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Abstract

Background

Decolonisation is a complex term reflected in the contention surrounding its definition. The UK university has faced increasing calls to decolonise and in turn examine its own entrenched coloniality. Part of the institution, the academic library has faced similar pressures to decolonise, notably regarding learning and teaching.

Aims

This study aimed to investigate how decolonisation is understood and perceived among academic librarians to gain insight into how the academic library can best support the decolonisation of learning and teaching at UK universities.

Methods

The research took an inductive approach. Purposive sampling was used to recruit nine librarians from eight UK university libraries for semi-structured interviews. The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis which provided insight into decolonisation practice in UK academic libraries.

Results

There is a clear willingness among librarians to actively contribute to decolonisation work at their respective institutions. This proactiveness is essential and where decolonising work is codified in strategy, a dedicated role or allocated time and resources, these initiatives are arguably more effective. This is particularly the case when coupled with strong library leadership and institutional support.

Conclusion

Decolonising learning and teaching can take many guises. Librarians must be proactive in their approach and willing to do the work. When guided by strong library leadership and with the support of the institution, these librarian activists are arguably best placed to support the decolonisation of the curriculum given their proximity to resources, academics and students. It is questionable, however, whether a decolonised curriculum alone constitutes success.

Introduction

Background

Decolonisation is a complex and multifaceted term with numerous interpretations and definitions. Tuck and Yang (2012) perhaps express it most succinctly as "the repatriation of Indigenous land and life" (p.1). In the context of UK higher education, there have been increasing calls to "decolonise the university" with student-led campaigns including 'Rhodes Must Fall Oxford' or the National Union of Students' (NUS) 'Why is my curriculum white?' leading the way (Bhambra, et. al., 2018; Chaudhuri, 2016). These UK student-led movements are reflective of a broader rise in student activism across the globe and the Rhodes Must Fall Movement in particular is significant in the UK as it represented a student-led attempt for the painful legacy of British coloniality to be acknowledged and actively addressed. The campaign was arguably successful in bringing the topic of decolonisation to the forefront of public consciousness yet fell victim to widespread attempts by the British media to control the narrative and thus avoid discussing decolonisation at all (Gebrial, 2018). Nevertheless, it remains a key indicator of the general mood on UK higher education campuses at the time, paving the way for similar movements across the country.

Beyond this wider movement, the academic library has come under increasing scrutiny to both actively contribute to the decolonisation of learning and teaching and in turn examine its own entrenched coloniality. This embeddedness arguably arises from the inherently colonial and Eurocentric origins and values Western higher education systems possess, with UK universities as a by-product of this (Birdi, 2021). Decolonisation cannot occur in a vacuum, however. While the academic library is arguably best placed to lead decolonisation initiatives through its collection policies, reading lists and proximity to academic staff (Appleton, 2020), in some cases, the entrenched coloniality of the institution represents a very real barrier to success (Mbembe, 2016). The extent to which colonialism is embedded in the institution will vary across universities. In some universities and university libraries, there will be proactive staff motivated by a desire to enact positive social change, who, when supported by strong library leadership and with institutional backing, will have been able to make a more significant contribution to decolonising the curriculum. This contrasts with their colleagues at other institutions who perhaps lack this same drive or may be hindered by workload or conflicting strategic priorities. Furthermore, how decolonisation efforts and initiatives are strategically managed is also likely to impact how successful they will be in contributing to decolonising projects. There may be differences across institutions and academic libraries where decolonisation work originates from the library itself, feeds

into university policy or is perhaps in direct response to wider institutional strategy. Arguably, only if the academic library and its parent organisation are strategically aligned in terms of decolonisation, can the library be best utilised to facilitate the decolonisation of learning and teaching.

This small-scale study outlines the need for research into the decolonisation of learning and teaching at UK universities, as well as the role, or potential role, that the academic librarian plays in supporting this practice. Rather than provide recommendations or suggestions of best practice, the authors intend to provide insight into if and how academic librarians are contributing to decolonisation and what factors are conducive to their success. Repeated reference is made to the strong or critical library leader, which, in the context of this study, refers to an assertive and transformational leader willing to be critical in their practice and proactive on decolonising.

Aims and objectives

This study aims to investigate how decolonisation is understood and perceived among academic librarians with a view to gaining insight into if and how academic librarians are contributing to the wider decolonisation of learning and teaching at the UK university, and what factors are conducive to this success. The study therefore sets out to engage with the following objectives:

- Examine perceptions and understanding of decolonisation among academic librarians
- Investigate how academic libraries impact the decolonisation of learning and teaching at UK universities
- Investigate how decolonisation is strategically managed within the academic library and in relation to UK universities

Literature review

What is decolonisation?

Alvares and Faruqui (2012) broadly define decolonisation as the "quest for non-eurocentric paradigms [in higher education]" (p.13), a definition also used by Appleton (2020) in his chapter on the role of critical library leadership in managing decolonisation. A narrower interpretation of decolonisation is offered by Tuck and Yang (2012) as "the repatriation of Indigenous land and life" (p.1). Charles presents a much wider interpretation encompassing the intersection of "otherness" among students in a higher education setting (Charles, 2019).

Bhambra, et. al. (2018) point to the multifaceted nature of the term and layers of nuance involved in its unpacking. "'Decolonising' involves a multitude of definitions, interpretations, aims and strategies" (p.9).

The authors point to two key referents in grounding its political and methodological coordinates. Namely, by first resituating colonialism, empire and racism and secondly by offering "alternative ways of thinking about the world and alternative forms of political praxis" (p.9). Mbembe (2016) echoes this dual interpretation of the term presenting decolonisation as first challenging the Eurocentric model and second "imagining what the alternative to this model could look like" (p.36). Behari-Leak, et. al. (2017) argue that the focus should rather be in the detail of decolonisation as opposed to its definition. "'Decolonisation' is a nuanced, layered concept … an understanding of the process of 'decolonisation' lies more in its detail than its definition" (para. 2). While there may be variation in the precise wording of a definition, there is consensus in the body of literature reviewed of decolonisation as a complex term with a multitude of layers and nuance underpinning its interpretations and usage. Given its multifaceted nature it is perhaps unsurprising that a second body of literature emerges with its authors denoting decolonisation as a contested term.

Defining decolonisation – a point of contention?
Crilly and Everitt (2021) provide a comprehensive overview of the contention surrounding decolonisation. The authors suggest that while there is "clarity in its intention", the contention perhaps arises first from its enactment. Especially within the context of decolonising the academic library, decolonisation cannot be defined as a finite project subject to the usual processes and procedures associated therewith. "In relation to the library, perhaps it is the implication that decolonisation is a definable, finite and measurable process that is problematic" (p.xxii). Second, they argue the contention could arise from the need to contextualise decolonisation. Again, within the context of the academic library, if constrained within the structure of the neoliberal university they question whether decolonisation is even possible.

Given the degree of contention around the use of the term, it is unsurprising that recent discourse rarely fails to cite Tuck and Yang who highlight the danger of using decolonisation as a metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012). By repeatedly calling for the decolonisation of schools or student thinking, the authors argue the term loses its essential meaning as "the repatriation of Indigenous land and life" (p.1). Instead, they continue, "when metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future" (p.3). This point is reiterated by Appleton (2019) who argues, there is a danger of the term becoming "tokenistic". This is further echoed by Doharty, et. al. (2021) and Mehra (2021) who describes US libraries' as "tripping over their feet in a race to show their sympathies"(p.137) in response to public outrage at the police killings of George Floyd.

When examining the varying definitions of decolonisation and the contention surrounding the usage of the term, a consensus emerges regarding the importance of context. That is not to devalue the work of Tuck and Yang, rather, for the purposes of this paper, to contextualise decolonisation within teaching and learning at UK universities, and, more specifically, the academic libraries that operate within and contribute to said structures.

Decolonisation and the university

Locating decolonisation in the university are Alvares and Faruqui (2012) who state, "diversity and plurality of knowledge systems are vital …. for avoiding the frightening economic, educational and cultural consequences of Europe's near total intellectual and educational monopoly over Asia, Africa and Latin America" (p.13). Just a short time later, the 'Rhodes Must Fall' movement at the University of Cape Town in South Africa (Mbembe, 2016) quickly spread across the globe leading to similar campaigns such as that at the University of Oxford in the UK (Chaudhuri, 2016). In the UK, students as a driving force behind calls to decolonise universities can be seen in the National Union of Students (NUS) campaign "Why is my curriculum so white?" or in the numerous pledges to decolonise the curriculum such as at the University of Keele, for instance (Bhambra, et. al., 2018). Former NUS Vice-President of Higher Education Hillary Gyebi-Ababio (2021) again places students at the heart of decolonisation efforts in UK universities, "this work for the educational community needs to be about the student – every student who continues to be wrongly taught about the violence of current and historical colonialism in their education" (p.5). If students are empowered to tackle the entrenched coloniality of their education, then this sets the tone in their future social milieu.

In contrast, a second body of literature argues that much of the efforts to decolonise universities in the UK remain hollow and tokenistic in nature, failing to address the systemic racism and entrenched coloniality at the core of such institutions (Mehra, 2021). Doharty, et. al., (2021) write that such empty calls have a negative effect on Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) staff and students in UK universities who ultimately become disproportionately burdened by efforts to decolonise if racism remains structurally embedded in the institution. "The reduction of decolonial agendas to hollow diversity initiatives … shows that, for anti-racist institutional change, there is yet much work to be done" (p.234). Mbembe (2016) echoes the idea of the university structure as a barrier to the potential success of any calls to decolonise. He argues that the emergence of the student as a consumer in an increasingly neoliberal education system has prevented students from accessing "the free pursuit of knowledge" (p.30).

Thus, to decolonise the university is to go much further than diversifying the curriculum or removing

colonial relics from view. A holistic approach is needed and one which seeks to dismantle the very system calling for decolonisation in the first place. The university as an institution must therefore be aligned in its strategy to decolonise. This would imply that, at present, the academic library can only work on decolonising from within the institution. As Jones and Wilson (2021) write, "in the same way that there have been calls to decolonise the university curriculum, the university library must be considered along the same lines. It is not appropriate to decolonise one part of an institution but leave all others steeped in Whiteness" (pp.58-59).

Decolonisation and the academic library

As part of the wider calls to decolonise the university, academic libraries have also come under increasing scrutiny to decolonise. In a practical sense, this often centres around efforts to diversify the curriculum through collection development and reading lists, among other areas (Crilly, 2024). Wilson (2021) uses practical examples to illustrate such initiatives at LSE. He uses data from the library management system to highlight the lack of diversity among published authors in the collection and then offers suggestions as to how the library might address such inequalities. Central to his work is the belief that librarians are uniquely placed to facilitate decolonisation work thanks to their liaison capacity between staff, students and institution. A view echoed by Towlson (2024) who describes the librarian as an "advocate for decolonising" when "liaising with academic staff around reading lists and purchases" (p.239). The role of the academic librarian in decolonisation is also championed by Clarke (2021) who describes them as "activists" (p.127) and goes on to describe the "Liberate our Library" campaign at Goldsmiths. As part of the campaign, library staff run workshops for students on critical information gathering and inclusive citation under the moniker "Resistance Researching" (Goldsmiths, 2018). This demonstrates the power in collaboration and ownership of initiatives proposed by Wilson (2021) and Towlson (2024) as well as the importance of student involvement as described by Gyebi-Ababio (2021). Whilst librarians in the UK are bound by CILIP's Ethical Framework (CILIP, 2018), Clark (2019), in contrast, puts forward the argument that the library cannot lead decolonisation efforts. By attempting to do so, he argues, the library runs the risk of creating silos and reinforcing the status quo. Whilst his description of the librarian as a facilitator echo those of Wilson, his take on the library's role in decolonisation has also been viewed as apathetic to the valuable impact they can indeed have (Appleton, 2020). Appleton in turn points to the importance of critical library leadership as a way librarians can contribute to the decolonisation of learning and teaching at the university. Reinforcing the notion of "active" efforts by librarians, he states that the diversification of reading lists, etc. is not enough to decolonise the curriculum. Instead, such practice must be championed by library leadership.

"Only by accepting, encouraging and enabling critical approaches to academic librarianship can we be in a position to lead liberation work from and within the library" (p.92).

Ishaq and Hussain (2021) also argue the importance of library leadership in decolonisation efforts. Yet more specifically in championing diversity measures to ensure fair representation of BAME staff in their institutions. In the context of decolonising the academic library, they argue that only once BAME staff in academic libraries enjoy "fair and equal treatment" can the library effectively decolonise.

Research questions

When investigating the decolonisation of learning and teaching at universities, the importance of the academic library cannot be understated, not least due to its unique position to facilitate a diverse curriculum and communicate such efforts across the institution. Yet it is by being part of the institution that perhaps presents the biggest barrier to its efforts. While there is evidence of librarians working as activists alongside student-led movements, decolonisation cannot be truly successful if this is not reflected in the make-up of the staff or aligned with wider university strategy. This paper therefore sets out to engage with the following research questions:

- How do academic librarians understand and perceive the decolonisation work of the library and the wider university?
- What do academic librarians do to contribute to the decolonisation of learning and teaching at the university?
- What factors influence decolonisation work and initiatives within the academic library?

Methodology

Research approach and method

This project primarily took an inductive approach, allowing for conclusions to be reached based on analysis of the data collected and supported by the literature, away from any explicit theoretical framework. Qualitative methodology "aims to generate deep insights concerning particular topics" (Bryman, 2016, p.350) and as such was selected to enable the consideration of ambiguity and nuance that exist within a small sample of academic librarians' personal experience of decolonisation at their respective institutions. This was viewed as essential given the sensitive complexity of the subject matter and context within which it was discussed. While the samples of people or cases may be smaller, qualitative research usually results in far more detailed information, increasing the depth of understanding but reducing generalisability (Patton, 2015). Furthermore, this interpretivist approach and method provided space for dialogue and reflection which in turn facilitated insight into the

understanding and perception of decolonisation among academic librarians at UK universities. Finally, examination of the literature has also shown decolonisation cannot be constrained to finite projects or procedure and, as such, attempts to quantify it should be avoided.

Data collection

In line with the proposed inductive approach and qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews were deemed the most suitable method of data collection. Semi-structured interviews allow for an element of continuity across the data collection procedure but also provide scope for participants to clarify or elaborate on certain issues resulting in in-depth and highly meaningful data (Bryman, 2012; May, 2011). By enabling open-ended answers, participants were also afforded greater flexibility to self-reflect and guide the conversation. In pursuit of answers to the research questions, the flexible approach of semi-structured interviews increased the likelihood that "participants' perspectives will be revealed … whether or not it has occurred to the researcher to ask the 'right' question" (Bryman, 2012, p.357). Yet by maintaining a similar framework of dialogue for all interviews, it was also intended that this method allow for greater scope for comparison during analysis of the data (May, 2011).
The structure of the question sheet [Appendix A] broadly followed that of the literature review, becoming increasingly granular to allow participants to speak in detail and provide the depth and understanding conducive of qualitative data (May, 2011). The list of questions was sent to participants in advance once they had agreed to be interviewed. This decision was taken due to the complexity of the subject matter and to give the participants adequate time to prepare with the view to keeping the interviews to the allotted time of 60 minutes.
The interviews were conducted online and via Google Meet to limit expenditure and time inconvenience to participants. The video feature ensured social cues regarding facial expression or body language could still be picked up upon much in the same way as a face-to-face interview.

Sampling

Participants were selected in the first instance using the [JISC Mail LIS-decolonisation Best Practices Excel Sheet](). Subscribers to this mailing list are presumed to have an interest in decolonisation work in libraries and in this instance were invited to detail their initiatives and experiences in a shared document. Selection was based on the decolonisation work described in this Excel Sheet and the dates the work was carried out (2020–2023) to better enable recent reflection. The interviews were all conducted between June and July 2023. Care was also taken to ensure a variety of project and institution types, as well as geographical spread across the UK, to try and produce additional scope for

comparison during analysis. While the authors cannot be aware of all instances of decolonisation work, effort was made to target a representative sample (such as different institution types) from those instances of which we were aware. This further pertains to the purposive nature of the sampling in pursuit of information-rich cases. Nine academic librarians were initially contacted via email from seven institutions, of which seven replied and agreed to be interviewed for this research project. A further participant was contacted via snowballing sampling, by which they were recommended for interview by another participant due to their "experiences or characteristics that are relevant to the research" (Bryman, 2016, pp.383-384), expanding the total number of participants to eight. The ninth and final participant was found via an invitation to a webinar detailing decolonisation work in the form of systematic reviews. The ease at which participants were recruited for this study points to the importance of this research and the willingness of academic librarians to further the debate around, and contribute to, the decolonisation of learning and teaching at UK universities.

Ethical considerations

Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter and the fact that interview participants were asked to draw on examples from their current places of employment, it was essential that the safety of participants was guaranteed throughout the research process. To minimise the risk of identification, all personal data and identifying information pertaining to the institutions examined were anonymised in the interview transcripts and in this paper itself.

It is pertinent to note the privilege of the authors as a white research student and academic, respectively, whose education and professional experiences have taken place solely within Northern Europe. Whilst there are no claims of shared experience, this privilege is important to note as a potential research limitation and ethical consideration and will have undoubtedly affected the lens through which the data was viewed and interpreted (Patton, 2015; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017).

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data in line with the steps outlined by Braun and Clark (2006). This method allowed for flexibility around theory and induction and facilitated the complexity and nuances inherent within the subject matter investigated. Reflexive research as facilitated by thematic analysis is also well suited to the subject matter given the scope for personal interpretation and nuance of context (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Findings

The following refers to the nine participants interviewed for this research project to allow for simple referencing without the need for personal identification:

Participant key	Institution description
A1	Teaching-led university with ca. 30,000 students
B2	University-level art school with ca. 2,000 students
C3	University college with ca. 6,000 students
D4	Research-intensive university with ca. 30,000 students
C5	University college with ca. 6,000 students
E6	Collegiate research university with ca. 18,000 students
F7	Teaching-led university with ca. 35,000 students
G8	University college with ca. 10,000 students
H9	Music and drama academy with ca. 1,500 students

Figure 1: Participant key

1 Embedded decolonisation

One key finding was that contributions to decolonising learning and teaching were judged as being more effective when initiatives were embedded into the curriculum. Within this theme of embeddedness, several related findings pertaining to allocated time and resources and staff training are also discussed. Embedded decolonisation often coincided with critical library leadership which resulted in an increased sphere of influence over library staff. Such leadership casts a positive shadow and contributes to a culture of willingness to accept and embrace change alongside a commitment to progressive values. At institution E, achieving this kind of embedded decolonisation is already a short-term goal for library staff:

> "Next year, my colleague will be teaching information, literacy and information skills, but decolonised by default." (E6)

In this instance, the library is looking to embed decolonisation into the curriculum by ensuring the resources available for them to search for will be globally representative and not limited to authors from

the Global North. We see a similar approach at institution A where the librarian recounted delivering a series of workshops around decolonising reading lists to academics which then became part of a teaching qualification for all new lecturers. Thus, embedding decolonisation into the teaching of new staff at the institution:

> "I've developed a workshop that's decolonising the reading lists … we developed a postgraduate certificate for academic practice which is basically a teaching qualification that all new lecturers have to do when they start. And that workshop became part of that programme." (A1).

Embedded decolonisation therefore occurs with the support of senior library management exerting their influence over learning and teaching at their respective institutions. In this way, a decolonised curriculum need not be named in an explicit working group or policy document, but rather becomes "business as usual" for the library and wider institution looking to decolonise. This was perhaps expressed most neatly by participant G8 who surmised:

> "I think embeddedness has to be a growth mindset. As well as doing the action and doing the work, it's got to be about mindset." (G8)

1.1 Allocated time and resources

Findings also showed that support from senior library management can lead to allocated time and resources to invest in decolonisation efforts. At one institution, this was a seconded role affording the librarian dedicated time and allocated resources to furthering the decolonisation agenda within the library and wider institution. A similar example can be found from participant E6 who described a named decolonisation lead at their academic library, responsible for all decolonisation efforts and initiatives:

> "We're encouraged by the university to really focus on decolonising and there's always a named member of staff [in the library] who is working on decolonising and leading on it and multiple ones working on different facets of decolonising. The aim is to do almost decolonising from the ground up." (E6)

In this instance, library management have formally appointed someone to take ownership of all the decolonisation work that is taking place within the library and therefore granting the time and resources

necessary to make a worthwhile contribution to decolonising learning and teaching at this respective institution.

1.2 Staff training

Efforts to embed a decolonised curriculum in some institutions involved library staff running workshops for academics to demonstrate how they can embed decolonisation into their teaching. This is significant given the reluctance among librarians to enter the academic space at times. It shows significant willing on their part and demonstrates a certain bravery and level of advocacy:

> "Three of us in the group worked to produce a series of lesson plans so that those workshops could be used by other people in other areas, and we had a little go at talking to academic departments about decolonising." (D4)

Another participant described just how embedded their workshops and training for academic staff had become at their university:

> "Offering some tools that they can use to kind of co-create to kind of review reading lists … maybe even co-create new reading lists with students and with colleagues … I delivered that across the university and it's part of the staff programme." (A1)

In this above example, the mention of engaging students alongside staff demonstrates an awareness of the multifaceted nature of decolonisation and of just how important it is to share knowledge and good practise across the institution.

2 Institutional support

Another significant finding to emerge from the data collection was of participants detailing institutional support as beneficial in embedding decolonisation into the curriculum. This manifested as specific organisational bodies, strategic alignment between university and library policy, and accountability. In contrast, the challenge of operating as part of a wider institution also emerged and is detailed in this section. At one university, the librarian interviewed described how decolonisation initiatives codified in university-level policies or strategies gave "permission" for librarians to do the work:

> "But I think having the strategy to do the work and gives you permission to take the space … it definitely gives a focus and says, it's important to us and we need to do the work." (G8)

In this example, the librarian highlights how alongside a desire from staff to engage with decolonisation work, having the support of the institution in terms of a strategic priority enabled them to do so in the sense that they were "allowed".

2.1 Organisational bodies

Across other universities, the interviews conducted found evidence of institutional support in the shape of formal bodies or organisations whose remit was partly to engage in the decolonisation of learning and teaching at the university in question. Having official bodies at the university dedicated in some way to decolonising demonstrates institutional support and again helps to ratify the work of librarians. At another university, one participant spoke of the influence of formal organisations had on their efforts to decolonise:

> "Because we had had the support of the exec, we were told that we could continue and look across the board. Basically, Decolonising A was born … and we were asked if we wanted to continue so obviously the answer was yes." (A1)

In this example, having the support of the university executive board is also explicitly mentioned in furthering the agenda and helping to decolonise learning and teaching.

2.2 Strategic alignment

The support of the institution was also cited as valuable in so far as aligning with the library's strategic goals. In this regard, one participant described how the library's work to help decolonise learning and teaching directly contributed to the university's strategic aims:

> "When I talked to one of our top exec team members … basically, whatever you do it has to either meet one or help with tackling one of those issues. One is to raise awareness about issues around race and racism. Second one is to reduce awarding gaps. And the third one is to help diversify staff recruitment … how can we raise awareness? We can do that via reading groups with a zine. When we do the workshops on the decolonised reading list, we talk about the issues of diminishing awarding gaps by having a decolonised curriculum." (F7)

The above institution's goal to diversify staff recruitment also demonstrates intent and willing to engage in decolonisation more broadly. In cases where formalised policy was not in place, participants expressed frustration at the lack of a codified strategy, fearing that with the responsibility resting on the

shoulders of individuals, efforts to decolonise would be halted should the individual leave the institution:

> "What I do wish was that the library would make provisions for having a permanent member of staff dedicated to decolonisation or team or ratify it in some way, make it formal. Because I know at the moment if my co-chair left, if some of the other people left it wouldn't carry on." (C3)

Institutional support comes in many guises. Having the support of the institution in the form of either codified policy, dedicated organisations or strategic aims therefore emerged as significant in determining the success of librarians' efforts to decolonise learning and teaching at their respective universities.

2.3 Accountability

Where there is buy-in from senior management, and especially where budgets or finances are concerned, librarians are held to account, as would be expected in any organisation. In this case, having the support of the institution means being accountable both to senior library leadership and to those at the very top of the university hierarchy:

> "But ours has been one that has been top-down and strategic-level project. So, our work as well, for example, we would answer to the board of governors … it would go right up to the top." (A1)

In terms of decolonisation, therefore, the librarian in this case must report on their work at the highest level, signifying institutional support of embedded decolonisation. At a different institution, another participant also reported being invited to university managerial meetings to present their work on decolonisation:

> "I think we're invited to be on a round table discussion in the autumn where our decolonising processes and what we're doing to focus on decolonising, will be discussed and maybe even slightly criticised or grilled by other members of the university." (E6)

The same participant also commented on being held accountable in the sense that being named a lead for decolonising work as part of an official job remit means reporting on progress in regular performance reviews. Thus, institutional support comes with accountability which participants cited as

motivating them to do the work. As in any organisation, being held accountable is much more likely to yield results.

2.4 The challenge of fragmentation

The UK university can be a sprawling institution within which the academic library sits. Although not always concerned with size, this sprawl of academic and professional services departments, among others, can lead to an institution feeling fragmented. As such, some participants reported efforts to decolonise as often occurring in silos, lacking any unifying cohesion. This was described by one participant as "pockets of good practice" (B2) indicating the university was lacking a cohesive policy on decolonisation despite efforts occurring across the library and wider institution. The same sentiment was echoed at a second university where the librarian described the frustration at a lack of clear overarching policy on decolonisation:

> "Our aim is for our work to sort of feed into their work and for us all to sit together, however, institutionally there isn't a really big institutional steer, everything's quite fragmented." (D4)

In these above instances, participants refer to the lack of cohesion between their respective university departments as negatively impacted their ability to effectively decolonise. In other cases, the bureaucracy that accompanies an institution such as a university was described as a barrier to success, with the challenge of procedure hindering attempts at progress:

> "It's challenges of process. It's not around people not wanting to do decolonising work. It's challenges around the systems that you have in place as a university." (G8)

In this way, the university as a complex organisation was viewed as a barrier in some cases as bureaucratic challenges can be seen to have impeded the progress and good work of many motivated individuals operating across the organisation. The challenges of fragmentation are thus contrasting in nature. In one instance, the complexity of the institution leads to siloed workflows impeding decolonisation efforts, whilst on the other this fragmentation can manifest as a barrier to efforts in the form of entrenched bureaucratic processes.

3 Self-motivated individuals

A third key finding emerged in participants describing the importance of individuals who were motivated to engage in decolonising work in part due to their own self-interest and often despite increasing workloads and/or a lack of resources. Together with critical librarianship, advocacy and collaboration

with other institutions, these findings are detailed in this section. In some cases, these proactive librarians were deemed essential to furthering decolonisation efforts in their library with some fearing progress would be lost if they were to change roles or leave the institution entirely:

> "If I left or my co-chair left the group would fall apart and Decolonisation at C Library would probably be gone. And I imagine that that might be the case with quite a few of my colleagues and other libraries." (C3)

The same participant also highlighted a desire to formalise decolonisation efforts in the shape of support, demonstrating that without such policies in place, any work they were doing on decolonisation would not take place if they were to leave:

> "I know the library has other priorities at the moment. But if we could just, have it continued in some way and have that kind of strategy in place to keep it going. That would be the ideal for me." (C3)

The work of key individuals was also highlighted by another participant who spoke of the influence such figures wield in terms of furthering the decolonisation agenda at their library and wider university:

> "And I think M ended up being on a lot of different boards and she became quite key and instrumental to some of this work…you can't help but feel a loss when somebody who has that sort of voice and moves institutions." (G8)

3.1 Overworked and under resourced

In contrast, not having enough time or resources was reported frequently among participants as a reason why they felt unable to make substantial efforts to decolonise. Amid current funding crises in higher education, many of the librarians interviewed felt overworked and with any time dedicated to decolonising efforts only carried out on top of their daily workload. This increases the role of the individual in stepping up and doing the work and highlights the level of motivation required to initiate decolonisation projects beyond their usual scope of work:

> "There was something happening where they wanted the library strands to feed into the school. But I've heard nothing since. It's too much work and people are just too busy…" (C5)

This sentiment was echoed by a colleague at the same institution who commented:

"Because I think one of the things that's most tricky is that this is not a formal part of my job or my colleagues' jobs. You're doing this all in your own time, you're taking time out of your regular tasks and so it's an extra workload." (C3)

This was echoed at another institution where the librarian also highlighted the importance of personal motivation in wanting to do the work alongside or on top of an already heavy workload:

"I think the thing is, there are so many demands on people's time that, I think people need to have that interest in order to add another thing onto the things that they already need to do." (D4)

Across the participants interviewed, all expressed a desire to contribute to the decolonisation of learning and teaching at their respective institutions but the instances where this work was codified in a named role or they were allocated designated time and resources were arguably where they felt they could achieve more or the work they were doing was more effective.

3.2 Critical librarianship

Among the participants who spoke of the influence of key individuals, some referred to these efforts as critical librarianship. At one institution, librarians had formed critical librarian reading groups whose work centred around efforts and discussions on how to decolonise their library. By allowing the conversation to take place, these librarians are working to embed decolonisation into the curriculum of their institution.

At another institution, this attitude among librarians was deemed "just good librarianship" (E6), suggesting this participant at least felt that decolonisation efforts at their university were so embedded as to no longer warrant special mention.

3.3 Advocacy and self-promotion

In addition to being motivated to initiate decolonisation work in their libraries, some participants spoke of the need to better promote or advocate their efforts in a bid for wider recognition or to further embed good practice across their respective institutions:

"I think we're now bringing it more to her attention, the new Chief Librarian. I'm forwarding everything to her. To say academics are saying this, speakers are saying this …. there's a movement and she said she's very proud and she goes you must put it in the university bulletin." (C5)

At a second institution, there was evidence of librarians working to engage others at the university in their work on decolonisation. By promoting good practice across the institution, they were looking to contribute to the decolonisation of learning and teaching and ultimately embed this approach as standard.

3.4 Collaboration with other libraries or institutions

There is evidence of some librarians looking to other libraries or institutions to share examples of good practice. In the first instance, this was found in the LIS-Decolonisation Best Practice Excel Sheet from which participants for this research project were recruited. During the interviews themselves, many also spoke of sharing the work they were doing in a bid to further decolonisation efforts at other institutions:

> "They've been working really hard just to make sure that those voices are well represented and are morally and ethically approached correctly. And after they invited me to do that panel, they asked me to join something called Lab, which is a Library Advisory Board." (C5)

There was also evidence of university libraries organising conferences around the topic of decolonisation together:

> "So, we've done the positive action traineeship, we've done a lot of work with other universities … this is the library team that has done this and so I co-organised conference with B and U." (G8)

For smaller, specialised institutions this collaborative approach seems especially useful in advocating the work of individuals and furthering the decolonisation agenda:

> "That was why I asked others if we wanted to come together and do something so that we could hear what other institutions would do and have a platform to talk together. It was really interesting … there's definitely a good reaction to what we've been doing." (H9)

4 Student engagement

Given students are the learners at universities it seems pertinent that they be involved in the decolonisation of their curriculum. Engaging students in the decolonisation of learning and teaching therefore emerged as a key finding in this research project with participants discussing the various ways, such as specialist internships or sitting on official bodies, they were involved in their efforts to decolonise. At one university, the librarians interviewed described a student-led initiative to diversify reading lists:

"It was called the Counter Canon Challenge. Through the Liberate Group, we put on an event with them. And it was a student-led initiative … a challenge was set students to include at least 20% of racialised scholars as part of the assessment reference list." (G8)

The same participant also described an allocated budget specifically for students' suggestions to the collection:

"We've got our Liberate Book Fund, so there's quite a lot of and suggestions have come through from students for different books that they would like to have added to the course. We have that ring fenced budget every year." (G8)

This represents student-driven acquisitions actively impacting decolonisation work within the university library. With regards to collections, there was also evidence at a second university of plans to pay students to recommend resources:

"There are plans afoot to start getting students paid to identify decolonised resources to recommend to us. Because if we can get students who are from the Global South to recommend resources that they think are great. And we'll be able to integrate them into our collections … because if they recommend resources, we're more likely to use them." (E6)

4.1 Student internships

This paid involvement of students in decolonising library work was further evidenced by participants who mentioned internships designed to focus on a specific aspect of decolonising. At one institution, the participant described hiring students to look at both the library space and reading lists:

"I have to say that was a project that has really taken off and we've got some brilliant results … she created an economic development reading list, and it was just fascinating … with the intention that the academic department will load it on lib guides." (C5)

Despite the success of such projects, a second librarian at the same institution also spoke of the barriers of the university in being able to hire students for such work:

"She was like, why don't I get one of my students to do this? Make a radical reading list and use it on my course. Then we tried to get funding but bureaucracy being what it is you can't just choose a student to do this ... and it's like, okay, this is not going to happen, but the

whole idea of that came from an academic and she was really interested in getting her

students to collaborate on what text you use but bureaucracy always gets in the way." (C3)

In this case the challenge of process again emerges as a barrier to success, despite the motivation of individuals in contributing to decolonising efforts. Even in cases where universities had designated budget for decolonising work, involving students through paid internships appeared to be challenging. Yet despite such challenges, participants generally spoke favourably of engaging students in decolonising work and recognised the importance of involving them in such tasks.

4.2 Students on official bodies

Another method of engaging students in decolonisation efforts is to include them in official bodies or groups dedicated to decolonisation work:

> "It is called the Awarding Gap Community of Practice … and yeah, it's led from an academic colleague … and we've got students as well presenting some projects they have been working on." (F7)

This was sometimes conducted in an official capacity via the Students' Union:

> "The Liberate Group is a group any of our staff can join. It's completely open and … we have the old sabbatical officers from the Student's Union in as part of that group." (G8)

In this way, student engagement emerged as a key finding when investigating librarians' understanding of and contribution to decolonisation both within their libraries and across the wider institution.

5 External drivers

Alongside management buy-in, motivated staff members and student engagement, there is evidence in some institutions of external factors impacting or even initiating decolonisation work. Most commonly this was in response to widespread social movements. The murder of George Floyd and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement during 2020 was cited by multiples participants as inspiring action on decolonisation at their university:

> "I feel like Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall, I think those are factors. And I think there's always kind of localised things that come up where everyone's like, okay, we need to respond to this because students aren't happy." (B2)

In one instance, a participant also mentioned the pressure from other institutions as motivation to examine their own practice and approach to decolonising:

> "I went to a couple of workshops at conferences … and one of the librarians at one of these gatherings said, we look at you guys in terms of decolonisation so it's like we really should be doing something about this." (C3)

In contrast, some librarians spoke of the danger of tokenism when engaging in decolonisation work in response to external events. One participant, for example, spoke of how without real substance, efforts to decolonise could remain hollow:

> "I just feel like a lot of universities are paying lip service rather than being meaningful. And what I'm saying about the kind of policy wide versus on an individual scale is you can make your workplace somewhere that feels safe and inclusive for students. And I think that's kind of more important than having a strategy on diversity." (B2)

There is a danger therefore in universities making empty gestures unsupported by meaningful action. Participants demonstrated awareness of this issue, however, and the work they discussed as part of the interview process suggests the contribution librarians are making to the decolonisation of learning and teaching is very real indeed.

Discussion

The findings point to a deep and nuanced understanding and perception of decolonisation among the participants. Rather than provide concrete examples of best practice, they instead shed light on the environmental factors and circumstances which can best enable decolonisation work in UK academic libraries. Upon thorough investigation of the findings in line with the methodological approach, three strong themes emerged regarding the academic library's role in supporting the decolonisation of learning and teaching at UK universities, around which the following discussion is structured.

1 Proactive librarians

All participants reported a strong personal desire to enact positive social change, describing in detail their own understanding and perception of the term decolonisation. As reflected in the literature, there was some variation in the exact definition described among the librarians, yet all spoke fluently about how their understanding influenced the work they are carrying out at their respective university

libraries. The librarian's personal motivation therefore emerged as a significant factor influencing their contribution to decolonising learning and teaching.

This sense of purpose and proactiveness among the librarians is reflective of the literature examined. In a chapter on decolonising the academic library, Clarke (2021) writes, "before we talk about decolonising the library, we have to talk about building a movement of people to lead and do the necessary work, without whom nothing will change" (p.128). This emphasises the importance of individual willingness when it comes to engaging with decolonisation efforts within the institution. The notion of librarians as activists tallies with the responses given by participants when asked to describe their work on decolonising and what motivated them to do it. Many described a sense of personal duty or social responsibility that encouraged them to take on decolonising tasks on top of their daily workload. This willingness to engage in work outside of their official remit alongside personal interest suggests a level of personal proactivity essential to contributing to the decolonisation of learning and teaching at UK universities.

Furthermore, it could be argued that this social activism is also what motivated librarians to encourage student engagement when carrying out decolonisation work and initiatives. The literature shows that student involvement is key when considering decolonisation in the context of UK higher education. As Gyebi-Ababio (2021) writes, "students must be central to the work of decolonising the library" (p.5). Several participants recognised the necessity of engaging students in efforts to decolonise and one in particular highlighted how student-led campaigns went on to influence decolonisation policy in the library. This is again reflective of the body of literature which places students at the centre of decolonisation efforts within UK, and indeed global, universities and highlights the importance of grassroots protest in instigating much of the progress. Finally, the proactive librarian as a key figure in engaging in decolonisation work could in part be attributed to their unique position as a facilitator within the institution. Often serving as an interface between students, academic staff and the institution itself, the library is ideally placed to lead decolonisation efforts. This was demonstrated by participants when describing some of the work they were doing which included, staff training (A1), running events (C5) and ground-up collection development (E6).

This proactiveness in working collaboratively echoes the work of Wilson (2021) in his account of decolonising the collection at LSE. He writes, "libraries should be proactive and stay ahead of the curve, rather than being reactive. By doing this, we give ourselves opportunities to collaborate with academic staff and to influence the shaping of curricula" (Wilson, 2021, p.236).

Thus, the proactive librarian emerges as a key figure in supporting the decolonisation of learning and

teaching at UK universities. Their willingness to carry out this work often goes above and beyond their official remit and is in some cases without any institutional mandate or strategic influence. This is influenced in part by a strong sense of social responsibility which emerges from their own understanding and perception of decolonisation. By seeking to engage with students and academic staff, they demonstrate a certain bravery that sees them serve as advocates within the library and wider institution.

2 Critical library leadership

The importance of critical leadership within the library emerged as a significant factor in influencing librarians' work on decolonisation. In cases where senior library managers exerted a positive sphere of influence in terms of enacting social change, this was reflected in a culture of values lending itself to strategic engagement with topics such as decolonisation.

This increased access to those with the power and authority to enact positive change within the university undoubtedly yields increased influence, and, as a result, a higher probability of success in relation to decolonising outcomes. Of course, there is overlap here in terms of the individual themselves, meaning when a proactive librarian sits in close proximity to university decision makers, they are more likely to be able to implement their agenda of decolonisation. "Staff need to be empowered to take action. Library leaders need to be consistently highlighting the importance of diversity through our conversations. By continuing to have such conversations, we are being critical of our own library leadership" (Appleton, 2020, pp.57-58).

Adjacent to Appleton's notion of critical library management in leading liberation efforts in the library, Ishaq and Hussain (2021) point to the importance of educating "white leadership about equality and diversity issues" and making it a strategic priority to increase diversity amongst staff (p.48). One senior library leader interviewed (G8) utilised their managerial position to create a positive action traineeship designed to bring more people from marginalised groups into librarianship. While a second senior library leader echoed the findings of Ishaq and Hussain (2021) by reporting on their efforts to increase staff representation through recruitment techniques and career progression.

This demonstrates how critical library leadership can be used, not only to create a positive working environment conducive to change, but to sow the seeds for long-term decolonisation efforts in terms of increasing the diversity of library staff. As Ishaq and Hussain (2021) write, "the leadership of libraries need to lead from the top and champion equality and diversity. They should demonstrate that they view equality and diversity as a strategic priority rather than a peripheral endeavour" (p.51).

Strong library leadership therefore contributes to the decolonisation of learning and teaching at UK

universities by affording library staff the time and space to engage in decolonisation work. In cases where library leaders share proximity to university managers, this proximity can be utilised to exert influence over strategic priorities. There was relatively little discussion about the representation of BAME staff in academic libraries in the interviews conducted, perhaps due to the majority white participants, their respective roles or the lines of questioning used. The literature shows, however, that increasing diversity among library staff should be viewed as a strategic priority "if successful decolonisation of libraries is to be achieved" (Ishaq & Hussain, 2021, p.39). This suggests library leaders ought to give greater weight to this matter and increase efforts to improve the experience of BAME staff in order to better contribute to decolonising. In an expanded work, increased focus would be given to this area and yet when solely concerned with the decolonisation of learning and teaching, it would appear strong library leadership is best utilised in terms of empowering staff and creating the space for them to do the work.

3 Institutional support

Finally, alongside proactive librarians and critical library leadership, institutional support emerged as a third contributing factor to the successful decolonisation of learning and teaching at UK universities. In some cases, this took the form of allocated time and resources in a named role. This formal designation enabled library staff to dedicate time outside of their normal scope of work to engage with decolonising efforts (A1) and (E6). This led to increased accountability as participant E6 stated:

> "If you're named. You actually have to do it." (E6)

In cases where participants had to carry out decolonising work on top of their daily tasks, many described this as a major barrier to success, with some calling on the institution to formalise the work in some way. Aside from making it easier for library staff to do the work, this also helps nullify the risk of decolonisation work stopping should the proactive librarian leave their role. Furthermore, support from the institution in terms of formal policy documents contribute to the library leader's mandate in allowing library staff to engage in decolonising work. Participant G8 described this as "having permission". The strategic alignment between the university and the library therefore has a strong influence on the library's role in supporting the decolonisation of learning and teaching. As Appleton (2020) writes, "many library and information workers feel that they do not have the time or space (let alone the permission or approval) to involve themselves in critical practice." (p.57). He continues, "even if you embed a culture of critical practice and reflection … into the library workplace, it will still be in isolation if it does not have an impact on the wider institution" (p.57).

Despite the best efforts of proactive librarians and their supportive leaders, however, the UK university can be a vast and/or sprawling institution which can in turn present its own challenges to success. Several participants described how work often seemed to occur in silos or "pockets of good practice" (B2). This suggests that while policy may be in place, if the institution as an organisation is too fragmented, then this could manifest as a very real barrier to decolonisation.

> "It's challenges of process. So, it's not around people not wanting to do decolonising work." (G8)

This struggle between people and processes is reminiscent of Crilly and Everitt (2021) who question the validity of decolonising within the structures of a university, "there is quandary at the heart of the calls to decolonise – if the neoliberal university is part of the problem, and systematically racist, is decolonisation a philosophical possibility? And, by association, can libraries decolonise within those structures and constraints, or is coloniality so embedded as to be immutable?" (p.xxii). Mbembe (2016) echoes these concerns questioning whether the increasing bureaucratisation and neoliberalism of the university renders decolonisation as a concept incomplete.

Furthermore, while not explicitly mentioned by participants, the challenges of a fragmented institution could conversely allow proactive librarians to develop their own policies and projects pertaining to decolonisation, away any from executive policy. Arguably, the barriers resulting from overly complex processes instead foster grassroots initiatives such as student-led protests which could in turn lead to wider systemic change. This tension between grassroots and systemic efforts is one not explored in detail here but would benefit from further research when examining the decolonisation of learning and teaching at UK universities.

The academic library must therefore strive to ensure that their strategy of decolonisation broadly aligns with that of the institution. Where possible, senior library leaders should seek to influence policy and decision making at the top to ensure a unified approach. In cases where decolonising learning and teaching is a strategic priority, the university has issued a mandate to dedicate time and resources to do this work. Furthermore, codified documentation, when accessible to all, formalises this approach and ensures a certain degree of accountability. Strategic alignment between the academic library and the institution is of even greater importance considering the often-fragmented nature of the institution and the danger of tokenism that occurs when calls to decolonise are met in isolation.

Conclusion

Decolonisation is a multifaceted and nuanced concept (Behari-Leak, 2017) with much contention surrounding its definition (Crilly, 2021). Similarly, within the context of higher education, increasing calls to decolonise the university have been met with both enthusiasm (Birdi, 2021) and criticism (Appleton, 2019; Doharty et al., 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2012). When considering the academic library as part of the institution, such calls to decolonise have in turn led to increased scrutiny to examine both the role the library can play in this work and in turn its own entrenched coloniality.

With regards to the decolonisation of learning and teaching at UK universities, this small-scale research project aimed to examine academic librarians' understanding and perception of decolonisation, with a view to unearthing if and how UK academic librarians are contributing to decolonisation and what factors influence their success.

The role of the individual is of enormous significance when considering how academic libraries support decolonisation. With increasingly heavy workloads, the librarian must be willing to do the work beyond the scope of their daily tasks and often without any kind of formal acknowledgement or validation. This motivation can often be attributed to a personal interest in social justice movements, which in turn leads to developing an understanding of decolonisation and what this means within their personal and professional contexts. These are librarian activists committed to ensuring students enjoy a diverse curriculum in a safe and inclusive environment. Guiding the proactive librarian is a committed leader, often exhibiting the same motivation to enact positive social change as their staff members or leading by example. Critical library leadership fosters a culture of values (Appleton, 2020) in which staff are afforded the space to think and discuss topics such as decolonisation. By instilling this growth mindset, the academic library, when led by a strong leader, is therefore best positioned to support the decolonisation of learning and teaching.

Third, the support of the institution is key in providing the funding, time and resources, as well as a mandate for the academic library to contribute to decolonisation efforts. In cases where the university and library are strategically aligned, the work of individual academic librarians to decolonise is formalised in policy, helping to present a unified approach amid the oftentimes fragmented institutional organisation. Furthermore, where decolonisation is a strategic priority, this reaches every pocket of the institution and better protects against the risk of tokenism or reactionary measures in the face of societal pressures.

Much like the term itself, the decolonisation of learning and teaching can take many guises and there remains no simple formula by which to do so. Instead, this small research project has highlighted the

need for academic libraries and their parent institutions to be open to change and proactive in their approach to decolonising. Amid the context of student-led protest and librarian activists, it would appear the university is under increasing pressure, both externally as well as from within, to lead from the top and allocate the necessary time and resources to decolonising. And yet without a unified, systematic approach to dismantling the structures so steeped in colonial history and racism, it is questionable whether a decolonised curriculum alone constitutes a success. While there remains much work to be done, the role of the academic librarian and their leaders should not be underestimated. Looking ahead, the authors accept that there remains much scope for future research. The tension between grassroots and systemic action is an area worthy of deeper investigation, as too is the contribution of the critical library leader and what indeed constitutes this label. While decolonisation is arguably country specific, there is no reason as to why this study could not be replicated in other western nations or potentially expanded to include other instances of diversification from the mainstream norms.

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Appendices
Appendix A: List of questions used in semi-structured interviews

Introductory questions
Opportunity to address any questions regarding research/consent/information sheet
Introduce research topic and explain why wanted to talk to specific participant
Verbally review consent for interview recording and transcription
Thank for agreeing to take part and begin interview

General
Could you start by telling me a little bit about your professional experience and background?
(What library, position, how long have you been in role, etc.)
Where does decolonisation work fit into your role?
Understanding decolonisation
What does the term decolonisation mean to you?

What factors do you think have contributed to your understanding of the term?

Decolonisation at the university
What is your perception of decolonisation at your university?

Is there a specific team/organisation responsible for decolonisation at your university?
If yes, who is on it and what kind of work do they carry out?

How do you think decolonisation is understood by the university as a whole and does the decolonisation work/initiatives reflect this understanding?

Have any of these initiatives directly influenced decolonisation work in the library?
In what way?

Decolonisation in the library
What is your perception of decolonisation within the library?

How do you feel decolonisation work is received and understood within your library?

Is there a specific team/organisation responsible for decolonisation at the library?
If yes, who is on it and what kind of work do they carry out?

How do these align with the university's position and strategy?

Is the library guided or encouraged through central university initiatives to engage in decolonisation work?

Is there any decolonisation work that the library leads or has led that feeds into university policy and strategy?

Initiative-specific questions
Can you reflect on the successes and challenges that you experienced with this particular initiative?

What happens next with regard to the outcomes?

Looking ahead
Aside from this project, what, if anything, do you do as part of your job that you see as contributing to decolonisation? (If nothing, why?)

What do you think the library needs to change in order to act as a strategic partner or even leader in decolonisation efforts at the university?

Closing
Before we close the interview, is there anything you would like to add? Or feel we have not addressed?

Thank you for taking part