

# **Decolonizing academia at LSE: ‘Global South’ student’s experience**

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## **Project title/research question:**

How do MSc students who identify as from the 'Global South' in Health and International Development programme perceive and experience Development Studies at the LSE?

## **Motivation**

As a Global South student pursuing a masters in International Development programme at the LSE, I am interested in how Global South students perceive Development Studies, specifically given their differences in background and lived experiences in contrast to their Global North peers. Understanding these nuanced experiences and perceptions of Global South students is essential as Global South students and staff represent a minority of the population in the programme. Moreover, as the focus of the subject is of the Global South, critical inquiry is necessary to interrogate the learning environment at LSE in light of the recent decolonizing movement to create a more conducive environment for all.

## **Literature Review**

The decolonizing academia movement has recently gained traction in the UK, most prominently since the Rhodes Must Fall movement, which originated in the University of Cape Town in 2015, questioning the centrality of white voices and eurocentrism in academia (Charles, 2019). Within the Department of International Development at the LSE, calls for decolonizing the curriculum mirrors a greater need to uncomfortably confront the colonial roots of this discipline and the neocolonialism of contemporary development projects. Freire’s (1970) work in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* demonstrates not only the need to confront these power hegemonies but to *liberate* people from it. Yet, Freire’s (1970) skepticism about liberation led by oppressors also mirrors the experiences of Global South students in the Department today. Moreover, his conceptualization of “dehumanizing” the student within the academic sphere can extend its analysis to how students from the Global South understand and relate to their identities in the classroom.

The space within higher education and academia is merely a microcosm of the greater demands by members of the Global South and BAME communities and their calls for greater social transformation and the radical shifting of power hierarchies (Le Grange, 2016; Heleta, 2016; Luckett and Shay, 2017). Without such an approach, the Development studies field will lack in critical analyses required to productively engage with the Global South and rectify the oppressing roots of the discipline.

## **Methodology**

This research conducted two focus group discussions and one 1-2-1 interview via Zoom, averaging about 90 minutes each with seven students, identifying as one male and six females, who self-identified as from the Global South in MSc in Health and International Development track within the International Development Department at LSE. This research defines the Global

South synonymously with people of color from the Global South and Global North with White. They were asked to reflect on their perceptions of Development studies at the LSE based on their reading materials, lectures, classroom/zoom interactions with their global north peers. The inclusion criteria for this study included students with a nationality from countries in the Global South, those with dual nationalities (at least one from the Global South), and those born in the Global South but currently hold nationality in the Global North.

## Findings

### *Power Dynamic*

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from this study concerns hierarchy of voices within the Development studies, with the dominant voices being white. Students mentioned that the vast majority of the assigned essential readings were from white scholars, taught by majority-white professors/teaching staff to a majority of Global North white students, which meant that voices from the Global South, including people of color, were drowned out. For example, *participant 2* noted:

*"I am grateful (for education at LSE), but it saddens me to say that so many people are falling through the cracks because so many narratives are perpetuated about where some of us are from because there are so few of us in the room."*

As such, students shared their feelings about the curriculum being catered to Global North students. Therefore, students shared that they felt suppressed not only because of their minority status but also because their Global North peers would speak with the full authority of the lived experiences of the Global South. As such, the participants felt that there was a sense of fetishization of underdevelopment where the concept of Development was seen as needed only in the Global South, not in the Global North. On the other hand, when some participants shared their critical perspectives on specific discussions, their Global North peers and academic staff would not know how to respond to their comments, and thus they felt that their voices were brushed aside and ultimately silenced.

This, therefore, critically integrates decolonizing the academia/curriculum at LSE, specifically when the focus of the discipline is of the Global South. As *participant 2's* comment shows, there is a genuine concern of academic discourses perpetuating a colonial mentality of the Global South due to limited spaces reserved for their voices.

### *Need for inward reflection*

As such, to the participants, reflexivity, and positionality is of central concern. They constantly had to rethink their place within their culture in the Global South and their place within the culture of the Global North. To them, Development studies were not just a degree or a career. Development was their everyday life. To them, Development as *participant 1* puts it:

*"Development, as I've always known, is a messy and very brutal process, there's a lot of blood in it, there is a lot of fear and lot of oppression...most of these have been exposed to us at some point in our daily lives... they've gotten rid of all that defining grievances of various countries and peoples of the Global South, and they are like development is HIV/AIDS programs."*

On the other hand, they also mentioned that their Global North peers might not necessarily have to wrestle with the day-to-day consequences of Development. One example they gave was that their Global North peers could arbitrarily pick and choose any country in the Global South for their academic inquiries. This displays a sense of superiority complex that the Global South students do not necessarily have. They mentioned that they stay in their own lane by focusing on countries they are familiar with historically and emotionally. Therefore, the participants viewed this demand for separation of emotions (subjective) from academic life (objective) at LSE as superficial. Consequently, the participants believed that this objective inquires at LSE, which is catered to Global North students, gives rise to white voices over lived experiences of communities from the Global South.

Furthermore, the participants were genuinely concerned about the types of education they and their Global North peers were receiving at LSE. They believed that university education is a foundation to how the working world continues to manifest itself. As such, one participant mentioned, "If the university is not going the extra mile to break these barriers down, it is not merely enough to pay lip services to decolonize the curriculum/academia" (*Participant 7*).

### *Solidarity*

When participants were asked about their coping mechanisms, they mentioned that they relied on other Global South students with similar backgrounds and experiences for emotional support. One of the popular mechanisms was identifying and communicating with their other Global South peers after seminars on specific topical areas of discussion precisely because they could not contribute because of the power dynamic in the class. Similarly, participants shared that they would socialize with other peers from the Global South via region-specific group chats or outside of the LSE. For example, *Participant 4* comments:

"I just find the ethnics; I go to other persons in the classrooms who are not ethnically ambiguous then vent about the class because I don't feel like I can go to my white peers because I don't want to feel like I was pointing at them, and I don't want to put a burden on them because they just don't understand."

One of the reasons for seeking support from their fellow Global South peers was that they experienced a lack of department support for challenges that arose explicitly because of their identity, i.e., microaggressions, racism, the fetishization of lived experiences. They felt that lack of diversity on the academic staff meant that specific experiences at LSE could not be shared because they came from different backgrounds than their Global North staff/peers. As such, the participants commented that decolonizing academic/curriculum initiatives are dangerously falling in the realm of the rhetoric, i.e., we acknowledge, recognize, but lacking in action.

### *Double Burden*

Likewise, participants shared an assumption that some academic responsibility to explain the lived experiences of Global South challenges fell on the Global South students. This was felt whenever a popular case study region or a country-specific questionnaire appeared. Some of their peers/staff would expect anecdotal evidence of their personal lived experiences. However, when they did share their personal narratives, they felt that their lived experiences were seen as

exotic and fetishized. Moreover, their Global North peers would be surprised when their narratives told positive sides of their lived experiences rather than how it was portrayed in the readings by white people a decade ago. Participants, therefore, shared that decolonizing somehow has become their responsibility and enlightening their Global North peers on top of their academic demands. For example, *Participant 1* comments:

"Sometimes I feel like I'm just holding my classmate's hand and babying them through the decolonial approach."

Moreover, some global north peers would privately message the participants, though some are showing a genuine interest, unaware of the burden of their inquiries on constantly having to explain themselves. Consequently, participants felt that they were mentally exhausted and shut off. This particularly intensified during a specific topical discussion area where white voices overtly dominated the reading materials, lectures, and classrooms.

## **Recommendations**

### **Critical reflexivity for staff and students – departmental level**

1. Preliminary researched-based workshops between academic staff and Global South scholars and/ or global south professional diversity/inclusivity trainers on how to better understand the experiences of Global South students and how best to support them.
2. Establish a researched-based training course for all students on the power dynamics of the classroom setting at the beginning of the first term.
3. Academic staff should encourage Global North students to critically reflect on their positionality within the Global North and their positionality in the global south. I.e., their country's involvement in the underdevelopment of the Global South using inward reflection.
4. Networking events also need to address the power dynamics in the field, i.e., inequity in salaries of international staff versus nationals, top-down approach recruitment (white Global North centered recruitment events), etc.

### **Avenues to address global south students' concerns in the classroom – departmental level**

1. Allocate separate online departmental feedback surveys for Global South students to express concerns/recommendations for their taught courses and the wider LSE community.
2. Provide an exclusive space for Global South students to come together (without staff and Global North students present) to voice concerns and/or recommendations to be relayed to department/and or academic staff.
3. Establish paid Global South peer support liaisons and have them professionally trained to respond and address specific concerns that arise explicitly of having a Global South identity.

### **Avenues to address systematic oppression – school level**

1. Increase funding and efforts towards hiring more Global South staff.
2. Increase scholarships and efforts towards increasing Global South student representation/population.
3. Increase Global South scholars/voices in the reading curriculum.
4. Promote the 'Inclusive Teaching' session by the Eden Center
5. Address the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) representation and retention of the department by establishing an EDI committee with heavy representation by BAME students and staff.
6. Initiate Research Dialogues on these issues that everyone from the Department can attend and contribute.
7. Have an expert on decoloniality and/or critical race studies to audit working and teaching in the department.

### References

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