

*HOW CAN WE REVISE THE TEACHING
CURRICULUM OF HIGHER EDUCATION TO GAIN
DECOLONIZED KNOWLEDGE?*

Re-imagining the university

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Introduction

Our group consists of 5 students: Jef, Margot, Quinten, Surya and Yannick. Both Margot and Surya have a history of partially growing up in different countries, for Surya this being Congo and for Margot this being France and Qatar. During the group brainstorm we noticed some differences, for example, them learning about different history topics compared to the other three team members. This made us aware that the curricula of schools are geo-dependent. Jef, Quinten and Margot are Caucasian. Surya and Yannick are of Asian descent. Both groups proclaim not to have been subjected to racial discrimination within academia. Furthermore our group can be divided into 3 disciplines: Jef and Margot study design sciences, Quinten and Yannick study sciences and Surya studies humanities.

The university is a Western-centric institution. Even in the non-Western world it abides by Western norms, values and modes of operation that were spread to these places through colonization. One of the clearest examples in which the university overrules the South's history, culture, knowledge and contributions to our world is the curriculum. University curricula fails to include contributions of the South, fails to mention if knowledge was extracted/gathered from the South and/or does not mention the history of coloniality that has taken place at the hands of the west.

In this paper we wish to propose ways in which the Western-centric curriculum can be decolonized. Colonization is the act of taking control of an area of activity, in this case the curriculum and thus knowledge. We define knowledge as the understanding and awareness that individuals or groups possess about facts, information, skills, concepts, or principles acquired through experience, or education. We will propose 3 arguments for systems that will help decolonize the curriculum:

1. A change in the way universities approach the creation of their curriculum.
2. Interdisciplinary basket courses that are taught by professors from the Global South.
3. A board that surveys/reviews curricula for the presence of coloniality.

Although these claims will not 'solve' the problem of coloniality in academia and higher education, it will help clear the path to a more equitable, fulfilling and absolute education. Nevertheless we will give counter arguments as to why and how these policies could fail or be flawed and how these flaws can be mitigated.

First Argument

In order to decolonize the education system we need an inherent shift in the perspective of such a system. The current curriculum in universities is set up on the basis of universality. Addressing the problem of a universal structure in academia directly addresses our concern as doing so dismantles the grasp of colonialism over university curriculum. A universal curriculum is the idea that there is a one fit all system in which all students, regardless of country and cultural background, follow approximately the same

institutionalized and Westernized curriculum. The exception of course being, “a specific group of socially, culturally, economically, and racially privileged class of people, who consistently contribute to the universal expansion of capitalist modes of knowledge production” (Dey, 2023, p70 - 71). The exemption of universality should not only be for the individual who fit a certain criteria established by capitalistic ideals and colonial perspectives, but a privilege to all who require, which is everyone.

The process of dismantling colonialism, via adopting principles of diversity over universality, as emphasized by Sayan Dey in *Green Academia*, begins by setting up a curriculum that refers to the specific needs and backgrounds of their students as reference. The diversification process would look different for the curriculum in the Global North in comparison to that of the Global South. Curricular diversification for the north would mean the implementation of non-Western ideas to broaden the Western perspective on the relevance and importance of Global South ideologies within the academic curriculum. This would further serve as a means to dismantle extractivist structures of knowledge. For the Global South diversification would entail establishing curricula parallel/in close relation to the respective cultural backgrounds. For example, a biology course taught in the Philippines would look very different from that in Belgium due to the different ecological composition of the two countries, and the country’s different cultural background. By adapting university curriculum to different countries courses are taught in, the study will not only mean a lot more to the students as it relates to them and their background directly, but it will strengthen their own cultural identity, their notion of its relevance, and gradually but most definitely dismantle the hold coloniality has on Academia.

Adopting a principle of diversity although theoretically seems like a plausible solution to decolonizing the university, it may work against the very intent of diversification. The check-list of diversity is a common tactic used by universities, where they use the term diversity as a, “ ‘hopeful performative’ (mis)used to rebrand the university externally, but change is opposed internally. As diversity is given a commercial value, it is merely employed as a quantifiable “performance indicator” neglecting the supposed aim of change.” (Bourabain, 2020, p.263 - 264) The diversity aspect Bourabain mentions is regarding the admission of ethnically diverse students, which boosts the promotional aspect of the university. This same concern would then apply to curriculum in relation to diversification. If a quantifiable system were installed to measure diversity in curriculum, we run the risk of having a metric that serves as a promotional tool rather than actually addressing decoloniality in academia. Some may also argue that having a universalized system would be beneficial on a global scale as a universal curriculum would make knowledge assessment and circulation more effortless, as well as facilitate other aspects such as globalization and immigration. Hence benefiting those in precarious conditions, and presenting more opportunities than repercussions.

The concern that curriculum diversification will turn into a marketing stunt for universities is of partial concern as the diversification of curriculum would be focused on (but not solely) the transformation of Global South academia away from the predominating Western narrative. Serving more so as an engine for dismantling a predominating global view (the Western/colonial perspective). This would encourage each

country to foster their specific cultural ideals without having the larger Global North players exploit the process for their self-aggrandizement. In regards specifically for the Western university, our third claim/proposition would solve this discrepancy, as an establishment of a board will monitor and keep in line Western universities in the dismantling of coloniality within curriculum.

Second Argument

Even in the present day, the remnants of colonization are still detectable in academia. “Scholars have critiqued the dominance of the Western academy in the production of knowledge about Africa” (Patricia, 2022). This problem goes beyond just simply the production of knowledge specifically about Africa. An abundance of Western and Eurocentric perspectives has been dominating the academic knowledge production and dissemination as a whole. This is problematic since it may lead to the marginalization and stereotyping of non-Western cultures, power imbalances regarding resource distribution, cultural biases and underrepresentation of local knowledge in academia. To address these issues, more diverse and inclusive perspectives need to be introduced in these curricula. One way to accomplish this is by the incorporation of interdisciplinary basket courses given by professors from the Global South. These courses can include various fields of study such as sociology, economics, sciences, and literature.... Academics from the Global South with proficiency in their respective fields can offer enriching courses that broaden students’ perspectives not only in their global worldview but also within their specific areas of study. By incorporating broad basket courses instead of conventional course-specific ones, the problem of finding enough knowledgeable professors from the Global South who are willing to teach such inclusive courses gets bypassed. At the same time, the courses are still specific enough to give students meaningful insights into their chosen field of study. The potential benefits of integrating these interdisciplinary basket courses taught by Global South academics are significant. The firsthand experience provides a more nuanced and authentic comprehension of the topic, offering students the opportunity to engage with the experiences and perspectives of scholars from ethnic groups that have been misrepresented or excluded from the established academic world. As a result, undermining outdated stereotypes and misconceptions that can emerge from a Western-centric perspective.

Examples of these basket courses might include addressing power dynamics in the exact sciences between the Global North and South; and examining issues like unequal resource distribution, academic recognition, and representation. Another example might be a course that delves into more region-specific knowledge, which would empower students to have a more holistic understanding of their own field of study. For instance, biology displays itself differently in the Global North and South. Inviting professors from the Global South to give courses with unique biological perspectives from their own respective regions, could meaningfully enrich Western biology curriculums.

The previously discussed potential benefits of integrating these interdisciplinary basket courses taught by Global South academics are compelling. One of the key advantages is the opportunity for non-Western perspectives to enrich students’ comprehension of ongoing discriminating affairs in their respective field

of study. However, they should still be implemented thoughtfully and with caution. The end goal is to decolonize the academic curricula as a whole in the function of knowledge production and distribution. Therefore, the incorporation of these basket courses should be part of a broader effort to decolonize academia. The mistake of assuming that the implementation of these basket courses are sufficient to decolonize the academic curriculum must be avoided. The recruitment of professors from the Global South should be a genuine cooperation between academia from the Global North and the Global South, thus promoting sustainable partnerships contributing towards mutual learning and benefiting both parties involved. Hereby preventing a top-down approach where the Global North might dominate even more over the Global South and effectively undermining the end goal of decolonization. Consequently, preventive measures must be taken to ensure that these implementations do not become a superficial marketing campaign to highlight diversity and inclusivity at universities. Furthermore, while promoting diverse perspectives is essential to effectively decolonize the academic curricula, it is important to maintain academic rigor. The quality of the material must still meet academic standards. Instead of compromising the quality of the academic courses, the inclusion of more diverse perspectives should enhance and enrich them.

On a final note, these basket courses given by Global South professors should be seen in the context of creating a global academic community network that ultimately transcends to borders of the Global North and South. In this global academic community, both sides are equally represented and benefit equally from this global cooperation between Global North and South academics. Ultimately promoting the educational experience in both academic communities, encouraging cross-cultural understanding from both sides, and confronting the established Eurocentric academic world.

Third Argument

Universities curricula content depends on what professors experience in the field, specified on what studies they are teaching and what source material they can gather. In all fields, they have a certain accountability towards society. In order to form a curriculum, they look at researchers that have defined knowledge throughout historic and current times. Some historic academics acquired information through the means of violence, displacement and/or destructive imperialism. (Murrey, 2019) This is a concern.

We claim that, by looking through the perspective of decolonization, there could be an independent localized board to review curricula in universities in order to check them for coloniality. Assuming that university curricula structures and professors are not always aware of these matters. This board could consist of researchers from another university inside a certain area or country in combination with people from local communities. At least, not from their own university. In this way, they are not biased. Further, there is also the topic of geographic decolonization. A difference between colonizer and colonized, which is often depicted respectively by the location in the northern or Southern hemisphere of our planet. In the colonized areas of the world, there is a need for localized knowledge, due to it being lost through colonization. But also current knowledge that is brain-drained or displaced by bigger universities or corporates in the northern hemisphere.

In the Global South, there are examples of how this damage occurs and how it could be answered. Yambao et al. (2022) describe how such a place could be developed or linked to an area where there are colonizing circumstances. Benneworth et al. (2018, p.25) write about a mutual benefit to be gained, built in both the university and the community: “university knowledge helps societal partners to achieve their goals, societal partners’ knowledge enriches the university knowledge process. A typical situation involves an academic helping to conceptualize and structure a particular local case, and in turn that local case serves to help create new academic knowledge.” In the case of localized boards that would mean conceptualizing the boards structure. It should serve the community and the university as a whole. Therefore, these universities and communities should enable their local knowledge and be a springboard for researchers out of the area. This, as an intervention of putting themselves on the map again. In the Global North that means opening up about knowledge from other parts of the world, as mentioned in the second argument. Those universities have looked at knowledge from a historical universal point of view. Whilst universal knowledge should be explored more than what was already ‘established’.

As a counterclaim to this argument we could argue that local knowledge would only circulate in a certain geographic area and thus create an echo-chamber. If local universities would review other universities in a specific region, and vice versa, topics would become more universal in an area and might lose their unique knowledge bound to that region. In Global North university boards, this could possibly mean conforming knowledge that was or is colonized. Localized boards from the Global North should be aware of this issue and this should be countered with knowledge that is gathered by localized boards from the Global South.

Underlining the establishment of a knowledge-unified Global South that converses with boards from the Global North is a scenario that we like to dream of. The power of exchanging knowledge would refute this counter-argument. As mentioned in the second argument, the exchange of knowledge in different areas of the world could break the trend of further colonization, we need to broaden perspectives instead of narrowing them down. Otherwise the concept of localized boards wouldn’t be one step closer towards decolonizing our curricula.

Conclusion

To re-imagine the University, we came up with three main claims in which we believe we can guide academia to the right paths, which are: more equitable, fulfilling, and absolute education.

The first main claim was a proposition to change the way universities approach their curricula. It is currently much too focused on universality. There is an assumption that university is a one fit system for all. This could not be further from the truth. Diversity can be addressed in specific ways, however, we believe that we should first focus on diversifying the knowledge. A curriculum should first address the specific needs and backgrounds of their students, before they expand and address diversification to society and more - you need to learn to walk before you run.

Secondly, we offer a more diverse and inclusive course as a solution in order to get rid of dominating perspectives in academic curricula. We will offer this by inviting professors from all over the world to share their knowledge. It is a subtle way to get rid of courses that only teach from a single point of view and to exclude misinformation. Furthermore, if both parties engage to its full potential on this idea and implement it in both ways, it may even result in the creation of a community network. Where knowledge is not solely shared professionally through papers, but on a more personal level. Because in the end, we strongly believe that apprehension is not only admitted through academic research papers. The most interesting knowledge is gained through teaching on a personal level with personal experience.

Lastly, a university is free to define their own curricula. Through a panel of professors, each from a particular region, we will counter colonialism. Essentially this board is a way to audit the curriculum through a derived method of peer review. If the curriculum is hand tailored, professors and students will also be more likely to engage at their full potential. Therefore completing their duty of accountability towards society.

However, all these claims do come with many counter arguments. It is important to note that these are just a few of many adaptations we can make to re-imagine the university. We do not believe that there is such a thing as an ideal university. You can never fully satisfy everyone. Furthermore, the ideal model of a university today might not be applicable to the future generations that will go study in higher education. Students also often choose a university based on what corresponds the most to them. There is a reason why we are all studying at Universiteit Antwerpen, and not Universiteit Gent or KU Leuven. Just to mention that our ideal university can differ from someone else's.

Recognition of group member's contributions:

J.J. M.K. Q.R. S.S. Y.M. conceived and planned the essay. M.K. and S.S. provided the essay with a correct structure, outline, and arguments for the essay. Q.R. and Y.M. planned the weekly internal deadlines and kept track of the overall work completion.

J.J. took a governing role for the podcast. This for the technical part as well as the leader of the conversation. M.K., Q.R., S.S., and Y.M. ensured for suitable research that was applicable to their own bachelor's degree with coordinating theories to discuss in the podcast. All authors provided critical feedback and helped shape the essay.

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