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Creating scyborg assemblages of hope in UK Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an analysis on the importance of staff and students coming together to transform British neoliberal universities through assemblages of hope among scyborgs (multiple organisms which are part of universities). I have developed the term *scyborg assemblages of hope* to understand how individuals and groups challenge oppressive systems within UK universities. *Scyborg assemblages of hope* is a praxis and pedagogical approach aiming to imagine alternative joyful futures. It is co-created between students, staff and community collectives outside the university to promote communication, listening and reflection. The connections made through this praxis are multiscalar and often contradictory. Yet, they help to facilitate a decolonising university with an explicit commitment to radical systemic change. Scyborg work is contradictory because it happens within the UK neoliberal university but still leaves room to create new assemblages which (momentarily) disrupt the functioning of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This paper draws on creative methodologies (alphabet attack, Lego Serious Play, poster creation and body mapping) used in two workshops, one focus group and two community activities with underrepresented undergraduate students at a Russell Group university. Such co-production of knowledge explores how the neoliberal university can and is continuously transformed into (momentarily) decolonial realities.

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Introduction

In the last two decades, many UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have increasingly adopted discourses and policies designed to promote equality, diversity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives as well as the ‘decolonisation’ of their curriculum (Doharty et al., 2021). Despite this, British universities continue to perpetuate structural inequalities (Arday et al., 2021). Among these are the social and racial composition of their students and staff (Arday & Jones, 2022). This situation creates a state of constant

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tensions within such institutions. On the one hand, universities amplify an egalitarian discourse attempting to showcase the diversity of their campuses. On the other, the lived experience and praxis of universities remains exclusionary and alienating for many of their students and staff, particularly those from racially minoritised communities. In this article, I critically explore such tensions and contradictions within UK HEIs. By doing so, I add to the growing number of research on how racism and other forms of discrimination is experienced and challenged by staff and students of colour in British universities. To do this, I propose a way to 'hack' systems of oppression embedded within British universities through *scyborg assemblages of hope*.

Based on la peperson's (2017), Giroux's (2003) and García Peña (2022) work (see further down), I have created the term *scyborg assemblages of hope* to understand how individuals and groups challenge oppressive systems and transform UK universities. *Scyborg assemblages of hope* is a praxis and pedagogical approach co-created between students, staff and community collectives outside the university which contribute to building open communication, listening and reflection with the goal of imagining alternative joyful futures. It does this in part by using creative art-based methodologies as pedagogical tools to facilitate wider conversations around sense of belonging and nurturing community outside the boundaries of the neoliberal university. *Scyborg assemblages of hope* foster non-hierarchical relations between teachers and students through reflective practice, where metrics and other neoliberal benchmarks are challenged.

The findings of this research are based on two workshops, one focus group and two community activities (Black heritage walk and climate activism event) held at a Russell Group university in the UK over six months in 2023. Creative methodologies such as alphabet attack, Lego Serious Play, poster creation and body mapping were used in the workshops and focus group. These activities helped students and me, imagine (even if briefly) an educational environment resisting the commodification and colonial attitudes of universities.

In addition, the findings offer a reflection on the importance of staff and students coming together to transform British HEIs. As I argue, the contradictions of UK neoliberal universities make it incredibly difficult for marginalised staff and students to feel a sense of belonging. *Scyborg assemblages of hope* (represented by staff, students, HEIs resources and physical spaces) emerge to produce the 3rd world university, a decolonising one. This is achieved through community building and acts of hope within and outside educational spaces. I show how *scyborg assemblages of hope* may lead to more community-led and potential decolonial pedagogies which foster greater inclusivity and equality among staff and students. Such pedagogical practices and community fostering could lead to structural and material changes within UK HEIs. This could be achieved by prioritising collective needs, care, justice and equality guided by marginalised and underrepresented students and staff.

The structure of this article is as follows. I start by contextualising the short comings of the UK HEIs decolonisation agenda. This serves as a backdrop as to why we need to rethink such initiatives and its harmful impact on staff and students from marginalised backgrounds. Secondly, I explain the theoretical underpinnings I used to develop the concept of *scyborg assemblages of hope*. I explore the ways in which la paperson's (2017), Giroux's (2003) and García Peña (2022) work have influenced my concept. Next, I describe the methodology used for data collection and analysis. This

is followed by the analysis section which is divided in two major themes: the contradictions of the neoliberal university and hope and community building. Finally, I offer some concluding remarks about the possibilities and limitations of this approach.

Failed decolonisation of UK universities

In Britain, universities function to facilitate and perpetuate colonial relationships *via* the (re)production of knowledge (Loyola-Hernández et al., 2022). Such relationships are 'indebted to white-supremacist, heterosexist, ableist, settler-colonial, capitalist epistemologies' (Boggs et al., 2019, n/p). This creates a hostile environment towards Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC),¹ who are seen out of place in an overtly white institution (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2022). With this article, I add to scholarly debates which are critical of so-called decolonial agendas within British universities. Such criticism emanates from universities' lack of commitment to structural changes, deep transformation of the neoliberal curriculum and its impact on staff and students of colour. This problem has not gone unnoticed.

Recently, several student-led campaigns such as *Why Is My Curriculum White?* have addressed the connections between colonialism, racism and capitalism within UK HE (Bhambra et al., 2018). Such campaigns seek to dismantle these inequalities by bringing to the forefront the overlooked and neglected histories and epistemologies created by marginalised communities, particularly the Global South (Arday et al., 2021). These initiatives prompt us to recognise decolonisation as the material struggle of marginalised communities against diverse forms of violence (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012). However, 'decolonisation' initiatives within British universities have been watered down to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) practices and changing of reading lists (Doharty et al., 2021; Loyola-Hernández & Gosal, 2022) or been usurped by top-down managerial approaches to 'decolonising the university' (Maldonado-Torres, 2016). Consequently, these implementations do not address the structural inequalities which replicate and validate unequal power relations within UK HEIs (Noterma & Pusey, 2012). Due to this, decolonisation of UK universities remains largely a metaphor of change rather than a material reality.

On scyborgs, hope and community building in UK HEIs

The figure of the scyborg (la paperson, 2017) helps explore the limits and possibilities of decolonial discourses and practices within British universities. For la paperson (2017), the scyborg is 'to name the structural agency of persons who have picked up colonial technologies and reassembled them to decolonising purposes' (p. xiv). This point is crucial in understanding how *scyborg assemblages of hope* can occur within the neoliberal university. As seen in the analysis section, through innovative pedagogical practices and community building, staff and students can disrupt/hack systems of oppression embedded within UK HEIs. This is done by using and repurposing the space and resources provided by universities for decolonial purposes.

Understanding the university as a technology of power allows us to understand UK HEIs as hackable (Prasad et al., 2022). It lets us comprehend the complexities and complicit nature of working and studying in universities as 'we are both victims of

neoliberal forces in the contemporary university and perpetrators in producing it' (Le Grange, 2023, p. 40). To that end, la paperson (2017) argues there are multiple universities existing simultaneously within one system –neoliberal HEIs in the Global North-. This understanding of HEIs removes the binary juxtaposition of colonial vs decolonial universities. Rather, decolonial pedagogies and practices in universities are seen as sticky and complex. Decolonial praxis can happen in British university, where fees are paid (due to neoliberal policies), and degrees are awarded where academic metrics which act as drivers to participate in HE.

To comprehend this further, it is necessary to explain what these multiple co-existing universities are. The 1st world university is one immersed in the academic-industrial-complex with 'an ultimate commitment to brand expansion and accumulation of patent, publication and prestige' (la paperson, 2017, p.37). The 2nd world university exists within the first one. It is ideological in nature and seeks a 'pedagogical utopia' (p. 43) where there are no hierarchies between students and staff. It relies on a liberal approach to critical pedagogy where it individualises change *via* critical consciousness (McLaren, 2022). la paperson (2017) argues that through the awakening of consciousness, the scyborg becomes aware that there is a 'colonial code to be cracked' (p.44). The 3rd world university is a decolonising one. One with an explicit commitment to radical systemic change.

In addition to the role of the scyborg, the 'praxis of hope' is necessary to foster collective care. Such practices challenge UK universities as neoliberal institutions. Hope becomes the possibility of change which enables active learning (Ichikawa, 2022). Giroux's (2003) concept of 'educated hope' clarifies the role pedagogy plays in creating *scyborg assemblages*. We can build alternative and just futures through inclusive, community-led, non-hierarchical learning and teaching. Such pedagogical practices happen within and outside traditional educational spaces. *Scyborg assemblages of hope* allow organisms (staff, students, physical and metaphorical spaces) connected to the system (neoliberal university) to be disloyal 'against the master code of its makers' (la paperson, 2017, p. 55). This decolonial hope not only creates spaces for counter-assemblages but links scyborgs in a multiscale way in the form of community.

Nurturing a sense of community is critical for racially minoritised staff and students who are marginalised in UK universities. At times when being 'the one' in a sea of whiteness can feel desperate, isolated and violent, hope of finding and fostering collective care becomes a lifeline. Lorgia García Peña (2022) argues that 'Community is the most effective form of rebellion' (p. 31) and resistance to the neoliberal university. Rebellion against a system built on the foundation of exclusion, exploitation and harm. These relationships need to be founded on love which 'will always challenge and change us' (Hooks, 2003, p.137) in multiple and complex ways. To love as a collective is also to refuse to be loved by the very institution which harms marginalised communities withing HEIs. Rather we need to use the institution's resources and spaces to create liberating, just and caring futures.

Methodology

Prior to this project, I wrote a report on the impact of decolonising initiatives and practices in my faculty (Loyola-Hernández and Gosal, 2022). Findings indicated

resistance from many staff engaging in and implementing these initiatives. As a result, I felt necessary to shift attention to the way in which students and staff create and nurture community outside the constraints of the neoliberal university. I sought to develop practical examples of how to tackle these challenges by applying active learning activities, within and outside traditional educational spaces. I had three objectives: 1) create and expand a sense of community and belonging among staff and students from marginalised backgrounds; 2) co-create practical solutions to implement the university's decolonial framework based on student-staff partnership, and 3) expand our understanding of what qualifies as knowledge outside traditional educational spaces.

The methodological framework of the project is based on the five dimensions of racism and coloniality experienced in UK university settings (see Figure 1) which I developed elsewhere:

These dimensions (colour blindness, white gaze, West centrism, neutrality and exclusion) demonstrate the ways in which British universities are complicit in systems of oppression. It also points to the need of disrupting/hacking them through anti-racist and decolonial everyday actions and reflections. These dimensions helped shape both the research design and analysis of this project. First, the five dimensions provided a direction into thinking of creative methodological data collection techniques -such as art and use of Legos- that are often overlooked in research on sense of belonging in HE. Second, they also informed the word prompts used in alphabet attack (see further down) as well as the prompt used in the focus group to create posters on an event participants would like the university to do if money was not a restriction. Third, the five dimensions also helped centre students as knowledge producers *via* their lived experiences. I specifically recruited students from marginalised communities, who are often overlooked in these discussions (see below). Seeing students as

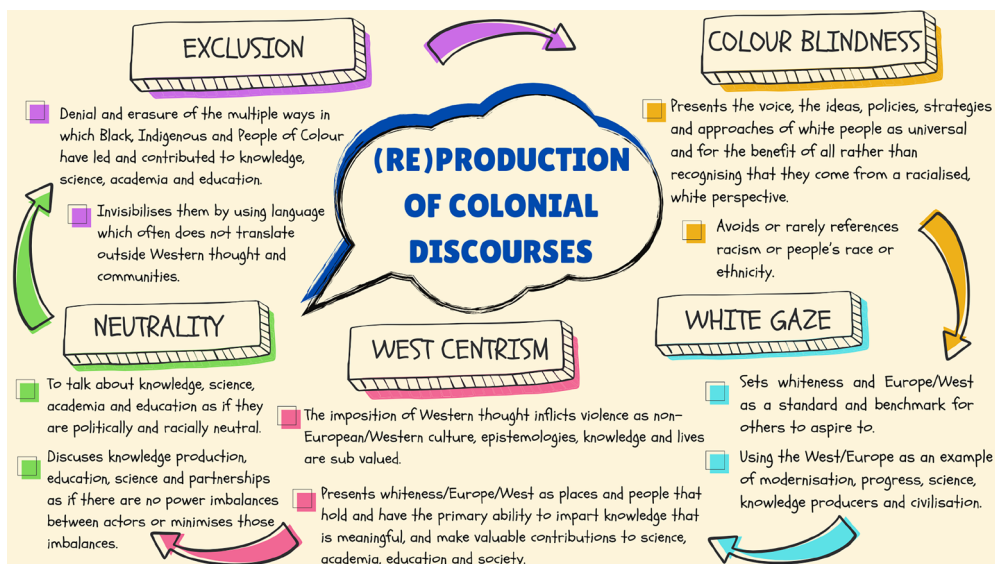


Figure 1. Image of the Five dimensions of racism and coloniality in university settings.
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co-knowledge producers breaks the Western neoliberal binary of good-bad, teacher-student, object-agent and objectivity-subjectivity. Incorporating lived experience as knowledge reflects a more complex understanding of people's multiple positionings (Osborne et al., 2021). Finally, the five dimensions provided a general theoretical framework to code and analyse qualitative data collected in the research activities.

I used purposeful sampling to recruit undergraduate students enrolled in a UK-based Russell Group university who felt underrepresented at university. Ethical approval was given by the university. Potential participants were recruited *via* email and posters with the following message:

Who is part of your community at uni? Are you an undergraduate student from the faculty? Do you feel 'under-represented' at University e.g. due to race, faith, class, sexuality, age, nationality or other reasons? Do you want to help expand our understanding of what qualifies as knowledge outside traditional educational spaces? If YES then come join our project!

Recruitment materials also explained students total time commitment to the project (12h). Students would be compensated for their time and catering would be offered in each event. No prior preparation was required to attend the activities.

Participants who answered the initial recruitment survey ($n=9$) were in their final year of their degree, except one. After providing further project details (participant information sheet), seven students returned the informed consent. Of the total of participants involved in the project ($n=7$), four were Black and Students of Colour while three were white. Four identified as men while three as women. My own positionality as a migrant woman of colour who has been involved in activism helped me connect with students. I've written elsewhere (Loyola-Hernández, 2019) of how as a Global South scholar working in UK HE, I depart from a place of submission and privilege. In the piece, I propose an anti-frontera (anti-border) decolonial feminism that 'recognises and values the passing of people, families, ideas, sentimientos [feelings], from one place to another, knowing that sometimes our physical presence in certain places are acts of resistencia [resistance]' (idem, n/p). This philosophy was at the core of this research, as the design, collection and analysis of data was guided by feminist critical pedagogy, which views students as knowledge producers *via* their lived experiences.

In total, students participated in two workshops, one focus group and two community activities over six months in 2023. To encourage bonding between participants in a non-hierarchical way, an alphabet attack was used in the first workshop. Alphabet attack consists of a prompt given which relates to the overall theme. Participants write a word associated with the prompt. Alphabet attack helps tackle difficult issues in a group setting (Voices that Shake!, 2021). Afterwards, students and I reflected on the words displayed (learning, teaching, university and community) and how they related to the theme of university experience.

Next, students were asked to build their ideal university out of Legos using the Lego Serious Play (LSP) technique. LSP is a technique which uses Lego bricks as a communicating and problem-solving exercise to examine difficult topics in a group setting (Peabody & Noyes, 2017). LSP has been shown to be an inclusive teaching practice and is used to amplify student voices (Hayes & Graham, 2019). For the focus

group, students created a poster for an event they would like the university to organise. For the final workshop, community mapping based on feminist body-territory mapping (Zaragocin & Caretta, 2021) was used to enable students to reflect on their material and emotional relationship with the university in ways traditional maps cannot. Workshops helped participants link their everyday experiences with systemic power structures without academic metric constraints (Heidemann, 2020).

Finally, two community activities -a walk on campus on Black history led by Heritage Corner (a grassroot initiative to rescue Black history in Yorkshire) and a film screening and panel discussion on climate activism- were undertaken. These cultural events were points of reflection for my and participants' experiences of (un)belonging (Westoby et al., 2019).

Quotes used in this article emerged from the two workshops and focus group. Students were recorded (with their consent) only after finalising and producing materials using the alphabet attack, Legos, posters and body mapping. While students were creating these materials, I stepped out of the room and the voice recorder was turned off. Once students had finished the activity, I came back and turned on the recorder. I used the material produced by students as prompts to explore reasons why they had written certain words associated with learning, teaching, university and community. I also asked questions about the posters drawn and the university built out of Legos. After the conclusion of the activities, I carried out visual analysis of the material produced by students and pictures taken of the Lego university built by students. The two community activities were not recorded as they were opened to all members of the public.

After initial coding and visual analysis, two analytical themes emerged: a) contradictions of teaching and learning in the neoliberal university and b) community building and nurturing inclusive environments within UK HEI. Both these themes reflect the juxtaposing experiences lived by staff and students, especially from racially minoritised communities. In the following analytical section, these are explored in more detail.

The contradictions of the UK neoliberal university experienced by students of colour

Over the past few years, there has been an institutional push to increase the number of staff and students from underrepresented communities working and learning in British universities (Bhopal & Henderson, 2021). Despite this, UK HEIs continue to (re)produce systems of oppression. This generates a tension between universities' 'egalitarian' discourse and the lived experience of many of their students and staff, particularly those from racially minoritised communities. In this section, I explore in more detail the multiple inconsistencies which occur within this space. Specifically, I focus on the conflicting messages students receive from the university in terms of 1) representation, inclusivity, accessibility and 2) the role that the university plays in (re)producing inequalities.

Representation, inclusivity and accessible adjustments

HEIs are racialised places because whiteness is the norm (Reay, 2018). In other words, the systems of oppression which sustain the neoliberal university have a detrimental

effect on racially minoritised students. Being one of the few BIPOC in an overwhelmingly white space works in two ways. On the one hand, it disrupts whiteness with the presence of bodies which are seen as out of place (Ahmed, 2012). On the other, this functions as a tool to maintain the status quo 'through investment in ideas of unity, progress, and diversity that are based on whiteness' (García Peña, 2022, p.15). This was expressed by one of the students when asked why they wanted to participate in the project:

It is possible to count on two hands the number of people of ethnic minorities on my course – being one of the few myself. Coming from schools and an area where this was not the case, this was quite the culture shock. In general, seeing people who look like you around university and in my course specifically makes you more comfortable especially during the first few weeks of the first semester. Not only are the students predominantly white but the teaching staff are too (Student 5, Black male).

An intersectional approach to improving students from marginalised backgrounds' experience at university is fundamental. As seen in the above quote, feeling not seen or represented influences how comfortable students feel in their course. For example, during one of the workshops, students discussed how uncomfortable they felt when lessons addressed race as the only non-white person in the room:

I hate that thing when you know it's the topics about race or whatever. And you can just see people in the corner of their eyes looking. Yeah, I wonder what she's thinking. Like, not in a bad way, but just out of curiosity. If you come from a more diverse background, it is a shock to the system (Student 4, Pacific Islander female).

As seen in the above quote, staff and students who do not fit the white-abled, cis-gendered and Western body feel they do not belong; impacting their mental health, retention and progression (Arday, 2018, 2022). Notions of unbelonging influence students' mental health and learning environment which ultimately impacts their progression (Yosso, 2005).

One way in which this is acutely seen is in the obstacles racially minoritised students face when asking for reasonable adjustments during their course. This demonstrates the interconnection between ableism, racism and the marketisation of HE (Henrik Nieminen, 2023; Madriaga et al., 2010). During the alphabet attack during workshop 1, students had written 'access' in relation to 'learning'. When I asked what the relation between these two words was, one of the students highlighted their interconnected identities were almost never acknowledged:

I'm black working-class bisexual, representation is scarce at university for each part of my identity and almost nonexistent representation that acknowledges intersectionality. [...] People are talking about like why do people get extra time? It's just a little bit like, well, it helps me to access so I'm able to do my assessments. I was like, OK, we're just being judged (Student 1, Black female).

The connection between neurodiversity and race in UK HE has increasingly been explored by Lewis and Arday (2023). They argue there is generally a 'whitening of how we understand neurodiversity in academia' (p. 1299). Taking an intersectional approach to accessibility adjustments is vital to improving underrepresented students'

learning experience. This is particularly important for BIPOC working class students with Special Education Needs (SEN). These students tend to be underdiagnosed because of the overlap of ableism, classism and racism (Johnston & Akay, 2022). During the same workshop described above, another student emphasised how much they felt out of place because of their neurodiversity:

If you do not fit into this idea of like what a good student meant to be like it's like you don't really belong (Student 4, Pacific Islander female).

HEIs need to acknowledge the structural discourses and practices which build the 'good' versus 'bad' student narrative. That is, anyone who does not fit the abled, white, cisgendered Western body is seen as 'bad/othered'. University staff must challenge this perspective to create spaces which are oriented in 'wellness, relationships, collective care and action' (Ginwright & Pour Khorshid, 2021, p. 262).

Being critical of British neoliberal universities

Contradictions between UK universities 'egalitarian and inclusive' discourse and the lived experience of students from underrepresented students can also be seen in the content students are taught. During the research activities, students expressed feeling frustrated to be taught social justice issues while feeling the university was not self-critical of its role in multiple unequal power relations. This reflects la paperson's (2017) theory that universities in the Global North are in assemblage with other oppressive systems. For example, during the body mapping activity in workshop 2, students expressed the hypocritical nature of the university's role in climate change and capitalism (see Figure 2).

These students engaged in critical consciousness (Freire, 2017). This generated a sense of complicity for their involvement in unequal power structures. As seen in Figure 2, students felt conflicted about learning about the negative role capitalism plays in the world while having to be part of this harmful system during their time at uni and beyond. A clear example of this was when students highlighted the hypocrisy of the university for teaching them about climate change and sustainability but inviting fossil fuel companies to career fairs. This consciousness awakening (2nd world university) is pivotal for the creation of decolonial praxis (3rd world university). In this example, a decolonial praxis was possible (envisioning different graduate jobs, holding the university accountable) but limited in being able to make material changes on this topic. However, increasingly more students across UK universities have taken matters into their own hands by engaging in direct action to demand universities divest from fossil fuel companies (BBC, 2023), generating 3rd world assemblages.

Another theme where students were critical of the university was in relation to food justice. Being able to purchase food on campus was heavily discussed among participants in all the activities. There was an acute awareness of the financial hit students have taken over the past few years. This is especially seen in the increase in food crisis among university students (Magoqwana, 2018). Participants mentioned food being unaffordable to purchase in the student union because of high pricing. They also criticised the university and Student Union's preference of 'big brands' versus

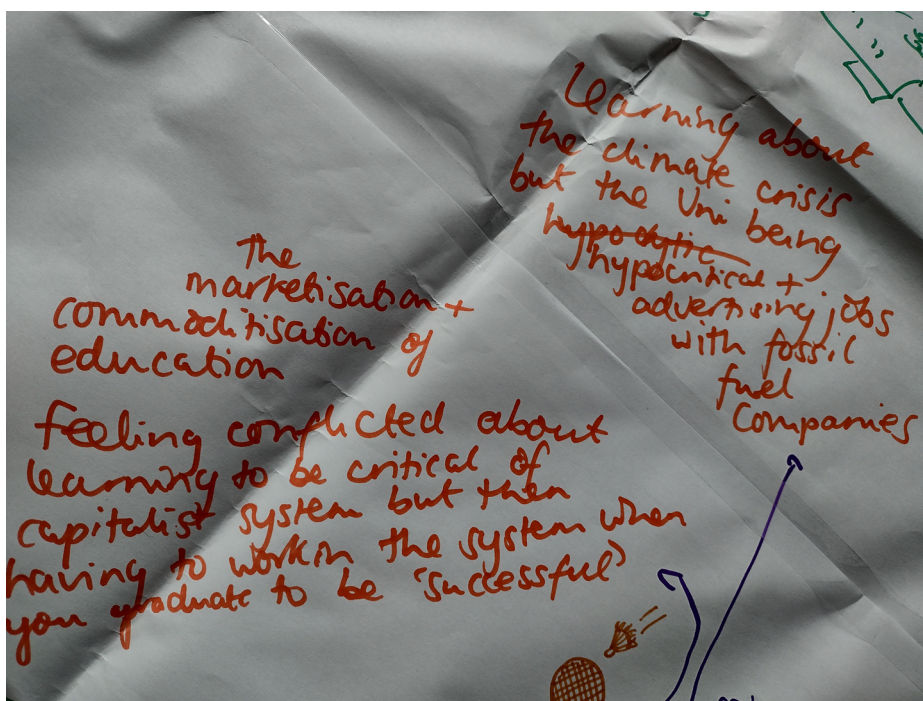


Figure 2. Image of 'core/stomach' in body map activity.

Source: Picture by author, all rights reserved.

more local and sustainable business. This conversation was particularly prominent during the body mapping activity in workshop 2. When I asked which places students did/didn't enjoy on campus, students mentioned the Student Union:

The biggest thing is like [name of an international coffee shop] opening. I think that's just such a wrong direction. High Street brands like [name of an international coffee shop] is a very problematic company that you know is involved in quite a lot of like fair washing and a lot of problematic things. I would say I don't like that space [student union] (Student 6, white male).

Increasingly lines between HE and corporate life/practices are being blurred. This can be translated into universities becoming 'hypercommercialised spaces increasingly resembl[ing] malls [...]' (Giroux, 2003, p.153). The university has a role in providing a well-rounded and holistic experience. This entails being able to offer affordable, healthy and culturally aware food choices. Yet as seen in the above quote, market competition drives HEIs including student unions. Staff and students encounter neoliberalised values which are a direct contradiction to social responsibility.

Because Global North universities are '*in assemblage*' (la paperson, 2017, p. 63, emphasis in original) with the military-industrial-complex and other capitalist organisations, it becomes necessary to hack it *via scyborg assemblages of hope*. As seen in the following section, nurturing collective assemblages becomes imperative to explore notions of complicity and possible transformative action points in a kind and loving way. This must happen far from the worry of neoliberal metrics of assessments and marking.

Nurturing hope within UK universities

As seen in this section, creating counter spaces to disrupt corporate time (1st world university), force us to slow down and reflect (2nd world university) and generate anti-neoliberal practices (3rd world university) can be facilitated through *scyborg assemblages of hope*. One way to do this is through innovative pedagogical practices used in this project. Such techniques help us navigate the intricate and often contradictory experiences of staff and students of colour in British universities. An example of this type of pedagogical practice can be seen in the alphabet attack during the first workshop. When students were given the prompt 'learning' (Figure 3) multiple words were written down which reflect the conflicting sentiments.

Words such as decolonisation, community and education were associated with 'learning'. In the same exercise, students also used oil investment, xenophobia and money to describe 'learning'. Complex feelings of guilt are often experienced by teachers who see education as a transformative tool but are restricted by neoliberal university guidelines (Giroux, 2013). Educators are being pressured to professionalise students so they can obtain a 'high quality earning' job after graduating (Quinlan et al., 2025). This forces students to see themselves as consumers and staff as producers of a commodity (i.e. course material, core skills to get a high earning job). Under this model, priority is given to prepare students to participate in the capitalist workforce once they graduate. The current system rewards individualism and competitiveness and discourages community care and equality among staff and students (Loyola-Hernández et al., 2022).

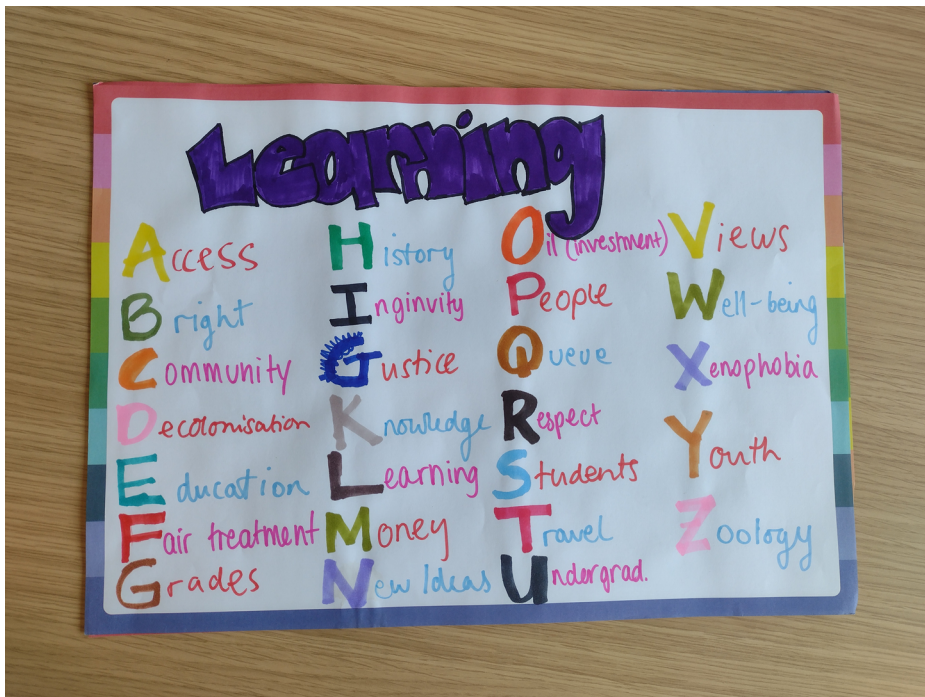


Figure 3. Alphabet attack exercise done by students with 'learning' as prompt, first workshop.
Source: Picture by author, all rights reserved.

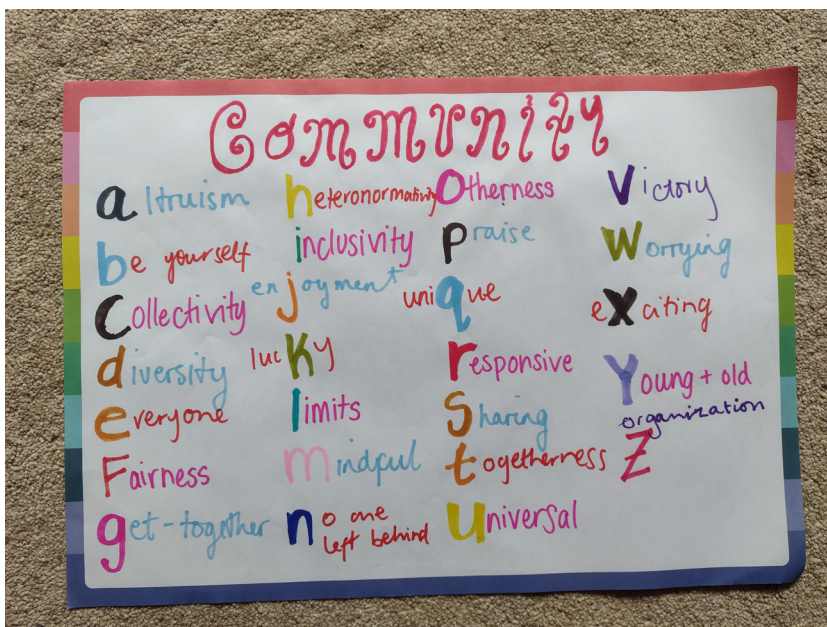


Figure 4. Alphabet attack exercise done by students with 'community' as prompt, first workshop. Source: Picture by author, all rights reserved.

This can feel disheartening and discourage staff and students to nurture collective praxis of care. This is where hope becomes key for implementing *scyborg assemblages*. We cannot create spaces of disruption within British neoliberal universities without hope. Hope from both students and staff, where learning from each other in a kind and supportive way and resisting together is a reality (Freire, 2001, 2017). Hope to create a learning environment where metrics such as assessments, marking, grants and publications do not exercise pressure points for exchanging knowledge, experiences and building community.

To explore the ways in which *scyborg assemblages of hope* are created and nurtured by students, it was important to understand how participants viewed the concept of 'community' (Figure 4). Words such as be yourself, no one left behind, inclusivity, togetherness were used by students to describe positive outlooks on 'community' versus words like heteronormativity, otherness, worrying and limits which were used to denote negative sentiments. The diverse and contradictory words associated with 'community' reflect the existence of multiple universities within one. It also demonstrates the double-edge notion of love and exclusion within UK neoliberal HEIs discussed in earlier sections.

Creating community spaces becomes imperative for students who feel underrepresented, as they are 'group-affirming spaces where students of colour feel safe and secure' (Samatar et al., 2021, p.720). Students who feel out of place at university need to feel supported. The importance of community was expressed by one of the participants during the first stage of the project:

I believe that developing a community, in which everyone is welcome, and a sense of belonging within the University is fundamental for students' wellbeing and overall success concerning their chosen degree (Student 7, mature white female).



Figure 5. Ideal university built by students using the Lego Serious Play technique, workshop 1.
Source: Picture by author, all rights reserved.

A way in which this project sought to create (even if momentarily) the 3rd world university space was *via* Lego building (Figure 5). Students had to collectively negotiate a cluster of things from the physical appearance of the university, accommodation and tuition fees, sustainability to issues around senior management.

After building the university out of Legos, students walked me through the space they had created. Among the highlights, their university had accommodation for staff and students which was affordable and in good condition. Free transportation (powered by solar energy) was offered to promote sustainability and encourage less use of Ubers. Students emphasised transportation should be free as many struggled to move around and beyond campus due to strained finances (Crawford & McKenzie, 2023). Wider use of the sustainable garden on campus and an extension of this program across the university were also mentioned. This would be a way to cope with the financial burden students are currently facing to purchase food discussed previously:

We added like a little like food pantry cause you know how expensive it is to get food on campus and like it's just really difficult having like some kind of affordable food thing. It would be really nice [to have affordable food] (Student 4, Pacific Islander female).

Multiple green areas would help increase biodiversity and wildlife on campus. Students pointed out the importance of being surrounded by nature, including green areas. These can help decompress, offer moments of relaxation and reconnect with the environment. Community gardening projects have been known to bring people from different backgrounds together (Jakubec et al., 2021).

A way in which their ideal university promotes non-human and human connections was being completely net zero. Their university uses a hydroelectric generator and is fully divested from oil. Other forms in which they wanted to promote a sense of belonging was having smaller classrooms. Teaching and learning activities were not based on marking and assessment but rather explored creative thinking. Finally, students had an entire discussion on whether their university wanted/needed a VC. They agreed that it was important to have someone help shape and support the community. However, participants expressed this was a different type of management.

They [their VC] don't got any hair, but they're more representative. We're talking about representative of, like, race and, like, sexual orientation and things like that (Student 1, Black female).

And they're down here. With everyone else and they're talking to the students and staff. They are not in a tower by themselves (Student 2, white female).

Senior management have a critical role in determining the extent to which neoliberal policies impact universities as they 'set budgets and internal policy, as well as by the signals they send to faculty and staff about the core ethos of their institution' (Croucher & Lacy, 2022, p.282). Hence, participants located their VC 'with staff and students' and presented them with non-binary pronouns to reflect what diversity and inclusion means to them. This signals to what they expect a leader to do. Students thought senior management should listen and be self-reflecting of the needs of everyone but particularly those marginalised within UK HEIs. This would in theory lead to material changes which would transform the current state of the neoliberal university.

As seen in this section, creating *scyborg assemblages of hope* means disrupting the core values associated with the British university. This means not having any assessments or other metrics linked to these interactions. Community-led pedagogies value intergenerational knowledge and interdisciplinary exchanges. They discourage barriers between students and staff. These interactions must happen while being in community with each other. Such collective organising nurtures curiosity, critical thinking and empathy which may lead to change. *Scyborg assemblages of hope* facilitate community-led pedagogies to move beyond the 2nd university (where critical pedagogy is located) to a decolonial praxis (3rd university). Even if momentarily.

Conclusion

I have discussed how the marketisation of UK HE has made it increasingly difficult to create and nurture a sense of community. This is partly due to the values which accompany the neoliberalisation of education. Within this context, competitiveness, individualism, fast pace, standardisation and pitting students against each other are taught and championed. Less priority is given to collective building, time to develop

critical thinking, creativity, compassion and love. I show how staff and students move between worlds to create new ones by attempting to dismantle neoliberal dynamics within British universities. Creating *scyborg assemblages of hope via* community-led pedagogies is key in disrupting British neoliberal HEIs. This is because they generate pockets of hope and possibilities to hack systems of oppression within these institutions. This makes educators and their actions ineligible to the university. These assemblages also allow us to deploy the institution's resources and space for social justice activism and organising (Reddy, 2018).

I have argued that *scyborg assemblages of hope* are contradictory. They happen within Global North neoliberal universities. Yet, these HEIs are hackable. Meaning, they can be transformed (Even if momentarily) from within by staff, students and the wider community, into decolonial and community-led projects. A way to do this is to advocate for the importance of community building beyond formal university settings, i.e. the classroom; as well as incorporate some of the bottom-up practices discussed in this article. Such collective actions help us, especially as underrepresented communities, navigate the stickiness and contradictions of working and studying in UK HEIs. By exploring such themes, I add to the growing body of literature on the impact of how racism and whiteness is experienced and challenged by students of colour in UK HE (O'Neill, 2025).

I've suggested elsewhere changes to policy and institutional frameworks which can be enacted by UK HEIs who are committed to structural changes -3rd world university- (see 'recommendations' in author reference). In this article, I provide practical examples of methods that can be used to create and nurture *scyborg assemblages of hope*. I've produced a step-by-step guide of how one can translate the methodological data collection techniques used in this project to pedagogical practices ([link to guide](#)). The implementation of such pedagogies has led to tangible actions in my university. This demonstrates the project's wider structural implications. First, having funding from the Leeds Institute For Teaching Excellence (LITE) has meant engaging with different groups involved in teaching, student access and sense of belonging initiatives. This has fed into current and future strategies to support underrepresented students and staff. Second, a 'community shelf' with games, puzzles and mindful activities has been piloted in the researcher's school reception. The expectation is it may contribute to building a sense of belonging and community within the school by bringing staff and students together outside teaching interactions.

Finally, a poster based on the outcomes of this project has been co-created by the author and Nicole Marie Burton from Petroglyph Studios to reflect the multiple complex conversations on climate change, decolonisation and sense of (un)belonging during the research. The Whose Uni? poster is available to anyone around the world via a [free downloadable link](#). The poster seeks to be a pedagogical tool which can be incorporated into mainstream teaching practices beyond HE in ways traditional lectures, seminars and tutorials cannot. The above actions allow us to make new and nurture ongoing *scyborg assemblages of hope* to hack the neoliberal university.

However, we must acknowledge the limitations of *scyborg assemblages of hope* given they are still located within the 1st world university. These spaces may have little to no impact on material changes needed to address systemic oppression. Yet, until such transformations occur, there is an urgent need to create *assemblages of hope* which provide a space for community building among scyborgs.

Note

1. I recognise that BIPOC is a term which originates in the USA, and it is a contested term in the UK given how the far-right has appropriated the term “indigenous”. In the UK, the institutional term used is Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority (BAME, BME). However, as a scholar from the Global South, particularly a Latin American country, it is important for me to recognise Indigenous people and scholars who self-identify as such, who have migrated to the UK.

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