



# NOW MORE URGENT THAN EVER: CREATE A MASTER'S IN CRITICAL DIASPORA, RACE AND LIBERATION STUDIES

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- At the start of the academic year, students continue to mobilize for structural change in Flemish higher education.
- Current curricula neglect colonial histories, diaspora experiences, and contributions of marginalized communities.
- Black Studies initiatives abroad show how alternative knowledge production can reshape universities.
- A Master in Critical Diaspora, Race and Liberation Studies would help build a more inclusive, just, and pluriversal higher education system in Flanders.

After nearly two years of student protests and many mass demonstrations in Brussels and around the world, the Flemish rectors published an open letter during the summer holidays entitled “We cannot remain silent about the inhumane conditions and the deep humanitarian crisis in Gaza.”

The Belgian rectors call on the Belgian government to “act decisively” in response to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and to prepare further actions alongside other countries. As the academic year approaches, two questions arise. On the one hand, what objectives and actions will the rectors commit to? On the other hand, will their letter remain just words? Meanwhile, many colleagues and students continue to press for an academic boycott, as Israeli universities play an essential role in the colonisation of Palestine and in the ongoing genocide in Gaza (extensively documented in Towers of Ivory and Steel by Maya Wind).

In this time of live-streamed genocide, social unrest, growing inequality, political rigidity and right-wing radicalisation, students in Flanders and Brussels refuse to remain indifferent. They mobilise around issues such as racism, colonialism, climate, and social justice. They challenge their educational institutions and demand a system that takes responsibility for its role in historical and current inequalities.

These students act as engaged citizens who combine critical thinking with social commitment. They actively imagine alternative futures and collectively build towards a more inclusive world.

Within this context, the call for structural change in higher education grows louder than ever. Students show interest in institutions and programmes that make structural space for non-Western forms of knowledge production and contribute to transforming higher education into a fairer and more pluriversal space.


This policy brief builds on research into the desirability and conditions for launching a programme inspired by the Black Studies programmes in the United States. We conducted this research between 2021 and 2023. We carried out individual interviews and organised focus groups with racialised students and lecturers, as well as conversations with key figures such as Professor Kehinde Andrews, who established the only existing Black Studies programme in Europe – at Birmingham City University – and lecturer Zawdie Sandvliet, who initiated an Afro-Dutch Studies programme, originally at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences and later elsewhere.

We propose the creation of a Master’s in *Critical Diaspora, Race and Liberation Studies* in Flanders – a programme that would systematically highlight the contributions of racialised minorities to knowledge, culture, and social struggle in Belgian and European society – one which helps transform the university into a more just and pluriversal space. The programme we propose closely aligns with what young people on campuses are tirelessly striving to transform.

## The International and Belgian Call for Decolonisation

The call to decolonise universities—prominently visible in South Africa (#RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall) and the United Kingdom (#WhyIsMyCurriculumWhite)—has also reached the European continent. In the Netherlands, the occupation of the Maagdenhuis in 2015 led to the slogan “No Democratisation without Decolonisation.” In Belgium, student organisations began making similar demands in 2017, which gained further momentum after the global Black Lives Matter protests in 2020.

Decolonisation is understood here as both an intellectual and an active social justice project. It challenges Western knowledge production, which regards itself as universal and superior, and calls for recognition of non-Western forms of knowledge. It is not only an academic challenge but also a struggle for social transformation.



In 2024 and 2025, we are once again witnessing a global student mobilisation—this time against the silence and complicity of our governments and universities in the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. In Belgium, young people are leading the struggle to force radical systemic change by any means necessary. Students are calling for universities to end partnerships with Israeli institutions due to ongoing human rights violations. They stress that human rights assessments must be taken seriously and applied consistently so that universities no longer engage in collaborations that contribute to war, genocide, and other human rights abuses.

This radical call for accountability aims to bring changes to administrative policies, research priorities, and curricula. It is rooted in learning that is community-based, pluriversal, and non-linear, placing the struggles of marginalised groups at its centre.

### Structural Exclusion and Hunger for Knowledge

Conversations with students, activists, and professors between 2022 and 2023 reveal a clear pattern: students of colour experience Flemish higher education as white and Eurocentric. They miss curricula that pay attention to colonial history, diaspora experiences, and the contributions of marginalised communities to science and the arts.

Current knowledge transmission largely ignores the historical and contemporary realities of racism, coloniality, and global inequality. This affects not only racialised students but also limits all students' ability to understand the world in all its complexities.

A Master's programme influenced by Black Studies initiatives in the United States and the United Kingdom could address these structural gaps. As Kehinde Andrews emphasises, it is not only about access to the university but about transforming its very nature: creating a university that is connected to the social struggle for justice.

By generating new knowledge and building archives on the contributions of marginalised groups, such a master's programme could:

- De-mythologise: Unravel European narratives that portray modernity and democracy as separate from colonial exploitation.
- De-silence: Acknowledge who speaks, who remains silent, and which knowledge is deemed legitimate within academic spaces.
- De-materialise: Link knowledge to social change, emancipation, and the redistribution of power.

These three strategies, based on the work of Olivia Rutazibwa, form the foundation for the design of this programme.

### The Power of Black Studies: Lessons from Abroad

The establishment of Black Studies in the United States and the United Kingdom did not result in the full decolonisation of universities. However, as Hortense J. Spillers demonstrates, these programmes created new paradigms and practices that transformed the humanities. Black Studies fostered alternative forms of knowledge production outside of the white-centred canon, it empowered historically marginalised voices, and supported broader social movements for equality.

Those experiences in the United States and United Kingdom teach us that separate programmes may not achieve total institutional transformation, but they do create essential spaces for alternative narratives and practices.

In Europe, such structural change has yet to be achieved. Although initiatives such as Afro-Dutch Studies exist, there is still no broad institutional recognition of the urgency of decolonial practices.



## Policy Recommendation

A Master's in *Critical Diaspora, Race and Liberation Studies* is a necessary step towards a more inclusive, just, and pluralistic Flemish higher education system.

Younger generations of students of colour demonstrate an insatiable hunger for more just and diverse knowledge production. Flanders can and must respond—not only to address historical injustices but also to create universities that truly contribute to the formation of critical, global citizens.

More than ever, we need a master's programme that brings together students, professors, and broader social organisations and movements in a powerful anti-colonial network, capable of enabling structural change in times of global crises, racism, and colonial continuity.

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