

SOAS COP Policy Briefings

To Inform Government and Parliamentary Debate



Decolonising Further and Higher Education (7th May 2020) by Dr Maryyum Mehmood & Afia Ahmed Chaudhry

The [Times recently reported](#) that Headmistress of Michaela Community School, Katharine Birbalsingh, defied “activists attempting to decolonise the curriculum” by putting “dead white men back on the timetable”. This reflects an all too common misunderstanding of decolonisation. To be clear, it does not demand the removal of “[dead white men](#)”. Instead, it requires undoing the legacies of colonialism that are apparent in today’s world, and engaging voices that often go unheard. Statements made by Birbalsingh show that there is still much work to be done in demystifying decolonisation. Parliament must take a lead in this process.

Decolonial education is **not** about side-lining white academics or ‘traditional’ scholarship due to its ‘Western’ origins; rather, the goal is to enrich learning by fostering appreciation of different approaches to academic study; and by engaging with non-Western ideologies, and female and minority voices. **The aim is to champion a more holistic approach** to research that redresses oft-reductive Eurocentric perspectives which tend to **neglect lived realities of most of the World’s population, the impact of colonial legacies, and its attendant racism**. By **exploring a variety of global intellectual traditions** and acknowledging the historical context of many unquestionable assumptions within academic discourses, the present educational framework can be reshaped to make society fairer and more harmonious. Unfortunately, the **decolonisation discourse is yet to impact decision-making in Parliament, and affect the national curriculum as well as society’s relationship with colonial history**.

The decolonisation movement **must begin in schools, extend beyond academia, and take hold inside the corridors of power since the implications for the whole of society are profound**. The question of what knowledge ought to be taught was most clearly articulated in the [Bullock Report](#) from 1975, which stated, ‘No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represent two totally separate and different cultures which have to be kept firmly apart.’

The UK’s BAME population being roughly 20%, the decolonisation debate also highlights the stark reality of inadequate minority representation in the UK’s education sectors, and an inevitable identity crisis amongst students. This further illustrates how **decolonisation and representation are inextricably interwoven** and must **be tackled via the broader rubric of fostering inclusivity** in education. Fundamentally, the failure of the **curriculum to reflect reality in all its entirety** serves only to perpetuate the betrayal of, and oppressions against, already marginalised black and brown bodies. It is **imperative that decolonization discourse permeates the domain of policy across education and guides its formulation and implementation**.

For the sake of both equality and democracy, **decolonisation must be afforded due recognition** at the highest levels of decision-making; and **educators and students must inform and influence it**. To achieve this, educational bodies can **link students with those in positions of power and policy-making**. In addition, Parliament must **widen access** to these spaces and ensure that constructive and potentially transformative voices that **reflect every part of society** are included.

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