

Decolonization of Higher Education

Levelling the playing field - equal conditions and opportunities within academia

Introduction

Education is a crucial instrument for emancipation, but throughout history, it has been used as a tool for oppression. Colonial powers used education to dominate others by imposing their language, culture and ideas of the world as the only legitimate way of living. Today we can still find examples of presumptions and asymmetrical power relations in academia both in Norway and internationally. The 2015 Rhodes Must Fall campaign, at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, was a campaign that demanded the removal of the statue of the former colonial ruler Cecil Rhodes from the university campus. This campaign was a symbol for the desire of students and academics to take a stand against institutional racism at the country's universities.

In Norway, we see also a need for more nuanced dissemination of knowledge to make our educational institutions more democratic, fair, and inclusive. Higher education must lay down the foundation for critical and independent thinking. This will make it possible for students to identify skewed and unfair power structures that create inequality in conditions and possibilities within academia. To create change, it is essential to support students and academics, nationally and internationally, that ask critical questions and advocate decolonization of higher education.

What is decolonization?

Decolonization is a term that can be understood in several different ways. The term decolonization is often used to describe liberation processes in countries that were exposed to political and economic colonialism. However, it can also refer to a process that decolonizes people's mindset, where established norms and mindsets are put into question. Decolonization of higher education is about identifying how wider colonial processes have created repressive and asymmetrical structures that affect what is recognized as knowledge, what is being taught and by whom. Wider colonial processes have helped shape the west's historic dominance and helped constrict knowledge production and our understanding of the world.

Since the sixties, Norwegian students have collaborated with fellow students globally for decolonization from colonial powers, for example through the strong commitment in the fight against the apartheid regime in South Africa and by supporting liberation movements in Latin America. Students in Southern Africa and Latin America learned that the universities did not deliver comprehensive, neutral knowledge and insight, but taught students to feel inferior to the colonists. Norwegian students have supported and continue to support decolonization internationally through voluntarily paying the SAIH-Tenners, which is a scheme adopted by Norwegian student

representative councils across the country. This money has among other things supported SAIH's cooperation with indigenous and Afro-descendants in Latin America and their right to an education in accordance with the international legal framework, as ILOs Convention 169 and UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Education has historically been an important instrument in weakening or eradicating indigenous peoples' language, culture and worldview. State governed assimilation politics has through the education system had dire consequences for indigenous peoples' life and societal development. Indigenous peoples have on many occasions criticised research on indigenous people for not being neutral or objective. In many cases, this research has not been perceived as relevant to the issues they face. In addition, much of the research has been characterized by a colonial stance (E.g. to legitimize oppression by using biology to support the notion of different races).

In Norway, the Sámi University of Applied Sciences (Sámi allaskuvla) in Kautokeino was approved as an equal higher education institution in the 1980's. This happened in connection with a Norwegian reconciliation process and recognition of the government's anti-Sámi policy and it's consequences with violations of indigenous peoples' rights. In many countries, the national authorities do not recognize indigenous languages, epistemology, culture and worldview in institutions that follow Western universities, and indigenous universities are struggling to be recognized by their national authorities. The lack of recognition of higher education institutions that challenge the established western knowledge authority, in practice, is a continuation of the discrimination of colonial times. This does not mean changing the principles and methods of science or replacing Western universities, but recognizing and acknowledging that other perspectives and knowledge systems are of value.

Decolonization processes are about raising awareness about who is quoted in academic texts, who is read, who produces and disseminates knowledge and who feels at home at the university. Should education be a tool for liberation, the teaching must be based on the students' own situation and experience. Local conditions, languages, culture and world understanding must be taken into account in higher education. If not, you risk reproducing stereotypes, unfair structures and, like the colonial age educational institutions, put one understanding of knowledge higher than others. Youth and students are important actors to create positive social development, but it requires that their education facilitates critical and independent thinking. Both academics and students will benefit from engaging in a decolonization process that opens up for a wider range of perspectives and wider representation.

How this can be done in Norway

In the Norwegian context, academics and students should work for nuanced knowledge dissemination and address asymmetrical structures within academia. These structures must be highlighted as well as work on the awareness around our own colonial past must be increased.

In curriculums, lectures, and research there is also a need for diverse academic perspectives, to avoid reproducing a one-sided western understanding of knowledge. One example of this is, for instance, the inclusion of researchers and writers from the area being studied in the Area Studies programs (Områdestudier). Academics from the Global South must also be recognized as co-producers of knowledge. In general, all fields of study should facilitate students with the ability to put their subjects within a social context, be critical, and able to identify unjust power relations and structures. Many students and academics need to become more aware of the perspectives presented within their disciplines as well as a contextual understanding of how knowledge has been produced. In addition, there is also a need to understand why these are dominant and who has access to participate in debates. Without such approaches, Norwegian institutions of higher education strengthen the reproduction of the West's dominance in the knowledge hierarchy, where non-western knowledge dissemination is excluded. Through the awareness over who's knowledge one is building upon, and acknowledgement of non-western researchers' contribution, we can also become part of the decolonization process.

Name of student democracy believes that:

- Good education should facilitate and encourage critical and independent thinking
- Students should be able to identify uneven structures and what effects such structures have for students' and academics' conditions for participation and opportunities within academia.
- Institutions of higher education should convey diverse perspectives and knowledge, and not only promote a one-sided Western understanding of knowledge
- Higher education that takes a point of departure in indigenous peoples and afro-descendants' culture and understandings of the world must be recognized

Name of student democracy will:

- Raise awareness among students and academics in Norway about the issues of one sided and non-inclusive knowledge dissemination
- Work so that diverse understandings of the world and knowledge is visible in the curriculum, lectures, and research within Norwegian institutions of higher education
- Support students and academics who promote decolonization of higher education and who work to challenge one sided knowledge dissemination, both in Norway and globally.