

Freedom of Expression, Academic Freedom and Demands for Decolonisation of the Curriculum in Crisis Time

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Freedom of expression and academic freedom are the basic tenets of higher education. They enable the pursuit of knowledge, the expansion of horizons, the discovery of new ideas, the progression of humanity, and the critical reflections on social, political and scientific events. Freedom of expression and academic freedom are now under threat. Frequently, incidents are reported in which university and college lecturers are facing threats and are losing their jobs because of statements they made in the classroom and on social media. Recently, Dr Mike McCulloch of Plymouth University was investigated following a complaint that the mathematician and physicist had 'liked' some controversial tweets. An expression of opinion via the means of liking tweets was enough to warrant a university investigation. COVID-19 and the events that followed the killing of George Floyd have yielded global stress and pressure. During crisis time, often the extremists dictate the agenda. During crisis time, freedom of expression is often the first casualty.

Freedom of thought and expression are essential to any institution of higher learning. Universities and colleges exist not only to transmit knowledge. Equally, they interpret, explore, and expand that knowledge by testing the old and proposing the new. This mission guides learning outside the classroom quite as much as in class, and often inspires vigorous debate on those social, economic, and political issues that arouse the strongest passions.

Consider the recent calls for decolonisation of the curriculum that highlights the sensitivities in teaching about events, behaviours and ideologies that are repugnant to many of us, which audiences find challenging and upsetting, which are historically and factually true, and which are important to study and analyse in certain contexts. In the Western world, the curriculum has been heavily influenced by white males of the middle and upper-middle classes of society because the majority of university lecturers belong to these categories. Decolonisation of the curriculum challenges lecturers to think about the way knowledge has been consolidated and transferred for generations, asking us to re-construct knowledge in an inclusive way that recognizes diversity and plurality of cultures and ideas.

Decolonising the curriculum calls for a cultural shift and re-organisation of power structures. The issues are complex and multi-faceted layered, calling into question well-established research methodologies, the funding and production of academic knowledge, and the staffing and organisation of colleges and universities (Bhopal 2018; Hooks 2003). The implications of such a process should not be underestimated.

There are very good reasons why academics and universities might wish to consider where the boundaries lie between appropriate and unacceptable pedagogical content. However, any conclusions drawn must follow careful deliberation, requiring input from academic and academic-related staff who must play a pre-eminent role in determining the curriculum. Decolonisation requirements must not simply be

announced without adequate deliberation. The end product of following open deliberations and due process might give us something we currently lack at universities: a teaching 'safeguarding' policy, or a code of practice to help academics navigate the sensitivities of communicating controversial subject matter.

Common sense alone provides no guidance. What are the implications of asking us to think how race, gender and class impacted knowledge? Should we provide social and historical context when we study a text or a phenomenon, something that most of us already do, or omit from our curricula people who supported racism, slavery and colonialism? How can educators 'decolonise', for instance, the study of the American civil war, slavery in the commonwealth, James Baldwin's writings, Immanuel Kant's philosophy, and the rise of Fascism and Nazism? Is the use of the n-word unacceptable in all circumstances, or only some? What about the epithets used to describe other racial, religious or gender groups and identities including Native Americans, Africans, Jews, Muslims, travellers, homosexuals and women at large? As well as words, do we also prohibit the use of controversial imagery or references to unpleasant historical events? Who decides?

These are difficult issues that require transparent and sensitive deliberation. Any attempt to draw lines and define boundaries of acceptability will have far-reaching consequences across the university curriculum. While decolonising the curriculum is desirable as it brings to the fore pondering over issues that many have taken for granted for many generations, this process cannot be done in a way that might undermine academic freedom and endanger the livelihood of lecturers who struggle to understand the issues at hand and what they are required to do. If universities wish to leave the task of 'decolonisation' to the discretion of each and every individual scholar, the result is bound to be varied and contested very much like today's reality.

In the United Kingdom, academic freedom and freedom of expression are defined by The *Education Reform Act 1988* (para. 202) as academics having "freedom within the law to question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or privileges". Furthermore, the Office for Students (OfS) strongly supports free speech. It is expected from the OfS to intervene if problems emerged at particular institutions. The Joint Committee on Human Rights (2018) instructs that the OfS "should ensure that university policies do not inhibit legal free speech and are not overly burdensome". It is the OfS role to examine reports on intimidation and issues related to freedom of speech. Academic freedom, therefore, is dependent upon proper employment conditions and thorough engagement with scholars in redefining the bounds of scholarship and in setting clear guidelines for curricula redefinition.

Bibliography

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