**Diversification, decolonisation, and the curriculum**

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1. **Preliminaries.**

Contemporary calls for ‘decolonisation’ of university curricula, teaching practices, and wider research practices and academia cultures – messily entangled with wider political and cultural issues and related in different ways to wider discourses about higher education.

In this talk I want to call attention to some important

1. **Decolonisation and diversification.**

**Decolonisation** and **diversification** are different things: decolonisation should be understood as a specific rationale for and strategy of diversification and therefore valuable, but partial.

**First concern**: ‘decolonisation’ is too often either undefined, underdefined, or defined in ways that conflates quite different kinds of problems.

Distinguish between:

1. *Intellectual diversity* – marginalised figures, marginalised traditions, and marginalised disciplines and methods, where diversification means trying to understand and repair their marginalisation*.*
2. *Demographic diversity* – identifying and attempting to repair demographic problems in departmental and disciplinary demographics, intersectionally construed to refer to sexist, racist, classicist, ableist, ethnic, and other modes of exclusion.

Decolonisation is not always well-defined, but plausibly refers to a specific intellectual and demographic diversity problems.

**Second concern**: if a focus on decolonisation issues obscures other kinds and sources of intellectual and demographic problems, one risks **myopia**.

Example: almost all British academic philosophy curricula privilege European philosophy historically, methodologically, and topically and either ignore, exclude, or downplay so-called ‘non-Western’ philosophies.

However, only some of the attitudes and assumptions are salient to coloniality. Conflating decoloniality with diversification is a serious mistake – occluding some causes, misdescribing others, and distorting our collective understanding of wider problems (eg scientism).

1. **Trade-offs and backfires.**

Diversification efforts can incur two other kinds of risks: ***Trade-offs*** and ***Backfires***.

1. **Trade-offs.**

Definition: a decision situation where an attempt to increase one desirable quality comes at the cost of decreasing another desirable quality.

**Third concern:** some efforts to increase curricular diversity will involve trade-offs, for instance between different kinds of intellectual and demographic diversity.

Example: expanding a history of philosophy module to include Indian and Chinese traditions achieves intellectual diversity at the cost of decreasing gender diversity.

Upshot: we have to decide

1. what kinds of diversity to prioritise
2. what values and commitments one is willing to trade-off
3. whether trade-offs are one level can be offset at another—for instance, should we measure diversity at a **modular** or **curricular** level?
4. **Backfires**

Definition: situations where decisions lead to outcomes that are unintended, undesired, and typically contrary to the original intentions (ie worsening the problem one wanted to fix).

**Fourth concern**: some efforts to increase curricular diversity run the risk of backfiring and especially in cases where problems and risks of diversification are not taken seriously.

Example: attempts to correct the Eurocentrism of philosophy curricula by introducing new modules in Chinese and Indian philosophical traditions – this might **aim** to increase students’ understanding and appreciation of those traditions, but can intensify **xenophilia**: an excessive and uncritical enthusiasm for culturally ‘Other’ philosophies:

1. Entrenching hostility towards some amorphous thing called ‘the Western tradition’.
2. Encouraging tendencies to make crass, rapid, and reactionary dismissals of the ‘core’ or ‘canonical’ aspects of the Western philosophical traditions.
3. Entrenching racist, romanticising, ‘Orientalist’ assumptions and attitudes.

These are backfires, insofar as they are failures of critical understanding and appreciation.

1. **Summary**.

**First concern**: ‘decolonisation’ is too often either undefined, underdefined, or defined in ways that conflates quite different kinds of problems. *Bad definitions = bad practice*.

**Second concern**: if a focus on decolonisation issues obscures other kinds and sources of intellectual and demographic problems, one risks **myopia**.

**Third concern:** efforts to increase curricular diversity can involve trade-offs, for instance between different kinds of intellectual and demographic diversity.

**Fourth concern**: efforts to increase curricular diversity can run the risk of backfiring and, especially, in cases where problems and risks of diversification are not taken seriously.

I think these four concerns should be taken seriously by advocates of diversification. The core values, for ensuring effective diversification, will include **carefulness**, **pluralism**, and a kind of **clear-sightedness** about the risks.

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**REFERENCES**

I give a fuller account of trade-offs and backfires in this [article](https://symposion.acadiasi.ro/trade-offs-backfires-and-curricular-diversification-pages-179-193/).

I describe xenophilia and a related failing – *neophilia* – in this [article](https://archive.philosophersmag.com/reloading-the-canon/).