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Decolonising Ireland's education system remains vital despite the country's wealth and privilege

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Ireland urgently needs to decolonise its higher education system. British rule spanned several centuries in Ireland and policies during this time sought to replace Irish culture with British norms, leaving a legacy that continues to influence Irish higher education.

Today, Ireland is a wealthy and confident nation state. But this hides a colonial past which saw its language, culture and intellectual heritage systematically suppressed. Our education system has long been shaped by English-speaking and, recently, specifically American intellectual ideas. This has left limited space for Irish perspectives and thinkers.

Ireland has grown close in many respects to nations which were once colonising powers. It has taken on many of their entrenched practices. For education, this includes the export of western “expertise” to non-western countries, known as “helicopter research”. This is where researchers from wealthy countries study communities in lower-income countries without involving local researchers.

Another well-known phenomenon, known as “white saviourism”, positions western experts as heroic figures, bringing solutions to “underdeveloped” regions without understanding the local context. Irish professionals are not exempt from this dynamic.

Grassroots, student-led initiatives such as “Why Is My Curriculum White?” and “Liberate My Degree” have emerged from students’ demands to challenge the Eurocentric dominance of university teaching. These initiatives also push for greater inclusivity and representation within higher education.



Trinity College Dublin students called for greater recognition of the Irish language on campus. Alexey Fedorenko

Our university, Trinity College Dublin (TCD), continues to address its colonial legacy through various initiatives, such as denaming the college library, repatriating human remains and honouring female scholars with new busts in the library.

Recently, a movement emerged, led by Trinity College Dublin's Students' Union (TCDSU), advocating for greater recognition of Irish language rights within the university. The union prominently displayed a banner reading “Cá bhfuil an Ghaeilge?” (“Where is the Irish?”) on the university’s iconic Campanile (its bell tower). These efforts aimed to draw attention to the need for stronger representation of the national language in signage, official communications and advertisements: a call that TCD promptly addressed.

Questioning hierarchies

As mentioned, English and American frameworks continue to shape much of Irish university education, sidelining Ireland’s intellectual traditions. This affords little space to Irish thinkers in fields such as Initial Teacher Education (ITE) or psychology.

This issue also finds expression in cultural practices, such as the frequent mispronunciation of Irish names. Names like Siobhán, Aoife, and Tadhg are often treated as comedic challenges in US media, which is widely consumed in Ireland, reducing their rich linguistic and cultural significance to punchlines. While seemingly trivial, this reinforces a broader disregard for linguistic diversity and reflects the ways Irish identity has been marginalised, even in the modern era.

Addressing these challenges requires more than tokenistic gestures. In higher education, decolonisation involves reclaiming neglected voices and critically examining our assumptions and biases. Decolonisation is not about simply adding Irish or non-western thinkers to reading lists but about fundamentally reshaping how knowledge is framed, taught and contextualised.

Efforts to decolonise must address the specifics of Irish identity, such as the revival of the Irish language and culture. Post-independence, these efforts have faced accusations of elitism and uneven implementation. Future efforts must take an inclusive approach that integrates perspectives from migrants and minority communities, reflecting the multicultural reality of today's Ireland.

Decolonising the higher education system in Ireland requires an approach that acknowledges the legacies of colonialism and privilege, and recognises that Ireland takes part in many practices today that come from that colonial mindset.

But by taking the right approaches, Ireland can create an education system that authentically represents its past, present and future.

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