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Belgian universities at the core of decolonization

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Over the past few years, calls for decolonization have addressed academia. They also reached Belgian universities.[1] In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests of June 2020, the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) and the (Francophone) Rector Council (CRef)[2] decided to set up a joint 'Interuniversity Working Group on the Colonial Past', henceforth the Working Group. The Working Group was asked to reflect on the role universities can play in the decolonization of academia in particular, and of society in general. The Working Group consisted of one scholar for each participating university who each operated as a single point of contact with all relevant actors within his or her own institution.[3] The Working Group's initial members authored this contribution.[4]

The Working Group started its activity by making an inventory of where the universities currently stand in dealing with Belgium's colonial past and the broader themes associated with it today. This inventory supported further reflection offered by external experts from various countries' regions and disciplines.[5] These in-depth conversations subsequently formed the basis for further internal reflection, resulting in the report titled *Belgian Universities and the Dealing with the Colonial Past*. In this contribution, we provide a brief summary of the inventory and the report.[6]

The decolonization of the academic world

The concept of "decolonization" can be interpreted in various ways. Historically, it refers to the process leading up to formal independence in the years and decades following World War II of the populations that had been colonized by western countries. Despite independence, the process of decolonization has remained incomplete, and the colonial legacy has continued to reproduce profoundly unequal economic relations, political power structures, and epistemologies privileging western forms of knowledge and representation over non-western ones.

Recent campaigns on the so-called "decolonization of the mind" call for an end to specific collective, institutionalized mindsets and attitudes rooted in this colonial past, which imbue institutions in our diverse societies reproducing inequality along ethnic, racial and religious lines. Universities need to be at the forefront of the decolonization process. Historically, they were actively involved in the colonial project. Belgian universities contributed to the economic exploitation and transformation of

1. For an international state of the art of the decolonization of academia, see inter alia Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancioglu (eds.), *Decolonising the University,* London, 2018.
2. Belgium is a federation and higher education is a competence of the Flemish and French communities.
3. Special thanks to Aurora Geerts (VLIR) and Elisabeth Kokkelkoren (CRef), who attended the meetings and helped to organize them.
4. In a later stage, other institutions' representatives joined the Working Group : Catherine Lanneau (ULiège), Catherine Guirkinger (UNamur) and Cleo Maerivoet (ITG [Institute of Tropical Medicine]).
5. Including non-academics, such as artists and activists. We would like to thank Thérèse Biselele (PhD in Medicine, DRC), Sandrine Colard (PhD in Art History, Belgium & USA), Sarah Demart (PhD in Sociology, Belgium), Hugo Devlieger (Professor emeritus of Medicine, Belgium), Mailia Geoffrey (Member of [Collectif] Mémoire Coloniale [et Lutte contre les Discriminations], Belgium), Clémentine Kanazayire (PhD Psychology, Rwanda), Sanchou Kiansumba (Member of Mémoire Coloniale, Belgium), Hippolyte Mimbu (Professor of History, DRC), Raïssa Montois (Member of Mémoire Coloniale, Belgium), Patrick Mudekereza (Writer and Artist, DRC), Matthew Stanard (Associate Professor of History, USA), Fons Verdonck (Professor emeritus of Medicine, Belgium), Natalya Vince (Reader in North African & French Studies, UK) and Sophie Withaeckx (PhD in Philosophy, Assistant Professor, the Netherlands) for their input.
6. The full text is online available, both in French (http://www.cref.be/communication/20211027_Gestion_du_pass%C3%A9_colonial.pdf) and in Dutch (https://vlir.be/publicaties/koloniaal-verleden/).

Central Africa and developed scientific disciplines that supported and legitimized the colonial ideology, interests and rule. But even today, as reference institutions for the production of scientific knowledge, they do not operate fully independently from the realm of politics and power structures that reproduce inequality. All in all, the Working Group identified six substantive areas for decolonizing academia.

(1) The decolonization of academia involves a thorough reflection on the role that universities played in the colonial past. This should be based on historical research and take place in collaboration with colleagues from non-Belgian universities, primarily from the regions that were turned into Belgian colonies in the past.

(2) Universities still today have many material relics related to colonialism they acquired through their close involvement in the colonial project. Part of their patrimony includes commemorative plaques and tributes, ethnographic and other collections that may or may not be on display, and even human remains. Universities should deal with this heritage in a much more thoughtful way than has been the case to date. For instance, they should enable research into the material's origin and significance, develop participatory processes with the heritage communities involved, promote multiple historical and current readings, curate spaces for voices that have to date been marginalized, and consider restitution.

(3) Universities are also more broadly embedded in the current geopolitical relationships that have been shaped by European colonialism. They are actors in diplomacy and foreign relations. Nonetheless, as centers of knowledge production, they should remain self-reflective and critical of the privileged position of Europe/the 'West'/the 'global North' in the world. This can be done inside their own education and research programs, but also through cooperation with non-European universities.

(4) Universities should actively work towards greater diversity and inclusion and strive to reflect contemporary society in all their ranks – from students to professors. In February 2021, Kinshasa-born Déborah Kayembe Buba was elected Rector of the University of Edinburgh.[7] Given the present composition of faculty in Belgian universities, which by the way does not reflect the diversity of the Belgian population, it can hardly be imagined that this could have occurred in our country.

(5) Universities should generate knowledge supporting the contemporary decolonization process in Belgian society. They have to investigate their own role, the colonial past in general, the ways in which colonial narratives and structures influence today's institutions and norms, our current ways of thinking and acting (e.g. Eurocentric perspectives, dominant historical images, the reproduction of inequality, white privilege, systemic racism, structural discrimination, etc.), the dominant perceptions of different population groups (in Europe and beyond), etc. This is not limited to the humanities. In computer science, facial recognition is more accurate for white people than for others and algorithms appear to reproduce and exacerbate existing structures of inequality; in dermatology, pathologies of patients with dark skin are less likely to be recognized; and in mathematics, the importance of Pythagoras is generally acknowledged, but an equally pioneering mathematician such as Aryabhata is far less well known. These are just a few examples where decolonization creates awareness around the partiality of perspectives that are now taken for granted, redressing our understanding of the genealogy of our knowledge, increasing recognition of non-western knowledge, opening up the space for non-European perspectives to be seen and heard, and enriching the global understanding of our world and societies.

(6) Universities should not only *produce* that knowledge, but also proactively *disseminate* it. This should happen first and foremost within society at large, then within their own curricula, in which

7. This position is different from a university rector in Belgium.

presupposed hierarchies of knowledge and intellectual frameworks and epistemes inherited from colonial mental structures are often reproduced without interrogation. Increased awareness and self-reflectivity on these continuities will improve the quality of research output and contribute, more globally, to better social cohesion.

Decolonization is a continuous process. It not only requires reflection and deconstruction, but also new policies regarding education, staff, students, international relations, etc. It starts from the recognition that issues of decolonization are deeply intertwined with academic activities and practices and with the functioning of universities as institutions that generate and legitimize knowledge. Furthermore, decolonization does not consist of ticking off a list of achievements. It is simultaneously a bottom-up and a top-down process, and therefore requires both a change of mindset and a reorientation of policies. Such a struggle against complacency is a healthy reflex. But decolonization is also more than that. It is a necessary questioning of deeply embedded structures that have a major impact on our lives and societies.

An inventory of existing decolonization initiatives

Belgian universities have already taken steps towards their own decolonization. In recent years, in particular, interest in this process has increased and many initiatives have been taken. The Working Group has made an inventory of these activities. This section gives just a few illustrative examples; for a more comprehensive list, we refer to the online report (including an English summary).

Almost all universities have established working groups, committees and other bodies. Some examine the university's colonial heritage and historical relations with Congo, for instance an institutional reflection at ULB that led to an agreement with the University of Lubumbashi on the restitution of ten human skulls. Other areas of activity, such as development cooperation, have been structurally embedded in academia for a longer time and provided a forum for close contact with partners in former colonies (but so far made little space for criticism on the connection between development and colonization or on the very notion of development). Especially at Flemish universities, special commissions advise on diversity. There are also many grassroots initiatives, such as reading groups, pop-up libraries (e.g. WeDecolonizeVUB) and networks (e.g. Afric@ULB). University staff also participate in federal initiatives, such as the Congo expert commission and the research project "Resolution Metis".

The public-oriented activities organized by Belgian universities are countless: lecture series, conferences, seminars, workshops, panel discussions, network conferences, film and documentary shows with debate, guided tours, etc. on decolonization take place at every university. UCLouvain awarded an honorary doctorate to Achille Mbembe in 2017; ULiège and UAntwerpen to Denis Mukwege in 2018 and 2019, respectively; and UHasselt to Stella Nkomo in 2022. In Liège, this designation accompanied the creation of a Mukwege International Chair on Violence against Women and Girls in Conflict. Several universities have (co-)organized exhibitions, such as *Congoville* in Antwerp, *Notre Congo* in Brussels, *Contentious Heritage* in Hasselt, and *Mayombe* in Leuven/Louvain. Universities and professors participate in external activities or host initiatives from non-academic actors. Students of African origin often have their own association, but also other student groups engage in the topic, as the open letters 'Dekoloniseer UGent' and '#DecolonizeKULeuven' illustrate.

University curricula also reflect an increasing interest and include decolonization as a topic. This especially pertains to particular programs, such as the Master in Development Evaluation and Management (UAntwerpen), the Master en sciences de la population et du développement (ULiège), the Master de spécialisation en langues et civilisations africaines (ULB), and the program 'Décentrer l'histoire: Subalternités et critiques postcoloniales'

that UCLouvain will launch in 2022 for all bachelor students. In addition to such programs, numerous courses pay attention to precolonial and colonial history and its various effects. Several universities have taken initiatives to reflect on the Eurocentric character of their curriculum (e.g. the Metaforum working group on multiregionality at KU Leuven and the YesWeScan initiative at VUB, a critical reflection on Eurocentric and colonial biases in STEM and Human Sciences departments). Academics are equally involved in raising attention to the topic in primary and especially secondary education. They participate in advisory boards, help draft vision statements and strategic plans, organize training for teachers and publish new textbooks.

Universities have scholarships and grants for students and junior scholars from regions beyond the Western World, including Central Africa. They closely collaborate with VLIR-UOS and ARES, the institutions in Flanders and French-speaking Belgium that support collaboration of Belgian universities and university colleges with partners in seventeen other countries. They have also developed their own programs, such as Scholars in Resident (UAntwerpen), Bourses Esprit libre du Fonds Jacques Lewin – Inès Henriques de Castro (ULB), Marc Vervenne Fonds (KU Leuven), and Fonds Action Sud (UMons). Many academics at Belgian universities conduct research and training projects in regions beyond the Western World, usually with local colleagues.

Can we conclude from these examples that Belgian academia is on track in the process of decolonization ? Some critical comments should certainly be made. First, there are major differences among faculties and scientific disciplines. Certain disciplines (e.g. history and the social sciences) are often farther in the process of critical self-examination than other ones (e.g. medicine, biology and the exact sciences). Moreover, many initiatives take place at only one or a few universities, and are largely absent elsewhere.

Second, the rising awareness of the importance of decolonization does not always translate into a fundamental self-reflection and actual decolonizing action. The mere mention of Africa in a course does not mean that a thorough reflection on coloniality has taken place. Decolonizing initiatives are often supported by a few interested individuals, but not structurally embedded in higher education. Neither do they systematically lead to the questioning of existing curricula, research practices and Eurocentric knowledge. Almost no data are currently collected and no monitoring is in place about key aspects of decolonizing efforts (e.g. composition of staff and students, education curricula, budgets, etc.).

Public outreach

Raising awareness is an essential part of decolonization, and an aspect where academia should play an important role. Our global society is still embedded in political and economic structures inherited from our colonial past. If left unquestioned, contemporary processes of exclusion and marginalization will keep undermining equality and social cohesion.

Some people show attitudes of suspicion and relativism towards demands to decolonize. This can be avoided by presenting and discussing insights from research to the general public. It should not be limited to sharing multidimensional narratives about the colonial past, objectifiable statistics on discrimination, insights into recent migration history, etc. Universities should also support the societal debate with their expertise in broader domains : social and psychological dynamics, diffusion and transformation of collective memories, ways of interacting with artistic and architectural heritage, legal dimensions, etc. Moreover, academics need to translate their insights into more accessible forums, such as documentaries, films, exhibitions and art, possibly in collaboration with journalists, TV producers, activists, and artists.

Secondary education should pay more attention to the global connectedness of Belgian and European history and to contemporary social issues. It is striking how little Belgian students know about

non-Western, and especially African, history and society, and the interdependency of Belgian history with other regions of the world. Universities can play a key role in decolonizing schools by developing teaching materials and training teachers.

An equally important advantage of this public outreach is that it fosters communication with groups that are currently underrepresented in universities. Their information and inspiration can be enriching. Children – of migration origins, but also others – often ask interesting questions that academics have not yet considered and activists bring up themes that require more research. In other words, public outreach not only consists of speaking and teaching, but also of listening and learning.

Public outreach of decolonizing academia can be stimulated in various ways. Academics' public activities towards wide audiences should play a more prominent role in the evaluation processes based on which academics build their careers. Research project applications should structurally include knowledge exchange with civil society, the arts and/or relevant audiences, including racialized communities, i.e. communities, for instance of migration origin, that are ascribed certain ethnic or racial identities which they do not always identify with themselves. Funds should be made available to compensate non-academics for participation in conferences, since this requires time, organization and financial costs for them.

Diversity at all levels

On 1 February 2021, several newspapers headlined that one in seven first-year students at Flemish universities has non-European roots. More concretely, 14 % of new students reported that either they or at least one of their parents or two of their grandparents were born outside the EU-15. That seems like an impressive figure, which is at odds with the general perception of 'white' auditoriums.

However, these data should not be taken at face value. Since they do not contain details on the age of the students or on the total group of eighteen-year-olds with non-European roots, it is not known whether they are under-represented or not. The same applies to their geographic origins: is there an over-representation by students from, for instance, East Asian or North American countries? Moreover, there are significant differences between universities and faculties. And finally, the academic staff in Belgian universities are still very homogeneous. More data are needed on the composition and progression of students and faculty, as well as the reasons for a possible underrepresentation of people with a migration background or from particular regions, such as Latin America, Africa and West or South Asia. More information is also required on funding bodies (BELSPO, Innoviris, FWO, FNRS, …), their attention to racialized groups, the theme of decolonization, and the intersectionality of gender, migration background and social class. This requires data that paint a more detailed picture (e.g. data on non-approved applications for projects or jobs). This measuring and monitoring can draw inspiration from the important progress made in the past ten years in the field of gender equality, which is partly due to the availability of statistics.

The universities have rightly realized that diversity starts at the base: attracting a more varied student population. Still, more efforts can be made. It is important to diversify recruitment channels and communication, taking into account the diversity of target groups. Student associations, especially those including students with a non-Western background, can actively help with this. The staff of universities' social services (e.g. those informing about scholarships and student jobs), health services (e.g. student psychologists and doctors) and tutoring bodies (e.g. monitors) should also become more diverse.

Education can also be tailored more closely to diverse living environments, eliminate the obviousness of certain assumptions, and question the existence of one type of "normal" student. Young people with a migration and/or a lower-class background often do not recognize themselves in the subject matter that is at the core of university

curricula. It would be useful to provide training for academic staff in order to create more awareness and competences, and to encourage them to adapt their courses and other activities.

Ultimately, this should also lead to a further diversification of the faculty. Many programs lack faculty with a non-Western background. Explicit attention must therefore be paid to diversity in vacancies and selections. Diversification is an important driver for decolonization. It contributes to deconstructing dominant narratives and generates new insights.

Cooperation with non-Western universities, in particular Central African ones

Decolonization primarily concerns Belgian society, but it cannot take place without attention to other regions: certainly Central Africa, but also other historical migration countries and by extension the entire non-Western world. In the colonial period and the first decades after 1960, Belgian universities were very active in Congo. Over the past decades, this commitment has gradually receded. Decolonization should go together with re-establishing ties with Central Africa, preferably in a structural manner, in order to receive different perspectives and memories on a shared past.

The development of new contacts with Central Africa is best started by examining the experiences and results of the past decades. Individual colleagues who have continued to work with and/or in the region point to shortcomings in research and 'development' policies: little support and coordination, focus on excellence (e.g. postdoc instead of doctorate level, doctors instead of nurses), harsh competition with other countries, etc. Other elements for improvement are the focus on reciprocity (e.g. African guest lecturers at Belgian universities), the need to change the biased perception of Congo still too centered on its problems, the broadening of cooperation with non-academic actors, the follow-up of completed projects, etc.

More recognition for cooperation with non-European regions in project assessments and promotion request applications can encourage a greater number of academics to explore these lines. It is striking that many academics have limited contacts with non-Western regions, even though they educate generations for a life in a globalized world.

In this renewed cooperation, partners from regions beyond the Western world must of course be full partners. The forms of collaboration need to address their priorities, needs and perspectives, rather than our own. In order to avoid reproducing colonial power dynamics, it is also important to include various partners, and not just colleagues who have been trained in Belgium or speak French, for example.

Expanding the educational offer

Over the past decades, reflection on the colonial system and its consequences has developed into a separate and interdisciplinary field: subaltern or postcolonial studies. These insights have found footing in Belgium in various ways: especially thanks to individual researchers, but also through the emergence of the domain of cultural studies. However, subaltern or postcolonial studies have not developed into distinct academic disciplines in Belgium. The same applies to related fields, such as African studies, black studies, decolonial studies, etc. It is advisable to embed these disciplines more structurally in Belgian universities. This can eliminate a historical backlog, make current staff and students more aware of the issues, increase universities' visibility and attractiveness among students with a migration background, and act as a motor for the further decolonization of universities and society.

This embedding can be done in different ways. The disciplines can receive attention within certain courses or programs. This is already happening to some extent at most universities, but it is largely limited to specific courses and therefore does not reach all students. Decolonization deserves atten-

tion across disciplines. The establishment of faculty- and/or university-wide courses can address this. This could go hand in hand with the creation of chairs, in single universities or at the inter-university level, whereby each year an international scholar provides a series of lectures that can be offered as a subject in various study programs.

The creation of an inter-university master's degree on decolonization could anchor decolonization more firmly into Belgian academia. This initiative could bring together different disciplines, integrate existing initiatives, stimulate international cooperation and develop further expertise. These are important advantages: the knowledge – both about other disciplines and specifically about Belgium – is currently not always available. Similar initiatives already exist abroad, such as the Institute Project on Decoloniality at the University of Edinburgh and the MA Race, Migration & Decolonial Studies at University College Dublin.

Conclusion

Decolonization – i.e. the abolishment of specific collective, institutionalized mindsets and attitudes rooted in the colonial past – has become an important issue at Belgian universities. Significant steps have been made in this process, and the fact that the Flemish and French-speaking Rector Councils in the summer of 2020 created an interuniversity Working Group for reflection and recommendations shows the importance being attached to the topic. However, this does not mean that Belgian academia can rest on its laurels. Results highly differ between universities and faculties. Many achievements result from individual staff members' commitment. Structures do not automatically follow and some groups would still explicitly or silently label decolonization as a fashionable claim rather than a necessary societal process. Moreover, important data are lacking, for instance on the composition of students and staff and the possible underrepresentation of certain groups. All in all, it is important to remain actively concerned about decolonization and to permanently question curricula, research practices and the Eurocentric knowledge regime. Greater diversity among students and staff will create more perspectives and can serve as a mirror for self-reflection. The same goes for collaboration with African partners, as long as this is based on equality and reciprocity.

The authors are members of the Groupe de travail interuniversitaire "Passé colonial belge"/Interuniversitaire Werkgroep "Koloniaal Verleden België".