



Decolonizing Universities and Colleges

Possibilities for Reflections and Actions

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July, 2025

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Abstract

Where do we derive our knowledge from? What does this have to do with various forms of colonialism? Would our academic system look different if the most prominent universities were not primarily located in Europe and the United States? Which theories would we teach, and after whom would we name our monuments and lecture halls? The goal of this document is to provide an introduction and food for thought for a decolonial practice in universities, focusing specifically on the German-speaking region and Austria. Academia bears a responsibility to critically examine its active role in creating current societal disparities. Moreover, the intensifying and multifaceted crises demand a diversification of knowledge systems and a reflection on existing power structures to address these crises sustainably. Reflection questions, actionable suggestions, and additional resources aim to make this topic tangible and provide a starting point for further engagement. This "mini-guide" was developed by a project group on decolonization at BOKU University in the spring/summer of 2024. The initiative stemmed from a desire to spark discussions about colonial continuities in Austrian universities. This is not a comprehensive or definitive collection but is intended as an impetus to confront colonial continuities, collaboratively develop alternative practices, and ultimately bring them to life.

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Introduction

The topic of decolonization, particularly the decolonization of knowledge, has garnered increasing attention in recent years due to social movements. Decolonial approaches open spaces to address and deconstruct historical and ongoing colonial entanglements. This document serves as a collection of actionable steps for universities (including brief descriptions, reflection questions, and practical options), alongside a list of resources and literature for further independent research and engagement with the subject.

This “mini-guide” was created by a (predominantly *white*) project group on the topic of decolonization at BOKU University in spring/summer 2024. The reason for this was the desire of students and staff to stimulate discussions on colonial continuities at Austrian universities. This desire was reinforced by discussions within the framework of the Africa-UniNet network, which was launched in 2019. In 2023, the General Assembly of the network took place in Vienna and opened with two keynotes, both of which, in different ways, commented on the cooperation between European and African universities and outlined necessary changes. As a result, and at the suggestion of the project group, the idea was born to compile materials and approaches to decolonize universities and higher education institutions. The guide was also discussed with participants of the Seasonal School organized in the framework of the Afrika UniNet funded project “Decoloniality of Research and Learning Methods in the Global South (DERT)” held in Mombasa, Kenya, August 2024. Quotes and contributions from the Seasonal School are included and highlighted in this second edition. The participants are not named individually, as the quotes were derived from a World Café, where all participants contributed to the group results. The quotes therefore do not exclusively reflect the perspective of individual speakers.

We emphasize that this collection is incomplete and does not offer a one-size-fits-all solution for institutions. The historical, cultural, social, and political contexts and connections of each institution must be considered. The most significant lever for change may vary depending on the academic discipline and the specific focus of the university, department, or institution. Our recommendation is to start with one focal point and build upon it. We also added space for each action points to add one’s own ideas and questions.

To introduce the topic, we also provide a brief explanation of “Why decolonize universities at all?” Many terms relevant to the context of decolonization are defined within the text or in footnotes. Should further terms remain unclear, we recommend consulting the extended literature list (starting on page 25) and the following sources: the [Anti-Racist Educators Glossary](#), the [Glossary for Discrimination-Sensitive Language](#), or the [Decolonising Glossary](#).

Why decolonization?

Movements such as *Rhodes Must Fall* in South Africa and at Oxford University (Knudsen and Andersen 2018) or the anti-racist *Black Lives Matter* movement (Black Lives Matter 2024) are two examples among a growing number of social movements addressing the enduring effects of colonial history. These diverse movements, comprising students, civil society, and indigenous, critical, and activist scholars, highlight the fact that universities were embedded in colonial knowledge systems and continue to benefit from and reproduce colonial structures and patterns. This reproduction occurs through enduring advantages gained by colonial powers via the extraction of knowledge, artifacts, and resources, as well as through a scientific system still predominantly shaped, influenced, and dominated by former colonial powers in Europe and North America.

“Because I believe that even Africa has a way to deal with problems we came across, until the colonisation, when we were told that the knowledge was rubbish“

Participants of the workshop, Seasonal School 2024

The colonial practice itself was legitimized by the pseudoscientific assumption of "races" (BOKU Coordination Office for Gender Equality, Diversity, and Accessibility, n.d.). "White¹ scientists contributed to legitimizing white supremacy" (ibid., no page). As such, universities bear a particular responsibility in addressing racism. Sociologist Philomena Essed describes racism as "an ideology, a structure, and a process by which certain groups are perceived as inherently different and inferior based on actual or attributed biological or cultural characteristics" (ibid., own translation). This process of attribution is referred to as "Othering²." Consequently, groups and their knowledge are devalued, and their access to discourses and resources is limited (ibid.).

Amid current multiple crises, including the climate and biodiversity crises and increasing social inequality, it is essential to reflect on the continuity of colonial practices, which have historically influenced the capacity to act and continue to and continue to impact people's abilities to address these crises. "The wealthier and more privileged we are, the less susceptible we are to the physical consequences of global warming. Conversely, those with the least suffer the most from climate change" (Otto 2023, 22, own translation). Existing power systems further exacerbate the climate and biodiversity crises (Horcea-Milcu et al. 2024). Otto (2023) identifies a colonial-fossil narrative, wherein the burning of fossil fuels coupled with (post)colonial thinking has

¹ “‘White’ and ‘whiteness,’ like ‘Blackness,’ do not denote biological characteristics or actual skin colors but are instead political and social constructions. *Whiteness* refers to the dominant and privileged position within the power dynamic of racism, a position that often remains unspoken and unnamed” (Amnesty International Austria 2024, n.p.). To highlight this construct, *white* is written in italics and lowercase. Black is intentionally capitalized, as it represents a self-designation by people who share a common experience of anti-Black racism. Black does not describe a (skin) color but rather “a social and political construction within a global power structure of white dominance” (Jaspers, Ryland, and Horch 2022, p. 15).

² Definition of Othering: "Othering refers to a continuous act of boundary-making, in which people are rendered as 'the Others' through stereotyping. 'The Others' are categorized as non-belonging, deviant, and devalued. The process of othering often occurs within a power imbalance" (IKUD Seminare 2024, n.p., own translation).

contributed to current problems and injustices, including climate change. She refers to this as a “justice crisis”.

In this context, decolonization can be examined through an intersectional³ lens, revealing the intersections and interactions of systems of power and discrimination. Issues such as gender equity, disability, age, origin, and other forms of discrimination must also be considered. Additionally, the wealth and capacity to adapt to these crises are unevenly distributed both globally and locally. Katharina Mau links capitalist practices with the climate crisis, stating, "To enable production and consumption in the Global North⁴, companies disproportionately exploit

“The example I gave about theories I used for different disciplines; for example, if you talk about feminism and the existence as a black woman this may not necessarily be the same experience that a white woman has”.

Participants of the workshop, Seasonal School 2024

raw materials, energy, land, and labor from the Global South" (Mau 2024, 25, own translation). This aptly illustrates the continuity of colonialism in today’s global economic system. Decolonial epistemologies call for a paradigm shift that embraces a change in perspective, opening new avenues of thought to address these multiple crises and exploring alternative solutions and actions (see also actions in the field of research) (Mignolo 2011).

Engaging with decolonization is not limited to "obvious" disciplines like sustainability or development studies. It also extends to basic research and fields such as [mathematics](#), [veterinary medicine](#), and more, as demonstrated by the toolkit [Decolonizing Science](#).

Decolonization in Austria

"Austrian involvement in the colonial era was intertwined with global politics, and the country actively participated in expeditions and research journeys" (Klenke, cited by ÖAW 2021, n.p., own translation).

A tangible continuity of this involvement can be found in Austria through numerous objects, collections, and artworks from formerly colonized countries. Even today, representations of colonial entanglements can still be found in the cityscape of Vienna and other cities. Austria is also not exempt from other, less immediately visible or tangible forms of colonial continuity. These include forms of (everyday) racism, structural discrimination in the education system, the marginalization of other knowledge systems, understandings, or worldviews, and thought patterns that perpetuate a uniform image of progress, development, and modernity.

In recent decades, the topic of decolonization and the impacts of colonization have been increasingly discussed. Examples of this in Austria include:

³ Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw and describes the mechanism by which systems of discrimination (sexism, racism, etc.) do not operate independently from one another but rather interact and intersect (Crenshaw 1989).

⁴ Categorizing terms like "Global North / South" obscure socioeconomic differences within countries in the regions they refer to and often convey prejudices or value judgments. In this document, we have chosen not to use these terms, except in direct quotes from others. We refer here to the subsection -> *Decolonial Pedagogy and Awareness Building*.

- The [Black Voices petition](#)⁵
- A [conference](#) on the de-/colonization of knowledge at the University of Vienna in cooperation with the [Academy of Fine Arts Vienna](#), the [University of Art Linz](#), [IWK](#), and [IFK](#) in 2021
- Lectures and exhibitions at the Weltmuseum Wien (see lecture "[Colonialism Today?](#)")
- [Reflection on cultural heritage](#) following the exhibition "[Space for Kids. Denk\(dir\)mal!](#)" at the Kunsthalle Wien
- A [project at the Natural History Museum Vienna](#) focusing on the research of colonial acquisition contexts
- Courses at the University of Vienna on "Colonial Continuities in Knowledge Systems" at the Institute for African Studies (in part initiated by students)
- Exhibition "Claiming Spaces" at the Institute for African studies, which took place in the framework of a decolonization focus.
- Publication from Black historian in Austria such as from Claudia Unterweger: *Talking Back: Strategien Schwarzer österreichischer Geschichtsschreibung* or also Vanessa Spannbauer
- Regular city walks "[African Vienna](#)" in Vienna, led by [Prof. Walter Sauer](#), who has also (co-)authored several relevant publications on the topic of Austria's colonialism
- Various exhibitions⁶ such as:
 - [„Symposium zur Restitution Afrikanischer Raubkunst“](#) with Achille Mbembe (2022) organized by Daniel Bitouh and Simon INOU
 - Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński. On the topic of colonial posing in the Kunsthalle Wien ([Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński im Interview](#))
 - [Facing History](#) – Spaces of Black resistance with Simon INOU and the historian Vanessa Spannbauer in the Wien Museum
 - [Avant-Garde and Liberation 2024](#) at the mumok

Decolonization in Universities

"Who can know, who is allowed to speak, whose knowledge is heard, which knowledge is understood, and which is made to disappear?" (Claudia Brunner in Deutschlandfunk Nova 2023, own translation).

The persistence of structures and a deeply rooted understanding of modernity and progress contribute to the continuity of colonial practices⁷. Terms like "universal," "general," or "excellent"

⁵ Particularly active on the topic of decolonization in the Black Voices referendum were: Camila Schmid Iglesias, Maffeu Kamdem & Solomon Osei-Tutu (creation of educational material on Austria's colonial history)

⁶ It should be noted that many institutions have only taken up the issue of decolonization due to the activism of Black people. For example, the activist Simon INOU has played a key role in the background and has been campaigning for years with institutions. More content and events can be found on the page: <https://www.blackaustria.info>

⁷ Decolonial theorists criticize the understanding that "Western" modernity (including capitalism and liberalism) is regarded as the only form of progressive civilization. "Western" European societies and states are portrayed as modern, while others are seen as "traditional" or even backward. This image of modernity reproduces hierarchies and justifies violent interventions in the name of development toward modernity (Lehmkuhl 2012).

knowledge often conceal an understanding of types of knowledge and approaches defined by European, *white*, and "Western"⁸ societies. Other forms of knowledge remain invisible, are not seen as equivalent, or are not even recognized as knowledge. Universities, as central places for the production and dissemination of knowledge, play an important role in making our knowledge systems more inclusive, diverse, and decolonial. By recognizing and valuing knowledge systems that have been devalued by colonial structures, the possibility and diversity of scientific insights in the context of global crises can also be increased (Gopal 2021). The goal is not to replace one form of knowledge with another, but rather to foster recognition, dialogue, and relationships between them to generate new insights and understanding (examples in sustainability research include Johnson et al. 2016; Hatcher et al. 2006; Kealiikanakaoleohaililani and Giardina 2016).

"We grew up knowing that what is not published is not scientific, but this does not in any particular way mean that the knowledge is not valid. So we end up having knowledge that is based on geographical positionings and it is never shared in platforms that are accessible"

Participants of the workshop, Seasonal School 2024

This approach seeks to counteract the reproduction of colonial thinking and epistemic violence⁹.

Decolonization in the context of universities means critically engaging with historical entanglements and existing structures. It involves the responsibility of science to become aware of its active role in creating current social and global inequalities and to actively challenge them. This responsibility can be understood in the context of the 2002 University Act, §1, which states: *"Universities are called upon to serve scientific research and teaching, the development and exploration of the arts, as well as the teaching of the arts, thereby contributing responsibly to solving human problems and the flourishing development of society and the natural environment"* (Universitätsgesetz 2002, n.p., own translation).

However, there is no single path to decolonization. Rather, it is a continuous process of questioning that must always be considered within the given context. Additionally, decolonization is not a final state that can be achieved with a few measures. It is an ongoing reflection process that seeks to identify and make visible structures created by colonial logics and to design alternative practices (Gopal 2021). Central to this is the development of practices that counter hierarchical, homogenizing, and dichotomizing perspectives (Torres Hereida and Slezak 2022). This requires a willingness for reflexivity, critical self-examination, and engagement with one's own patterns and ways of thinking. Furthermore, the "thinking and action mechanisms of the present must be analyzed, and ways of intervention must be found. In various areas of our worlds of knowledge and life, it is important to find both (counter-)strategies of analysis and criticism and opportunities for solidarity networking. This serves to theoretically and practically, globally and

⁸ In this sense, "Western" is not understood geographically, but refers to a hegemonic socio-political distinction between countries (Khan et al., 2022).

⁹ "Epistemic violence refers to the form of violence associated with our knowledge. This is located within a global dimension of power imbalances, which are always also relationships of violence" (Torres Herreida and Slezak 2022, 4, own translation). Terms such as epistemic oppression (Dotson 2014, cited by Brunner 2023), epistemicide (Santos 2014, cited by Brunner 2023), and epistemic injustice (cf. Hänel 2022) are also used. An example of epistemic violence is the requirement that publishing in English is necessary for academic relevance, a standard to which even established non-English journals must conform in order to be considered academically significant, even within their own (non-English) discourse communities (Brunner 2023).

locally, highlight, deconstruct, and initiate the dynamics of transformation of neo-/colonial power relations" (University of Vienna 2021, n.p., own translation).

A decolonial approach can take place on multiple levels, beginning with contextualization and historical engagement. Given that forms and consequences of colonialism continue to persist today, actions should extend beyond historical reflection to also address existing practices. Possible approaches can be found at the level of teaching content and curriculum design, pedagogy, research methods, knowledge transfer and archiving, as well as structures of international cooperation and university admissions.

A critical anti-racist stance, reflection on one's own actions, and awareness of possible (unintended) reproduction of colonial mindsets and practices are essential. It is not enough to "just" oppose racism; it is important to actively work against racism and one's own socialization (Ogette, cited in Reinhard 2023).

Actions at Universities

The following section outlines possible actions for universities. For each action, we have formulated a set of reflection questions. These are intended to stimulate reflection, dialogue, and further inquiry. We have also compiled a list of potential activities and examples. The reflection questions, their discussions, and the resulting activities may vary depending on the academic discipline and context; of course, additional approaches are possible.

Not all questions and approaches may be relevant to all university members. Depending on one's role at the university (academic, administrative, teaching, artistic staff, students, university leadership, etc.), some questions may be more applicable than others. The points below do not constitute an exhaustive list, and we welcome and encourage additional ideas. If an exciting idea arises, we are happy to receive suggestions for additions.

Following fields of action are discussed:

- Historical involvement in colonization and its reflection
- Diversifying and revising curricula
- Decolonial pedagogies and awareness-building
- Promote decolonial research approaches
- Development and exploration of the arts
- Access to knowledge, knowledge transmission and archiving
- Considering exchange and partnerships from a decolonial perspective

→ Historical Involvement in Colonialism and its Reflection

"To understand how knowledge and colonialism are connected, and how knowledge was colonized and continues to be colonized today, we need to examine the mechanisms of colonialism" (polis aktuell 2022, p. 3, own translation). To uncover and make visible historical connections and continuities by reflecting on an institution's involvement in colonialism is therefore crucial for knowledge-generating and disseminating institutions like universities.

Reflection Questions:

- Were university members historically involved in colonial research expeditions, and are these actions still celebrated today?
- Were the university's research efforts used to legitimize colonial practices?
- Where and how did the production of knowledge and its underlying ideologies contribute to colonial history¹⁰?
- Are there stolen artifacts in the university's collections, and where do these collections originate?
- Are there human remains in the collections?

Activities:

- Conducting a systematic review of colonial entanglements (e.g., [reviewing the entanglements of Berlin universities](#)).
- Creating an exhibition or publishing a small publication on the topic (example: The "[brown downsides of BOKU](#)").
- Returning artifacts and collections (see the [recommendations of the Advisory Committee for guidelines for collections in Austrian federal museums from colonial contexts](#)", 2023).
- Raising awareness regarding the treatment of human remains and facilitating their return (ÖAW, 2021).

¹⁰ Kant's philosophies, for example, contributed to the fact that the concept of "race" was able to establish itself in German-speaking countries in the first place, and these ideologies were in turn used to justify colonialism and the exploitation of people. Malthus' theory can also be viewed critically in this context: "In the name of sustainability and resource scarcity, debates on population tend to blame the poor without adequately problematizing structural inequalities that sustain racial capitalism and stimulate scarcity. This narrative is a remnant of the Malthusian thesis that problematized population growth in relation to food scarcity without problematizing utilitarian human wants." (Chaudhuri, 2022, 207 reference to Kallis, 2019).

→ Diversifying and Revising Curricula

Curricula are a central element of knowledge transmission at universities and serve as an important lever for addressing the topic of decolonization. Compared to "hard" structural changes, the approach through curricula is often considered a "soft approach" (Gopal 2021). It focuses on increasing the diversity of perspectives and knowledge.

Marginalized, Indigenous, Black voices, or voices from People of Colour (PoC)¹¹ have often been excluded from the discourses, and their knowledge has even been erased (see epistemic violence). This "epistemicide" — the erasure, suppression, or invisibilization of knowledge from marginalized groups — must be actively countered (Wysong 2020). This refers not only to the teaching content itself (literature, sources, resources, methods), but also to the teaching staff. Breaking with racist and colonial structures also means that Black, Indigenous and PoC not only have their say on the topic of racism or colonialism, but that the voices of all people are included in the curriculum in general.

What is particularly important here is that decolonization goes beyond simply changing the content of curricula. It's about incorporating voices in such a way that they connect with existing debates and approach the subject from other perspectives (Ramgotra, cited in Wysong 2020).

Reflection Questions:

- Is the topic of colonial history/decolonization addressed in the study program? In what form, how, and in which formats?
- To what extent does the content of the curriculum/course work start from a particular profile/way of thinking of students and their view of the world?
- What is being taught? Which theories are used? Are there colonial or racist entanglements in these teachings or theories?
- What literature is read in the courses? How/From which perspective is this literature read? Who is portrayed as "other" (see "Othering")?
- Are there diverse perspectives on the subject in the literature?
- Is there a diversity of lecturers? Are Black, Indigenous, PoC and diverse Voices also able to contribute to topics other than Anti-Racism, Anti-Discrimination or (de)colonization?
- How diverse is the available literature, and who is cited?

Activities:

- Survey among lecturers to find out whether and how the topic is incorporated into courses.

¹¹ PoC (People of Colour) is an international self-designation for people with experiences of racism. The term marks a political and social position and is understood as emancipatory and solidaristic. It opposes divisive attempts through racism and culturalization, as well as discriminatory labels imposed by the *white* majority society (Amadeu-Antonio-Stiftung 2014, cited by Amnesty International Austria 2024). There is also the term BIPoC, which includes Black people, Indigenous people, and People of Colour together. In this context, we have chosen to list the groups separately in order to make the differentiation between the affected groups visible.

→ Decolonial Pedagogies and Awareness-Building

Pedagogy is the method of knowledge transmission and assessment, encompassing existing learning support systems. An inclusive pedagogy begins with recognizing different life paths and experiences. For students, it may not be a given that they have access to the university. They may face various prejudices both within and outside the university. Inclusive pedagogy aims to level the playing field for diverse individuals (SOAS 2018). This involves practices that take diverse and deviant perspectives seriously and teach how to handle diversity and complexity. Furthermore, a decolonial pedagogy recognizes that students are embedded in global power imbalances, which affect their success in various contexts. The goal of decolonial pedagogy is to change these structures through education by empowering students to navigate their environment independently and critically (ibid. 2018).

The language in which knowledge is conveyed, and communication takes place can also be a structure that either favors or marginalizes certain groups. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o points out that, "[t]he domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised" (Ngũgĩ 1986, 16). Through the choice of language and terms, values, power, hierarchy, and control are conveyed. Therefore, it is essential to question and reflect on language use and what or who might be excluded as a result.

"The language issue is very critical. Some students may be required to bring language certificates for many universities which creates big barriers. In some areas the government is forcing universities to teach in the local languages to decolonize those curriculums [sic]."

Participants of the workshop, Seasonal School
2024

Categories like "Global North and South," "the West," "developing countries," or "rich and poor countries" elevate certain countries and regions while devaluing others (Khan et al. 2022). Furthermore, these terms obscure relevant social and structural differences within regions and countries by homogenizing entire areas (rich/poor or developed/underdeveloped). A decolonial and intersectional approach demands differentiation and specification within specific contexts.

Reflection Questions:

- Which societal power dynamics (between students, between students and faculty) are reproduced by teaching practices? What alternatives (diverse, critical, decolonial) can be offered?
- How can balanced participation of students be enabled?
- Do students have the opportunity to share their own knowledge?
- What evaluation criteria are used? Which knowledge systems and scientific or other approaches are integrated into the evaluation? Are only specific types of knowledge and approaches evaluated?
- Is there support for educators in teaching and evaluating different knowledge systems?

- Is there support for educators in recognizing and dealing with inequality and discrimination?
- What goals do university strategies (e.g., development plans, internationalization strategies) pursue, and how are discriminatory/exclusionary/prejudiced/racist assumptions and ways of thinking reproduced or challenged?
- In which language is communication carried out? Who is excluded as a result?
- Do the terms we use reproduce violent or exclusionary structures?
- (How) is there an emphasis on an open culture of mistakes and reflection?

Activities¹³:

- Transmitting ideas and knowledge by juxtaposing material from different fields (SOAS 2018).
- Reflecting on privileges, e.g., with the activity “Privilege for Sale” ([Privilege for Sale | The Safe Zone Project](#)).
- Surveying students’ interests and asking for feedback—incorporating suggestions into the course (SOAS 2018).
- Reading articles about pedagogy in one’s field and attending training focused on diversity, coloniality, inclusion, and critical thinking (SOAS 2018).
- Counteracting dominance structures within student groups and fostering participation from as many students as possible (SOAS 2018).
- Allowing free time and space within courses for students’ topics.
- Inviting external perspectives (e.g., through excursions, guest lectures) and fostering exchange with students.
- When possible, using participatory and interactive methods (World Café, Fish Bowl, talking circles, small group work) and inclusive settings (e.g., circle seating) or concepts (see also Education for Sustainable Development - ESD).
- Addressing behavioral patterns like “White Fragility”¹⁴ in teaching.

¹³ Some of the activities mentioned here are generally relevant for innovative, non-hierarchical/horizontal teaching and are not only specific to a decolonial context.

¹⁴ The term “White Fragility” describes the reaction of *white* people when racism, their *whiteness*, and the associated privileges are brought up (Di Angelo 2011). According to sociologist Robin Di Angelo, many *white* people enjoy special protection and security in society. This leads to a lack of necessity and ability to engage critically (or self-critically) with racism. In confronting situations, typical defense mechanisms such as anger, fear, or guilt and shame follow.

→ Promote Decolonial Research Approaches

Many academic disciplines and traditions have grown out of the culture, history, and philosophy of the European or “Western” world (Chilisa 2012). Furthermore, many disciplines still benefit from the results of exploitative research practices during the colonial period, as well as from theories and methods generated during that time. A decolonial perspective challenges the assumed universality of this knowledge and questions “Western” rationality. Practicing decolonial research means, among other things, considering the relationship between method and power (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017). Frequently, it is still the (often *white*) scholars who determine which knowledge will be pursued, how it will be researched, and when it is considered legitimate. Existing local knowledge from actors is only legitimized by researchers from the outside. Conventional methods often include a clear separation between the researchers and the “Other” being studied (see also “Othering”). “For a long time, the members of indigenous peoples, their cultures, their knowledge, and their cultural assets were regarded as objects of research by Western scholars” (Kansy 2021, 2, own translation). Through this devaluation, “other” knowledge cultures and practices are either stigmatized as irrationalities, violently suppressed, and deemed illegitimate or entirely “foreign,” or they are distorted into desirable kitsch, exoticism, and esotericism. In other cases, the knowledge of the “Other” is appropriated, but at the cost of its origin being erased, hidden, and even the trace leading to it concealed” (dekolonial.univie.ac.at 2021, s.p., own translation).

“So, we felt that it would be very important to also package the indigenous knowledge. And maybe we can put it to test to see if it actually transports into reports too, because I believe that even Africa has a way to deal with problems we came across until the colonisation, when we were told that the knowledge was rubbish”

Participants of the workshop, Seasonal School 2024

Transdisciplinary research approaches *can* address this issue because transdisciplinary research (in addition) involves the knowledge of non-university stakeholders (e.g., affected individuals, relevant social actors) and incorporates their perspectives into the research process (Hinterleitner et al. 2023). Also, in transformative research, which increasingly deals with sustainability and the sustainable transformation of society, existing power dynamics are reflected upon, and efforts are made to break them down. Horcea-Milcu et al. (2024, 7) write: “[e]xisting ways of creating and applying knowledge are often a product of the same system and power dynamics driving the sustainability problems that transformative research is seeking to address in the first place [...] To build socially inclusive spaces and prevent marginalization of voices, breaking ingrained power relations is needed. As are decolonizing social relations in the practice of knowledge creation and celebrating plural ways of knowing that challenge narrow scientific framings.”

Decolonial research first involves an engagement with the history of one’s discipline and a critical examination of the theories and methods used and taught. This type of research, which challenges existing dichotomies, thought patterns, and approaches intending to work inclusively and participatively, often requires more time and may not fit into traditional funding and publication models. To secure this type of research within the academic system, a structure is

needed that promotes decolonial approaches. This includes adjusting (internal) evaluation and assessment standards to make the effort and other conditions of this research visible and to value it. The necessary change in metrics would also be beneficial for other areas of research, e.g., sustainability research, transformative research (see [Memorandum “The Future of the University”](#) by the BOKU Ethics Platform).

“Most researchers quoted and trusted are western, and published in international peer reviewed journals”

Participants of the workshop, Seasonal School 2024

Reflection Questions:

- What is the historical background of the discipline or research field?
- On what theories is the research based? What worldview and conception of humanity underlie these theories? Who or what is excluded by these theories?
- How were/are the research questions generated? Who was/is involved in generating them?
- Which research questions are considered relevant? (Relevance implies value judgments, which can also be questioned.)
- Who benefits from the research?
- How are the data generated? Who is involved? How are the different participants treated, and what rights and opportunities do they have?
- How is the generated knowledge made available to the participants?
- Are certain types of knowledge generation rated higher in internal evaluation?
- Is there support for researchers who want to apply other, decolonial research methods?
- Which studies are cited, and which are not? Are civil society sources considered, which might offer a different perspective on the context?

Activities:

- Provide resources for researchers, such as those available here: [Decolonisation and Anti-Racism](#)
- Engage with alternative indicators and evaluation systems
- Reflect on one’s own research approaches and methods in the decolonial context (see questions). A basis for this can also be found in questions that need to be answered as part of an ethics application (e.g., [BOKU Ethics Commission’s checklist for research involving humans](#))
- Incorporate different/diverse non-academic stakeholders and perspectives (e.g., people from other, possibly formerly colonized, countries, local perspectives, indigenous peoples, civil society organizations, artists) with transdisciplinary methods and clearly

→ Development and Exploration of the Arts

Just like universities focused on natural sciences, technology, social sciences, and humanities, art universities bear a societal responsibility. In addition to the outlined options for action, it is essential to incorporate decolonial practices within the field of "Development and Exploration of the Arts (EEK)." The EEK, defined as the "redesign, reinterpretation, artistic deepening, or broadening of horizons in artistic practice" (Kunstuniversität Graz 2024, s.p., own translation), offers a multitude of opportunities to connect artistic actions with decolonization. The anthology by Bauer et al., "Künste dekolonialisieren: Ästhetische Praktiken des Lernens und Verlernens" (Bauer et al., 2023), addresses decolonization in the context of art universities and can serve as inspiration for personal reflection.

Reflection Questions

- What thought processes underpin one's own artistic practice?
- How are stereotypes handled?
- How are diverse perspectives represented and integrated? Which perspectives are these?
- With whom are artistic partnerships formed?
- What viewpoints are represented through art?
- How are artistic processes altered or developed, and what societal or political direction does this promote?
- What artistic practices are employed, and where do they originate?
- What materials are used, and where do they come from?
- What is perceived as aesthetically pleasing?

Activities

- Incorporate diverse perspectives and individuals into the EEK.
- Avoid cultural appropriation.
- Acknowledge origins and sources of artistic practices - Create awareness.
- Utilize artistic practice to highlight decolonization and anti-discrimination themes and reflect on societal and political issues.
- Reflect on one's own and others' artistic practices from a decolonial perspective.

→ Access to Knowledge, Knowledge Transmission, and Archiving

“We also noticed that many channels are westernized, knowledge in Africa is not documented and is usually transferred from generation to generation by storytelling and sometimes shared by chance. Also, from culture-to-culture knowledge is not uniformly accessible. So, universities are trying to make knowledge accessible by subscriptions.”

Participants of the workshop, Seasonal School 2024

Universities provide access to knowledge, serve as spaces for learning, teaching, and research, and are thus central to the development and transmission of knowledge within society. This includes access to the university itself as well as to different knowledge systems. University libraries additionally offer access to literature search engines and (academic) publications. Libraries promote cultural participation, support education, training, and further education beyond studies and research, and thus contribute significantly to opinion-forming processes (Schürer 2023). However, they can also present barriers. The selection and organization of knowledge always involve a judgment. What is included, how is it made accessible, and how is it represented within the collection?

In the Seasonal School 2024 workshop, the following points were also mentioned as obstacles: low income makes access to university more difficult, different learning abilities and language barriers.

Reflection Questions:

- Who can be present at the university? Who has (financial and physical¹⁵) access to the university?
- How are students supported in attending courses despite, for example, caregiving responsibilities?
- Where is literature published? Who has access to publications?
- How is literature categorized? Which literature is prioritized? Which is made invisible through categorization?
- What search engines are used? What alternative search engines are available?

Activities:

- Promote access to the university and to knowledge for marginalized and disadvantaged groups (e.g. through scholarships).
- Evaluate library collections, identify gaps, and expand sources to increase the diversity of available knowledge.
- Establish contact with publishers and publications on this topic.
- Raise awareness of the possibility of acquiring literature through the university (e.g., as a "[desiderata book](#)").

¹⁵ E.g. including accessibility

→ Considering Exchange and Partnerships from a Decolonial Perspective

Cooperation and exchange across countries and regions can significantly contribute to generating new knowledge and sharing perspectives. However, these (international) collaborations are intertwined with historical and colonial structures. Additionally, some research collaborations are often guided by the geopolitical interests of respective funders. To adopt a decolonial perspective when establishing new partnerships and exchange programs (or evaluating existing collaborations), it is important to recognize these entanglements and their implications for research and teaching.

Hierarchies and power relations in research collaborations arise from differing conditions, competencies, and resources and often reinforce the higher valuation of knowledge and expertise from the dominant partners (UKCDR and ESSENCE 2022). Historically and today, research topics and methods are frequently determined by institutions (funding bodies or research organizations) in former colonial powers, Europe, and North America. There is often an assumption that knowledge from these regions promotes transformation and development worldwide. The selection and formulation of research topics may vary significantly from other (geographical, diverse) perspectives. The reasons for participating in partnerships may also differ greatly (Aanyu et al. 2020).

“However, in the context of decolonization, we noted that some African countries lack policies that allow universities to independently invite external lecturers. Instead, these invitations often rely on externally funded projects aimed at enhancing specific knowledge or delivering specialized courses. We discovered that when hosting visiting lecturers, language barriers can pose significant challenges to communication and understanding, potentially hindering the exchange of knowledge.”

Participants of the workshop, Seasonal School 2024

“We also noted that immigration policies in some European countries can make decolonization efforts difficult, particularly when there are restrictions on access for individuals from Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) or Latin America.”

Participants of the workshop, Seasonal School 2024

Reflection Questions:

- How are exchange formats for students and teachers designed? Do these formats reproduce colonial patterns?
- From which regions are guest professors invited?
- To what extent do the focuses of the university's internationalization strategy¹⁷ reflect colonial pasts or inequalities?

¹⁷ The Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science, and Research has developed an internationalization strategy for the Austrian higher education landscape to be implemented by 2030: [National Mobility and Internationalisation Strategy for Higher Education 2020-2030](#). Similarly, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research has formulated such a strategy: [Internationalisierung der Hochschulen](#).

Further Information

In conclusion, we would like to encourage you once again to engage with this topic and continue educating yourself. Below, you will find additional literature references and resources.

Further Reading

Arndt, S. und Hornscheidt, A. (2018). **Afrika und die deutsche Sprache**. Unrast Verlag. Afrika und die deutsche Sprache – UNRAST VERLAG. <https://unrast-verlag.de/produkt/afrika-und-die-deutsche-sprache/>

Blog entry - What would it mean to decolonize the Curriculum

<https://medium.com/hindsights/what-would-it-mean-to-decolonize-the-curriculum-4fcedbe781d1>

Blog entry - Decolonial? Postcolonial? What does it mean to ‘decolonise ourselves’?

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- Un/Doing Epistemic Violence** Journal with many contributions on epistemic violence <https://www.mattersburgerkreis.at/site/de/publikationen/jep/alleausgabenartikel/article/577.html>
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Resources

- Nature: Decolonizing science toolkit:** <https://www.nature.com/collections/giaahdbacj>
- Anti-racist educator’s glossary:** <https://www.theantiracisteducator.com/glossary>
- Active Hope Training:** [ActiveHope.Training](https://www.activehope.org/)
- Decolonising glossary:** <https://curatorialresearch.com/services/research/decolonisation/decolonising-glossary/>
- Glossar der neuen deutschen Medienmacher*innen Glossar:** <https://glossar.neuemedienmacher.de>
- MOOC** about “Diversity and variety in the context of the university” (English and German) <https://imoox.at/course/helci>
- SOAS module:** Ethical Reflexivity And Research Governance: Navigating the Tensions https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/32038/1/Ethical%20reflexivity_OA%20FINAL.pdf
- UKCDR Best Practice Case Studies:** Four Approaches to Supporting Equitable Research Partnerships. <https://ukcdr.org.uk/publication/four-approaches-to-supporting-equitable-research-partnerships/>
- Resource for Ethical International Partnerships.** Sustainable Futures in Africa <https://osf.io/bh52y>
- Austria's Colonial Heritage City Guide:** https://kunsthalleswien.at/101/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/KHW_DecolonizingVienna_komplett_LowRes.pdf?x24075

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