**Impact case study (REF3)**

REF2021

| Institution: SOAS University of London |
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| Unit of Assessment: 34 - Communication, Cultural and Media Studies |
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| Title of case study: Decolonising the University Across Disciplines |
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| Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2007–2020 |
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**Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:**

| Name(s): | Role(s) (e.g. job title): | Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: |
|---|---|---|
| Lindiwe Dovey | Professor of Film and Screen Studies<br>Reader in Screen Arts and Industries<br>Senior lecturer in African Film and Performance Arts | 2007–present |
| Meera Sabaratnam | Senior Lecturer in International Relations<br>Lecturer in International Relations | 2013–present |

| Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016–31 July 2020 |
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| Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N |
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**1. Summary of the impact** (indicative maximum 100 words)

Research at SOAS helped academics worldwide, across diverse disciplines and in particular within Film Studies and Filmmaking HEI programmes, to change their curricula, syllabi, and pedagogical style to make Higher Education teaching far more inclusive and globally representative. It also prompted and supported universities more broadly in decolonising their institutional practices and policies. The work was concentrated within UK institutions and in Canada, Norway, Sweden and Nigeria, and stimulated intense debate in the media in relation to the legacies of colonialism and nationalism, race equality, and the future of knowledge production, including in museum curation. It also had a direct impact on student activism in these regions.

**2. Underpinning research** (indicative maximum 500 words)

Despite the fundamental role of universities as repositories and generators of knowledge, in many university disciplines in the past assumptions regarding racial and civilizational hierarchy informed and justified the expansion of colonial rule in Africa, Asia and the Middle East until the mid-twentieth century. There is thus a growing need to challenge educational assumptions, models and frameworks, question how the location and identity of researchers and teachers impact on dominant perspectives (or not) and dismantle the structural inequalities that have damaging effects on certain groups of students. These issues are most acute in formerly colonised nations.

The research of Meera Sabaratnam (Lecturer in International Relations and Senior Lecturer in International Relations from 2013) focuses on the legacies of colonialism and the theory and practice of decolonisation in relation to Higher Education, development, and international statebuilding work. Based on media analysis and on interviews and observations among international and national statebuilding actors in Mozambique, Sabaratnam considers a range of decolonising tools to reframe the politics of international relations **[3.3, 3.4, 3.5]**. The research of Lindiwe Dovey (Senior Lecturer in African Film and Performance Arts, Reader in Screen Arts and Industries, and Professor of Film and Screen Studies from 2007) focuses specifically on filmmaking in non-EuroAmerican contexts (in particular across Africa) and how the mainstream film industry in EuroAmerica can be decolonised. Dovey has identified the Eurocentrism of the mainstream film industry and global image economy **[3.1]** and the need to decolonise Higher Education curricula and pedagogy in and through film **[3.2]**. Dovey was awarded a 5-year ERC

grant of EUR1,985,578 (GBP1,785,000) for her research project 'African Screen Worlds: Decolonising Film and Screen Studies' (2019–2024).

Sabaratnam is the Chair and Dovey is a member of the Decolonising SOAS Working Group, founded in 2016. The Decolonising SOAS Working Group draws together staff and students to gather perspectives and produce decolonising approaches; in particular, Decolonising SOAS Working Group member Kerem Nişancıoğlu has been involved in producing foundational peer-reviewed texts for the university sector, including Bhambra, G. K., Gebrial, D. & Nişancıoğlu, K. (eds.), Decolonising the University (Chicago: Pluto Press, 2018). Spearheaded by Sabaratnam, the working group publish resources such as the SOAS Decolonising Learning and Teaching toolkit [3.6], as well as discipline-specific toolkits **[3.7]**, spearheaded by Dovey. The insights from the research are summarised as follows:

**Specifying and elaborating Eurocentrism/coloniality (colonialism's underlying logic) as fundamental problems informing academic debates and practice [3.2, 3.3, 3.5]**: Eurocentrism and coloniality underpin Higher Education globally. A mythologised image of Europe and the West, and the marginalisation and denigration of people of colour, creates significant and consequential limitations for our understandings of our academic fields, and the world at large.

**Defining 'decolonisation' as an intellectual, narrative and empathic response to the problem of Eurocentrism/coloniality in Higher Education and beyond [3.1–3.7]**: Current Western 'subject-object' models of knowledge production are replaced with a 'subject-subject' model that brings non-Western perspectives into dialogue and contestation with existing accounts of the world.

**Elaborating what 'decolonising the curriculum and pedagogy' means [3.6, 3.7]**: The Decolonising SOAS Learning and Teaching Toolkit (2018) [3.6], lead-authored by Sabaratnam in collaboration with the Decolonising SOAS Working Group (including Dovey), sets this out in practical steps by: 1) highlighting the colonial contexts in which academic disciplines were originally created; 2) diversifying source materials and incorporating critical and creative content produced in the Global South by people of colour; and 3) ensuring pedagogical strategies are sensitive to contemporary racialised biases and exclusions. Discipline-specific toolkits by Dovey's team **[3.7]** are helping particularly in terms of the second of these steps.

**3. References to the research** (indicative maximum of six references)

3.1. Dovey, L. (2015). *Curating Africa in the Age of Film Festivals*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN: 9781137404138 **Peer-reviewed**. Submitted to REF2021

3.2. Dovey, L. (2020). 'On Teaching and Being Taught: Reflections on Decolonising Pedagogy'. *PARSE,* 11, Special issue: 'Intersectional Engagements in Politics and Art' (K. Hagström-Ståhl, J. Hemmings, J. Mistry & K. Naderehvandi eds). https://parsejournal.com/article/on-teaching-and-being-taught/ **Peer-reviewed**

3.3. Sabaratnam, M. (2011). 'IR in Dialogue … but Can We Change the Subjects? A Typology of Decolonising Strategies for the Study of World Politics'. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39(3), pp. 781–803. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829811404270 **Peer-reviewed**

3.4. Sabaratnam, M. (2017). *Decolonising Intervention: International Statebuilding in Mozambique*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International. ISBN: 9781783482764 **Peer-reviewed.** Submitted to REF2021

3.5. Sabaratnam, M. (2020). 'Is IR Theory White? Racialised Subject-Positioning in Three Canonical Texts. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies.* https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829820971687 **Peer-reviewed**

3.6. Decolonising SOAS Working Group (2018). *Decolonising SOAS Learning and Teaching Toolkit for Programme and Module Convenors*. https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/decolonisingsoas/learning-teaching/toolkit-for-programme-and-module-convenors/

3.7. Dovey's 'Decolonising Film and Screen Studies' Team (2020). *Decolonising film and screen studies toolkit*s. https://screenworlds.org/resources/#toolkits

**4. Details of the impact** (indicative maximum 750 words)

The impact of this research was felt both within universities nationally and internationally, and across the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Approaches to curriculum development,

pedagogy and institutional practice were changed, through adoption by academics and influence on student campaigns. Within the public debate accompanying these changes, there was increased understanding of the issues and a broadening of support, as well as some negative reactions showing that the issues were being heard and debated in conservative circles.

*SOAS* **[5.1]**
Following campaigning and presentations by Sabaratnam, SOAS formally adopted a Vision for Decolonising SOAS in June 2017. SOAS **[5.1a]** significantly resourced and implemented ongoing work on Decolonisation regarding changes to teaching, student engagement and public engagement practices from 2016, with an increased annual investment to 2019–2020 comprising funding for an academic lead, administrative support, and a budget to support the activities of the Working Group (investing GBP50,000–60,000 annually). The Board of Trustees, Academic Board, its Quality Assurance committees and its Teaching and Learning committees consider this a strategic priority and receive updates several times a year **[5.1b]**. Resources were developed for SOAS and the university sector and made available on dedicated web platforms **[5.1c, 5.1d]**.

*UK Higher Education policy* **[5.5, 5.6]**
SOAS's decolonisation work was drawn on as best practice in a major policy report by Universities UK and the National Union of Students on closing racialised attainment/award gaps **[5.5 p53]**.

Following coverage of the presentation of SOAS's work on decolonising the curriculum, legacies of empire and the need for diverse leadership to the Duchess of Sussex by Sabaratnam in January 2019, Chris Skidmore MP, Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, gave a speech in February 2019 highlighting the significance of racial inequality in universities, and quoting Sabaratnam's words that 'change is long overdue' (although the quote was misattributed to the Duchess of Sussex) **[5.6 p3]**.

*UK HEIs* **[5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.12]**
Between 2019 and 2020 in UK HEIs, Sabaratnam gave 14 talks, seminars and workshops to approximately 1,000 people in total **[5.2a]**. This and sharing of the SOAS Toolkit **[3.6]** ignited (and was influenced by) academic campaigns for decolonisation/liberation at QMUL, Cambridge, Oxford, LSE, Birkbeck, UCL, KCL, Birmingham, Bristol and Sussex.

Training on Decolonising the Curriculum and anti-racist pedagogy delivered directly by Sabaratnam enabled staff to improve their literacy about equalities issues and to rethink their approaches to curricula and pedagogy at a number of HIEs, including the University of Birmingham (2018), the University of Portsmouth (2019), Swansea University (2019) and UCL (2019), among others. Feedback questionnaires filled out by 74 participants at Birmingham, Swansea, Portsmouth and UCL on a 1–5 scale (where 5='very useful') found the workshops improved the staff's understandings of how inequalities worked in education (4.5), gave them insight into their own pedagogies (4.5), influenced their future pedagogical development (4.5) and future curriculum development (4.5) **[5.2b]**. In comments, participants described what they would now do differently including: 'Be very aware of unconscious bias or assumption' **[5.2c p1]**; 'Be more energetic in pursuing diverse critical voices and updating reading lists' **[5.2c p2]**; 'More lit [sic] from global south' **[5.2c, p1]**; and 'Make ethnicity/race more prevalent in the curriculum' **[5.2c p1]**. The Birmingham workshop and its impact **[5.3a p2]**, was cited as good practice in their successful application to the Athena Swan Bronze award **[5.3b]**.

In March 2020, Dovey's 'Decolonising Film and Screen Studies' team made freely available on their website 8 toolkits aimed at helping film studies departments and educators to decolonise their teaching **[5.1d]**. At the University of Leeds, the research has been 'instrumental to the definition of the ethos and to the design of the syllabus on the new MA Film Studies' **[5.12]**.

*International HEIs* **[5.9, 5.10, 5.11]**
Thirty global teaching staff from more than 10 Higher Education Institutions (e.g. from Sweden, South Africa, the Netherlands, Brazil, India and the UK) participated in Dovey's co-organised workshop 'Decolonising Pedagogy: Exploring Processes in Image-Making' (May 2019, University

of Gothenburg, Sweden). Lecturer and filmmaker Shelley Barry described the profound impact of the workshop on her teaching at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa, where they were 'currently undergoing a process of recurriculisation [of] African cinema in our new degree in Communication and Media' and explained that guidelines presented by Dovey would 'steer the path by: 1) placing a focus on African film that displays Africans as agents of change as opposed to victims of colonialism and imperialism; 2) providing an online resource of African cinema to students and theoretical responses from African scholars, amongst others; 3) searching outside the confines of African cinema for readings by scholars.' Barry added she was hoping 'to learn from Dovey's practice of pedagogy and to be mentored by her in the content creation of new courses' **[5.9a]**. Professor Eli Bø (Stockholm University of the Arts) indicated that 'having heard Lindiwe's important lecture and her approach to curating and teaching African cinema I am now encouraged to look, together with my students, at our subject area and my teaching methodology from a less obvious vantage point.' She added that her 'classes and workshops are becoming more stimulating . . . thought-provoking and . . . relevant' **[5.9b]**.

Decolonisation is crucial – perhaps more so – where, due to inequalities in resources, colleagues in the Global South have to contend with a paradoxical lack of access to knowledge produced about and by people in the Global South. The workshop 'Decolonising Film and Screen Studies in Nigeria' (March 2020) that Dovey's team (in particular Dr Añulika Agina) co-organised with their partners at the University of Lagos (in particular Dr Patrick Oloko) played a vital role in supporting Africa-based screen scholars in decolonising the teaching of Film Studies and film production. There were 20 participants from across Nigeria, including the most eminent and early career film professors, as well as from Canada, France and the UK (from a total of 16 universities). All Nigerian participants reported in the workshop survey that they found the conference linked otherwise isolated teaching staff and departments in various institutions. A senior Film Studies professor and Vice-Chancellor of a major Nigerian university commended the workshop for its 'total focus on re-orienting the film industry in Africa towards a more domesticated narrative.' **[5.10 p1]** All found Dovey's team's toolkits (including toolkits by Dovey, Agina and Dr Michael Thomas) useful and planned to use them immediately. Almost all respondents identified concrete changes as a result of the workshop. **[5.10]**

The Association for Commonwealth Universities promoted SOAS's work on Decolonising the Curriculum within its Peace and Reconciliation Network (comprising over 40 universities), making decolonisation/reconciliation a centrepiece of its contributions to the Times Higher Education's Teaching Excellence Summit programme in June 2019 in Ontario, Canada (over 200 attendees), and developing further work on the theme of decolonising education. The staff of the Centre for Learning and Teaching at Western University, which hosted the summit, awarded Sabaratnam an informal 'Most Inspiring Participant' award for contributions at the summit. **[5.11]**

*Student activism in Norway* **[5.6, 5.8]**
Following coverage of an event at which Sabaratnam gave the keynote speech on 'Decolonising the Academy' in Oslo in 2018, a major and vigorous debate began in the Norwegian national press, including the newspapers Aftenposten, Dag and Klassekampen **[5.6e, 5.6f]**. Sabaratnam was invited to present the work again at 3 different events in Norway in February 2019, and the Norwegian national student activist group SAIH adopted a policy to campaign nationally for the decolonisation of education. SAIH described the collaboration with Sabaratnam as 'of great value' **[5.8a p1]**, confirming that the SOAS toolkit – including the tackling of discriminatory practices against the Sami population – had influenced the development of their own toolkit **[5.8b side 4]**. SAIH's events on decolonisation attracted over 500 attendees, and 4 student parliaments at different Norwegian universities voted to adopt decolonisation policies **[5.8a]**.

*Public debate in the UK* **[5.6, 5.7, 5.13]**
From 2017, the decolonisation projects at SOAS were covered in major UK press outlets multiple times, including the BBC, The Sunday Times, The Daily Mail and The Mirror **[5.6a–d]**. Sabaratnam introduced key issues in the debate in a column for The Sunday Times published in February 2019 **[5.6b]**, which was followed by a reaction piece by Times columnist Melanie Phillips: 'Decolonising the curriculum is sinister and wrong', Phillips wrote, citing Sabaratnam's discussion of John Locke

as imbricated in the slave trade. Sabaratnam then debated the issues with John Humphrys on the BBC Radio 4 Today programme of 18 February 2019 **[5.6a]**. This radio appearance prompted significant public engagement highlighting the interviewer's open hostility and the handling of the interview by Sabaratnam. On Twitter, Sabaratnam's 'Mentions' rose into the 100s and Tweet Impressions were more than 40,000 on that day. One commented that Humphreys' 'churlish resistance of @MeeraSabaratnam's calls to Decolonise the Curriculum on @BBCRadio4 is both maddening and is clearly evident of why this needs to be done' **[5.7a]**. Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott tweeted: 'Great interview this morning on @BBCr4today about decolonising education. You got your points across, despite John Humphrey's best efforts to trivialise the issue' **[5.7b]**. MEP Molly Scott Cato was similarly encouraging as she found Sabaratnam 'brilliant on @BBCr4today in the face of patronising interruptions from Humphrys', adding that 'failure to decolonise the British mind and culture – as [Sabaratnam] explained – is a key reason for the #BrexitShambles and means we will come a cropper in the world if we don't stop it' **[5.7c]**. The campaign group Operation Black Vote covered the interview in detail on 19 February 2019, arguing that the demands were reasonable but likely to be challenging to the British establishment **[5.6g]**. Yet some political views did start shifting in the wake of these public debates; the Labour Party's 2019 General Election Manifesto committed to audit Britain's colonial legacy.

Following her keynote address at the Museums Association conference on decolonising museums in October 2019 (over 400 attendees from the museums sector), Sabaratnam was invited to be a diversity/decolonisation consultant on [text removed for publication]. Many of Sabaratnam's recommendations about the text and exhibition resulted in a more balanced global story about the war. She was appointed as a Fellow of the [text removed for publication] and consulted on further displays **[5.13]**.

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

5.1 Impact at SOAS: **a**) Decolonising SOAS vision statement 2017; **b**) Letter from Deborah Johnston, Pro-Director (Learning and Teaching), SOAS; **c**) Decolonising SOAS website: https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/decolonisingsoas/ and **d**) Screen Worlds: Decolonising Film and Screen Studies website: https://screenworlds.org/

5.2 Impact of Decolonising the Curriculum workshops**: a**) List of 'Decolonising the Curriculum' workshops, 2019–2020; **b**) Decolonising the Curriculum' workshops at Universities of Birmingham, Swansea, Portsmouth, and UCL: collated quantitative data; **c**) collated comments.

5.3 Impact on University of Birmingham: **a**) Decolonising the Curriculum resource, August 2020; **b**) Email from Head of the International Development Department

5.4 UUK-NUS (2019), Black Asian and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment at UK Universities #ClosingTheGap, p53. https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/bame-student-attainment-uk-universities-closing-the-gap.aspx

5.5 Chris Skidmore's speech, Nottingham Trent University, 28 February 2019. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/universities-minister-calls-for-greater-improvement-on-access

5.6 Media file: **a**) Transcript of BBCR4 Today, 18.02.19; **b**) 'If we want a global Britain we need to decolonise the curriculum', Sunday Times, 17.02.19; **c**) 'Markle backs decolonising the curriculum in UK universities, Daily Mail, 17.02.19; **d**) 'Markle wants to tackle discrimination in male, pale and stale universities Mirror, 18.02.19; **e and f**) Klassekampen - July 2018 (Norwegian); g) UK Establishment resisting attempt to Decolonise Curriculum, OBV, 19.02.19

5.7 Three key tweets following Sabaratnam on BBCR4 Today programme, February 2019

5.8 Impact on SAIH: **a**) email from President **b**) Decolonising of Academia toolkit (Norwegian)

5.9. Letters following 'Decolonising Pedagogy', Valand Academy, May 2019, from: **a**) Shelley Barry; **b**) Eli Bø.

5.10 Collated feedback - 'Decolonising Film and Screen Studies', Uni of Lagos, March 2020.

5.11 Email from Western University on Teaching Excellence Summit, June 2019.

5.12 Email from Alan O'Leary, Professor of Film and Cultural Studies, Uni of Leeds

5.13 Email from Senior Curator [text removed for publication], January 2020