toolkit); student engagement (including partnership-working with the student union); Library and Learning Services (including decolonising collections and reading lists, and staff development); and research (including enriching the research environment). Here, the institution was forced to consider the relationships between factors that enable/disable students from seeing themselves, their identities, images, histories and stories reflected in it.

These priorities were developed in a subsequent survey with students ($n = 35$) and staff ($n = 66$) in Spring 2020. The numbers engaging were significantly hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, and this flags the potential for the day-to-day realities of epidemiological uncertainty and crisis to reproduce institutional inertia. As individuals struggle to survive, live, work and study, engagement with cultural change becomes more difficult. However, issues arising from the surveys reflected some of those that had erupted through the Black Lives Matter movement, including: a concrete focus upon equality; explicit working to tackle discrimination, including in disciplinary processes; representation inside and outside the classroom; and, developing conversations around harassment and discrimination. Whilst staff highlighted 10 separate factors underpinning educational inequality, including biases, deficit thinking and denial, it should also be noted that limited numbers of students ($n = 2$) and staff ($n = 2$) did not agree with the aims of the project.

Other institutions have also begun to work on institutional projects, pivoting around the REC and responses to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) report (2019) on *Tackling Racial Harassment: Universities Challenged* (see, for example, the University of Liverpool 2020). However, Decolonising DMU attempts to generate an active critique of the institution. Its working definition (2021b, np) explicitly 'recognises that racial inequality in Britain originates from colonialism. In seeking to decolonise, we are creating an anti-racist University which allows all to succeed.' Further, the project (Decolonising DMU 2021b) recognises 'that racial inequality has been built over

centuries on the dominant western and northern hemispheres and patriarchal interpretations of value and merit.’

These are a deeply challenging set of statements, which connect the project to a set of risks relating to culture, business case, relationships and accountability, including making visible racist incidents; the power of whiteness, white privilege and white fragility; a lack of institutional, emotional resilience; denial of the relationship between privilege and coloniality; placing the burden of responsibility for change on Black/of colour students and staff; reputational challenges, including failing or essentialising the needs of Black/of colour students and staff; and developing institutional courage, mutuality and faith. These issues are situated theoretically in a position paper (Decolonising DMU 2021b, np), which ‘seeks to establish *both* a symbolic idea *and* a lived reality of the University that is *neither* unitary, universal, and/or linear, *nor* Eurocentric in its assumptions. It questions the assumed power of the status quo.’

Through the position paper (Decolonising DMU 2021b), the project situates itself as ‘a movement of dignity’ that engages with the ‘complex denials, exclusions and violences, which have been enmeshed with the idea of the University in the global North.’ The project centres dialogues around coloniality as a process and the potential for revealing the dignity of difference. It does this by creating spaces and capacities with which to name, learn about and critically discuss basic problems of privilege, inequality, division, exclusion, othering, exploitation, alienation, and institutional and structural oppression. Engaging with these processes is crucial in addressing the ongoing relations of colonial injustice that continue to structure, permeate and pervade our lives today (Maldonado-Torres 2017; Stein and de Andreotti 2016).

Whilst there is much work going on in institutions around the histories and lived experiences of victimisation, harassment and depression, in particular in relation to race, gender, sexuality and disability, there is a fourfold risk: first, those who benefited from privilege are too fragile or immersed in denial to engage; second, those whose lived experience is of racism feel that those experiences are being co-opted and sanitised, or that they are not authentically heard; third, those whose teaching, research and scholarship have been developed in relation to inclusion and social justice do not feel fully engaged or involved; and fourth, the institution perceives too high a reputational, governance or management risk, in particular in relation to culture wars (Curran, Gaber, and Petley 2019).

Decolonising DMU focuses on a complex, whole-institution discussion about the tools, practices and visions for a University that addresses these risks authentically and dialogically, in order to help shape meaningful futures for its staff, students and communities. Here, the focus is upon: diversifying structures, cultures and practices; decentring dominant knowledge production; devaluing hierarchies and revaluing relationality; disinvesting from power structures; and, diminishing predominant voices and magnifying those made silent. Our starting point is the *cultures* within which *whiteness* operates.

Cultures of whiteness

The *cultures* of UK higher education constitute one of the most significant obstacles to its decolonisation. Neoliberal cultures of self-entrepreneurship and individualised competition among staff and students, racist cultures that prioritise white forms of institutional

knowledge and behaviour, and sexist or misogynist cultures of patriarchal academic performativity and domination, all militate against meaningful decolonial change (Nyamnjoh 2019). Decades of widening participation policies in UK HE demonstrate that it is entirely possible quantitatively to improve BAME representation among students and staff, without seriously undermining cultures of whiteness. As hooks (1994, 5) notes, efforts at challenging racism in HE can simply 'reinscribe old patterns' of institutional whiteness. She asks how we 'educate young, privileged, predominantly white students to divest of white supremacy' (hooks 1994, 5).

That the dominant, cultural structure of majority-white, global North societies like the UK can be understood and theorised as *white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* (Ahmed 2017; hooks 1982, 2000), confronts that hegemonic culture. Most staff and students in UK HE are socialised into hegemonic cultures, which are reproduced through well-documented power dynamics. Its staff, and especially those who tend to be white and male, and who represent prestige and privilege, *both* energise this dominant culture *and* are the most empowered to change it. For hooks (1994, 6), to decolonise must not simply mean allowing white staff (or students) the space to critically reflect on their pedagogical practices, or it risks keeping in place 'existing structures of domination.' HE culture must be transformed to the extent that Black/of colour students and staff experience it as a positive space, where they might co-produce with others, rather than banking privileged knowledge.

Banking is reproduced by a culture of whiteness that denies alternative narratives and histories, which systemically reproduces *microaggressions*. These may be considered 'the chief vehicle for pro-racist behaviors' in institutions, and consist of statements, representations, and interactions that are both 'subtle' and 'often automatic, and non-verbal' (Pierce et al. 1977, 65). Linguistic microaggressions are a cornerstone of such behaviours. Statements that focus on the quality of written and spoken English, in particular in relation to the questioning of an individual's home and culture, are well-documented (Sue et al. 2007). Some HEIs have attempted to target these microsocial practices as an intervention in cultures of whiteness, for instance, in enabling 'race equality champions' to challenge microaggressions (University of Sheffield 2020).

Denigrating stereotypes reinforce a message of being *othered*, with the racialised body marked as a trespasser and rendered out of place (Puwar 2004; Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury 2018). This might be a function of intentional or unintentional microaggressions, and some institutions have acknowledged the negative impacts of these, including: 'Loss of self-esteem, feelings of exhaustion, damage to the ability to thrive in an environment, mistrust of peers, staff and the institution, decreases participation and ability to study and students dropping out' (University of Edinburgh 2020, np). Feelings of exhaustion have been analysed as racial battle fatigue, which negatively impacts the mental health of Black/of colour staff and students at the intersection of 'the physiological, psychological, and behavioral strain exacted on racially marginalized and stigmatized groups' (Smith 2008, 617). Whilst this strain is witnessed in the numbers of Black students seeking specific mental health support, University counsellors are not always trained or equipped with the skills to support staff and students with such experiences (Leading Routes 2020).

Decolonising DMU is working explicitly to shine a light on these cultures of whiteness, which reproduce a sense that some bodies are in-deficit because they do not

measure-up. Institutionally, it is focused upon the linguistic practices, interpretations and uses of its policy framework. Its communities of practice explore existing tropes around: white, working-class boys; anti-white racism; and, the assumption that evidence of student performance is objective truth. Its emerging analyses of the institutional research environment, encourages a richer conversation around voice, privilege and prestige in research. In its library workstream, workshops are focused upon real examples of linguistic microaggressions faced by students and staff. Partnership work with the students union is predicated upon being unapologetic in confronting harassment.

The intention is to build cultures through which recognition of privilege and belonging are explicitly acknowledged. This reflects on Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury's (2018) question: *Are you supposed to be in here?* They argue that 'our goal is not to find a way to belong here. We aim to find a way to thrive here' (Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury 2018, 156). This is a challenge to cultures of whiteness, reinforced through microaggressions. Here, Decolonising DMU seeks to reveal the subtle, everyday, and often unconsciously produced, racist cultures that texture the 'white background of academia' and 'perpetuate normative whiteness' (Johnson 2020, 89). In this, it has become clear that the University must recognise that institutional racism and cultural whiteness are not only enacted at the level of 'feelings' resulting from microsocial, intersubjective experiences, but also through meso- and macro-level, organised social *structures of dissipation*.

Structures of dissipation

In England, discussions about racial inequality in HE crystallise annually around the release of data identifying degree outcomes. Historically, these consistently evidence the attainment/awarding gap between white and Black/of colour students. Explanations for this have tended to collapse around a binary of: first, a student deficit model, which risks naturalising performance around demographic characteristics; and second, analyses of the negative impacts of a Eurocentric epistemology. However, both University and student representatives argue that any 'gap does not exist in isolation within higher education, but is part of the wider structural nature of racial inequality in the UK' (UUK and NUS 2019, 10).

Crucially, the UUK and NUS report (UUK and NUS 2019) outlined how historical reviews demonstrate the extent to which racial inequality is structured and reproduced. These include criminal justice, education and employment, as noted in *The McPherson Report* (1999), *The Race Disparity Audit* (2016), *The Lammy Review* (2017), and *Race in the Workplace: The McGregor-Smith Review* (2017). In response, campaigns for widening participation encouraged enrolment of Black/of colour students, which increased by just under 16 per cent over a 5-year period from 2013. Yet, this drew attention to the reality that racial disparities affect the student life-cycle, from application and enrolment to continuation, attainment and progression. Moreover, connections were made to issues of promotion and development for Black/of colour staff.

The UK HE sector has slowly begun to recognise the interconnected ethical, moral and business cases for action, with a particular focus upon structures, cultures and practices for staff and student recruitment and representation. At the level of the sector, this catalysed the launch of the REC, the publication of the EHRC *Tackling Racial*

Harassment: Universities Challenged report (2019) and the subsequent UUK *Tackling Racial Harassment in Higher Education* report (2020).

However, for specific communities, such reports merely signalled an ongoing willingness to talk about inequality, without acting. One result has been a deep questioning of the institutional structures that continue to reproduce alienating conditions of learning, teaching and research. For instance, campaigns like *Rhodes Must Fall*, *Why is my Curriculum White?*, and *why isn't my professor Black?* centre the structural positioning of colonial legacies within *both* the sector *and* actual institutions. The inability of institutions to develop structural responses beyond broadening reading lists and library collections, or seeking REC recognition, catalysed a more radical set of demands around decolonising. These connect to a rich movement of Indigenous and anti-racist praxis, which 'are advocating for a university that is not oblivious to its being implicated in the colonial difference that configures today's local and global realities' (Icaza and Rolando 2018, 108).

This challenges the structural inertia of the University, in particular when it is faced by fluid movements that can act quickly in response to local and global events. This challenges the ethical position of institutions, whose business cases tend to depend upon low-risk approaches to problem-solving in relation to particular kinds of performance. For instance, in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd in the United States, Black Lives Matter protests and demands brought the reality of racial disparities in the act of living into sharp relief with the structures of universities that are also implicated in a range of inequalities. In the UK, this was compounded by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which again drew attention to differential impacts across groups (Blundell et al. 2020), including in research funding (Inge 2020).

Whilst protests brought many universities to the position of publicly stating their stand against racism and for anti-racism, they also demonstrated how institutional attempts to mitigate the negative impacts of such social shocks, were affected by: the limits of what message could be communicated; the speed of communication; and, the potential energy for change latent within institutional structures. Whilst the Decolonising DMU project launched 6 months earlier, the renewed, societal energy of the Black Lives Matter movement shone a light upon the ways in which institutional structures tend to dissipate such potential, whilst at the same time highlighting the relevance and importance of its work inside those structures, including the classroom.

Gebrial (2018, 25) outlines how critique of the relationship between knowledge, subject methodologies and hierarchies, and the reproduction of institutional structures, might usefully begin from the classroom, where we question exclusion through 'existing power structures.' In projects like Decolonising DMU this leads to uncomfortable, institutional questioning or denial of the connection between what knowledge is to be excluded and the perpetuation of structural inequalities. It is important to recognise how the traditional, discipline-based structures of academic institutions work towards denial, in part because they rest upon historical, methodological essentialism, reinforced by ideas of objectivity.

The Decolonising DMU team acknowledges modes of denial and attempts to act as a mirror for how the plural and hegemonic structures of the University dissipate radical energy through inertia. As Gebrial (2018, 29) articulates, 'at its heart, decolonisation is about recognising the roots of contemporary racism in the multiple material, political, social and cultural processes of colonialism and proceeding from this point; this involves

the laborious work of structural change at all levels.’ Here, the project also interrogates managerial and disciplinary structures and hierarchies, which reproduce particular epistemologies and ontologies in research, community engagement, student support, quality assurance, academic offences, and so on (see, for instance, Arday, Belluigi, and Thomas 2020; Glasener, Martell, and Posselt 2019).

It is important to note the important relationship between individual and communal agency and formal/informal structures, in a movement of institutional change. The core of this is how ways of knowing, knowledge and evidence are used to reproduce institutional structures that can tend to dissolve or co-opt elements to maintain its dominant forms. For Ahmed (2012) these structures act as walls, through which some bodies can pass, and which deny the lived experiences of others. Again, this tends to dissipate the potential for the renewal of institutions in ways that enliven the learning, teaching, professional services and research experiences of specific communities. The bureaucratic forms of the institution generate efficiency in the delivery of services by normalising the student and staff experience in ways that work against some individuals and groups. This is revealed in: the accessibility of student services, often separated in central units; the homogeneous, technological structuring of the curriculum and learning support; and, the governmental organisation of centralised disciplinary structures.

Issues of (dis)connection with institutional structures were revealed in the initial evaluations from the Freedom to Achieve project and Decolonising DMU. These shone a light upon the potential for certain groups to experience institutional denials of a meaningful, student experience, through a lack of representation in structures, and spaces for authentic activity. This was mirrored by a feeling that institutional structures mapped to particular processes and policies, which reinforced non-belonging and double or false consciousness upon some. Thus, the work of the project on revisiting quality assurance documentation and human resources policies focuses upon ‘the need to utilise the resources and position of the institution, while recognising, accounting for and undoing its inherent exclusivity’ (Gebrial 2018, 20).

This is a pivotal challenge for projects like Decolonising DMU, precisely because addressing racial inequalities in the classroom, and in the staff–student experience of the institution, has to move beyond the metrics of attainment, continuation and progression, and the data sets of demographics. It pushes the reimagining of the institution away from ignorance of the impact of monocultural approaches, and situates work with governing bodies, executive boards, faculty executives and teaching teams, against their material and historical Eurocentrism. This is a test for institutions, which pride themselves on their alleged liberalism, and which seek to normalise this through awards like the REC. At issue is how to connect such normalisation with the humanised, person-centred voices and narratives of Black/of colour staff and students, which tends to destabilise dominant forms.

As a result, the Decolonising DMU project has to catalyse institutional faith in the ability to deconstruct REC data, to spotlight and highlight inequalities, and bring these into dialogue with the voices of affected students and staff. The risk is that the legacy of dominant structures denies authentic dialogue, and reproduces a new layer of othering for particular communities. As a result, the integration of disparate forms of energy inside and through the institution, rather than their refusal or dispersal, is a moment of tension for the project. It demands recognition, across all levels of the University

and in all functional units, of the levels and types of racial harassment and inequalities. This reveals one final challenge, namely that this work is laborious and time-consuming, precisely because it seeks to challenge long-established legacies and change cultures and practices, whilst staff and students are also having to engage with their everyday work. At a time of pandemic, the time and energy required for this is further stretched, as institutional forms have to respond to heightened uncertainty. This act as a drag on long-term projects that are already incremental, and which tend to be conditioned through *practices of inertia*.

Practices of inertia

The practices of the University have a structuring reality for those who work and study in it, be they learning, teaching, assessing, professional services, administration, knowledge transfer and exchange, research and scholarship, commercialisation or public engagement. Each of these have been described in relation to processes of financialisation, marketisation and commodification (Hall 2018; McGettigan 2015), and through them to forms of managerialism and performance management (Erickson, Hanna, and Walker 2020). In this way, and predicated upon specialisation and ranking, different academic activities can be compared across a global terrain (Morrissey 2015). University practices have been impacted by crises, like austerity and Covid-19, and increasingly operate based upon probabilities and risk, conditioned by modes of performance that can be optimised. This develops practices based upon discourses of impact, excellence, entrepreneurship and value-for-money, which tends to push the blame for imperfections and uncertainties onto those deemed unproductive.

The very practices of the University are grounded in the methods of closed professions and disciplines. This is one reason why the diffusion of pedagogic change projects, like student as producer, become difficult to instantiate within, let alone across, institutions (Neary 2020). The power and privilege of professions and disciplines, noted by the American Economics' Association (2020), Particles for Justice (2020), and in the noise around #shutdownSTEM in response to Black Lives Matter, demonstrate *both inertia and* an acknowledgement of the need for anti-harassment and anti-discrimination work that critiques how academic disciplines construct the world. Such constructions tend to reinforce dominant perspectives, and delegitimise alternative possibilities that question the system and its structures.

This focus upon reinforcing existing structures by refining subject-based practices is reflected in the regulatory and governance frameworks for HE sectors, which prioritise value-for-money, earnings potential and human capital. The risk-modelling of uncertainties shapes the data-driven optimisation of performance, alongside the development of new intellectual commodities and services (Birch, Chiappetta, and Artyushina 2020). Here, the University's material history, shaped by the power of the market, reveals a social terrain for the commercialisation of research and knowledge production (Hoofd 2017), alongside its use in securitisation and militarisation (Murphy 2020). This tends to stymie the potential to generate new practices based upon alternative life experiences, histories and identities, unless they have economic value.

Thus, whilst there is appetite for transformational or radical institutional change projects, such as those like Freedom to Achieve, these tend to be constrained within

normative operational parameters focused upon finessing established systems. This is one reason why institutions are accused of tokenistic responses to crises, like Black Lives Matter, or the differential impact of Covid-19. Too often universities' responses to anti-racist work are seen to be performances (Ahmed 2012). In this, Ahmed (2009, 45) argues that 'Diversity work becomes about changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations. Doing well, or a good performance, would then be about being perceived as a diverse organization.'

Here, it is not simply the size and complexity of the University as an organisation, which dissipates radical or transformation re-energy. Rather, the material history of cultures and structures creates its own inertia, as 'the legacy of Eurocentrism' (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nisancioglu 2018, 239) In Decolonising DMU, staff and student responses connect with these legacies through a focus upon authentic relationships, which develop personal connections and enable self-actualisation. Again, it is important to reflect upon the fact that for some communities, a feeling of underrepresentation in institutional spaces remains a live concern, stripping away the content of institutional EDI practices.

Moreover, this tends to be reinforced through practices that replicate white fragility, in their constant demands for demonstrable proof, truth or evidence before any action can be taken. As a result, continuity tends to trump change in anti-racist work, in spite of structural, differential attainment, employability and earnings outcomes. This is a reminder that in spite of legislative trends, there is much historical and material inertia, predicated upon institutional brands, risk management, performance management, and social and intellectual capital (Bhopal and Pitkin 2020).

As a result, there is a need to confront practices that reinforce: fragility and denial; the co-option or sanitisation of lived experiences; the disengagement of those already undertaking anti-racist work; and, the risk-management of perceived reputational damage. Building the anti-racist University, predicated upon practices of dignity, demand a courageous focus upon authentic learning, teaching, research, public engagement and professional services. This brings us back to the idea that decolonising the idea of the University is a movement of dignity, shaped by equality.

Decolonising the idea and practice of the University

The structures that tend to dissipate radical energy, the cultures that reproduce hegemonic norms of whiteness, and practices that reinforce inertia, point towards deep problems that exist in the delivery of change projects. There can be a tendency to see decolonising as EDI-related work, to be managed by local experts who are expected to do the thinking, develop the project plans, and deliver organisational compliance. Where institutions have a focus upon organisational development, change can be subsumed within project and programme management methodologies, which reduce complex social problems to risk-management. However, such methodologies might offer an opportunity to situate the yearning for change against an established framework that brings it into dialogue with other institutional priorities.

In the face of refusal, denial and inertia, there are additional risks in reducing the human experience of the University to a project or programme that can be institutionally mandated and managed. These connect to the depth of institutional buy-in, and whether responsibility for outcomes and impact remains embedded in the project team or the

organisation. Significant issues arise where the institutional status of projects fails to centre groups traditionally made marginal, ignores those with expertise, or threatens those with privilege. Here, one ongoing matter arising for Decolonising DMU is its ability to bring grassroots, horizontal activity into dialogue with structural and strategic governance and regulation.

In this, the language of this work, and opening-out the structures, cultures and practices of the institution around communication is crucial, in relation to the staff–student experience, learning, teaching, professional services, research, and community engagement. There is no purity in terms of language and modes of communication. Rather, a willingness to treat dialogue with dignity and always-emergent, reflects the need for authentic relationships demanded by students through Freedom to Achieve. Yet, having working positions and aims that are *both* open to critical dialogue *and* always provisional, is difficult for organisations that demand evidential certainty, and inside cultures that claim objectivity and inclusivity.

Decolonising DMU is working on this balance between demands for ongoing performance data, and the needs of its communities for authentic, longitudinal dialogue. This raises deep institutional questions around trust and honesty, in relation to reported metrics and the methodologies upon which they are based. This conditions how institutions address issues of microaggressions, double consciousness, racial battle fatigue, and behavioural code switching (Meghji 2019). These issues reflect the embodied and psychological trauma of ongoing, racial inequalities experienced differentially.

It should be noted that for project teams, tackling these concerns is emotionally laborious and dents resilience. Whilst there is limited conflict within the Decolonising DMU team, tensions have existed over the balance between evaluation and the need for action, in particular where painful lived experiences are revealed. Crucially, such revelations offer white, project partners the opportunity to witness these impacts at first-hand, and negotiate what is to be done holistically. For instance, in terms of behavioural code switching, this work can highlight how whiteness and demands for assimilation inside established forms, codes, cultures and practices, is debilitating for some staff and students. This enables allies to work against white fragility and privilege, and to model openness, transparency and confidence, and further develop pluralistic, authentic relationships.

One crucial issue is how institutions use projects of decolonising to move from resistance to resonance. This matters because such projects can tend to be divisive, catalysing: first, cynicism or denial; second, demands to subsume intersectional analyses under class; and third, to claim colourblindness. Might students and staff who hold such positions be engaged in dialogues, as a movement of dignity that develops authentic relationships inside and outside the University? Or, is there a need for a moral economy inside the University, through which such views might be enabled in relation to academic freedom, but from which the institution disengages? In developing a moral economy, projects might usefully focus upon the legitimising notions for communal action, in terms of rights, obligations and customs that reflect ‘the wider consensus of the community’ (Thompson 1971, 78).

Rather than an institutionally defensive posture, building the anti-racist University demands a communal, qualitative shift, and allyship (Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury 2018). Beyond pledging allegiance, role models must be seen to act, both inside and

outside the classroom, student service, library, laboratory, executive board, governing body, and so on. This also relates to community engagement, including: partnership with the University's Societal Impact and Engagement Directorate on its post-pandemic #buildbackbetter project with Leicester City Council; and, work with research centres and institutes on decolonising theory, methodology, and impact. The challenge is to ensure that experiencing the institution as a 'space invader' (Puwar 2004) becomes the exception, rather than the rule for Black/of colour communities. This shapes the value of activities like decolonising the reading list, developing a content analysis of quality assurance documentation, and holding workshops with governors, as obligations to refuse performative or tokenistic approaches.

One final, crucial point is the need for decolonising projects to disaggregate and make plural the staff and student experience at the University. For instance, there are differential outcomes for African students and Pakistani students, compared to Indian and Chinese students. There are complex disparities between home and international students. How do institutions approach these data and the identities, histories and narratives that underpin them, in ways that are sensitive, and with interventions that do not reinforce deficit models and unconscious biases? Is it possible to use an engagement with a disaggregated, differential and authentic set of experiences to challenge the homogeneity of the institution, which is framed around issues of personalisation inside a reductionist student experience?

This demands tangible participation in decolonising, including: partnerships that build communities of practice; the role of student ambassadors and societies; the community engagement of practice-based researchers; difficult conversations about transnational education; explicit connections to education for sustainable development and decarbonising. Rather than focusing upon the separations between different individuals, is it possible to centre decolonising by reproducing structures, cultures and practices around the unity and connection of that difference? The humanity of the institution emerges from the dignity of those differences, and the common characteristic that ties individuals together is that they are all unique. This is the ongoing challenge for our work, which takes decolonising as a humane, critical pedagogical practice at the level of the institution.

Notes

1. Throughout, Black is capitalised to reflect a communal sense of identity with a specific set of political, social, cultural and aesthetic characteristics. This is reinforced by writers of colour and Black writers who stress the importance of self-identification and reclamation. In this way, Black mirrors the capitalisation of, for instance, *Asian*, *South Asian* and *Indigenous*. We do not capitalise white precisely because this risks legitimising the white privilege that our work seeks to abolish. Moreover, whilst whiteness operates as a terrain of power, it lacks modes of political, social, cultural and aesthetic cohesion beyond its political economy.
2. In developing this research, ethical approval was gained for a wider set of surveys and co-creation events, governed by the DMU, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Disclosure statement

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

Data availability statement

The data associated with the paper are analysed at: Ansley, L. 2018. *Freedom to Achieve: Project Evaluation Report*. Leicester: De Montfort University. <http://hdl.handle.net/2086/16793>

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