Paying for the work of racial equality in higher education

Dr Churnjeet Mahn
Reader in English Literature
University of Strathclyde
What are we ‘decolonising’?
‘Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation.’


What we’re often taking about is:
Taking institutions and disciplines which centre the experience of the world through knowledge produced by white people (which historically has used BAME people as ‘case studies’ or ‘objects’ of research), and recognising this isn’t the single perspective from which the entire world is seen and experienced.

And if we’re lucky:
Some of our reading lists might include a few items that are by people who are not white.
Competing narratives about diversity

- Some types of social justice work have better optics for institutions.
- Policy-driven diversity implementation often produces diversity silos (although intersectionality will always get a reference).
- Thinking about when and why an axis of difference is highlighted.
- Photo Bank Diversity/corporate diversity.
- How do we move from silos of diversity to connected forms of social justice that is ‘messier’ and ‘harder’?
- International students.
- Moving from being ‘invisible’ to be ‘hypervisible’.
‘We don’t have diverse students’

Assumptions around the student body only being white begins the process of creating and delivering a white-centred curriculum where the experience and history of most of the world is marginal.
Critical accounts to support students in the world

- Equipping all students with a critical vocabulary to name, explain, and understand the world around them.
- Extends to all disciplines.
- Extends to all services.

Images of books:
- Superior
- The Return of Race
- Science
- Algorithms of Oppression
- Flatlining
Feeling racial inequality in the classroom

• Social vocabularies of racism vs lived experiences of racism
  • BLM; BAME deaths during the pandemic; Sewell Report.
  • Being the ‘expert’ in the absence of staff expertise (having to ‘explain’ racism).
  • Silencing difficult experiences (due to lack of confidence or understanding).
  • Stepping outside the classroom (and social media). Who moderates the world?
Who does this labour (mentoring)?

• Often falls to BAME women
• Students often ‘tasked up’ with being experts under the veil of it being enabling or student-centred (are they being paid for this? Will the university use their materials?)
• When staff and students call out racism they are held to high evidentiary standards
Complaint

• People who speak out about structures become the problem
• You will experience resistance (from staff and students)
• Exhaustion and frustration means it’s working
• Social justice necessitates redistributing social and economic capital, who wants to give that up!?
• Foster different kinds of networks *between* people with shared experiences while creating separate spaces for critical debates
Who pays for the labour of racial equality in higher education?

• How do BAME people pay for it?
  • Everyday racism
  • Being ‘tasked’ to perform diversity
  • Progression

• Do universities pay for it?
  • Are we hiring BAME people in professional services and in academic and teaching positions?
  • And if we’re not, do we care? And if we care, what are we doing to evidence it and change it?
  • Are we sure we’re challenging cultures or creating silos that excuse structural change? Are the ‘usual suspects’ doing the ‘good work’?
Practical steps: the curriculum needs support

- **Spaces for critical conversations:** a reading group as a training or development activity? Fostering spaces for students that includes clear and accountable processes of support?
- **Who are our courses for?** Normalising discussions about curriculum design – silos of diversity?
- **Scenario planning:** what support mechanisms are in place for you and for student? University media and PR?
- **Understanding the data** your institution does and doesn’t collect about race.
- **Representation:** Asking questions about who is in the room (from open days, to lecture halls, to meeting rooms) and why it might not be a hospitable environment. If our teams don’t represent society, who do they represent?
- **Decision making:** Becoming cognizant of who makes decisions and which voices are heard. Is it more of the same?
- **Believe (staff and) students are experiencing racism:** it’s common for staff and students to under-report racism because they think they won’t be believed, or that it will be used against them. It will be ‘easier’ for individuals and institutions to silence these voices.
- **Identifying support:** what specific forms of support (from mental health to mentoring) are available for BAME students? What training and skills do those people have?
Thank you for Joining

Resources from this webinar will be available on the Enhancement Themes website shortly

For information and resources about our webinar series, please visit the Collaborative Cluster page on the Enhancement Theme website: