

## **EDITORIAL**

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This special issue of *Postcolonial Directions in Education* showcases an intersectional and inclusive selection of the proceedings of the conference *Voicing Young Researchers for the Future of Europe*, which took place in Malta between the 14 and 15 February 2023. This conference was one of the deliverables of the work programme of the *COST Action CA20137 Making Young Researchers' Voices Heard for Gender Equality (VOICES)*. It was convened at the University of Malta, under the auspices of Organisation of Basic Science for Sustainable Development and of the European Platform of Women Scientists, in connection with the work programme of the International Year for Basic Science and Sustainable Development 2022.

The choice of the VOICES' network to publish the proceedings of its first annual conference in this journal is informed by the

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recognition of the explained (post)colonial dynamics within HERI contexts, and the curiosity about a postcolonial reading of ‘young’<sup>5</sup> researchers’ lived experiences as students, professionals, and persons that is enhanced by the nuances that the intersectionality perspective can illuminate. The postcolonial perspective enriched the select proceedings published in this special issue with a problematised approach to the intersectional epistemological and ontological backbone guiding the VOICES’ network. In this regard, the postcolonial thrust that runs across the papers’ discussions elucidated that terminology, conceptual, policy and practice manifestations of intersectionality affecting ‘young’ researchers in HERIs are underpinned by symbolic and historical legacies. Specifically affecting how under-representation, misrepresentation, dislocation, and fragmentation limit the co-construction of quality ecologies required for genuine capacity-building and professional development. Furthermore, cognizant of concurrent risks and manifestations of ‘cancel culture’ in HERI contexts that result from antagonistic and divisive trends within the scholarly/activist debates and interactions that have equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) agendas (Sullivan & Suissa, 2022; Hillman, 2022; Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018), the VOICES network identified a rationale for a dialogue between postcolonial and intersectional perspectives.

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this editorial, the use of inverted commas for ‘young’ is intended to express a critical and problematised approach to the use of this term. We stand for an inclusive, equitable signifier, where the signified can include scholars who are older than 40 years of age and still in the early(ier) career stages, particularly when this is (partly) due to socio-cultural factors that can include gendered-life courses and non-mainstream career pathways.

## **Background: ‘Young’ researchers in Europe**

Higher Education, Research, and Innovation (HERI) institutions are increasingly compelled by neoliberal economic models, and this reflects in their recruitment, remuneration and management of human resource management (Yangson & Seung Jung, 2021; Beban & Trueman, 2018; Møller Madsen & Mahlck, 2018; Ergül & Coşar, 2017; Takayama et al., 2016). It also translates into research positions that increasingly imply travelling, migration, working in multicultural settings and adjusting to transnational family and community experiences (European Commission Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2018; Vohlídalová, 2014). These trends and developments foreground manifestations of postcolonial dynamics within HERI contexts on matters such as which countries and cultures are (still?) calling the shots with respect to epistemological and ontological directions, funding matters and resource allocation, perceptions and (mis)representations of status and quality differentials between education systems, power dynamics, explicit and implicit hierarchies within HERI institutions, and gendered dimensions and trends in related mobility, doctoral and postdoctoral studies (Ergül & Coşar, 2017; Nalbantoğlu, 2017; Adriansen et al., 2016; Vohlídalová, 2014). Nonetheless and concurrently, such trends and developments also translate to opportunities to decolonise curricula, resist epistemicide, and voice intersectionality (Adefila et al., 2022).

In the above-described contexts ‘young’ researchers play a somewhat recognized role in advancing research innovation and knowledge development by bringing fresh perspectives to research (Chen et al., 2015; Cantwell, 2011; Musselin, 2004; Åkerlind, 2005). ‘Young’ researchers also contribute to the enrichment of academic life and culture, through innovative teaching, founding, and participating in associations and networks – and therefore to research excellence overall. Yet in many parts of Europe, there is only a minor share of women and other minorities among ‘young’ (and senior) researchers (European Commission, Directorate-General for Research, and Innovation, 2021). Only slightly over half of those in the academic sector are employed on permanent contracts, compared to the vast majority of those in other sectors (European Science Foundation, 2017, p. 11). Moreover, their working conditions have become increasingly unstable as they are particularly affected by the growing casualisation of the academic workforce and precariousness of the academic life (Murgia & Porgio, 2019). They face, among other things, insecure employment conditions (short-term contracts, part-time), low remunerations, long working hours, increasing requirements (mainly mobility), intense academic competition, overwhelming administrative and organisational tasks, and a lack of recognition by research organisations. Many of these work experiences are profoundly gendered, with intersectional dynamics at play (European Commission, Directorate-General for Research, and Innovation, 2021).

In parallel, and from a theoretical / ideological stance, international, and national research communities are advocating the integration of intersectionality across research fields. Intersectionality recognizes that the simultaneity of individuals' multiple social identities, such as gender, race, class, age, etc., may lead to both opportunities and oppressions that vary according to a given situation (De Silva, 2020). Notably, it has been argued that, whereas some postcolonial perspectives (e.g., postcolonial feminist studies) have not given due attention to particular forms of class, gender, race, and/or age (Bahri, 2010), intersectionality adopts a more inclusive view; because it allows us to go beyond a focus on gender that ignores class, race and other social-political structures, such as decision-making. It has been suggested that intersectionality can give a more comprehensive perspective in the analysis of the extent to which inclusive higher education is committed towards gender equality, discrimination, and genuine opportunities for 'young' researchers.

In response, summons and work plans for gender+ equality are increasingly featuring in the European political agenda, reformist, strategic and quality assurance discourses, and work programmes; and many EU-funded projects are increasingly focused on gender mainstreaming in research institutions through the implementation of Gender Equality Plans. These include LeTSGEPs (2020-2023), GEARING ROLES (2019-2022), SPEAR (2019-2022), GENDERACTION (2017-2021), EQUAL-IST (2016-2019), ACT (2018-2021). Several certification and award schemes already exist in Europe (Athena Swan Award, Label égalité, etc.);

while the CASPER project (2020-2022) examines the feasibility of establishing a European certification system for gender equality for Research Performing Organizations (RPOs).

### **Aims and scope of this special issue**

Cognizant of the above context, this special issue hosts a dialogue between intersectional and postcolonial analyses of the matters discussed in the selected papers. This is done by recognising and further developing the discussions of earlier issues of the same journal, which include the 2018 special issue titled ‘Postcolonial Critique of Knowledge Relations in Higher Education’, edited by Lene Møller Madsen and Paula Mählck (PDE, Volume 7, No. 1), and the 2014 special issue titled ‘Knowledge and Activism’, which featured Nisha Thapliyal as guest editor (PDE, Volume 3, No. 1).

Additionally, this special issue scrutinises the nuanced, gendered, and intersectional visibility and invisibility of ‘young’ researchers going through diverse study and professional development stages: from PhD candidates to postdoctoral researchers and beyond. In this manner, the various papers of this special issue elaborate alternate or nuanced treatments of (anti)racist and (de)colonizing higher education, research and innovation contexts and experiences; or challenge canon and canonicities, hegemonies, and divisive, siloing or ‘cancel culture’ identity politics. The special issue also sought to voice a reimagination of the politics of representation and hybridity of institutional cultures and practices.

## **Key issues and outcomes**

In this volume, voicing of at-risk or vulnerable researchers occurs through a critical discussion of research studies on discrimination, gender-based violence, misrepresentation, or underrepresentation, globalised and localised conflict, diaspora and dislocation, unsustainable work-life formulae, alienation, isolation, and precarity. Indeed, this special issues chronicles research studies that yielded nuanced (and the guest editors dare add, sometimes shocking!) datasets. Noteworthy in this regard are the papers authored by Anna Hata, Camila Lamartine, Rakibe Kulcur et al., JosAnn Cutajar and Roderick Vassallo, and Eleni Meletiadou. These papers shed light on how gender-based discrimination and harassment are (mis)hidden in plain sight (Lamartine, this volume; Cutajar & Vassallo, this volume, Meletiadou, this volume), mystified by fragmented and incongruent understandings of who the 'young' researcher is - which, in turn - yields invisibility (Kulcur et al., this volume). However, the studies that feature in this volume also voice complex and ambivalent critical perceptions of 'young' researchers and female students in Nepal (Hata, this volume), and of migrant ECRs in the United Kingdom (Meletiadou, this volume), and in Germany (Papaioannou, this volume).

At the level of practices, Cutajar's and Vassallo's paper draws on research with students and staff of the University of Malta that yielded mixed-data evidence on where and when sexual

harassment occurs, who are the targets, and whether these reported the incidents they were involved in, to whom, when why and with what effect. The discussion of findings draws on feminist, postcolonial, decolonial and institutional theories to analyse processes, symbolic and material systems that help reproduce differences. Cutajar and Vassallo conclude colonialism prevails when differences are naturalised, hierarchies are justified, and oppression is perceived as emanating from the inherent inferiority of certain groups of people.

The special issue's discussion also ventures out of the Mediterranean toward the European shores of the Atlantic – specifically to Portugal where Camila Lamartine unravels what it means to be “a colonised body in the coloniser's space” (Lamartine, this volume, p. 83), as informed by qualitative research with Brazilian ECRs in Portugal. The findings of this study suggest the way forward is not about eliminating Eurocentric knowledge, but rather reconstructing original epistemologies suppressed by the colonial process (Mignolo, 2003). Consequently, Lamartine (this volume) advocates for a reconfiguration of historically imposed ideologies. A related recommendation emerges from Kulcur et al.'s study with ECRs that dismantles the ‘public-private divide’ and flags the need of intersectional monitoring and evaluation for HERIs and ECRs (Kulcur et al., this volume, p. 3).

The use of under-represented or innovative research designs that feature in the various papers is also remarkable. These include qualitative content and thematic analysis of metadata of



publication indices (Saha et al, this volume), feminist institutional ethnography in Malta (Cutajar & Vassallo, this volume), cross-case primary and secondary data analysis to discern gendered sensitive curricula in Architecture Studies in Lisbon, Coimbra, and Porto (see Matos Silva, this volume), and life stories from Nepal “to grant epistemic justice to marginalised voices and foster participants’ representation” (Hata, this volume, p. 215).

In sum, this special issue complements postcolonial studies in education with voicing ‘young’ researchers’ resistance-driven excellence and excellence-driven resistance. This duality is unpacked by means of the analysis of the intersectional dimensions unravelled in the case studies discussed in the individual papers. As guest editors, we are proud to contribute to the impact dimension of the COST Action VOICES’ work programme.

We are also honoured that this special issue has enticed the attention and much precious time of ‘young’ researchers hailing from the smaller EU member states (and Mediterranean islands) Malta and Cyprus to those with roots or research in the farther and much larger countries, such as Brazil and Nepal.

Certainly, COST is much to credit in this regard, for its vision and provision of genuine opportunities; together with the persons with leadership and management roles within VOICES and who constitute the editorial board of *Postcolonial Directions in Education*, because these are persons and academics who are committed to walking the talk.

It is augured this special issue contributes to further scholarly recognition, evidence-based policymaking, and participatory and democratic development of practices that counter all injustices that are (mis)hidden in plain sight or whitewashed with pseudo-internationalisation rhetoric.

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