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Chapter 14 Decolonising HEIs – Start at the Top

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Abstract

This chapter explores the imperative of decolonising higher education institutions (HEIs) through an approach that extends beyond curricula to leadership, decision-making structures, and institutional cultures. The discussion focuses on university boards as pivotal sites of leadership, highlighting their role in perpetuating colonial legacies and the need for transformative leadership to dismantle entrenched power structures.

The chapter situates decolonisation within transformative leadership theories, suggesting the critical conscious leadership (CCL) as a reflexive model that addresses inherent biases and drives systemic change. Persistent issues such as the ethnicity awarding gap underscore the structural inequities embedded in HEIs and the necessity for deeper interventions. The Board Diversity Toolkit is presented as an example of fostering reflexivity and inclusivity in leadership practices through using diversity as the more established relation of decolonising.

Decolonising is an ongoing process that requires dismantling and rebuilding systems shaped by colonial histories. Universities, as generators of knowledge and societal influencers, are called upon to lead transformative change by challenging the dominance of Western epistemologies and fostering globally inclusive perspectives. Starting at the top with leadership, this chapter argues, sets the strategic direction for sustainable and authentic decolonisation efforts that benefit all stakeholders within the education system.

Introduction

Decolonising, especially in education, often refers to the decolonising of the academic curriculum, be that the explicit curriculum (reading lists, module content, assessments) (Grange, 2020) or the hidden curriculum such as implicit values or norms (Alsubaie, 2015). However, to decolonise higher education, in particular, the efforts must go much deeper and wider. They must include the entire university as a system and, indeed, higher education as a whole sector for there to be an impact that is not tokenism (Pimblott, 2020).

This chapter specifically considers university leadership systems and particularly university boards or councils as key sites of leadership, which can often be overlooked in the debate of

decolonising the curriculum. Universities are by their very nature complex systems in themselves, generators of research and knowledge and therefore have power and shape thoughts and mindset of both students and potentially wider society. As Bhambra et al., (2018) have pointed out, universities recognise that they are key sites of coloniality where Western knowledge is 'produced, consecrated, institutionalised and naturalized (Bhambra et al, 2018: 5). According to Gopal (2021: 883) 'it [decolonising] entails re-examining the definition of knowledge itself – including what and how we come to know – in very fundamental ways. 'Europe' in its colonial incarnation laid sole claim to sole epistemological authority; legitimate knowledge could only emerge from within its remit.' This involves the reflection of a University as a generator of knowledge to challenge itself not just in terms of historical, political, or colonial reflection but also its intellectual claims, which might have privileged their own (cultural) knowledge to the exclusion of other epistemologies. This would be to their own peril, limiting their own intellectual exploration of any given phenomenon. In this way decolonising makes intellectual sense on top of all the other arguments for it.

The decolonising of universities has different origins. There are those institutions which are located in formerly colonised countries (e.g. Ghana or India), universities located in former coloniser countries (e.g. Britain or France) and those that have never been colonised (e.g. Thailand). There is a body of literature that is focused on decolonising the universities in previously colonised countries whose higher education systems may be modelled or even set up by either colonisers or at least based on the models from coloniser countries (Mamdani, 2019). This is despite the fact that universities have existed well before colonisation in places like Egypt, Morocco or Tunisia, but the contributions to knowledge from these places is deprioritised, ignored or somehow treated as idiosyncratic to their culture or region (Maffi, 2023).

Msila (2020) discusses how leaders in, for example, African universities need to shed their colonial shackles and advocate for the overhauling and transformation of colonial and apartheid systems if the search for epistemic freedom is to be realized. Msila emphasized the need to recognise alternative models of leadership that are not necessarily based on Western, Eurocentric assumptions and called for the use of indigenous knowledge that is often overlooked or marginalised. These same calls could be used to decolonise Western, European universities who privilege Western knowledge and values as the norm and all others to be subsidiary. Decolonising leadership would require a transformative approach, and Zand (2018) presents a comparison between African and other non-African models of leadership that can offer a starting point. Whilst it may be argued (ironically) that, for example, an African model of

leadership may not work in other cultural contexts, the point is that there needs to be a recognition that there are alternative models and that these are equally valid. The issue is when Western ways are positioned as the norm and, therefore, the 'best', and it is this that needs to be dismantled when decolonising universities with a realisation that authentic and indigenous knowledge and theories have the same value as other knowledges.

Before delving further into decolonising University leaderships, it is worth exploring the structure of University leadership with a focus on the UK higher education system. This is relevant given Britain has been a colonial power and is often viewed (by themselves too) and other colonised nations as the 'gold standard', which could be more a reflection of their colonial power rather than an actual gold standard.

An overview of the UK University leadership system and decolonisation

The University leadership in the UK context is headed by a Board (or Council) which is responsible for activities at the institution (Higher Education and Research Act, 2017). These responsibilities range from overseeing quality and academic standards, as well as the more operational elements such as staffing and finances. Boards tend to consist of between 10 and 40 independent, voluntary (unpaid) members external to the University with varying compositions in terms of professional backgrounds (Kretek, 2013). They are appointed through a recruitment system run by the University itself. Boards are largely independent and autonomous but are accountable to the Office for Students (England) for key regulatory objectives and refer to bodies such as the Committee of University Chairs: the voluntary representative body for the Chairs of UK university boards, Advance HE or Universities UK for good practice. University boards do what they need to develop, enhance and promote the success of the institutions they lead. However, University Boards are not known for their diversity, and the roles for Board membership tend to (traditionally) attract males who are at the latter stages of their careers from (often) corporate environments (Wheaton, 2019). This demographic does not lend itself to diversity or decolonising their Universities and indeed such a demographic tend to be the beneficiaries of the privileges of colonial structures (Hakovirta et al., 2020).

Universities in the UK vary in their history, size and origin. Some are ancient institutions (such as Oxford, founded in the 12th Century or St Andrews, founded in the 15th Century) and others gaining more recent university status - 1992 and beyond. The Universities vary in size in terms of student numbers, and most receive public funding. Depending on a range of factors such as history, location, and origin, a range of categories of institution has emerged, such as mission

108 groups, which are self-selecting groups of institutions that share common interests. There are
109 the research-intensive Universities (Russell Group) or the 'pre-92' or 'post-'92' universities,
110 which refers to when an institution gained university title based on the 1992 Higher Education
111 Act, where polytechnics were converted into universities (Crozier et al, 2008). These contexts
112 as well as whether they are based in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland will shape
113 the University ethos and culture (ahmed Shafi et al, 2023). These historical and contextual
114 factors are relevant because they have an impact on staff and student intake as well as who is
115 then appointed to their Boards.
116
117 With regards to decolonising the University, the point that is relevant in terms of these
118 contextual factors is multi-faceted. Firstly, if Board members are appointed by the Board itself,
119 there is much evidence to suggest that existing members are more likely to appoint members
120 that are similar to themselves (Wheaton, 2021), which means a greater likelihood of
121 maintaining a status quo. When we position that within the decolonising debate, we know that
122 diverse compositions be that of a Board, academic staffing or students, lends itself to diverse
123 voices which can stimulate decolonising of a University. This is reflected in the Rhodes Must
124 Fall campaign in South Africa (Newsinger, 2016) and other Universities such as the School of
125 Oriental Studies in the UK where students first began campaigns such as 'Why is my Curriculum
126 white'(Peters, 2015) driven by their more diverse student and staff bodies.
127
128 Secondly, the very existence of the University itself as a generator of knowledge is key to
129 perpetuating colonial structures of which a 'colonised' curriculum is the result. Universities
130 today "remain deeply implicated in the production of these broader inequalities, not only as
131 sites of knowledge production, but also in their increasingly expansive roles as employers,
132 property developers and asset managers (Pimblott, 2020, p.215). Transformation in the
133 University leadership and Boards, more specifically, is an opportunity to decolonise the
134 University and its structures in a way that can act as a catalyst for decolonising curricula. A
135 University Board that is alive to the need to offer a University education that goes beyond the
136 colonially established parameters of knowledge to its globally diverse and globally aware
137 students will not tolerate a curriculum that excludes or privileges particular types of knowledge
138 over another. They would no longer accept 'established' models of leadership but would look to
139 dismantle existing models which are confined by a colonial mindset and foster a curriculum that
140 not just embraces but actually seeks broader epistemologies to inform their curricula.
141
142 Thirdly, the University Board, as the leadership entity of the University, has to lead and drive
143 decolonising efforts. In the UK, the number of students of colour enrolling in Universities has

144 increased but these are largely concentrated in the newer, 'post-'92' universities (Murphy &
145 Wyness, 2020) as opposed to the more established, research-intensive, historical and Russell
146 Group universities and are less likely to receive 'good' degrees leading to the Black Awarding
147 Gap – a persistent problem in the UK (discussed later in this chapter).
148

149 Other University Leadership structures

150 Not all University leadership and governance structures are arranged in the same way as the
151 UK, despite many following the British model (Rowlands, 2013). For example, Pakistani higher
152 education boards are made up of members that are based on the role they play within the
153 institution and the very top of the leadership is the vice chancellor who themselves are a
154 political appointment, appointed by the government rather than the University (Usman, 2014).
155 This represents a different leadership and governance structure altogether which would have
156 different implications for decolonising the University leadership structure. This is because
157 appointing a diverse Board is not as simple as 'just going out to recruitment' in the 'open
158 market'. Rather a pipeline of diverse candidates coming through the University sector system is
159 needed in order to diversify the Board's membership. This requires much more sustained
160 efforts to change the 'face' of the Board. Again, it could be argued that in a place like Pakistan
161 which was borne out of colonial legacies with its own economic and political fragilities, presents
162 additional problems and priorities to decolonise their universities and curricula. Nevertheless,
163 discussions on decolonising curricula and positioning local epistemologies is an emergent
164 narrative within Pakistani universities (e.g. Khan, 2023). Though the extent to which it is yet to
165 reach leadership and governance is questionable, not least because of their inherent Board
166 structures.
167

168 Locating the decolonising of universities within leadership theory

169 To better understand the significance and transformative potential of decolonising universities
170 and given how they play a central role in generating, disseminating and being 'custodians' of
171 knowledge (Delanty, 2001), it makes sense to situate the significance of the task within the
172 transformative theory of leadership (Shields, 2010). This positions the need to decolonise
173 universities within academic theory and conversation, enabling a buy-in that goes beyond the
174 oft-used words of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). And whilst decolonising strongly leans
175 into the principles of EDI, positioning it within transformative leadership adds another
176 important dimension: that of the role of decolonising as one which goes beyond organisational
177 transformation and instead is *transformative*. The terms transformational and transformative
178 are often used interchangeably even by Burns (1978), whose seminal works categorized
179 leadership as transactional or transformational. Transactional leadership almost seems

180 instrumental in its approach whereby a leader will look to effect change for a particular purpose
181 without any reference or recognition of power or other structural issues which shape any given
182 current status quo. Transformational leadership refers to transforming an organisation, but
183 seems to limit it to, for example, quality or effectiveness.
184
185 Shields (2010) in her paper discusses the differences between transformational and
186 transformative leadership where transformative leadership acknowledges and challenges
187 power and privilege and how these shape structures that perpetuate social inequality and
188 injustices. To that end transformational leadership gets to the heart of inequalities which can
189 facilitate the goal of truly transformative leadership aims. Shields (2010) argues that although
190 Burns' (1978) works referred to transformational leadership, much of the work itself,
191 nevertheless, refers to transformative leadership concepts. This is because Burns (1978) does
192 refer to "transformation of an entire social system" (p. 202) and the need for "real change—that
193 is, a transformation to the marked degree in the attitudes, norms, institutions, and behaviors
194 that structure our daily lives" (p. 414). It is this aspect of transformative leadership that is
195 relevant to decolonising universities, starting with the leadership approach.
196
197 However, Seyama-Mokhaneli, (2024) argues against and challenges transformational leadership
198 models, especially in the context of African universities. This is based on the premise that such
199 leadership models are based on the colonial assumptions of the 'great white male leader' (Liu &
200 Baker, 2016) which perpetuate Western supremacy. Seyama-Mokhaneli (2024) therefore
201 proposes an alternative leadership model, that of critical conscious leadership (CCL) which she
202 argues is a much more reflexive approach which "enables a shift of paradigms, renewed
203 thinking and practices that disconnect organisations' leadership from the remnants of
204 coloniality" (p.71). Such a disconnection at an individual leadership level is no doubt essential
205 to shed the remnants of decolonial systems, structures and even thought processes. Other
206 scholars (e.g. Sindane, 2021; Jansen, 2019; Mamdani, 2019) working in this space would agree
207 that attempts to decolonise universities using transformational leadership approaches alone
208 have not been as successful as expected. This is argued to be because transformational forms of
209 leadership may well transform, but that transformation is still underpinned by a Eurocentric
210 values system rather than that which is authentically emancipatory for African or other
211 colonised contexts. As a result, the transformations are limited in that they have not reached
212 the level of enabling, for example, fair access to higher education or better social and economic
213 opportunities for poor black students (Badat, 2020).
214

215 The work of Seyama-Mokhaneli and other scholars from the African region is relevant for
216 Western universities in their quest for decolonisation, despite the differences in context. This is
217 because the CCL model emphasizes the need for reflection and reflexivity in leaders themselves,
218 as individuals and, as Boards or Councils. Unless there is this level of personal and individual
219 exploration and challenge of one's inherent assumptions, biases and values, the chances of true
220 decolonising will always be limited to surface level attempts and risk slipping back into old
221 ways. Thus, while the context of e.g. African or other previously colonised universities is
222 different in that other nations colonised them, Western universities privilege whiteness in
223 systems and structures as the default, which are inherent because they were not deliberately
224 colonised in the same way. So, in many ways Western institutions have the power and privilege
225 and supremacy of whiteness 'baked in' to the structures even more deeply. And the desire to
226 transform or the need to change these is not as uniformly motivated as it may be in previously
227 colonised lands. In this sense, Burns (1978) notion of transformative leadership combined with
228 CCL is probably an appropriate place to start to decolonise universities in Western contexts.
229 Therefore, the remainder of this chapter will explore the use and design of one example of a
230 Toolkit (ahmed Shafi et al 2023), originally designed to improve Board diversity in Western
231 institutions but particularly how these same principles could be used to decolonise university
232 leadership in the form of Boards or Councils as described in an earlier section of this chapter.
233

234 ## Decolonising University Leaderships – starting at the top

235 Diversity in the context of equity and inclusion has been a fairly well understood term. Many
236 sectors of industry in the corporate sector and overall public institutions understand that
237 diversity of people in any given context is a good thing and that it actually helps any
238 organisation or institution perform better in its aims and goals. For example, the corporate
239 world recognises that a diverse leadership in terms of Boards facilitates and improves the
240 performance of its businesses (Taylor and De Lourdes, 2008). This is simply because a diversity
241 of voices means that a Board can be more broad and agile in terms of its thinking, its problem-
242 solving and innovation (Fredette & Sessler Bernstein, 2021) – all of which are needed for
243 success in most fields. However, having diversity alone is not enough to do all of these things
244 because whilst it can do all of the above, the extent to which it does it is limited by the (wider)
245 systems, structures and processes of the organisation or institution itself, as well as the wider
246 system/s within which it operates and is situated within. In order to truly free itself from
247 colonial thinking (Mignolo, 2010) which developed and then shaped institutions over time, it
248 becomes necessary to deliberately engage in *decolonial* thinking and to decolonise, and diversity
249 is one means to do this. Arshad et al. (2021) distinguished between diversity and decolonising
250 and emphasized how diversity in higher education refers to different types of people included

251 in, e.g. university reading lists or perhaps staffing or student body and perhaps the more
252 understood and acceptable term. They argue that decolonising involves the dismantling of
253 colonial forms of knowledge and practices that goes beyond diversity alone.
254
255 Indeed, to stop at just diversity in the workforce or the Board without scrutinizing the system
256 and its processes means to limit the impact of diversity and stop short of challenging existing
257 status quos or ways of (de-colonial) thinking and doing. Taking the example of Boards in the
258 corporate or even the HE sector, gender balance has almost been achieved in UK university
259 Boards at 43% and is improving well (Reedy & Quinn, 2024). However, just because a Board is
260 gender balanced does not automatically mean that the women on that Board are heard or that
261 the organisation is now responsive to and benefits from having male and female voices. ahmed
262 Shafi et al's (2023) paper indicated that whilst there was a near gender balance on HE Boards,
263 their data revealed that women did not suddenly feel they had an equal say or equal voice. The
264 Boards and organisations still seemed to be set up for male leaders and male voices. Hence
265 more work is needed.
266

267 The ethnicity awarding gap

268 Evidence of the colonial impact of universities in Western societies is that of the ethnicity or
269 black awarding gap. This is where the students from ethnic or black minority ethnic
270 backgrounds are less likely to achieve a higher-level degree than their white counterparts, even
271 as more students are achieving higher degree outcomes (Arday et al., 2021). Earlier work on
272 this called it the 'attainment gap', however this was changed to the *awarding gap* in recognition
273 that rather than a deficit in the student, the issues were the structures of society and its
274 institutions that disadvantaged these particular groups which then lead to awarding gaps
275 (Arday et al, 2021). It is important to note that the awarding gap is a complex phenomenon and
276 it is not just the fault of universities but represent multiple disadvantages that interact in
277 diverse ways across time and space (Ghann, 2021) resulting in degree awarding gaps. There
278 have been many attempts to close the awarding gap through legislative, sectoral, institutional,
279 and personal initiatives. However, the awarding gap has remained (Loke, 2022), suggesting
280 that what has been done is either not enough or is the wrong thing. In their paper ahmed Shafi
281 et al (under review) argue that because the awarding gap is so complex, solutions must
282 recognise the whole system (Wong et al., 2021) and work with the idiosyncratic nature of
283 individual institutions. This should be as part of a wider system and therefore consider the
284 geographical location, demographics, historical and overall understanding of the issues that are
285 within individual institutions. The awarding gap is relevant here because not only are
286 awarding gaps an outcome of systems which do not foster belonging or inclusion (Wong et al.,

2021), and could be said to be so because colonial systems in Western societies were designed for a particular demographic. If you do not fit that demographic, then you are likely to face more barriers and struggles which then shows in degree outcomes as an example.

Decolonising the university thus means a decolonising of the institution at its heart which has traditionally privileged the white male leader. Improving diversity alone at a decision-making table is not enough and will not close awarding gaps. Decolonising universities benefits all those groups who have usually been on the margins of leadership (Arshad et al., 2021). There has to be a deliberate effort, but as Arshad et al (2021) point out, diversifying is a more palatable endeavor that does not cause 'discomfort'. However, discomfort is exactly what is needed if change is to be genuine, sustainable and authentic.

The Board Diversity Toolkit is an interesting example as it was the first national toolkit of its kind and as the name suggests, it was designed to diversify (UK) University Boards and most universities would likely be comfortable with this need. This paper nor the Toolkit is advocating for 'comfort' however, what it is advocating for is 'buy-in'. 'Buy-in', (to borrow a term from organizational change management literature) is necessary for the deep level work required for decolonising. Hubbart (2022) argues that "insufficient truth acceptance and buy-in results in deficient stakeholder engagement and a decreased likelihood of organizational change initiative success" (p.1). This emphasizes the importance of engaging the key stakeholders of an organisation because not doing so means limited success of the proposed changes. The Board Diversity Toolkit was also designed to work on how a Board reflects on itself as individuals and then as a collective, as one of the first things to do. It requires Board members to challenge deep seated assumptions and understand how these may be preventing them engaging in (diversity). Once there is a deep understanding of the need for diversity from the ethical, moral, inclusions, diversity of thought reasons to the need to develop more successful organisations, only then, can a Board or leadership genuinely be ready to decolonise its systems, processes and structures. That is because decolonising is not just about doing. Indeed, the doing part of decolonising is the *outcome* of de-colonial thinking that comes about from a changed mindset which illuminates the colonised nature of our institutions, processes, structures and ways of being. In a sense once one can see the colonised nature of our systems and processes (and ourselves), it is difficult to 'un-see' it.

Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter suggests that decolonising is not an event, rather it is a process. It requires sustained efforts to dismantle and rebuild systems that have evolved over potentially

323 centuries. It involves the changing of cultures that have equally evolved and are less formalized
324 but nevertheless entrenched in the day-to-day unsaid norms of any institution or society. For
325 such structural changes to occur to that depth, it is no surprise that it is important to start at the
326 top of an institution so it can set the (strategic) direction of the institution and embed it within,
327 for example, its overall strategy, aims and vision. This requires some radical and courageous
328 thought. But universities should take comfort in the fact that universities *should* be at the
329 forefront of driving change through enlightened thinking and new knowledge (Bayuo et al.,
330 2020). Particularly, universities should see this as imperative to their role as we enter a period
331 of 'enlightenment' where it is no longer acceptable to continue to perpetuate colonialism
332 through the systems that were set up during colonial times to support colonialism. The world is
333 in a different place, and universities play a pivotal role, especially as they are fostering the next
334 generation of thinkers.
335

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