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# ECR Blog: 'Decolonisation in the context of Welsh Higher Education' by Dr Ahmed Raza Memon

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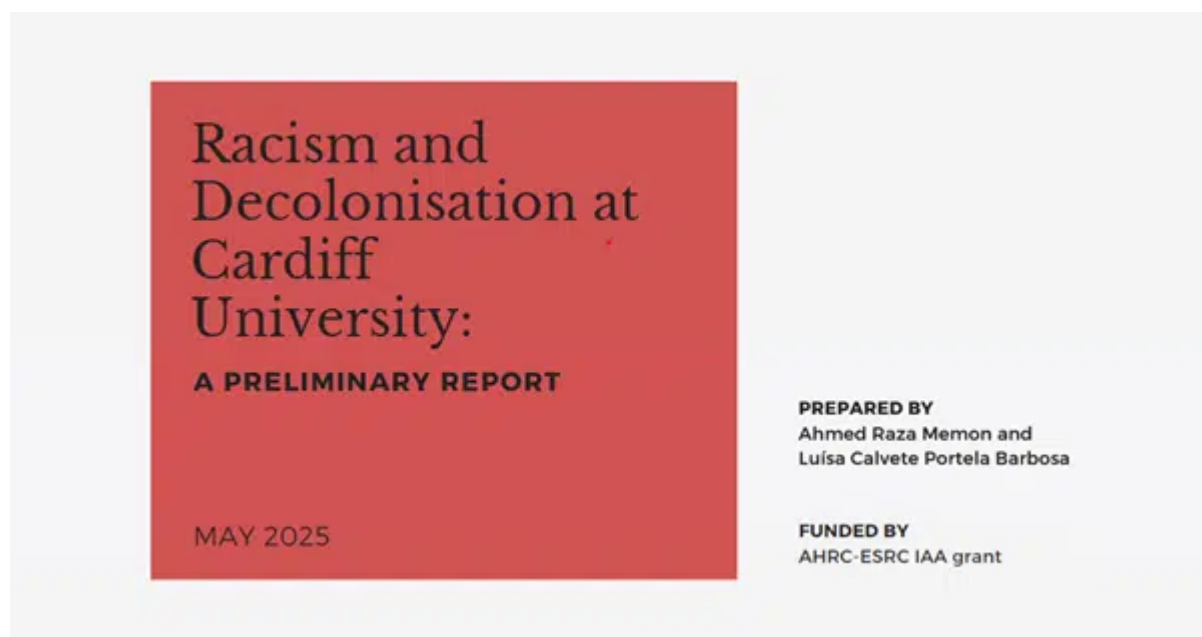
Dr Ahmed Raza Memon is a Lecturer at Cardiff University with expertise in decolonial research and teaching, focusing on building student informed pedagogical practices. The author has published in *The Law Teacher*, *London Review of International Law* and *International Journal of Law in Context*, is a consultant with anti-racist literacy consultancy MA Consultants, and is a co-founder and editor of *Decolonial Dialogues*.

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In this short blog, I reflect on my practical experience using research-led pedagogical approaches and engaging in 'decolonising' work within the Welsh context. I focus on my work at Cardiff University and how it has been shaped by student-focused, community-based research, as well as my experiences as both a consultant and a scholar of decolonising Higher Education (HE). This approach moves beyond the usual 'legal' and 'business-oriented' concerns often associated with equality work.

I organised a workshop supported by the **Learned Society of Wales' Research Workshop Grant Scheme**. The workshop was co-led with Dr. Riadh Ghemmour from MA consultancy. It brought together stakeholders, including academic and professional staff working on anti-racist efforts in the university, to discuss practice and implementation of decolonising efforts. Specifically, the workshop centred on the significance of student perception and participation to any such decolonising efforts and initiatives. The workshop also allowed me to introduce a preliminary research report I co-wrote with Dr. Luisa Calvete Portela Barbosa as a scholarly assessment and evidence of a student-focused perspective on decolonization and racism at Cardiff University.

The report reflects our intellectual and political grounding in Black feminist, decolonial, and critical race theory. These theoretical approaches emphasise that experiences of marginalisation cannot be individualised to one category whether they be race, class, gender, disability. Instead, such experiences are often interlinked and intersect with each other. A racial experience is therefore also an experience that can be 'gendered', i.e. how Muslim women experience Islamophobia is unique as an experience: the 'gendered' racism is about how specifically Islam is understood and how specifically *Muslim women* are perceived. These theoretical perspectives go beyond a 'legal' understanding of equality which boxes each experience in isolation and focuses on how communities explain their experiences as more complex. The full report can be read on this website: <https://sites.google.com/view/decolonisingcardiffreport/home>



I had applied for the Learned Society of Wales grant scheme to supplement a series of workshops on 'Decolonising the University' held at Cardiff University in 2022. At this point, conversations of decolonising the curriculum had just begun to happen in Cardiff, shortly after the Black Lives Matter moment. This particular moment was crucial for an institutional [the racially motivated murder of George Floyd by police officers in the United](#)

States led to a global wave of reaction, and reinvigoration of the question of racial anti-black violence. In the UK, existing decolonisation movements, specifically in England, were already met with a range of responses, ranging from staff-led research centres (such as the School of Oriental and African Studies), student-staff collaborations (such as Westminster University's Social Pedagogies of Justice and University of Kent's Decolonising Project), and more clearly in student-led movements that were part of official student unions but also independent of the university. After the BLM moment, institutional responses needed to be more robust as the question of 'is the university racist' became a significant mainstream question—covered also by Linda Adey's BBC documentary *'Is Uni racist'*<sup>[1]</sup>. In the same documentary, Cardiff University was highlighted as the university with the third highest number of reported cases of complaints of racism.

In this context, undertaking a project using Cardiff University as a case study to assess decolonisation of HE, specifically in the Welsh context, seemed timely and important. The LSW grant also enabled me to build a longer application for further funding through the AHRC-ESRC Impact Acceleration fund, with my colleague Luisa Calvete Portela Barbosa. While we saw many community efforts, notably from Race Cymru Council, EYST Wales, and Race Alliance Wales, what was missing was a holistic, more grounded study of what it means to do 'community' research alongside and *with* students about their perception. The focus of lived experience, emphasized in the best models of 'decolonising' methods and research work, is often absent in institutional promises around decolonisation that seem to focus simply on curriculum or 'representation.' Most importantly, it is also necessary to foreground that the purpose of 'decolonisation' is not necessarily an end result but a meaningful engagement with how a student community feels, perceives, and navigates the university culture. While generally the focus is on students of colour, the lessons of decolonising practices and thinking broadly include intersecting oppressive structures (such as gender, sexuality, class, disability, etc.).



Led by Black feminist, critical race theory, and decolonial methodology, our report reveals a high level of mistrust, isolation, a sense of being instrumentalised or used for purposes other than for their own benefit, and the belief that the university culture is 'Eurocentric.' The full report details these reflections, but it is important to recognize that the methodology and theoretical approach taken were not necessarily considered by institutional approaches to anti-racism and decolonisation in higher education. For



their narratives, transparency, and, to an extent, vulnerability in an informal group space are all elements important to doing work alongside students as a 'community' and as 'knowledge producers.'

While higher education institutions are embroiled in serious financial concerns, the important aspect of doing this work is to maintain, build, and show that there is a clear understanding of what 'community' actually means within university contexts. More often than not, business concerns such as limiting reputational damage still seem to be the driving factor for many 'anti-racist' institutional responses. In order to move beyond promises, a serious shift is needed in how we approach questions of utilizing the resources many staff of colour have created across disciplines, in relation to both curriculum and student support. In the end, staff members and concerned leadership in institutions need to think creatively about whether or not they are actually serious about 'decolonisation' and equality or whether it will remain a public relations response that is short-lived, vague, and a tick-box exercise. Our independent report contextualises these concerns and points towards meaningful directions/practices and re-orientations. In the report, we highlight that one of the key aspects of implementing any decolonising initiative is both creating principled environments for meaningful 'student-staff' partnerships and facilitating students in these spaces to constructively present and build ideas through their lived experiences. An important part of supporting this aspect is creating good coaching and mentoring programmes for students of colour that attends to the specific needs of their lived experience, and more importantly is done by staff members attuned to racial literacy i.e. they understand and acknowledge the impact of racism on students and their university life. While these lessons are contextual to Cardiff University, they are useful for other higher education universities in Wales.

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[1] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/1c314b3c-c895-4566-9b92-d9d3a1acb079>

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