

Miseducation: decolonising curricula & culture in our universities

Mia Liyanage

based on the report for HEPI

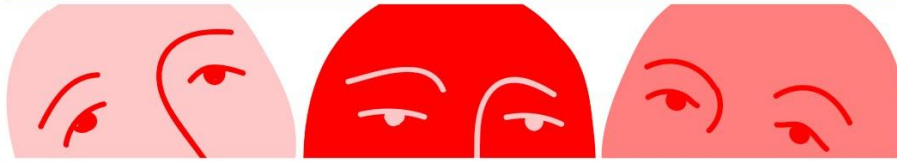


Welcome & thanks

bit.ly/miseducation-hepi

Structure

- Introductions & my background
- Decolonisation today: the issue & why it matters
- Motivation & aims for *Miseducation*
- Process
- The Report: findings & testimony
- Conclusions: A Silent Crisis
- Q&A



CORE EVENTS

SATURDAY 5 MAY

Entrenched Roots
Nazrin Shah Auditorium, Worcester College
8:30-10pm

SUNDAY 6 MAY

The Sun Never Set on the British Empire
Moser Lecture Theatre, Wadham College
7:30-9pm

THURSDAY 10 MAY

How Does Oxford Perpetuate the Class System?
Corpus Christi College Auditorium
6:30-7:30pm

FRIDAY 11 MAY

Uprooted
JDP, St Hilda's College
7:30-10pm

COLLEGE EVENTS

FRIDAY 4 MAY

De-Colonial Tour of Oxford, Pitt
Rivers Museum, 4-5pm

SUNDAY 6 MAY

Finding My Identity in a Chip Shop:
Group Discussion on Identity and
Oxford, Sibthorpe Room, St Hilda's
College, 3-5pm

Collaboration With Oxford and
Oxford: Community Activism in
Oxford Panel and Discussion, East
Oxford Community Centre, 4-6pm

MONDAY 7 MAY

'How Can Education Be a Tool For
Challenging Structural
Discrimination?' Okinaga Room,
Wadham College, 6-7:30pm

Film Screening: Culture Within the
African Diaspora & Development
Through Music
Mary Ogilve Theatre, St Anne's College,
6pm

TUESDAY 8 MAY

Colonial Knowledge Formation and its
Effect on Oxford Collections and
Curriculum, Mawby Room, Kellogg
College, 6pm

Collaboration With On Your Doorstep:
'the Politics of Homelessness', Lady
Brodie Room, St Hilda's College, 6-8pm

WEDNESDAY 9 MAY

Decolonising the History Curriculum:
Panel Discussion
History Faculty Lecture Theatre, 12:30-2pm

Wikipedia Edit-a-Thon: Missing
Academics of Colour, Okinaga Room,
Wadham College, 4-5pm

Class and Social Life at Oxford
Sultan Nazrin Shah Centre, Worcester
College, 4-5pm

'Rhodes Is Falling: What About the
UK?' Harris Manchester Lecture Theatre,
Oriental College (TBC), 7-8pm

WoC Chats, Tower Room, Wadham
College, 7:30-9pm

THURSDAY 10 MAY

Celebration of BME Art, Mansfield
College 4-5pm

Staging Parallel Lives
Fitzhugh Auditorium at Exeter College's
Cohen Quad, 12-2pm

Collaboration with Oxford Labour
Club: Talk by Marsha De Cordova,
Venue TBA, 5pm

Institutional Classism and Society's
Most Vulnerable: a Panel
Discussion, Lecture Room 23, Balliol
College, 7-8:30pm

FRIDAY 11 MAY

Radicalising the
Curriculum: Dr. Antara Halder, Turl
St Kitchen (TBC), 5pm

REVISITING THE PAST. ENVISIONING THE FUTURE.



Background

Roots in student activism

Latest article: review of the RHS LGBT+ Histories and Historians report, HEPI blog:

bit.ly/lgbt-history-review

Miseducation: decolonising curricula, culture and pedagogy in UK universities

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Debate Paper 23

HEPI policy report

& Advance HE work

AdvanceHE



QAA
Scotland



Tackling Underrepresentation of Ethnic Diversity in the Workplace

Short Life Expert Working Group of the Tackling Racism on Campus project

Anti-Racist Curriculum Project

A new collaborative research project funded by SFC and in collaboration with QAA Scotland that aims to understand and support the development of an anti-racist curriculum for universities and colleges in Scotland.



Decolonisation & anti-racist action in 2021

Decolonisation in 2020

Oxford

- Rhodes Must Fall Oxford (RMFO) 2014
- Common Ground & pleasure activism
- Rhodes Must Fall in 2020
- Common Ground Open Letter & Oxford's BLM "response"





Image of signs opposite the Rhodes statue following the protest (9 June 2020)

Decolonisation in 2020 *Oxford*



Statue of Edward Colston, May 2018

Decolonisation in 2020

Bristol

- Statue of Edward Colston, a prominent Bristol slaveowner, toppled in BLM protests
- Temporarily replaced by a statue by the British artist Marc Quinn
- Subsequent controversy
- Plinth remains empty

Toppling of the statue, 7 June 2020

Decolonisation in 2020

Bristol





Decolonisation in 2020

Bristol

Marc Quinn, A Surge of Power (Jen Reid), 2020

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Debate Paper 23

‘Miseducation’ Motivation, Aims & Process

Motivation & Aims

- Existing work on decolonising (e.g. *Decolonising the University* book)
- RHS Race Report, 2018
- Lots of work in HE that discussed ‘whether’ to decolonise
- But nothing that seemed to cut through the debate, nor anything that reached outside its immediate audience of allies
- Activists, academics & policy-makers
- Hoping to draw out complex arguments
- *‘The central aim of this report is to publish candid conversations with academics, activists and policymakers alongside each other, in order to show the transformative power they can wield in discourse about decolonisation.’*

Process

- Qualitative data
- Long-form, relatively unstructured interviews
- Giving the space to activists & advocates for decolonization that they are rarely afforded
- Moving away from digestible but reductive soundbites
- Safer space to discuss the discrimination and intellectual violence colonised education can bring
- The result: 16 contributors and over 20 hours of testimony
- Majority named in the end, but some anonymous

Evaluating

- Personal positionality. Same questions, different interviewer?
- Asking those already in favour – eliciting responses not often heard by those outside of pro-decolonization circles
- Interviewees who were against...? Exemplifying misconceptions
- Range of respondents
- Timing: researched 2019, published July 2020. Impact of BLM resurgence
- Around half of respondents were Black; should have been higher. More questions that centred Black experiences & demanded responses to anti-Black racism

**Miseducation: decolonising
curricula, culture and
pedagogy in UK universities**

Mia Liyanage



Debate Paper 23

‘Miseducation’ Findings & Testimony

bit.ly/miseducation-hepi

1. Get educated about decolonisation and end its conflation with equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives

Decolonisation is very sexy, but the understanding of it is very limited ... people seem to think that we only care about the reading list and not the wider context of what education should be. That is a bridge we need to cross at some point.

– *Fope Olaleye, NUS Black Students' Officer*

There is a fear, there is a reaction. There are people consciously bristling because they don't know what this thing is. It's the relationship with the activism – in many spaces that immediately makes people worried.

– *Kate, adviser*

1. Get educated about decolonisation and end its conflation with equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives

[There is] a kind of unstated but implicit view, which I'd have a lot of sympathy with, that European histories and British histories are important histories, particularly for us located where we are in the world. So, we would want to protect those even if we don't necessarily want to privilege them. Or if we don't necessarily want to assume their importance, we might want to argue their importance.

– *William, department head*

I think the curriculum always needs to be challenged, and therefore to approach from a decolonising perspective is very valuable... [But prefers not to use the term:] It sounds like you're taking something out, and in my mind, it doesn't fully do justice to the potential richness that you might be putting in.

– *Caroline, Vice Chancellor*

1. Get educated about decolonisation and end its conflation with equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives

I'm thinking – ‘universities fully think that if they close the Black attainment gaps they've dealt with racism!’ That's really dangerous ... it's essentially saying: you've taught Black students how to succeed in the white liberal institution and to, like, assimilate.

– *Sara Khan, Liberation and Access Officer, University of Manchester Students' Union (now NUS)*

People don't seem to understand what we're talking about. There's that quote, ‘when we are talking about decolonisation we are simply dreaming of a better tomorrow’. ‘Dreaming of a better tomorrow’ isn't closing up the shitty gaps that exist today! People are like, ‘if it got rid of racism, would you be happy?’ And I'm like, no!

– *Fope Olaleye, NUS Black Students' Officer*

2. Reprioritise: decolonisation is both pedagogically necessary and academically rigorous

It never was a debate; it's the right thing to do, it's a moral obligation.

– *Eloise Moss, lecturer, the University of Manchester*

It makes me immensely sad and frustrated that on a regular basis I'm still having a conversation about diversity versus excellence.

[We're] not talking just about how you change yourselves and the curriculum to benefit different groups, but talking about how all students benefit ... about diversity competence: this concept that the students will leave being better, more aware, more critical academics and members of society than they were when they arrived.

– *Kate, adviser*

2. Reprioritise: decolonisation is both pedagogically necessary and academically rigorous

[People say] we're already exploited, so how do we do this "additional labour"? Which it's not; it's not additional labour, but it's *shifting* your labour, and it's part of your job.

– *Eloise Moss, lecturer, the University of Manchester*

It's just a question of the right amount of willpower. The attempted curricular overhaul that they made in the last few years was a complete farce because [the changes] were really just cosmetic. But they made some very serious curriculum reform; they did change the structure of the curriculum, but not where it actually mattered. So I just don't buy this claim that these are logistical problems. Then why are they able to change some things but not others?

– *Hussein Omar, lecturer*

3. Fund BAME research

They use the excuse that ‘we haven’t got any money’, and that a lot of universities ‘don’t realise’ that they can impose positive action. But they don’t do it because they don’t really want more scholars of colour in the faculty. Because deep down they don’t value that knowledge and they don’t value those types of people. That’s the bottom line.

– *Nicole, lecturer*

It’s not a decolonised university if you have a wide range of curricula but taught by a completely unrepresentative staff to a completely unrepresentative student body.

– *Eli, activist*

4. Tackle discrimination, hostility and unconscious bias

I think there needs to be a recognition there that these environments are violent, really, and that people need to be able to go through university in a way that allows them to think rather than shuts them down from the outset.

– *Beth Davies-Kumadiro, Common Ground co-founder*

I delivered a developing cultural competence workshop and it was really negative – some of the comments were just downright rude. The session wasn't great; I felt like it was a very hostile environment. So a lot of the work I do, I'm [now] having to co-deliver with a white member of staff... I get that triple jeopardy – I'm a woman of colour, and I've actually got a lot more experience than most of the people I train. And then there's the added layer; I haven't got my doctorate. I don't even think having a doctorate will make a scrap of difference. They'll still treat me the same.

– *Nicole, lecturer*

4. Tackle discrimination, hostility and unconscious bias

Only so long can you protest a very racist statue, very racist people, telling you they're not racist. Ignoring you, disrespecting you. Not listening to any of your concerns. Literally giving you so much disrespect. It's from all angles ... And you'll have people saying stuff literally to your face.

– *Beth Davies-Kumadiro, Common Ground co-founder*

Loads of universities think that anonymous marking solves racism. But of course it doesn't, because what you are describing is writing critical pieces on race, on gender, on trans issues and then getting marked down by someone who doesn't know that you wrote it. They are reading that you were writing something radical. That is what's getting you marked down.

They somehow think that we can put a Band Aid on a bullet wound by putting Toni Morrison on the reading list! And it's just not going to happen'.

– *Sara Khan, Liberation and Access Officer, University of Manchester Students' Union*

5. Institutionalise decolonisation: create departmental roles and engage students

Whether anyone will admit it or not, activism is effective, because these conversations would not be happening if these movements didn't exist. I mean, this is an entirely student-led initiative and now, no matter how many times faculties try to claim ownership over this, they are very much the latecomers to these debates.

– *Hussein Omar, lecturer*

They are saying, 'I'm really, I'm absolutely sold. I want to do this. I really do. [But] there is no time. I have no time to stop and think. I have no time to go back and look and enhance and develop my materials. I do not have time, or the confidence to take a risk in changing how I teach'.

– *Kate, adviser*

5. Institutionalise decolonisation: create departmental roles and engage students

I feel like a big question for me, maybe because of the way that Rhodes Must Fall was shut down [in 2015], is if we're putting all of this effort in, who are we speaking to? How is it going to work? How is it going to have an impact? What is the impact? What is the legacy? Where are the changes? How do we quantify it?

– *Beth Davies-Kumadiro, Common Ground co-founder*

He was like, 'I can't look at you right now because I cannot tell you what you teaching me, made me feel'. And I was shocked, I had no idea ... 'Seeing you teach History made me realise I don't have to do a Science degree. I can go full History now. You look like my sister, and I could be you'. And we just didn't look at each other because he was almost tearing up.

– *Shahmima Akhtar, RHS & UoB, on an experience with a Brown student of hers*

Conclusions

I think a lot of the work we're doing isn't even for us, it's for in ten or fifteen years; maybe two generations. So that someone who has the exact same story as me has an easier time; has a more realised time at university. And that will be better.

– Fope Olaleye, NUS Black Students' Officer

- There is a 'silent crisis going on in our institutions: a crisis of student and staff wellbeing; of course rigour; and of academic expression.'
- We're facing extraordinary challenges in 2020. 'These issues may make that of decolonisation seem a lesser priority; something to be tackled later, not now. What the testimony in this report has proven above all, however, is that decolonisation strikes right at the heart of the core aims of a university education.'
- 'Decolonising holds the potential to revamp tired courses, inspire disillusioned staff and equip students with the knowledge they need to face the modern world. This is not a pipe dream. With genuine commitment, it can become a reality.'
- **Impact:** some individual and institutional response. But this discussion must continue.

Links & Reading

Oxford & related

- [Common Ground](#) (@commonground.ox on Instagram)
- Common Ground Open Letter: [Oxford University Must Tackle Systemic Racism](#)
- Adrienne Maree Brown, [Pleasure Activism](#)
- Rhodes Must Fall Oxford, [Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire](#)
- [Somalinimo](#): documentary short about being young, Black, British, and Somali at Cambridge University

Bristol

- David Olusoga, [The toppling of Edward Colston's statue is not an attack on history. It is history](#)
- Code Switch, [The Protests Heard 'Round the World](#)
- The White Pube [thread](#) on Twitter
- Jenny Bastet on Marc Quinn [on Instagram](#)

My work

- *Miseducation: decolonising curricula, culture & pedagogy in UK universities*: bit.ly/miseducation-hepi
- *We're Here: Review of the 'LGBT+ Histories & Historians Report' from the Royal Historical Society*: bit.ly/lgbt-history-review
- [LinkedIn](#)
- Podcast: Education for Social Change, [Mia Liyanage on decolonising universities?](#)
- Podcast: Advance HE, Decolonising Identity: ['What's in a name?'](#)
- Advance HE [Anti-Racist Curriculum Project](#)

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Thank you!
Q&A and discussion