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Decolonising the curriculum: students' perspectives in criminology

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ABSTRACT
Building on the recent intensified calls to decolonise the curriculum in higher education in the UK and beyond, and on my modest initiatives amongst some colleagues, this paper explores the impact of the dominant Eurocentric curriculum on minoritised ethnic students, and their perspectives of our decolonising initiatives, with the aim of refining them. To do so, I exercise 'affective awareness', and 'decolonial reflexivity', working with my discomforts whilst engaging with 10 minoritised ethnic students in criminology purposively selected to participate in semi-structured interviews after completing self-administered questionnaires. Based on the findings of this work, I argue that for 'decolonising the curriculum' beyond the box-ticking exercise, it should involve more than broadening the canon and revising reading lists. It should engage in an uncomfortable unpacking of asymmetrical power relationships and a shift in the practices of knowledge production, in ways that include the students' perspective more closely.

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Introduction

Over the past six years in my academic career in the UK, as a woman of colour, teaching, learning and researching in a predominantly White institution, I have felt a strong desire and commitment to take part in the creation of 'radical and liberating spaces in the academy and beyond' (de Jong, Icaza, and Olivia 2019, xv). Recognising that the classroom 'remains the most radical space of possibility' (Hooks 1994, 13), I aimed to follow decolonial and feminist pedagogies. These pedagogies promote the commitment to enhancing inclusive education (de Jong, Icaza, and Olivia 2019), encourage teaching practices that share power with students (Tolman and Lee 2013), and democratise the teaching setting by adopting styles that are non-authoritative (Johnson-Bailey and Lee 2005). It is through the notion of positionality that both approaches encounter each other to explore ways of teaching that enable the 'recognition of difference as a ground for knowledge' (Icaza and de Jong 2019, xvi). They also share with one another the critique of knowledge production (Banks 2020), and the understanding of knowledge as political (Jacobi 2011). But embodying a feminising decolonising praxis in the neoliberal higher education institutions we work within, is 'an inherently contradictory and ambiguous

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endeavour' (Motta 2019, 25). Motta (2019, 25) describes higher education institutions as spaces that continue to exhume 'the logics and rationalities of coloniality', denying and violating the 'knowing-be-in' of other races.

In fact, the conditions within which knowledge is constructed are, in and of themselves, barriers to change (Grant 2020; Banks 2020). In the UK, at best, change mostly features design and reading lists (Grant 2020). UK Universities use equality and diversity statements to promote a seemingly diverse campus to prospective students, but they do not dedicate the human or financial resources to tackle inequalities (Elhinnawy 2022). If we are to push for meaningful change, we need to think about, not only what we teach, but how we teach it, and criticise it. We also need to deconstruct asymmetrical power relationships within our academic spaces between those in decision-making positions, educators as well as students. Transformative education, as Banks (2020) argues, requires the infusion of perspectives, frames of reference, and ideas that will expand students' understanding. Yet, this is not a straightforward task. It presents several challenges that are currently being discussed in departments and universities across the UK (Grant 2020).

Recently, debates on decolonisation have become more dominant among scholarly discussions (Arday and Safia Mirza 2018; de Jong, Icaza, and Olivia 2019; Quinn 2019; Shannon et al. 2020; Moosavi 2022). They call for 'the end of dominant ideologies that position white, male, Western, capitalist, heterosexual, European worldviews in higher education' as the central knowledge canon (Arday, Zoe Belluigi, and Thomas 2021, 300), favouring more inclusive intersectional curricula that embody global perspectives and experiences (Shay 2016; Arday and Safia Mirza 2018; Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018; Icaza and de Jong 2019; Banks 2020). These perspectives vary across disciplines and regions depending on shifting relationships with geopolitical power centres (Shahjahan et al. 2022). But while 'debates on decolonisation have proliferated at a theoretical level, work on operationalising them within the academy is just beginning' (Shannon et al. 2020, 2). And while those among us who wish to decolonise the academy 'call for other scholars to be reflexive, it is rare for decolonial scholars to turn the decolonial gaze towards ourselves' (Moosavi 2022, 2).

Building on the recent decolonising efforts, and acknowledging the latter critique, this paper centres the voices of 10 minoritised ethnic students in criminology, aiming to explore their perspectives regarding the potential absence of a diverse curriculum that embraces decolonisation, their experiences of studying in a predominantly white institution, and the ways in which this impacts their sense of belonging to the university and society at large. The paper also aims to gather students' understandings of the ways in which our modest efforts to introduce a 'decolonising agenda' has impacted their learning experiences. More importantly, it questions the ways that our decolonising initiatives can be refined. To achieve this, I exercise 'affective awareness' (Motta 2019), and 'decolonial reflexivity' (Moosavi 2022), working with my discomforts whilst engaging with my students in semi-structured interviews and open discussions to identify possible limitations to our decolonising efforts. This enables us to interrogate our decolonial practice in a way that may have the potential to truly transform our higher education system and institutions.

Echoing previous studies, the findings of this study reveal that the centrality of a Eurocentric canon results in marginalising and alienating minoritised ethnic students

within: the curriculum, the classroom, and the university at large. This seems to be affecting their overall university experience, and their attainment. This paper supports that decolonising the curriculum should involve more than diversifying the canon and revising reading lists. For a decolonising of our higher education institutions to go beyond the box-ticking exercise, it should engage in an uncomfortable unpacking of asymmetrical power relationships and a shift in the practices of knowledge production, in ways that include the students' perspective more closely.

The context of higher education in the UK

In recent years, calls to 'decolonise the curriculum' across the world have created differing conceptualisations and practices (Shahjahan et al. 2022). In the UK, a historical centre of colonial rule, this began with calls for inclusive curricula initially driven by 'internationalisation' and 'widening participation' agendas (Bird and Pitman 2020). An 'inclusive' curriculum was seen as vital to achieving equality and representation for a diverse student population (HESA 2019), and has also been associated with efforts to address the attainment gap as minoritised ethnic students seemed 'less likely to attain a "good", first or upper second-class, degree compared to their white peers' (Bird and Pitman 2020, 2). It is only in the past decade that the examination of curricula in the UK has been associated with the broader movement to transform the knowledge base, rather than merely the addition of 'diversity' tokens (Andrews 2019).

But while many universities claim to champion diversity, their institutions, curricula as well as staffing do not yet reflect these claims (Alexander and Arday 2015; Trust 2017; Shannon et al. 2020). Mohanty (2003, 200) writes about a type of 'attitudinal engagement' with diversity that 'encourages an empty cultural pluralism and domesticates the historical agency of Third world people'. Despite the efforts, the monopoly of white European canons continues to dominate the current curriculum, adversely impacting the engagement and sense of belonging of minoritised ethnic students (Arday, Zoe Belluigi, and Thomas 2021). Once at university, students are likely to encounter; a) curricula containing little or no resources by or about people of colour, and teaching methods that exclude, limit or silence their participation (Black 2019); b) a lack of representation among academic staff, with white males occupying the most senior positions (Trust 2017), and; c) institutional level power structures that lead to invisibility, erasure, stereotyping, and other forms of racism and oppression (Arday and Safia Mirza 2018). Andrews (2019) argues that the attempts to erase the historical, intellectual and cultural contributions of indigenous and other non-western populations within our education systems impact the capacity to adopt or appreciate perspectives that cast-off the notion that Europe as the epicentre of knowledge. This creates 'the idea that the "centre" of academic study is white, male, able-bodied and straight' (Black 2019), which means that academics and students of colour are constantly marginalised, and that learning spaces are not reflective of the increasingly diverse student populations (Tate and Bagguley 2017). This reveals the entrenched institutional racism that continue to influence the Academy and society at large (Shilliam 2014). Intrinsically, and as Arday, Zoe Belluigi, and Thomas (2021), 302) argue, universities and their curricula 'remain complicit in facilitating the opposite of their intended charge to portray inclusion, equity and diversification'.

Inspired by movements in other parts of the world, campaigns such as 'Why Is My Curriculum White?' and 'Why Is My Professor White?' (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018) called into question the 'Dead White Men' approach to teaching and the ways in which knowledge is 'produced, propagated and perpetuated through White, Western perspectives' (Begum and Saini 2019, 196). Such efforts address the continuing existence of embedded oppression and western privilege, aim to remove the barriers that have long silenced or dismissed non-western voices, and seek to unravel the epistemic injustices of a higher education system dominated by western culture and thought (Harvey and Russell-Mundine 2019). As a woman of colour in the academy, I agree with Begum and Saini (2019, 196) that decolonisation campaigns hold not only professional, but also personal resonance fueling 'our desire to impart real change' in the way knowledge is constructed within our universities. But the structural changes the academy has been undergoing continues to undermine such efforts. Limited funding, heightened competition for students and 'increasingly bureaucratic measures of benchmarking through the Research (REF) and Teaching (TEF) Excellence Frameworks'[1] have destabilised such efforts (ibid). In addition, and despite sustained efforts, 'decolonising' remains a thorny term that involves a multiplicity of viewpoints, approaches, and political projects (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018). Within UK universities, colleagues have notably cringed at the term, preferring to use the whitewashed, neoliberal interpretation of 'diversification' (Matus and Infante 2011). This fear of the term, as Begum and Saini (2019, 198) argue, shows not only a lack of commitment to but a lack of acknowledgement of 'the need to challenge' the centrality of Eurocentrism within UK universities.

Approaches to 'decolonisation'

Although the focus on decolonisation seems recent, demands for the decolonisation of education have a long and broad history connected to post- and anti-colonialism, and making visible subaltern identities, particularly in the global South (Winter, Webb, and Turner 2022). These movements argue for a new conception of the University, grounded in challenging dominant ideological positions that privilege particular voices, questioning the economic dependence, exploitation erasure and knowledge/power relations in former colonised countries (Shahjahan et al. 2022, 82). Collectively, they push beyond reimagining the curriculum and modes of assessment, to interrogating the 'distinct-but-interconnected processes of colonisation and racialisation in their own practices and lives' (Hall et al. 2021, 903). As Hall et al. (2021, 903) argue decolonisation is both a critique of institutions and a critique of knowledge. But approaches to decolonisation are not homogenous, they 'respond to the particular conditions of their own temporal and spatial contexts' (Pimblott 2020, 211).

Chilisa (2019), argues that previously colonised people should get the opportunity to rediscover and recover their own ideologies, identities, languages, histories, and cultural principles. This involves reclaiming ways of knowing, replacing what was historically aimed at benefitting the colonial masters with the knowledge which a particular group want to learn, value and cherish. Le Grange (2016) and Smith (2021) argue that decolonisation is about constructing a curriculum that acknowledges and creates space for the voices and knowledge of indigenous people. Mbembe (2016), sees decolonisation

as a holistic term that involves breaking the cycle that deems students as mere customers and consumers of knowledge rather than active participants in its production. Within the decolonising approaches, there is the radical which fully rejects Western knowledge, and the integrative which seeks to accommodate both Indigenous and Western knowledge. In my modest initiatives, students were introduced to discussions that prioritised colonialism, racism, and various inequalities in ways that were less common in the curricula. Some were resistant, and others showed appreciation for such initiatives. But, in the spirit of the feminising and decolonising approaches that I follow, it is necessary to interrogate such attempts. This work particularly aims at that.

The research process

Theoretical grounding

To challenge the seeming (im)possibility of embodying a feminising, decolonising pedagogy, Motta (2019, 25) argues that our praxis must deliberately embrace our decolonising knowing-subjectivities to break boundaries, reveal new possibilities, and discover diverse forms of knowledge and collaborative ways of creating such knowledge. Freire (1970, 2005 theorises an approach that is committed to the empowerment of oppressed and marginalised communities by advocating a dialogical, non-hierarchal practice based on critical consciousness. He argues that the troubles with our education system would only be resolved through 'true commitment to the people, involving the transformation of the reality by which they are oppressed' (Ibid. 126). He argues that discovery cannot be purely intellectual or practical but must include 'serious reflection' (Ibid. 133). Reflexivity, thus, becomes a precondition for carrying out decolonial work effectively, regardless of the context and positionality from which we work (Hayes, Luckett, and Misiaszek 2021).

But critical pedagogy has also drawn criticisms. Ellsworth (1992) asks whose story and whose knowledge is right? and which students become empowered? Luke (1992) describes critical pedagogy as essentialist, androgynous and naïve, questioning the real power relations at play. Hooks (1994, 49) critically questions 'not only the sexism of the language but the way [Freire] (like other progressive Third World leaders, intellectuals, critical thinkers such as Fanon, Memmi, etc.) constructs a phallocentric paradigm of liberation'. Feminist theorists have particularly focused on the need to create safe spaces for *all* that can 'enable exploration of unchartered and unknown territories of thought and analysis' (Motta 2019, 29). To do so, Motta (2019) highlights the importance of working with discomfort and instances of disruption to create moments of possibility. But such work, she argues, requires immense and complex forms of 'affective awareness' and practice of decolonisation that a) begins from and centres the perspective of the other; b) embraces multiple forms of knowledge, knowing and knowing-subjectivity; and c) centres all that has been negated, denied and alienated (Motta 2019).

Drawing on Freirean approaches, decolonial reflexivity, feminist theory and intersectionality that pays particular attention to layered forms of oppression, accounting for the interplay of experiences at the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and (dis)ability, this study argues that only by being reflexive, working with our discomfort, engaging students and being keen to understand and incorporate their perspectives can

we see things that may otherwise remain invisible. While the questions of how and *what* to teach students have been asked for decades, they have rarely been asked of the students themselves (Jagersma 2010). As argued by Downes and Groundwater-Smith (1999) it is our ethical responsibility to 'hear' students; they question, 'who best knows what it is to be a student if not the students themselves?'

Methodological choices

As a first step in this project, purposeful sampling was employed to recruit participants. This involved recommendations from colleagues who provided me with several names. Additionally, 'convenience sampling was used to diversify the pool of participants to ensure that the sample was as representative as possible' to the broad minoritised ethnic demographic within the sector (Arday, Zoe Belluigi, and Thomas 2021; 303, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2017). This study included 10 participants from the following self-identifications: Females; Black African (n = 3) Indian (n = 1) Arab (n = 1) African (n = 1), Males; Asian- Indian (n = 1), Black British (n = 1), Black African (n = 1), British Bangladeshi (n = 1). Replicating a study conducted by Arday, Zoe Belluigi, and Thomas (2021), this study consisted of two parts. The first involved each participant completing an anonymous self-administrated questionnaire later used to inform and personalise the second part of the study which involved an in-depth interview. Interviews were conducted via MS teams due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. Ten semi-structured interviews ranging from an hour to hour and half were completed. Participants were informed about the specific nature of the project and were asked to read and sign a consent form. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using pseudonyms. Thematic analysis was conducted (initially via Nvivo software) to identify key themes emerging amongst participants. Anonymised quotes from the interview transcripts are used to illustrate different themes. Procedures for securing the data included: limiting the accessibility of the generated data only to myself and transcribing the recorded interviews personally without seeking the help of any transcriber(s)[2].

From an ethical perspective, establishing positionality in relation to the research was a vital step toward recognising and reducing researcher bias and power imbalances. As a researcher and a woman of colour academic, it is essential to acknowledge my close association with racialised discourses. Although all actions were taken to maintain objectivity and minimise potential biases (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2017), some natural bias was inevitably inherent. As a member of academic staff in the same institution where my participants study, it is also crucial to address the asymmetric position of power with regard to participants. In view of that, throughout the research process, I repeatedly asked myself in what material ways I maybe benefitting from this research in relation to those involved? In what ways I may have authority to assess the situations I am involved in during the research? And am I faithful to my feminist decolonial values? Employing reflexive strategies was pivotal in carrying out this research in acknowledging context, history and mutually constituting relationships. To further minimise the power imbalance, I have chosen to interview students to whom I was not a tutor at the time. Additionally, being aware that informed consent is an ongoing process, I was regularly checking that participants are comfortable and happy to continue and ensuring that they

understand that they can stop or pause at any time. And finally, my writing aimed at giving participants the space to represent themselves the way they wanted, thus minimising both researcher bias and power imbalance. In my findings, I gave insights rather than interpretations of students' experiences and used extended quotations that present what they themselves wanted to say (Nencel 2014).

Findings

Marginalisation and alienation with the curriculum

In the call for a 'decolonised curriculum', the 'curriculum' is often confused with content of the curriculum. The curriculum as a broad concept, includes both the visible and hidden: values and epistemes embedded in institutional structures (Shahjahan et al. 2022). Based on interviews, it became clear that despite our decolonising efforts, the curriculum continued to reflect little knowledge associated with students' lived experiences and diverse histories. This resulted in my participants finding themselves underrepresented and under-stimulated with their histories, narratives and experiences almost absent from mainstream discourses. The introduction of some new and diverse content, according to a first-year self-identifying female, African student, was 'much needed', 'illuminating', but 'not enough', and introduced 'too late'. More importantly, it has failed in representing the varied intersections of students' identities, evident in the following quote that speaks of the need to see oneself reflected in the knowledge provided:

> Often when you [the lecturers] talk about race you'll discuss 'men' of colour, and when you talk about gender, you'll discuss white women . . . but women of colour are left out of it . . . I can tell you how black men engage in crime, how white women might get into crime. But that does not really apply to me specifically so while the efforts that have been made are appreciated, I still feel left out! *(First-year, Female, Black African)*

Participants expressed feelings of alienation even when non-western histories were discussed. They suggested that whenever 'decolonial' content was discussed, it tended to homogenise the experiences of all indigenous people. The following quote reflects how the 'different' experiences to those identifying as African or Black mark her feelings of alienation. In particular, she explained how movements like Black Lives Matter hindered rather than facilitated the inclusion of other histories and experiences in the curriculum:

> I don't know how to say it and due to things like Black Lives Matter obviously everyone was very open . . . but most of what we were introduced to this year mainly focused on black people! There are other cultures that experience racism not only Black people. There are Asians, South East Asians like me. There are South Americans. We get taught nothing about these cultures *(Second-year, Female, Indian).*

And when some of us (educators) attempt to include diverse histories, we approach them from a 'White Saviour complex' perspective (Straubhaar 2015); a lack of recognition of social privilege, or we address them with discomfort that is ostensibly noticeable to our students. It is not surprising that many of us 'burdened with hundreds of regulations and precautions, try to avoid any type of conflict' (Acevedo 2020). But this 'paralysing view' as Acevedo (2020) argues 'perpetuates the very nature of social inequality, and by ignoring it we are certainly complicit in its continuation'. Among participants, there was a strong

feeling of the need to consider the reluctance of educators to allow meaningful arguments and open debates about race and racism in their pedagogical spaces. The following quote explains how this created a sense of discomfort resulting in a reluctance to engage in discussions despite initially intending to participate:

> I feel like sometimes you know lecturers do talk about things like recent racist slurs . . . but they are very specific with how they come across and . . . it feels very scripted, very forced at times . . . I think they themselves are not comfortable talking about it . . . from my perspective I want to engage more with such topics . . . but if our lecturers expect us to engage, they should learn to feel more comfortable with these topics
>
> *(Second-year, Female, Black African).*

Finally, participants emphasised a feeling of being consumers/receivers of knowledge rather than active collaborators. They all agreed that there is a need for the university to involve them in designing their modules. The role students can play in regard to the content and structure of the curriculum has been discussed by various scholars, like Freire (1970, 2005 and Eisner (2001), among others. It is not enough to diversify our reading lists or include topics on non-western knowledge. To move away from the 'banking' model of education, this should be done in active collaboration with students, in ways that force us to unlearn the practices and mindsets which centre our knowledge, privilege, and power: the invisible curriculum.

Feelings of isolation in and out of the classroom

Participants in this study found it hard to engage within the learning space when the content discussed was markedly dismissing their identities. Engagement is viewed in the literature as vital for enhanced learning outcomes for all students (Saeed and Zyngier 2012; Cents-Boonstra et al. 2020). Motivation is seen as a pre-requisite for engagement, which is not only an end in itself but is also 'a means to the end of students achieving sound academic outcomes' (Saeed and Zyngier 2012, 252). In this study, participants revealed parallel experiences about their motives to (or lack of) engagement in the classroom which were, firstly, dependent on the lecturers' passion and enthusiasm and their own relatedness to the topic. Some provided examples of lecturers who interacted 'well' in the classroom and showed 'care' for them; 'they listened to diverse voices of students', as one explained. These are simple interventions that seem to make a huge difference for minoritised ethnic students (Felix 2019, 14).

'Topic' came next as motive to engagement, hence the importance of including diverse topics that represent all students. This confirms what is already in the literature about the link between belonging, engagement, and seeing ones-self in the curriculum (Ahmed 2012; Arday and Safia Mirza 2018), which may start, but does not end, with reading lists. In dealing with lecturer's reluctance in openly discussing issues of race and racism, Ross et al. (2014) suggest that talks about race, unconscious bias, and the use of wrong terms should be included in teachers' training. This is echoed by several participants, one of which says:

> If it is a topic that I like and know a lot about and confident about then I would want to speak and discuss with my tutor and colleagues . . . like especially if it's like a controversial topic . . . racism and how others perceived racism . . . I feel like yeah with topics that feel personal to

> me or the topic that I just generally understand and have a lot of knowledge about I would take part in but with topics that I don't understand fully or not relate to so I just wouldn't really engage as much *(Second-year, male, Black African).*

A crucial experience among participants was the building and sustaining of a classroom community, which they described as integral to their engagement. Many found the expectation to talk with peers to be daunting especially during the first weeks of the year. Emphasising that despite that seminars are seen as engaging, most students said that they find it hard to engage with their colleagues and harder to make friends. It was even harder for those who are markedly different in terms of how they dress, how they speak or both. This is exemplified in the following quote which was spoken in a mix of both languages and translated by myself:

> Sometimes I feel like they don't listen to my ideas . . . I feel scared to say my opinion about something . . . I just say it to myself, but I can't discuss a topic with the tutor or the other students . . . I have experience with a group from last year and this year. They don't take my seriously; they ignore me when I try and present an idea, especially in group work *(Second-year, Female, Arab).*

Making friends at university was an important aspect during discussions. For several students making friends was a challenge, especially during the first year. A few students mentioned the possibility to 'mingle' with some people of colour during whole-year cohort lectures when teaching was on campus. Several students argued that in small seminar sessions, it was harder to engage (especially when the topic involves Indigenous Knowledge and histories of the Global South) when most or all the students are white.

> I am the only black person within the seminar so sometimes I'd kind of like fallout . . . I just wouldn't always feel comfortable especially if we're talking about specific topics because not everyone understands or I just kind of don't feel like I always fit in. I can but it's just more of the sense of belonging and feeling comfortable with my peers which I don't always feel *(Third-year, Female, Black African).*

Several participants reflected feelings of alienation within both the physical and the virtual classroom, stressing that not being able to contribute to a breakout room felt like 'sitting on a table on your own' during in-person sessions. With the turn to online teaching and learning, which resulted in the use of various technologies to enhance student engagement, like breakout rooms, quiz apps (Kahoot, whiteboard, etc.), it became even more difficult for minoritised ethnic students to engage:

> I don't talk in the breakout rooms . . . I feel like maybe in 3rd year because everyone had kind of like maybe gotten within their friendship groups . . . the breakout rooms would have people who never spoken to each other before. It is even harder for me when I'm the only black person in the room *(Third-year, Male, Black British).*

Some students suggested that quiz apps further isolated them, because 'they are not really allowing everyone to engage together . . . you're on your phone doing the answers' (First-year, Female, Black African). As students get allocated to seminar groups that they are required to attend all year, it is crucial that student services ensure the diversity of each seminar group. Sadly, some students went as far as to avoid attending seminars altogether because of their lack sense of belonging.

> I know who's going to be in this seminar, and I'd avoid going because I just feel uncomfortable at being the only black person there. Even in group work, I was the only ethnic minority there; I just don't feel comfortable. I just felt like maybe it could be a bit more diverse . . . it will be easier! *(Third-year, Female, Black African).*

And finally, a few participants seemed to genuinely believe that the lack of engagement is 'because of them'. They felt they are the problem, not the curriculum, not the tutor, not their colleagues but solely them. 'Internalised racism', the development of ideas, beliefs, actions and behaviours that support or collude with racism, remains one of the most neglected and misunderstood components of racism (Pyke 2010). This is a dilemma that desperately needs to be discussed in future work that addresses decolonising the curriculum.

> Making conversations wasn't always easy and no that's no one's fault. Maybe it could be me. I should probably be more social, but I feel I don't fit in. I kind of like take a few steps back and like maybe isolate myself or just work by myself coz even in my first year I just like worked by myself *(Second-year, Female, Black African).*

Lack of a sense of belonging to the university and society at large

A common expectation shared by participants was the importance of social integration both in and out of the classroom. Outside the classroom, participants avoided student societies because they didn't feel they represented them. They described an initial enthusiastic view that university would be an enjoyable social experience but, in reality, they failed to form friendships. Except for those who already had family and friends close to the university, participants, both UK-based and international, affirmed a lack of sense of belonging. Some noted that within student societies there were exceptionally low numbers of minoritised ethnic students involved, which resulted in their feelings of marginalisation within wider student population.

All but two students (who were born and raised in the city) talked about specific experiences and interactions at university that led them to a realisation that they are not welcomed or do not belong to the school community. Several students reported that a key barrier to engagement was the noticeable lack of diversity within clubs and societies. Many added that they would feel more comfortable if there were more minoritised ethnic students involved because it would make them feel as though there is a place for them. Two participants who did not have specific experiences attributed to these feelings described a general lack of belonging.

> You know you're not welcome. It's not something specific, it may not even be obvious, but you know . . . you feel you're not welcome *(Third-year, Male, Black African).*

> I used to see the crime society, but I don't I wish to join . . . I just don't feel that welcoming spirit *(Second-year, Male, Black African).*

Barriers to long lasting engagement within student groups, included frictions between members and the perception of cliques existing within these societies, with several students recounting feeling judged even when members are from the same ethnic group. The intersections of race and gender seem to further exacerbate these feelings.

For one student this lack of belonging was linked to both her being not Hindu enough and not being heterosexual.

> So I went to the Hindu SoC and it was a really weird experience because . . . I'm not a strong Hindu but I thought meeting people with like a similar background might be good . . . So, I went for a couple of weeks and then people started asking me questions . . . I don't speak my Homeland language as confidently as they were, so they were really judging me for it . . . I had a girlfriend as well so it was like they were 'how you could be Hindu and be queer!' . . . I'm never going back there *(Second-year, Female, Indian).*

On a positive note, most students I interviewed felt strongly supported by university staff and academics. Several students asserted that their lecturers have provided a safe environment for them to talk about 'sensitive and controversial' topics related to prejudice, religion, etc, yet such encounters were not in the classroom:

> I think engaging with our tutors was great. When we talk to them personbally, I feel like they listen to us, they take on our perspectives, they share with us their opinions which makes it easier for us to share our opinions too *(Second-year, Male, Asian-Indian).*

> I think my learning experiences have been good because I feel like my lecturers have been helpful . . . whenever I email them and ask them for help, they respond at once . . . they made it really easy to just go and ask even if it was something that I thought was silly! *(Third-year, Female, Black African).*

Evidence suggests that an imbalance in diversity can lead to individuals from ethnic minorities feeling less included within their educational environment (Akhtar 2022). This leads to lower motivation, lower academic self-confidence, lower levels of academic engagement and lower achievement (Arday, Zoe Belluigi, and Thomas 2021; Pedler, Willis, and Elizabeth Nieuwoudt 2022). In the context of this study, students' sense of belonging seemed to have affected their overall university experience. It is therefore vital that universities boost efforts to create environments that are racially and ethnically diverse and fully inclusive for both students and staff from various minoritised ethnicities. The idea is not to homogenise these experiences in yet another 'box' but to attend to these differences and the ways in which their experiences diverge.

Discussion

Working with and for minortised ethnic students

As evident in the above findings, the need for a curriculum that includes canons and knowledges that reflect the varying identities and aspirations of students remains a central tenet to a decolonising agenda, also echoed among several empirical studies (Shannon et al. 2020; Thomas and Jivraj 2020; Cents-Boonstra et al. 2020; Arday, Zoe Belluigi, and Thomas 2021). Among participants, the inclusion of canons that move beyond the dominant Eurocentric curriculum and superficial engagement with various indigenous knowledge was described as essential to their engagement and sense of belonging. They also argued for the importance of collaboration between academics and students echoing current calls to include minoritised students in curriculum design processes (Jagersma 2010) to ensure they are reflective of the ever-increasing diverse student populations.

Such collaboration can create spaces through which marginalised voices may be represented, 'often supported by pedagogic change and development' (Winter, Webb, and Turner 2022, 8). But as mentioned in the introduction, this is not an easy process given the dearth of institutional support. To create policies that address and actively breakdown the heteronormativity, coloniality, and white supremacy entrenched in our higher education structures, it is imperative that serious discussions between staff, students, and educational developers take place (Elhinnawy Forthcoming). Support that speaks to the unique realities of minoritised students and staff needs to engage multiple levels of institutional stakeholders; academic leaders, departments, and faculty members (ibid).

Shannon et al. (2020), 11) call for the recognition of students as 'embodied, knowledge-making persons situated within communities, rather than as abstracted individuals to whom academia imparts knowledge created by others'. They, thus, show how a decolonising agenda can be brought into teaching practices in ways that transform the broader social relations that have historically governed the teaching space (ibid). To do this, our decolonial initiative must work with indigenous knowledge in order to expose unequal power relations and processes. There is a rich body of literature within African scholarship of such work that can be used to develop this agenda (see, for example, (Mbembe 2016; Meda 2020; Shannon et al. 2020).

Decolonising should be everyone's responsibility

Among participants, there was a consensus for discussions on decolonising the curriculum to not only take place among students and academics of colour but among *all*. One student said:

> This is not an issue that should only concern people of colour, because we will all benefit from a safe environment that reflects us all. If all of us realised the benefit of creating such spaces where we can all belong, then I think the university will be able to ensure that no student is left behind or feels uncared for. We all should work together to make them feel it
> *(Second-year, Male, British Bangladeshi).*

The latter quote spoke of the need for a 're-evaluation of the current structures within our universities that continually oppress particularly minority groups intersectionally' (Arday, Zoe Belluigi, and Thomas 2021, 308). Tate and Bagguley (2017) argue that the dismantling of existing discriminatory cultures within our universities should be at the heart of the attempts to create an atmosphere that serves *all* members of the university community. Arday, Zoe Belluigi, and Thomas (2021) assert the need for a collective and concerted effort to redesign the curriculum to provide something that engages diverse students inclusively. This is an emotionally, mentally, and physically exhausting job. However, they emphasise, 'the mobilization of social and structural change seldom happens throughout history without the instruments of activism, advocacy, dissent, disruption and protest' (ibid, 310). As already mentioned, the opposition to change is deeply entrenched within our institutions (Andrews 2019), because debates about decolonisation create discomfort. The need to address this discomfort 'cannot be left solely to minoritised ethnic students and scholar activists', it must involve *all* academics, students and staff (Arday, Zoe Belluigi, and Thomas 2021, 310).

Conclusion

Whilst the sample of this project might seem insignificant, the diversity of participants makes it possible for the findings of this research to open up further research toward more practical approaches to decolonisation. I do not wish to offer a 'statement' about what 'decolonising the curriculum' should mean, how it should be done, or both, as this would 'simply reproduce the coloniality logic of universality' (Shahjahan et al. 2022, 75), which is critiqued by decolonial theorists. The findings of this study maintain the need to move beyond the limitations of 'diversity' as it is commonly understood (Cheang and Suterwalla 2020, 880). Ahmed (2012, 81) points out that 'diversity' has an 'appealing and non-confrontational sound, that provides a "feelgood" factor' which masks underlying issues of inequality and racism (ibid). For 'diversity' to move beyond the 'box-ticking', it should drive meaningful and long-lasting changes. This involves recognising the structural racism that continues to influence our universities at present, and making sure that structural disadvantages that results in attainment gaps for minoritized ethnic students are being carefully addressed (Arday, Zoe Belluigi, and Thomas 2021; Andrews 2019; Banks 2020; Hall et al. 2021; Shannon et al. 2020; Winter, Webb, and Turner 2022). It also involves constantly 'reviewing knowledge biases, not only in terms of curricula' (Cheang and Suterwalla 2020, 880) but also between students and staff, and students and each other. But for this to transpire, we must allow for trial and error, and understand that emotional labour will be heavily involved in the process. Decolonising is not a one-off action; it is an ongoing process. Seeing it that way may enable us to create the transformative education that Banks (2020) called for. (See also Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018; Mai and Kadiwal 2021; Alexander and Arday 2015; Shay 2016). Such transformations may inspire and empower teachers and students from all backgrounds to deepen their intellectual curiosity (Cheang and Suterwalla 2020, 881), critical and reflective analysis of power, and the historical and on-going systemic oppression that minoritized ethnic students face throughout their lives (Moosavi 2022).

For decolonisation to be possible, we must work with our discomfort and accept the complexity of the concept in order to allow the accommodation of multiple perspectives and approaches to decolonisation based on our socio-political positionality, our role inside academia and our access to power (Motta 2019; Quinn 2019). As such, we need to centre the voices, perspectives, and lived experiences of indigenous, decolonial and anti-colonial intellectuals, scholars and activists (Le Grange 2016; Mbembe 2016; Smith 2021). This means changes in funding and infrastructural support must be informed by such voices (Opara 2021). To address the failure of decolonisation as inclusionary politics we must centre intersectionality that addresses systems of patriarchy, capitalism, sexism, racism, xenophobia, ableism, homo/transphobia and ageism. The decolonisation initiatives need to integrate with other initiatives and movements struggling to address and dismantle these intersecting systems of oppressions which continue to brace up inequality and coloniality in higher education and beyond (ibid). A critical reflection on how these structures re-

produce and maintain these intersectional systems of oppression is necessary for decolonisation to be achieved.

Notes

1. The REF (Research Excellence Framework) is a system for assessing the quality of UK higher education research. The REF outcomes are used to inform the allocation of around £2 billion per year of public funding for universities' research. And similarly, the TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework) is a UK Government framework which aims to assess excellence in teaching at universities and colleges, and how well they ensure excellent outcomes for their students in terms of graduate-level employment or further study.
2. With regards to aspects of procedural ethical practices, a successful application was made to the School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at Nottingham trent University, in February 2021.

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