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# Diversifying, decentering and decolonising academic libraries

## Background to the themed issue

Academic libraries are often perceived as neutral spaces at the heart of the university, but in the global North, universities themselves are increasingly being recognised as institutions deeply embedded within colonial and power structures. Arguably therefore it is difficult to be truly neutral in such environments, so what does this actually mean for academic libraries? Recently, the terms "decolonization," "decentering," and "diversification" have emerged as critical lenses through which to examine and challenge these structures, aiming to create more inclusive and equitable library spaces and services. This special themed issue of *New Review of Academic Librarianship* has been produced in order to explore some of the current practices through these critical lenses and to share good practices in these areas through a series of research papers and case studies.

The idea of the themed issue came about through a 2022 editorial board discussion on current academic library practices in and around decolonisation and diversification. It was acknowledged that many libraries around the world were adopting more critical approaches to librarianship and consequently many different decolonisation and diversification initiatives were emerging and being shared through various scholarly and discussion platforms. However, during the editorial board meeting, the question was asked about how such initiatives were valued and how the evidence of their impact was being demonstrated? To this end, it was decided that the time is right for *New Review of Academic Librarianship* to contribute to the debate through a themed issue, as the general decolonisation, decentering and diversification themes had not really been areas that the journal had explored before, and we hope that this themed issue goes some way to redress this.

A call for abstracts dealing with demonstrable initiatives and case studies was circulated in early 2023, to which there were 27 responses from academic library practitioners from 6 different countries. Of these 19 were accepted and commissioned as full papers, and eventually, after multiple rounds of peer review, 10 have been submitted for publication in the themed issue. Unfortunately, none of the initially accepted abstracts from academic library colleagues in the global South were progressed adequately enough to make the final issue, and the end result is a selection of papers from libraries in the UK, U.S.A, Australia and New Zealand. Having said this, all the papers and case studies contained in the themed issue represent decolonisation, decentering and diversification initiatives from academic libraries situated in the global North, where perhaps it could be argued that the need for such work is more pressing.

## Introduction

The academy itself plays a substantial role with regard to social justice, both in reflecting and mitigating against inequalities and re-producing them (Arday & Mirza, 2018). With academic libraries, arguably in a strong and influential position within the academy, it is highly appropriate that they are involved in this social justice work. The notions and concepts of diversifying, decentering and decolonising are ways in which academic libraries can achieve this. This whole area of work involves a critical examination of the historical and ongoing impact of colonialism on academic library collections, services, and practices. It entails

recognising the Western bias inherent in many academic library systems and actively working to dismantle it. This process involves challenging the canon, diversifying collections, and centering indigenous and marginalized voices within library systems and collections. Jess Crilly's literature review on diversifying, decentering and decolonising sets the themed issue up through presenting the multiple theoretical perspectives through which critical librarianship actions are progressing this social justice activity. The review covers numerous case studies of critically informed action, or praxis across a variety of academic library functional areas and institutional settings. The review makes the diversity work that is taking place in academic libraries more visible and includes discussion around the embedding of critical librarianship and the ever growing discourse of decolonisation. This includes themes such as decentering neutrality, decentering diversity, anti-racism, decentering whiteness and centering critical race theory.

### **Critical collection analysis and incorporating indigenous knowledge**

Following on from Crilly's literature review are a selection of papers which focus on areas of academic library collections. Invariably, such work involves examining library holdings to identify gaps and biases in representation. This includes assessing the proportion of works by authors from marginalized groups, the geographic focus of collections, and the dominant narratives presented. The paper *Decolonising and diversifying the Library through student partnerships* by Halliday, Courage, Matthews and Globerson looks at the value and impact of different decolonisation initiatives deployed at the University of Warwick Library, in the UK. This includes student driven initiatives around critical collection analysis and diversification of collections and collection development.

In their paper *A methodology for or surveying indigenous collections at an Australian academic library* Mocatta, Stoker and Mackintosh present the findings and impact of a research project at the University of Sydney's Library which piloted a methodology to survey its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural collections in order to enhance and develop metadata to ensure that culturally sensitive collections and material can be identified and protected. Several of the other featured papers include collection level decolonisation and diversification and indigenous knowledge initiatives including those by Ball and Fuchs, where the diversification of their collections at St John's University has been incorporated into a longitudinal planning period for developing inclusive and anti-racist library services. This includes working with students to make changes to relating to equity, diversity and inclusion to their collections and collections policies.

### **Contributing to curriculum decolonisation**

One of the starting points for library decolonisation work is its alignment to more general curriculum decolonisation and several of the themed issue papers address different ways in which this has been achieved. Such activity involves working with faculty to decolonize curricula and ensure that library resources support this process. This can include creating curated collections and reading lists, such as the project presented in the paper *The Library and beyond: decolonization as a student/academic co-created project* by Hopkins, Traczykowski, Baksh, Huda, Islam and Reyes. In this article activities around critical analysis of collections and reading lists led by the library and faculty at Aston University result in the development of a framework for decolonising reading lists as part of the wider curriculum decolonisation work. Students from under-represented groups were involved in the project and indeed have co-authored the paper featured in the themed issue.

Elsewhere other library driven curriculum decolonisation initiatives are presented around using library instruction and information literacy as a vehicle for decolonisation. In the paper *Information literacy through the lens of epistemic justice: centering the missing and unheard voices of marginalized groups*, Xu showcases the ways through which librarians can help students interrogate structural issues in knowledge creation. Through using library instructional opportunities, Xu shares how students can be introduced to inequalities within higher education library systems and shares how through her project, students came to appreciate different forms of knowledge and recognized their own agency in centering the voices of marginalized groups.

Towilson's paper *Decolonising DMU: Reflections on Changes, Challenges and Impact with an Eye toward the Future* discusses the experiences of working together to create an anti-racist institution at De Montfort University. Towilson reflects on the library's involvement in a university wide, holistic initiative to extend anti-racist work across the structure and composition of the institution, moving away from a sole focus on the curriculum. The Library at De Montfort has played a core role in working with staff and students to gain better representation in library collections, facilitating library work experience to enhance staff and professional diversity, working with academics to decolonise reading lists, enabling changes in pedagogical practice and to raise awareness of issues and the lived experience of the diverse student population.

### **Shifting the power dynamic**

Decentering and diversifying, whilst central to this themed issue are contested practices. Whilst decolonisation is described by Bhabra et al. (2018) as both a discourse and a praxis, with distinctive features, in which colonialism, empire and racism are the empirical and discursive objects of study, the concepts of decentering and diversifying have been criticised within the library and information sector, for being performative, and evading critical questions of race (Brown et al., 2018, Brown et al., 2021) Decentering can involve shifting away from a Western or Eurocentric worldview and creating a more inclusive and equitable library environment. Several papers in the themed issue demonstrate the impact and value of this work and hopefully the work presented does not appear performative, as per the criticism of decentering and diversity work.

Blake, Huatahi, McDonald, Roberts and Tairi present their paper *Ko te tangata (for the People): The challenge of indigenizing libraries in Aotearoa*. Here the authors, representative of a range of New Zealand/Aotearoa universities present case studies on the different stages about how together New Zealand/Aotearoa university libraries are achieving indigenization. This includes themes of recruitment and retention of Māori staff, the commitment of senior leaders to indigenization and allyship, and the active promotion of te reo Māori (Māori language) and tikanga Māori (Māori convention, practice, protocols)

Through completely different types of activity, decentering and power dynamic shift is achieved and demonstrated in the papers already mentioned by Hopkin et al. and Halliday et al. and Towilson. A further example can be found in the paper by Katz and Deckman, in their case study: *Lehmann College - Adapting for Anti-Racism: Collaboratively Diversifying Faculty Open Professional Development*. In this paper they demonstrate how their librarians are uniquely positioned to influence anti-racist culture change in universities through the development of Open Educational Resources and share their experiences of developing and

delivering *Open for Anti-Racism faculty workshops* through their Learning Management System

## **Building Inclusive Communities**

A final sub-theme of the themed issue is that of inclusive environments and communities. Diversification involves creating a library environment that reflects the diversity of its community, both staff and students. It entails expanding the range of voices, perspectives, and experiences represented in library collections, services, and staff. This process also involves actively recruiting and supporting staff from diverse backgrounds, and creating inclusive spaces that welcome all users. It is very pleasing to see that a number of the papers featured in this themed issue involved collaboration with students and focus on the importance of the student voice within the case studies presented. For example, user-centered design is key to this area of building inclusive communities, and the papers from Hopkins et al. and Halliday et al. demonstrate effective initiatives for achieving inclusive environments and practices through user-centered design and co-creation.

However, more specifically, in their article *Engaging to empower: honoring student sentiment and voices to implement a holistic approach to creating an inclusive and anti-racist library*, Ball and Fuchs focus on a multiyear approach implemented by their university library to become more inclusive and anti-racist in response to students' voices. Their holistic approach involves creative, practical, and manageable actions that enable academic libraries to become more closely attuned to the needs of students. They discuss how making changes relating to equity, diversity and inclusion regarding policies, services, and collections, library practices and environments can be significantly altered, resulting in a more transparent commitment to breaking down the structural barriers of racism. Similarly the final paper in the themed issue by Farrier, presents a piece of research into an anti-racist community of practice at a UK academic library. The paper explores the impact of a grass-roots Anti-Racist Community of Practice on organizational culture and how much it influenced the decision-making practices of the library's Senior Management Team. In particular, the paper reports on how themes and issues of structural and institutional racism, privilege, power tensions, the impact of whiteness, and the problem of a policy-led approach to increasing diversity can hinder decentering and diversity initiatives.

## **Conclusion**

The over-arching themes of diversifying, decentering, and decolonizing academic libraries are complex and ongoing areas that require sustained discussion, commitment and collaboration. The research papers and case studies contained within this themed issue present just a small selection of initiatives and activities that have taken place and continue to take place in this field. The purpose of the themed issue was to present such a selection of activities and initiative, not just reporting upon what has been implemented, but to start to give some consideration to the value and impact such activity has on creating and contributing to inclusive academic library environments. Hopefully this has been achieved, and by reading about the successes and subsequent impact that these actions and initiatives have had will continue to motivate and inspire academic librarians to continue this very important work.

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