



The Internationalist

Episode two transcript – does decolonising higher education matter?

Natasha Lokhun:

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

In this series, we're looking at the responsibility of universities to confront both the past and the present. Who gets to learn and who gets to teach in today's society, where the legacy of empire is still an open and often painful issue? Universities are places of learning and of transformation, and they play a critical role in creating open and fairer societies. But they also reflect the world in which they operate, and they can even reinforce inequalities.

In today's episode, we're asking how can the curriculum be authentic to where it's taught? Depending on the country, you might be talking about decolonizing or indigenizing the curriculum. Curricula, bodies of knowledge basically, tend to be modeled on templates of learning that have usually originated in the so-called West. But whose knowledge counts and who gets to decide this?

Today, I'm joined by two guests who will help me explore this important issue. Meera Sabaratnam is Senior Lecturer in International Relations at SOAS, University of London in the UK, and Chair of De-colonizing SOAS Working Group. Welcome Meera, and thank you for joining us.

Meera Sabaratnam:

Thank you.

Natasha Lokhun:

And our second guest is Marg Forster, Associate Head of the School of Māori Knowledge, Te Pūtahi-a-Toi, at Massey University in New Zealand. Hello to you, Margaret.

Margaret Forster:

[foreign language 00:01:30].

Natasha Lokhun:

Thank you both for joining us. I think it just highlights what a global issue it is, the fact that it's breakfast time for Meera and myself in the UK, and Marg, what time is it in New Zealand?

Margaret Forster:

Time to go to bed. 9:40.

Natasha Lokhun:

That is late. Marg, actually, I'll come to you first. The concept of indigenizing the curriculum has been around in New Zealand, I understand for 30 to 40 years. What has changed in that time? And can you give us a practical example of what an indigenized curriculum looks like?

Margaret Forster:

I think one way to answer that is probably to talk about my own experiences in the university. So I was a student back in the early 1990s, and at that stage, I was studying science at university and there was no indigenous content in the curriculum, at that particular stage. If you jump forward

about a decade, that's when I started working as a Māori researcher at Massey University. I entered into a department that was a School of Māori Studies, so everything we teach is based on Māori culture, Māori language, our ways of thinking, our ways of knowing.

Having said that, other disciplines or other schools outside of our particular department, you would have been hard-pressed to find any indigenous content in a lot of that material. Jumping forward to today, we are increasingly seeing indigenization of other curricula. So this year, we started teaching Māori knowledge in a core science program. Couple of years ago, we started teaching Māori knowledge and Māori culture into social work programs and Bachelor of Health Science.

We're starting to see an increase in indigenous content. But more importantly, I think we're starting to see an increase in Māori scholars in other disciplines. And I think that's what's pushing the Māori content.

Natasha Lokhun:

And Meera, I mean, compared to universities in New Zealand, and I think the example that Marg's given of what's happening at Massey, SOAS is really at the start of the process. The Decolonising SAOS Working Group was set up in 2016. What sort of change are you working towards? Thinking about that kind of process that Marg has spoke about, what would you hope to see in 30 to 40 years time?

Meera Sabaratnam:

So it's partly true to say that we're at the start of that process. I think at SOAS, because we've been thinking about the relations, particularly between Britain and Asia, Africa and the Middle East for a century, it's clear that anti-colonial or post-colonial thinking has been a necessary part of that story for almost all of that time.

What we've seen in recent years is a reinvigoration of that idea, and specifically driven by students and specifically driven by students in this moment. I think it's about an intensification and a reenergizing of an underlying idea. But I think what's interesting at this particular present moment, in higher education in the UK, is that the numbers and the kinds of students going to university have expanded massively in the last 10 to 20 years.

So the university is a much more diverse place. There's many more scholars of color and international scholars that are part of that. And so the absences in the curriculum and its narrowness just becomes more obvious to everybody concerned. And so what we're really trying to do is challenge that narrowness, and say that universities and... Well, an education generally has to be not just teaching from one standpoint, but teaching from multiple standpoints.

And particularly in the UK, where I think it's fair to say that that narrow vision and that hierarchical attitude towards the rest of the world has been the dominant mode of thinking for a long time. That's a specific thing that we need to challenge.

Natasha Lokhun:

It's interesting, because you've both touched upon this idea of people, really, helping to drive the change. Meera, you spoke about students. Marg, this idea of Māori scholars now, you're seeing more of them and they're coming to the fore, and they're helping to develop the knowledge and bring that to the fore.

I think if you're seeing the motivations, it's coming from students, it's coming from scholars in the subject, and then getting a whole institution behind it. I guess that's the next phase as you move it from perhaps what might be seen as a niche concern, to actually an institution-wide topic. Marg, can I ask you for your thoughts on that?

Margaret Forster:

Definitely. I think in a New Zealand context anyway, we've had head quite a few years at having a go at this, so our School of Māori Studies, or what we now call School of Māori Knowledge, it was first established way back in 1970s by some very distinguished Māori scholars.

Speaker 4:

In Māori and express our thoughts, should not be denied that right.

Speaker 5:

Not so much whether this particular petition succeeds, but whether it is possible to save the language.

Margaret Forster:

They really did the hard fight, having to argue that Māori knowledge is actually an academic subject, and it should have its own place within the academic institution. So then I think as successive generations have come in, we've all put our own mark on the curriculum and what counts as, in our case, Māori knowledge and how we teach it. And while we have taught it in one particular corner of the university, we like to think of it as the center of the university.

Over time, I think we started branching out into other disciplines and it's really like colonizing other spaces. So it has been part of that political project for us, of being able to be heard and for our knowledge to have a same kind of standing beside other ways of knowing. A big part of that, I think has been linked to that resistance movement, reclaiming Māori rights in New Zealand, particularly our rights around the Treaty of Waitangi, and what that means for the standing of our own ways of thinking, our own knowledge in this space.

Natasha Lokhun:

Can you give us an example, you spoke about branching out and I guess what that means, how that's come into play in practice? What has that meant when, I guess the influence... You've really seen the influence spread.

Margaret Forster:

So Māori rights, our political rights, our use of our language, our use of our knowledge and our culture, it has to be a central and integral part of the university. So not just an add-on to another subject. So we've had lots of conversations between Māori, non-Māori, Māori knowledge academic subject area, and a whole lot of other academic subjects, talking about how do we authentically increase the Māori content in a number of our courses?

And how do we do that in a way... We this phrase, [foreign language 00:08:56]. So how do we do it in an empowering way, in a way that recognizes that knowledge-base actually originates in the land and in our communities? So it doesn't automatically transfer well to an academic setting, and also recognizing our colonial past and the power dynamics that sit in that space. There's a whole lot of things there to untangle, if we're actually going to be able to use Māori knowledge in a way that's [foreign language 00:09:28], or empowering for our people. Because first and foremost, our knowledge is for our people and our communities. It's not for academia.

We spend a lot of time talking with other disciplines about what is the goal, from their perspective? And then we talk about things like, well, is it appropriate for a non-Māori to be delivering Māori content? And my answer there would be no. We actually need our own Māori scholars in front of our students. I think that does a couple of things. It allows us to maintain what we call a [foreign language 00:10:05], or guardianship role over our knowledge. But I think more importantly, it allows us to put role models up in front of our students.

Natasha Lokhun:

That phrase, our knowledge is for our people and our community, I think is so powerful. And I can see that, although I wouldn't claim to know a lot about it, from what I understand about the Māori culture, as you said, that's not just a saying. It's a belief that's put into practice.

Meera, as I say, that phrase, our knowledge is for our people and our community. Reflecting on, I suppose, what's happening at SOAS and you spoke about in the UK, higher education space, it's a different context. What are your thoughts on that, and I guess how the process compares?

Meera Sabaratnam:

I think it's important to say that the context that Marg's talking about is in some ways, the mirror image of what we've got in the UK. So Marg's is in a settler colonial space, where the displacement

and the erasure of indigenous knowledge has been central to the dynamic, over number of centuries. Whereas in the UK, you're in the seat of power, in the seat of empire, or at least the previous seat of empire. And so the issue that we have is a problem of defining Britishness or Englishness by whiteness, and by a particular relationship to that center.

When we're talking about decolonizing, what we're trying to do is transform this hierarchical way of thinking into a more democratic way of thinking, a more inclusive way of thinking. So one of the conversations that we often end up having in the UK is, are you saying that only black people can write about Africa, or only people of Middle Eastern descent can write about the Middle East? We're not saying that.

What we're saying is two things. One, it's important to have role models from around the world, so we understand that. But two, there is a standpoint that comes from being grounded in a space, which makes your perspective on things different from if you're studying it from afar. The history of studying Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and often Latin America as well, is one of Northern scholars studying it from a very distanced way, without having to live in and negotiate those spaces. And often coming to it with a set of preconceptions and stereotypes and theories.

The challenge for us is to think about how to learn about the world, not to know as in to dominate it, but how to learn about the world. And to cultivate a mode of engagement which is respectful, and democratic, and critical, and rigorous, and all of that. But we still, of course, have all these structures, which are heavily concentrated in the West. Journal publishing university rankings, all of these things that constitute the hierarchies.

Natasha Lokhun:

Just thinking about that point about journals, and this idea of, I think it's fair to say that academia, that's at the hub of it. This idea of journals as the mechanism, as it were, for knowledge to be shared, transmitted. Once it's in a journal, then it's real knowledge. I think that's fair to say, that's how the concept works. Marg, what does that mean in the context of Māori knowledge, and being able to push that forward?

Margaret Forster:

Yeah, it's a huge issue in the sense that all of us are ranked, as far as our research and teaching goes. And for a while there, it was unfortunate that rankings were based on journals, particularly international ones, highly ranked, which have not in the past, had that conversation with indigenous knowledge, have not really acknowledged or recognized the way we think and the way we write. We have gotten around that a little bit, by developing our own journals. AlterNative is probably one of the more well-known ones. So creating spaces for Māori scholars to publish.

But we're also moving into a system in New Zealand, where we're trying to place more emphasis on the impact of research, its impact on our communities, on development and on helping to resolve pressing social issues. I guess it's ranked a little bit higher than all of the publications, not that publications aren't important. And there's a lot of Māori scholars publishing in a whole lot of other spaces. But we're also looking for other ways to measure performance.

When I think of measures of good research, I think of things like long-term relationships with communities, where you're continually going back and engaging in different research projects. So it shows that there's a level of trust there, shows that your research is relevant to those people and to the issues that have been identified by those people.

I also think another key measurement of success is our ability to mentor new and emerging scholars, and to build that workforce. And then probably third would be that networking and sharing of different ways of using our knowledge in contemporary contexts, so that we keep growing and developing what we know, so it doesn't stagnate.

Natasha Lokhun:

Meera, I know that this isn't a scientific institution as such, but that approach, does that sound familiar, I guess? Using the policies to help drive change. And if so, what challenges do you see with that?

Meera Sabaratnam:

I suppose there's two things driving the changes at SOAS, and I think more widely in the UK. And lots of institutions now, are trying to do something a bit like this. And I think of these things as on the one hand, quality and quality assurance, and then the other thing is equality legislation and frameworks.

So in terms of the quality assurance, one of the things that we've tried to do in SOAS is build in decolonizing sensibilities into our quality assurance. When students do their evaluations of modules, one of the things that they're asked is how inclusive was the curriculum, or how diverse was it? And did the teaching methods help you feel included? It's not like a box-ticking exercise where it's like, how many scholars of color did you have in this module, in this module, in this module?

We also asked program conveners to reflect in their annual reviews of their programs, have they used the toolkit that we developed for program and module conveners? And there's also training going on. So I think one of the key issues in the UK, not so much at SOAS, but particularly outside there, is that people do lack basic literacy on questions like race and racism, how it affects students, how it affects society. Even its prevalence in society, people are very under-informed about.

For example, if you take the idea that students who have experienced racism might be less willing to put up their hand or venture forward ideas, because they've experienced negative reactions from teachers in the past or people in the past. They might engage with teaching formats that give students a more equal voice in the classroom.

Now, they're not evenly taken up. And I would definitely not say that we've cracked the issue of how to deal with racism in the classroom, and that we've fixed all our problems. But we're certainly a lot more literate about them than we were, previously.

Natasha Lokhun:

As you say, you've not cracked it. It's not solved. What do you think, what's next? What is the next step, in terms of making change? And do you see that as a slow process, is it incremental? Or do you think there's a big step change that could happen?

Meera Sabaratnam:

I think for big changes to take place, education needs to start at quite a young age. So often by the time you get to university, students have accumulated quite a lot of life experiences about this and that. And so starting their education young, in terms of thinking about how to think in a more open and critical and reflexive way, is a very positive thing.

And also, I mean, the societal change has to be there. Even if a university is very welcome and inclusive, but students still have differential access to housing, employment, all the rest of it, then no matter what you do in a university, it's still not going to affect those bigger issues.

Natasha Lokhun:

Thank you. Marg, can I ask for your final thoughts then, please? Just on, I guess, what's next for indigenizing the curriculum? Is there a next phase or is this a path that you see just continuing?

Margaret Forster:

I think there is a next phase. When I look back at how we have introduced Māori knowledge into universities, I think we did it in a manner that was quite generic and there was certain types of information that we weren't ready to share. And I think we're moving into a phase now, where... I do a lot of place-based teaching, and what attracts me to that is that our back yard then becomes our classroom. So we can draw on the, what we call [foreign language 00:19:20], or tribal narratives from the area that I'm standing.

When I look around, I think of all the different knowledge forms that only [Te Hana 00:19:29] have, and we try and locate our students and our work in that particular space. When I do my research, because I'm from another tribal area, I often use the knowledge that's associated with my own people and our own community. When we're talking about what is authentic, what is perhaps a future, I think it is really our own [foreign language 00:19:56] or our own land, and our own knowledge has gone from that general to now, specific to a particular area.

Natasha Lokhun:

Thank you.

I think today, what has really emerged for me, are two elements. One is the importance of people. So the headline topic might be decolonizing or indigenizing the curriculum, but really this is about people, both in terms of driving change and helping to make that change happen, but also in terms of the impact. So looking at how it has the potential to have an impact on communities, in terms of the research and the knowledge that's created. And also for students at university, and making them feel more involved.

And that's actually quite a nice link to our next episode, which is going to look at the student body and the student experience. How can we foster a sense of belonging for all students, while they're at university?

I'd like to thank our guests for today. Meera Sabaratnam, Senior Lecturer in International Relations at SOAS, University of London, and Chair of the Decolonizing SOAS Working Group. And Marg Forster, Associate Head of the School of Māori Knowledge, Te Pūtahi-a-Toi, at Massey University in New Zealand.

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Thank you for joining me, Natasha Lokhun. The producer is Lindsay Riley, executive producer, Richard Myron, and it's an Earshot Strategies production.