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Supported Open Learning and Decoloniality: Critical Reflections on Three Case Studies

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Abstract: Open education has been highlighted as a route to social justice and decolonisation. This paper presents reflections on decolonisation processes pertaining to three educational technology projects conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa, Myanmar and Kenya, each of which featured contributions by The Open University (UK). Through recognising the importance of under-represented Global South perspectives, we consciously and critically reflect on our cases from a Global North framing to assess the extent to which the Supported Open Learning (SOL) model for engagement supports decolonisation and related processes. We use the categories of coloniality of being, coloniality of power, and coloniality of knowledge to structure our reflections. As open educational practice (OEP), the SOL model can offer a practical approach which emphasises equity and inclusion. SOL involves both an ethos and a set of pedagogical practices. This can support meaningful critical reflection and exchange while offering a pragmatic approach to the delivery of educational technology initiatives. In conclusion, a framework mapping features of SOL and their relation to decoloniality is offered.

Keywords: supported open learning; decolonisation; decoloniality; open educational resources; open educational practices; critical reflection



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1. Introduction

In this paper, we critically reflect on the application of the Supported Open Learning (SOL) approach undertaken in a series of education interventions involving The Open University (UK) (which is our home institution). We provide background and context for both the concept of SOL and its potential relationship to decoloniality. The cases presented all involved collaboration with different partners in the Global South (namely, the Pathways project in Sub-Saharan Africa (2020–2021); the Transformation by Innovation in Distance Education project in Myanmar (2018–2021); and the Skills for Prosperity project in Kenya (2020–2023). These initiatives all focused on the delivery of educational technology initiatives in the Global South, and share commonalities in the challenges presented and the strategic use of open approaches to collaboration. There are structural similarities between the cases chosen as well as important contextual differences. All three of the projects were affected by the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic [1,2].

Acknowledging and challenging historical legacies is crucial for fostering decolonized educational practices that respect and empower marginalised communities. Historically, education and educational technology have acted as a vector for colonial processes. European colonisation often involved the intentional replacement of native languages with the languages of the colonisers. This linguistic assimilation aimed to erase indigenous cultures and identities, reinforcing the dominance of colonial powers. Educational systems played a central role in this process by implementing policies that prohibited or discouraged the use of indigenous languages in schools, favouring the imposition of European languages as mediums of instruction [3]. Didactic pedagogies, characterised by a one-way transmission of knowledge from teacher to student, have been pervasive in colonial educational systems.

Such approaches prioritise rote memorization and passive learning, discouraging critical thinking, creativity, and indigenous knowledge systems. These pedagogical practices perpetuate power imbalances and hinder the development of students' agencies and their cultural autonomy [4]. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is much interest in the possibility of leveraging education systems to arrest, ameliorate or reverse colonisation [5–8], or extend the process of decolonisation to the Global North [9,10]. This is especially apparent in the critical tradition stemming from Freire [3] and Illich [11]. Education is increasingly understood as having an important relationship to social justice [12] and open education is regularly highlighted as a promising route to social justice and decolonisation.

Open education and open educational resources (OER) provide opportunities to diversify the curriculum and challenge the dominance of Eurocentric and Western knowledge. OER are educational materials that are in the public domain or released on an open licence that permits forms of reuse. This means they can be created, shared, used, and repurposed freely. This allows educators and content creators to incorporate a wider range of perspectives, voices, and knowledge systems from different cultures and regions of the world, thereby fostering a more inclusive and decolonized approach to education [13]. Open education and OER promote the democratisation of knowledge by removing barriers to access and participation in education. This accessibility may allow marginalised communities and individuals who have been historically excluded or underrepresented in formal education systems to engage with educational resources, contribute their knowledge, and challenge dominant narratives from Western-centric discourse. In this way, open education may empower marginalised groups and support efforts to decolonise. Open education encourages the active participation and collaboration of learners, educators, and communities in the creation and sharing of knowledge. This approach values the importance of local knowledge, indigenous knowledge systems, and community-based knowledge production [14]. By recognising and incorporating more diverse forms of knowledge, open education can contribute to decolonising education by challenging the hegemony of Western knowledge and acknowledging the value of alternative knowledge systems [15]. Open education is thus increasingly seen as a route to promoting social justice [16–18].

Such claims about the potential of open approaches to support decolonisation processes must be tempered by considering critiques that have been made of this position. Open approaches to education have themselves been described as a form of neo-colonialism. For instance, OER may be freely available, but they are typically encoded with unacknowledged cultural, pedagogical, and institutional elements [19]. It has been suggested that open access publication can render academic labour invisible [20]. It is larger and more well-established institutions that have the capacity to produce OER, while effectively implementing and using OER requires a certain level of infrastructure, including reliable internet access and OER repositories. This means that OER is not a “magic” [21] technocratic solution to structural inequality or the legacies of colonialism. The literature on openwashing shows that at least some of the initiatives using the branding of “open” do not meet the criteria that most open education advocates would advance [22,23]. In the interest of retaining a critical perspective, it is fair to ask in whose interest “openness” operates [24]. At the least, we must be circumspect about grand claims of decolonisation through OER. The ambition of this paper is not to arrive at a final judgement but to explore the extent to which the affordances of SOL can support decolonisation processes as a specific style of implementation.

The cases discussed below all used SOL as a way to approach the delivery of educational technology initiatives. SOL combines the principles of open education with structured support systems for learners. It aims to provide learners with the flexibility and openness of self-directed learning while also offering guidance, resources, and mentoring to ensure their success. SOL recognizes the importance of learner agency and self-directed learning while acknowledging the need for support structures to enhance learning outcomes. It combines the benefits of open education (such as access and flexibility) with the scaffolding and guidance required for successful learning experiences that are meaningful

to the individual learner. SOL has a long history at The Open University (UK) and can be considered an expression of institutional knowledge gained through supporting atypical higher education learners as well as introducing many educators to the concept and use of OER.

SOL is an emergent approach rather than a prescribed doctrine. For distance education pioneers since the late 1960s, supporting adult learning at a distance has been a central focus during a period of rapid change in information and communication technologies. Bell and Lane [25] identified SOL with “policies toward co-learning, access to learning, quality standards and the authorship of educational material” as a key part of a paradigmatic focus shift from teaching to supporting learning. In a historical review, Ison [26] detailed four key aspects of SOL: high quality, multimedia teaching materials; locally based tutorial support; quality research and scholarship; and highly professional logistics (e.g., administration and feedback at scale). McAndrew and Weller [27] discussed how learning design can be successfully integrated into SOL. They argue that the surfacing of design elements presents opportunities to improve learner experience while open licensing encourages sharing and supports future iteration. This is perhaps the first attempt to transplant the essence of SOL as an ethos for learners to other educational technology contexts using OER as a medium. SOL was used in this way in the influential Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) project since 2005 in collaboration with many institutions from eight African countries to provide flexible OER for educator development [28,29]. TESSA increased the transferability and formalisation of the SOL approach outside of the UK and informed the design and development of the OpenLearn repository of OER [30]. The approach also inspired a sister project, TESS-India, which localised the same OER for an Indian audience and found that open aspects facilitated this [31]. Reflecting on the TESSA and TESS-India projects, Buckler et al. [32] found that OER is a key part of supporting knowledge partnerships and cultural exchange while offering a route to addressing hierarchical power structures. Gosling and Nix [33] explored SOL in the context of work-based learning and found that the model facilitated collaboration and involvement from a wider range of stakeholders. A further route of application for SOL has been in targeting educational inequality in Western contexts. These included Bridge to Success, which leveraged OER to improve retention rates on community college courses in the USA [34], and Bringing Learning to Life, which was funded by the UK Department for Education to offer functional skills courses in English and mathematics to UK in-work learners through OpenLearn [35].

These examples suggest that the use of open educational resources (OER) has been an increasingly prominent aspect of SOL as it is employed in more diverse contexts and in new configurations. SOL is not generic or prescriptive in that it acknowledges the different and potentially diverse needs of learners which can vary according to context. In SOL, learners have access to educational resources and learning environments where they can explore and engage with the content at their own pace and according to their individual learning needs. They have the freedom to choose what, when, and how they learn, and they are not bound by traditional classroom settings or rigid schedules. SOL is thus distinguished by its combination of support mechanisms to assist learners throughout their learning journey. This support can come in various forms, such as the following:

- *Mentoring and Guidance*: Learners may have access to mentors, tutors, or facilitators who provide guidance, answer questions, and offer personalised support. These mentors help learners set goals, develop learning plans, and navigate learning materials.
- *Peer Collaboration*: SOL often encourages community, collaboration, and interaction among learners. Peer networks and online communities can be established to foster collaboration, discussion, and knowledge sharing. Learners can engage in peer-to-peer learning, exchange feedback, and collaborate on projects or assignments.
- *Learning Resources and Tools*: SOL may provide learners with curated resources, learning materials, and tools that support their learning process. These resources could include textbooks, videos, interactive simulations, online quizzes, and more. Learners are

guided to relevant and reliable resources to enhance their learning experience. Where applicable, OER fall under this category.

- *Assessment and Feedback*: SOL incorporates assessment and feedback mechanisms to evaluate learners' progress and provide constructive feedback. This can be performed through self-assessment, peer assessment, or feedback from mentors. Regular feedback helps learners identify areas of improvement and adjust their learning strategies accordingly. Increasingly, analytics from virtual learning environments are used to support this process.

In addition to these generic forms of support (which have their origin in the SOL model as used in UK higher education), we can also understand SOL as having a certain distinctive ethos and being itself a form of OEP. Pragmatically, the flexibility of OER and related OEP can support collaboration and implementation. More ideologically, SOL offers a route to the incorporation of concepts like diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice into educational practice.

2. Materials and Methods

Since our concept for this study is retrospective, reconstructive, and reflective, the primary data that we consider come from existing project documentation and our experiences as researchers and educational technologists. We are highly aware that we present this as a perspective from the Global North, and this invites possible criticism for not including the reflections of our collaborators in the Global South. This is partly down to the pragmatics of coordinating input from historical collaborators when projects and funding have ended. There are significant constraints on the time available for post-project analysis, which is typically an underexplored area of research [36]. Our aim here is not to provide a comprehensive account of decolonisation processes for all (or even just the most important) stakeholders but to present our perspective as part of dialectical and dialogical sharing from those who worked across several such projects. There is very little literature reflecting on decolonising processes in educational technology from a Global North perspective. This may be attributable to the idea that it is usually seen as preferable to prioritise voices from the marginalised Global South. We qualify the present contribution as being consistent with the need for “a heterogeneity of conceptual, strategic and practical approaches to taking up the decolonial project” [5] and “embracing diverse possibilities for connecting and aligning changes with decolonising aims” [37]. The approach we take to our critical reflections is necessarily grounded in acknowledgement of our positionality and privilege as researchers [38], pp. 17–19, and a belief that this kind of sharing constitutes a form of open educational practice. We offer reflections on our perspectives of decolonising academic practice [10,39,40] alongside the caveat that it is not the complete picture and ours are not the only nor most important perspectives.

Decoloniality is a complex and contested concept, which has been defined as “the dismantling of relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender and geopolitical hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern/colonial world” [41], p. 440. The overarching ambition of decoloniality is more ambitious and transformative than what can be achieved within the context of a time-bound educational intervention. The scope of our framing question for the study reflects this: “To what extent (and how) can SOL facilitate or support decolonisation processes as part of collaboration in the provision of technology enhanced learning?” Within this concept of SOL, we include both pedagogical provisions and actions taken in support of community building and knowledge exchange as well as the ideological commitment to social justice, sharing equity, and working towards diversity and inclusion. The decision to present the outcomes of this study as a collection of linked case studies is guided by the sentiment that this is the approach most suited to exploratory and contextual theory formation [42].

We present three case studies [43] that are linked by their use of the SOL approach to delivery but vary in their countries and contexts. None of the projects were primarily

focused on ‘decolonisation’ per se but there were extensive considerations of context and attempts made to adhere to the principle of primarily being supportive. Bringing a conceptual lens to (de)coloniality within the case studies is complex. Coloniality is central to decolonial theory. The concepts of coloniality of being, coloniality of knowledge, and coloniality of power describe the enduring effects and structures of colonialism that persist beyond the formal end of colonial rule [44]. Understanding the relationship between these concepts is crucial for investigating and addressing the legacies of colonialism.

- *Coloniality of Being*: Coloniality of being refers to the ways in which colonialism has shaped and continues to shape individual and collective identities. It refers to the deep-seated psychological and ontological impacts of colonialism, including the construction of racial hierarchies, cultural inferiority/superiority, and the marginalisation of indigenous and non-Western ways of being. Coloniality of being encompasses the lasting effects on subjectivity, self-perception, and the ways individuals understand themselves and their place in the world [45].
- *Coloniality of Power*: Coloniality of power refers to the persistence of power structures and systems that perpetuate colonial relations and inequalities. It encompasses the economic, political, and social mechanisms that continue to uphold and reproduce colonial hierarchies and oppression. Coloniality of power is concerned with the ongoing subjugation of colonised peoples, the exploitation of resources, and the maintenance of systems that perpetuate racial, cultural, and socio-economic inequalities. Coloniality of power has a strong association with the epistemological foundations of colonialism [46–49].
- *Coloniality of Knowledge*: Coloniality of knowledge refers to the ways in which colonialism has influenced and continues to influence knowledge production, dissemination, and validation. It highlights the power dynamics embedded in knowledge systems, where Western epistemologies and ways of knowing are privileged, while indigenous and non-Western knowledge(s) are often devalued or marginalised. Coloniality of knowledge exposes how Western-centric knowledge has been imposed as universal and authoritative, erasing and suppressing other knowledge traditions and ways of understanding the world [50,51].

As shown in Figure 1, the three concepts are interconnected and mutually reinforcing [52]. Coloniality of power underpins and enables the coloniality of knowledge, as power structures determine which knowledge is legitimised and which is marginalised or excluded. Meanwhile, the coloniality of being reinforces and is reinforced by the coloniality of power and knowledge, as power relations and knowledge systems shape individual and group identities and self-perceptions through cultural intersubjectivity and labour relations [41,53]. In the cases below, we use these categories to structure our reflections. Here, we used the coloniality of being, power, and knowledge to structure reflections. Our rationale is that these are key elements of decoloniality which afford a flexible yet relevant focus for the differing contextual features for each case. To meaningfully scope this study, a corpus of different outputs from across the three projects formed the basis for our reflections on the relationship between SOL and decoloniality. The materials used as the basis for our reflections are collections of research outputs from the projects [54–66].

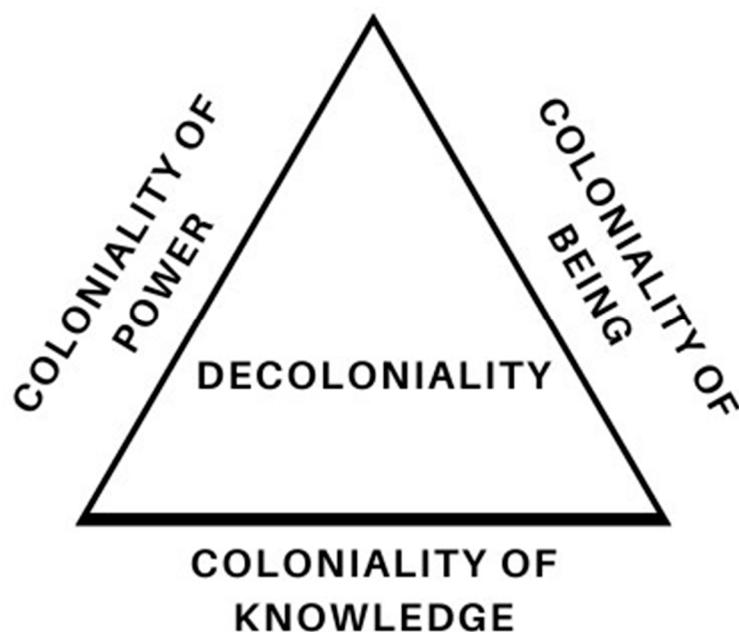


Figure 1. Decoloniality Case Study Conceptual Framework.

3. Results

3.1. Case Study 1: Pathways to Learning (Sub-Saharan Africa)

3.1.1. Background and Context

Pathways to Learning was devised as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and the appetite that quickly arose from this for professional development in teaching online. The OU UK had existing OER courses to draw on, and experts who could provide some time to support the endeavour. Through collaboration with the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE), two programmes were presented over six weeks in July and August 2020. The programmes were aimed at (1) Tertiary Educators in any role or subject area, and (2) Teacher Educators as a particular audience where upskilling was valued and resources were readily available from existing projects. (While ‘Sub-Saharan’ is a widely used term, some have criticised this language as being colonial since it condenses distinct cultures and countries into a homogeneous grouping. We use the term here as a geographical description and note that there were no restrictions on participation from anywhere in Africa).

3.1.2. Key Goals, Activities, and Challenges

The programme format was devised through discussions with ACDE and followed a common approach where existing OER courses (Take your Teaching Online [67] and Making Teacher Education relevant for 21st Century Africa [68]) were taken in their existing form without modification, and wraparound guidance, activities, and webinars were provided each week (Figure 2). Due to the desire for a rapid response, modifying the courses to suit the particular needs of the learners was not considered feasible. Instead, accommodations were made once the project was live in response to consultation with the partners. The wraparound support and activities provided opportunities for the programmes to become a better fit to the African audiences. This included some webinar sessions led by ACDE members (e.g., on quality assurance), which provided a local perspective, and a Telegram group which became a popular space for networking and discussion among participants, largely managed by ACDE members with some prompts for discussion related to course topics facilitated by staff from The Open University (UK). Priority topics of interest and need were identified in collaboration with ACDE. In some cases, these did not fit the existing content of the OER course. For example, designing assessments online was raised

as a key issue, and two webinars were focused on this topic because it was not strongly featured in the OER.

Figure 2. Tertiary Educator programme webinars (Pathways).

There was a keen interest expressed from African partners in providing recognition for completion of the course. While The Open University (UK) could not agree to provide formal credit for this open course, learners were awarded Badges and Statements of Completion.

3.1.3. Outcome(s), Impact, and Evaluation

Over 750 learners engaged with the Tertiary Educator programme and over 500 engaged with the Teacher Educator programme. These participants came from at least 16 African countries. Kenya and Nigeria had by far the greatest representation, accounting for 75–83% of participants in the introductory webinars and surveys. This may have been reflective of the networks through which the programmes were advertised. English was also the only language used in the programmes, which potentially restricted engagement. Evaluation surveys and interviews were used to gain insights into the participants and their experiences on the programmes. A total of 37% (287/771) of all those who registered interest in the Tertiary Educator course completed it. Furthermore, 66% (287/437) of those who completed week 1 went on to complete the whole course. These figures are relatively high when compared with most open online study. The evaluation showed that the cost

and lack of access had been barriers to professional development that these free and open opportunities for development were addressing. There were, however, evident barriers to participation for many, such as limited internet access and electricity in home environments.

3.1.4. Reflections from the Perspective of Decoloniality

Coloniality of Being

The aims and content of the Pathways project assume that The Open University UK was an authority with valuable expertise to share, not only in the specifics of online learning, but in wider areas of pedagogy and assessment. This can be viewed as a reflection of the position the university holds with a long history of teaching online and as an originator of the open model that—with different implementations—several institutions in Africa have adopted. But it could also indicate an untested assumption of superior understanding which could resolve pandemic-related challenges in African contexts, despite substantial cultural, political, and practical differences. There were efforts to foreground African perspectives, for example a session to share the ACDE's Quality Assurance Toolkit, but this was a minority of the content. Working entirely remotely, with lockdowns impacting on all the individuals involved, relationships had to be established and decisions made quickly and wholly virtually. Time constraints and a need to focus on action limited opportunities to negotiate ownership and roles.

Coloniality of Power

Discussions related to power among participants in the Pathway activities highlighted institutional and national issues more often than explicit issues of power between the western and African partners on the project. For example, participants lamented their own national government policies that restricted assessment to in-person exams. Issues such as the inability to award Open University UK academic credit for completing the programmes could be seen as instances where power was held in The Open University (UK). The funding coming from the UK GCRF and the proposal being led from the UK led to much decision making occurring within the UK. The rapid nature of the project limited opportunities for co-creation; for example, there was no opportunity for African partners to suggest changes be made to the OU UK-produced course materials. There was some sharing of ownership over aspects of the project, with a Telegram group being managed by the ACDE leads and acting as an important platform for discussions of the course.

Coloniality of Knowledge

Project evaluation was led from The Open University (UK) and while there was engagement in this from African colleagues—for example, when conducting interviews with participants—the design, management, and reporting were all directed from the UK. As noted above, the majority of knowledge and expertise represented in the project was from The Open University UK.

3.2. Case Study 2: Transformation by Innovation in Distance Education (TIDE), Myanmar

3.2.1. Background and Context

The UK Aid-funded Strategic Partnerships in Higher Education Innovation and Reform [69] programme's Transformation by Innovation in Distance Education (TIDE) project aimed to improve the quality and perception of distance education in Myanmar. TIDE had a holistic approach, working with a range of governmental, national, and local stakeholders to support policy and institutional change whilst developing and delivering capacity building for educators, senior management, and technical, librarian, and support staff. TIDE had a particular focus on environmental science topics and co-creating OER around the theme of environmental management; Myanmar was second on the list of countries most impacted by climate change from 2000 to 2019 [70]. The TIDE project ran for 3.5 years until its premature closure in May 2021, following the military coup in February. The project engaged with 40 Arts and Science universities across Myanmar, and directly with more

than 650 educators and technical, library, and support staff [71]. At the time of the TIDE project, a majority studied at a distance, with around 500,000 students [69], p. 145, [72,73]. The Open University acted as expert lead regarding both OER and the implementation of SOL.

3.2.2. Key Goals, Activities, and Challenges

Prior to early 2021, TIDE took place within the context of a previously isolated country transitioning to democracy following decades of military rule. TIDE aligned with and supported Myanmar's National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) 2016–2021 [74] and, as the project developed, also provided support for new strategies such as the one campus: two systems model that sought to devolve distance education provision [63,73]. TIDE also responded to the impact of rapid technological changes in Myanmar, including rapid increased access to the internet and mobile devices from 2013 onwards, suggesting how these could be harnessed for educational purposes as well as supporting digital literacy capacity building [63].

The use and development of OER were central to TIDE [73]. As shown below in Figure 3, the two-year capacity building programme for both academics and technical, librarian, and support staff was structured both to raise awareness of open education whilst supporting the collaborative creation of OER through a staged series of activities. These programmes were delivered using a cohort model, with ten universities beginning the programme each year. The two-year cycle of training was delivered face-to-face at residential schools and online outside of these twice-yearly week-long events.

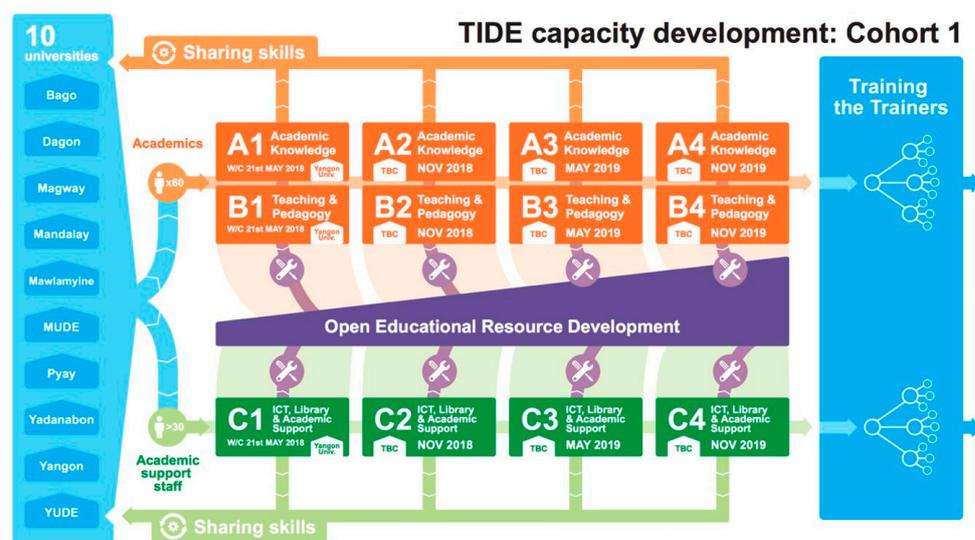


Figure 3. TIDE Capacity Development.

Site visits and the delivery of workshops and other activities face-to-face were also key. The project also produced a large range of legacy OER [75].

TIDE was heavily impacted by COVID-19 and the project underwent two pivots as a response to the emerging pandemic. First, face-to-face activities, such as the residential schools, were redeveloped for online delivery. Second, the two-year cycle of capacity building was streamlined and redeveloped for later cohorts. A further, critical challenge for TIDE was the military coup in February 2021. TIDE's model of stakeholder collaboration, which involved close collaboration with the Ministry of Education, was no longer possible. In addition, with the safety of colleagues being paramount, and university staff across Myanmar being involved in the civil disobedience movement, it became impossible to continue collaboration.

3.2.3. Outcome(s), Impact, and Evaluation

Given the early and unexpected end to TIDE, opportunities to evaluate and understand the project's impacts were curtailed, having already been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic [73]. Although formative evaluation had been completed prior to the military coup, no further data collection was subsequently possible, and the summative evaluation was limited to project team members and the analysis of student online course feedback [73].

As noted above, TIDE provided direct capacity building training for more than 650 educators, with an estimated 3000 further staff benefiting from cascade training, which was supported by OER. In total, 88% of educators participating in the TIDE programme "... reported applying approaches to support the development of 21st century skills for their students." [76]. TIDE also developed online open courses for students in both Myanmar and English languages and these were accessed by more than 12,500 students with 95% of learners saying they had developed new skills as a result. The project had other notable outcomes including contributing to the planned future NESP and providing support for a new open university in Myanmar [76].

3.2.4. Reflections from the Perspective of Decoloniality

The TIDE project took place within the context of the legacy of colonial rule (by the United Kingdom until 1948) and decades of military rule from 1962 onwards, before the National League for Democracy (NLD) were elected in 2015. Myanmar's transition to democracy was halted by the military coup of February 2021.

Coloniality of Being

In both the instance of British colonialism and military rule, the education system and that of higher education was developed and maintained (or not) to support certain ideologies and needs. Lall, for example, describes how British colonialism introduced "modern HE" to Myanmar, before its quality "deteriorated sharply" after 1948, particularly due to military intervention and the control of HE post-1962 [72]. Similarly, Fink outlines the lack of investment in education more widely and how education was centralised, organised, and developed to support military rule and suppress dissent [77].

A key example of this within the context of TIDE was the dominance of distance education in HE, the prevalence of which was deliberately designed to ensure limited contact between students and consequently limited opportunities for organising against the regime [77]. An outdated curriculum and centrally produced materials, a rotation system that resulted in lecturers moving institutions regularly [72], the structure of HE and staff engagement and motivation [78], and the perceived standard and applicability of courses to the job market were all challenges to be addressed [66]. Providing examples of and demonstrating alternative pedagogical approaches including more critical approaches, highlighting openly available resources, training, and curricula that could be utilised, and making use of more collaborative approaches to amplify the voices and experiences of colleagues in Myanmar (e.g., through workshops) were all aspects of TIDE that countered these approaches. The project also encouraged and provided a selection of courses, materials, and activities that were optional and potentially enabled exploration beyond TIDE's core curriculum. The cohort approach that was deployed supported a training of trainers model but also resulted in sustained engagement from our first cohort (2018–2019), members of which continued to engage and contribute to the project in different ways, including the co-development of open courses.

At the time of the project, Myanmar still retained many colonial-era laws. Within the context of OER, the context initially was one in which an outdated law (The Copyright Act of 1914) was still in place, with a new Copyright Law enacted in May 2019. Understanding current practices with regards to the use of existing resources and how to frame and introduce the idea of open licensing within this context was therefore key.

Coloniality of Power

TIDE was led by the OU UK in partnership with two UK universities, who provided environmental science expertise and had existing research connections to Myanmar, and three key Myanmar universities, with in-country support from the Myanmar-based Irrawaddy Policy Exchange (IPE). The project was the result of a period of discussion and engagement, in which developing relationships with and support from Myanmar stakeholders was key [63]. Collaboration with the Ministry of Education was essential throughout the project, both in terms of agreeing and progressing all aspects of the project but also in ensuring engagement from universities in project activities. IPE played a particularly important role in TIDE, providing day-to-day support and ensuring appropriate engagement and communication between the ministry, universities, the UK-based project team, and other stakeholders. Myanmar-based IPE staff were Myanmar nationals and had a vital role in understanding and navigating the complexities of protocol and context and enabled the project to effectively navigate existing hierarchies and structures whilst enabling consensus around the project's work.

Coloniality of Knowledge

Over 100 different languages are spoken in Myanmar and TIDE resources and activities were largely delivered in English. English is the official language of HE delivery in Myanmar, following its reinstatement in 1982 after twenty years of Myanmar language replacing it during military rule [72], p. 132.

In practice, English language levels varied across the project's participants [79] (see [73]). Although TIDE initially engaged with participants primarily in English, as the project progressed, TIDE adopted a different approach, prioritising translation support where it was most needed, e.g., for support, technical, and librarian staff or students. Live translation by Myanmar nationals was introduced to support the delivery of residential schools, other face-to-face activities, and online sessions and to enable meaningful discussion and engagement between UK and Myanmar colleagues. In addition, outputs, materials, and OER produced for the project were translated into Myanmar language. However, even translation into Myanmar language does not mean the material is immediately accessible; due to the number of different languages spoken and the political complexities regarding the dominance of Myanmar language, further work to understand participant needs, particularly as the project moved to engage with later cohorts, who were often based in more remote regions, would have potentially been beneficial.

3.3. Case Study 3: Skills for Prosperity, Kenya

3.3.1. Background and Context

This project was originally set as a part of a bigger programme (Skills for Prosperity) in nine middle-income countries in South East Asia, Latin America, and Africa with the aim of supporting the government of Kenya in establishing the National Open University of Kenya. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in the government's priorities, it focused on developing higher education capacity and expertise to deliver quality digital education (online and blended). To support the government of Kenya in addressing the gap in such expertise, The Open University (UK) designed and delivered a 2½ year nationwide capacity development programme in partnership with 37 public universities in Kenya as a part of the Skills for Prosperity Kenya project (funded by UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) [80].

3.3.2. Key Goals, Activities, and Challenges

The project had two stages and aimed to develop and enhance existing digital education capacity for public universities and to introduce staff to the principles of effective, inclusive, and accessible online and blended education. To design the programme, a comprehensive needs assessment with the main stakeholders and based on JISC Digital Capabilities Frameworks [81] was conducted to identify staff skills and knowledge gaps

and to define the learning outcomes for the programme after desk research, and liaison with the relevant stakeholders in order to attend to national, local, and learner needs. In addition to the needs assessment, several co-design workshops and touchpoint meetings (n = 24) with a selected number of universities were held to promote a cooperative way of working, making minimal assumptions about universities' working context and to ensure the programme supports participants in meeting their institutions' strategic priorities with regards to digital education. Following the needs assessment, a two-staged programme based on the SOL model and using an existing openly licensed course [67], as shown in Table 1, was developed.

Table 1. SFPK Capacity Development Programme.

Online Education (Stage 1) Baseline Capacity Development	Digital Education (Stage 2) Mastery Capacity Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level 3 training-advanced • 29 public universities • Eight-session self-study online course, requiring 30 h of study • Wraparound webinars • Online community of practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level 3 training-advanced • Eight public universities • Eight-block online self-study course with moderated discussions • Expert webinars with moderated discussions • University projects supported by expert mentors • Online community of practice • Mastery programme required 72 h of study • Thought-leader training (150 h of postgraduate microcredential) [82]

Both stages of the programme involved engaging with some self-study learning material and wraparound expert and general webinars and discussions in an online community of practice (a closed Facebook group); however, the mastery programme had a mentoring scheme where university teams designed and developed digital projects based on their institution's priorities and were mentored by experts from The Open University [83]. This was an opportunity for both the OU and universities to share their practices.

In developing the programme, issues of limited and unreliable connectivity, limited access to digital devices, participants' time constraints to engage with the programme, the needs of participants with a disability, and the uncertain and difficult time of the pandemic required specific design and delivery considerations to ensure supported open learning. These included the following:

- *Flexible scheduling* with a self-paced delivery mode relying mostly on asynchronous activities to recognise participants' needs and enable them to engage with the programme at their own pace, fitting study around work and other commitments.
- *Offering downloadable content in multiple formats* since accessing online content with unreliable Internet is difficult, learning materials were available in multiple formats that could be downloaded and accessed via a mobile to a tablet. This meant offering more control to participants over their learning as they could download learning resources at times when they had Internet access, and then work on them offline.
- *Accessible learning material* meaning all learning content met international accessibility standards (e.g., images and diagrams were accompanied by alternative text for screen readers) to support participants with special learning needs and to be as inclusive and accommodating as possible.
- *Distributed award system* where a distributed award system of specialised digital badges (e.g., Online Assessment Badge; Learning Design Badge) and a certificate of completion was considered to motivate and encourage participation and to meet recognition expectations.
- *Local support*: In addition to the UK-based technical and academic teams, an online community of practice, a dedicated mailbox for individualised learner support, and a Kenyan coordinator dealt with inquiries and tasks that could not be addressed remotely.

As well as dealing with local issues, the coordinator identified cultural and contextual factors that might otherwise have limited accessibility, inclusion, and diversity.

3.3.3. Outcome(s), Impact, and Evaluation

In total, 337 participants enrolled on the programme and 233 completed it, becoming digital education champions at their institutions. Some also contributed to the formation of The Open University of Kenya. A multi-stage and longitudinal (over 18 months) evaluation of the programme based on King's professional development impact evaluation framework [84] showed that the programme had positive immediate and short-term impact on participants in terms of learning new conceptual knowledge and skills or enhancing the existing one(s) and creating changes in "product" (e.g., digital content, policy, new partnerships), "processes" (e.g., teaching, creating learning content, and assessing students), and "staff outcomes" (e.g., change in perception, critical use of EdTech, and new forms of collaboration) levels.

3.3.4. Reflections from the Perspective of Decoloniality

Coloniality of Being

The Open University as the project lead had authority and power over the programme structure, design, and content mainly due to being known as experts in digital education including open and scaled distance, and online and blended delivery. The authority of The Open University is rooted in their role as one of the pioneers and main experts in the field and having extensive experience in the area. Thus, the OU having a position towards the top of hierarchy had more to do with their knowledge and experience than the West and Africa historical and political discussions. This being said, the programme aims and scope were determined by the Ministry of Education in Kenya, taking into account the needs and priorities of higher education institutions, and the ministry influenced many major decisions.

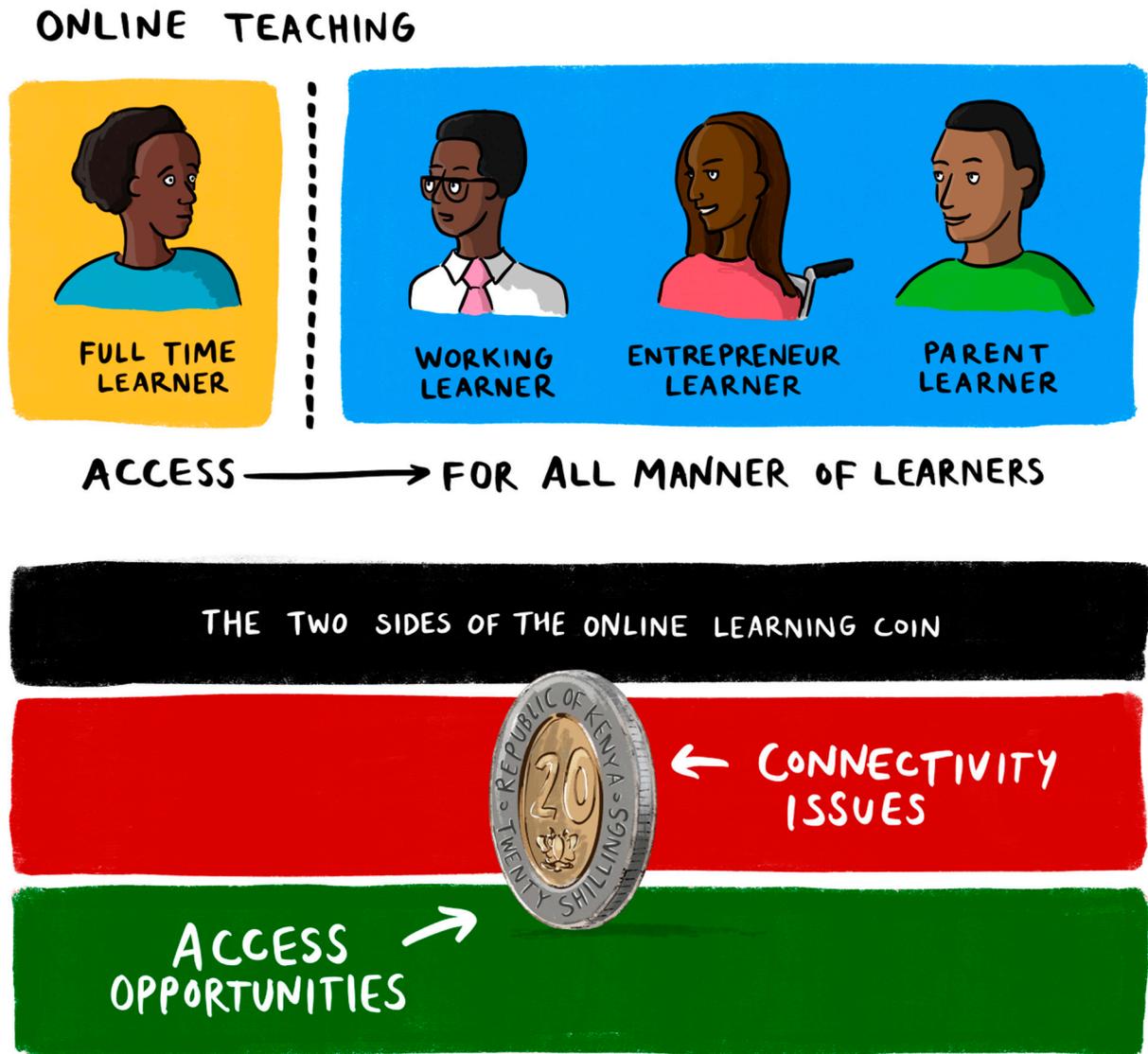
In addition, throughout the projects, there were efforts to foreground Kenyan perspectives. This is mostly evident at the early stages of the capacity development, i.e., participant recruitment and the programme design through minimising social classification, gendering, and professional hierarchisation. The project specifically aimed at developing the capacity of females and persons with disabilities, who are often given fewer development opportunities, and participating universities were requested to prioritise nominating these two groups. In addition, by emphasising the inclusion of three staff groups, i.e., educators, managers, and support staff, the project tried to minimise the hierarchy of roles and status. Moreover, as the project covered the majority of public universities (37 out of 39), it reached most of the counties ($n = 31$), 19 of which are classed as low to middle economic class [85]. Thus, attempts were made for inclusive participation in capacity development at individual and regional levels.

Moreover, when the learning content and OER was localised for the training, the Kenyan perspective was heavily consulted. Co-identifying relevant content, co-developing the illustrations with a sample of participants and a Kenyan educational consultant (Figure 4), including images and examples that represent a variety of ethnicities, genders, and age groups, and using local lexis (e.g., *matatus*) were a few strategies used.

Coloniality of Power

This is the most complex unit of decolonial thinking and practice to reflect on due to the involvement of different stakeholders, such as the funder (FCDO), the Kenya Ministry of Education, the SFPK consortium lead (the disability support charity Leonard Cheshire), and the Vice Chancellors of participating universities. Although The Open University led the project, many decisions and activities were heavily influenced by systems, structures, and invisible norms within which other stakeholders functioned, and it was necessary to adapt the work around them. Funder decisions about the focus of project, Ministry decisions about the number and type of universities to be involved, vice chancellor influence,

universities’ internal policies about who to attend the training or lead university teams, and participants’ decisions about the type of award are examples that show that power was distributed, although not equally and fairly. For each element of the project, one or two stakeholders were directing the decisions and actions mostly due to their positions and status.



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Figure 4. Examples of co-developed illustrations for learning content.

Coloniality of Knowledge

A small degree of decolonising practice in relation to knowledge was observed in the design and delivery of the programme. The knowledge of OU as leading experts in online education was dominant when providing the baseline digital competencies and skills, although the decisions about what to cover and develop was informed by what participants already knew and what they identified as their needs and preferences through a needs assessment and a series of co-design workshops. Those who attended the mastery programme had full control over the type of knowledge they wanted to learn about or enhance through setting institutional practical projects. Thus, the knowledge of the participants was not fully undermined, but was only maintained and valued in certain elements of the programme.

4. Discussion

In each of the three cases presented in this paper, The Open University (UK) was involved in the delivery of transformative digital education services as a subject expert. This meant that there was always a sense in which the UK involvement was to represent and share a particular form of expertise. The SOL approach was present throughout both the subject matter and the forms of collaboration that were employed in the projects. It is also worth noting, however, that the reality of delivering initiatives like these is highly complex in practice and often involves various degrees of compromise and accommodation. The COVID-19 pandemic, changes in government, and, in the case of TIDE in Myanmar, a military coup, meant that these projects were conducted during challenging circumstances. (In the case of Pathways, the pandemic itself provided the rationale for a project focused on digital transformation.)

When acting as an expert partner, a key challenge, therefore, is avoiding overly paternalistic attitudes and practices. Open practices and transparency in process can support a more horizontal and less authoritarian understanding of power. This can confer greater opportunities for personal freedom, agency, expression, and creativity [23,86,87]. However, this ethos can come into conflict with pre-existing structures of power in the contexts of application, some of which may be directly influenced by colonial history and heritage. Since The Open University led both the management of the project and acted as subject experts, there is a delicate balancing act to be struck between providing leadership in a particular domain and respecting the autonomy and self-determination of the collaboration partners. Sometimes, this is largely a matter of process and ongoing dialogue, but cultural differences can lead to complexity. Openness cannot be used to enforce a particular political or organisational agenda, but it can be used to demonstrate alternative forms of activity and promote cooperative ways of working. In most cases, though, the requirements of the projects mean that the focus is on the delivery of something other than ‘decolonization’.

Another significant challenge relates to the dominance of English as the language of international collaboration which can disadvantage non-native English speakers [88]. All three projects were conducted in English, and this can lead to the uncomfortable situation where the language of the ‘decolonising’ force and the language of the colonising force are the same. Beyond highlighting this as an example of Anglocentrism and Western privilege, it is also important to note that this adds cognitive load to the non-native English speakers and increases the possibility of miscommunication. There is no obvious solution to this issue. It is feasible that automatic translation services could soon reach a point where instantaneous and reliable rendering would allow all parties to use their most familiar or most comfortable language. However, this kind of technology is not yet in place and lesser-used languages in the Global South will undoubtedly be the last to be integrated into such systems should they become viable.

Short-to-medium term interventions, like those described in this paper, are typically focused on the pragmatics of delivering what they are funded to do. Indeed, decolonisation was not an explicit aim for the projects discussed here and we have been reflecting by reading this theme back into our research activities. None of the OER used was ‘decolonised’ or otherwise reviewed for suitability before these projects started, and the review of materials was conducted in collaboration with project partners.

As an ambition, decolonisation is an incredibly complex concept and even more heterogeneous and multi-faceted in practice. Therefore, it is necessary to be circumspect about what can actually be achieved by educational technology interventions. This is especially the case with regards to things that happen within the timeframe of a project. It may well be that the longer-term impact can support meaningful economic, cultural, or social change, but the restrictions of the funding cycle entail that, by this point, the expert researchers will typically be focused on a new initiative. One contribution this paper tries to make is showing how ongoing reflection may be of benefit, but there is also a case for longer-term funding scenarios that could support more detailed research and evaluation over time

being more effective at supporting decoloniality. As Nusbaum [89] contends, there is no evidence that OER are any better than commercial texts at addressing issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, but in the longer term, the diversification of curriculum—and making it easier to influence the curriculum—can reinforce or support these ambitions. It is also worth some caution here, however, since influence over the curriculum can also be misused or exploited. Some of the nuance of the SOL model can easily be supplanted over time by a more generic or neoliberal offer of technology-enhanced learning which does not emphasise OEP or the same degree of contextual support for learners. Adapting the approach to the context and the specific needs of learners and other stakeholders is a strong advantage of SOL but also makes it relatively resource intensive. Furthermore, the potential inconsistency of human support can lead to variations in learner experiences which may be undesirable [27]. A lack of ongoing support is thus a power dynamic that may inhibit the progress made towards decoloniality through research and implementation projects like those discussed above.

We do not claim that our reflections in these cases can be an exhaustive account of what is important for decoloniality, not least because we only present a particular and limited perspective on such issues. Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter [16] describe how both ameliorative responses (redistribution of resources, recognition of identity, and representation) and transformative responses (economic restructuring, re-acculturation, parity of rights) are possible. However, this kind of transformational change is well beyond the remit of the kinds of interventions discussed in this paper. This begs the question: what kind of aspirations are reasonable within educational technology research projects? If decolonisation is too lofty or complex, what is a more reasonable ambition? Our answer here is that decoloniality can be foregrounded as part of the discussion with stakeholders, though in practice, it is unlikely to be prioritised unless it is specifically deliverable as part of a project. The SOL approach is procedural, and so more an ethos and a way of doing things than a clear goal. This leaves some hostages to fortune but can also be understood as an attempt to empower without specifying the exact path that should be followed. This can lead to an ambiguous relationship between acting as an authority and encouraging self-determination for the partners in the Global South. OER can be a route to greater control over curriculum and the more effective localisation of knowledge, but making OER central to the delivery of education typically involves sustained effort over a timeframe longer than most projects.

To provide a focus on decoloniality, we have used a simple framework structured around the coloniality of being, power, and knowledge. This conceptual framework can accommodate a wide range of relevant factors such as justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, pedagogy of care, embodiment, tradition, cultural knowledge, relation to environment, and technological infrastructure. However, its categories are also quite abstract and philosophical. Our reflections are necessarily reductive and interpretive, which should be understood as a limitation of this study. However, the flexibility of the framework means it could also be explored with other, similar projects or alternative collaboration models. Another obvious way to use the framework would be to complete it together with (or in parallel to) the collaboration teams from the original projects. This could bring to light any differences of perception and facilitate coming to a shared understanding about the potential for improvement in the future. This must be tempered with the understanding that what applies in one context need not apply in another: the temptation to create an orthodoxy or template for decoloniality should be resisted. Coloniality is a persistent force [42] which must continually be re-engaged with. SOL offers a route to this through its sensitivity to context and its recognition of the need for openness and dialogue, but this should not be mistaken for implying that the use of OER is a panacea for dealing with issues around coloniality. As Adam [90] notes, openness can be a route to addressing injustice but does not itself necessarily address injustice.

5. Conclusions

This study has compared the affordances of the SOL approach across three case studies. From our perspective as researchers at one of the world's leading distance education institutions—and with the caveat that we do not imply our voices are the only or the most important—we have argued that SOL, while being relatively resource intensive, confers several ways of supporting decoloniality. There is no easy solution to decolonisation, but SOL is an approach that can be taken by scholars and practitioners in Global North to work towards shared understanding and empowerment in context. Table 2 shows how features of the SOL model—while still somewhat abstract—can adhere to some contours of the conceptual framework used in this study.

Table 2. Relating SOL to the Categories of Decoloniality.

	Decoloniality		
	Being	Power	Knowledge
Supported	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognising authentic human needs Practising empathy Tailored or individualised support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledging differences in privilege Acting to equalise and democratise power Amplifying marginalised voices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-creation of knowledge Sharing of expertise Pedagogical support Learning design
Open	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion Sharing practice Emphasising transparency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognition of colonial history Engaging with the legacy of colonialism Sensitivity to context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of OER Co-creation Promotion of open licences Encouraging adaptation of curriculum
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making minimal assumptions about people or contexts Openness to dialogue and perspective sharing Engagement and negotiation as a route to understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid transactional mindset in favour of co-creation and collaboration Expand opportunities for sharing knowledge and expertise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Construe diverse stakeholder activity as (co-constructed) learning Being prepared to calibrate approach depending on feedback and experience

Ultimately, investigating the coloniality of being, coloniality of knowledge, and coloniality of power requires critical reflection, engaging with diverse perspectives, and amplifying the voices, bodies, and knowledge systems that have been historically marginalised. Our reflections in this study recognise the ongoing effects of colonialism and the importance of working towards decolonial praxis that challenges and transforms these structures.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: As this study is reflective and uses publicly available information, no ethical review was required. The three projects used as case studies were all subject to review and approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee at The Open University, UK. The approval codes are HREC/3642/COUGHLAN for Pathways; HREC/3684/Lane for TIDE Myanmar; and SFPK: HREC/4527/Goshtasbpour/Whitelock for Skills for Prosperity.

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Data Availability Statement: No new data were created for this study. The relevant materials for the cases are available below.

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