



The Internationalist

Episode one transcript – does decolonising higher education matter?

Natasha Lokhun:

Welcome to this first edition of The Internationalist Higher Education Matters, a podcast from The Association of Commonwealth Universities. I'm Natasha Lokhun. This series will delve into the responsibility of universities, to confront both the past and the present. I'm going to be asking who gets to learn, and who gets to teach in today's society, where the legacy of empire is still an open and often painful issue.

This year around the world from South Africa to Australia, from Canada to Kenya, we've seen protests against current racial injustices, and demands to address historical roles. Universities are places of learning, and they have a key role to play in creating open and fairer societies, but they're also reflections of the world in which they operate, and they can even reinforce inequalities. Demands to correct the wrongs of the past are often accompanied by calls for decolonization. But what does decolonization actually mean, especially for higher education? The word comes laden with lots of implications, and many people have their own ideas of what it is, and what it consists of. To help untangle and hopefully shed light on this controversial term, I'm joined today by two people whose views on this issue, have been shaped by both their personal, and professional experience. Professor Adam Habib is the Incoming Director of SOAS, University of London, and served as the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa.

Adam is not just a scholar of political science. He's someone who has immersed himself in political and social struggle during the years of apartheid, and afterwards. As someone of Indian heritage, he has also experienced the reality of being a minority in South Africa. We're also joined today by Professor Jonathan Jansen, Distinguished Professor of Education at the University of Stellenbosch, and President of the Academy of Science in South Africa. Jonathan, you are known for your views on transformation, peace and reconciliation, and unity. And, you very much put these into practice when you were appointed as the first Black vice-chancellor in the history of the University of the Free State, really leading change through education. With that in mind, I wanted to ask you first, what springs to mind for you when you hear the term decolonization?

Jonathan Jansen:

So when I hear decolonization, I hear two things. One is a historical process in which countries in Asia and Africa, other parts of the world were formerly decolonized. In other words, the nationalist elite takes over, people have democratic elections, they choose their own leadership, etc. So, as the historical process of the late 50s, the 1960s and 70s. That's the one thing I hear, and indeed much of the literature on decolonization cited today, actually refers to those anti-colonial protests, and to processes that today we described as decolonization. But, there's a second meaning, which is more commonly understood today. And, that is decolonization as a process to address the lingering effects of empire. In other words, the things that colonialism left undone, and that includes everything from the dominance of the English language, over indigenous languages in the former colonies, to the inequalities that still exist between those who are privileged, and the natives, so to speak.

When students protest today, often those two things get confused, decolonization as a historical process, and the decolonization as a live contemporary process, in which we try to unscramble things that continue to linger from colonial rule into the present.

Natasha Lokhun:

And reflecting on that, that influence of, as you say, almost these sorts of two phases really, where you have that anti-colonial movement, and then the more contemporary meaning. Adam, what do you think of the key elements when it comes to decolonization in higher education specifically?

Adam Habib:

The first element of it is representivity. I think it's absolutely important that we reflect a diversity of people. And that's important, it seems to me, for creating the sense of belonging, but also it's important for surfacing new knowledge. The second element is, if you like, surfacing all knowledge systems in the human community. All of our communities have had different bodies of knowledge, some of it more formal, some of it more informal. The third, and it will be interesting to get Jonathan's views on this, it seems to me that if we are going to create the professionals, and develop the knowledge structures to address the challenges of our time, which are all transnational in character, then we got to look beyond disciplinary boundaries. And, the challenge I have in that regard is that much of the programmatic curriculum in the university has its roots in the late 19, early 20th centuries, around a body of discipline focused structures. And, I question whether that's the most appropriate foundation on which to establish this.

And then, fourth and finally, if we looked at all of our challenges are transnational in character, climate change, inequality, political and social polarization. To fix them, what need is technologies, world-class science, but local knowledge. And, our mode of global partnership until now, has been to identify talented people in the developing world, and taking them to London, New York, and Beijing. And, North of 80 percent of those, other than in Singapore and post 2006 China, never returned. And so the challenges, we weakening institutional capacity, and human capabilities to address that.

Natasha Lokhun:

I will definitely come back to you. But I mean, you mentioned you particularly like to hear Jonathan's thoughts on your third kind of key element, which is thinking beyond disciplinary boundaries, Jonathan, your reflections.

Jonathan Jansen:

Problems around the world do not come to us as specific disciplines, or in the form of a particular fields of inquiry. They come to us as whole problems that require of course, a much more sophisticated and integrated approach, than what our socialization as disciplinarians allow. So for example, COVID-19, I've always been amazed at how the approach to the study of the problem particularly in the early period, was only through the lenses of epidemiology or Virology or vaccine science, on re-opening of schools based simply on infection rates within the local community. You have to consider things like the particular forms of organization in a classroom and in a school, which is often packed, often intense, often interactional. And therefore, you needed education organization specialists to cast their eyes on the problem. This is not one or the other.

Natasha Lokhun:

And the idea of returning, I suppose, to the foundation of disciplines and looking at that. Adam is your opinion that would help address these challenges, if we take that real life example of COVID, is it about looking back at the foundations? Is it about drawing in new sources of knowledge? How would that apply I suppose, using that real example that Jonathan gave?

Adam Habib:

We you need a conversation on how you reimagine the programmatic foundation of the university, by bringing a conversation between discipline, disciplinary lenses, and multidisciplinary lenses. And whether that's done... The way we've done it now, as you do discipline-based courses in your undergraduate, and you sometimes move on to multidisciplinary in your post-graduate, I'm not so sure that, that's the logical thing to do.

Natasha Lokhun:

If I may, you used the word we Adam. I mean, is it your opinion that, that conversation needs to be happening in other universities, between universities?

Adam Habib:

I think it needs to be happening within universities, between universities, and between universities stakeholders. So, let me give you an example. One of the interesting things in the UK is that, the humanities doesn't receive a subsidy. Whereas the engineering sciences, and the natural sciences, and the medicinal sciences, receive a subsidy. Now, if you thinking about, we want to understand pandemics and create professionals, then those professionals need to understand the sociology and anthropology of pandemics, as much as they understand some of the medicinal sciences that Jonathan has been speaking about. How you finance that, is also going to be important. Co-curriculum, world-class science in conversation, if you like, with local understanding. Well, that co-curriculum is going to have to be reimaged. How are you going to finance it in an unequal world, where the funding in the UK or the U.S. is so much larger, than a funding in South Africa, or let's say Tanzania?

Natasha Lokhun:

We've touched upon the pandemic naturally, because we're all living it at the moment. And, it's fair to say that 2020 is obviously been quite a momentous year. Thinking about that further, and reflecting on not just COVID-19, but also the impact of the murder of George Floyd, and the resulting kind of protests. And, where do you think we are now in the debate around decolonization?

Jonathan Jansen:

I think that the debate on decolonization is over. The question that I've often asked myself is why in South Africa did this stem emerge, when it was never part of South Africa's anti-apartheid, or even anti-colonial banner, under which to organize students and others in fighting for changes to our universities. So, one of the things that worries me, because I do believe that decolonization is one of the different ways, not the only way, one of the different ways in which we can dislodge power within institutional arrangements, such as in university curricula. Because, it was used so often as part of a broader political strategy, it was easily displaceable or dispensable. So, because it's a slogan, you wait for the next slogan to come along. And, when decolonization just becomes a banner for protesting, rather than a deep deliberative attempt to shift these complexions of higher education institutions, the cultures that keep them in place, and the content that is stowable.

I mean, take like the United Kingdom, for example. I had seriously doubt, that young people in schools in the United Kingdom get an adequate exposure from early on, to the imperial history of Great Britain. I doubt that very much, okay. Now, how on earth can you talk about decolonization, unless those really fundamental knowledge, and power of inequality and exploitation are dealt with at a deeper level, than simply a protest march, or the bringing down of a statue, and so on. In that context, even something as horrific as the murder of George Floyd, cannot be sustained if it simply takes place in that realm of street politics. And, doesn't also take place in the context of the transformation of institutions from the policing system in the big cities, to the curricula of the universities.

Natasha Lokhun:

So, given the fact that there is this element of the movement, and as you say, these dramatic moments not translating. Do you think there's a risk Adam, that the term decolonization is losing its meaning, losing its power?

Adam Habib:

I think you're absolutely right. The social mobilization is necessary to put stuff on the agenda. The George Floyd moment, the issue of statues and memorials, and how you think that. But if you leave that simply in the hands of politicians, you get into trouble. And, my problem is that there's too many politicians in the debate, and too few scholars. I gave you some definitions of what I think are elements of the decolonization, now I want to qualify it. So, the first I said is representivity. Bu, here's what the problem is, surfacing different strands of knowledge, absolutely necessary, but that does not mean we don't look at it critically. Too many people, politicians or political activists say, "I don't like something, therefore it must not be taught." I've had students walk in and say, "I'm a

Marxist, I don't want to learn neoclassical economics." Well, how do you learn Marxist economics, without an understanding of neoclassical economics? More importantly, the university project is to force you to look at challenges differently, to reimagine challenges. It is meant to create intellectual discomfort.

Everything requires a critical gaze, including the knowledges that come out from communities that have previously disadvantaged. And it seems to me that too often, we are so politically correct in this debate that we don't want to say actually, certain of the stuff is really nonsensical. And actually, too much of the decolonization debate is coming from a nativist framing. It's coming from an ethno-nationalist framing. Decolonization, if it's meant to be progressive and radical, needs to recognize a cosmopolitan world we live in. It needs to recognize the importance of social justice, in that cosmopolitan world. It cannot be the essentialization of racial, or cultural, or religious identities. And as long as we don't do that, we're not going to be advancing a radical and progressive project.

Natasha Lokhun:

This idea of intellectual discomfort. And, I think the term intellectual you're using that very broadly. You talk about re-imagining public spaces, for example, this idea of us being comfortable with those conflicting views. Jonathan, you mentioned obviously, your key interest is in the curricular. How does that concept of intellectual discomfort sit with what you think, or how you think curriculum should evolve?

Jonathan Jansen:

So, in the hardcore version of decolonization, you must replace a Western knowledge at the center of, let's say, the African curriculum, with African knowledge at the center, okay. The world doesn't work like that, knowledge doesn't organize itself like that. So as scholar, my orientation is to say, "What is the best and the most appropriate forms of knowledge that I can draw on, from North America, or from Western Europe, or from Southeast Asia," in order to understand the [inaudible 00:16:19]. Even as the problem sets themselves, the new theorizing comes from within the African continent. So, I see knowledge being produced much more in partnership with, rather than in antagonism to a Western knowledge. In other words, I don't see myself as lacking either in confidence or competence, as lacking in the ability to generate my own theoretical ideas around complex problems. And unfortunately, we play into the hands of the powerful in the West, by pretending we know nothing, by pretending we produce nothing, by pretending.

So, I want to look at knowledge from all over the world to the extent that it helps me understand a complex problem, rather than a priori starting off with the notion that there's good knowledge and bad knowledge, knowledge from the West and knowledge from the Global South. I find that to be incredibly self-defeating.

Natasha Lokhun:

If I can almost reflect back what I think I've heard from both of you, whether we're talking about, as you say, the content of the curriculum, research projects. Adam, you spoke earlier about the way that universities interacts with each other, and the need for kind of global or co-curricular rather. It strikes me that you're both calling for across these different issues, very much for the progressive conversation, the progressive movement and discussions to be global. It's not something that can necessarily happen at just the national level. Am I right in thinking that? And, Adam I'll come to you first, if you think that is the case, then is that happening right now? And if not, how do you think it can move to that?

Adam Habib:

So, I'm suggesting that it happens at a multiplicity of levels. It will happen within institutions, it'll happen with the national structures, it will happen within global structures. And even, when it happens within the institution or the nation, it must be conducted in a manner with open boundaries, with open parameters, that sees the agenda, not simply as a national agenda. It sees the problem as effectively a global conversation. You see, I often say, the institutions in the UK and U.S. sometimes, the most prominent, are worried about their brand. But, they so focused on the institutional brand, that they forget the institutional mission. The mission is to train citizens of the

21st century, to create professionals that can allow us to address the multiplicity of challenges that are playing out on a transnational plan.

Natasha Lokhun:

Jonathan, your ideas on, have universities forgotten their institutional mission, and the essentially global nature of that, and the inherent call for social justice within it as well?

Jonathan Jansen:

My understanding of the universities today is that they have lost their focus, by being pressurized into what some people call neoliberal compulsions. In other words, how can we be more efficient? How can we make more money? How can we serve the state more faithfully? How can we go up in the global rankings? Now, those are not unimportant things, particularly the need to be... And, I speak as a former vice chancellor. It was important for me not to waste money, it was important for me to make sure that we could give a good account of our spending, in the context of being largely state-funded institutions. But, universities are not government departments, universities are not there to service the state. And so, I am concerned that these other mundane measures of goodness, tend to dominate in the daily work of institutions, and they forget.

And, that's why we are susceptible too, when the state infringes on the autonomy of institutions, we susceptible, because all of our focus has been on these traditional metrics of performance. We therefore cannot defend academic freedom, when we need to. And as a result of that, we start to do things that plays into the agenda of conservative regime. Such as in South Africa, this clamping down, for example, on the hiring of African professors from outside of South Africa. You're not a university. If you don't open yourself to the best talent from anywhere in the world, in making an academic appointment. But here in this country, you have to now declare whether you're White, Colored, Indian, or African. And, you have to declare whether you are from other African countries, whether you have residency status, and all of that nonsense. This is bad.

And then you have, even among decolonial activists in South Africa, people who then make these claims that, depending on whether you're from within our borders or outside of our borders, you are a credible or legitimate candidate for an academic position. Now, hello, those borders were created by colonial authorities. So, you can't on the one hand, want to be decolonized in your political position, but at the same time, respect the very borders that colonial powers inaugurated, in order to keep us apart, in order to create this sense of distance, and so on. So, I really do believe that charity begins at home, you begin by changing your own conditions of oppression, rather than to imagine that the problem lies elsewhere.

Natasha Lokhun:

We're coming to an end now. So Jonathan, I just wanted to ask you for a final thought really on, do you think we'll ever be able to leave this topic, this idea of decolonization behind?

Jonathan Jansen:

I don't think decolonization as a concept, or as politics should ever be left behind. I really do believe it is an important analytical tool for making sense of the state we're in. I would like to see much more attention being paid to the curriculum, not as in an either or, African versus Western, but in a much more complicated, sophisticated way. Thinking about who produce knowledge, where we publish that knowledge, who benefits from that knowledge. What is very important to the realize, especially when it comes to decolonization, it doesn't just happen by spontaneous combustion, it happens through deliberation, through agencies, through people taking concrete steps to change the curriculum.

Natasha Lokhun:

Thank you. Adam, your thoughts. Are we ever going to be able to walk away from this?

Adam Habib:

What I think we need, is a complete re-imagination. That imagines the epistemological foundations of the institutions in fundamentally new ways, in tune with the realities of today. And, because it's such a complex task, I do think tolerance and open debate has to be the hallmark of it. Don't use

the colonial institution as the parameters of the re-imagination. And, tolerance and open debate has to be non-negotiable in this deep deliberation, that is required at this historical moment.

Natasha Lokhun:

Thank you. I think today's conversation has really revealed how complex, and profound the discussions about decolonization should be, whether that's the right term to use, how contested that term is. And also, I think how there is that need for really a global debate, and for it very much to be a debate, and to be open and welcoming of those different points of view, and to be comfortable with discomfort as well. I look forward to over the podcast series, exploring some of these issues in more detail, and having that debate.

I'd like to thank our guests for today. Professor Adam Habib, incoming director of SOAS University, London, and Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. And, Professor Jonathan Johnson, Distinguished Professor of Education at the University of Stellenbosch. I hope you found this episode of the Internationalist, Higher Education Matters, valuable. The Association of Commonwealth Universities is committed to highlighting the issues that influence learning, and teaching in your world. Please do subscribe to this series, wherever you get your podcasts. And like, comment, and share the program. You can find us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Just search for The Association of Commonwealth Universities. Thank you for joining me, Natasha Lokhun. The producer is Lindsay Riley, Executive Producer, Richard Miron, and, it's an Earshot Strategies production.