



PAPER

# Applied Feminist Systems Thinking in decolonising the university curricula, pedagogies and institutional practices

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the application of Feminist Systems Thinking (FST) as a strategy to decolonise university curricula, pedagogies, and institutional practices, drawing on postcolonial and decolonial frameworks. FST is a praxis, with the capacity to interrogate power dynamics. Recognising the complex interconnections between power, knowledge, coloniality, and institutional practices, the paper illustrates an embedded approach to decolonising. This paper emerged from four years of experience as a research fellow leading institutional commitment to decolonise. Key interventions include collaborative curriculum redesign, workshops on whiteness in the academy and critical pedagogy, incorporating alternative epistemologies that reflect the lived experiences of marginalised groups within academia, and a sustainable approach within existing university processes and regulatory frameworks. The study contributes to broader discussions on the role of universities in addressing historical colonial injustices and offers some ideas on curriculum design and pedagogies to integrate equality, diversity, and inclusion in learning development and teaching frameworks.

**KEYWORDS:** Feminist Systems Thinking, decolonise, decolonise HE, decolonise the university.

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## Introduction

Long before the emergence of contemporary decolonial movements such as Rhodes Must Fall in 2015, earlier intellectual and activist movements, including the Negritude movement in the 1930s and Black Power-era student activism in the 1960s, laid the groundwork for challenging colonial knowledge systems (Joseph, 2006; Sene, 2024). Building on these foundations, the movement for decolonising universities was reignited and significantly expanded in South Africa in 2015, led by students of colour. It rapidly gained impetus on campuses around the world and found fertile ground among higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK. The movement mounted a radical critique of the coloniality of HEIs, that is, how universities in post-colonial societies continue to reproduce colonial power structures and ideologies centuries and decades after the formal end of colonialism.

Decolonising the university requires critical engagement with its intellectual premises, alongside material and systemic disinvestment from entrenched colonial legacies and ongoing injustices (Marsh, 2022). In the UK, the movement has challenged HEIs to recognise and eliminate the racialised disparities that are detrimental to the successful achievements of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME)<sup>1</sup> students and faculty. The requisite transformations are many, for instance, increased representation of BAME faculty, especially in senior leadership positions (Arday, 2021; Maylor et al., 2021). However, a key imperative—on which this paper focuses—has been the call for universities to re-evaluate curricula, pedagogical practices, and research environments. These currently validate Western knowledge as legitimate while ignoring or dismissing alternative knowledge systems, reinforcing racism, reproducing the authority of whiteness, and reducing BAME people to consumers rather than producers of knowledge.

Grounded in postcolonial and decolonial frameworks, this article reflects on four years as research fellow mandated to deliver policy objectives to start decolonisation processes in a UK university. I am inspired by Lugones (2003), who calls for coalition building as an important political strategy for decolonisation; by Collins' (2000) scholarship on Black feminist epistemology and its challenges to dominant Western ways of knowing, which thus provides a

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to use the term BAME, as it was the prevalent terminology during my activities and workshops. While staff consultations are ongoing to align institutional language with broader usage, no definitive changes have been made. Therefore, I retain BAME in this paper.



framework for decolonising HEIs; by Freire's (1970) insights on education as a site of reproduction of racial and other inequalities; and by Madlingozi's (2023) call for decolonisation from below, while forging communities of critical consciousness. These liberatory theorists inform my thinking about decolonisation, its possibilities and limitations, particularly in the context of my own work to foster decolonisation within a UK university. Central to these reflections are my own experiences of employing the principles and methodology of Feminist Systems Thinking (FST), developed by Stephens (2011), as a framework to embed decolonial thinking and praxis into the university curricula, research, and practice.

The article explores the links between colonialism and university education, followed by an introduction to FST principles and a reflection on my own positionality when engaging with this work. The article then moves on to show the application of FST in engaging with decolonisation and the challenges and limitations encountered while delivering this work. In doing so, I illuminate the importance of creating learning environments that are committed to and grounded in principles and praxis of equality, diversity, and inclusion. Central to this discussion is the concept of learning development, which encompasses what students learn, the ideas they are exposed to, and who facilitates their teaching and learning. Hence, I offer some ideas on creating curriculum design and pedagogical approaches in universities to achieve the desired outcome.

## **Colonialism, knowledge production, and university education**

The relationship of colonialism to education and knowledge production is dynamic and multifaceted. Siddiqui (2023) argues that European colonisation of the Global South went beyond the occupation and exploitation of people, land, and other material resources. It also involved the erasure of indigenous epistemologies, as colonised peoples were forced to abandon traditional knowledge, branded by Europeans as backward and unprogressive in favour of Western epistemologies, that diminished the knowledge and humanity of the colonised (Lugones, 2003; Quijano, 2000). Worldwide, universities are dominated by Western intellectual traditions and knowledge produced by white male scientists which reproduce colonial hierarchies of knowledge and exclusionary practices (Hall & Tandon 2017). Scholars including Hall and Tandon (2017), Lugones (2003), Quijano (2000), and Wynter (2003), argue that the exclusion and non-acknowledgement of Global South communities and their



culturally relevant epistemologies perpetuates the Western hegemony of knowledge and prohibits institutional transformation. They argue that the dominance of Western knowledge throughout the Global South began with European expansionism, which relied on the extraction of material resources and the exploitation of colonised people's labour to fund these explorations. This dynamic continues today through a coloniality of power that is the persistence of racialised, economic, epistemic, and social hierarchies which originated in colonial rule but continue to structure the contemporary world (Quijano, 2000).

Scholars from various disciplines have explored the impact of European epistemic violence on the Global South and its aftermath on contemporary global politics of knowledge production (Darby, 2006; Mudimbe, 1994). Spivak's (1988) pioneering work conceptualises epistemic violence as the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogenous project to constitute the colonial subject as 'other', to explain the violent erasure of subaltern ways of understanding the world. Our contemporary world rests on discourses and practices of coloniality and power, which undergird the structures of economics, authority, permissible norms of knowledge, subjectivities, and hierarchies of inequality (Quijano, 2000).

The last decade has witnessed increasing commitment by UK HEIs to address race as a systemic problem blighting the academic experiences of BAME students and faculty (Advance HE, 2021; Universities UK, 2020). Teaching on race, equality, and decolonisation must be integral to university curricula, and pedagogies, which remain conduits for coloniality (Behari-Leak et al., 2021). Facing up to the decolonisation imperative has focused attention on learning (and unlearning), which has required rigorous evaluation of curricula, pedagogies, and practices, to tackle inequities such as the racial awarding gap.<sup>2</sup> Thomas and Quinlan (2021) argue that the racial awarding gaps damage the long-term socioeconomic prospects of Black and Brown graduates. Advance HE (2021) asserts that addressing this racial awarding gap would require a substantive focus on current university practices and student outcomes. This paper is a reflection on ongoing work in a UK university that created a dedicated resourced role within the academic framework to support institutional commitment to decolonisation and build an equitable, diverse, and inclusive learning and development environment.

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<sup>2</sup> The racial awarding gap is the difference in the proportion of White UK students awarded a 1st or 2:1 degree compared to BAME students (Universities UK, 2019).



## Feminist Systems Thinking principles

Feminist Systems Thinking (FST) is a social research approach that emerged from Dr Anne Stephen's four years of action research with communities in Northern Queensland, Australia. Rooted in both feminist epistemologies and systems theory, FST was developed to strengthen systematic intervention in complex social contexts (Stephens, 2011). The approach is grounded in principles that integrate insights from feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2004), participatory action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008), and critical systems thinking (Midgley, 2000). FST aligns closely with Collins' (2000) insistence on centring lived experiences, and Madlingozi's (2023) call for decoloniality from below. By bridging these traditions, FST offers for learning developers and educators a nuanced framework for addressing power dynamics, marginalisation, and local knowledge in social change initiatives.

Stephens developed FST as an approach to strengthen systematic intervention, based on five core principles:

1. Adopting a gender-sensitive approach.
2. Valuing voices from the margins.
3. Incorporate the environment within research.
4. Selecting appropriate methodologies.
5. Undertake research/action that promotes plurally desirable and sustainable social change.

Stephens (2011) critiques the conventional systems thinking approach as overly hierarchical, often detached from lived experience, particularly those of marginalised groups. By applying feminist principles, FST emphasises inclusivity and reflexivity, thereby making it relevant to understanding systemic and complex socio-political structural issues. FST provides a vital lens for reimagining learning and development practices in HE, ensuring that they are effective, transformative, and equitable. Applying FST to decolonising the university promotes context-specific learning by centring lived experiences, especially those of marginalised groups. FST produces learning initiatives rooted in the specific socio-cultural realities of participants, making education more relevant and impactful.

Alongside this, FST encourages organisations to interrogate power imbalances in learning development and teaching, ensuring that marginalised voices are amplified, through inclusive decision making. FST fosters critical thinking and reflexivity to question systemic inequalities



and helps to understand how power plays out within HEI systems, and to re-imagine curriculum design and pedagogies rooted in lived experiences. FST aligns learning and development with broader goals of social justice, equality, diversity, and inclusion, and for universities to foster a sense of safety and belonging for marginalised academic communities.

For the purposes of this analysis, I adapted Stephen's (2011) FST as my primary framework to plan and design the work on decolonising at the university. FST's focus on complexity, interconnection, and iterative transformation enabled me to examine and intervene in the racialised dynamics of knowledge production and institutional practice, revealing how racial injustice is embedded in policies and everyday academic processes such as curriculum design, assessment, and pedagogy.

Together with principles one and two, principles three, four, and five shape the later sections of this paper: incorporating the environmental and systemic dimensions of decolonising are taken up through the institutional mapping; the role of selecting appropriate methodologies is visible in the redesign of the set of workshops that I developed and delivered; and the commitment to plurally desirable sustainable social change underpins the action plan and the university-wide embedding of decolonising practice in teaching, curriculum review, and regulatory structures.

At the same time, I recognise that FST is just one among many feminist approaches.

Postcolonial and abolition feminisms provide crucial critiques that both complement and challenge my framework. Postcolonial feminists interrogate the imperial foundations of knowledge systems and highlight how academic institutions uphold Eurocentric epistemologies (Mohanty, 1984; Spivak, 1988; Wynter, 2003). Abolition feminists go further, demanding the dismantling of oppressive structures like carcerality, surveillance, and border regimes, raising the question of whether genuine transformation is even possible within such institutions (Davis, 2003; Puar, 2017). The work of Harney and Moten (2013), particularly their concept of the 'undercommons', has been influential in shaping my thinking; they imagine transformation through refusal, fugitivity, and collective study that evades institutional capture. Likewise, Ahmed's (2021) work on complaint and diversity shows how institutional mechanisms often suppress the very challenges they claim to support.

My project at the university was embedded within institutional structures and aimed to push from within, while staying critically aware of the limits of that position. I do not see FST as



opposed to abolitionist or postcolonial approaches; rather, I believe it must be stretched and reshaped by them. Moving forward, I intend to more deeply integrate these critiques, especially around refusal, reparation, and redistribution, as I continue to question what transformation means within and beyond institutional boundaries.

In bringing together systemic analysis, lived experience, and practice-based intervention, this paper intentionally mirrors the methodological commitments of FST. FST insists on the inseparability of standpoint, structural critique, and context-specific action; accordingly, the following section turns to my own positionality as an integral site of knowledge production. By moving from the conceptual foundations of FST to a reflexive account of my trajectory into decolonial work, the paper enacts the very principles it outlines, demonstrating how theory, experience, and practice must continually inform one another in decolonising university spaces.

### **My turn to decoloniality**

From activism to academia, my commitment towards social justice is an ongoing, deeply personal and professional political goal. As a post-partition subject of the British Empire, I grew up in postcolonial Assam, a state tucked away in the Northeast of India. Assam has its own fractured colonial history enveloped within a plantation-based economy of tea production. Established by the British East India Company, the tea industry spawned a complex political history of migration, demographic change, and indentureship (see Behal, 2014; Varma, 2016). India in the 1990s was a relatively newly independent state and still wrestling with the imposition of neo-colonial, neo-liberal measures forced upon the country to rebuild a sustainable economy ravaged by the British imperialists. My childhood was indubitably shaped by these imperial legacies, the scars of which I continue to live.

As a working-class woman of colour from the Global South, I have endured poverty and inequality in its most brutal forms while navigating various social and gendered norms. My experiences prompted me towards a degree in the social sciences, and later to a career in the gender and development space for over a decade, before shifting to the UK to pursue a doctoral degree in gender studies. My life has been peppered with instances of overt and covert racism; on the streets of Sweden, where I held a fellowship, to enduring intrusive and



racist questions at European immigration checkpoints, to navigating institutional structural racism: my work on decolonising begins at the site of my own struggles.

Over a decade of work in gender, development, and anti-racism, my work is guided by the core principle of intersectional feminism (Crenshaw, 1991) which forces recognition of the complex intersections of caste, class, gender, race, sexuality, and other intersecting identities. Decolonising to me is a lifelong learning-unlearning reflection and action process that addresses the socio-political and economic needs of the most marginalised, especially those from former colonies who continue to navigate coloniality.

It is important to mention here the general precarity of research fellowships, which are ordinarily based on fixed-term contracts. However, my specific research fellowship is unusually, a permanent contract, facilitated by my employer who sponsored my UK work visa. My remit is to provide strategic direction to the university's management to deliver the institution's decolonising vision. The role sits within the university's academic framework and reports directly to the Pro-Vice Chancellor, Education and Student Experience.

I also want to highlight that while the nature of my role may be seen as part of the university's effort to signal a visible and ongoing commitment to tackling racial inequities, it is also steeped in precarity and performativity. As Ahmed (2012) and Keval (2025) suggest, institutions often position racialised and gendered bodies as evidence of their diversity, while placing the burden of transformation on those same individuals. I am critically aware of these tensions as I navigate my role in the university.

In the following section, I share my experiences and reflect on my role as a Research Fellow delivering this work.

## **Decolonising a UK university using FST**

FST helped me amplify the voices of the university's BAME faculty and students. My first task in my role was to map the nature and scope of decolonising work already happening across the university. The starting point was a systematic review of the university's existing decolonising vision. The university's vision statement acknowledged the presence of structural racism, its deleterious impact on the experiences of BAME staff and students. It declared its commitment to providing an anti-racist teaching and learning environment; advocated for a collaborative approach that prioritised equity and inclusion of the university's most



marginalised voices. Student and staff from BAME groups were instrumental in creating this decolonisation vision, one that mobilised the senior leadership to promote the imperative to decolonise essential elements of its teaching and learning provision: designing inclusion and embedding sustainable structural changes within the institution's system for ongoing decolonising policy and practice.

This vision document steered the way towards decolonising the curriculum, research, and pedagogy. I employed a gender-sensitive approach as the first FST principle. I prioritised speaking specifically with women and LGBTQ+ identifying people, BAME staff and students, groups who are most likely to be disproportionately impacted by systemic structural violence. Our conversations on racial trauma and how it harmed BAME people, especially women and LGBTQ+ identifying people and their communities, in educational settings were challenging and emotional to navigate. As a Brown migrant woman with lived experiences of racism in European educational environments, I shared my own positionality and racial traumas with the academic community with whom I engaged. I then incorporated the insights from these sessions in spaces of influence where policy decisions on EDI and curriculum revisions and course revalidations happened. In conversations about adopting EDI policies, providing specialised therapy and support to BAME staff beyond the standard Employee Assistance Programme, and decolonising work that involves curriculum and research practice revisions, I was able to centre the voices of BAME communities at the heart of the university's decolonising strategy.

### ***Engaging students' voices***

The next strategic task involved incorporating student voices into the project. There, I adopted the second principle of FST, that is, to value the voices of the student communities, and facilitated conversations with the student union (SU), to understand how students engaged in decolonising teaching and learning at the university. Supported by the SU, I held five focus groups with student communities to understand student needs and engagement in decolonising work that is being undertaken by the university. Given the time and resources available, focus groups allowed participation in, and representation of, students from across all the schools in the university. Recruiting students for these sessions was largely facilitated by the SU, which had a mandate to encourage the participation of BAME and international students.



Guided by decolonial ethics of Smith (2012), I chose not to record focus groups or use direct quotations to protect participants from extractive research practices, particularly those of BAME communities. I documented each session through detailed notes and memos written immediately after the discussions. These notes captured recurrent themes and contextual nuances. While this choice prioritised care and trust, it also introduced limitations: participants' voices were represented through my interpretation as a Brown, migrant, feminist researcher. I do not claim to speak for them, but I take responsibility for how their insights are shared and the ethical implications of doing so.

I want to highlight that diversity in reading and classroom materials need not necessarily translate into transformative decolonial education (Arshad et al., 2021). During discussions with students, a crucial realisation emerged about this discrepancy between their lived experiences being represented in the classroom's instructional design and resources. A student's testimony, shared in one of the focus group discussions, bolsters this argument. In an advertising class, the teacher used case studies from Asian and Latin American countries, where large fashion houses promote BAME individuals in their advertising banners and commercials. However, for a student from Bangladesh, the site of the 2014 Rana Plaza incident may bring disassociation to the learning objective of promoting inclusivity in brand advertising. Students in the focus groups shared their feelings of confusion and upset while attending lectures on advertising, and disclosed how they were mourning the loss of friends and family in the Rana Plaza incident.

For context, the Rana Plaza incident in Savar, Bangladesh, in April 2014, was one of the deadliest industrial disasters in history. An eight-storey commercial building housing multiple garment factories producing clothing for global brands collapsed due to structural cracks. Over 1130 people were killed and more than 2500 injured (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2024). The major fashion houses had failed to address these problems, despite multiple warnings from engineers and architects (Motlagh, 2014). This tragedy highlighted significant issues in global supply chains, and not least, the fashion industry's exploitation of labour in the garment industry (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2024).

One way to incorporate a transformative decolonial approach would be to emphasise the coloniality of capitalist fashion production, which would reveal the role of fashion houses in contracting sweatshops in countries such as Bangladesh, India, Cambodia, and Vietnam. It



would also make visible the exploitative and appalling working and living conditions of labourers in these regions. Similar relevant examples can be drawn from different courses across the university. That said, diversified reading lists alone do not necessarily address students' sense of unbelonging within the university (Adewumi et al., 2022; Arshad et al., 2021). This is where learning developers, librarians, and lecturers can play a crucial role. By embedding critical decolonial perspectives into curriculum design, resource selection, and classroom dialogue, they can foster a deeper critical consciousness. These colleagues are well-positioned to influence teaching practices in ways that challenge dominant narratives and create more inclusive, reflective learning environments that resonate with students lived experiences.

Findings from the focus groups informed my approach to developing a race-inclusive curriculum framework, which is now embedded as part of the university's Teaching Quality Enhancement (TQE) function in course planning and revalidations.

### ***Engaging leadership in dialogue***

The next step was to present the outcomes of these initial findings in senior spaces. Even though the majority of the university senior executives supported this initiative, I encountered significant resistance and discomfort when presenting them in middle level management spaces. As a Brown woman sharing these insights, I faced significant pressure to raise awareness about the need for recognition of the racial trauma and exclusionary experiences of BAME communities within the mid-to-senior levels, where decisions regarding the deployment of resources such as staff engagement and workload are taken.

This preliminary mapping of the university system to understand the length, breadth, and scope of engagement on decolonising work helped me identify existing structures and processes within the university as entry points to mobilise for embedding sustainable efforts in decolonising the curriculum, research, and practice. I developed an institutional action plan, guided by insights from the systems mapping and focus group discussions, as well as the university vision statement that guided the strategy. The need for an action plan emerged to give strategic direction to the institutional commitment to collectively own this work with shared responsibility and accountability. The action plan brought cohesion to the collective endeavour to create equitable, diverse, and inclusive learning and development experience,



guided by FST principles four and five: selecting appropriate methodologies and undertaking action that promotes plurally desirable and sustainable change.

The action plan commenced with a critical project focused on the university's self-reflection regarding its own connections to colonialism and empire in the colonisation of the Global South. Scholars argue that universities are not neutral sites; they are crucibles of Eurocentrism and, in many ways, contribute to the destruction of subaltern knowledge systems (Enslin & Hedge, 2024; Gopal, 2021). This self-reflection plays a crucial role in comprehending the historical narrative of this university.

### ***Creating spaces for dialogues on whiteness***

The next process in the institutional plan was to create spaces for conversations on whiteness, how whiteness manifests in educational spaces, and its impact on knowledge production, design, and delivery. The most challenging part of this action was the agreement and acceptance of conducting what I called, 'Challenging Whiteness Workshop' (CWW). These workshops are usually divided into four sessions, delivered over one or two days, depending on staff availability. The four sessions are designed to facilitate conversations and learning on colonialism and its links with racism; how coloniality structures society, sustains social disadvantage, and its particular iterations within education; and how whiteness is made invisible/visible in our work as course leaders, lecturers, and administrators.

The primary objective of the workshops is to encourage a collective solidarity and deeper understanding of intersecting forms of violence that BAME communities face every day (Lugones, 2003). They also aim to foster effective allyship and nurture communities of critical consciousness (Madlingozi, 2023), referring to groups that collectively develop critical understanding of social, political, and economic inequalities, enabling them to recognise and challenge oppressive systems. Finally, the workshops aim to develop a shared understanding of decolonising and its situated context within the university's specific area of focus.

Initially, my proposed workshops were met with some resistance by a section of staff. To address this resistance, I adopted FST principle four—selecting appropriate methodologies—to strategically redesign the workshops in a way that would still speak to the issue of whiteness and racism, but in ways that are tailored to the specifics of the schools. For example, CWW for Law and Social Sciences was designed around self-reflexivity and



positionality of participants in interrogating whiteness, while CWW in Psychology and Community Health involved learning-based activities to encourage staff to interrogate the role of whiteness, colonialism, and capitalism in social infrastructures.

In workshops where participants have not previously engaged with decolonisation, I curate content that focuses on evidence-based studies on racism in the academy; its intersecting links to racial awarding gaps; and how anti-racism work relates to equality, diversity, and inclusivity. For the CWW that I facilitated for the Schools of Business and Engineering, the workshop was designed in ways that integrated participatory reflective exercises, inviting participants to create diverse ways to embed decolonial thinking within course design, delivery, resource materials, and end assessments. CWW in Business School was developed around issues of colonialism and racism in the global trade and business, complemented by available data on race-based inequalities in business sectors. CWW in Engineering and Architecture was focused on racism in engineering fields and how whiteness shows up in various engineering and architecture projects.

Within the content of CWW, I engage in discussions surrounding colonial violence and the neo-colonial structures of educational institutions that perpetuate systemic racism. These workshops aim to initiate dialogues that foster a collective understanding of decolonisation. However, they often represent some of the most challenging and contentious environments I have encountered, as my positionality as a Brown woman and migrant academic is made hyper visible. In certain contexts, the dominance of whiteness within these environments obscures the realities of racism experienced at the university and dismisses the lived experiences of structural violence shared by BAME colleagues (Ahmed, 2012).

To address these challenges and mitigate the risks of racial trauma among BAME participants, the planning and design of these sessions have been an ongoing learning process for me. Some workshops are structured as voluntary sessions for BAME colleagues, while others incorporate group exercises that allow participants to share their experiences in a safe space, distinct from the broader audience. Additionally, a Black or Brown counsellor is made available in a separate room, providing access to individual and group therapy for BAME colleagues.



### ***Applying FST in designing the workshops***

The CWW workshops are designed around FST principles that prioritise marginalised voices, particularly those of BAME women and LGBTQ+ identifying people. These sessions encourage participants to reform curriculum practices and frameworks that foster sustainable social change and improve student outcomes. Applying FST in designing these workshops has helped to encourage staff groups to reimagine curriculum and pedagogical designs and to foster an equitable, diverse, and inclusive learning and development environment.

Following the CWW are critical pedagogy (CP) workshops, to which staff teams are invited after attending two to three sessions on decolonising. The rationale behind facilitating CP workshops after CWW is to ensure staff groups are first exposed to and aware of the ideas, discourses, and debates on racism and whiteness in the academy, reflecting the FST commitment to analysing how intersecting systems of power shape educational spaces, and are willing to decolonise their course design, delivery, materials, and assessments.

CWW workshops thus create spaces for self-reflection and awareness of how colonialism, racism, whiteness, misogyny, and sexism structure academic environments, consistent with FST's focus on gendered and intersectional power relations, while CP workshops build on these foundations by challenging traditional ways of knowledge creation and dissemination. Together, these approaches guide staff in critically engaging with their own practices and in developing inclusive, socially responsive curricula.

These workshops have helped participants to rethink and reimagine course design and delivery. One academic from the Law division, who attended both the CWW and CP workshop, shared their understanding and positionality as a white academic teaching law, especially the 'Stop and Search' powers of the UK police that disproportionately affect Black people (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010). They fed back that attending both sets of workshops has challenged their traditional approach to their teaching law as though law was neutral, without incorporation of alternative legal approaches to the Western model, nor reflecting on how Western law has been used to subjugate and oppress colonised peoples. The workshops provoked this lecturer to reflect on the coloniality of Western law education, and its instrumental role in subjugating colonised peoples. This academic was motivated to redesign their course materials and content to include critical analyses of case studies of legislative measures that sustained and reproduced racism, and which disproportionately affected Black



and Brown people. Their new awareness of the coloniality of contemporary Western law and their commitment to decolonising law as an ongoing process aligns with the objectives of both workshops I delivered.

In both CWW and CP workshops, I incorporate the decolonial frameworks of Freire (1970) and Collins (2000), depending on the area of focus. In facilitating reflective exercises and conversations, I engage with Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), exploring the intrinsic relationship between social class and knowledge production, and the hegemonic role of universities in perpetuating coloniality and the oppression of racialised minorities in our society.

I turn to Collins' (2000) work on Black feminist epistemology to guide my content design for these critical pedagogic sessions. In her seminal work, Collins (2000, pp. 251–271) highlights four dimensions that are crucial to understanding the intersection of lived realities of Black women with knowledge production. They are: (a) the importance of lived experiences in shaping realities and identities; (b) dialogue over adversarial debates to assess knowledge claims; (c) by centring lived experiences and dialogue, knowledge is built around ethics of caring; and finally (d) self-accountability. The main objective of these critical reflective sessions is to bridge the personal and professional lives of participants who want to embed decoloniality in their everyday roles, as active members of society and in their professional roles as academics. As argued by Collins (2000), knowledge is inherently built upon lived experiences; hence, assessments of knowledge are both personal and political and have implications for how it is created, disseminated, and assessed in university settings.

### ***Embedding of decolonising in existing systems***

After four years of undertaking the ongoing action research on decolonising the curriculum, pedagogy, and practice, what resulted from the experiences was a learning document that informed the systemic embedding of this work in existing processes in the university. I referred to already existing regulatory frameworks that universities must report on, such as the Office for Students (2018) that mandated universities to share an Access and Participation Plan to show what English universities are doing to reduce racial awarding gaps and leaned on them to make a case for decolonising to be included in processes. I understand that this strategy could potentially institutionalise performative decolonisation (Ahmed, 2012).

However, given the structural restrictions and limits of university-based educational settings



in the UK, taking this approach was a strategic decision guided by the FST principle of undertaking research that promoted plurally desirable and sustainable social change.

Having identified the mandatory quality checks that academics must incorporate in their courses, the regulatory framework provided a means to motivate even those who were reluctant to this work and initiate fundamental unlearning. I was supported in the work of embedding decolonising with assistance from teams placed in these regulatory structures of the university, such as the Teaching Quality Enhancement team, Race Equality Charter team, Access and Participation Plan of the university, and teams that support academic development in teaching and practice. Course teams are now required to share how they are embedding the lessons and learning from their engagement with decolonising. The impact is measured from inclusive recruitment practices, student engagement in classrooms, diversified course curricula, and finally the reduction of racial awarding gaps.

Invoking the fifth FST principle of undertaking research/action that promotes plurally desirable and sustainable social change, I aimed to implement actions that foster sustainable transformation, guiding the university from a non-racist position to an active anti-racist one, and integrating a decolonial approach to the knowledge they produce and disseminate. Applying this principle meant diversifying the capacity of teams in the regulatory frameworks and academic development to build a collective understanding of decoloniality; the ongoing decolonising of HEI teaching and learning practices, working with the SU to strengthen student engagement in anti-racism work; and finally influencing policy changes at senior levels to ensure long-term sustainability of this work.

A key outcome of this work has been the gradual yet sustained institutional recognition of intersectionality, not only as a theoretical lens but as a practical imperative. Drawing on Collins' (2000), Crenshaw's (1989), and Lugones' (2003) insights, I ensured that the workshops, focus groups, and policy engagement processes were designed to attend to how race, gender, class, and migration status intersect in shaping the lived realities of students and staff, which is also reflected in applying FST principle one in adopting a gender-sensitive approach. For example, in the CWW, BAME voices, particularly women and LGBTQ+ identifying people, were prioritised not just as participants but as knowledge-holders whose lived experiences informed the structure and content of the sessions. Content in CWW includes insights from focus group discussions with BAME students and staff that I did earlier, combined with



existing data on the pay and career progression of LGBTQ+ identifying people, Black, and Brown women of colour, revealing significant systemic and structural barriers that are not just racialised but also gendered (Abdelaal, 2025). These elements are crucial for understanding how whiteness manifests within institutional environments and for informing policy processes aimed at facilitating change. In response to these insights, the organisational development team is creating a leadership pipeline specifically targeted at LGBTQ+ identifying people, Black, and Brown women within the university. This initiative includes mentorship programmes, leadership shadowing opportunities, and impact assessments focused on addressing gender and racial disparities in pay, promotion, and representation of LGBTQ+ identifying people and BAME staff in leadership.

These intersectional insights were then used to reform institutional processes, such as course revalidations through the racial justice framework embedded in TQE, so they are no longer generic, but responsive to specific forms of structural disadvantage. The inclusion of mental health support (such as counsellors for BAME participants) was also a practical outcome rooted in intersectional praxis, recognising how racial trauma is compounded by gendered and migratory precarity. FST, particularly its fourth and fifth principles—selecting appropriate methodologies and undertaking action that promotes plurally desirable social and sustainable change—helped me map the institutional system, identify leverage points, and push for interventions that centre relationality, equity, and the transformation of oppressive structures. As a result, intersectionality has now been embedded into the university's TQE processes, not as a buzzword, but as a criterion for assessing inclusivity in curriculum design, staff development, and student experience. These are concrete institutional outcomes that reflect both the application and impact of an intersectional, feminist systems-based approach.

## **Challenges and limits to decolonising the university**

Decolonising in institutional settings comes with its own unique challenges. While delivering this work as the lead, my learning curve has shown how micro and macro spaces within and around universities are sites of struggle. Besides this, the current political climate of the UK remains tethered to a past when British imperial reach extended to three-fourths of the world and Britain ruled the waves, a nostalgia-shrouded past that markedly informs the lives of Black and Brown people, as evidenced in the Windrush scandal, Grenfell Tower fire, and the 2016 Brexit vote that saw mobilisations on Britain securing its borders (Browne, 2021; Slaven,



2022; Tyler et al., 2024). Immigration controls are increasingly forcing universities to monitor student progress, physical or virtual engagement with their studies, and reporting any changes or absences to the Home Office (Dickinson, 2025).

Despite the university's stated commitment to decolonising the teaching and learning environment, securing buy-in from some staff has presented challenges; over the last three years, hostility towards the university's decolonising vision has heightened, with people in positions of power dismissing the need for and introduction of race equality initiatives within universities. Bhopal (2020) highlights the institutional resistance to change, which often manifests as a lack of commitment and bureaucratic obstacles to change.

A pedagogic approach I apply is to locate my positionality in decolonising and embrace vulnerability. My politics of engaging in decolonising involves an ongoing self-critique of institutionalising a political movement. I encountered deeper existential questions, mainly whether universities can be decolonised at all? Scholars have conducted substantive research on the various challenges encountered in decolonising a university. Rollock (2021) and Bhopal (2020) both highlight the underrepresentation of BAME in leadership roles within universities—in 2024, only 2 out of 164 vice-chancellors of UK universities were BAME (Awolowo, 2024). The absence of their voices at university decision-making tables means that the sector misses vital opportunities to learn about the constraints to university curriculum changes.

Moghli and Kadiwal (2021) highlight the colonial roots of many disciplines, which pose significant challenges for decolonisation initiatives, while Bhabra et al. (2018) highlight the impossibility of transforming the status quo as change-resistant universities continue to reproduce colonial knowledge frameworks. I share the views of these researchers; my experiences of leading decolonising initiatives at a UK university lend validity to these conclusions. I had to sit with the discomfort of accepting that perhaps what I refer to as decolonial work does not translate into the ultimate aims of the movement itself. However, as someone appointed to engage with this work in a professional capacity, I strategised ways that would speak very closely to the decolonial aims of the movement.

For educators and learning developers, embracing this kind of vulnerability is both essential and crucial. Their roles position them at the heart of teaching practices, curriculum design, and student engagement. By acknowledging their own positionalities and engaging critically



with the discomfort that comes with decolonising work, they can foster more inclusive pedagogical teaching and learning environments. This would involve not just adding BAME authors to the reading list but also questioning dominant epistemologies and modelling reflexivity and openness that is critical for transformative change. Learning developers can act as bridges between institutional frameworks and critical pedagogies, advocating for practices that resist tokenistic reform and instead aim for meaningful, systemic shifts in knowledge production and learning.

Further, the challenges of navigating a sometimes-hostile environment, as illustrated in this paper, have often obscured the gendered and intersectional dimensions of this work, leading to a lack of meaningful outcomes in these areas despite my intentions. In my own feminist practice, I acknowledge this limitation as a critical one, as it reflects difficulties to integrate decolonial approaches within existing neo-liberal structures and systems.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper illustrates the transformative potential of using feminist systems thinking as a method within the context of decolonising the university. This paper draws from my experiences of using FST as a foundational method, guided by postcolonial and decolonial thought, to design sustainable strategies aimed at building inclusive and accessible curriculum, pedagogies, teaching and learning practices. This study offers possible ways to effectively question and break down systemic, structural, visible, and invisible forms of oppression in university curricula by combining and drawing from postcolonial and decolonial work. Key interventions, such as challenging whiteness sessions and critical pedagogy sessions, illustrate how learning developers and educators can foster a bridging of personal and professional aspects in academic engagement with decolonisation. By taking a gender-sensitive approach and centring the voices of the most marginalised, this paper enhances the academic discourse on engaging with decolonising in sustainable ways that promise long-term societal changes.

Findings from this ongoing research reaffirm that decolonisation is not an end activity but an ongoing process that necessitates sustained commitment and accountability at individual and institutional levels (Gopal, 2021; Mignolo, 2011). Integration of FST encourages reflexivity, enabling dialogues to navigate the complexities of power dynamics and resistance. Ultimately,



this paper enhances the knowledge of how universities, even with their colonial, imperial pasts, can actively participate in redressing historical injustices and fostering social justice.

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