



The Internationalist

Episode three transcript – belonging at university, an equal future?

Natasha Lokhun:

Hello, and welcome to this latest edition of The Internationalist - Higher Education Matters. A podcast from The Association of Commonwealth Universities. I'm Natasha lokhun.

Natasha Lokhun:

In this series, we delve into the responsibility of universities to confront both the past and the present. I'm 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. Universities are places of learning and they have a critical role in creating open and fairer societies. But they also reflect the world in which they operate and they can even reinforce inequalities. In today's episode, we're getting to the heart of this issue and talking about those whose minds and lives are shaped by university, students. The traditional model of universities has been, it could be argued, elitist. They've been viewed as ivory towers that rise above society, rather than reflecting it.

Natasha Lokhun:

We are starting to see this change as more students from different backgrounds enter higher education. But what is their experience of actually being at university like? And how should universities create a sense of belonging for all of those who attend? I'm joined today by two guests who bring different perspectives on this topic. Candace Brunette-Debassige, is Acting Vice-Provost and Associate Vice-President of Indigenous Initiatives at Western University in Canada. Welcome Candace, and thank you for joining us.

Candace Brunette-Debassige:

Thank you for having me. It's good to be here.

Natasha Lokhun:

Larissa Kennedy is president of the National Union of Students in the UK. She's currently on a sabbatical year from reading Politics, International Studies and Hispanic Studies at the University of Warwick. Hello to you, Larissa.

Larissa Kennedy:

Hi, thanks so much for having me as well.

Natasha Lokhun:

Larissa, I'm actually going to come to you first as the students in the room, to ask you your thoughts on this idea of universities being an inclusive space for all students. Do you think that's a realistic ambition?

Larissa Kennedy:

I don't think that universities, as we know them, are able to be inclusive for all students, no. Because they're spaces that were never built by, nor for us. And so it's almost this question of trying to force black and brown students into a space that's always going to be reproducing forms of racism that they experience. So, whilst I think it's important that we look at what decoloniality means within the

Academy, I also think it's important that we're building spaces outside of it. Because those spaces are never going to truly reflect, as much as we try and we move within them in the ways that we can and do what we can to improve them.

Larissa Kennedy:

I just think in the long run, we're also going to need to think about how we build spaces that are actually centered on the healing of black and brown folks. Centered on the education that we not only want, but deserve and need. And I'm just excited about the limitless possibilities once we're actually building beyond these systems and structures, that are actually complicit and active actors in our oppression and the violence that we face.

Natasha Lokhun:

You talk about spaces outside the Academy. Do you mean literally? And I know that you don't mean literal spaces, but that means that you don't see a space or room for those spaces rather, within universities, is that right?

Larissa Kennedy:

I do think that de-colonizing work within the Academy is so, so important. Don't get me wrong. I love doing that work and seeing how far we can push the boundaries of what we can do within, but I also really do take great pride in being a small part of the team at the Free Black University. At the moment we're building this hub for radical and transformative knowledge that actually centers black healing. And already, I can just see that that space is going to be far beyond, and move far beyond what we could ever do within the Academy, because we're not fighting within.

Natasha Lokhun:

If I may, that's quite a pessimistic perspective really, or viewpoint on universities and their capacity to change and transform. Candace, do you agree?

Candace Brunette-Debassige:

I can completely respect and I don't deny that it is a struggle. The work that I've lent and my labor to the project of decolonizing from within, or indigenizing from within, as we talk about here in Canada. And there are days I question that project. It is a project of struggle continuously because the disciplines, the structures, the policies, the procedures, they were not built with indigenous peoples in mind. And when we look at indigenous peoples in Canada, from my grandparents' generation, my grandparents generation were legally prohibited from attending universities, unless they enfranchised. And enfranchisement meant that they gave up their rights as indigenous peoples to assimilate. And that was forced assimilation, certainly to get higher education, but even after those laws were abandoned, there was continued to be an assumed assimilation. And the assumed assimilation happens in how the institution is built on Euro-Western ideologies, colonial ideologies, racist ideologies that reproduce the ways of thinking about indigenous peoples and indigenous ways of knowing, and it tends to silence us.

Candace Brunette-Debassige:

And it tends to other us. The work that I'm doing in universities is trying to shed light on that. And that's a project of struggle because it's so dominant in the institution. It's so taken for granted that people don't generally see it or even recognize it. So, you feel like you're trying to point something out that people aren't interested or willing to recognize. So, I hear and respect what Larissa is pointing to. I don't deny that reality. But I'm holding onto some hope, I'm still working within the institution and trying to do what we can because I have seen change.

Natasha Lokhun:

What kind of change?

Candace Brunette-Debassige:

When I think about the intergenerational shifts in my own family, it's clear. My grandparents' generation, legally prohibited. My mother's generation, a lot of people at that time in the seventies, when she was growing up, were going in as mature students. Were often getting into the university,

not directly out of high school, but maybe they would go into the workforce and go to college first, then go to university or go in through an access pathway program. Today in 2020, we're seeing students... First nations, indigenous students in Canada coming in right out of high school and going into the university. They're getting through at higher rates than they used to. We're still chronically underrepresented and their experiences I think are debatable, but there's a larger representation and we have more indigenous faculty members. And this is where I think that the shifts really happen is when we have more indigenous faculty members, because they're contributing to changing the classroom. That's really exciting. That gives me great hope. So, I can see that generational change over time. It's small, but it is there.

Natasha Lokhun:

And if I can pick up on one point, which you said, which is this idea that of just how crucial, if we're talking about change, how crucial it is to have representation amongst the scholars in the actual academic community. To have members of marginalized communities there. You also talked about the fact that, although there might be more students now than there were before, their experience might be debatable. I wonder, Larissa, can I ask you to reflect on the interplay within that? And do you have the experience of the change, or the difference, or the impact of that idea of representation in the people who are teaching you? And how that affects your experience of being at university?

Larissa Kennedy:

Yeah. I find that a really interesting one because I speak to so many black students who say they just would not have survived the institution without the black woman, specifically actually, and women of color, who've been doing the work of uplifting them. And it's funny, even for myself and my personal journey through education, I haven't had black professors or anything, nothing like that. But I've always continued to seek out the black folks at the institution. So, as you said, at the beginning, I study politics and social studies, Hispanic studies, but I actually ended up seeking out black women in the history department, in the sociology department. They weren't even related to my study directly, but I was like, "You're there! And I need to find out what you're up to and what you're doing, just so I can feel like this is possible." Navigating these institutions is hard.

Larissa Kennedy:

It's exhausting for us as students. Sometimes it just feels insurmountable when you feel like you're trying to just do the work and actually get through that, which obviously for any student, is a journey. But also on top of that, feeling that there's pressure on you to also change the institution because you're looking around and thinking, I don't want the next set of students of color after me to have to experience this as well. In the UK, I don't know if this happens everywhere, but in the UK, we have these things called Freshers' Fairs. So, for the first years, we run a bit of a fair where they can come up to every stall and hear about the society and if they want to get involved. So, we were running ours for the anti-racism society, welcoming people to the stall and student after student, after student, after student came up to us, talking about the racism that they'd experienced and how harrowing it had been and how shocked they were. And these students of color were on day four of their university experiences.

Natasha Lokhun:

Day four is incredible, right? You've only been there four days. What kind of racism? Do you have examples?

Larissa Kennedy:

Yeah, it was all of this interpersonal stuff where they felt so ostracized, so othered from the people that were around them. They just felt like they couldn't relate, people asking things like, "Can you teach me to twerk?" All of this, just microaggressions already. And myself relating to that, because at the time I was a second year student, and I could so relate to what they were going through. We can't keep doing this as a community because we focus so much on getting people through the door and making sure that people have access to these institutions. But what are we giving them access to?

Natasha Lokhun:

One of the things that I've been pondering about when thinking about this topic, is where does that journey into university start? I agree with you, it's not just about... If we think about in the... And again, I'm afraid that I must speak from the UK perspective, A-level results day, which is the day that people find out whether they've got into university. There's lots of focus on how many black students, for example, have got into Oxbridge, but what about their experience when they're there, right? I'm quite interested in where this sense of belonging or not belonging might start. And Candace, if I can ask you to reflect on your own journey into university, how much is it about trying to foster this sense of belonging, really before you set foot in the door?

Candace Brunette-Debassige:

It's been a journey of struggle, for sure. But in Canada, indigenous people, we started what we call Indian Control of Indian Education. And I know Indian is not the appropriate term, but this was back in the seventies. In Canada, we started to really just reclaim our rights. At that time, it was all around supporting us in transitioning into the dominant university in the seventies. So now, we're in 2020 and every university and college in Canada, I am pretty sure it's almost 100%, have indigenous student services. And this is a unit that's there to support them. So, it's not just about a service that helps students once they get in and helps them get through. So, okay. So, you know how to code switch? Okay. You got to act like this when you go in certain spaces and we're starting to actually even move beyond that and say, "You know what? Indigenous people don't need to change. The university needs to change."

Natasha Lokhun:

What kind of shifts are we saying? What do you think is good practice?

Candace Brunette-Debassige:

Well, there's a role like mine at our university. There's a Senior Leadership role now, I recognize it. It's still the typical university structure, it's not transforming maybe the way Larissa is thinking about really dismantling and shifting the way that universities operate. But we are getting... Our voices are at different levels.

Natasha Lokhun:

It's about feeling welcome at university. That's feeling like a guest, right? If you're welcome in someone's house, you're allowed in as a guest. Wipe your feet, be polite, have a cup of tea. And then it's actually about unlocking this idea of the transformational potential of education. We talk about it, what does it actually mean? How can it actually shape your life? And that's really what it's about tapping into. Larissa, does that speak to you?

Larissa Kennedy:

Definitely. I feel like it's this interplay between the fact that these institutions, but fundamentally the people within them, hold this immense power in both legitimizing and de-legitimizing what we see as worth studying, what is worth knowing about, what is knowledge. And when there's someone in that space who gets it, and is actually legitimizing what you care about, and what's relevant to you. Even the pedagogy that you identify with and all of those other things, it really does open up this whole interest in education that you might not have experienced before.

Larissa Kennedy:

I know for me, getting to do work around, particularly the Caribbean, it was so enlightening for me because I was like, "Wow, this really speaks to something that's actually relevant to me and actually touches me in a different way." And I'm like, "Yes, I want to spend the hours reading and I want to do this work and I want to get into it." And until that point, I was just doing the work. I was doing the work to do the work. But when it hit that point, I was like, "I'm doing this work 'cause I love it and I'm interested." And that's when it starts to make a difference. And that's when it almost becomes easier to navigate these spaces because you know what you're doing it for.

Natasha Lokhun:

I think back to the time that I was at university, there was one lecturer of color in the department that I was at university at. And you're right, she was a beacon. What was interesting is I didn't

gravitate to her just because she had the same skin color as me, it wasn't as crude as that, it was also because what she was actually teaching. She taught a module that was about Pidgin and Creole languages. And I come from... That's my parents were Mauritius, they speak a Creole language, and that was the first time that I'd ever seen that language actually acknowledged. As a scholarly material, as something that was frankly worth studying.

Natasha Lokhun:

It was just something that my parents spoke at home and then obviously outside the house, you speak English, right? But actually to see it, just to study it in the same way that you study other languages was really, really powerful. And that's the thing that struck me and stayed with me. And that's really interesting, those moments and that, just how important those kinds of experiences are and how much it is about connections between people. Candace, Larissa, any thoughts or reactions?

Candace Brunette-Debassige:

Well, my own experience is coming to the fore for me. Same, same. I literally can viscerally remember the moment that I went into a class and I saw a Anishinaabe woman teaching in front, and it struck me. My own internalization, I was confronted with that too, because it was not the norm. And I noticed that. I noticed that in myself, but everything that she taught, she taught from an indigenous standpoint. It had relevance to me and my family and it carved everything that I did after. I was never engaged in high school, I was practically pushed out of high school, assumed a lot of things because of where I came from and assumed never to go to university, frankly. I was told by my guidance counselor, "You're not university material."

Candace Brunette-Debassige:

And I only got into university through a bridging program. And I say it quite proudly because I say, "I got in through the back door 'cause they would have never let me in the front door." I didn't have the courses and I didn't have the grades and I didn't have the self-esteem. I really believed everything that everyone said about native people. I really did. I internalized it. And it was through my education, by indigenous people, around decolonizing ourselves that I started to deconstruct that and start to release the shame that I had believed. That I was not smart enough, that I didn't belong there, that my voice didn't matter.

Natasha Lokhun:

Once you're in the university, you've gone through that journey. You're there, you're in a classroom, you're surrounded by students. How important is the way in which you're taught? We spoke a little bit about what you're taught and how that's important, but what about the ways in which you were taught and the impact of that? Larissa, have you got some reflections on that?

Larissa Kennedy:

For me, this is one of the most interesting parts of decolonization because it is the thing that really stirs me to think about what abolition of universities, as we know them, looks like. And what it would mean to build a new with universities that create pedagogy rooted in liberation and rooted in healing and rooted in care and all of those things. And one of the things that we try to do through the Warwick Decolonize Project is create spaces to talk about decolonizing pedagogy and the fact that one person claiming to be The Arbiter of Knowledge and what is and isn't relevant and is that ever going to be truly anti-racist? Just even beginning to ask those questions.

Natasha Lokhun:

Do you think you've seen it, Candace? Reflecting on the work that's happened in Canada?

Candace Brunette-Debassige:

I've seen it in pockets. Within indigenous pedagogies, it's about self evaluation. So, it's not about getting other people to evaluate you, but you evaluate yourself. And I've seen little pockets in even our university, Western University, the faculty of education just recently applied to their BEd Program, a pass or fail system, which I thought was really great because it gets us away from that competitive model. The competitive model gets us into trouble because then you have students, just touting their marks and all they care about is whether they're beating each other in their GPA marks.

And it doesn't create a community of learners, the way that we want to see it in indigenous education, anyway. So, I've seen it, but I've also seen it not be able to be completely fulfilled either.

Natasha Lokhun:

You've both spoken about the fact that this is hard work. This is labor and it's a struggle and it can be tough. Is there an ultimate goal here? Do you think that it's possible to move past the struggle and what might it look like? What might the student experience at university look like if we are able to move past the struggle? Candace, can I ask you first?

Candace Brunette-Debassige:

I don't know if it will ever not be a struggle if we continue to maintain the system as it is. I just hope that we could be less of a struggle. I'm quite realistic. I don't know. Maybe I'm jaded. Maybe I need to step back and the younger people might have it. I can't even believe I'm saying that. I feel like, I'm 43...

Natasha Lokhun:

Doing yourself a disservice.

Candace Brunette-Debassige:

I'm 43, I've been doing this work, I've been doing the work for almost 20 years and I've seen changes and it is getting better for indigenous peoples in the Academy, but it's shifting. The students are getting through, but the faculty are struggling. There's new struggles that emerge as we progress. Progress is not the right word I'm looking for, but as we move this journey along, but it's better than it was 20 years ago. So, that's where I'm at today. I don't know if it will ever be not a struggle.

Natasha Lokhun:

Larissa, what do you think?

Larissa Kennedy:

Wow. Well, first of all, props to Candace 'cause I'm 22 and I'm already tired. So, I think to be honest, I think that's why I don't see it not being a struggle within the institutions as they exist. I think as you say, it gets easier. There's going to be a point at which I'm no longer doing this work and I'm handing on the baton. And I hope at that point, I can look back and say, "Wow, yeah, it is easier." Even though those people will probably be looking at it thinking, this is a struggle. In terms of long term, I don't foresee it ever being easy for us within these institutions. And I think ultimately, if we want to access education and really access knowledge in the most free sense, I think we need to build our own spaces that are reflective of the knowledge that we need as a community and the things that we want to pour into our community.

Natasha Lokhun:

This episode for me, has really focused a lot on the personal. And it's been really inspirational actually to hear from two people who have taken their own personal journey into university and through university, and actually turn that into work, basically. And I recognize that it's hard work, there is labor being done there to help make change and to help move things forward. I'd like to thank our guests for today. Candace Brunette-Debassige, Acting Vice-Provost and Associate Vice-President of Indigenous Initiatives at Western University in Canada. And Larissa Kennedy, president of the National Union of Students in the UK.

Natasha Lokhun:

The next episode in our podcast series is going to look at the relationship between universities and the land that they've been built on. We'll be asking, "What's the place for reparations?" I hope you found this episode of The Internationalist - Higher Education Matters, valuable. The Association of Commonwealth Universities is committed to highlighting issues that influence learning and teaching in our 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.