From silence to 'strategic advancement': institutional responses to 'decolonising' in higher education in England

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Abstract

Amid the rising calls for a 'decolonised curriculum', scholars and activists have outlined what needs to be done to 'decolonise the university'. Yet in practice, those involved in decolonising work often face considerable backlash and institutional resistance.   Drawing on empirical research with students and staff across nine universities in England, this paper sets out to capture the contested terrain of 'decolonising the university'. We draw on qualitative accounts, collected through in-depth interviews with 24 individuals who are engaged in individual and/or group-based decolonial efforts, at discipline/departmental/institutional level to achieve change in their universities. We conceptualise and explore institutional responses to 'decolonising' through three strategies: rejection, reluctant acceptance, and strategic advancement. Presenting a snapshot of decolonising work in England over the period 2014-2021, our findings raise questions about what needs to be done to counter institutional co-option, incorporation, and the dilution of the radical message of decolonising.

Key words: Decolonising work, institutional responses, strategic advancement of decolonising, Eurocentrism

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Introduction

Global calls to 'decolonise' education have risen significantly in recent years, becoming more pronounced in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matters (BLM) protests following the racist police killing in Minneapolis of George Floyd in May 2020. Since then, universities in the UK[i] and elsewhere have rushed out public statements in which they have made commitments to 'anti-racism' and 'decolonising the curriculum'. Some of these universities have faced backlash for their performative gestures at this time having hitherto done little to respond to decolonising agendas while also failing to effectively address persistent racialised inequalities. Drawing on interviews with students and staff in England, this paper aims to capture the contested terrain of 'decolonising the university'. While scholars argue that '[d]ecolonising involves a multitude of definitions, interpretations, aims and strategies' (Bhambra, Nisancioglu, and Gebrial 2018, 2), within and across a number of universities in the UK, as elsewhere in the colonial metropoles and former colonies, a series of mostly student-led campaigns have drawn attention to the Eurocentrism[ii] at the heart of Western education systems. Campaigns such as Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) (Cape Town) and RMF (Oxford) have exposed the legacies of empire, colonialism and slavery that reinforce the institutions, their disciplines, policies, curriculum and practices. Calling for the colonial structures of higher education to be dismantled, the campaigns highlight how Western education was, and is still, a key site through which colonialism, and colonial knowledge, is produced, institutionalised and naturalised (Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2016).

Amid the rising calls for a 'decolonised curriculum', scholars and activists have outlined what needs to be done to 'decolonise the university'. Yet in practice, those involved in decolonising work continue to face considerable backlash and institutional resistance (Chantiluke, Kwoba, and Nkopo 2018). We set out to exemplify this institutional resistance as part of our analysis of decolonial efforts within and across university projects. The empirical site for our research is England, where a number of universities make progressive claims about 'decolonising the university'. We draw on qualitative accounts, collected through in-depth interviews with 24 individuals who describe themselves as being involved in 'decolonising work'– that is, they are engaged in individual and group-based decolonising efforts, at discipline, departmental or institutional level to bring about change in their universities. Our analysis builds on the growing body of literature that charts interpretations and practices of decolonisation alongside institutional responses (Ahmed 2012; Batisste 2013; Stein and Andreotti 2016; Gaudry and Lorenz 2018; Blake 2018). As we later discuss, these studies highlight the tensions and contradictions inherent in attempting to decolonise spaces that were customised to advance colonisation and racialisation. While much of the above-mentioned literature is based on discursive analysis, our paper contributes new empirical insights into how decolonising is being defined by student and staff activists as well as universities' senior managers. Drawing on Bell (1980) we highlight the circumstances in which universities have embraced and/or resisted 'decolonising' in England.

The paper is structured as follows: we first explore what it means to decolonise in the contemporary moment when a wave of campus-based activism has re-opened questions about the transformational possibilities of institutions that are steeped in Eurocentrism and coloniality; we then briefly outline the contextual factors that form the backdrop for UK-based decolonising work; following an overview of our research design, we discuss how decolonising

is being framed, interpreted, contested and claimed and the measures that have been used to progress or hinder decolonising work agendas. We conceptualise and explore institutional responses through three strategies: strategic rejection, reluctant acceptance, and strategic advancement of 'decolonising' and consider some issues for the future direction of decolonising work in England.

We argue that strategic advancement of 'decolonising' by some university managements is being pursued as universities face pressures to recruit and retain students in the context of economic downturn and the post-Brexit period and as the UK emerges from the Covid pandemic. However, strategic advancement of 'decolonising' can also contribute to an institutional taming or a dilution of the discourse, especially when top-down initiatives and strategies are pursued while leaving intact the structures and processes that perpetuate coloniality. Presenting a snapshot of the contested terrain of decolonising work within and across universities in England over the period 2014-2021, our analysis poses questions about what needs to be done to counter institutional co-option, incorporation, and the dilution of the radical message of decolonising.

What does it mean to 'decolonise education'?

Postcolonial analyses highlight that while powerful nations may have vacated their former geographical colonies in Africa and Asia, 'they retained them not only as markets but as locales on the ideological map over which they continued to rule morally and intellectually' (Said 1993, 25). Coloniality, a term coined by Quijano (2000) refers to this ongoing logic of domination underlying imperial conquests (in the Americas as well as Asia and Africa) and Eurocentrism in shaping the knowledge and culture of institutions including higher education long after decolonisation or the dismantling of colonial administrations. Following Mignolio (2011), we understand decoloniality as an epistemic, political and pedagogical project that seeks to understand and disrupt coloniality.

Since 2015, campus-based activist projects have drawn attention to the coloniality of higher education. RMF at Cape Town University in South Africa provided a catalyst for the wave of student movements calling on their universities to 'decolonise the curriculum'. In the UK, student-led movements emerged prior to the 2015 RMF movements, taking inspiration from campaigns such as #iTooAmHarvard[iii] – a campaign started by Harvard student Carol Powell in March 2014 which, in turn, drew on the long history of struggle by African Americans to achieve equality in American higher education via the campuses of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Blissett, Baker, and Fields 2020). In 2014, students at University College London (UCL) produced a 20-minute video asking, 'Why Is My Curriculum White?' as they took aim at the 'Whiteness' and Eurocentric domination that has obscured the impact of slavery and colonialism at British universities (El Magd 2016). It galvanised the support of the National Union of Students (NUS) with launches at Warwick and LSE in 2015, Bristol, Birmingham and Manchester in 2016, and an online presence at many more universities.   Along with another high-profile NUS campaign, 'Liberate My Degree', these projects generated national debate about the need to 'decolonise the university'.

In contrast to the NUS-supported and largely student officer-initiated campaigns, some of the more recent student campaigns have met with a lack of support and sometimes opposition from their own students' union.   For example, in November 2019, a group of students at Warwick University ended a 30-day occupation of their students' union building in protest at the 'Union's failure to adequately combat racism and structural oppression, and the wider legacies of colonialism at Warwick University' (Warwick Occupy 2019). In July 2019, another group of predominantly Black and racially minoritised students ended a 137-day long occupation of the grade-II listed Deptford Town Hall building in southeast London. Goldsmiths

Anti-Racist Action (GARA) was formed following high profile racist incidents that occurred as part of the students' union elections process which the occupiers argued were left unchallenged within the university. Despite GARA winning landmark concessions from the University including mandatory anti-racist training for all staff and the reinstatement of scholarships for Palestinian students (GARA 2019) many of the agreed changes had not been implemented a year later (Goldsmiths Student Union 2020). For us, these delays, and the lack of support from student bodies signal the sustained effort needed to transform institutions that are so steeped in colonial legacies. They also highlight that concessions are often made not because universities agree with the need for change but to diffuse the impending threat or reputational damage or in other words, because of 'interest convergence' (Bell 1980).

The theory of interest convergence originates in the work of Critical Race Theory scholar, Derrick Bell (1980), who argued that Black people achieved civil rights victories only when White and Black interests converged. Bell argued that the 1954 decision in which the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in public schools in America did not happen because the US wanted to take a moral stance against racism but for reputational reasons. Many in the US administrations linked progress on civil rights to success in America's struggle against Soviet communism during the Cold War in the competition of influencing nations in Africa and Asia. The threat of domestic upheaval was also a factor in the decision. Once the interests diverged, the enforcement of civil rights was curtailed.

Although applied in a different time and space, Bell's theory is helpful for analysing institutional claims and strategies focused on decolonising in England. We draw on 'interest convergence' to ask whether institutional claims made in 2020 reflect genuine advancement of decolonising work or the short-lived victories that Bell referred to when talking about desegregation moves by the US government in the 1960s (Bell 1980). Working with this lens means that our focus cannot be the motivations of individual senior managers. Rather, we draw on the principle of interest convergence to highlight the structural pressures and circumstances that converge at a particular historical movement to underpin a strategic advancement of decolonising by some universities. We next sketch out some of these structural pressures and drivers, also highlighting the persistence of racialised inequalities that have driven students to demand the decolonisation of their universities.

Contextualising decolonising claims of universities in England

Decolonise movements are shaped in each locale both by histories of anti-colonial struggles and by the conditions facing racialised groups in the contemporary moment. In the UK, a new generation of student activism has emerged amid a climate of increasing scrutiny and surveillance of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students in universities. This has taken place in the context of more than a decade of austerity and rising nationalism and populism, especially in the run up to, and aftermath of, the Brexit referendum in 2016 (Virdee and McGeever 2018). The Covid-19 pandemic and 2020 BLM protests have also exposed the depth and persistence of racialised inequalities in wider society and within higher education. Despite rising numbers of BME students applying to and attending UK universities over the last 30 years, they remain less likely to secure places in elite institutions; BME students also continue to achieve lower outcomes, on average, than White students with similar entry grades (Boliver 2013; Noden, Modood, and Shiner 2014).

This picture of structural and systemic disadvantage has been compounded by the hostile environment created by immigration and counter-terror policies in a post-9/11 context. As well as the over-policing, continued surveillance, and racial profiling of BME students through the auspices of Prevent arm of the UK government's counter-terrorism strategy (Shain 2011;

Miah 2017), in the aftermath of Britain's EU referendum and the rising tide of nationalism, targeted racial harassment on campuses has also increased (Housee 2018).

'Bottom-up' pressure from the student-led decolonising campaigns has been accompanied by a series of national reports providing statistical and empirical evidence of the persistence of racialised inequalities (NUS 2011; NUS 2017; EHRC 2019; UUK 2020). However, universities also face intense pressure due to shifting higher education markets globally and changes in the way that UK higher education is funded. With the tripling of tuition fees over the last decade, universities have become more reliant on student fees and loans for their income. Most providers received less than 15% of their income as grant funding in 2015 (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2016) leaving universities to scramble for student income amid a series of complex rules and regulations including on-off caps on student numbers.

We understand these pressures on higher education as stemming from the economic conditions associated with the 2007-08 global financial crisis and the continuing economic downturn. The UK has a long-standing comparative advantage in providing education to international students based on the importance of English in the global economy and the high-quality courses its universities offered. It has the second-largest group of international students in the world, after the US, in the number of foreign students it educates, approximately 20% of its entire university student body. There is a risk, however, that the UK will soon be overtaken by Australia. New threats amid the UK's withdrawal from the EU, together with the introduction of harsher visa regulations pose further complications for the UK higher education sector. Although international student numbers have risen in recent years, the UK's overall market share has fallen, and competitor countries are more active in recruitment (Migration Advisory Committee 2018). The rise of the Global East in reshaping global higher education and increasing competition for international students is also worth mentioning here. In the past 30 years, there has been a rapid expansion of 'world-class universities' in Asia. Among the world's top five countries for outbound international students, four are in Asia: China, India, Vietnam and South Korea. While Western countries still attract the most incoming international students, some Asian countries are emerging as regional education hubs (Xin Xu 2021).

These factors and pressures form an important context for our analysis because they provide a backdrop for universities' developing responses to demands for decolonising the curriculum. As we later highlight, universities have responded in a range of ways to student demands for decolonising, but a notable shift occurred from 2020 with universities more readily embracing the language of decolonisation and anti-racism with some moves towards 'mainstreaming' decolonising work - the introduction of top-down senior manager-led initiatives for 'decolonising the curriculum' that are designed to be embedded within institutional processes. We contend that this shift towards 'mainstreaming' can be read through the lens of 'interest convergence' (Bell 1980) as universities face pressures around recruitment in the context of economic downturn and the post-Brexit period. Decolonising work has therefore become strategically important for universities. As they compete for more students, in particular international students from the Global South, they must demonstrate their commitment to university-wide change towards eliminating racialised inequalities. Before presenting our data, we briefly consider some of the literature that has explored institutional responses and the possibilities for decolonising.

Possibilities for institutional transformation

We earlier mentioned the lack of agreement over how decolonising is to be conceptualised and the methods needed to achieve it. This raises questions about the possibilities for 'decolonising'; it also leaves the way open for universities to label as 'decolonising' a range of

activities from diversifying reading lists to introducing special modules about decolonisation and/or employing a few more Black staff while leaving intact structures and processes that perpetuate coloniality. Blake argues that this type of inclusion without attention to the histories and structures of oppression justifies the organised abandonment of underrepresented communities. (Blake 2018, 309). Battiste (2013) also describes this as an 'add and stir approach', where content about the Global South is added to existing curricular without providing the proper cultural and historical context.

Academics, including Stein and Andreotti (2016, 4), argue that within institutional responses, 'inclusion' is often framed as a benevolent gift, with racially minoritised staff 'expected to perform their gratitude and refrain from further dissent'. Those advancing more radical critiques or demands can be accused of being ungrateful. In this way, 'the boundaries of the institution and of acceptable modes of knowledge production and critique are still firmly policed by White (and capitalist) power structures' (ibid). They argue that the majority of institutional actions around colonialism and race focus on 'inclusion' with little commitment to 'a redistribution of resources' (ibid) so that scholarships and symbolic gestures (renaming buildings) may be offered in place of real structural change that may facilitate a transition to decolonial futures.

Gaudry and Lorenz (2018, 223), writing about the Canadian academy, also set out three possibilities for transformation from 'inclusion' to wholescale reform of institutions. However, they argue that institutions have only started the implementation of the least transformative vision of decolonising which they identify as 'indigenous inclusion'. Scholars therefore remain sceptical about the possibilities for decolonising because despite extensive academic critique, proposals and toolkits from scholar-activists, universities seem remarkably resistant to change even as they profess to 'decolonise' (Ahmed 2012; Almeida and Kumalo 2018; Begum and Saini 2019).

Building on the above literature we now present the findings from our research. In the following sections we briefly explain our methodological approach before exploring how decolonising work is being interpreted and some of the measures that are used by university managements to advance or hinder the work in universities in England.

Research Design and Methodology

The paper draws on interviews with 24 individuals who are involved in decolonising work within universities in England. The sample includes those who have been part of institutional and/or discipline or unit-level decolonising networks within institutions. A third of our interviewees had been involved in decolonising work across more than one university. We therefore captured participants' perspectives across 9 universities that were geographically spread across England. Of the 24 individuals interviewed, 8 are, or were, involved in decolonising work as students or student officers including one who was now employed within a professional services role, 11 were academic staff with 5 staff in professional services or managerial roles including 1 ex-student. The sample includes 3 senior managers, who were operating at dean or head of directorate level. In addition to a diversity of roles and responsibilities the sample was also mixed in terms of racial/ethnic identities with our participants identifying as follows: 4 as Black; a further 4 as politically Black[iv]; 4 as Asian; 2 as a 'Person of Colour'; 4 as 'Mixed'; 6 as White.

All four authors were involved in the collection and analysis of the data with the interviews being conducted between October 2020 and February 2021 during the second and third Covid-19 lockdowns in England. Given the national restrictions at this time, the interviews

were conducted online and recorded digitally following ethical approval. All the authors have also been involved in decolonising work with two being founding members of a decolonising network in an English university. Although we collectively understand decolonising as a knowledge project which involves identifying colonial systems, structures and relationships, and working to challenge these both inside and outside the classroom, we did not offer a definition of the term in our interviews. Our aim was to capture the ways in which decolonising was being defined and operationalised by our participants. In the next section we present our findings focusing on the different meanings and interpretations of 'decolonising' for our participants and the institutional measures used by university managements to respond to student and staff-led decolonising work.

Shifting conceptions and contested ownership of decolonising work, 2015-2021

A key theme across the interviews centred on the contested meaning and ownership of 'decolonising' at this moment. In line with the existing academic literature (Tuck and Yang 2014; Bhambra, Nisancioglu, and Gebrial 2018), our research revealed multiple definitions and interpretations of decolonising in operation; this was the case even within the same decolonising groups. For Susi, decolonising work is, and should categorically be, a knowledge project:

> I think it should be about knowledges. I really do not want to see a decol movement degenerate into anti-racism and social injustices and all that. They are associated issues, but to me, decol is about knowledge, knowledge authorisation, legitimisation, construction. (Susi, Academic)

However, for others, the meaning of decolonising was not fixed. Ella, explained how her own understanding of decolonisation was constantly shifting.

> On this particular day..I will have one understanding of decolonisation that could be very different to next year or even yesterday, Right now, I'm really aware that decolonisation can be used in a metaphorical way, .. universities can stake claim to doing decolonisation but … what they're really doing is diversifying, which is still good, but it's not decolonisation. .. I understand decolonisation [as] …. serving justice, in some cases, reversal, in some cases undoing all the violence, subjugation, purposeful racialisation of human beings, their land, their cultures, their languages, their rights, for the purpose of White Western capitalism instead. (Ella, Academic)

In this case, decolonising is understood as a project which involves exposing and undoing the legacies of colonisation and racialisation. However, for Ella, the goals of this project are constantly being challenged by the evolvement of the discourse of decolonisation. Part of the battle involved preventing decolonisation from being superficially applied as a metaphor (Tuck and Yang 2014) for a range of goals and activities including diversifying reading lists. Here, Ella shared Susi's concerns about decolonising work being claimed for multiple causes. Alongside these notions, decolonisation was also defined by some as 'inclusion' or diversifying' and there were critiques of a 'let's market ourselves as a decolonised university' from a 'we are the university' perspective. To explain this, and to set the context for our later analysis, we briefly outline three overlapping phases of decolonisation work drawing from our participants' reflections on developments nationally in the UK from 2014 to 2021.

Student officer-initiated decolonising initiatives – 2014 onwards

We mentioned above the 2014-16 decolonising campaigns which included the RMF campus-based, and NUS initiated multimedia campaigns such as 'Why Is My Curriculum White?' and 'Liberate My Degree'. Our participants, including Saira confirmed that these were very much student-officer led:

> Our student union education officer was nothing short of amazing. [T]hey led the campaign 'Why Is My Curriculum White', and it was from that that I got involved and I've been doing that work since then. (Saira, Professional Services)

Among our sample, staff members had also been involved in these early campaigns including Catherine, the head of a professional services unit who led a successful institutional initiative focused on reading lists in her university, inspired by 'Liberate My Degree' and Dev and Helen who were both involved grassroots campaigns since 2016.

'We are the university' - 2018 onwards
Overlapping with and building on this initial phase, a second wave of decolonising movements emerged around the University College Union (UCU) industrial action (over pensions) in February-March 2018 which provided a space for discussion of the role and purpose of the university (Collini 2012). Over two months, UCU members flooded social media taking aim at neoliberal policies and cultures that have become embedded within a marketised model of higher education since the 1990s leading to widespread casualisation of the sector. Drawing on the slogan 'We are the university', staff critiqued various aspects of the neoliberal university. Decolonising featured in the many teach-outs delivered in this period. A key prompt for the focus had been the UCU Black Members-initiated 'Day of Action on Racism' in February 2018 which coincided with one of the strike days. Decolonising groups formed at this time were still predominantly student-led but less directed by student officers and some were staff-led.

'Mainstreaming' decolonising work – 2020 onwards
Our participants mentioned a third wave of 'decolonising' as distinctly different to the grassroots student and staff-led movements. While some university managements were already responding to calls to decolonise, in most cases, a top-down institution-led approach to 'decolonisation of the curriculum' was initiated only in the aftermath of the BLM protests in May 2020. Participants across 4 of our 9 universities recognised their universities as mainstreaming decolonising work through developing such top-down institutional approaches. Alex, a senior manager at one of these universities outlines the aims of his own institution-led project:

> [C]ompared to others that I've observed, we're better at .... we've done more work and achieved more in terms of mainstreaming the work and getting pretty much everyone to have it on their radar... I don't think there are many universities that've adopted the same kind of systematic approach that we're demanding ... I've written recently to every school, every director and asked them to write back to the Race Equality Group, detailing what specific areas ... they feel they've got the most opportunity to impact on positively. (Alex, Senior Manager)

Alex mentions his attempts to mainstream decolonising under the umbrella of race equality and takes pride in his university having 'done more work' and 'achieved more' than other universities. While Alex's university was gaining a reputation for advancing further and faster than others, some of our participants expressed concerns about potentially superficial tick-box approaches to decolonising within this mainstreaming. For Tara, such institution-led projects represented yet another neoliberal performance indicator that could be worn as a badge of achievement:

> There is a huge level of irony that there is an imposed way to decolonise from the top … I think because the conversation, nationally, has moved to 'let's decolonise', it has also moved to 'let's tick this box'. … and suddenly decolonise is a measurable thing according to senior management … (Tara, Student)

Alex and Tara's accounts reflect the tensions that arise from the neoliberal corporatisation of UK universities and decolonisation of knowledge projects. One of the issues here is that the neoliberal marketised model of higher education is presented ostensibly as a colour-blind project which is premised on western-centric notions of meritocracy (Bhambra, Nisanicoglu and Gebriel 2018). Within the neoliberal marketised structure of higher education, discussions about race and coloniality come to fore only when there is a business case for advancing them. Alex's comments about being 'better than' other universities imply market advantage and therefore as Tara notes, the discourse of decolonising is deployed as a performance indicator to be measured. This instrumental approach to decolonising was also reflected on by Dev.

> When George Floyd was murdered….it started the global anti-racist movement … Our university, taking the heart of our success on things like [our decolonising publication], made a statement to say 'we've achieved a lot' and … 'we are a very good, well-ahead, anti-racist university'. When they did that, I'm not using the word backlash, but what happened was people said, 'we don't accept what you've said'. (Dev, Academic)

In Dev's view, the university co-opted the work of the decolonise network in the midst of the BLM protests to make the case that it was, like Alex's university, 'well ahead' of other universities in terms of its commitment to anti-racism. Rather than being seen as a genuine commitment to anti-racism the university was exposed by students as opportunistically advancing decolonising work when under pressure to demonstrate its anti-racist credentials. An open letter from students forced the university in Dev's words, 'to eat humble pie' and to start a formal consultation exercise on how to address race inequalities institutionally. What Dev describes here is also an example of what we term 'reluctant acceptance' of decolonising work by his institution. Having failed to opportunistically pass off existing decolonial efforts as its own, Dev's university was forced by the student and staff response to formally engage with the work to demonstrate its commitment to antiracism.   In the next section we map out this 'reluctant acceptance' alongside other institutional strategies in relation to 'decolonising'.

Institutional responses to staff and student-led decolonising work

Here we explore the institutional measures used by university managements to respond to student and staff-led decolonising work. Although our wider project centred also on student union and departmental responses to decolonising work, our focus here is university management staff with strategic responsibility for teaching-learning and curriculum design. This includes, deans, pro-vice chancellors for teaching-learning, heads of departments and directorates for teaching excellence. We highlight the measures that were used to refuse, reject and/or claim decolonial efforts within their institutions categorising these through three related strategies:

1. Strategic rejection of decolonising work
2. Reluctant acceptance of the need to decolonise
3. Strategic advancement of decolonising work

In doing so, we do not suggest that universities moved in a linear way from 1 to 3 in the period captured by our research. Instead, we found that universities used all three strategies at various stages so that even in the phase of 'mainstreaming' which required a strategic advancement of decolonising, some universities continued to use tactics of silence/ refusal and 'divide and rule' which we categorise as strategic rejection of decolonising work.

Strategic rejection

A range of tactics were used by university managements that we count as part of this strategy. The first was to ignore or refuse to engage with decolonising work. In some cases, management-led initiatives were introduced without consultation with existing decolonising networks.   For Karima this silence and refusal was a tool of oppression (Ahmed 2010) 'to continuously remind [Black students] that these spaces were not designed for us' (Karima, Student).

Selina explains that management in her university had reluctantly agreed to meet with her after the students' direct action forced them to. Even so, there was strategic rejection of the demands they put forward. This was done through the claim that the work was '*already happening*'.

> [Senior manager]...was saying 'We've done this, we've done that' or 'if you checked our website you would see that we've got decol on the website'. Putting it on your website isn't enough, we have to have actual actions. …Another thing that really upset them was that we wrote our demands down and...we did not hear the end of that; they kept saying 'Oh, you know, it sounds quite aggressive' and I was like, 'First of all, are you just saying it's aggressive because some of us are Black?' (Selina, Student)

The meeting represented a hesitant acceptance of the need to engage with the network while at the same time the University attempted to refuse the demands of the network.   The suggestion that the University was doing the work already could be seen to imply that students should be grateful and not rock the boat (Stein and Andreotti 2016) while the tone-policing invokes colonial stereotypes of Black women as strong and aggressive who need to be contained (Carby 1982). The focus on the *manner* in which the students' message was conveyed instead of the *message* itself can be seen to distract from the structural issues of injustice; it also reasserts the power, dominance and Whiteness of the institution by prioritising the psychological discomfort of the (White senior male) audience.

Reluctant acceptance

We define reluctant acceptance as a containment strategy that was used by institutions when the demands from students and staff could not easily be silenced, especially given the intense public scrutiny of universities and the pressures to avoid income (and reputation) loss, post-Brexit. Participants cited a range of devices used by senior leadership groups to deal with the demands including stalling. As Patricia mentions, almost a year after agreement was reached to remove colonial statues, her university was still holding talks about the processes needed to make this happen. 'I had an email two days ago saying that we're going to talk about the statues again…. I'm thinking, '<u>another</u> talk!'   She went on to describe the placatory moves that were used in formal meetings with management to discuss action. Meetings were held with plenty of time allowed for discussion, but little was achieved in practice.

> When we would be having these long meetings with the deputy VC [who is] very personable, but after a while you think this is part of a strategy that the person will talk and talk and talk …so you can't get a word in edgeways. (Patricia, Academic)

Like Patricia, Vijay also expressed frustration about the stalling tactics used by university managements to avoid making strategic and structural changes within their institutions. He explained how in his university, budgets for a seminar series were allocated but no commitments were made beyond this. 'We had speakers and [management] would encourage us to have these seminars but that is where it ended'. We identify these as holding tactics as similar to the strategies that were evident following the public and media reactions in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder when Black people were repeatedly asked to share their stories of racism as part of the learning process for White people. Such strategies can be seen as having a stalling effect as Black people's anger was aired while also being contained. The university was seen to be acting through the process of giving funding for seminars, while the structures that perpetuate Eurocentrism and coloniality were left untouched (Ahmed 2012).

Dev also recounted how tactics of delay were compounded by the placing of unnecessary obstacles. He had been tasked with setting up a 'decolonisation exhibition'. However, even after formal sign-off from management, Dev felt that gate-keeping methods (Almeida and Kumalo 2018) were used to delay the work:

> We have one wall which stretches up to … 15 metres and the height of it is 3 metres ….On that wall [is one] White artist and that's all … I said to the library manager 'I would like to use the wall' and there was real resistance about using that wall for the exhibition. There was also the commitment side to give; every little hole had to be made good. (Dev, Academic)

Dev describes after how facing initial refusal and delay he was then reminded to remove any traces of the exhibition. While a legitimate request, our participants gave many examples of how delays and expectations to remove all traces of their work were experienced disproportionally by BME staff and students serving as constant reminders that higher education spaces were not built for them (Ahmed 2012; Almeida and Kumalo 2018).

Strategic advancement
While reluctant acceptance involved universities grudgingly accepting the need to respond to student demands, we define strategic advancement of decolonising as a more proactive strategy driven by a need for the institution to be 'seen to be' responsive in the face of wider pressures and social changes. Although some institutions were already engaged in, or claiming to be decolonising, the key drivers of this response in 2020 were the Covid-19 pandemic and the BLM protest movements along with uncertainty around future student recruitment. Selina and Karima who had struggled to engage senior management over a two-year period, found in the aftermath of the BLM protests that they were now invited to comment, at very short notice, on the university's official anti-racist statement. 'We were really surprised as it was normally us chasing them and not hearing for ages. Mind you, they didn't really give us much time to respond and in the end, we didn't have time to contribute' (Karima, students). Strategic advancement meant that the university made a public commitment to decolonisation in the face of external pressures to declare an anti-racist stance. While the decolonising network was acknowledged, the tokenistic and belated manner in which the chairs of the network were 'included' in the process raised questions about the University's motivations and commitments to actual racial justice.

Michael, responsible for equalities and diversity work in his department, talks below about his university's motivations for decolonising in relation to recruitment needs rather than a commitment to the work, per se.

I'm sure there are individuals who do care about [it], even at senior management level, but I think overall, it seems to me that there is almost a neoliberal pragmatic aspect to it, namely that universities want to recruit students and be seen as open and inclusive. They need those things, like with Athena Swan, they need the badge or the badges to show off as it were to be accredited. (Michael, Academic)

Michael's reference to 'neoliberal pragmatism', student recruitment and accreditation as reasons for engaging in decolonising, supports our argument about the opportunistic or strategic advancement of decolonising. Like Michael, Ella was also sceptical about her university's motivations for 'mainstreaming decolonising':

We've shown that we can change things rapidly with Covid; ..It's what the motivation is, and ultimately this is a neoliberal capitalist society. They are only really motivated by money and I think the pressure of the BLM, through the potential loss about international students, the potential loss of all of our Black students, because they don't want to be among racist universities, this is a big economic threat, but then, ..what I'm concerned about with Brexit and with all the economic fallout of the pandemic in the next few years, when the University has to tighten its belt, can it still hold on its diversity agenda and its decolonisation? (Ella, Academic)

Ella's comment signals that her university's advancement of decolonising is a case of 'interest convergence' (Bell, 1980) referring to factors such as the potential loss of Black students, she maintains that the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated how quickly initiatives can be put into place. However, in her view only a business case for decolonising prompts universities to take action. Ella's questions about whether the wins gained now would translate into meaningful institutional change or be short-lived also cohere with Bell's theory and we take up this theme in the next section.

Grassroots or top-down decolonisation?
We now turn to a consideration of what the strategic advancement of decolonising might mean for those involved in grassroots' decolonising work. Given the proliferation of projects, participants discussed their ideas for how decolonising might progress given this contested terrain. Most agreed that grassroots decolonial efforts would likely fail without some institutionalised support eg, funding for students, time for staff, institutional approval of decolonised content, methods and pedagogies or additional resource for new staff or programmes of work. However, there were also concerns about dilution and institutional taming of the discourse and what this might mean for those who have already invested heavily in decolonising work.

Alex, cited earlier, expressed his view that a top-down managerial approach was not the most desirable way forward, but it was important to have a two-way flow of communication between the 'grassroots, bottom-up demands for decolonising' and a management-led approach.

I suppose it has to be…a mix and a balance between ...grassroots, bottom-up demands for change from students and staff and the management support … if it's only management-led, it doesn't have that demand coming from below, then it just becomes managerial …one of the more interesting and challenging things about all the work is trying to ensure that we still have energy flowing …from below and above. (Alex, Senior Manager).

What Alex identified as a potentially 'healthy flow of energy' between management-led and staff and student-led approaches was differently constructed by others. For Tara there was an inherent tension because the relationship between the 'above and below' forces that Alex described, was not operating on an equal power basis. One factor was the scarce financial resource for the bottom-up, decolonise group in Tara's university. As with many decolonising groups nationally, it was often reliant on the unpaid labour of primarily Black and Brown women (Chantiluke, Kwoba, and Nkopo 2018). Tara and others felt that the group's considerable work was being co-opted without proper recognition within the institution's approach to decolonising. 'They sometimes include a nod to our work, but I don't think it's appropriately credited. (Tara, Student)

The levels of co-option involved in management-led decolonise projects were commented on by other participants. Selina considered this to be a critical moment for the future of decolonising networks. In her new university, a prominent discipline-based group had disbanded as the institution introduced a top-down decolonising initiative because, according to Selina, it became 'an issue of complicity rather than cooperation'. Burnout and exhaustion were also factors for this group of mainly Black female students (Chantiluke, Kwoba, and Nkopo 2018).

For Helen, institution-led approaches risked superficiality, or an 'institutional taming' of decolonising.

> With any social movement you have the challenge of institutionalisation and taming… Writers have talked about decolonising being revolutionary; you don't want it to get lost in diversifying …Decolonising is about looking at the root …and [my university] has benefited from slavery, it has that profound history there. (Helen, Academic)

Helen went on to explain the colonial history which was being formally catalogued through the grassroots decolonising network. However, the approach taken by a 'top-down' decolonising led by management threatened erasure of this history and   colonial legacies at the expense of more measurable targets for decolonising. In one sense the developments that we have mentioned reflect the impossibility of decolonising institutions that were designed to support colonisation and racialisation (Said,1993). However, Omer remained optimistic about the prospects for grassroots decolonising work while calling for more clearly defined goals and independence.

> I think this group should remain independent first. I don't want to be part of that [official] structure… otherwise your power of pressuring will disappear… and I think this is the urgent task: we should clarify our position. …We've initiated this project, and the university is responding to *this* project. So, we're two separate bodies and this dual-ness, this separation, should be kept. (Omer, Academic)

We end with Omer's account because it enables us to reflect on the current and future direction for decolonising work in higher education. Omer's comments when read alongside the earlier mentioned disbanding of some networks suggest that grassroots decolonising work in England finds itself at a crossroads. Strategic advancement of decolonising may have provided some resource and institutional backing for grassroots networks but has come with costs, not least of which is institutional taming of the radical message of decolonisation.   Omer points to the need to reclaim decolonising work from this institutional co-option suggesting that this can be done through first, clearly defining aims/goals second, by maintaining a clear distinction and independence from the formal university structures. However, doing so would require long-term and most likely un-resourced effort which brings us to back to issues of burnout and the sustainability of grassroots decolonising work.

Conclusion

We have argued that calls to 'decolonise education' have risen in the UK since 2014, amid a wave of unrest about higher education conditions for staff and persistent racialised inequalities and outcomes for both students and staff. As the campaigns have developed, there has been a proliferation of aims, goals and methods under the umbrella of 'decolonising the curriculum' meaning that 'decolonising' remains much contested terrain.

We identified three overlapping phases of decolonisation in higher education in England in the short period between 2014-2021. Decolonial efforts have mushroomed at this juncture with groups communicating their messages via occupations and through open letters as well as manifestos, zines, academic books, papers and exhibitions. While university managements have actively engaged with decolonial efforts and campaigns, our findings show that there has also been strategic rejection of the work through refusal, delay and silencing. Some universities have made claims to decolonising through strategic and often opportunistic advancement. However, these claims have been voiced considerably more loudly in the aftermath of the BLM protests in 2020.

We have argued that strategic advancement of decolonising reflects 'interest convergence' (Bell 1980) as universities face pressures to recruit students in uncertain times and circumstances.   While some participants identified strategic advancement of decolonising as necessary and inevitable, they also identified risks: tokenism, superficiality, and a ramping up of the exploitation of Women of Colour, especially, as decolonising is delivered through neoliberal managerial principles of 'more for less'. Institutional taming of the discourse was also associated with the work becoming divorced from a structural focus on coloniality. With some high profile decolonising groups disbanding because of 'co-option', there would seem to be a sense of decolonising work being at a crossroads.

We ended the previous section with Omer because his account posed an important question for the future of decolonising work: If the movement develops a clear set of aims and goals through connections with other grassroots movements while also maintaining independence from official university processes, then might it be possible to head off institutional co-option, incorporation, and the dilution of the radical message of decolonising?

Notes
[insert endnotes here]

Acknowledgements

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[i] While the empirical site for our research is England, we refer here to the UK as the sovereign state and heartland of the British Empire. The UK is also referenced when we cite examples of decolonising from the countries that make up the UK and when referring to specific polces or developments that also impact the wider unit of the UK.

[ii] We understand Eurocentrism as a false universalism based on the claim of European superiority—'the notion that European civilisation …has had some unique historical advantage, some special quality of race and culture or environment or mind or spirit, which gives this human community a permanent superiority over all other communities, at all times in history and down to the present.'(Blaut 1993:1) Within a higher education context, we understand Eurocentrism to refer to a form of cognitive imperialism (Battiste 2103) in which European based knowledge and values are centred at the expense of other forms of knowledge.

[iii] The campaign which spread across 40 universities in the US involved students sharing short videos and photos of themselves on Tumblr with the caption 'I, too, am Harvard'. The project set out to expose the everyday encounters with racism experienced by Black students on campus and the emotional toll it took to deal with these microaggressions (Baker and Blisset, 2018).

[iv] Political Blackness is an umbrella term used by people who are likely to experience racial discrimination based on skin colour. The UCU uses 'Black' to refer to people who are descended, through one or both parents, from Africa, the Caribbean, Asia (the Middle East to China) and Latin America. It refers to those visible minorities who have a shared experience of oppression.