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'It's all very well having a diverse curriculum, but if there is no curriculum, it can be as diverse as you like': Precarity and decolonising in the neoliberal UK higher education system

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Abstract
Drawing upon interview research across two academic departments as part of the early stages of a 'decolonise the curriculum' initiative at a Southern UK university, this study highlights a growing gulf between policy and practice in efforts to address systemic racial inequalities in UK universities. A reliance upon precarious labour, a culture of unpredictable change, and entrenched academic hierarchies were found to contribute to issues of ownership over knowledge, a lack of time to engage with decolonising, and to securely employed staff directing the responsibility for such work away from themselves, often towards the more precarious. Underpinning the analysis was a theme of collective disillusionment: where anxiety and a sense of impending doom around the future of a career, a course and even an entire discipline impede social justice aims. Utilising theories of neurotic academia and crisis ordinariness, the discussion shows how the current neoliberal market imperatives of universities in the UK must be considered when attempting to embed decolonising initiatives.

KEYWORDS
decolonise the curriculum, higher education, neoliberalism, precarity

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Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This article addresses the intersecting experiences of academic worker precarity and decolonising the curriculum initiatives in higher education, through analysing candid reflections from those involved in this work.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper provides empirical evidence for the argument that decolonising the curriculum initiatives are impeded by institutional issues such as job security and employee wellbeing. It contributes to existing knowledge around how disillusionment and anxiety can be perversely productive in a 'neuroliberal' HE environment, sustaining diversity intiatives whilst stymying their potential for radical change.

INTRODUCTION

For many years, scholars and activists have been pushing for a more racially diverse higher education, with UK universities such as Cambridge, Oxford, LSE, Kent, Keele and Queen Mary adopting formal strategies and policies that aim towards decolonising their curricula. Brought to prominence by the #RhodesMustFall movement to remove slave trader Cecil Rhodes' statue at the University of Capetown in 2015, a later, similar campaign at Oxford University, and the mobilising power of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, decolonising efforts in British institutions Britain were in part a response to a drive from student unions in the UK to challenge the racial disparities students were observing in their education. While the involvement of students in co-participatory decolonising work has been documented elsewhere (Hall et al., 2021; Adewumi & Mitton, 2022), in practice decolonising a curriculum also requires a change in institutional policy and teaching activities, with buy-in from academic staff who will deliver the content. It is this aspect that is of interest for this paper, considered in relation to the recent changes observed within the UK Higher Education (UKHE) sector.

One of the more drastic of these changes can be seen in debates around academic precarity (Albayrak-Aydemir & Gleibs, 2023; Begum & Saini, 2019), and its role within the 'neoliberal' or 'marketised' university (Loher & Strasser, 2019; Mason & Megoran, 2021; Pérez & Montoya, 2018). Casual labour has long been an established part of the academic job market (Burton & Bowman, 2022), where junior, temporarily employed staff cover the teaching hours of established academics on open-ended contracts, enabling them to focus upon securing research grants and producing 'impact'. More recently, the reduction of centralised government funding to UK universities, stagnating student fees and other neoliberal pressures have left institutions severely stretched financially. In 2024 the status of the UKHE sector was described by Universities UK as 'unsustainable' (Tudor, 2024), and it was estimated that 72% of UKHE providers would be in financial deficit by 2025/6 (Office for Students, 2024). The situation is the most unstable it has been in UKHE history, and by virtue of that, risks entrenching wider societal divisions, hierarchies and inequalities.

Within this paper we are concerned with how such a climate impacts upon academic efforts to decolonise the curriculum. We discuss responses to an initiative we refer to here as 'Create Curriculum Change' (CCC), which began in 2018 at a university in the South of the UK. As with many 'decolonise the curriculum' projects, it sought to reimagine inclusive

pedagogies aimed at addressing the 'racialised attainment gap' (Hensby & Adewumi, 2024). The initiative comprised dedicated staff support and a toolkit to assist academics with the process of making their module reading lists and teaching materials racially inclusive and was followed up with a survey and series of interviews with colleagues who participated in the project. The staff members interviewed ran modules across two departments teaching social sciences and the humanities respectively; both departments were targeted for CCC due to the severity of their home student degree-awarding gaps, where Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME)[i] students were less likely to achieve a 2:1 or First-class honours degree than white students. These particular degree-awarding gaps are a 'wicked problem' (Austen et al., 2017; Ugiagbe-Green & Ernsting, 2022) that have garnered a lot of attention in HE policy recently, despite research going back to the 1990s identifying the fact that BAME students were less likely to receive an upper class honours degree (Connor et al., 1996). The issue persists even in relation to degrees such as Sociology, despite the discipline expressly teaching students of the racial inequities they are experiencing (Joseph-Salisbury et al., 2020).

This article does not seek to assess CCC as a pedagogic initiative; rather, it applies a reflective analysis to the aforementioned survey and interview data, using a lens of academic precarity in the neoliberal university. The initial purpose of the follow up survey and interviews was to get a sense of the incitements and barriers that emerged when attempting to tackle awarding gaps. Upon revisiting the interview data, particularly in the more recent HE context, it became clear that academic labour conditions were impeding participation in the project. Many of the staff interviewed were on fixed-term, insecure contracts or were otherwise experiencing a strong sense of insecurity in their roles following university restructures and strikes, and due to impending redundancies. Academic casualisation and precarity of both research and teaching staff is increasingly a problem for the academy according to the University and College Union Freedom of Information briefing report (2023). It was found that the proportion of UK academic research staff on fixed-term contracts was as high as 99% at certain institutions (UCU, 2021). A growing proportion of university teaching staff are now employed on a temporary or even zero-hour basis, which is having negative impacts upon the student experience (Kahn et al., 2024; Williams, 2022). This has also contributed to an atmosphere of discontent and uncertainty within the academy, a 'pessimistic mood' (França, 2024) emerging from the juncture between the fantasy of an academic career and its neoliberal reality (Bone, 2021).

When a university decides to implement an initiative such as CCC, the process usually involves professional services staff alongside those involved in teaching. But, as the 'gatekeepers' or 'custodians' tasked with delivering diverse forms of knowledge (Arday et al., 2021), academics are ultimately responsible for implementing and sustaining decolonising work. The impacts of workplace insecurity and precarity upon institutionally-led decolonising projects have been little explored. This article therefore focuses upon the realities of doing this kind of work in the sector, addressing a dearth of empirical work and theorising around how academic working conditions intersect specifically with purportedly student-centric 'decolonising the curriculum' initiatives.

The article begins with a review of 'decolonising the curriculum' literature and studies in HE. This is followed by an intersectional review of contemporary debates around precarity, focusing further upon precarious academic work at universities and its racialised realities. The case study and qualitative methodology are discussed before the findings are presented in the following thematic categories: *Eleventh-Hour Teaching, Lack of Ownership, I'm not the EDI Guy*, and *Collective Disillusionment*. These findings are then situated in debates around academic precarity, institutional responsibility, and how the pessimism and anxieties of academics (including those prompted by discussions of race) are being exploited in a 'neuroliberal' system of governance (Loveday, 2018). The article offers a new perspective

on the structural impediments to decolonising initiatives when considered in relation to the current politics of HE and suggests that projects such as CCC risk being relegated to 'tick box' exercises, engaged with only to pay lip service to current 'decolonisation hype' (Behari-Leak, 2019, p. 58).

Literature review

Decolonising higher education

'Decolonising' (the proactive withdrawal from prior colonial influences) as a term came into usage during the political struggles in 1950s Africa (Césaire, 2001; Fanon et al., 2008; Jansen, 2019a; Memmi, 1957), although the impetus can be seen as far back as the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois at the turn of the last century (1899). Education has long been a site of anti-colonial struggle, offering opportunities for the liberation of oppressed people through awakening their consciousness (Freire, 1970) and encouraging 'movement against and beyond boundaries' (bell hooks, 2014, p. 12) that constrain us. In the UK, the university system grew to great prominence as an institutional arm of the British Empire and consequently, much of that which constitutes 'important' knowledge embedded within HE teaching, research and pedagogy is deeply entrenched in Eurocentric and colonial epistemologies.

As previously mentioned, student activism across campuses in the West opened hitherto-closed doors to conversations about whose ideas and knowledge are privileged in HE. Arguably, this is contextual to the neoliberal or 'marketised' university landscape, where students hold an unprecedented degree of consumer power with which they can influence the direction of HE policies. Students have more of a voice and an opportunity to invoke change than ever before because institutions 'are afraid of students voting with their feet – and their wallets' (Ali, 2022, p. 931). Numerous student-led campaigns have been developed and made into university policy since the 2010s; for example, University College London's Why is my curriculum white? (2014) movement led to changes in hiring requirements and procedures, grants for resources and events, and many subject-specific policies around inclusion and diversity in teaching and research. Within these kinds of policy changes, commitments to decolonising module reading lists are common, as reading lists offer a 'representation of the legitimised ideas, theories and perspectives that dominate within a discipline' (Adewumi & Mitton, 2022, p. 56). They reflect the carefully preserved foundations of a given curriculum, and implicit to those foundations are real people; academicians whose work necessarily reflects the dominant ideologies of their time and context.

However, Tehrani (2015) has questioned how much space is allowed for real revolutionary change within decolonising initiatives based around reading list amendments. She cautions that merely 'including' authors from historically-excluded backgrounds rarely leads to equity but instead suggests a complicity with and acceptance of longstanding structures of oppression. 'Decolonising' can end up being, she suggests, yet another of the 'Master's tools' described by Audre Lorde (Lorde, 2018); wielded against Black and minority ethnic communities regardless of any genuine anti-colonial intention. The idea that universities co-opt and absorb initiatives that seek to improve racial equity has led to calls to 'decolonise the decolonising' (Moosavi, 2020). Kehinde Andrews has warned of the 'institutionalisation' of the efforts and energies of Black and brown people to improve HE, and how they themselves can become the very 'tools' Lorde spoke of (Andrews, 2016). He argues that universities 'produce' racism through the ways they are organised and operated, and through normalising white intellectualism (Williams, 2016). These institutions are built on 'toxic soil', in which nothing that challenges it can grow or flourish (Salt, 2019). Why, Salt asks, would you incorporate decolonising initiatives within a machine when 'you know the machine is broken?' (ibid.).

The new buzzword of 'decolonising' has become 'so capacious as to stand in for any form of critical engagement with race and representation, or indeed, the mildest of curricular reforms' (Gopal, 2021, p. 876). The 'folding in' of decolonising and anti-racism work within equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives at universities has been identified as an issue, erasing their radical potential and making such efforts an 'empty container' for the management of performance and other bureaucratic monitoring indicators that proliferate in HE (Hall et al., 2025, p. 329). Liyanage (2020) argues that only 'meaningful engagement' with decolonising agendas can prevent their failure, going beyond merely 'tinkering with' reading lists (Ali, 2022; Jansen, 2019b) to also educate those in charge of them about the colonial legacies of their subject. Andrews and Salt above identify that the space in which decolonising efforts seek to invoke change has endemic structural flaws, embedded in everything from their history to their hiring practices and their research activity. Decolonising therefore also encompasses a pressing need for representation of people of colour at the staffing level (Arday et al., 2022) and the addressing of flawed academic publishing systems that favour those from the Global North, as these often exploit precarious academics who are more likely to be from minority groups (Last, 2018). Staff members who need to enact these changes are of primary importance (Hall et al., 2025). As of 2022, it remains the case that most UK academics are white: 80% at the most recent count (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2022). This disparity also stratifies in terms of seniority, with only 1% of professors being Black (ibid.), and job security: the few people of colour that do secure employment in HE in the US, Australia and Europe are less likely to be on secure contracts (Zheng, 2018, p. 242). Academia, as with other professions, replicates inequities produced by racial (and racialised) capitalism.[ii] By this we argue that hierarchies that prioritise white labour and devalue the work of people of colour are continually reconstituted through the materiality of institutional operations. Initiatives that centre decolonising, then, are essentially bound up in labour processes and their precarious insecurities (Attewell, 2016).

Precarious academia

Although the sociological term is credited to Pierre Bourdieu in his work on *precarité* amongst non-permanent workers in Algeria (1936, in Alberti et al., 2018), material precarity was the standard experience of daily life for many in the West before that time (Kalleberg, 2009), only alleviating after World War II. Precarity has received a great deal of critical attention in recent years, in response to a general shift in employment practice towards short-term contracts, unpredictable hours, erosion of hard-won employment rights and benefits, and a reduction in statutory protections against workplace exploitation. Eli Thorkelson argues that the 'French cultural category' of *précarité* has become a powerful 'mobilising label' (2016, p. 477), but that its use has a tendency to 'other' and exclude, particularly along lines of race and class. There is some scepticism around the tendency of theorists such as Standing (2011) to conceptualise precarity as a new phenomenon, with concerns that such research fetishises 'classical, full time employment' (Sowa, 2020, p. 129) when for those living and working in the Global South, for example, precarity never really went away (Scully, 2016). Precarity has always had a close relationship with power, status and social stratification. Outside of privileged groups, precarity commonly perpetuates. UK higher education is no exception to this rule, as it 'reproduces the position of an established elite with characteristics skewed in the expected ways by age, gender, race and ethnicity' (Holmwood & Marcuello Servós, 2019, p. 317). In the last few years, however, with many universities experiencing acute financial crises that must be adjusted for through cuts to programmes and reductions in staff costs (Office for Students, 2024), it appears that very few are safe from the widespread precarity of the sector. The gradual reduction of centralised government

funding to UK universities has artificially elevated the importance of institutional research impact agendas, making them paramount to a university's continued existence. In response to these neoliberal pressures and the massification of UKHE, universities become more like 'factories' that end up 'competing against each other for scarce resources' (Slater, 2012, p. 117), a situation that can entrench wider societal divisions, hierarchies and privileges within the system. As a result, one-third of UKHE staff are on some form of fixed-term contract (Sim & Bierema, 2025; University College Union, 2021).

This study is especially concerned with the role that precarity plays in relation to the practicalities of doing decolonising work. Prior work in this area tends to focus upon professional services rather than academic staff. Kirton et al. (2007) highlighted how 'diversity professionals' did not necessarily see social justice aims and business aims of universities to be in conflict, suggesting that Suki Ali (2022) is correct in her assertion that the 'management' of racism in HE can be problematic. Keisu and Carbin (2014) studied those working in gender equality initiatives, and found that increased managerialism and auditing prevented staff from engaging with radical solutions or visionary thinking. Precarity as a tool of neoliberal capitalism can therefore offer a means of stymying collective resistance, a process that, within universities, inhibits innovation and creativity (Sowa, 2020).

Loveday (2018), in their work on governance in the neoliberal university, describes what they characterise as the neurotic academic, where professional anxieties become 'privatised' (Gill, 2016, p. 237 in ibid.) in a manner that proves useful for the extension of the neoliberal aims. Building on Isin's theory of the 'neurotic citizen' (2004), Loveday suggests that academic staff can be easily manipulated via a system of 'neuroliberal governance' (ibid.) and will often willingly take on the individual responsibility for self-managing conditions around them. 'Academic neuroses'—the quite normal anxieties one would experience when one's career or discipline is threatened—can be 'both produced and productive […] both an effect and effective' (Loveday, 2018, p. 163). Concerns about one's academic future are easily exploited by universities to ensure staff members are working most efficiently in the pursuit of neoliberal goals. Therefore, the activist spirit behind calls for decolonising curricula and other important diversity work can be tempered by the atmosphere of neoliberal discontent in present day UKHE. The 'symptoms' of privatised anxiety around precarity (entrepreneurialism, imposter syndrome, competition) can be used to help tick EDI boxes, appease funders or recruit students, but they also leave all accountability for the management and success of such initiatives solely at the feet of the individual, in what Loveday describes as the 'responsibilisation of the self' (2018, p. 162). In such a scenario, universities and the wider HE sector do not take on a collective responsibility to decolonise curricula and are absolved from blame if projects such as CCC fail to bear fruit.

In response to these tensions in UKHE, we revisited the survey and interview data from the 2018 to 2020 project with precarity at the forefront of our analysis. Below, we detail our interview methodology and the case study institution where we explore this further.

METHOD

Create Curriculum Change is a pseudonym for a real project that ran at a UK university.[iii] It used a qualitative mixed methods approach comprising three components: a reading list review for diversity of authors, a series of student focus groups, and interviews with staff members, both those who were running the modules that were being reviewed for their diversity and academic and professional services staff who were in the same department but not directly involved in the review. Approval for the research was gained from the University Ethics Committee in advance of commencing, and informed consent was collected from participants on the understanding their responses would be anonymised. It is this latter staff

research, undertaken from 2018 to 2020, that is drawn upon here. The interviews called upon the staff involved to be reflective about teaching they had already done or were currently engaged with, but the interview questions themselves did not refer to precarity, labour conditions or contracts whatsoever.

School 1 (teaching social sciences) served as a pilot study for the review process, and the review in School 2 then expanded this research. In School 1, 28 large Stage One modules were assessed for their diversity, and in School 2, 24 modules were assessed. In 2018, 9 of these module convenors from School 1 completed a short qualitative survey, which were followed up with interviews with 4 convenors in 2019. Quotes have been taken from both the surveys and the interviews, and survey responses are marked in the findings with a *. In 2020, interviews were conducted in School 2 (teaching classics and archaeology, modern languages, linguistics, philosophy, comparative literature and religious studies) with a wider range of staff. This was to assess 'buy-in' across subjects and roles and all teaching and professional services staff members (not only convenors) in the School were invited to participate. Of a possible 143 staff members across 6 subjects and all professional services, 82 did so, with academic ranks ranging from Graduate Teaching Assistant to Professor. This resulted in 86 interviews in total across the two Schools (see Table 1). At the time the majority of the academic workforce in both schools identified as white: 74.7% in School 1 (2018/19) and 76.4% in School 2 (2020).

Most of the Lecturer/Senior Lecturer/Reader/Professor roles, but not all, were open-ended roles, as were the central professional services. All post docs, language lectors and graduate teaching assistants in School 2 were fixed-term. Staff on a precarious contract (anything up to 3 years in length) are labelled in the findings as FT for 'fixed-term'. Those on permanent contracts are labelled as OE for 'open-ended'. To pre-empt the conclusions below somewhat, it is worth noting that of the 82 participants, only 25 (30%) remain at the case study institution at the time of writing. Some of the subjects (e.g., Subject F) have been completely closed, while others have been drastically reduced.

The following questions were asked as a baseline:

1. Where are you in terms of your own knowledge about diversifying modules, and what do you already do?
2. How much opportunity do you have to influence diversity or inclusiveness in your role?
3. How important would you say this is to the department or university?
4. What kind of support would you need to make changes to your practice?
5. Is there anything that you feel is a barrier to doing this work?

Interviews were kept short to increase participation, but follow-up questions were asked as appropriate (e.g., about specific experiences that interviewees mentioned). Additionally, some participants were already very well informed about and involved in the project, and so the interview focussed on those experiences. While most interviews were 10–20 min long, participants were free to continue the conversation as long as they wished. They were also given the opportunity to ask any questions of their own, or to add anything that they felt was relevant.

Interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis conducted. All statements relating to impediments to carrying out CCC were identified and coded as in Table 2. They were grouped into four themes.

TABLE 1 Number of interview participants in Schools 1 and 2, categorised by role.

Subject	Role	No. of staff eligible to participate	No. of participants
School 1			
A	Lecturer/Senior Lecturer/Reader/Professor	19	4
School 2			
B	Lecturer/Senior Lecturer/Reader/Professor	19	10 (1 emeritus)
	Graduate Teaching Assistant/Language Lector/Post Doc	1	1
	Technical	1	0
C	Lecturer/Senior Lecturer/Reader/Professor	9	4
	Graduate Teaching Assistant/Language Lector/Post Doc	0	0
D	Lecturer/Senior Lecturer/Reader/Professor	12	10
	Graduate Teaching Assistant/Language Lector/Post Doc	7	5
	Technical/Professional Services	2	2
E	Lecturer/Senior Lecturer/Reader/Professor	22	18 (1 emeritus)
	Graduate Teaching Assistant/Language Lector/Post Doc	18	1
F	Lecturer/Senior Lecturer/Reader/Professor	13	8
	Graduate Teaching Assistant/Language Lector/Post Doc	7	3
G	Lecturer/Senior Lecturer/Reader/Professor	10	7
	Graduate Teaching Assistant/Language Lector/Post Doc	1	1
	Professional/Technical	3	0
Professional Services	Professional Services	19	12
Total		**162**	**86**

FINDINGS

The interview responses indicated a range of issues and impediments to engagement with the CCC process directly related to the presence of casualised, fixed-term and hourly-paid labour, as well as general concerns about job (and in some cases, ontological) security. This was observable in staff members regardless of whether they were on a precarious or open-ended contract. Alberti et al. (2018) describe how precarity is not only affecting the precariat, as its presence impacts upon individuals working alongside it, and subsequently the effectiveness of decolonising initiatives such as CCC.

The first identified theme was *Eleventh-Hour Teaching*. This is where careful planning for subsequent teaching years (or even terms) is not possible due to a reactive workplace culture that is contingent upon registered student numbers in order to maintain income and

TABLE 2 Thematic categories.

Codes	Description	Theme
• Time • Contract renewal • Short term planning • Competing demands	This is or seems like a big job, there are many competing demands, uncertainty over who is teaching what, a reactive culture, and no time to do anything.	*Eleventh-Hour Teaching*
• Lack of ownership • Individual efforts • Lack of leadership from the top • Lack of institutional support for change	Lack of commitment from either immediate management or university leadership means that individuals only do this work if they feel compelled to by their own principles, and often then shoulder a disproportionate burden. They are also more likely to be junior and therefore less likely to be the module convenor or on a permanent contract, and so less able to introduce changes.	*Lack Of Ownership*
• Lack of competence • Whiteness of teaching staff • Whiteness of the literature • Lack of relevant or accessible literature • Resistance to change • Established hierarchies	Staff lack the competence to deal with difficult conversations, and they only know the 'dead white men' themselves. The texts on the modules are canon. There is an over-representation of white people in the literature, so the textbook or core reading may have to be white (as senior established people write textbooks and core literature).	*I'm Not The EDI Guy*
• Restructure Anxiety • Survival of subjects/disciplines • Impending doom	Many contracts have been ended, so there are fewer staff. Those who remain are often young, female, BAME. Staff who remain feel unable to plan for the future. Difficult to pinpoint fears. Implausible to start anything new.	*Collective Disillusionment*

justify staff salary expenditure. Prioritising decolonising work such as CCC is hindered by a short-termist approach to teaching allocation (Leathwood & Read, 2022), which offers staff little time to get to grips with their teaching, let alone improve it. In an environment characterised by competing demands upon time and an inability to make realistic plans for future teaching, staff were cautious about committing to CCC:

> I have started these two jobs, basically on the first September. […] I'm not trying to fish but if you don't have these contracts over the summer […] there's only so much you can do, when you're taking on other work and other jobs and these kind of things. But that's, yeah, that's an issue that doesn't affect permanent staff so much.
>
> Female, White, FT, School 2

> This is the first time I have convened the module and I didn't have time to do much to change it – which is another practical challenge!
>
> Female, White, OE, School 1

Regardless of the nature of their contract, staff members demonstrated concerns about the time needed to undertake a proper reading list review, with one interviewee noting the expectation that improvements (and potential decolonising) of reading lists would take place over summer, something that is not possible if your contract ending coincides with the end of summer term. There seemed to be a disjuncture between assumptions around how, when and what kinds of academic labour are expected, and what are feasible when workplace uncertainty is a factor. Staff also felt that this work should involve students, but that would necessitate more work (and thus more time):

> It would be so great if we had more time. So that you could actually speak to the students and say, have any of you looked at the reading list? Did any of you discover anything during that reading list? And we don't really have the time.
>
> Male, White, FT, School 2

A related theme identified in the findings that directly impacted upon opportunities to decolonise reading lists was the *lack of ownership* over the participant's teaching. This was mentioned by colleagues across both schools, in relation to teaching on modules run by more senior colleagues where they felt they had no authority to enact changes. It was also mentioned in relation to being assigned teaching of modules arbitrarily and often temporarily, and therefore never having an opportunity to improve them in subsequent teaching years. Not only precarious staff identified this issue:

> I am only teaching these modules on a temporary basis, and cannot expound on any plans to change the module to suit issues of diversity.
>
> Male, BAME, OE, School 1*

Participants seemed to deal with the situation very differently. Some, as above, distanced themselves from any long-term responsibility and were firm in the fact that they could not take on the task of diversifying a reading list they do not control. This lack of power to change course content, alongside a lack of time to prepare in many cases, led to a sense of helplessness and doing just enough to get by. The precarious staff member from School 2 below describes how he is usually given a module to teach '*a few weeks before it starts*' and the need to ensure the basics such as lectures and assessments were in place in time overrode the need for the slow, careful revision of reading lists that were already provided. Because of this, he only became aware that a particular reading was problematic when it was too late to change it:

> […] I could see how it was going to cause issues on issues of race. […] And one of the students did raise concerns with me after the seminar and said that they felt very uncomfortable having to read that text, and, and obviously engage in it over the seminar. And they were a Black student.[…] I did feedback afterwards to both the module convener and the person who had chosen the reading because it's taught by multiple members of staff, that module… that I felt that in future, actually, I don't think it's a necessary text for us to have.[…] It was received well, in the sense that they could understand the concerns, but I'm […] not convinced a change will happen necessarily. It wouldn't surprise me if that reading was still on the module next year.
>
> Male, White, FT, School 2

The impetus to assess the diversity and change curricula must therefore filter through a hierarchical academic system that is not seen as especially responsive or adaptable, and at times wilfully ignorant of feedback that may improve the diversity of a reading list. In School 1, a participant describes how difficult it would be to challenge a more senior colleague about their lack of curricular diversity:

> How are you able to assert the fact that you don't need that lecturer who is more senior than you… that you no longer need them on the module because their content is rather out of date? They would lose their WAM [workload allocation model] points, how do you command that sort of assertiveness?
>
> Female, White, FT, School 1

Precarious staff felt less able to challenge what they were teaching due to their disempowerment within the academic hierarchy. Equally, managing the feelings of colleagues and mitigating the effects of 'out-of-date' modules upon students necessitated further invisible labour from any staff who were motivated to still try to improve the diversity of their teaching. They would 'work around' problematic content, for example, by changing seminar questions to ensure discussions reflect upon the aspect of race.

The fact that minoritised staff members generally undertake this work can sometimes operate as a deterrent to those with more privileged identities (particularly white men), who feel they are not best placed to be the person pushing initiatives such as CCC forwards and offer their own identity as the reason not to engage with decolonising their curricula. This forms a third theme: *I'm not the EDI Guy*:

> [when discussing a controversial video that centres race being used as a teaching aid] It's very explicit in racist terms and it would be great, I think, to tackle in a class of adults, as our students are. But clearly it's impossible and I'm a white male, so I wouldn't touch it with a stick.
>
> Male, White, OE, School 2

> I'm profoundly of the view that we cannot address this issue [of decolonising the curriculum] and related issues effectively with our current staff base. Because it is a very different thing for a non-BAME academic to be trying to decolonise the curriculum […] It's just quite simply not possible.
>
> Male, White, OE, School 2

These perspectives reveal several tensions. Firstly, they demonstrate the well-documented issue of a predominantly white faculty who cannot necessarily relate personally to the issue of race – a symptom of the 'leaky pipeline' (Williams, 2019) where fewer BAME people progress on to PhDs and jobs in the academy. Resolving this is tricky, as the task of addressing representation in academia is riddled with complexities such as the risk of essentialising race as a characteristic (Ali, 2022, p. 932). Secondly, the quotes demonstrate the anxiety experienced by white staff when they fear they may be speaking on behalf of marginalised communities, or worse: may be seen as co-opting their hard work. In the context of diversity work, and particularly in relation to decolonising, identity matters (Matthews, 2021). When those whose identities are made comfortable within the academic space are required to directly engage with the experiences of those who are not, an uneasiness develops. Involvement in projects such as CCC for white academics is marked by ambivalence because by virtue of their whiteness, white people are complicit within systems of colonialism, and that jars with decolonising aims (Matthews, 2021). When confronted with

this ambivalence, defensiveness tends to prevail (DiAngelo, 2022). This can, as above, lead to a plethora of excuses that could as easily be regarded as deliberate evasion as they could symptoms of a systemic issue.

For CCC participants, traditional markers of academic identity (being white and being male) sometimes lead to self-exclusion from decolonising work. The participants suggest who they think is 'the right kind of person' to participate in CCC, displaying a variety of concerns around how their own identity may be problematic in this context. Fear of lack of competency pervades the initial quote above, something that could be potentially eased by the provision of support or better training (Arday et al., 2021, p. 307). The second quote implies that the lack of 'appropriate' (i.e., non-white) staff to undertake CCC is an institutional failing. Similar responses were heard in relation to the lack of gender diversity on a Classical Studies programme in School 2, with one white male staff member detailing how he 'encouraged' a 'younger' female colleague to take on more labour to improve the gender diversity of their offering. The colleague he was encouraging was hierarchically junior and precariously employed. This work tends to be framed as an opportunity, but plays into a meritocratic ideology that is sustained by exploitative casual labour. Such instances unwittingly demonstrate the 'functional gap' (Zheng, 2018) maintained between precarious and non-precarious staff, where tasks that benefit individual merit are prioritised in favour of activities that benefit or elevate groups categorised in this setting as 'other', such as CCC.

This brings us to the final theme of *Collective Disillusionment*. The effect of extensive restructuring, employment freezes and a voluntary severance scheme alongside ongoing precarity in the university studied meant that decolonising the curriculum was liable to be deprioritised. Staff made frank statements such as CCC being '*not at the top of my list of priorities'* or one of a multitude of *'competing fights'*. Alongside this were inferences of anxiety, fatigue and overwhelm that speak somewhat dismissively of decolonising the curriculum as a lesser battle within a wider war.

These responses were surprisingly more prevalent in those on permanent contracts (although less surprisingly, predominantly amongst white colleagues). This cohort expressed serious reservations about engaging in CCC due to a planned university restructure where many courses and modules could be closed. The threat weighed heavily upon those who would have hitherto presumed their employment to be secure, making their responses especially cynical. As a permanently employed colleague in School 2 noted: '*It's all very well having a diverse curriculum, but if there is no curriculum, it can be as diverse as you like.*'

In times of change and the re-assessment of priorities within HE, initiatives that are not seen as 'business critical' (such as EDI) tend to be the first thing to be dispensed with. In all the responses from staff members in School 2 (as opposed to School 1, which was not so drastically affected by the university restructure), expressions of vulnerability, uncertainty and the threat of redundancy, regardless of the nature of the staff members' contract, infiltrated their view of the feasibility of decolonising:

> Obviously, time is a big factor, we all have to juggle a million things at the same time. […] and, you know, the sort of uncertainties that are there for us all [the university] at the moment.
>
> Male, White, OE, School 2

> There are quite a few curriculum reviews going on now. Because you know, we're losing staff, we're having to rethink things. We're having to close some things and do things differently.
>
> Male, White, OE, School 2

The responses suggested an atmosphere of manufactured uncertainty that extended beyond those whose contracts have a finite end date (Hassard & Morris, 2018) to those whose employment was technically secure. The circumstances of precarious working in HE have diffused and spread to those on open-ended contracts, triggered by a sector-wide tendency for institutions to suddenly allocate, revoke or otherwise rapidly change workplace responsibilities and conditions. There was analytical congruence between the tangible pressures on time touched upon in *Eleventh-hour Teaching* and the generalised sense (and perhaps ominous fear) of pressure and uncertainty highlighted here.

CCC's focus upon decolonising reading lists and teaching materials was a particular problem due to this context. One academic noted how starting modules from scratch would make decolonising more effective:

> If you are looking for the literature on relevant topics, it's very hard for you to find the articles or books written by, say, authors in other parts of the world. So what I think is really helpful is just to start with some new modules rather than […] just think about a new reading list within their own modules.
>
> Male, BAME, FT, School 2

This approach, of building decolonised modules from the ground up, is exemplary of 'cruel optimism' in academia (Bone, 2021, p. 286), where people maintain an optimistic commitment to a value system that is undermined by the material circumstances of its reality. In this case, decolonising work is being limited by institutional and sectoral pressures. The participant above goes on to say how '*it's pretty hard to just introduce new modules*' in his subject of Philosophy due to recruitment issues and '*the current situation*'. When a university exists in a state of crisis, innovation becomes limited, often counterproductive or a waste of time. A non-precarious School 2 staff member bemoaned the effort involved in diversifying a reading list when '*Everything is going to be changed anyway*…', later prefixing a remark with '*if I'm still here*…'. Another non-precarious School 2 staff member, who subsequently took voluntary severance, remarked dryly '*this is something for the future*, **if we [our department] survive'**. While precarious staff members were reflecting on the more practical limitations of decolonising their curricula arising from the nature of their contracts, non-precarious colleagues were similarly experiencing a spectral barrier that impeded engagement in long-term projects to decolonise the curriculum. Borne of trepidation and foreboding in response to rapid, alarming institutional changes, their language portends a neurotic fear about the potential for the inevitable destruction of their work and even their entire discipline. As will be discussed further below, non-precarious academics therefore often invoked neuroses around their own precarity as their reason for pushing back on diversity policy.

DISCUSSION

The research findings indicate that the possibility of engagement in projects such as CCC is almost impossibly intertwined with the wider financial stability of the institution and the HE sector, and how these structures impact upon individual academic careers and identities. It seemed difficult for participants to imagine CCC operating without reference to these constraints. To use the terminology of Karen Salt quoted earlier in this paper, CCC is a budding seed planted in toxic soil. After all, the first three themes of the findings are indicative of academia working as it always has: preserving the hierarchical status quo. *Eleventh-Hour Teaching* is not a new phenomenon, as time allotted to complete work is known to be unequally distributed to the detriment of marginalised social groups, a fact best demonstrated by the way that motherhood disadvantages female scholars (Maxwell

et al., 2019; Yin & Mu, 2023). The themes of *Lack of Ownership* and *I'm Not The EDI Guy* illuminate hierarchies that develop within departments where secure, senior staff members who embody characteristics associated with privilege have more say in the direction of the work they do than those who are junior and/or precarious. These hierarchies mean that the people more likely to engage with decolonising the curriculum (minoritised groups, who are statistically more likely to be precarious) are correspondingly less able to, and therefore there are fewer opportunities to enact change.

The research findings support the idea that voluntary decolonising work (such as engaging with CCC) does not ensure your job security, so is not treated as essential work in the academy. As a case in point, one of the staff members instrumental to the setting up of CCC was retained on successive fixed-term contracts until 2021, and the current project lead only received a permanent contract in 2022 after the project had run for more than 4 years. Both staff members were BAME. As predicted by Andrews (2016), these groups end up shouldering the emotional labour of the process, as well as being held responsible for any failings in its outcomes. Despite the fact that universities must fulfil local and national policy requirements around diversity and inclusion (Henderson & Bhopal, 2022) and comply with stipulations in Fair Access Agreements and laws like the Equalities Act, there is very little support or concrete guidance for those who commit to this work. Rarely, if ever, would an academic be judged on when a curriculum is suitably 'decolonised', so those working in this area not only have to reach targets for success: they must create them too. Compared to producing REF outputs or securing funding, this form of labour rarely serves to enhance someone's career (Clarke & Knights, 2015, p. 1869). In the highly competitive HE landscape, objectives that prioritise progressiveness and social justice end up being superseded by institutional aims. This causes tensions that are evident in the responses of the staff members interviewed. Without addressing these barriers, claims by institutions of having 'decolonised' through EDI initiatives risk becoming 'nothing but a euphemism for the enduring reproduction of oppressive social relations and consequent material inequalities' (Benjamin, 2002, p. 310; Ali, 2022).

It is clear in these findings that, for academics on precarious contracts who are accustomed (or resigned) to their circumstances of uncertainty, decolonising the curriculum is still regarded as important and should be engaged with, albeit temporarily or through doing extra workarounds. This corresponds with their need to demonstrate being a 'jack of all trades' who cannot drop any one of the many spinning plates required to sustain an academic career towards the end goal of permanent employment. But when it comes to *Collective Disillusionment*, even those who are more securely employed are required to work competitively and calculatedly – in case they need to look for employment elsewhere or re-apply for their own jobs. In this scenario, neuroliberal governance takes over and academics self-exclude from initiatives such as CCC in order to prioritise things that ensure they, their jobs and their departments 'survive'. The diversity policy remains in place, and is paid lip service to, but the practical work does not get done. Subsequently 'power relations and structural contradictions of the neoliberal university [remain] untouched and unchallenged' (Loveday, 2018, p. 163).

It is notable that attitudes towards engagement with CCC, particularly amongst fixed-term staff members, were generally positive and proactive. This was in spite of the practical roadblocks they were encountering in terms of available time or authority over module content. This illustrates what Bone (2021) describes as the 'crisis ordinariness' of academic work. Building upon the work of Berlant (2011), where individuals establish ways of coping with an untenable situation, she argues that staff 'manage the impasse of ongoing precariousness' (2021, p. 286) by adhering to a hopeful narrative, no matter how improbable. This is analogous to the wider pursuit of racial justice, where a crisis ordinariness persists because the possibility of achieving positive outcomes is continually compromised, yet an

ongoing attachment and commitment to them is necessary for self-preservation and identity (Berlant, 2011; Meer, 2022, p. 10). Advancing racial equality in UKHE institutions has been described as a 'consistent failure' (Ali, 2022, p. 4), yet persistence here continues and is exemplified by the workarounds described by our participants above. This study shows how the push towards decolonising work in UKHE institutions is not only propelled by cynical top-down measures designed to make universities more marketable. Rather, it is a messy juxtaposition of policy and academic neuroliberal tendencies, where atmospheres of uncertainty and doom are normalised, and impediments to a post-colonial future are accepted, endured and justified.

CONCLUSION

The atmosphere of precarity in the HE landscape means now more than ever that academic employment is 'uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker' (Kalleberg, 2009, p. 2), regardless of contractual status. This contributes to a growing collective of 'neurotic academics', for whom self-preservation via individualistic strategies is normalised. Precarity is a cause often championed by more secure academics, but one that most rarely identify with themselves (Thorkelson, 2016), despite it permeating their work. Whilst this makes them to some degree complicit with the problems precarity causes, it is also symptomatic of the wider status quo that systemically fails to prioritise the voices or knowledge of diverse groups.

As funding opportunities for decolonising initiatives such as CCC proliferate, these are frequently appropriated by universities for their own ends, as a cynical form of performance measurement (Ahmed, 2007), or a 'badge' that institutions can wear to improve their appeal to students and funders (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). Yet the end goal of these initiatives is rendered almost impossible by pernicious structural tendencies within academia. This study shows that such work requires a properly resourced and time-rich labour force, along with a workforce hierarchy that is representative and equitable in terms of race. Therefore, investment in decolonising and anti-racist work beyond the classroom and into wider university processes is required to 'raise consciousness, reduce complacency, and promote a critical self-reflection' of, for example, unconscious bias in recruitment (Campbell, 2021, p. 55). Secondly, in the case of CCC there is little to no stipulation that this work *must* be undertaken, nor evidence it will be adequately rewarded or even acknowledged by the academy if it is. Whilst there remain some who are still willing to decolonise their curricula due to possessing a marginalised identity or a deep concern for social justice, these individual motivations are being eclipsed by the requirements of the neoliberal academy, where academics must prioritise time towards marketing *themselves* and their own careers. For those on precarious contracts, decolonising risks becoming nothing more than an employability selling point, another string for one's academic bow.

The final theme of *Collective Disillusionment* brings these reflections around precarity, academic hierarchies and decolonising work at this point in the history of UKHE into stark focus. The findings show how at the time of the interviews, the dehumanising experience of precarious working conditions expanded beyond the particulars of fixed-term contracts and into the daily practices of securely-employed academics, hinting at the pessimistic path UKHE is currently walking. Now, in institutions around the country, whole schools of teaching and research expertise in the humanities (within which School 2 is firmly seated) are being swallowed up in market-driven restructures that claim to be responding to student demand. Both school and HE-level policy has sought for several years to divert students away from courses regarded as 'lower value' (Moran, 2022); often those in arts and humanities subjects at less prestigious universities. It should not be considered a coincidence that the

humanities are where important decolonising thought originated and flourished: in works from the disciplines of English Literature, History, and Philosophy. Likewise of note is the fact that historically fewer BAME students attend the 'more prestigious' institutions that are able to retain these disciplines within their offering (Arday et al., 2022). The activist spirit that underpins initiatives such as CCC requires a sense of hope for change and betterment. In the current context, the structured governance of academics' 'neuroliberal' sensibilities means staff members will continue to till the toxic soil in hope of a post-colonial future, while projects such as CCC continue to struggle to take seed.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The authors declare no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data supporting this study cannot be made available to preserve anonymity of the participants and institution.

ETHICS STATEMENT
The research proposal was submitted to the ethics review process in 2018 and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the host institution, which has been anonymised to avoid reputational harms.

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Endnotes
[i] The authors acknowledge that this term lacks differentiation, and obscures further inequalities that exist between ethnic groups (Ali 2022, p. 8). 'BAME' has also resulted in negative labelling, particularly in health research (Aspinall, 2021). However, the term is widely used in UK Government publications and policy and is used here only in relation to its use in particular contexts, literature, evidence or reports.

[ii] For background on racial capitalism, see Cedric Robinson's original conception of the term (2021). See also Melamed (2015), Pulido (2017), and Bhattacharyya (2018).

[iii] The case study has been anonymised to demonstrate the broader applicability of the issues identified here to other 'decolonise the curriculum' initiatives elsewhere in UKHE and beyond, and to protect the identities of the precarious colleagues interviewed.

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