The decolonisation of the taught postgraduate curriculum in the European Institute

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This research seeks to investigate possible recommendations for the European Institute to further decolonise its taught curriculum. As the European Institute has celebrated its 30th anniversary at the LSE, a critical reflection of the Institute's pursuit to decolonise its curricula is essential to ensure its continued progress. This pursuit is increasingly vital in the Institute, which is grounded in the study of Europe as a region. This region is the seat of colonialism. It, therefore, requires a critical reflection not only on internal affairs in Europe but also on how Europe interacts with the rest of the world – the colonial impact of multiple European countries as colonial powers and the neo-colonial impacts of this legacy today.

Methodology

To explore this issue, I conducted a mixed-methods study: a Qualtrics survey with 55 responses and two focus groups with seven European Institute students to gather quantitative data from the surveys and more detailed qualitative responses through the focus group discussions.

Findings

I. Findings from the surveys:

I.I Awareness of the topic
A surprising finding from the survey responses came from the question asking how familiar the respondents are with the movement to decolonise academic curricula. In response to this question 66.6% of respondents answered that they were either 'not very' or 'not at all' familiar. This finding led to the final recommendation in this report.

I.II Responses on the students' present experience at the LSE
An interesting finding from the survey responses was the range in how they rank the level of decolonisation at the LSE currently (Appendix 1) (100 = completely decolonised 0 = not at all). This shows that some students believe there are many improvements to be made while others feel that the goals have been met. This is exemplified by the finding that overall, 22% of respondents ranked the current standard as less than 25/100 and 17% ranked the current standard as more than 75/100. This raises an interesting question as to how to address the issue of decolonisation, since from these findings it is clear that a 'one-size' solution will not meet all students' expectations and standards. However, it is also important to not overemphasise the importance of 'appealing to the masses' when it comes to an issue as important as decolonising curricula.

I.III Responses to recommendations offered in the survey

The next set of survey questions offer a list of statements containing hypothetical changes which could be made, to which the respondent could answer 'Yes'/'Maybe'/'No' to whether they agree with these statements (Appendix 2; Appendix 3). These questions were helpful in showing the feelings of the cohort, especially in terms of what they view as positive change for the Institute. When analysing the survey data it is clear that there is still some ambiguity in the responses from the survey. For example, for the question 'Do you agree that the curriculum at the European Institute should prioritise a Western point of view?' the answer 'No' was the majority however only by a small margin. However, some questions receive a much more unified response with the majority of respondents agreeing that the removal of Western material all together is not the correct approach. Also, the majority of respondents agree that there should be a broadening of the topics covered. The clearest finding was to the recommendation that students should be allowed to study and discuss events from around the world fairly and evenly to which 0% of respondents answered 'No'.

II. Findings from the focus groups:
The findings from the focus groups show that these Master's students strongly believe that there are steps to be taken to further decolonise the curricula at the European Institute. I thematically analysed my focus group data and was able to see emerging themes in the responses. These included;

- **A shared appreciation for student input in seminars**
- The existing benefits of classroom discussions in seminars was recognised in the survey responses and both focus groups. Participation by students in seminars, offering examples from outside of Europe and applying a unique perspective to discussions was reflected on as a positive move towards decolonisation of application of the curricula.
    - o 'Most of the examples that are given that are non-European or non-Western or not from the global north are brought by students'.
    - o 'Students in general are quite enthusiastic to bring it up'

- **The need for a change in the positioning of Europe; from being the focus to being something which is critically analysed**
- The importance of reflecting on the role of Europe's colonial past and neo-colonial present across the globe was emphasised in both focus groups. Respondents emphasised that including a critical discussion of the Global South and colonial theory in core modules is vital in order to ensure that all students can graduate from the LSE with the ability to apply this analysis.
    - o '[In the European Institute] we should be focusing on Europe as the seat of colonialism'
    - o 'If you want to talk about Europe then you need to actually talk about Europe and not just talk about the EU and case studies on Europe. You can't talk about Europe without talking about colonization'
- This theme was also raised when discussing the importance of placing the onus on teaching staff to provide case study examples of countries outside of Europe and

readings with research on these. This discussion emphasised the importance of encouraging the application of colonial theory throughout teaching.

- o 'I think all of our essential courses need to have more non-European, non-Eurocentric perspectives in them that we can then use across our other modules. Kind of like a trickle effect'
- o 'It's not necessary to remove content that's from a Western perspective, but it's important to limit it and to criticize it when it's there.'
- o 'It seems like decolonization is often driven by students, and so it really should be the responsibility of the professors' 'I think it's really important that they themselves continue learning and are trained on decolonisation.'

- **The lack of diversity in teaching staff**
- This was something reflected upon in both focus groups and something which multiple respondents found troubling, especially in the context of the discussion of how to decolonise the curricula at the European Institute. This made respondents from each focus group agree that a move to a more diverse teaching staff from institutions outside of Europe is an important step for the Institute to take.

Recommendations

I. Reflect on the colonial influence of Europe across the world rather than solely focusing on Europe in core modules.

An interesting insight given in the focus groups was the trickle-down impact that a broader range of case studies from outside Europe and application of colonial theory to discussions would have. This follows the logic that by only including European examples in core modules and their reading lists, this limits the ability for students to branch outside of this in independent study/dissertation work due to limited accessibility and time for wider reading. This would then encourage students to pursue these case studies outside Europe and/or the application of colonial theory in other aspects of their work. This would then influence their independent projects and dissertation.

II. Encouraging teaching staff to lead and engage in existing classroom discussions and integrate literature and case studies from the Global South into their teaching.

A recommendation offered in the focus group was for staff to consider introducing a requirement for the students to include reference to examples from outside the EU in their classroom presentations. This would be a simple way to ensure the discussion of these cases without relying on the willingness of students to do so. A greater onus should be placed on the teaching staff to facilitate these conversations and encourage a de-colonial application to topics covered by highlighting the importance of this colonial framework of analysis to students in order to encourage them to pursue this further in coursework or further readings. A recommendation from the focus group discussion was that these further readings should come from sources beyond academic journals, to tackle issues of platforming faced by scholars from the Global South. For this approach to be adopted by staff, they themselves must be equipped with all necessary tools to apply this analysis to the topics they teach to be able to lead and engage in this student-led application of knowledge (Liyanage, 2020).

III. Hiring staff with fields of expertise including colonial theory, the Global South as well as guest speakers from institutions in the Global South.

I acknowledge that the recommendation to hire staff cannot be immediately introduced However, this is a long-term goal which should be a future aspiration of the European Institute. The benefits from having a more inclusive body of staff from a wider range of institutions was reflected upon in both focus groups, survey responses and is supported by existing literature (Hayes, Luckett and Misiaszek, 2021). This broader expertise would provide students a space to openly discuss topics and research questions most appealing to them. The outcome of this may be long term but it will enrich both the faculty of the European Institute and the opportunities offered to its students and research staff allowing for 'meaningful recognition' of a range of perspectives (Begum and Saini, 2018).

III.I Training offered to faculty

It is important to add, as mentioned during the LSE's roundtable discussion of decolonising curricula in 2020 (Colven, 2020), that the onus of teaching colonial theory should not only fall to those who are experts but should instead be the responsibility of all staff. This is something which was reflected on by a respondent in the focus groups who said that all professors and teachers should be trained in the application of these theories in order to facilitate discussions themselves. A department-wide course for faculty would allow them increased confidence/encouragement to teach this, while also enriching learning for students. Making this a mandatory course for all teaching staff might be difficult to implement; however, I believe that offering this to teaching staff as an optional training course would be a feasible option to introduce this recommendation.

IV. Highlight the goal of decolonising curricula as a university

I believe that highlighting this endeavour to decolonise curricula in the LSE 2030 strategy will put attention on this goal and increase its likelihood of having an impact throughout the institution. Featuring this goal as part of the strategy will also highlight the importance of this goal and the priority that this should have.

V. Support for the Eden Centre to continue its 'Thinking about Decolonising' seminar series

'Thinking about Decolonising' was a seminar series hosted by the Eden Centre from November 2019 until July 2020, which related to the importance of decolonisation specifically at the LSE. If the LSE increased its support of this seminar series it would enable the Eden Centre to continue this series and organise seminars with influential speakers. It would also be useful if these seminars were advertised amongst university staff and students. This recommendation relates to my survey findings which showed a lack of awareness of the topic of decolonisation. Therefore, this would have a positive impact allowing students and staff at the LSE to continue to get access to current information, debates and ideas on the topic of decolonising in an academic context.

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