Sohdi, Reece (2026) Decoloniality, staff development, and the limits of inclusive education in UK higher education: A reflexive case study. Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs, 26 (4). ISSN 1471-3802

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Received: 2 August 2025 | Accepted: 29 July 2026

DOI: 10.1111/1471-3802.70155

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Decoloniality, staff development and the limits of inclusive education in UK higher education: A reflexive case study

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Abstract

Inclusive education in higher education is increasingly framed through commitments to equity, diversity, and epistemic justice, yet the enactment of these commitments remains uneven and contested. This qualitative case study examines a cross-disciplinary staff development initiative at a UK post-92 university that engaged academic and professional services staff with decolonial approaches to curriculum design. Grounded conceptually in praxis, positionality and pluriversality, the initiative comprised participatory workshops and a practical toolkit intended to support critical reflection on colonial legacies in teaching and learning. Data were generated through workshop feedback, reflective testimonies and follow-up consultations with 40 self-selecting participants across education, health, business and professional services. Reflexive thematic analysis indicates that the initiative functioned primarily as a space for conceptual clarification and affective engagement rather than sustained pedagogical or structural transformation. Participants reported increased confidence in articulating decolonial concepts and heightened awareness of epistemic exclusion, alongside persistent constraints linked to assessment practices, institutional regulation and audit cultures. Although framed within inclusive education, issues of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and neurodiversity were largely absent from participant reflections. Rather than treating this as a limitation, the paper interrogates this absence as an empirical finding.

KEYWORDS
decoloniality, higher education, inclusive education, intersectionality, staff development

Key points

- Staff development initiatives can foster conceptual clarity, confidence and critical reflection on epistemic exclusion, but on their own rarely lead to sustained pedagogical or structural change within higher education institutions.
- Assessment regimes, validation processes, audit cultures and professional regulation significantly shape what educators feel able to change, highlighting the limits of individualised approaches to decolonial and inclusive education.
- Despite inclusive intentions, SEND and neurodiversity were largely absent from staff reflections, revealing how decolonial approaches may foreground race and coloniality while leaving ableist assumptions about learning and cognition unexamined.
- Meaningful inclusive education demands collective, sustained and structurally supported approaches that explicitly integrate decolonial, disability and inclusive education perspectives, rather than relying on reflective staff development alone.

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education remains a central, yet deeply contested, concern within global education policy and practice. At its core, inclusive education is underpinned by commitments to equity, participation and the recognition of diverse learner identities and needs (Ainscow, 2020; Florian, 2014). Within higher education, these commitments are often articulated through widening participation agendas, reasonable adjustments and policies addressing Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). However, despite their policy prominence, such approaches have been criticised for addressing inclusion primarily at the level of access and compliance, rather than interrogating the deeper epistemic, cultural and structural conditions that shape who belongs, whose knowledge counts, and which forms of learning are legitimised (Goodley, 2017; Norwich, 2013).

In recent years, decolonial perspectives have gained increasing visibility within higher education as a means of challenging Eurocentric knowledge traditions and exposing the colonial legacies embedded within curricula, pedagogies and institutional structures (Bhambra et al., 2018; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Calls to 'decolonise the curriculum' have been taken up across disciplines, often framed as part of broader equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agendas. Proponents argue that decolonial approaches can contribute to epistemic justice by foregrounding marginalised knowledges, unsettling dominant narratives and fostering critical reflexivity among educators and students (Andreotti, 2014; Mbembe, 2016). Yet, as decolonial discourse has become more mainstream within Global North higher education institutions, it has also attracted sustained critique. Scholars have cautioned that decoloniality risks being reduced to a symbolic or rhetorical project, detached from material conditions and relational accountability (Connell, 2007; Stein & De Andreotti, 2016). In particular, there is concern that decolonial concepts developed within and in response to Global South contexts are increasingly mobilised within Global North institutions without reciprocal engagement with decolonial practice, leading to what some have described as epistemic extraction or ventriloquism (Grech, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2012). These critiques raise pressing questions about how decoloniality is operationalised in practice, and whose interests it ultimately serves.

These concerns are especially salient when decoloniality is positioned as a route to inclusive education. While decolonial and inclusive education agendas share commitments to challenging exclusion and deficit-based thinking, their relationship is neither straightforward nor guaranteed. Inclusive education has historically been dominated by SEND-focused frameworks grounded in medical and psychological models, often critiqued for pathologising difference and reinforcing normative assumptions about ability and cognition (Erevelles, 2011; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). At the same time, inclusive education scholarship has increasingly embraced intersectional perspectives that recognise how disability intersects with race, class, gender and colonial histories to produce layered forms of exclusion (Artiles, 2011; Portera et al., 2025). Despite these developments, the integration of decolonial perspectives into inclusive education, particularly in relation to SEND and neurodiversity, remains uneven. Much of the literature addressing decoloniality in higher education focuses on race, representation and curriculum content, with comparatively limited attention to disability, access and normative assumptions about learning (Goodley et al., 2018; Puar, 2017). This raises the risk that decolonial initiatives may foreground certain forms of injustice while leaving others unexamined, thereby reproducing exclusion even within justice-oriented pedagogies.

One area where these tensions become particularly visible is staff development. Professional learning initiatives are frequently positioned as key mechanisms for embedding inclusive and decolonial approaches in higher education, offering spaces for reflection, dialogue and pedagogical innovation (Race et al., 2022). However, staff development has also been critiqued for individualising responsibility for change and operating within audit-driven cultures that prioritise compliance over transformation (Ahmed, 2012; Ball, 2012). While there is a growing body of conceptual work on decolonising pedagogy, there remains a lack of empirically grounded research examining how staff actually engage with decolonial ideas in practice, what constraints they encounter, and how such engagement intersects with inclusive education agendas, particularly SEND.

This study responds to these gaps by examining a decolonial staff development initiative within a UK post-92 university. Rather than evaluating the initiative as a model of best practice, the study adopts a reflexive, qualitative case study approach to explore how decolonial ideas were encountered, interpreted and constrained by participating staff. Central to this inquiry is an examination of what the initiative enabled—and what it failed to prompt—within participants' understandings of inclusion. The initiative was underpinned conceptually by the interrelated constructs of praxis, positionality and pluriversality. Praxis, drawing on Freire (1970), emphasises the inseparability of reflection and action in transformative education. Positionality foregrounds the situated nature of knowledge and the role of power in shaping educational practice (Haraway, 1988; Mirza, 2015). Pluriversality, articulated within decolonial scholarship, calls for the coexistence of multiple epistemologies and ways of being, resisting universalising claims to knowledge (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). While these concepts provided a critical orientation for the initiative, this study does not assume their enactment; instead, it interrogates the extent to which they were realised or remained aspirational within staff engagement. Importantly, this paper does not begin

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from the assumption that decolonial staff development necessarily advances inclusive education. Instead, it takes seriously the possibility that such initiatives may be partial, uneven or even complicit in reproducing exclusion. In particular, it examines how issues of SEND and neurodiversity are positioned within participants' understandings of decoloniality and inclusive education. Rather than assuming these agendas naturally align, the study explores how different dimensions of inclusion are conceptualised and enacted through staff engagement with decolonial approaches. By treating silence as data, the study challenges additive or sequential models of inclusion and invites more critical examination of how inclusive education is conceptualised within decolonial work.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do staff participating in a decolonial staff development initiative make sense of decolonial concepts in relation to their professional practice?
2. What institutional and epistemic constraints shape participants' capacity to enact decolonial approaches within higher education?
3. How are issues of inclusive education– particularly SEND and neurodiversity– articulated, marginalised or absent within staff engagement with decoloniality?

By addressing these questions, this paper contributes to inclusive education scholarship in three ways. First, it provides an empirically grounded account of how decolonial ideas are taken up within staff development contexts, moving beyond purely theoretical discussions. Second, it foregrounds the limits and contradictions of decolonial staff development as a strategy for inclusive education, rather than presenting it as a solution. Third, it centres the absence of SEND and neurodiversity as a critical analytic lens, offering insights relevant to researchers, practitioners and policymakers concerned with special educational needs in higher education. In doing so, the paper aims to interrogate how inclusive education is enacted within complex institutional contexts and challenges assumptions that well-intentioned pedagogical initiatives automatically translate into inclusive outcomes. The sections that follow outline the methodological approach, present the findings of the analysis and critically discuss their implications for decoloniality, inclusive education and SEND in higher education.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, reflexive case study design to examine a staff development initiative focused on decolonial approaches to curriculum design. A case study approach was selected to enable in-depth exploration of a bounded institutional intervention situated within specific organisational, cultural and policy contexts (Yin, 2018). Rather than seeking generalisable outcomes or evidence of impact, the study aims to generate contextually grounded insights into how decolonial ideas are encountered, interpreted and constrained in practice, particularly within inclusive education discourses in higher education. The research is informed by, but analytically distinct from, the conceptual framework of praxis, positionality and pluriversality. These concepts shaped the design of the staff development initiative and sensitised the analysis, but they do not function as methodological tools. Methodologically, the study prioritises transparency, reflexivity and analytic accountability, consistent with qualitative research standards and decolonial critiques of knowledge production (Smith, 2021).

Context and participants

The study was conducted at a post-92 university in England and involved a cross-disciplinary staff development initiative delivered over a series of participatory workshops. Participants were recruited through open institutional invitations circulated via faculty and professional service networks. Invitations to participate were circulated across the university through faculty leadership teams, professional service networks, institutional staff development communications and internal mailing lists. The workshops were open to all academic and professional services colleagues irrespective of disciplinary background or previous experience of decoloniality or inclusive education. Participation was entirely voluntary, with no expectation or requirement to attend. As a result, the sample represents those who chose to engage with the initiative rather than a purposive or representative institutional sample. This recruitment approach reflects the developmental nature of the initiative while also providing insight into which professional communities are most likely to participate in critical pedagogical staff development. In total, 40 staff members took part in the initiative. Participants included academic staff from the faculties of Education, Society and Creative Industries; Health Sciences and Wellbeing; and Business and Technology, as well as professional services staff from Library Services, Human Resources, Student Recruitment and Graduate Employability. Table 1 shows the breakdown of numbers in each faculty and department.

Representation was uneven across faculties, with staff from Education-related disciplines comprising the largest proportion of participants, while Business and Technology were minimally represented. This imbalance is treated not as a methodological flaw to be corrected, but as an analytic condition of the study. Self-selection and disciplinary clustering reflect wider patterns in higher education, where engagement with decolonial and inclusive pedagogies is often concentrated among staff already positioned within social justice–oriented fields. As such, the findings illuminate whose labour decolonial staff

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TABLE 1 Breakdown of participants split into Faculty, Professional Service and Academic role.

Faculty/ Professional service	Position	Number
Faculty of Education, Society & Creative Industry (FESCI)	Associate Professor/Professor (AP/P)	2
	Senior Lecturer/Lecturer (SL/L)	15
	Salaried Academic Tutor/ Academic Tutor (SAT/AT)	1
Faculty of Business & Technology (FBT)	Senior Lecturer/Lecturer (SL/L)	2
Faculty of Health Sciences & Wellbeing (FHSW)	Senior Lecturer/Lecturer (SL/L)	7
	Salaried Academic Tutor/ Academic Tutor (SAT/AT)	1
Professional Services (PS)	Home Student Recruitment (HSR)	2
	Library Services (LS)	4
	Human Resources (HR)	3
	Centre for Graduate Prospects (CfGP)	3

development tends to rely upon, and whose voices remain marginal or absent.

No demographic data beyond institutional role and departmental affiliation were collected. While this limits analysis of how race, disability, gender or other identity markers shaped engagement, it also reflects ethical caution in a politically sensitive area of inquiry. This absence is acknowledged as a constraint on interpretation and considered in the discussion of positionality and inclusion.

Staff development initiative and toolkit

The staff development initiative was delivered across one academic year through four participatory workshops, each lasting approximately 2 h. Three workshops were delivered face-to-face and one was delivered in a hybrid format to improve accessibility for colleagues unable to attend on campus. Workshops were offered in September, January, March and May, with approximately ten participants attending each session. Although some participants attended multiple workshops, attendance varied across the series as colleagues joined according to availability and professional interest. Rather than functioning as traditional training sessions, the workshops were designed as dialogic learning spaces intended to support critical reflection, collaborative discussion and application to participants' own disciplinary contexts. Each workshop combined short theoretical inputs with small-group discussion, collaborative analysis of case studies, structured reflection activities and opportunities for participants to apply ideas directly to their own modules, teaching materials and curriculum design.

Across the workshop series, participants explored a range of interconnected themes, including the conceptual foundations of decoloniality, decolonising the curriculum, positionality and privilege, critical thinking from a decolonial perspective, and practical approaches to reviewing curriculum content. Particular emphasis was placed on supporting participants to interrogate reading lists, assessment tasks, classroom discussion, research practices and module documentation through the accompanying practical toolkit.

Positionality was explored using the Pillars of Privilege framework (Sohdi, 2026), which encouraged participants to critically examine how multiple dimensions of privilege and marginalisation shape educational experiences and knowledge production. SEND and neurodiversity were introduced within this framework as one dimension of privilege and exclusion. However, no workshop was dedicated specifically to SEND, disability or neurodiversity, and these issues were not explored in the same conceptual depth as race, coloniality or epistemic justice. This contextual detail is important when interpreting the empirical findings presented later. The workshops incorporated case studies intended to provoke critical dialogue rather than provide predetermined solutions. These included comparative explorations of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Blackfoot understandings of wellbeing, discussions surrounding British Values and Indigenous value systems, and critical examination of research methodologies through activities exploring 'the good, the bad and the ugly' of literature reviewing, participant representation and research ethics. These cases encouraged participants to question assumptions regarding knowledge legitimacy, evidence production and curriculum authority.

Supporting the workshops was a Decolonising the Curriculum Practical Toolkit, developed as a reflective resource rather than a prescriptive framework. The toolkit included guidance on identifying overlooked scholarly contributions, critically reviewing reading lists, incorporating student voice into curriculum review, promoting critical thinking and interrogating research ethics and knowledge production. Throughout the workshops, participants used the toolkit to review existing teaching materials, plan curriculum developments and reflect upon disciplinary assumptions. An example version of the toolkit has been included as supplementary material to support transparency and transferability.

Data generation

Data were generated through three primary sources:

1. Workshop feedback forms as participants completed written feedback at the end of workshops, consisting of Likert-scale items and open-ended reflective questions focused on conceptual understanding, relevance to practice and perceived constraints. The workshop

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feedback instrument combined Likert-scale items with open-ended reflective questions designed to capture participants' conceptual understanding, intended changes to practice and perceived barriers to implementation. Open-ended prompts explored participants' understanding of decolonising the curriculum prior to the workshop, existing practices aligned with decolonial approaches, responses to the Pillars of Privilege framework, immediate and longer-term intentions for curriculum development and additional support required to embed decolonial approaches within practice. Likert-scale items examined the extent to which participants felt the workshops had prompted reflection on positionality and evaluated the usefulness of the critical thinking model introduced during the sessions.
2. Reflective testimonies and correspondence with some participants voluntarily sharing reflective statements via email following the workshops, elaborating on their experiences, uncertainties and intentions
3. Seven participants subsequently requested individual online consultations to discuss the application of decolonial approaches within their own professional contexts. These consultations involved a mixture of lecturers, senior lecturers and one member of Library Services seeking discipline-specific guidance. Notes from these discussions formed an additional source of reflective data, extending participants' initial workshop reflections rather than functioning as formal interviews.

These data sources prioritised participant voice and reflexive sense-making, while recognising that they capture self-reported reflection rather than observed or longitudinal change. No classroom observations or post-intervention evaluations were conducted.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase process: familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, refinement and writing. Analysis was conducted iteratively and reflexively, with attention to how meaning was produced through language, affect and silences, as well as through what participants chose not to address. Coding was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data, while also being theoretically sensitised by concepts from decolonial and inclusive education scholarship. Rather than seeking thematic saturation or frequency-based dominance, the analysis focused on patterns of tension, contradiction and constraint, alongside moments of conceptual clarity and discomfort. Analytic reflexivity was central to the process. Initial thematic groupings were revised multiple times as the analysis shifted from identifying outcomes to interrogating limits and exclusions. This included re-reading data to examine the absence of references to disability, SEND, neurodiversity and accessibility, which became a significant analytic finding rather than an oversight. Absence and silence were treated as analytically meaningful rather than as methodological limitations. Within qualitative inquiry, what participants do not articulate can reveal the boundaries of what is thinkable, speakable or prioritised within a given context (Mazzei, 2007, 2011; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). In this study, the limited reference to SEND, disability and neurodiversity across participant accounts was not interpreted as deliberate exclusion, nor as evidence of individual deficit. Instead, it was understood as indicative of the conceptual and discursive frames through which inclusion and decoloniality were being understood within the staff development context. Analytically, this involved attending to patterns of salience and omission across data sources, rather than isolated instances of silence. The analysis did not seek to infer participants' intentions, but rather to examine how particular forms of inclusion were rendered visible while others remained peripheral. This approach aligns with qualitative traditions that treat silence as data when it is patterned, sustained and analytically interrogated, rather than retrospectively filled through speculative interpretation.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity

The researcher is a lecturer in teacher education whose research over the preceding 3 years has centred on decoloniality, inclusive education, anti-racist pedagogy and curriculum reform within higher education. This prior experience informed both the design of the staff development initiative and the theoretical framing of the study, while also requiring ongoing reflexive attention to assumptions brought into data interpretation. Reflexivity extended beyond individual reflection through the maintenance of an analytic journal documenting emerging interpretations, decisions and tensions throughout the coding process. Initial themes were also discussed with experienced qualitative researchers and senior academic colleagues, providing opportunities to challenge interpretations, refine analytic categories and ensure that emerging themes remained grounded within participants' accounts rather than researcher expectations.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Sunderland research ethics committee. Participants received information about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw. Written consent was obtained, and all data were anonymised. Particular care was taken when using reflective testimonies, with explicit permission sought for anonymised quotation. Beyond procedural ethics, the study engaged with decolonial research ethics, recognising

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power relations in knowledge production and resisting extractive approaches. Participant reflections were treated as dialogic contributions rather than data to be mined, and the analysis sought to foreground limitations and silences alongside insights.

RESULTS

Quotations are identified using participants' faculty or professional service and institutional role (e.g., FESCI = Faculty of Education, Society and Creative Industries; FHSW = Faculty of Health Sciences and Wellbeing; FBT = Faculty of Business and Technology; PS = Professional Services). Reflexive thematic analysis of workshop feedback ($n = 40$), reflective testimonies and follow-up consultation notes ($n = 7$) generated four interrelated themes. These themes do not represent linear development or evidence of successful transformation (Figure 1). Instead, they capture how participants interpreted decolonial ideas within the constraints of their institutional roles, disciplinary contexts and professional identities. Across the dataset, participants articulated moments of clarity and intention alongside uncertainty, limitation and silence. The analysis below expands on each theme to demonstrate how these dynamics were expressed and patterned across the data.

Developing conceptual language, confidence and epistemic awareness

A dominant feature of the data was participants' emphasis on developing conceptual clarity and confidence in relation to decolonial ideas. Approximately two-thirds of participants described increased confidence in understanding and articulating concepts such as *decolonisation*, *decoloniality*, *knowledge pluralism* and *epistemic justice*. Many noted that these terms had been previously encountered in policy documents or disciplinary discussions but were experienced as ambiguous or inaccessible.

> 'I had heard these terms before, especially 'decolonising,' but never felt like I could explain them properly. Now I feel like I can talk about them confidently in team meetings.'
>
> (FESCI, L)

This growing confidence was not framed as mastery, but as an increased ability to participate in professional dialogue. Participants described being better equipped to distinguish between surface-level diversification and more substantive epistemic shifts.

> 'I can now distinguish between tokenistic diversity and what a truly decolonial approach to knowledge means. That's a major shift.'
>
> (FESCI, AT)

For some, this distinction marked a significant reframing of prior inclusive practice, challenging assumptions that diversification alone constituted decolonial work.

> 'Decoloniality was completely new to me. The distinction between that and just 'diversifying' the curriculum really helped clarify what the work actually involves.'
>
> (FHSW, L)

Conceptual engagement was also described as political and affective. Participants reflected on how epistemic structures shape belonging, authority and legitimacy within higher education.

> 'Belonging is something we often talk about in relation to student satisfaction, but now I realise it's deeply tied to the epistemic structures we reinforce through our teaching.'
>
> (FESCI, SL)

These moments of clarity were frequently accompanied by critical self-awareness and recognition of professional complicity in sustaining dominant knowledge hierarchies.

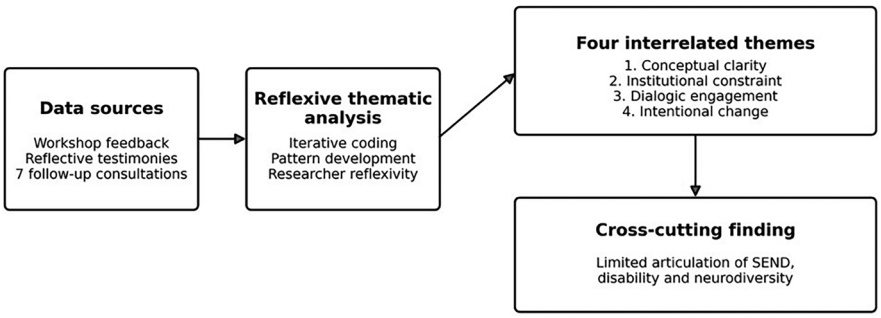

FIGURE 1 Overview of the analytical process and thematic structure generated through reflexive thematic analysis.

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> 'I was surprised how little I knew about plurality in knowledge systems. It challenged the idea that western knowledge is neutral or objective.'
>
> (PS, HR)

Taken together, these reflections indicate that the workshops functioned as spaces for epistemic reorientation, enabling participants to articulate previously unexamined assumptions about knowledge, neutrality and inclusion. While conceptual clarity was evident across faculties, its articulation varied by role and disciplinary context. Participants working in education and social science–aligned disciplines tended to describe epistemic shifts using established critical vocabularies, whereas staff in health and business contexts more frequently framed their learning as an initial exposure to unfamiliar concepts. Professional services staff often positioned their reflections in relation to institutional processes rather than curriculum content, highlighting how epistemic assumptions operate beyond teaching spaces. These variations suggest that while conceptual confidence increased broadly, the depth and framing of epistemic awareness were shaped by participants' positionality within the institution. Across these contexts, conceptual engagement was frequently accompanied by recognition of complicity. Rather than positioning themselves as agents of change external to the system, participants often acknowledged their participation in reinforcing dominant knowledge hierarchies. This reflexive positioning reinforces the interpretation of conceptual clarity as a relational process and one that involved recognising one's location within epistemic systems, rather than acquiring abstract knowledge alone.

Perceived agency, institutional constraint and the limits of control

While participants reported increased awareness and motivation to act, many simultaneously articulated a sense of constrained agency, particularly in relation to institutional systems such as assessment design, curriculum validation, research ethics processes and professional accreditation. Across faculties, participants perceived greater scope for change in day-to-day teaching than at programme or structural levels.

> 'Changing my reading list feels doable as I can bring in more diverse authors. But altering assessments? That's far more difficult and tied up in policy.'
>
> (FBT, L)

This distinction between classroom-level flexibility and institutional rigidity was reiterated across roles.

> 'I feel most able to make change in the classroom as discussions are flexible and students engage. Institutional structures like assessment boards are harder to influence.'
>
> (FESCI, SL)

Several participants framed this tension as indicative of a broader performativity within institutional decolonial agendas.

> 'There's a performative element as departments want to appear decolonial without changing the systems of validation, especially around assessment and research ethics.'
>
> (FESCI, L)

Research ethics processes emerged as a particularly salient site of constraint. Participants described re-evaluating how notions of objectivity, hierarchy and risk embedded in ethics procedures reproduce colonial assumptions.

> 'I supervise dissertations, and I now realise the extent to which our ethics processes reinforce western-centric research norms.'
>
> (FESCI, L)

Further complexity was introduced through participants' reflections on intersectionality. Some expressed uncertainty about navigating multiple dimensions of identity and exclusion when designing inclusive curricula.

> 'Even where I have control, like choosing materials, I worry about reinforcing stereotypes especially when teaching about race and disability together.'
>
> (FESCI, L)

These accounts illustrate that decolonial practice was experienced not as a clear pathway to action, but as an ongoing negotiation with institutional power, risk and responsibility. Importantly, constraints were not articulated uniformly across roles. Academic staff more frequently described assessment and validation as limiting, while professional services staff emphasised policy, compliance and reputational risk as significant barriers. Across both groups, institutional processes were described as opaque and difficult to influence, reinforcing perceptions that decolonial work was tolerated at the level of discourse but constrained at the level of governance. This distinction highlights how agency is unevenly distributed within the institution, shaping where and how decolonial intentions can be enacted. Participants' reflections also reveal how constraint produced caution rather than resistance. Uncertainty about 'doing the wrong thing' or unintentionally reinforcing stereotypes surfaced repeatedly, particularly when participants considered intersectional dimensions of race, disability and power. This caution underscores how

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institutional constraint does not merely limit action but shapes the affective conditions under which educators engage with decolonial practice.

Dialogic pedagogy, affective engagement and discomfort as learning

Participants consistently highlighted the dialogic and relational pedagogy of the workshops as a key enabling factor in their engagement. The use of case studies, provocations and co-reflective discussion was contrasted with more didactic or compliance-oriented professional development.

> 'The case study on Maslow and the Blackfoot origins was transformative. It exposed how so many concepts we teach are decontextualised or appropriated.'
>
> (PS/LS)

> 'I appreciated how we weren't just given a lecture. The reflective group discussions pushed us to see where our own complicity lies.'
>
> (FHSW, SL)

The emotional and affective dimensions of learning were frequently foregrounded. Participants described discomfort, uncertainty and emotional labour as integral to the process rather than as obstacles to be minimised.

> 'What made it powerful was the emotional labour involved as it wasn't just intellectual. It made me question my assumptions.'
>
> (PS, HSR)

Participants contrasted this experience with more performative forms of staff development.

> 'So much training is a tick-box exercise. This felt dialogic.'
>
> (FHSW, L)

> 'There was a strong sense that discomfort was part of the process, not something to avoid. That's not how most CPD works.'
>
> (FESCI, L)

Notably, the data contained no explicit accounts of resistance or disengagement. While this may reflect the supportive workshop environment, it also suggests that engagement was shaped by self-selection, limiting insight into how such approaches might be received across the institution more broadly. The absence of overt resistance should be interpreted cautiously. While participants consistently valued dialogic and discomfort-oriented pedagogy, this may reflect the self-selecting nature of participation rather than universal receptivity to such approaches. Those who engaged most deeply with discomfort and emotional labour were often already positioned within reflective or relational roles, suggesting that dialogic pedagogy may resonate most strongly with educators predisposed to critical self-examination. This raises questions about how such pedagogies might be received in contexts where professional learning is more tightly aligned with performance management or compliance.

Shifts in perspective, intentional change and the limits of inclusion

Many participants described intentional changes already made or planned in response to the workshops. These ranged from curriculum redesign and changes in language use to efforts to foster more critical classroom dialogue.

> 'I've already rewritten one of my module guides to foreground these concepts from the start. It's not perfect, but it's a start.'
>
> (FESCI, SL)

> 'I've started talking to colleagues about how we can create safer spaces for students to challenge dominant narratives.'
>
> (FESCI, SL)

For others, the most significant shift was a re-evaluation of pedagogic assumptions and gatekeeping norms.

> 'I'm looking differently at what we accept as academic tone or rigour. Who are we excluding by insisting on these things?'
>
> (FHSW, SL)

Participants also emphasised the ongoing nature of decolonial practice, resisting checklist approaches.

> 'My biggest takeaway is that decoloniality isn't a checklist but it's ongoing, reflective work.'
>
> (PS, CfGP)

> 'Before the workshop, I thought I was inclusive because I cared. Now I realise care alone isn't enough.'
>
> (PS, HSR)

Across faculties and professional roles, the workshops generated tangible shifts in conceptual understanding, professional reflexivity and collaborative ethos. However, despite these shifts, explicit references to SEND, disability, neurodiversity or accessibility remained largely absent from participant reflections. Inclusion continued to be framed primarily through epistemic and cultural

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lenses rather than through access, support or cognitive diversity. Despite participants' emphasis on ongoing reflection and intentional change, explicit consideration of SEND, disability and neurodiversity remained largely absent from accounts of enacted or planned practice. Where intersectionality was acknowledged, it was often framed as a source of uncertainty rather than as a dimension of pedagogical design. This suggests that while participants were beginning to question epistemic hierarchies, they had fewer conceptual resources for engaging with cognitive and learning diversity. The findings indicate that decolonial engagement did not automatically extend to interrogating normative assumptions about assessment, independence or academic rigour, reinforcing the interpretation of SEND absence as analytically significant.

The findings demonstrate that the staff development initiative supported conceptual clarity, confidence and critical reflection, alongside emergent intentions for change. At the same time, participants consistently articulated institutional constraint, affective labour and uncertainty about how to enact decolonial practice within existing systems. The relative absence of SEND and neurodiversity across participant accounts establishes a key empirical foundation for the subsequent discussion of how inclusive education agendas may fragment, even within justice-oriented pedagogical initiatives.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to critically examine a decolonial staff development initiative as a site through which the possibilities and limits of inclusive education in higher education could be interrogated. Drawing together the conceptual framing outlined in the Introduction and the expanded empirical findings, the discussion foregrounds how decolonial ideas were taken up by staff, how they were constrained by institutional structures, and how certain dimensions of inclusion, most notably SEND and neurodiversity, remained marginal or absent. Rather than positioning these findings as shortcomings of individual educators, this discussion situates them within broader debates about decoloniality, inclusive education and professional learning in the Global North higher education.

From conceptual clarity to constrained praxis

The results demonstrate that the staff development initiative was effective in fostering conceptual clarity and confidence among participants. Staff articulated an increased ability to distinguish between symbolic diversification and deeper epistemic shifts, and many described a heightened awareness of how dominant knowledge systems shape belonging and legitimacy within curricula. These findings align with scholarship suggesting that professional learning spaces can play a critical role in supporting educators to name and challenge epistemic injustice (Bhambra et al., 2018; Mbembe, 2016). However, the findings also make clear that this conceptual engagement rarely translated into sustained or collective praxis. Participants repeatedly described uncertainty about how far decolonial commitments could be enacted within existing institutional arrangements, particularly in relation to assessment, validation and research ethics. This gap between understanding and action echoes long-standing critiques within critical pedagogy that warn against the containment of critique within reflective spaces that do not disrupt structural conditions (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2005).

From an inclusive education perspective, this distinction is crucial. Inclusion is often framed as a matter of awareness, attitude or care, yet the findings reinforce arguments that structural arrangements, rather than individual dispositions, play a decisive role in shaping inclusive practice (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Norwich, 2013). The data suggest that decolonial staff development, when positioned primarily as an individual reflective exercise, risks reproducing the very dynamics it seeks to challenge by locating responsibility for change with educators while leaving institutional power relations intact (Ahmed, 2012).

Institutional constraint, performativity and the governance of inclusion

Participants' reflections on constrained agency highlight how decolonial and inclusive ambitions are mediated by institutional governance structures. Assessment systems, accreditation requirements and ethics processes were repeatedly identified as sites where colonial assumptions about objectivity, hierarchy and legitimacy persist. These findings resonate with analyses of higher education as an audit-driven environment in which innovation is encouraged rhetorically but limited in practice (Ball, 2012; Troiani & Dutson, 2021).

Notably, participants described a perceived performativity within decolonial agendas, where departments were seen to value symbolic alignment with decolonisation while resisting substantive change to systems of validation and control. This supports critiques that warn against the incorporation of decolonial language into managerial diversity frameworks, where it risks becoming depoliticised and instrumentalised (Stein & De Andreotti, 2016). For inclusive education, this performativity has particular consequences, as it may prioritise visible curriculum changes over less visible but more consequential transformations to assessment, pedagogy and support structures.

The findings therefore suggest that decolonial staff development cannot be understood in isolation from institutional governance. Rather than asking whether staff are sufficiently committed to inclusion, the data invite a reframing of the question: how do institutional systems delimit what forms of inclusion are possible or permissible?

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Positionality, participation and epistemic labour

The findings further illuminate how engagement with decolonial staff development was uneven across faculties and roles. Participants were predominantly drawn from education-related and student-facing contexts, with limited representation from more regulated or market-oriented disciplines. This pattern aligns with Ahmed's (2012) analysis of diversity work as labour disproportionately undertaken by those already positioned within social justice-oriented roles. Importantly, this uneven participation speaks directly to the ongoing concern about epistemic authority and representation. Rather than claiming to speak for 'staff' broadly, this study demonstrates how decolonial discourse circulates within a particular institutional constituency. Positionality, in this sense, is not simply an individual reflective stance, but an institutional condition shaped by disciplinary norms, perceived risk and professional accountability.

For inclusive education research, this finding underscores the need to examine who is invited into, and who is absent from, professional learning spaces. If inclusion work relies primarily on those already inclined toward critical pedagogy, it risks reinforcing inequities in epistemic labour and limiting the reach of inclusive reform (Ainscow, 2020).

Pluriversality, epistemic humility and global north decoloniality

Pluriversality was introduced as a key conceptual orientation within the staff development initiative, yet this indicates that it was experienced largely as a critical vocabulary rather than a relational practice. Participants reflected on the dominance of Western epistemologies and the appropriation of non-Western knowledge (for example, through the Maslow–Blackfoot case study), but engagement remained largely conceptual.

This finding speaks directly to critiques of decoloniality in Global North higher education, where theoretical engagement with Global South scholarship is not always accompanied by reciprocal learning from decolonial practice (Connell, 2007; Grech, 2015). Such dynamics risk epistemic ventriloquism, where decolonial concepts are mobilised without accountability to the contexts from which they emerge.

Rather than attempting to resolve this tension, the study foregrounds it as an empirical finding. Pluriversality, in this context, functioned as an aspiration constrained by institutional location. For inclusive education, this underscores the importance of epistemic humility and the need to move beyond critique toward relational engagement with diverse practices of inclusion, particularly those developed in materially constrained or majority-world contexts.

SEND, silence and the fragmentation of inclusive education

An important contextual consideration concerns the scope of the staff development initiative itself. Although the workshops were presented within a broader commitment to inclusive curriculum design, SEND and neurodiversity were introduced only briefly through discussion of the Pillars of Privilege framework and were not explored as standalone topics. Much greater attention was devoted to race, coloniality, curriculum representation and epistemic justice. Consequently, the relative absence of SEND from participant reflections should not be interpreted simply as participant omission but also as reflecting the conceptual emphases embedded within the staff development programme. This does not diminish the significance of the finding. Rather, it illustrates how professional learning initiatives themselves shape the forms of inclusion participants come to recognise, discuss and prioritise. The persistence of this silence suggests that SEND functions as an epistemic boundary within decolonial staff development, delineating what forms of inclusion are readily connected to decolonial critique and which remain conceptually marginal. While participants engaged extensively with questions of representation, voice and epistemic justice, inclusion was rarely articulated in terms of access, assessment design or the restructuring of pedagogical norms that privilege particular cognitive styles. This supports arguments within disability studies that inclusive education is often reduced to symbolic recognition while material and epistemic barriers remain intact (Erevelles, 2011; Goodley, 2017).

Crucially, the findings suggest that decoloniality does not inherently destabilise ableist assumptions. Participants' uncertainty about engaging race and disability together, and their hesitation around reinforcing stereotypes, indicate a lack of integrated frameworks for addressing intersecting forms of exclusion. From a depathologising perspective, this highlights the risk that decolonial initiatives may challenge racialised epistemic hierarchies while leaving intact normative constructions of academic ability, independence and rigour. For inclusive education research, this underscores the need to move beyond additive models of inclusion and toward intersectional frameworks that explicitly connect epistemic justice with cognitive diversity and access. This finding resonates strongly with critiques in disability studies that argue inclusion is often framed through symbolic recognition rather than structural transformation (Erevelles, 2011; Goodley, 2017). Puar's (2017) notion of debility is particularly instructive here, highlighting how certain bodies and minds are rendered peripheral within systems that value productivity, independence and normative cognition.

From a depathologising perspective, the absence of SEND discourse reveals how decolonial initiatives may inadvertently reproduce ableist assumptions if disability and neurodiversity are not explicitly engaged. The Results demonstrate that decoloniality, as encountered by

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participants, did not automatically prompt consideration of SEND. This challenges assumptions that decolonial and inclusive agendas naturally align, and underscores the need for deliberate, intersectional integration rather than additive inclusion.

Limitations

This study should be interpreted in light of several limitations that also point toward opportunities for future research. Data was generated primarily through workshop feedback forms, reflective testimonies and a small number of follow-up consultations, providing rich insight into participants' immediate reflections following the staff development initiative. However, these methods privilege initial responses rather than capturing how participants' understandings and intentions evolved over time. While the follow-up consultations added depth, semi-structured interviews may have enabled participants to elaborate further on their experiences, and focus groups could have provided opportunities for collaborative sense-making around decoloniality, inclusive education and SEND across disciplinary contexts. Similarly, the study did not include classroom observations or analysis of curriculum materials following the workshops, limiting conclusions about the extent to which participants' reported intentions translated into sustained changes in teaching practice.

A further limitation concerns the scope and context of the study. Conducted within a single UK post-92 university, the findings reflect the experiences of a self-selecting group of staff who chose to participate in a voluntary professional development initiative. As with qualitative case study research, the intention is not statistical generalisation but analytical transferability (Yin, 2018). The study also draws solely on staff perspectives and therefore cannot comment on how students experienced, or were affected by, subsequent curriculum developments.

Implications for inclusive education research and professional learning

The findings of this study suggest that decolonial staff development should be approached with caution when positioned as a vehicle for inclusive education. While such initiatives can create important spaces for reflection, they are insufficient in isolation and may inadvertently individualise responsibility for change. For inclusive education researchers, this underscores the importance of examining professional development not only as a pedagogical practice but as an institutional strategy shaped by power, governance and epistemic norms.

Future research should explore how decolonial and disability-informed pedagogies can be brought into dialogue in ways that resist additive or sequential models of inclusion. As Artiles (2011) argues, equity-oriented reforms must address intersecting systems of exclusion simultaneously rather than hierarchically. This requires reimagining staff development as collective, sustained and institutionally supported praxis, rather than as episodic reflective engagement.

By foregrounding consciousness-raising, institutional constraint, epistemic abstraction and the absence of SEND, the paper challenges optimistic accounts of decolonial practice and calls for greater epistemic humility and structural engagement. In doing so, it affirms that inclusive education—particularly in relation to disability and neurodiversity—cannot be achieved through reflective pedagogy alone, but requires sustained institutional commitment, intersectional analysis and critical engagement with whose knowledge, bodies and minds are recognised within higher education.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined a decolonial staff development initiative in a UK post-92 university as a situated case through which to interrogate the possibilities and limits of inclusive education in higher education. Rather than evaluating the initiative as a model of effective practice, the paper has foregrounded how decolonial ideas were encountered, interpreted and constrained within a specific institutional context. In doing so, it contributes a reflexive account of decolonial staff development as a partial, uneven and contested form of inclusive practice. The findings demonstrate that the initiative supported conceptual clarification, reflective dialogue and affective engagement among participating staff. Participants reported increased confidence in articulating decolonial concepts and greater awareness of epistemic exclusion within curricula. However, these shifts largely remained at the level of consciousness-raising, with limited evidence of sustained pedagogical or structural transformation. Institutional constraints– including assessment regimes, validation processes, audit cultures and professional regulation shaped what participants felt able to change in practice. These findings underscore the limits of staff development initiatives that are positioned primarily at the level of individual reflection without corresponding institutional support.

A central contribution of this study lies in its treatment of absence as data. Despite the initiative being framed within inclusive education, issues of SEND, disability and neurodiversity were largely absent from participant reflections. This silence reveals how inclusive education can become fragmented, with epistemic and cultural exclusion foregrounded while ableism and normative assumptions about cognition remain unexamined. For a field concerned with special educational needs, this finding highlights the risk that justice-oriented pedagogies may reproduce exclusion if SEND and accessibility are not explicitly integrated into decolonial work. The study also raises important epistemic questions about the mobilisation of decolonial theory within Global North higher

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education. While drawing on decolonial concepts such as praxis, positionality and pluriversality, the initiative did not engage with decolonial or inclusive practices developed in Global South contexts. This reinforces the need for epistemic humility and cautions against symbolic or extractive uses of decolonial language that are insufficiently accountable to lived practice.

Taken together, the findings suggest that decolonial staff development should not be positioned as a standalone solution for inclusive education. While such initiatives can open valuable spaces for reflection, they cannot substitute for sustained institutional commitment, collective praxis or intersectional engagement with the full range of educational exclusions. For inclusive education researchers and practitioners, this study underscores the importance of critically examining how inclusion is enacted, constrained and silenced within professional learning spaces. In conclusion, this paper contributes to inclusive education scholarship by offering a reflexive, empirically grounded account of the limits as well as the possibilities of decolonial staff development in higher education. By foregrounding tension, partiality and silence, it invites more cautious, accountable and intersectional approaches to decolonial inclusive education, particularly in relation to SEND and neurodiversity.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Reece Sohdi: Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology; writing – review and editing.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The author did not receive any funding toward this research project.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no financial interest (or other potential benefits) that will follow from the direct applications of the research.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Sunderland Research ethics committee on 19/01/24: 023328.

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How to cite this article: Sohdi, R. (2026) Decoloniality, staff development and the limits of inclusive education in UK higher education: A reflexive case study. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 26, e70155. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.70155

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