

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR

DECOLONISATION OF HEALTH EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Prepared For : *Faculty of Medicine and
Health Sciences, University of Ghent*

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BACKGROUND

A research project was conducted on “Decolonisation of higher education programs”, as part of an initiative by the Ban Ki-moon Center and ENLIGHT university network. This project aimed to develop actionable recommendations for decolonisation of higher education programs. The project engaged with students and faculty members in the University of Ghent’s Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, and undertook a participatory approach to study what decolonisation means in the context of the university education and how this should be achieved.

The first phase of this project included a desk review of policies and programs related to decolonisation, inclusiveness and equity within the university, networking with relevant university stakeholders, and a qualitative inquiry with students and faculty members of the department. The interviews and focus group discussions identified key focal areas that should be addressed to achieve academic decolonisation; (i) increased diversity in teaching staff and learning materials, (ii) sensitisation of teaching staff and students, and (iii) improved preparation for students travelling or working abroad.

The second phase of this project aimed to work with university stakeholders to co-develop relevant and actionable recommendations for decolonisation within the university. With funding from the Global Minds Grant, two workshops were organised with faculty members of (i) the Faculty Committee for Internationalisation of Medicine and Health Sciences (FCIGG) and (ii) the Global Health Masters (MGH) Program. Prior to the workshops, a video was distributed among the participants to sensitise them on the topic. This video consisted of two global health scholars describing the phenomena of colonial influences in health research and the relevance of the decolonisation movement to health academia. During the workshops, faculty members were engaged to brainstorm strategies that could be implemented within the university.

DECOLONISATION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Considering the contention around the term ‘decolonisation’, it is important that we start with an explanation of this oft-disputed word. At a political level, colonialism refers to countries imposing military and economic dominance over others, and decolonisation refers to the process of achieving independence from colonial rule. However, it is important to keep in mind that political colonialism was part of larger effort to exploit communities for their resources, disenfranchise these populations, and suppress their cultures and identity. Thus, ‘decolonisation’ is more than just the removal of foreign rule and a change of flags in previously colonised nations. It is a movement that seeks to reveal and dismantle power in all its forms. Please refer to the [sensitising video](#) developed within this project to deepen your understanding of the decolonisation movement.

During the course of the workshops, the participants debated whether ‘decolonisation’ is an appropriate term to use for efforts in Ghent University. There were concerns that the controversy around the term could derail the conversation and distract from the ultimate goal. While these are well-founded concerns, it is also telling that the participants often defaulted to the term ‘decolonise’ when speaking about the need to address power imbalances in the university.

Further initiatives in UGent may choose to use alternative terms which profess the same goals. However, considering the ubiquity of the term 'decolonise' at a global level, this report uses the term 'decolonisation' to describe efforts to dismantle power structures within the university.

INSIGHTS FROM THE WORKSHOPS

A number of key challenges were described by participants:

- Fragmentation within the university- Most initiatives are implemented at the faculty-level and are not disseminated through the university. Professors in the medical faculty had often not heard of initiatives taken up by other faculties.
- Resistance to change- It was felt that many professors do not see the need for decolonisation efforts and may be defensive of new initiatives. Here, it should be considered that the contention around the term 'decolonisation' may add to this defensive response.
- Time conflicts- While many professors expressed interest, they have conflicting responsibilities and limited time to engage in learning activities.

The participants also outlined resources within the university that could be utilised:

- Decolonisation is on the agenda- Decolonisation has been recognised as a priority theme for VLIR-UOS, and there is growing interest in Ghent University to include decolonial thinking into research and education.
- Corresponding university-level initiatives- The university has adopted 3 key strategies for future-proof education in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which includes blended learning through digitalisation, designing future-proof curricula and promoting life-long learning. These existing initiatives could be channelled to further the decolonisation agenda.
- Emirati networks- It was pointed out that retired professors often remain actively engaged within the university and are unencumbered by teaching duties. These professors can support learning initiatives.
- Student engagement- There are a number of motivated students who could shape decolonising initiatives. Such student efforts should be drawn into department-level initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1- Build Clear Career Trajectories for Non-Belgian Staff

This recommendation aims to promote diversity within the university staff by creating clear pathways for researchers from diverse backgrounds to work and thrive within the university. The university currently has very few non-European teaching staff and even less who are non-Belgian. This is despite having a substantial number of international students until the PhD level. The one currently existing initiative to integrate foreign-language speaking employees into the university is not suitable for engaging researchers. It is necessary to develop an integration plan which is designed to attract and retain foreign talent within the university. This would include; (i) starting at the early-career stage (PhD or Post-doc level) and continuing through the career trajectory, (ii) providing language courses and support, (iii) expanding intercultural competencies within the department (for both Belgian and non-Belgian staff), and (iv) addressing bias in hiring practices.

Recommendation 2- Develop Opportunities for Guest Lecturers

This recommendation aims to promote diversity within the university by creating opportunities for guest lecturers and knowledge exchange. This can be achieved in two ways: (i) by inviting guest lecturers from other countries to visit the university and (ii) using digital technology to facilitate guest lectures from international scholars. A useful resource in this regard is the **Global Minds 2.0** expansion which will provide funding for Short Teaching Stays with a specific focus on bringing scholars from the Global South to Belgium. Another useful resource is the university initiative for **future proof education** which includes digitalisation of teaching. This can be applied as online lectures delivered by professors based in other countries, with the use of subtitles to overcome language barriers.

Recommendation 3- Initiate a Course to Promote Understanding on Power and Equity in Health

This recommendation aims to promote sensitisation by developing a course on the power inequalities in health research and practice, and how to address these through decolonisation of teaching and research methods. It is important to develop two tracts for such an initiative; (i) one that sensitises teachers and trains them to include these concepts in their curriculum, and (ii) another that sensitises students and teaches to apply a decolonial lens to their course learnings. The **ENLIGHT** network (of which UGent is a part) provides funding to develop such initiatives, including curriculum design and organisation of summer schools. The **Global Minds 2.0** has a specific focus on educational initiatives, including the development of university-wide course to support learning. As both ENLIGHT and Global Minds have emphasised the importance of equity in their funding mission, these are useful resources to develop a new course.

Recommendation 4- Encourage Active Learning

This recommendation aims to promote sensitisation by encouraging learning of decolonial methodologies through practice. This can be achieved through expanding the evaluation criteria for student theses and internships, with students being required to provide a critical analysis of inherent power structures in their work context, how these have been addressed, their own positionality, and methods they used to promote equity.

Recommendation 5- Initiate a Preparatory Course for Students Going Abroad

The medical faculty already has a preparatory event (Health Sciences Crossing Borders event) for students who go abroad for their theses or internships. However, this should be expanded from a single day event to a broader preparatory course that encompasses workshops and sensitisation. Key aspects to focus on in such a training are cross-cultural competencies, sensitisation about power dynamics in north-south collaborations, and awareness about local pedagogies.

Recommendation 6- Initiate a Virtual Buddy program

This recommendation aims to promote equitable international collaboration by promoting intercultural competency and better understanding of different contexts. This can be achieved by connecting students with a peer from an international partner university, and encouraging knowledge exchange and shared reflections between the students. This can be integrated as an assigned task within an existing course.

Recommendation 7- Encourage Joint PhDs with North-South Collaborations

This recommendation aims to promote equitable international collaboration and encourage knowledge exchange, by involving diverse perspectives and expertise into doctoral education. This can be achieved by inviting international scholars (particularly those from the Global South) to co-supervise PhD students. The university already has [joint PhD agreements](#) with universities worldwide, which can be a starting point to encouraging decolonial perspectives in the PhD trajectory. This would include involving more Global South scholars in joint PhD supervision, and co-developing evaluation criteria that encourage more contextually-relevant methodologies, and dissemination methods.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following are a list of resources that will support efforts to put the recommendations into action.

Contact Points:

- [Ms. Jolien Tegenbos](#) from the University of Ghent's Academic Directorate for Internationalisation conducted a policy study to promote equity in international collaborations and is working with the Global Minds Fund to improve the funding guidelines.
- Mr. Sebastian Van Hoeck and Ms. Latifah Abdou from the [Universitair Centrum voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking \(UCOS\)](#) provided preparation trainings for students undertaking international work placements and conduct workshops for intercultural sensitivity training in higher education institutions.
- [Prof. Sami Zemni](#) from the Center for Conflict and Development Studies (UGent) initiated the working group "[Learning Network on Decolonisation](#)" within the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences.
- [Warda El-Kaddouri](#) from the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy (Ugent) is the curator of the 'Humanities Academie' which has been set up to focus on the need for decolonisation within the university.

Resources within UGent:

- A podcast series "Decolonizing the University" was started by masters students from the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences. This podcast explores the effects of colonialism in higher education and the experiences of UGent professors who have introduced decolonial perspectives in their curricula. Listen to it on [Spotify](#) or [Ufora](#).
- A lecture and workshop series "How to decolonise the university?" was organised from 2021 - 2022. The content can be accessed through [Ufora](#).

External resources:

- Keele University's guide to "[Decolonising the curriculum](#)" for teaching staff
- A reference booklet for teachers on "[Decolonising pedagogies](#)"
- UCL toolkit for [Decolonising Global Health](#) on improving curricula for global health education programs
- Recommendations to [decolonise study abroad programs](#)- curated by the School for International Training
- Stellenbosch University has published [recommendations for decolonising the university](#).
- If there are concerns about how university staff and students will respond to decolonisation initiatives, this [review](#) of case studies may be useful. Note that it focusses on South African universities.