Open scholarship and decolonisation in higher education

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Abstract

Open scholarship and university decolonisation communities share several values in attempting to promote long-term changes which challenge the problematic status-quo and promote a more representative and accessible research and knowledge infrastructure. Initiatives from these groups often experience similar barriers when attempting to drive such change. The current work therefore argues that further societal progress and justice could be possible with greater collaboration between open scholarship and university decolonisation communities.

Open scholarship is a movement to make “knowledge of all kinds more accessible, transparent, rigorous, reproducible, replicable, accumulative and inclusive” (Parsons et al., 2022). Whilst broad, this definition includes a wide range of individual practices and structural changes, including open educational resources, citizen science, open-source software, open peer review and open data, among many others. Such efforts can help tackle many inequalities by challenging, changing or removing exclusionary practices which have been perpetuated by ideological hegemony. For example, pre-printing research on open platforms like the Open Science Framework (osf.io) gives researchers the opportunity to disseminate knowledge and be acknowledged for their contributions, making their work more widely accessible, without the need for either researcher or reader to overcome privileged gatekeeping, approval or financial barriers. Facilitating accessibility and inclusivity are key parts of most models and visions of open scholarship (Syed and Kathawalla, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). For example, open scholarship is considered highly compatible with feminist perspectives (Siegel et al., 2021; Matsick et al., 2021), where exclusion of women, inequalities in invisible labour and recognition, and marginalisation of knowledge created by women, can be challenged. Open scholarship practices are considered predominantly (but not exclusively) positive in helping overcome the precarity faced by minoritised researchers when negotiating power, championing their voice, and democratising knowledge generation and dissemination (Fox et al., 2021; Pownall et al., 2021).

With a similar alignment in values, open scholarship has the potential to be considered part of ‘decolonisation’ efforts (Chan et al., 2022). Decolonising the curriculum (and/or university) represents a broad notion (Meda, 2020), typically referring to a focus on addressing the continued existence of embedded oppression and western privilege (Harvey and Russell-Mundine, 2019) and attempts to achieve better recognition and development of alternative knowledge (Arday et al., 2021). In practice, decolonisation demands transformative change to challenge the disproportionate power represented and perpetuated through the systems and knowledge presented. For example, not to look at how western theories apply to the global south or to see
work from the global south as an ‘alternative perspective’, but rather to consider and voice (in a
genuinely egalitarian way) knowledge created within different areas as contributing to cumulative
developments in our shared understanding (Adetula et al., 2022). This work goes beyond
developing a diverse curriculum or inclusive assignment to acting on the inequalities, oppression
and discrimination perpetuated by current structures, cultures and practices (Dar et al., 2021;
Doharty et al., 2021; Hall et al., 2021; Shain et al. 2021) towards greater social justice (Dawson,
2020; Gopal, 2021).

These movements of open scholarship and decolonisation are clearly not the same. However,
there are several shared values in – and shared barriers to – promoting progression and it is
hoped that this work, in elucidating these similarities, will promote further collaboration and
synergy between such communities.

Shared values

The open scholarship movement is perceived to rely upon the Mertonian norms which describe
the ideal scientific ethos (Chubin, 1985) and include the principles of communism (that
researchers have collective ownership of scientific outcomes) and universalism (that assessment
of a scientific claim should be independent of the personal attributes of the claimant). These
values are often considered to be implicit in the practices adopted (Tennant, 2020) and are often
inconsistently achieved (Ross-Hellauer et al., 2022). For example, the financial barriers to
publishing with open access means the geographical diversity of represented authors tends to be
less than that of non-open access publications (Smith et al., 2021).

Decolonisation is to decentre colonial-driven knowledge, perspectives and practices, instead
transforming organisations and knowledge to represent a wide range of inclusive structures,
positions and voices. Such work is often framed within certain groups of institutional values, such
as ‘Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion’ (EDI) or anti-racism (Hall et al., 2021), although the specific
values and practices represented are commonly contested (Shain et al., 2021).

Both decolonisation and open scholarship share an obvious moral motivation, but there is little
consensus in the central values held. Despite this, they demonstrate shared priorities and goals
in trying to promote long-term changes which challenge the problematic status quo and promote
a more representative and accessible research and knowledge infrastructure. In this manner,
developments in each domain are co-dependent. For example, we can better challenge the over-
representation of white, male, Eurocentric knowledge when there are fewer barriers for anyone
to access, engage with, create and disseminate knowledge. Similarly, we can foster more
meaningful collaboration and inclusive environments and thereby create more alternative
knowledge, when we transparently recognise and reward different types of contributions to
research and knowledge generation (e.g., through use of the CRediT taxonomy; Brand et al.,
2015).
Shared barriers

Decolonisation initiatives and open scholarship communities share a number of common barriers when attempting to drive change. For example, within both initiatives, there are plenty of misunderstandings relating to the multifaceted nature and changing scope of action necessary to drive meaningful change. Many universities are currently implementing decolonisation initiatives which do little more than check that the reading list is not entirely white (Schucan, Bird and Pitman, 2020). Changes (if any) to course content and assessment – or indeed to the wider structures and policies of the university – are minimal (Joseph, 2010; Moghli and Kadiwal, 2021). Other similar assumptions are made within open scholarship practices: for example, that sharing datafiles without associated codebooks, data dictionaries or metadata is sufficient for transparency (Buchanan et al., 2021). This being the case, concern continues in relation to both developments about ‘open-washing’ (Parsons et al., 2022) or tokenistic decolonisation work where there is an attempt to ‘tick the box’ without clear quality control (Shain et al., 2021). The institutional softening of more radical changes into narrow individual-level metrics in both decolonisation and open scholarship is common (Engzell and Rohrer, 2020; Shain et al., op.cit.) and highlights the shared need for higher standards of implementation and greater structural-level thinking.

To make incremental progress in either domain, holistic and sustained change is required. Initiatives which do not consider all stakeholders (Evans et al., 2022) and which disregard the problems with the wider systems and processes are unlikely to succeed. The status quo tends to be well-defended by those who have historically secured privilege from it and, in consequence, there are often substantial amounts of both structural and individual resistance to any attempt to drive such dramatic change. Some communities (Azevedo et al., 2022) and stakeholders (Evans et al., 2022) are currently making developmental progress and slowly improving standards across institutions and geographical boundaries. Most universities in the United Kingdom have decolonisation groups and there are international open scholarship groups, such as the Framework for Open and Reproducible Research Training (FORRT; Azevedo et al., 2019) for open scholarship pedagogy. Such communities are commonly led by early career researchers and/or those who are most excluded by existing practices (Pownall et al., 2021). Development in these areas is therefore heavily restricted by: the lack of recognition (Allen and Mehler, 2019); the physical, emotional and psychological burdens often experienced in attempting to overcome resistance; and the wider structural issues in higher education, like precarious work contracts (Lopes and Dewan, 2014). Groups attempting to tackle decolonisation and open scholarship simultaneously are only just forming; for example, the Advancing Big Team Reproducible Science through Increased Representation Team (ABRIR; Jeftić et al., 2021). These are integral communities which require sustained support, funding and infrastructure.

Concluding Thoughts

Both open scholarship and university decolonisation practices are of vital importance and require continued investment and championing by many stakeholders. Greater synergy between the communities leading such efforts could maximise positive impact. Open scholarship is about
making things open, but it is crucial to consider what should be open and for whom (Evans, 2022). There is potential for open practices to perpetuate or extend existing inequalities, rather than promote collaborative knowledge development (Bahlai et al., 2019; Cole et al., 2022; Ross-Hellauer et al., 2022) and so the adoption of a decolonisation perspective could maximise the accessibility of work through more thorough consideration of power, geographical differences and diversity in knowledge sources. Similarly, greater sharing and transparency of decolonisation efforts – whether through diversification of viewpoints, dissemination of evidence about specific practices, or the implementation of open materials – would facilitate more rapid developments in understanding and action whilst also exposing superficial practices. Thus, through greater collaboration between the open scholarship and decolonisation communities, we have the potential to drive further societal progress and justice.

Reference list


Opinion Pieces


