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Decolonising service design education:

A case study of the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Programme in Service Design Strategies and Innovations (SDSI)

Master's Thesis
Faculty of Art and Design
Spring 2025

University of Lapland, Faculty of Art and Design

Title: Decolonising service design education: A case study of the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Programme in Service Design Strategies and Innovations (SDSI)

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Degree program: Service Design Strategies and Innovations (SDSI)

The type of the work: Master's thesis

Number of pages: 142

Number of appendices: 6

Year: 2025

Abstract

As calls to decolonise design and higher education intensify globally, service design education in Europe has largely remained insulated from critical decolonial discourse. In an era marked by inequality, ecological collapse, and epistemic crises, rethinking how we teach, learn, and design has become increasingly urgent. This thesis addresses that gap by critically examining whether decolonisation - as concept, critique, and commitment - can inform more just and inclusive pedagogical and curricular practices within an international postgraduate programme: the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's in Service Design Strategies and Innovations (SDSI).

Employing a qualitative, exploratory case study approach grounded in interpretivist and critical realist paradigms, the study combines co-reflective workshops, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, autoethnography, and document analysis. It investigates the emotional responses, conceptual understandings, dominant narratives, and practical recommendations of SDSI students, faculty, and founders. Findings reveal wide-ranging emotional reactions: from scepticism and discomfort - especially among founders - to growing curiosity, reflexivity, and critical engagement among students and faculty. While founders framed decolonisation through historical or defensive narratives, faculty and students articulated nuanced critiques of Eurocentrism and systemic exclusion, calling for pluralistic approaches to service design education.

The research offers practical, stakeholder-informed recommendations and outlines a 12-month participatory roadmap toward a more reflexive and pluriversal SDSI. It argues that decolonising service education requires more than token inclusion or curricular add-ons; it demands an ethical and epistemological reimagining of what knowledge matters, how it is produced, and who it serves. Ultimately, this thesis positions decolonisation not as a checklist or trend, but as a transformative imperative for building more just, caring, and relational futures in and through design education.

Keywords: decolonisation, service design, higher education, case study, Erasmus Mundus

Acknowledgements

This thesis is not a product, an artefact or a deliverable; it is a relationship rooted in shared presence. Even though the selection of words, stories and interpretations presented in this thesis bear my name, this research does not belong only to me. It belongs to all the “knowledge co-creators” who have generously shared their views, feedback, struggles and dreams with me. Its completion embodies the collaborative spirit, intellectual curiosity and emotional labour of several external experts and numerous current staff, faculty, and students of the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Programme in Service Design Strategies and Innovations (SDSI). Their contributions have been pivotal in shaping my research in both seen and unseen ways. I am only a small part of a much larger constellation of co-thinkers and co-dreamers.

First, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisors Dr. Kiwoong Nam and Dr. Krista Korpikoski for their approachability, availability and patience throughout this process.

I am deeply grateful to Sabrina Meherally and sahibzada mayed (صاحبزاده مائد) from Pause+Effect, a decolonial design and research think tank and consultancy based on the ancestral lands of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. They expanded both my heart and understanding through their transformative learning experience on (de)coloniality in research and design. Their teachings on love, care, reciprocity and relationality have shaped not only this thesis, but how I aspire to live, relate, facilitate and design. I highly encourage you to follow, support and amplify their work.

A heartfelt thank you goes to my blood family in Italy (especially my sister Matilde), my chosen family of old and newer friends scattered across continents, and my SDSI family - for holding me, cheering me on, and reminding me that this work does not need to be done alone. You are too many to name, but you know who you are. Every pep talk, (virtual) hug, (video) call, shared meal, and “mental health” walk is noted and deeply appreciated.

I also wish to acknowledge the European Union’s Erasmus Mundus scholarships, which made it possible for me to dedicate the past two years to deep personal, academic and professional growth.

Last but definitely not least, I extend my respect and gratitude to the snow-covered lands, frozen waters, crisp air, white hares, Eurasian magpies (*pica pica*), and dancing skies of

Rovaniemi, and to all the non-human and more-than-human kin who have hosted me, taught me, and held space for me on their territories.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to:

- the co-founders, advisors, alumni and any former faculty members who journeyed through the early days of the SDSI programme and who co-created its foundations through courage and care whilst embracing uncertainty and experimentation.
- the current SDSI staff, faculty and Erasmus Mundus students across both first- and second-year cohorts, who are proactively contributing to the growth, unfolding and evolution of the programme.
- the SDSI staff, faculty and students yet to come, who will continue to improve, question and reimagine what this programme can become.

Reading disclaimer

In the spirit of transparency and trauma-informed practice, I wish to note that this thesis engages with topics of colonial violence, oppression and other sensitive themes that may be distressing for some readers. As you engage with these topics, you might experience a range of emotional, cognitive, or somatic responses. This thesis is intended to be approached in a way that honours your emotional and embodied experience. You are encouraged to read at a pace that feels comfortable, safe and appropriate for you, particularly when encountering sensitive content. I invite you to lean into practices of embodiment and to allow space for pause, reflection, and self-regulation, rather than reading with haste.

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List of abbreviations

- Art Academy of Latvia (LMA)
- Estonia Academy of Arts (EKA)
- Erasmus Mundus Joint Master (EMJM)
- European Union (EU)
- Higher education (HE)
- Higher education institutions (HEIs)
- Rhodes Must Fall (RMF)
- Service Design Strategies and Innovations (SDSI)
- Service design (SD)
- Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
- United Nations (UN)
- University of Lapland (ULAP)

Glossary

For the reader's convenience, this section defines and clarifies key terms and concepts used throughout this thesis. Readers may wish to refer back to this section. The core theoretical concepts are explored in greater depth in Chapter 3.

Academia: Drawing on Erdem (2023), Merriam-Webster (n.d.-a) and More et al. (2016), academia is conceived as a system, a professional identity, and a community of people (i.e. scholars, researchers, and intellectuals) involved in the gathering, production, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge, particularly within higher education institutions. It encompasses the values, norms, structures, and practices associated with researching, theorising, debating, and publishing. It is primarily concerned with the pursuit of knowledge in the service of intellectual, cultural, and societal advancement (Atkinson & Pelfrey, 2007). Academia is related to, but distinct from, higher education (see definition below).

Colonialism / Colonisation: Refers to the brutal, complex and variegated socio-political and economic phenomenon in which many European nations, from the late 15th and mid-20th century, established colonies in Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Caribbean, and Oceania by invading, subjugating, exploiting, exerting (military, political and/or socio-economic) control over and/or settling among Indigenous peoples and lands (Blakemore, 2024; Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b; Stuchtey, 2011). Colonisation was fuelled by imperialism - the policy of expanding countries' power and dominion by gaining (in)direct control over the territories, resources and/or people of other nations (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-c) - often leading to genocide (Moses, 2008; Tunstall, 2023; Woolford & Benvenuto, 2015). It was justified by ideologies of racial superiority, eugenics, and anthropocentrism, which dehumanised and discredited Indigenous peoples and their knowledge systems, replacing them with Eurocentric, white supremacist, and hierarchical structures and practices (Aldrich, 1996; Engerman & Sokoloff, 2012; Perraton, 1967; Smith, 2012). Today, neo-colonial systems continue to concentrate power and resources among a privileged few, perpetuating the oppression of Indigenous, Black, Brown, Queer, and other marginalised communities (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a; Tunstall, 2023).

Coloniality: Refers to the ongoing (and often invisible) legacy of colonisation/colonialism, persisting well beyond the formal end of colonial regimes (Grosfoguel, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2004; Quijano, 2000). It denotes the insidious systems of domination embedded in all material and subjective spheres of social life, including (higher) education (Meherally &

sahibzada, 2024a). These systems manifest through the active erasure, silencing, and marginalisation of Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, and the imposition of Western values, attitudes, power structures, relational frameworks, and modes of knowledge production (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a; Sims, & Naidu, 2024). Coloniality is also internalised at the individual level by most people, including those formerly colonised (Agrawal & Buchanan, 2025; Blauner, 1969). Examples of enduring colonial frameworks include modernity, Eurocentric intellectualism, ownership, commodification, extraction, scarcity, linearity of time, separation, carcerality and centralisation of power (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024b). Private property, for instance, first emerged in the United Kingdom, and was later violently imposed across the world through colonisation, dispossessing Indigenous peoples and turning their lands into commodities (Bhandar, 2018; Greer, 2024). Today, private property remains a building block of contemporary capitalist societies (Duvisac, 2022). Hence, private property relations exemplify coloniality, positioning Eurocentric legal norms as universal and perpetuating historical and structural inequalities (Davies, 2019).

Cultural competence: The ability to engage and communicate respectfully, ethically, and effectively with people from diverse cultural contexts (University of Sydney, n.d.). It necessitates ongoing self-reflection on one's own cultural background and how it influences values, attitudes, and behaviours (Ang et al., 2020). At its heart, cultural competence values diversity as a source of creativity, equity, and strength, and involves developing the knowledge, empathy, and skills necessary to navigate our increasingly multicultural and interconnected world (University of Sydney, n.d.).

Curriculum/a: The structured set of courses or modules that make up the academic offer of a programme of study, such as the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Programme in Service Design Strategies and Innovations (SDSI), as well as the specific content (i.e. topics, examples, materials, syllabi, readings lists, references) that is planned, delivered and experienced by students within each course/module. A curriculum is more than a list of courses and topics; it is a dynamic and contested terrain reflecting specific epistemologies, pedagogical intentions and institutional values, purposes, and theories that influence which types of knowledge and knowledge holders are centred and legitimised (Abdulla, 2025; Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006; Le Grange, 2006; Prideaux, 2003). As a core component of the student learning experience and academic offer, the curriculum should be co-designed with students, positioning them not just as recipients but as co-creators of educational value in

line with service design principles (Bovill, 2013; Bovill et al., 2011; Stickdorn et al., 2018). Curriculum is closely linked to pedagogy / pedagogical practices (see definition below).

Decolonisation / to decolonise: Traditionally, decolonisation refers to the historico-political process that marked the gradual and formal end of European colonial regimes (Merrier-Webster, n.d.-d). This process unfolded in waves from the late 18th century, reaching its peak in the mid-20th century, as colonised nations across the globe fought for or negotiated independence from European powers (Blakemore, 2024; Sims & Naidu, 2024). In this thesis, decolonisation (noun) and to decolonise (verb) are primarily used in relation to, and interchangeably with, decoloniality (see definition below) because the term “decolonialisation” is not widely used in the scholarly literature.

Decoloniality: The analytical and practical processes aimed at actively identifying, challenging, resisting, and dismantling coloniality (see definition above) in all its forms and across all spheres of social life. These processes, often rooted in decolonial and/or postcolonial theory, take many different forms in diverse contexts and places, and have different (yet often complementary) aims (Khandwala, 2020; Sims & Naidu, 2024). Notably, decoloniality includes efforts seeking to recover one’s identity, to critique Eurocentric intellectualism, and to centre and restore Indigenous perspectives and alternative ways of being, doing, and knowing underpinning our socio-politico-economic structures (Khandwala, 2020; Tunstall, 2023). Coming back to the example of private property as a form of coloniality, a decolonial intervention could look like reimagining property relations to create more equitable, collective and community ownership models that break free from privatisation (Duvisac, 2022).

Epistemic injustice: Refers to unfairness and harm related to knowledge production, validation, interpretation, access, and dissemination, rooted in power imbalances. At the individual level, it comprises (1) the denial of epistemic agency (known as testimonial injustice), that is, the inability to be heard and believed as a knower due to prejudice (e.g. sexism, racism, classism), and (2) the systemic exclusion and marginalisation of certain knowledge systems and knowledge holders from dominant and mainstream discourses (known as hermeneutic injustice) (Fricker, 2007; McKinnon, 2016). Epistemic injustice is also systemic and institutional, reinforced by Eurocentrism / Eurocentric intellectualism (see definition below) and global knowledge hierarchies (Hazarika, 2019).

Eurocentrism / Eurocentric intellectualism: The cultural and epistemic paradigm rooted in the assumption that (Western) European and Anglo-American ways of being, doing and knowing are superior, universal, default, and “truth”, while exoticising, devaluing, or omitting non-Western worldviews (EUI, n.d.; Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a). At its heart, Eurocentrism is the pervasive intellectual tendency to privilege and interpret the world, including non-Western societies, through Western ontologies, epistemologies, values, and experiences (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-e; Pokhrel, 2011). It manifests strongly in societal institutions and academia across the globe, where Western concepts and methods are treated as value-neutral, universally valid and globally applicable, while non-Western, Indigenous and subaltern thought is often either ignored or only included as peripheral (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a; Pokhrel, 2011). Eurocentrism is deeply embedded in the structures of global governance, economic models, and the epistemologies of the humanities and social sciences, shaping both what is considered legitimate knowledge and who is recognised as a legitimate knower (EUI, n.d.; Merolla et al., 2021).

Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters (EMJM): Refer to international master’s programmes offered under the latest 2 iterations of Erasmus Mundus initiative: the EMJM Degrees (2014-2020) and the EMJM (2021-2027). These programmes are a key part of Erasmus+: the European Union’s programme for education, training, youth and sport, which was launched in 2014 under Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 (European Parliament & Council, 2013). EMJM are designed to promote student mobility, cross-country cooperation, and academic excellence in higher education across Europe and globally (European Commission, 2024a).

Global North (equated with the West) / Global South: Are common but contested cultural constructs commonly used in the academic literature to describe nations based on geopolitical and socio-economic factors (Andreotti, 2006; Zembylas, 2023). The deeply problematic and overly simplistic nature of these terms - which flattens rich, local differences and reinforce colonial hierarchies of “centre/developed” versus “periphery/underdeveloped” - is acknowledged (Andreotti, 2011; Zembylas, 2023). In this thesis, these binary terms are used critically, not to denote fixed geographical boundaries, but to refer to entrenched global disparities in power, resource distribution, and knowledge production (Andreotti, 2006). They serve to illuminate the historical and ongoing dynamics of epistemic and cultural dominance, subordination and dependency that shape contemporary global relations (Andreotti, 2006).

Higher education (HE): Refers to the system and level of education provided by universities and other types of higher education institutions that grant academic degrees, diplomas, or professional certifications (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-f). HE is also commonly referred to as postsecondary, tertiary or third-level education (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-f). It includes values, norms, structures, and practices related to teaching, learning, credentialing, and student support services (Altbach et al., 2009). It is concerned with providing advanced learning, developing critical and professional skills, and contributing to the public good through teaching, scholarship, and civic engagement (Altbach et al., 2009). HE focuses on administration, access, policy, curriculum, and pedagogy; whereas academia (defined above) focuses on research, publications, scholarly debates and theorisation.

Higher education institutions (HEIs): Public or private organisations, such as universities, colleges, polytechnics, institutes of technology, and vocational schools, that are authorised to provide HE and award qualifications (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-g). HEIs typically require the completion of secondary education for entry, with entrance age starting around 18 years old (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-g). These institutions play a crucial role in delivering academic programmes, conducting research, and advancing societal development (Altbach et al., 2009).

Intersectionality: An analytical and theoretical framework that explores how multiple and interrelated systems of oppression (e.g. racism, sexism, ableism, and coloniality) overlap and interact in shaping the lived experiences of (marginalised) individuals and communities (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-h). Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality challenges single-axis analyses by emphasising that intersecting social identities (e.g. age, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, religion) are mutually constitutive and cannot be examined in isolation. In decolonial research, it is crucial for analysing the complex legacies of colonialism beyond simplistic binaries, revealing how structural inequalities are interconnected across multiple axes of identity and power (Denscombe, 2024).

Knowledge co-creators: Is used in place of conventional terms like “research subjects” or “research participants” to refer to all individuals who contributed intellectually and/or emotionally to the development of this thesis. These include fellow SDSI classmates, faculty members, and programme founders who shared their insights, as well as neutral “critical friends”, and external experts who helped me interrogate and problematise taken-for-granted aspects of the research process. This is an intentional linguistic and ethical choice, aimed at disrupting mainstream academic terminology based on colonial norms of extraction,

detachment and control in research, and centring care, reciprocity, and shared authority (sahibzada, 2025).

Pedagogy / pedagogical practices: The structured set of methods, strategies, and relational approaches utilised by educators to facilitate teaching and learning, deliver curricula, and assess students. These include in-person and virtual lectures, workshops, discussions, exercises, group work, tasks, homework, assessments, and broader support structures surrounding the learning process. Pedagogy is more than teaching; it is a complex interplay of relationships, instructional strategies and social justice commitments (Friesen & Su, 2023; Gupta, 2021). It reflects specific institutional values, disciplinary norms, beliefs and theories about what teaching and learning are, how they should happen, and who holds authority in educational spaces (Friere, 2005; Friesen & Su, 2023; hooks, 1994). It also embodies certain politico-epistemological perspectives, which influence what type of teaching and learning methods are centred and legitimised, and how power operates in the classroom (Friere, 2005; Friesen & Su, 2023; hooks, 1994). Pedagogy is intimately connected to the delivery of the curriculum (see definition above). As such, it is a crucial dimension of the student learning experience and should be tailored and adapted to the needs and contexts of the student audience, aligning with service design logics that priorities co-creation and responsiveness (Caingcoy, 2023; Jukes et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Stickdorn et al., 2018).

Service design (SD): Is a transdisciplinary approach to creative problem-solving and a relatively new academic discipline focused on creating or improving services-products-systems to better meet people's needs (Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011; Miettinen & Valtonen, 2013; Penin, 2017; Polaine et al., 2013; Stickdorn et al., 2018). Emerging in the 1990s and first formalised as an academic discipline in Germany, it combines insights and tools from design, business, technology, and the social sciences (Mager, 2009). As both a practical approach and a field of study, SD draws on methods such as design thinking and participatory research, using visualisation, prototyping and iterative processes to tackle complex societal challenges (Stickdorn et al., 2018). While its definition continues to evolve - being conceived as a mindset, toolbox, interdisciplinary language, and management style - SD is widely understood as a holistic and collaborative way to innovating public, private, and nonprofit services, enhancing both user experiences and systems (Penin, 2017; Polaine et al., 2013; Stickdorn et al., 2018).

1. POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

1.1. Introduction

“Every contact leaves a trace” (Motz et al., 2019, p. 82, based on Locard, 1928)

Welcome, reader. I am glad you found your way to my thesis, and I am grateful for your time, curiosity, and engagement. This thesis explores the potential for decolonising service design (SD) education by examining the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master’s in Service Design Strategies and Innovations (SDSI), of which I am currently a student (SDSI, n.d.-a). As a participant-researcher, it is essential to clarify the complex relationship I hold with the setting under study. My position is deeply connected to my personal, socio-cultural, and academic identities - who I am, who I have been, and how I move through the world (Herr & Anderson, 2014; Pillow, 2010; Rowe, 2014). These identities shape how I engage with the topic of decolonising SD - a field deeply entangled with Eurocentric, market-driven, and technocratic norms (Tunstall, 2023).

I offer this positionality statement as a foundational entry point into this thesis to: (1) ethically and explicitly identify and reflect on how my own position influences all stages of this research project, (2) build rapport and support your assessment of my research’s authenticity and credibility, and (3) align with critical, feminist, and Indigenous scholars and practitioners who emphasise the value and importance of reflexivity in qualitative research. That said, I am aware that positionality statements are not free from critique and can reproduce colonial norms if treated as a mere performance (Gani & Khan, 2024). Hence, I hold this tension close and offer this statement as an ongoing practice of accountability throughout the research process rather than a static gesture or box-ticking exercise. In what follows, I highlight the importance of (self-)reflexivity and reflect critically on my intersecting identities, core beliefs, and background to make transparent the values, motivations, and tensions that shape my engagement with decolonising SD education.

1.2. (Self-)reflexivity as a method, practice and data point

I choose to begin this thesis with self-reflexivity, defined as “[c]ritical consciousness through a personal accounting of how the researcher’s self-location (e.g. across gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality), position and interests influence all stages of the research process” (Pillow, 2010, p. 273). This is typically operationalised in theses, dissertations and research papers through so-called “positionality statements” that situate the researcher in relation to what and whom they are studying (Holmes, 2020). This includes disclosing my

identities, core values, cultural worldviews and personal experiences, as well as reflecting on how these affects how this thesis was planned, conducted, and written (Fonow & Cook, 2005; Kleinsasser, 2000; Pillow, 2010).

This self-location is not just academic; it is also cultural and personal. In my upbringing, introducing oneself is considered polite and, as someone who tends to overshare by nature, it feels natural. It also aligns with my aspiration to infuse this academic project with transparency, humility, and humanity. More importantly, given the nature of the topic of this research, I follow the lead of critical, feminist, and Indigenous scholars who assert that positionality and reflexivity are foundational to any qualitative research endeavour (Harding, 1986; Rose, 1997; Holmes, 2020; Smith, 2012; Jackson et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Schön & Celi, 2023).

I support the view that knowledge (production) cannot be abstracted from the specific time, place, or people who produce it, and that trustworthy research must locate the researcher and clearly state where it is coming from (Bourke, 2014; Chereni, 2014; Stoor, 2020). Reflexivity and positionality, in fact, sit at the heart of this thesis. They function as both validity methods, qualitative praxis, and data points (Boveda & Annamma, 2023; Milner et al., 2024; Pillow, 2010). As validity methods, they ensure transparency in how knowledge is produced and interpreted, accounting for the influence of my social location, assumptions, and relationships with knowledge co-creators (Pillow, 2010). As praxis, they guide my ethical stance and interactions with knowledge co-creators (see definition in the Glossary, p. 15) in relational, caring and responsible ways (Jadallah, 2024). As data points, they feed into my autoethnography, offering critical insights and supporting triangulation (Milner et al., 2024). This layered approach strengthens the trustworthiness of my research findings and affirms the centrality of situated knowledge in qualitative inquiry (Chereni, 2014; Corlett & Mavin, 2018; Pillow, 2010).

Reflexivity and positionality are also connected to my research motivation (see section 2.3.), philosophical stance (see Sections 2.6. and 4.3.1), ethical considerations (see Sections 2.7 and 4.5), and methodological choices (see section 4.3.3). I recognise my role in constructing the research problem and questions, shaping interpretations, and choosing what to highlight or silence. My commitment to reflexivity extends beyond this positionality statement. I continually reflect about and strive to control my assumptions and biases when analysing and writing by adding critical reflections either in footnotes or the main body of the text.

Nevertheless, I acknowledge that reflexivity cannot eliminate bias, and I remain mindful of critiques that warn against turning positionality into a performance of privileged self-awareness (Gani & Khan, 2024). Thus, I do not treat this statement as a one-time declaration, but as an ongoing practice of ethical self-interrogation, accountability, and responsiveness to power dynamics emerging in knowledge production throughout the whole research process (Gani & Khan, 2024; Pillow, 2010). Simultaneously, I remain alert to the possibility that I may inadvertently reproduce the very colonial logics I seek to challenge - through the methods I use, the voices I amplify, or the frameworks I rely on (Tamimi et al., 2024).

1.3. Intersecting identities and privileges

I carry many intersecting identities but the fact that I identify as - and occupy the position of - a white, European, cisgender¹, able-bodied, middle-class woman in my early 30s - raised and socialised in a Christian-Catholic, heteronormative household in Central Italy - largely determines how I experience the world and how society interacts with me. These positionalities have afforded me safety, comfort, mobility, as well as access to goods, resources, services, platforms and opportunities within social, educational and institutional systems built on colonial-capitalist logics. This means that I cannot fully appreciate what it feels like to live under systemic racism, ableism, classism, homo-lesbo-transphobia, Islamophobia, or structural exclusion. I can, however, relate to (internalised) sexism, misogyny, and gender-based expectations and limitations imposed by patriarchal norms. My proximity to power has also allowed me the time, energy, and resources to listen, self-educate, (un)learn internalised biases, and take purposeful (yet often imperfect) action in solidarity.

I am conscious that my identities have afforded me the privilege of being an ally, and challenging harmful dominant narratives from a place of safety. Yet, I am willing to confront uncomfortable truths about my complicity in the systems perpetuating such narratives. I recognise that I critique systems in which I am deeply embedded into and that I have personally benefited from the colonialist-capitalist structures I now seek to question. While recognising my privileges is important, I strive not to centre my self-awareness, discomfort or guilt in my thesis, as doing so risks recentring whiteness and reproducing the very power dynamics I seek to critique (Gani & Khan, 2024). In particular, I am mindful that my desire to ignite conversations around decolonisation within the SDSI programme “risks compliance

¹ Gendered female by birth and social expression.

or maintenance of colonial, neo-colonial, and post-colonial monolithic global discursive asymmetry of power structure”, and that I am researching within the constraints of institutional frameworks that may limit transformative possibilities (Tamimi et al., 2024, p. 816). This tension between complicity and resistance is not one I can resolve neatly, but I remain committed to grappling with it through ongoing (self-)reflexivity.

1.4. Core beliefs and commitments

My orientation toward the topic of decolonising SD education is rooted in my long-standing commitment to socio-ecological justice. I often take part in and/or support movements, campaigns and projects led by Indigenous, Black, Brown, Queer, Disabled, Muslim, and Racialised peoples working toward equity, liberation, and planetary care. I cherish and honour the wisdom of Martin Luther King Junior and Maya Angelou and live by their words that “[i]njustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere (King, 1963, p. 78), and that “no one of us can be free until everybody is free” (CNN, 2013, min. 2:20). My commitment to justice has sharpened my critical view of societal institutions, including HEIs and the SDSI programme (SDSI, n.d.-a).

I am vegan and believe in the interdependence of life, including humans, non-human animals, and more-than-human kin - a principle that guides both my daily choices and my theory of change. I am a firm believer in the cumulative power of small, consistent actions at the individual level to inspire others, encourage connection, and accelerate positive change. As Margaret Mead (cited by Keys, 1982, p.79) reminds us “never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens change the world: indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has”. Similarly, adrienne maree brown (2017, p.51) writes, “how we are at the small scale is how we are at the large scale...what we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale”. This means that I strive to lead from where I stand, take small actions, and raise my voice to ensure fairness, respect, and freedom both within and outside classrooms, universities, and professional settings. I believe that “the personal is political” (Hanisch, 1970, p.76). Personal experiences and everyday choices are never neutral; they are always political. From what we consume and choose to design, to what we teach and how we teach it, our choices are influenced by and reinforce our location within complex systems of power and privilege (Johnson, 2001; Saunders, 1997).

1.5. Educational and professional trajectory before SDSI

I am a second-generation² student. Before enrolling in SDSI, I completed high school in Italy and pursued HE in the United Kingdom. As such, I have been situated within academic institutions constructed through European modernity and moulded by Eurocentric perspectives. I have experienced the world as a “white woman whose Western culture and epistemology is considered transcendent under which all others must be subordinated” (Manning, 2018, p. 13). I speak the lingua franca of academia (i.e. English) fluently, and my academic trajectory includes degrees in Criminology and Criminal Psychology (Bsc), and Violence, Conflict and Development (Msc). Hence, I have been constrained by Anglo-Eurocentric perspectives my whole life, and I am aware that using English as the sole language of this research plays a central role in the colonisation of the mind - introducing both epistemic access and epistemic limitations from a decolonial point of view (Hamel, 2007; Thiong'o, 1987).

Due to my studies at the intersection of psychology, law, economics and political science, I have long been drawn to questions about human behaviour, power, and justice - themes that run deep in this thesis. In particular, I witnessed and supported early student-led campaigns to decolonise the curriculum whilst studying in London between 2015-2016 (read more in Section 2.3). That experience sparked my critical questioning of whose knowledge, stories, and systems are centred and legitimised in HE and academic programmes.

Prior to joining SDSI, I worked in communications, advocacy, and events management in the non-profit sector. My professional background and engagement in lobbying further contributed to my tendency to be critical of socio-political institutions, as my job often required me to challenge and hold institutions accountable.

My academic and professional journey, grounded in my intersecting social identities, has also been marked by significant geographic mobility. I have lived in 7 countries and over 10 cities. The cultures, histories, and places I have inhabited have profoundly broadened my worldviews through cross-cultural interactions. These experiences, particularly on (formerly) colonised and Indigenous lands, have informed how I understand and engage with the topic of decolonisation. These factors undoubtedly influence how I navigate and perceive the SDSI programme (SDSI, n.d.-a).

² A “second-generation” student is one coming from a family where at least one parent or guardian has graduated from university with a bachelor's degree or above (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

To better understand my positionality and potential biases, I created a timeline (see Figure 1 below) inspired by Chang's approach (cited by Cooper & Lilyea, 2022) and Lucero's (2018) visualisation method. This timeline juxtaposes my life milestones - cities and countries where I have lived, educational achievements, professional occupations, and extracurricular activities - with significant global and local movements related to decoloniality and anti-racism.

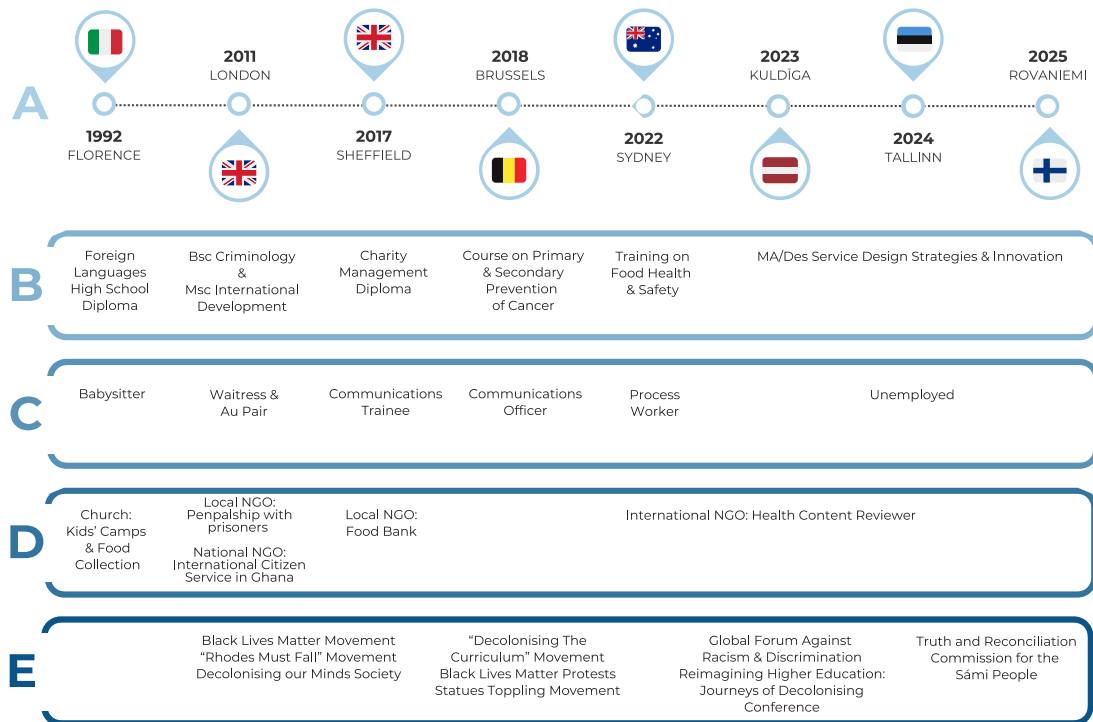


Figure 1. Timeline of the author's countries of residence (A), educational milestones (B), professional occupations (C), extracurricular and volunteer experiences (D) and major local events, movements and campaigns related to anti-coloniality (E).

Preparing the timeline in Figure 1 helped me understand that this research is inevitably influenced by who I am, and that who I am is the sum of the different people, places and experiences I have had so far. I believe that, as per Locard's exchange principle in forensics, "every contact leaves a trace" (Motz et al., 2019, p. 82, based on Locard, 1928). All the interactions, connections, and relationships forged along the way with people, places, animals and more-than-human kin leave a "residue" or emotional imprint within us, no matter how small. This residue changes us and helps us evolve. That has certainly been true in my experience.

1.6. Situating myself within SDSI

At present, I am a student in the EMJM programme SDSI (SDSI, n.d.-a), and this thesis represents both a personal and academic inquiry into a master's programme I am embedded in. Within SDSI, I occupy multiple positions: postgraduate student and researcher, participant and observer, peer and tutee. I am researching a system I am a part of, alongside others who are part of it - what Herr and Anderson (2014, p.40) call an "insider in collaboration with other insiders". This dual role allows for rich, first-hand insights into the programme's structures but also brings risks of bias, over-identification, blurred boundaries, and relational dynamics that may affect any stage of the research process. I elaborate on my stance about objectivity and neutrality in Chapter 4. I acknowledge that interactions with "other insiders" (i.e. classmates, faculty, staff) are inevitably layered with pre-existing relationships, shared experiences of comfort and conflict, and power dynamics, all of which may influence how they contribute to and engage in my research - potentially resulting in greater openness and/or withheld criticism. This dynamic is addressed in my ethical considerations (see Sections 2.7 and 4.5) and forms part of an ongoing ethical negotiation in the field. I also understand that my research operates within institutional structures that may limit or co-opt truly transformative possibilities.

At the same time, I feel like an outsider. I am relatively new to (service) design, design thinking, and design research. Although I have studied SD for the past 18 months, I do not (yet) identify as a service designer. Nor do I identify as a researcher, academic, or full community member within the contexts of Latvia, Estonia, or Finland - the 3 countries where SDSI takes place. I have lived only briefly in these places and remain unfamiliar with many of the local academic, institutional, and cultural norms. While I have studied at several universities, I have never conducted formal, primary research or worked within a university or art academy setting before. As such, I claim an outsider position vis-à-vis the (service) design, academic and cultural communities in Latvia, Estonia, and Finland. This outsider position offers a certain degree of distance, clarity, and perspective - enabling me to approach SDSI with a critical lens and interrogating how its epistemic and pedagogical practices challenge or reproduce colonial logics. Ultimately, my experience of being both an insider, (within the SDSI community) and an outsider (in relation to the SD and academic communities in Latvia, Estonia and Finland) provides a dual vantage - both distant and proximate - placing me in a strong position to conduct research on decolonising SD education.

1.7. Research as a decolonial act

My commitment to decolonisation is rooted in a recognition of the structural inequalities embedded within HE systems rather than a personal quest for redemption or academic legitimacy. I operate from the worldview that society is fundamentally conflictual and oppressive, and that our contemporary world cannot be understood outside the history and enduring legacies of colonialism and imperial rule (Elam, 2019; Lather, 1991; Pearce, 2008). Within this context, I strive to actively disrupt the colonial logics underpinning academic research and education by decentring myself as the “knower” and continuously questioning how I conduct research and engage with the knowledge, voices, and experiences of others (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024c).

Although I elaborate on my research philosophy and design in Chapter 4, I feel compelled to introduce here my current perspective on research that guides my entire thesis. I share Pause+Effect’s view that research is a collective practice of shared learning and responsible inquiry to be undertaken in collaboration with my classmates, faculty members and others involved in SDSI. A researcher, then, is anyone who gathers knowledge, interprets it, and makes decisions based on that information - responsibly and relationally (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024c).

I acknowledge that conventional, academic research is a Eurocentric paradigm, practice, profession, and institution based on Western values and philosophies (Smith, 2012). Historically, research has been weaponised as a tool of control and epistemic violence, often objectifying, marginalising, ignoring, silencing and/or misinterpreting the most vulnerable communities (Blair, 2015; Smith, 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017). These misrepresentations have been presented as objective truths, shaping academic discourse, institutional programmes, and policy in ways that fail to serve (and often actively harm) the communities being studied as passive objects (Blair, 2015). As such, I reject the notion that rationality, neutrality, objectivity, and impersonality are universal research virtues. Instead, I embrace subjectivity, relationality, and reflexivity as ethical and political commitments that guide how I co-produce knowledge (Haraway, 1988; Bordieu, 1990; Carr, 2000; Fonow & Cook, 2005). I also strive to infuse my research process with care, respect, and relational responsibility, in contrast to traditional extractive, transactional, and rushed academic practices.

Finally, I situate myself in the present moment, both temporally and geographically. I am at the beginning of my own self-decolonisation journey and have had many sources of

inspiration and teachers. I am learning from the inspiring work and struggles of both foundational and emerging voices in decolonial thought, as well as grassroots organisations like the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures collective (GTDF, n.d), the Decolonising Design Collective (Decolonising Design, 2017), and Pause+Effect (n.d.-a), among others. This thesis is the result of where I stand today; it is a temporal snapshot of reflections, interactions and learning accumulated over the past year. I highlight this because my views, methods, design practice, and positionality will continue to emerge, evolve and change with time, just as I will. I share this research not as a claim to definitive knowledge and analysis, but rather as a situated contribution to an ongoing, collective dialogue about what it might mean to truly decolonise SD education.

1.8. Summary

This positionality statement outlined how my intersecting identities, as a white, European, cisgender, able-bodied, middle-class woman, inform my worldview, access, and engagement with decolonial work. It reflected on the multiple positionalities and privileges I hold, my commitments to social justice, the tensions between complicity and resistance, and my dual insider-outsider role within the SDSI programme (SDSI, n.d.-a). It also articulated my general view on the practice and institution of academic research, and highlighted the cultural, academic, and professional experiences that continue to shape how I approach knowledge, research, and design practice.

I invite you to use this section as a lens through which to filter and interpret the rest of this thesis. You may wish to return to this positionality statement whenever you encounter reflections, narratives, or analytical choices that require deeper contextual understanding. The next chapter builds on this positionality statement by introducing the research problem, outlining the motivation for this study, and defining its scope and context.

2. INTRODUCTION

“The world is characterized by inequalities because the lifeworld is systematically colonized” (Crouch & Pearce, 2012, p.60)

2.1. Overview

This chapter lays the foundation for the thesis by outlining the broader socio-political and academic context surrounding global calls to decolonise, with a particular focus on HE and SD. It begins by examining the historical and ongoing legacies of European colonialism and the emergence of decolonisation as both a theoretical framework and practical imperative. The chapter then explores the motivations and scope of this research, detailing how the SDSI programme serves as an instrumental case for investigating the potential for intellectual decolonisation in curriculum and pedagogy. It further outlines the research aim, objectives, and questions, followed by a summary of the philosophical underpinnings and methodological choices guiding the study. Finally, it discusses ethical considerations and expected contributions at macro, meso, and micro levels, situating this research within wider conversations on educational equity, institutional change, and the future of SD education.

2.2. Background and research problem

Over the past two decades, debates about European colonial legacies have intensified alongside global calls to “decolonise” social institutions and public spaces across both the so-called Global North and Global South³ (Andersen, 2018; Bhambra et al., 2018; Le Grange, 2023; Smith, 2012). Decolonisation means different things to different people, encompassing a wide range of ideas and practices across contexts and time (Khandwala, 2020; Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a). However, the common thread is the recognition that the effects and legacies of colonialism on the lands, minds, bodies, and cultures of both the colonised and colonisers have been profoundly harmful and long-lasting (Andersen, 2018; Khandwala 2020; Ndlovu, 2018).

Decolonisation is not limited to the historical events and processes that led to the independence of former colonies. It also represents a daily practice of acknowledging, confronting and transforming the socio-cultural and epistemic legacies of colonialism in our

³ Although I use the terms “Global South” and “Global North” (equated with “the West”) in this thesis - because they are widely recognised and commonly used in academic discourse - I recognise their deeply problematic and overly simplistic nature, as well as the discomfort associated with their colonial baggage. For a more detailed explanation, see the Glossary on page 14.

daily lives, relationships, structures, and institutions (sahibzada, 2024; Thurston, 2022). This includes recognising “coloniality”, which refers to the ongoing legacy of colonisation manifested in the insidious values and systems of domination that continue to mould our socio-politico-economic and knowledge systems despite the formal end of colonial regimes (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Sims & Naidu, 2024). Coloniality manifests through the active and continued erasure of Indigenous, minority and alternative knowledge systems and the imposition of colonial values, attitudes, patterns of power, ways of relating and knowledge production (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a; Quijano, 2000; Smith, 2012). A more detailed definition of coloniality is in the Glossary on page 11.

Although colonisation has taken many forms throughout history, this thesis focuses on European colonisation and its connection to the development of capitalism. European colonisation refers to the historical processes by which several European countries invaded, exerted control over, and/or settled in large parts of the world, roughly between the 15th and 20th century⁴ (Blakemore, 2024; Stuchtey, 2011). European colonists, arriving in all continents, sought territorial, socio-political and cultural domination, exploiting Indigenous peoples and lands through ideologies of racial superiority legitimised by so-called scientific research (Aldrich, 1996; Engerman & Sokoloff, 2012; Perraton, 1967; Smith, 2012). These ideologies discredited Indigenous sciences, relational knowledge, and land-based wisdom, replacing them with hierarchical, white supremacist structures (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2012). Today, neo-colonial structures continue to oppress Indigenous, Black, Brown, Queer and other marginalised communities⁵, influencing not only our conceptual frameworks and research practices but also the way we design and develop solutions (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a; Tunstall, 2023).

The ideas behind contemporary, global calls to decolonise are not new. They have deep roots in liberation struggles and grassroots social movements outside Europe, particularly those led by Indigenous, Black, and formerly colonised peoples on the margins of hegemonic power structures (Gopal, 2021; Maldonado-Torres, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; Ramnath, 2011; Tunstall, 2023). Thanks to the persistent efforts of (marginalised) activists, theorists

⁴ While formal colonisation has ended - with Namibia often cited as the last country to gain independence from colonial rule in 1990 - (neo-)colonial relationships persist in many territories (Grosfoguel, 2002; Enslin & Hedge, 2024). Notably, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom still govern, fully or partially, 25 overseas territories (European Commission, 2020), raising questions of sovereignty, self-determination and decolonisation.

⁵ I acknowledge that Indigenous, Black, Brown, and Queer are not homogeneous socio-cultural constructs. They represent diverse groups of people who may self-identify with shared ethnic or gender/sexual identities, and who have been systematically discriminated against by dominant societal structures.

and cultural workers from all walks of life - including but not limited to Angela Davies, Audre Lorde, B. R. Ambedkar, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Mahatma Gandhi, Marcus Garvey, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Syed Hussein Alatas, Una Marson and Walter Rodney⁶ - these ideas found their way into mainstream academic discourse, public debate, and media in Europe (Andersen, 2018; Gopal, 2021). This resurgence has catalysed a growing interest in intersectionality (see definition in the Glossary on page 15), decolonisation and coloniality, fuelling movements that address systemic racism, ecological collapse, gender-based violence, and economic injustice under neoliberal capitalism (Bhambra et al., 2018; Denscombe, 2024; Le Grange, 2023).

From *Black Lives Matter* (BLMGNF, n.d.), which challenges police brutality and racial injustice, to *Rhodes Must Fall* (RMF) (RMFO, n.d.; Shepherd, 2022), which critiques colonial legacies in education; and from *#MeToo* (Me Too, 2025) and *Ni Una Menos* (n.d.), denouncing gender-based violence and the heteropatriarchy, to *#FridaysForFuture* (FFF, n.d.) and *Extinction Rebellion* (n.d.), calling out the lack of ambition by national governments and the European Union (EU) on climate action - decolonisation has emerged not as an abstract ideal but as a socio-political imperative and intersectional tool to challenge and transform the dominant practices that shape our social realities (Bhambra et al., 2018; Dube, 2021).

In many ways, “decolonisation has become a placeholder for critical responses to a range of issues characterising the present condition of the planet and people” (Le Grange, 2023, p. 9). While this expansion has brought decolonial thinking to the forefront of public and academic discourse, it has also diluted its radical epistemic and political dimensions - particularly its roots in Indigenous sovereignty and histories of land dispossession (McDonnell & Regenvanu, 2022; Tuck & Young, 2012). In their seminal article, Tuck and Young (2012) caution against conflating decolonisation with other progressive, social justice causes (e.g. anti-racism), or diversity and inclusion initiatives. Nevertheless, the mainstreaming of decolonial discourse across various spheres of life has helped widen recognition that injustice and inequity are inherently intersectional - shaped not only by

⁶ This short list is not geographically, ethnically or gender balanced. It only includes historical and recent figures whose work I have read or encountered, and who played prominent roles in the intellectual and socio-political foundations of decolonisation. I recognise that (wealthy) male thinkers and leaders are often centred as the canon of decolonial thought, reflecting patriarchal and colonial biases in how knowledge is recorded and disseminated. I also acknowledge the rich legacy of under-recognised women, queer, and gender-diverse activists, scholars and revolutionaries who have been, and continue to be, central to decolonial struggles, including those I am yet to discover and learn about.

colonial logics but also by interlocking systems such as sexism, ableism, classism, ethnocentrism, and religious discrimination (Denscombe, 2024).

In this new wave of decolonial discourse, especially since the RMF campaign, HEIs have increasingly come under scrutiny (Bhambra et al., 2018; Le Grange, 2023). RMF started in spring 2015 at the University of Cape Town (South Africa) as a student-led campaign, supported by some academic and administrative staff (Chikane, 2024). Students defaced and demanded the removal of a prominent statue of British imperialist and colonist Cecil John Rhodes, which was placed at the heart of the upper campus (Chikane, 2024). Protesters saw the university as a microcosm of society, and the statue as more than just a monument or glorification of one controversial figure; it was a symbol of the deep-rooted racism and colonial legacy embedded in education and public spaces (Daniel & Platzky Miller, 2022; Walker, 2024). The protests and occupation of university premises, which ultimately led to the statue's removal, thus served as a powerful metaphor for broader dissatisfaction with racism, sexism, and epistemic injustice - expressed in demands to decolonise the university campus (Badat, 2016; Chikane, 2024).

RMF quickly scaled to the national level, with similar protests replicated in many South African universities, sparking a march to the presidential offices and attempted occupation of the parliament (Mpofu, 2017). As the campaign evolved, it gained international attention, using the statue debate to expose persistent colonial legacies within HEIs, academic disciplines, and research (Chigudu, 2020; Murriss, 2016; Walker, 2024). As a result, a global movement was sparked with similar campaigns mushrooming in a variety of contexts across the world, especially in the UK, Canada, and the USA (Balachandran, 2021; Walker, 2024). These localised iterations, which continue to resonate to this day, are heterogeneous but broadly call for “intellectual decolonisation”: the dismantling of colonial structures and values within HEIs, disciplines, and research practices (Moosavi, 2020; Woldegiorgis, 2021). These calls are based on the premise that coloniality still determines what is taught, researched, published, and cited, and heavily affects the lived experiences of student, faculty, and staff (Bhambra et al., 2018; Mbembe, 2016). Since their inception, in fact, pre-modern and modern HEIs have been key sites of contestation through which Western knowledge is “produced, consecrated, institutionalised and naturalised” (Bhambra et al., 2018, p. 5). Intellectual decolonisation is therefore essential to confronting the deep-rooted exclusion of minority perspectives in academia (see definition in the Glossary on page 11) and HE (see definition on page 15), which not only harms marginalised communities but also prevents

HEIs and society at large “from realising the potential that only the acceptance and inclusion of diversity can facilitate” (Moosavi, 2020, p.332).

In the Global South, intellectual decolonisation is not merely academic; it is directly connected to political discourse aimed at addressing historical injustices (Enslin & Hedge, 2024; Osman & Maringe, 2019). In the Global North, meanwhile, its rise has been driven in part by digitalisation and HEI’s internationalisation strategies, which have led to a growing diversification of student, faculty and staff populations within universities. Consequently, a growing number of European HEIs now recognise the need to dismantle colonial legacies embedded in their buildings and campuses (Enslin & Hedge, 2024; Mbembe, 2016), institutional cultures and policies (Enslin & Hedge, 2024; Tunstall, 2023), curricula (Abu Moghli & Kadiwal, 2021; Le Grange, 2016), pedagogies (Edwards & Shahjahan, 2021; Shahjahan et al., 2022), and research practices (Seppälä et al., 2021; Smith, 2012). This recent surge of interest does not imply that these conversations are new; they simply have more visibility and traction now than they did prior to 2015 and the RMF movement (Moosavi, 2020).

“Neither should one presume that the new enthusiasm for intellectual decolonisation in some circles means that [it] has been universally endorsed within Northern academia given that Northern universities remain sites of racism, orientalism and white privilege, and given that there are significant numbers of Northern academics who resent, and...resist intellectual decolonisation” (Moosavi, 2020, p. 333).

Although university administrators in the Global North increasingly acknowledge the need for intellectual decolonisation, their efforts tend to be superficial at best and, at worst, may even reinforce coloniality (Moosavi, 2020; Woldegiorgis, 2021). These efforts are frequently motivated by a desire to satisfy students viewed as consumers within the current market-driven educational model (Brennan et al. 2018; Hall, 2017; Toderiou, 2021). Neoliberal reforms have, in fact, shifted HE from being a public good to a (private) service, where student satisfaction becomes central (Ng & Forbes, 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2006). This marketisation has transformed universities into service providers focused on co-creating value with students (Ng & Forbes, 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2006). While this shift has positively amplified the voices of students and faculty, it has also introduced complex trade-offs between educational integrity and consumer satisfaction (Hall, 2017; Ng & Forbes, 2009).

Although efforts to decolonise curricula and pedagogies in HEIs have gained traction - particularly in the Global South and in countries with direct colonial histories - relatively little is known about the emotional experiences, meanings, and understandings of students and faculty regarding decolonisation (Millner, 2023; Sathorar & Geduld, 2019; Zembylas, 2023). Given the continued momentum of global decolonisation movements and the growing importance of students-consumers in neoliberal universities, a deeper understanding of how decolonisation is perceived, interpreted, and emotionally experienced by students and faculty members is urgently needed (Bhambra et al., 2018; Ng & Forbes, 2009; Zembylas, 2023).

When it comes to curricula and pedagogies, universities continue to research and teach academic disciplines that are deeply shaped by colonial logics. The concept of the “coloniality of knowledge” points to the Eurocentric foundations of modern knowledge systems, highlighting how colonialism created an artificial hierarchy that positioned Western knowledge as superior and universal, while erasing, silencing, and/or marginalising Indigenous, minority, and alternative knowledge systems (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2011, Smith, 2012). This legacy has structured knowledge production and validation across most, if not all, social sciences and humanities - resulting in epistemic injustice and reinforcing the need for decolonial approaches to critically assess and transform inherited frameworks, tools, and theories (Balachandran, 2021; Hazarika, 2019; Merolla et al., 2021).

Design, like other social sciences and humanities, is not immune to the coloniality of knowledge. Design has always existed (Manzini, 2015). Yet, its professionalisation and institutionalisation in Western nations imposed narrow, Eurocentric narratives on its history and practice (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a; Midal, 2019). Design became complicit in processes of industrialisation and capitalist extractivism, reinforcing both material and epistemic inequalities (Akama et al., 2025; Fry, 2020; Tlostanova, 2017). Given design’s considerable power in shaping societies, institutions, and environments - and the responsibility that designers carry - it is imperative to interrogate the discipline’s inherent coloniality as part of broader decolonial efforts (Escobar, 2018; Noel et al., 2023). However, design and its various sub-disciplines continue to prioritise Anglo-Eurocentric perspectives and market-driven innovation (Abdulla et al., 2019). In particular, SD (see definition in the Glossary on page 16) remains under-engaged with decolonial critique and efforts (Akama et al., 2025; van Amstel, 2024).

In short, the past is still present. Our contemporary society, moulded by European colonisation and dominance, remains structured and sustained by harmful colonial logics (Quijano 2000; Mignolo, 2011; Meherally and sahibzada, 2024a). Despite the formal end of colonial regimes, subtle (and sometimes overt) systems of oppression and dependency persist through the mechanisms of “coloniality”, which increasingly manifest in cultural and epistemic domination (Quijano, 2000; Grosfoguel, 2007; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). This means that Western/Eurocentric worldviews, values, and knowledge systems - including those embedded in design and education - continue to be normalised and imposed, “limiting what counts as authoritative knowledge, whose knowledge is recognised, what universities teach and how they teach it” (SOAS, 2018, para 2.). HEIs, “as privileged space[s] of knowledge production and dissemination”, and design, as a set of practices and disciplines that shape everything in the world that is not natural, “[are] key site[s] where the legacy of historical colonial social constructions, imaginaries, practices, hierarchies and violence” is reproduced (Bhabra et al., 2018; SOAS, 2018, para. 2). Despite this, there is limited research investigating the decolonisation of (service) design education in European HEIs (Akama et al., 2025). In particular, existing scholarship tends to overlook the perceptual and affective dimensions of decolonisation (Zembylas, 2023). Therefore, this thesis seeks to address this under-explored yet important research gap.

2.3. Research motivation

My motivation to undertake this research project on decolonising SD education stems from three main sources: (1) the ongoing global calls from civil society to decolonise institutions, (2) the observations and experiences of my fellow SDSI classmates, and (3) my own personal, lived experience in the SDSI programme, as outlined in the positionality statement in Chapter 1.

Decolonising education and HEIs has been on my mind since 2015, when RMF started and gained global traction. At the time, I was a postgraduate student at the School of African and Asian Studies (SOAS) in London, United Kingdom. I vividly remember the protests and students’ demands to diversify and critically examine the heavily Western-centric curriculum, as well as to end the outsourcing of cleaning staff and to decarbonise the university’s premises (Howard, 2015; Ismail, 2017; Malik, 2017).

During the protests, I realised how much I had taken for granted the way I learnt, what I learnt and how I was taught what I learnt. Students leading the protests noted that this taken-

for-grantedness warranted reflection, as research has shown that schools and HEIs often reinforce specific socio-economic structures and social hierarchies through both formal and hidden curricula, perpetuating inequalities and institutional resistance to change (Apple & King, 1977; Chatrakul Na Ayudhya et al., 2023; Margolis & Romero, 1998; Martin, 1982; Portelli, 1993). They also highlighted that education is intertwined with social justice, citing article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “[e]ducation shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (UN, 1948, p.76). It was then that I fully grasped that there can be no equity and social justice if what we learn, and how we learn, is grounded solely in worldviews and knowledge systems that benefit the Global North, often to the detriment of other parts of the world (Denscombe, 2024; Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a; Smith, 2012). The imperative to critically question mainstream ways of learning, teaching, and researching has stayed with me ever since.

Fast forward to 2023: I joined the SDSI programme with a full scholarship and limited prior knowledge of (service) design, drawn by its promise as a creative, interdisciplinary discipline rooted in empathy and capable of driving positive societal change. As a scholarship holder benefiting personally, academically and professionally from SDSI, I am eager to give back to the programme by dedicating my thesis to its improvement and evolution. Early in the first semester of my first year, I began reflecting on two key observations: (1) the stark contrast between the diversity of the student body and the lack of diversity among faculty and staff, and (2) the absence of representation of people of colour and women in the curriculum. These concerns, echoed by several classmates, surfaced alongside broader issues - such as the lack of robust support structures for a highly diverse student body, particularly regarding visa processes and well-being. Through these personal and shared experiences, I began to question the Eurocentric intellectualism and limited inclusivity embedded in the curriculum and pedagogy of SD studies. This raised the suspicion that (1) such gaps may be structurally embedded within the design and delivery of SD master’s programmes like SDSI, and (2) that decolonisation - as both a powerful concept and a practical lens for unpacking how knowledge is produced and whose knowledge is valued - might offer a pathway to reimagining more just, reflective, and inclusive (service) design education. Further details about my initial observations can be found in Section 4.3.6.1.

Inspired by Garvey (as cited by Fraser, 2023) and Fanon's (1967) call that there can be no decolonisation without individual liberation from mental slavery, I started a personal journey to decolonise my mind and practice as an aspiring service designer, whilst observing, reflecting on, and analysing SDSI. In my first year, I actively spoke out against inequality in classrooms, student projects, and extracurricular activities. In the second year, I dedicated all my academic work and extracurricular engagements to the topic of (de)coloniality in (service) design. I also completed a five-week learning experience, *Reimagining Research*, offered by Pause+Effect (n.d.-b), which seeks to disrupt dominant, colonial, and extractive research paradigms and interrogate the role of coloniality in knowledge production. This thesis is part of that personal and scholarly commitment. At this point, it feels as though I am wearing a pair of sunglasses tinted with decolonial lenses, allowing me to see things I was once oblivious to. Now that I see them, I cannot unsee them, nor can I take these glasses off.

Throughout this journey, I have wrestled with and moved through layers of personal reflection, (un)learnings, fear, guilt, and the profound sense of responsibility that decolonial work demands. I am inspired by Papanek's call to action that "[it] is the job of the students together with their faculty to change the university; and, once changed, to preserve the university as an instrument of change for society at large" (as cited by Munch et al., 2022). These words mirror my belief that HEIs and their academic programmes should be spaces of transformation, not only of knowledge but also of power and possibility.

As a white, European, cisgender, able-bodied, middle-class student, I have chosen to engage in decolonial efforts not to speak on behalf of others, but in solidarity with the students most affected by systemic/colonial oppression. I follow the guidance of Indigenous and racialised scholars who argue that the proactive participation of white allies in decolonial efforts is crucial (Arday et al., 2021; Bhabra et al., 2018). Too often, in fact, the intellectual and emotional labour of decolonial transformation falls disproportionately on those already burdened by systemic oppression (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021). From a decolonial perspective, it is neither ethical nor sustainable to expect over-taxed, marginalised individuals to simultaneously resist hegemonic systems and educate others on how to dismantle them (Bhabra et al., 2018; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021). Decolonisation must be a collective and shared project, pursued across multiple levels and aligned with wider social justice agendas - involving everyone who inhabits educational spaces (Tuck & Fine, 2007). It requires all of us, especially those who benefit from systems of privilege, to

(un)learn, to listen, and to act (Bhambra et al., 2018; Van Houweling, 2021). At the same time, I remain critically aware that the notion of “white allyship” is not without its tensions and debates, with scholars warning of the risk of recentring whiteness in efforts to dismantle its dominance (Smith, 2012; Timmis et al., 2024; Tuck & Young, 2012). I approach this role with humility, recognising its contested nature and the responsibility it entails. My commitment is to contribute with care, to remain teachable, and to hold myself accountable as I walk this path.

2.4. Research scope and context

This thesis explores the potential for decolonising SD education through the case study of the EMJM programme in SDSI (SDSI, n.d.-a). My intersecting identities and lived experience as a student within the programme shape the framing and focus of this research, as discussed in the positionality statement in Chapter 1. Both decolonisation and SD education are complex and multi-dimensional phenomena, and SDSI is a microcosm of these complexities. Therefore, this research narrows its scope to a specific dimension of decolonisation and a particular academic programme.

Although decolonisation efforts take many intertwined forms and span different dimensions (e.g. territorial, material, intellectual, structural) (Enslin & Hedge, 2024; Zembylas, 2023), this research focuses specifically on intellectual decolonisation. More precisely, it examines perspectives on curriculum and pedagogical practices within the broader dimensions of intellectual and affective decolonisation, especially during the first year of the SDSI programme. This focus is intentional. Given the breadth of the decolonial discourse and the structure of SDSI, curriculum and pedagogy are the most feasible and contextually relevant aspects to investigate within the time constraints of a master’s thesis.

SD education, situated within the broader context of HE, is itself a layered and complex ecosystem composed of interconnected administrative (e.g. governance bodies, student services, libraries and IT services) and academic (e.g. faculties, programmes, courses, modules) components. This thesis narrows its focus to the level of a master’s degree programme, using SDSI to engage with and understanding broader dynamics of (de)coloniality in SD education. Similarly, although SDSI encompasses multiple actors (e.g. funders, administrators, faculty, students, administrative and support staff), this research centres on the perspectives of students, faculty, and programme founders. As the primary

service users of SDSI, students' voices are prioritised and centred in data collection and analysis.

SDSI offers a unique research context for examining decoloniality in HE due to its distinctive institutional and cultural positioning. Launched in 2021 and co-funded by the European Commission since 2023, SDSI is a two-year, interdisciplinary programme delivered by institutions in Latvia (i.e. Art Academy of Latvia), Estonia (i.e. Estonian Academy of Arts), and Finland (i.e. University of Lapland) (European Commission, 2022). As such, the geographical scope of this thesis is bound to a Northern European and Baltic academic and cultural context, and institutionally anchored in a relatively young, international master programme. The organisational structure of SDSI aligns with other Erasmus Mundus programmes: (1) it is open to students from all ages, backgrounds and corners of the world, (2) takes place in multiple countries, and (3) offers scholarships to the best performing applicants (European Commission, 2024a). Further details about SDSI are provided in the case study presentation in Section 5.2.

Although globally marketed to students and professionals of all nationalities and backgrounds, SDSI remains institutionally and pedagogically embedded in a Northern and Baltic European setting, with a predominantly homogenous faculty (SDSI, n.d.-b) and Western-centric curriculum (SDSI, n.d.-c). A starting point for this research is the fairly evident observation that SDSI students coming from all walks of life, bring with them diverse values, worldviews, and approaches to learning and teaching. This diversity contrasts with the homogeneity of the academic and institutional cultures in which the programme is embedded. While not unique to SDSI, these factors make the programme a rich site for examining what decolonisation might mean in practice for SD education, and what possibilities and tensions arise in the pursuit of programme improvement.

At this point, it is important to clarify that this research is not an audit or evaluation of the SDSI programme. In parallel with this thesis, a formal, EU-mandated evaluation was conducted in spring 2025 by independent consultants and submitted to the SDSI leadership and the European Commission. While I engaged with the independent evaluators and acknowledge some overlaps in the areas of curriculum and pedagogy, this thesis represents a distinct, student-led, relational inquiry grounded in decolonial and affect theory. SDSI was also selected as the research setting for pragmatic reasons related to access, time, and relevance. As a final-year student, I possess in-depth knowledge of SDSI's people, processes, and culture, along with direct access to resources and stakeholders. More detail

about the case study strategy and the rationale for selecting SDSI is provided in Section 4.3.4.2.

The findings of this research are temporally, geographically, and contextually bound, capturing a snapshot of the SDSI programme during a specific phase of organisational growth and pedagogical experimentation (2023-2025). As an evolving programme shaped by its institutional environments, SDSI may continue to change. Rather than being a limitation, this situatedness aligns with decolonial principles, which emphasise grounding inquiry in specific local histories, epistemologies, and power structures while resisting universalising approaches (Bhambra et al., 2018; Le Grange, 2016; Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a). This perspective also resonates with the ethos of SD, which prioritises deep contextual immersion to address the needs of specific communities in meaningful and tailored ways (IDF, n.d.; Stickdorn et al., 2018).

While mainstream academic research often prioritises generalisability and replicability, this thesis takes a critical stance toward those values, as outlined in the positionality statement in Chapter 1. As further elaborated in Chapter 4, in fact, this research does not seek universal claims but instead offers particularised insights that may support incremental changes within SDSI (SDSI, n.d.-a). Nevertheless, due to the structural similarities between SDSI and other Erasmus Mundus programmes, my findings may resonate with, inspire, or be of interest to coordinators, administrators, faculty, and students of similar design-related international master's programmes. They may also be relevant to coordinators and administrators of English-taught, design-focused international master's programmes within SDSI's partner institutions, such as the Sustainable Art and Design programme at the University of Lapland (ULAP), and the Interaction Design and Graphic Design programmes at the Estonian Academy of Arts (EKA) (ULAP, n.d.-a; EKA, n.d.-a; EKA, n.d.-b).

2.5. Research aim, objectives and research questions

Building on the research problem, motivation, scope, and context outlined above, this section presents the aim, purpose, objectives, core question, and sub-questions of this research project.

The overarching aim of this research is to critically examine and intervene in the SDSI programme by exploring the potential for decolonising its curriculum and pedagogical practices through participatory engagement and evidence-based interventions. Specifically, the research aims to uncover what should change within SDSI to transform its curriculum

and pedagogical practices into a more inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive experience for all students, faculty, and staff.

The purpose of this research is both exploratory and emancipatory. It seeks to investigate underexplored phenomena within SDSI, discover categories of meaning, and generate hypotheses for further research (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). At the same time, it aspires to encourage reflection, engagement, and meaningful change within the programme.

To pursue the research's aim and purpose, 3 key objectives were developed.

Objectives:

1. To explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and reflections of SDSI students, faculty, and programme founders regarding the curriculum and pedagogy.
2. To define and contextualise what “decolonising service design” means within the broader landscape of higher education and the specific context of SDSI.
3. To propose a set of actionable interventions that support the decolonisation and improvement of SDSI's curriculum and pedagogy.

These objectives, together with the interpretivist and critical realist worldviews described in the next section, informed the continuous formulation and re-framing of the main research question and the accompanying sub-questions below.

Main research question:

How do SDSI students, faculty, and programme founders perceive the idea of decolonising the programme's curriculum and pedagogical practices?

This core question seeks to examine SDSI stakeholders' overall perceptions of the potential for decolonisation to improve the programme. After reviewing the literature and given the multifaceted nature of “perception” - which encompasses a variety of aspects including feelings, understandings and discursive framings (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-i) - the following sub-questions were developed to explore this complexity in greater detail.

Sub-questions:

1. Emotional responses: What feelings or emotional responses arise when knowledge co-creators engage with the idea of decolonisation in service design and SDSI?
2. Meanings and understandings: How do knowledge co-creators understand or define the concept of decolonisation in the context of service design education and SDSI?

3. Narratives and framings: What dominant narratives or framings emerge in how knowledge co-creators discuss decolonisation (e.g. as critique, opportunity, threat, trend)?
4. Recommendations for change: What changes do knowledge co-creators propose to make the SDSI curriculum and pedagogical practices more inclusive, critical, or decolonial?

2.6. Summary of philosophical stance and research design

To answer the main research question and sub-questions above - and in alignment with my positionality, core beliefs, and views on research - this study adopts a hybrid interpretivist and critical realist philosophy, guided by feminist, postmodern, and decolonial perspectives. This orientation assumes that reality is neither singular nor value-free, but is constructed through socio-cultural, institutional, and historical contexts (Denzin, 1994; Crouch & Pearce, 2012; Lather, 1991; Creswell, 2013). Knowledge, therefore, is never neutral; it is relational, situated, and embedded within power structures (Crouch & Pearce, 2012; Lather, 1991; Creswell, 2013).

Interpretivism stresses meaning-making, subjective experience, and reflexivity (Denzin 1994; Pillow, 2010). It supports the use of qualitative methods to explore how SDSI's key stakeholders (i.e. students, faculty, and founders) understand and emotionally relate to the idea of decolonising the curriculum and pedagogy. Under this paradigm, research is co-constructed through relational dialogue and lived experience (Creswell, 2013; Crouch & Pearce, 2012). This aligns closely with the ethos of SD, which emphasises the inclusion of diverse perspectives and deep contextual immersion to understand peoples' goals, needs, wants, and problems, as well as the external constraints and opportunities that affect them (Penin, 2017; Polaine et al., 2013). It aims to address specific challenges of specific groups, such as the SDSI community, in tailored, nuanced and meaningful ways (IDF, n.d.; Stickdorn et al., 2018).

Critical realism adds a complementary layer by focusing on the material and systemic inequalities that influence the lived experiences of students, faculty members, and programme founders (Crouch & Pearce, 2012). It assumes that systemic forces, such as colonial legacies, institutional ideologies, and socio-economic hierarchies, profoundly shape educational environments (Creswell, 2013; Crouch & Pearce, 2012). Under this view, research must not only interpret the world but also challenge injustice, support action, and

lead to transformative change (Creswell, 2013). This resonates with SD's mantra of "doing, not talking" and its commitment to practice-based innovation (Hormeß & Lawrence, 2019; Stickdorn et al., 2018).

While this study adopts a critical stance that challenges orthodoxy, it also recognises that critique without practical relevance offers limited value to those involved in designing curricula and planning pedagogy. By integrating interpretivism and critical realism, this study captures both the personal and the political, situating individual perceptions of decolonisation within broader institutional and colonial structures. This dual lens is especially important in decolonial inquiry, where meaning and power are tightly interwoven (Chen & Lin, 2023; Morreira et al., 2020; Pillay et al., 2024).

Following the selected philosophical paradigms and the research onion framework (Saunders et al. 2019, p.130) - and drawing on similar empirical studies on decolonisation in HE by Chinyamurindi (2023), Takhar (2023) and Tamimi et al. (2024) - this study adopts a multi-method qualitative approach grounded in an action research case study strategy. This methodological and strategic combination is considered best suited for capturing the complex, nuanced, contextual, and emotional understandings of decolonisation among SDSI stakeholders. This approach is further informed by a "research into design" orientation (Frayling, 1993; Crouch & Pearce, 2012), allowing for a critical, decolonial, and interdisciplinary examination of SD education. Guided by action research principles and critical realism, this research embraces care, collaboration, and co-production of knowledge and action (Fine & Torre, 2021). In particular, a single, instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995) positions SDSI as the bounded system through which broader questions about decolonising SD education are explored.

Concerning data sources and collection methods, both secondary and primary data was gathered from multiple sources to ensure triangulation, strengthen construct validity, and embrace the multiplicity of perspectives brought by knowledge co-creators. Data collection was shaped by the researcher's dual role as both participant and observer, and was conducted using methods that prioritised reflexivity, flexibility, relationality and trauma-informed sensitivity. Sources and collection data methods included: (1) reflective field notes and autoethnographic writing, (2) participatory feedback sessions and classroom observations, (3) SDSI programme documents, curricular material, and institutional communications, (4) workshop and hybrid focus groups/workshops with students, (5) semi-structured interviews

with faculty members and programme founders, and (6) desk research and review of policy, academic, and grey literature.

Concerning data analysis, different techniques were applied in line with the nature of each data type. Abductive reasoning guided the synthesis of workshop and focus groups data, enabling intuitive and relational analysis of meaning. Meanwhile, an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse semi-structured interview and autoethnography, allowing for emergent coding and theme development directly from the dataset.

In keeping with the interpretivist and critical realist paradigms, subjectivity is not viewed as a threat to validity but as a productive lens through which insights can emerge (Denzin, 1994; Pillow, 2010). Subjectivity is explicitly accounted for through continuous (self-)reflexivity, an articulated positionality (see Chapter 1), and ethical engagement throughout the research process (see sections 2.7 and 4.5).

Regarding generalisability and replicability, this research does not seek statistical generalisation. Instead, following Mills et al. (2010) and Yin (2003), it aims to (1) identify patterns and themes that can be compared with existing literature to support the transferability of the research findings, and (2) enable particularised, context-sensitive, and ethically grounded change within SDSI (Mills et al., 2010; Yin, 2003). Further information regarding the trustworthiness of this study is provided in Section 4.6.

2.7. Summary of ethical considerations

Qualitative research is inherently ethically complex (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Williams, 2010). It delves into lived experiences, often touching on vulnerable, sensitive, and emotionally charged issues (Clark & Sharf, 2007). Decolonisation is deeply tied to histories of harm, exclusion, and epistemic injustice, which may evoke strong emotions (sahibzada, 2024). As Williams (2010) explains, research is not just conducted about or with people, but for people - making it a relational and morally charged endeavour. While this study did not require formal ethical review (as confirmed by my supervisors), ethics remained a central consideration due to the nature of this thesis's topic and my relational proximity to many participants, most of whom are friends, classmates, or lecturers.

In line with my positionality and the context of Finland, this thesis adheres to the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA, 2023), the EU General Data Protection Regulation (European Parliament & Council, 2016), the Finnish Code of Conduct for

Research Integrity (TENK, 2023), and the University of Lapland's policies (ULAP, n.d.-b). To strengthen my ethical awareness, I proactively enrolled in the national doctoral-level course *Research Ethics* (TUKO1246-3017), which informed my ethical stance and decision-making throughout the research process.

As detailed in Chapter 1, and to uphold ALLEA (2023)'s fundamental principles of research integrity (i.e. reliability, honesty, respect, and accountability), this research places self-reflexivity and participatory collaboration at its heart. I acknowledge the ethical challenges that arise from my dual role as a participant-researcher, and I remain critically reflective of power dynamics, insider-outsider tensions, and relational ethics involved in engaging with peers and educators.

This study upholds 4 international ethical principles: autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice (Beauchamp, & Childress, 2019). Regarding autonomy, all knowledge co-creators were adults over 18 years of age who were invited to participate based on informed consent. To mitigate harm and balance benefits and risks, I incorporated trauma-informed approaches, offered participants choice and flexibility in how and when to participate, and avoided any deceptive practices (Fathallah, 2024). To uphold the principle of justice, I actively sought diverse voices, with a particular attention to amplifying the voices of students from underrepresented backgrounds. Finally, the use of a small number of artificial intelligence tools is acknowledged. Chat GTP by Open AI (2025) was used for proofreading purposes, and Transkriptor was used to automatically transcribe interviews verbatim. More details on my ethical approach are provided in Section 4.5. My full ethical considerations and safeguards plan is available in Appendix 1.

2.8. Expected contribution of the thesis

Amidst global calls to decolonise social institutions, research into decolonising HE in general and SD education in particular, has never been more urgent. This is especially true in the context of today's "knowledge-based service economy" (CEDEFOP, 2011; OECD, 1996, OECD 2020) and so-called "post-truth" society (McIntyre, 2018). Today's world is marked by widening inequalities, ecological collapse, epistemic crises, institutional distrust, the proliferation of misinformation, and a growing dissatisfaction with conventional forms of academic knowledge production (Fleming, 2013; McIntyre, 2018; Seppälä et al., 2021). In this context, we can no longer ignore the persistent and harmful influence of colonial values and power structures within HE and beyond (Bhambra et al., 2018).

Power and responsibility, in fact, increasingly lie with those who produce, store, and disseminate knowledge (Innerarity, 2013), and with those who design the product-service-systems and futures that shape and impact our lives (Atak & Şık, 2019; Fry, 2018; Manzini, 2015; Papanek, 1971). Notably, as services account for over 70% of the EU's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), SD (education) is gaining recognition as a key contributor to the service economy and a potential driver in addressing today's polycrises toward a more sustainable future (Eurostat, 2021; European Commission, n.d.-a; Fleming, 2013; Valde-Amland, 2024).

At the macro level, this thesis contributes to the growing body of literature on decolonisation in HE and the underexplored intersection of (de)coloniality and SD education. It advances critical inquiry into how curricula, pedagogy, and institutional culture sustain or challenge colonial epistemologies and educational inequalities. Broadly, this research aligns with Goal 4 of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aims to ensure quality, inclusive and equitable education with an emphasis on global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity (UN, n.d.-a). By critically interrogating dominant knowledge systems and advocating for more inclusive, contextually grounded curricula, pedagogies and institutional practices, this research also relates to Goal 16 of the UN SDGs. The latter aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions (UN, n.d.-b). Specifically, this thesis supports Targets 16.6 and 16.7, which call for transparent, inclusive, and participatory institutional development (UN, n.d.-c).

At the meso level, this research is situated within the specific context of SDSI, a young, rapidly expanding international master's programme. Since receiving Erasmus+ funding and full Erasmus Mundus status in 2023, SDSI has seen significant growth and student body diversification. This thesis responds to that diversification by capturing and amplifying students' qualitative perspectives on curriculum and pedagogy - perspectives that are currently not fully accounted for in the programme's institutional evaluation mechanisms, which rely primarily on standardised and mostly quantitative surveys. This research seeks to support continuous programme improvement, enriching internal monitoring and evaluation processes, and informing strategies to enhance student experience and inclusion. In addition, given that SDSI must demonstrate its value and impact to the European Commission to maintain accreditation and funding beyond 2028, this thesis offers insight into how students, faculty, and founders can work more collaboratively to co-create value and ensure the

programme's long-term relevance. Furthermore, as SDSI functions as an organisational entity, this thesis also contributes to the field of organisational studies, particularly in managing pedagogical diversity and intercultural complexity in international academic programmes.

At the micro level, this thesis adopts a reflexive and decolonial stance toward the research process itself. It contributes to the field of "research into design" (Frayling, 1993; Crouch & Pearce, 2012) by exploring how research can be conducted through a critical and decolonial lens, challenging extractive and Eurocentric knowledge practices and promoting collaborative, relational, and transformative modes of inquiry. In doing so, this study seeks to broaden design scholars' and practitioners' understandings of what decoloniality can mean within both academic research and design practice.

2.9. Thesis structure

This thesis is organised into 6 substantive chapters, each building upon the previous to develop a coherent and critical exploration of decolonial approaches within service design education, with a specific focus on the SDSI programme. The structure has been intentionally designed to reflect a journey that is both introspective and analytical, weaving together personal positionality, theoretical grounding, methodological rigour, empirical findings, and critical reflection.

Chapter 1: Positionality statement - This chapter establishes my reflexive stance and outlines the intersecting identities, experiences, and epistemological commitments that shape this research. It frames research as a decolonial act, situating it within the broader SDSI context and emphasising the significance of (self-)reflexivity as both a methodological and ethical imperative.

Chapter 2: Introduction - This chapter introduces the research by outlining the background, problem statement, motivation, scope, and context. It presents the research aim, objectives, and questions, along with the philosophical positioning and ethical considerations that underpin the study. It concludes with a summary of the thesis structure.

Chapter 3: Literature review - Building on the Introduction, this chapter critically engages with relevant theoretical and conceptual frameworks, with a focus on decolonial theory and affect theory. It explores the historical context of European universities, critiques the commodification of knowledge, and reviews current

debates on decolonising (service) design education. The literature review sets the foundation for understanding the systemic dynamics the research seeks to address.

Chapter 4: Research design - This chapter details the research strategy and methodology, structured using the research onion framework. It discusses the philosophical underpinnings, methodological approach, data collection and analysis methods, and the ethical stance adopted from a decolonial perspective. The chapter also reflects on the trustworthiness and integrity of the research process.

Chapter 5: Results and findings - This chapter presents the empirical findings based on a multi-perspective case study of the SDSI programme. The data are organised around different knowledge co-creator groups (i.e. founders, faculty, students, and experts) and structured thematically across emotional responses, understandings and meanings, narratives and framings, and recommendations. The chapter provides a rich, layered account of SDSI stakeholders' perceptions and lived experiences.

Chapter 6: Discussion and conclusions - The final chapter revisits the main research question in light of the findings, connects the results to the existing literature, and reflects on practical implications for the SDSI programme. It introduces a framework for moving towards a pluriversal SDSI and outlines 4 phases of transformation. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and closing reflections on the research journey.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

“[M]odernity is a European narrative that hides its darker side, ‘coloniality’. Coloniality, in other words, is constitutive of modernity - there is no modernity without coloniality”
(Mignolo, 2011, p.39)

3.1. Overview

This chapter presents the key outcomes of a scoping and relational literature review (see Section 4.3.6.2.3) that explores the intersections of decolonisation, SD, and HE. The review is guided by 2 primary aims: first, to identify a significant research gap, and second, to develop a relevant and suitable theoretical framework for this study. This chapter draws on a wide body of literature that informs epistemological and pedagogical discourses on decolonisation, with particular emphasis on the intellectual and affective dimensions of coloniality. In doing so, it gives a partial answer to the research sub-question concerning the meanings and understandings of decolonisation (see Section 2.5) by critically analysing foundational concepts such as coloniality, decolonisation, and decoloniality. Through this conceptual groundwork, the chapter identifies a research gap in the theorisation and practical application of decolonising SD education in Global North universities. It also establishes a theoretical framework rooted in decolonial and affect theory, which informs both the research design, and the methodological choices discussed in Chapter 4.

3.2. Theoretical framework: Decolonial and affect theory

As described in the Introduction (see section 2.2), calls to decolonise societal institutions, including universities and the education they provide, are gaining momentum globally. These calls urge both students and educators to rethink Eurocentric curricula, pedagogies and institutional power dynamics (Bhambra et al., 2018). Before delving into the research gap regarding the decolonisation of SD education, it is essential to present the theoretical framework of this thesis and to conceptualise decolonisation.

3.1.1. Conceptualising decolonisation

Decolonisation is a contested, resisted, blurred, and polysemic concept, movement, and project, which holds various meanings across contexts and historical periods (Mehereally & sahibzada 2024a; Tunstall, 2023). The term has been used in multiple ways - initially to refer to and interpret the historico-political process that marked the gradual and formal end of European colonial regimes (Blakemore, 2024; Sims & Naidu, 2024), in contrast to colonisation / colonialism (see definition in the Glossary, p. 11). Increasingly, however, the

term is used interchangeably with “decoloniality”, referring to the analytical and practical acts and processes aimed at proactively identifying, challenging, resisting, and dismantling the legacies of colonialism in all its forms and across all spheres of social life (Khandwala, 2020; Sims & Naidu, 2024).

Mainstream discourses on decolonisation, in both the Global North and Global South, typically recognise two preconditions: (1) a lived experience of colonisation, and (2) an ongoing coloniality of power (see Figure 2 below) (Woldegiorgis, 2021). As outlined in Chapter 2, lived experiences of colonisation have formed the basis of campaigns, movements, and politico-academic discourses such as RMF, which have naturally focused on recognising and debating how colonisation has negatively affected HE systems and institutions in the Global South (Ndlovu-Ghatseni, 2013).

Another key conceptual foundation of decolonisation stems from Latin American subaltern and postcolonial scholarship (Woldegiorgis, 2021). These bodies of work argue that colonial structures of power - which created artificial and often binary hierarchies of race, gender, knowledge, and nature - have deeply shaped, and continue to influence, the modern world (Grosfoguel 2007; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Quijano 2000). The matrix of coloniality (see Figure 2 below) reveals the “hidden side of modernity” and of our colonial-capitalist world systems, describing the core interrelating dimensions of coloniality (see definition in the Glossary, p.11) and how they manifest across our social structures, relationships, epistemologies, and relationships to the natural world (Quijano, 2007; Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2009, p. 132).

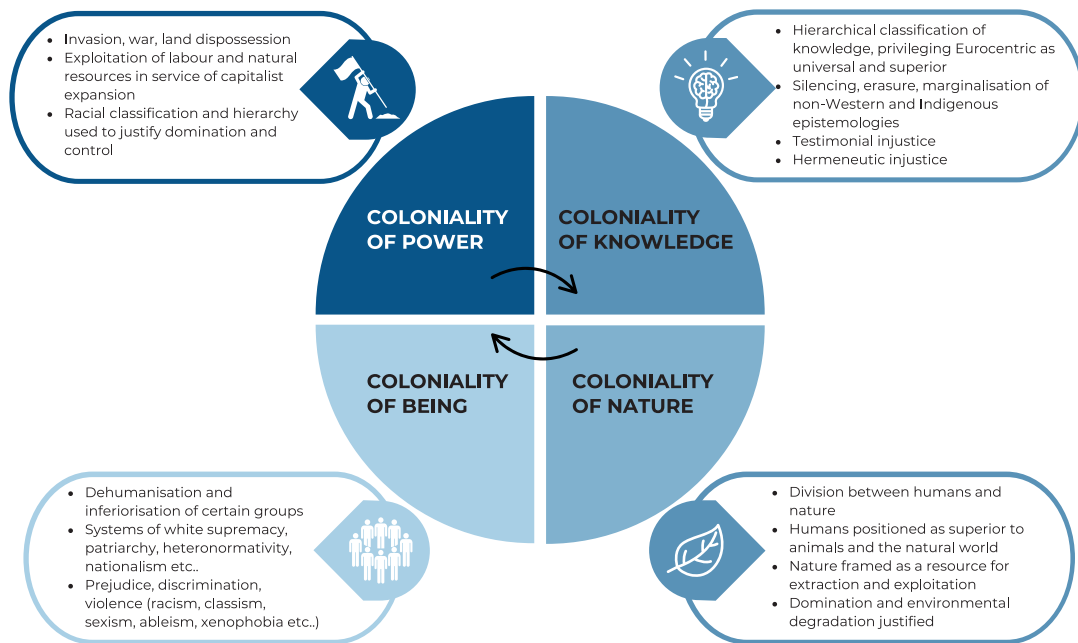


Figure 2. The matrix of coloniality

Note: Adapted from Amariles-González et al, (2021) and Sims & Naidu (2024)

This dominant discourse tends to frame decolonisation/decoloniality as a linear, goal-oriented set of acts beginning with European invasion and culminating in the pursuit of a just and inclusive future for all (Woldegiorgis, 2021). In the case of RMF, as presented in Chapter 1, student activists advocated for broadening access, improving representation, and integrating historically marginalised Black voices and non-Western epistemologies into South African universities - through redesigning campuses, reducing tuition fees, hiring local lecturers, introducing Indigenous languages, and related efforts (Mbembe, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). This discourse positions decolonisation as a social justice project aimed at addressing epistemic injustice (see Glossary, p.13) by reclaiming and revitalising diverse and threatened worldviews, traditions, and cultural heritage within society and its institutions (Woldegiorgis, 2021).

Although this framing of decolonisation is needed and valid, it implicitly assumes the presence of previously colonised territories, peoples, and systems that require liberation (Le Grange, 2023; Tuck & Young, 2012). As such, this narrow view inadvertently limits the scope and applicability of decolonisation/decoloniality to contexts with direct colonial histories, overlooking global knowledge hierarchies that necessitate broader interrogation (Woldegiorgis, 2021). In this thesis, I align with Khandwala (2020) and Woldegiorgis (2021) in advocating for an expanded conception of decolonisation - one that extends beyond

identity recovery, Indigenous sovereignty, and Indigenous revitalisation, to also include wider critiques of Eurocentrism (see Glossary, p. 14), modernity, and their intertwinement with coloniality.

As illustrated in Figure 3 below, this expanded understanding views our entire lifeworld as shaped by drivers of colonial origin. The historical forces, power dynamics, and socio-economic trends that have shaped society as we know it - as well as given rise to today's polycrises (e.g. systemic racism, climate collapse and widening social inequalities) - can all be traced to enduring structures of white supremacy and colonialism (Crouch & Pearce, 2012; Birney, 2021).

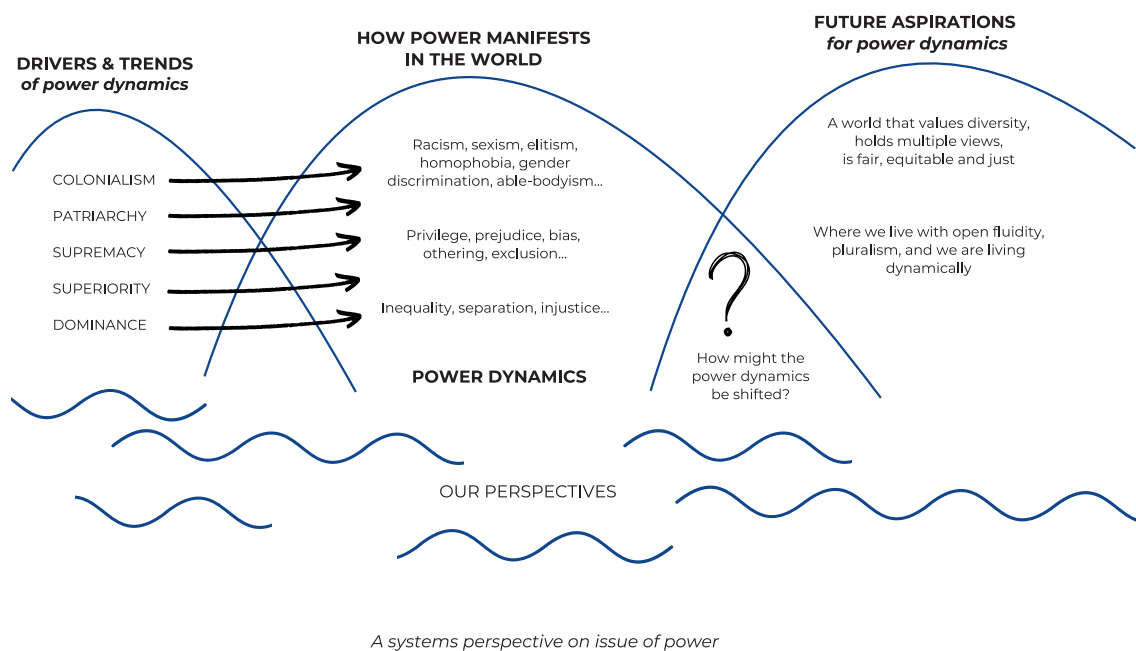


Figure 3. The colonised lifeworld
 Note: Adapted from Birney (2021)

This broader framing extends the concept of decolonisation beyond material and territorial inequities to address intellectual hierarchies and epistemic oppression. It introduces the notion of “intellectual decolonisation” - the imperative to enact a fundamental epistemological shift that challenges and redefines what counts as knowledge, what/how knowledge is produced, validated, and taught, and who is authorised to produce, teach and legitimise it (Enslin & Hedge, 2024; Moosavi, 2020; Zembylas, 2022). Thus, intellectual decolonisation is relevant not only for formerly colonised peoples or contexts, but also for communities, institutions, and countries in the Global North - many of whom were colonists themselves (Woldegiorgis, 2021).

3.1.2. Intellectual decolonisation

Decolonial theory introduces the concept of coloniality as a matrix of power (see Figure 2 above) that sustains Western hegemony in knowledge production (Grosfoguel, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2004; Quijano, 2000). In the context of HE, intellectual decolonisation calls for the deconstruction of Eurocentric epistemic canons that have actively - and often violently - marginalised, silenced and suppressed non-Western ways of knowing, teaching, researching, and learning (Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2012). It also calls for “liberating institutions from the hegemonic Western ideologies, philosophies, and thought” that permeate their curricula and pedagogies (Woldegiorgis, 2021, p. 897).

While the decolonisation of curricula and pedagogical practices has been a prominent agenda in the Global South, it remains nascent in many contexts across the Global North (Balachandran, 2021; Bhabra et al., 2018; Gopal, 2021; Le Grange, 2023). In countries such as South Africa, debates around the decolonisation of HE have gained urgency, spurred by student movements and postcolonial realities (Walker, 2024). These movements have challenged faculty to revisit both the content and methods of their teaching (Badat, 2016; Chikane, 2024; Mbembe, 2016; Walker, 2024). Although no consensus has emerged on a single definition of these efforts, a clear mandate surfaced: to critique and problematise Eurocentric knowledge and embrace a “multiplicity of epistemologies” or pluriversality (Escobar, 2018). In such contexts, academic programmes at all levels have begun expanding their curricula beyond Western canons by integrating, for example, a discipline’s relations to colonialism, race, and gender into their history modules (Bhabra et al., 2018).

Conversely, in the Global North - outside a few pockets in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States - the decolonisation of curricula and pedagogies remains underexplored (Abdulla et al., 2019; Bhabra et al., 2018; Tamimi et al., 2023; Walker, 2024). However, many Western universities are slowly beginning to acknowledge these issues (Gopal, 2021; Lau & Mendes, 2024). Mainstream design discourse remains dominated by Western-centric ontologies, epistemologies, and practices, with minimal inclusion of perspectives from non-Western contexts (Abdulla et al., 2019). Similarly, design pedagogy has not adequately addressed the deep-seated power dynamics stemming from colonial-capitalist modernity (Abdulla et al., 2019). As a result, HE in the Global North largely reproduces Eurocentric knowledge, and efforts to decolonise remain fragmented and uneven - highlighting an important research gap.

Decolonial theorists argue that to truly decolonise, one must go beyond critique of colonial narratives and actively engage in building radically just and pluriversal futures (Noel et al., 2023; Stein et al., 2021). Escobar's (2018) concept of the "pluriverse" is central to decolonial theory. Escobar (2018) envisions a world in which multiple ways of being, doing, and knowing co-exist, as opposed to a singular, dominant, Eurocentric worldview rooted in colonial-capitalist modernity (Escobar, 2018). Within design education, embracing pluriversality could entail the creation of spaces for multiple design ontologies by, for instance, shifting from human-centricity to planet-centricity, or from technology-driven to land-based practices (Noel et al., 2023; Stein et al., 2021).

Decolonial theory also emphasises the persistence of power dynamics and epistemic imbalances in classrooms and knowledge production, urging faculty members, educators, and facilitators not only to question what is taught, but also how it is taught, by whom and under what terms (Harms Smith, 2019; Tejada & Espinoza, 2003). Decolonial thought advocates for co-creation with marginalised and vulnerable communities by, for instance, relinquishing academic authority and enabling community members, immigrants or Indigenous leaders to co-teach and shape HEIs (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a; Tejada & Espinoza, 2003).

Complementing this, critical pedagogy, rooted in the work of Paulo Freire (2005) and bell hooks (1994), offers a powerful framework for decolonising SD education. It centres on liberation, dialogue, and the dismantling of oppressive systems. Rejecting the traditional "banking model" of education, critical pedagogy promotes co-created, experiential learning that values students' lived experiences (Freire, 2005; hooks, 1994). Its key principles - dialogue, co-creation, and critical reflection - support the redesign of curricula in partnership with students, encouraging horizontal learning structures and flattening traditional hierarchies (Freire, 2005). This approach encourages critical consciousness, empowering learners to identify and analyse colonial legacies, power structures, and systemic injustices in design, and to develop inclusive and socially just practices (hooks, 1994). Finally, critical pedagogy cultivates "critical hope", a belief in the possibility of meaningful change through informed action, motivating students and educators to engage in the transformative work of decolonisation with agency and purpose (Freire, 2005).

Furthermore, two key insights emerge from decolonial scholarship. First, decolonisation/ decoloniality is not merely a theory but a praxis: it is not sufficient to analyse colonial legacies without also actively re-centring historically marginalised voices, knowledges, and

traditions (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a; Mignolo, 2011). Second, decolonisation is not simply symbolic or additive (e.g. acknowledging Eurocentrism, or adding a few non-Western texts into reading lists), but must be systemic and transformational, demanding a fundamental rethinking of the assumptions and the very foundations of knowledge production and academic disciplines (Meherally and sahibzada, 2024a).

3.1.3. Affective decolonisation

Another important research gap in the literature concerns the paucity of studies on the perceptions and emotional responses of students, faculty members, and university staff towards decolonisation. It has been argued that intellectual decolonisation, including the decolonisation of curricula and pedagogical practices, is not only a structural or epistemic process but also a deeply emotional and affective one (Kruger & Zembylas, 2024; Millner, 2023; Sathorar & Geduld, 2019; Zembylas, 2023). It requires vulnerability and a willingness to sit with discomfort, as well as to engage with uncertainty and conflict (Millner, 2023; Zembylas, 2022).

Affect theory investigates how emotions and the unconscious intersect with the socio-cultural and political dimensions of subjectivity (Zembylas, 2021). In education-oriented research, this framework has illuminated how feelings are entangled with power, history, and politics across policy, curriculum, and pedagogy (Kruger & Zembylas, 2024). When applied to decolonisation, affect theory underscores the importance of addressing the emotional and sensory dimensions of coloniality - dimensions that shape how students, educators, and staff feel, interact, and respond within educational spaces (Sathorar & Geduld, 2019; Zembylas, 2023). As Zembylas (2023) contends, genuine epistemological change must attend to the affective attachments individuals hold toward existing knowledge systems, including feelings of loss, resistance, belonging, or hope.

Yet, to date, few studies have systematically explored the emotional dimensions of decolonisation in HE (Kruger & Zembylas, 2024). Existing literature has largely focused on structural reforms or curricular revisions, often neglecting the emotional labour and identity tensions that accompany curricular and pedagogical experiences (Kruger & Zembylas, 2024). Affective decolonisation recognises this lacuna and stresses the importance of understanding and transforming the “affective atmospheres” (i.e. emotional-somatic responses) that sustain colonial values and ideologies, and that marginalise non-Western identities and epistemologies (Zembylas, 2023). Addressing these affective dimensions helps create educational spaces that promote critical self-awareness, relational

accountability, and inclusive engagement, while resisting the reproduction of colonial emotional norms (Millner, 2023).

This process involves dismantling the emotional structures of colonialism and cultivating new, postcolonial emotional frameworks rooted in affirmation, relationality, and ethical responsibility (Kruger & Zembylas, 2024). Researchers have identified a range of emotional reactions to decolonisation, including resistance, defensiveness, fatigue, and uncertainty among students and faculty when confronted with colonially biased curricula or pedagogies (Choat et al., 2023; Edwards & Shahjahan, 2021; Fomunyan, 2023; Hlatshwayo & Alexander, 2021; Zinga & Styres, 2018). By contrast, students and staff from marginalised backgrounds often report feelings of alienation when their histories are ignored, and greater validation and belonging when their experiences are reflected in the curriculum (Choat et al., 2023; Tamimi et al., 2023; Zinga & Styres, 2018). These insights suggest that many universities fail to fully account for the emotional labour, identity conflicts, and transformative potential that decolonial work entails. Affective decolonisation emphasises the need to engage both intellectually and emotionally, recognising that the process of decolonising education involves not only what is taught but also how it feels to learn, teach, and belong.

3.1.4. Relevance of decolonial and affective theory

Having conceptualised decolonisation, it becomes evident that decolonial theory and affective theory serve as relevant and complementary theoretical frameworks for this research, which focuses on both my personal journey of decolonising the mind and the SD education provided by the SDSI programme. In fact, as various scholars assert, coloniality operates not only structurally and institutionally, but also at the individual level, having been internalised by most of us regardless of our personal or national histories (Agrawal & Buchanan, 2025; Blauner, 1969). As Fanon (1967) powerfully reminds us, decolonisation cannot occur without individual liberation from mental and psychological forms of colonial oppression.

Acknowledging my positionality as a white, European, cisgender, middle-class student who benefits from, and is a complicit in the colonial and social systems I inhabit, I feel ethically compelled to interrogate the educational and (service) design structures in which I am embedded. Audre Lorde's (1983, p. 98) assertion that "[t]he master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" is particularly resonant here. The "master's house" functions as a potent metaphor for the (neo)colonial systems of power and domination that continue

to structure our institutions, including HEIs, under the guise of neutrality, meritocracy and progress (Bhambra et al., 2018). These systems are sustained not solely through policy and hierarchy, but through the banal, everyday practices of individuals who, often unconsciously, reproduce coloniality and maintain the status quo in their thinking, teaching, and research (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a; sahibzada, 2024). To challenge this, we must reject the false promise of reform through existing frameworks. We cannot dismantle colonial and neoliberal logics embedded in academia, HEIs, or SD programmes using the same Eurocentric theories and methods that have historically legitimised exclusion, extraction, and erasure. Decoloniality, then, is not simply a conceptual lens: it is a radical refusal, a political stance, and an epistemic intervention that underpins the purpose, design, and praxis of this research.

During my preparatory data collection (see more details in Section 4.3.6.1), and in line with findings by Gopal (2021) and Omodan (2012), I observed that SDSI students - whether inspired by wider social justice and human rights movements or drawing from their own lived experiences - demonstrated a desire to challenge perceived injustices in classrooms and to hold faculty members accountable. These insights affirm the relevance of decoloniality not only at the individual level but also as an emergent, collective imperative within the SDSI student community.

Moreover, I argue that decoloniality is equally relevant at the programmatic and institutional levels. The SDSI programme is jointly delivered by 3 HEIs based in Estonia, Finland and Latvia, namely EKA, LMA and ULAP. Although these institutions are relatively young and lack direct historical ties to colonial regimes⁷, they nonetheless operate within globalised, market-driven HE systems that (1) reproduce material and epistemic inequalities and (2) promote design education frameworks shaped by Western-centric, capitalist logics. As Stein et al. (2021) and Woldegiorgis (2021) argue, overcoming the reductive paradigms of colonial modernity, requires all universities and academic programmes - regardless of their colonial

⁷ I acknowledge the complex histories of colonisation experienced by Estonia and Latvia under Soviet rule, and the ways in which institutions such as EKA and LMA were compelled to adapt to the ideological and structural pressures of that period. I also recognise Finland's dual position within colonial relations: both as a territory historically colonised by Sweden and Russia, and as an active participant in internal settler colonialism, particularly in the north, where the Indigenous Sámi peoples reside. Finnish (and earlier Swedish) expansion into Sápmi (i.e. the ancestral territory of the Sámi) has involved systematic land dispossession, cultural assimilation, and the marginalisation of Sámi political and epistemic sovereignty. This colonial relationship is not a relic of the past; it persists today through state control over Sámi territories and resources, often exercised without free, prior, and informed consent. While ULAP supports Sámi research and rights in certain domains - and is located just outside Sápmi - it nonetheless operates within Finnish legal, institutional, and epistemic frameworks that fail to fully recognise Sámi self-determination or land sovereignty.

past or lack thereof - to confront their complicity in the global inequality systems they inhabit.

To date, despite the diversity of its student body, the SDSI programme exhibits a noticeable absence of explicit conversations around decolonisation, representation, diversity, inclusion, or related topics in its formal curriculum, pedagogy, or institutional discourse. I advance that this silence not only limits the programme's potential to encourage critical global citizenship and reflexive, inclusive (service) design practices but also fails to reflect the lived realities and aspirations of many of its students.

In addition to their theoretical relevance, the integration of decolonial theory and affective theory provides a critical lens for the methodological and interpretive dimensions of this research. Decolonial theory informs the interrogation of structural power relations and epistemic hierarchies within SDSI, while affect theory centres the emotional, sensory, and often unspoken dimensions of educational experience. This dual framework guides both the analysis of curricular content and institutional structures, as well as the interpretation of students' and faculty members' affective responses that emerge in discussions (or silences) around decolonisation. Together, these theories support a nuanced understanding of how systemic and emotional dimensions of coloniality are reproduced, and potentially disrupted, through SD education.

As Woldegiorgis (2021, p. 895) aptly reminds us, “[d]iscussions on the decolonisation of higher education beg a clear understanding of the historical trajectory of the sector itself”. Hence, in the next section, I trace a brief, reductionist history of the modern European university system⁸ to contextualise the structural legacy in which the SDSI programme is situated.

3.3. Brief (reductionist) history of modern European universities

In most countries, modern universities and art academies, rooted in Enlightenment and humanist ideals, evolved from the medieval European model (Brennan et al., 2018). European universities have long positioned themselves as custodians of the public good: spaces for critical inquiry and the collective advancement of knowledge through research,

⁸ I recognise that there is no singular, linear or universal history of the emergence and evolution of modern universities in Europe. Each national context has been shaped by different historical trajectories, socio-political conditions, and epistemic traditions. This section does not attempt to offer a comprehensive or definitive account of the diverse and complex histories of HEIs across the continent. Instead, it serves as a necessary contextual framing for this thesis, recognising both the partiality of any historical narrative and the importance of recognising the colonial entanglements that have shaped European universities as institutions.

teaching and civic engagement (Brennan et al., 2018). Within this idealist vision, knowledge was to be guided by scholarly curiosity and reciprocity, while education and research were valued for their intrinsic contributions to societal progress and civic participation (Brennan et al., 2018). Yet, this egalitarian ideal rarely materialised in practice. Early HEIs were deeply exclusionary - typically accessible only to white, wealthy men - and closely aligned with bourgeois, religious, and imperial-colonial interests (Di Simone, 1996; Nardi, 1991; Ringer, 2004). Universities in the Global North amassed authority and power in large part due to:

“...the flow of resources and profits from colony to metropole...[which allowed them to] accumulate archives, specimens, objects and information afforded to them...by the power of colonial knowledge-gathering - ethnologising, museumising, mapping, anthropologising, narrating, cataloguing, dissecting and classifying peoples and lands outside what was deemed Europe” (Gopal, 2021, p. 877).

Simply put, while modern HEIs claimed to advance the public good, they failed to meet the economic definition of a public good - namely, non-excludability and universal access - and instead served the interest of a narrowly defined “public” (i.e. wealthy Europeans) at the significant material and epistemic expense of colonised peoples and lands (Gopal, 2021).

Fast forward to the end of World War II in 1945, and particularly from the 1960s onward, European HE underwent significant “massification”, as national governments expanded investment in public education systems as part of post-war economic reconstruction (Trow, 2000). Access widened, enrolments soared, and new institutions emerged (Williams, 2016). During this period, education was increasingly framed as a right, a tool for equity, and a means of building human capital⁹ to modernise welfare states (Ng & Forbes, 2009). The incorporation of design into the university system illustrates this broader institutional shift.

A common narrative of design history in the Global North holds that design education and research, as we know them today, emerged in the 17th century with the separation of the arts and sciences (Frayling, 1993). This led to a distinction between design and scientific inquiry, and later, in the 19th century, to the establishment of practice-based design institutions outside the traditional university structure (Frayling, 1993; Grand & Jonas, 2012). In the 20th century, particularly with the rise of mechanisation, design evolved from craft-based to

⁹ Human capital refers to the collective skills, knowledge, experience, and creative capacities of individuals that are viewed as assets contributing to economic productivity and organisational success. It encompasses both formal qualifications and “tacit” knowledge shared through practices like mentoring and apprenticeship. In policy and economic discourse, cultivating human capital is often framed as essential to innovation, competitiveness, and welfare state development.

industrial and entered university settings (Buchanan, 2001; Cross, 2006). As with many other fields during this period, this institutionalisation was not neutral; it entailed the codification of Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies and the marginalisation of crafts, Indigenous, and non-Western design traditions and epistemologies (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a).

As public investment in HE grew alongside economic recovery, the purpose of education and design gradually shifted from intrinsic, civic purposes toward its extrinsic utility for national competitiveness and individual advancement (Brennan et al., 2018). In this new paradigm, knowledge production started to be guided by its potential for financial return and the pursuit of personal status and institutional reputation (Brennan et al., 2018). While this expansion in access coincided with the acceleration of formal decolonisation (from the 1950s to the 1970s), during which many African, Caribbean, and Asian nations gained political independence, dominant Eurocentric knowledge systems remained largely unchallenged (Enslin & Hedge, 2024).

From the 1980s onward, neoliberal reforms and austerity policies further redefined education as a private investment in one's economic future (Brennan et al., 2018). Public funding declined, and financial responsibility was increasingly transferred to students, regional authorities, philanthropists, and private investors (Brennan et al., 2018). This transformation was further accelerated by EU initiatives such as the Erasmus+ Programme (European Commission, n.d.-b) and the Bologna Process (European Commission, n.d.-c), which promoted (and still promote) academic mobility, cross-border collaboration, comparability systems, and labour market responsiveness.

In this paradigm, knowledge is increasingly conceived in terms of its market utility and valued for its potential to drive innovation, generate profit, enhance competitiveness, and elevate institutional or national prestige (Jacob, 2003). Consequently, HEIs are no longer primarily understood as democratic institutions dedicated to critical thought and collective advancement; instead, they are viewed as service providers offering credentials that facilitate employability, social mobility, and economic productivity (Ng & Forbes, 2009). Within this shift, HEIs have been, and continue to be, expected to function as entrepreneurial actors, competing for students, funding, and international visibility within the global knowledge economy (Marginson, & Yang, 2020). Nevertheless, these dominant discourses on mobility, academic excellence, and competitiveness largely ignore questions of epistemic (in)justice and colonial restitution, thereby reinforcing historical inequities (Enslin & Hedge, 2024). Additionally, the dominance of English as the academic lingua franca keeps reinforcing

prestige hierarchies that obscure non-Western institutions, knowledge systems, and languages (Abdulla, 2025). Below, in Figure 4, I offer a visual overview of the evolution of modern European universities in relation to the contexts that have shaped them.

PHASE	FUNDING SOURCES	ECONOMIC SYSTEM	POLITICAL SYSTEM	COLONIAL STATUS	GLOBALISATION STATUS	KNOWLEDGE CONCEPTION	HIGHER EDUCATION CONCEPTION
Pre-1945 ÉLITE PHASE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Church Wealthy patrons Limited state funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre-industrial Early capitalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monarchies Empires Authoritarian regimes Early nation-states & democracies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entangled with imperialism, accumulation of colonial knowledge & resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proto-global networks within Europe Limited to elite mobility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intrinsic Scholarly Linked to elite & bourgeois interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elitist Exclusionary Claimed public good Served privileged groups
1945-1979 MASSIFICATION PHASE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primarily public funding Welfare states 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welfare capitalism Kynesianism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Single-party socialist states Right-wing authoritarian regimes Democratic welfare states 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formal decolonisation (colonial epistemologies persist) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanding internationalisation & mobility Post-war cooperation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partly intrinsic, personal status & reputation, linked to national development & social equity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social right Tool for democratisation & human capital formation
1980s-Present NEOLIBERAL PHASE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced state funding Increased reliance on students, regional authorities, private sector & philanthropy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neoliberal capitalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Post-authoritarian & (neo)liberal democracies EU integration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coloniality reproduced through global rankings, English dominance & Academic capitalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hyper-globalized Competitive Metric-driven 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extrinsic Tied to market return, innovation & prestige 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Private investment in personal advancement Market-driven Performance-oriented

Figure 4. Overview of the history of European modern universities

3.4. Commodification, marketisation and servitisation of knowledge

One of the most profound transformations accompanying the neoliberal turn in HE has been the so-called “commodification of knowledge”¹⁰. This refers to the process by which knowledge - once understood as a shared, relational and intrinsically valuable gift - is increasingly repackaged as a tradable good to be priced, sold, and scaled across global education markets (Jacob, 2003). This development echoes earlier historical processes, such as the enclosure of common lands, the commodification of labour during industrialisation, and the monetisation of leisure in post-industrial contexts (Kauppinen, 2014). Yet, as Kauppinen (2014, p. 406) warns, claims that “knowledge has become a commodity” or that “higher education has been commodified” require careful scrutiny. The economic status of knowledge and education is not fixed; it can range from the patenting of research to the commercial packaging of HE as a globally tradable service (Brennan et al., 2018). Therefore, the core normative question is not whether commodification has occurred, but whether it ought to occur.

¹⁰ For an in-depth discussion on the commodification of (scientific) knowledge, including critical arguments challenging the notion of knowledge as a commodity, please read Jacob (2003) and Kauppinen (2014). While these important debates fall beyond the scope of this thesis, they remain crucial to understanding the broader political economy of knowledge production.

Europe today is widely framed as a “knowledge-based service economy,” where human capital and intangible assets (e.g. knowledge, creativity, research) are seen as central to socio-economic growth (CEDEFOP, 2011; OECD, 1996; OECD, 2000). In this knowledge economy and post-truth era, marked by disinformation, distrust, polycrises and declining confidence in science, power increasingly rests with those who produce, store and distribute knowledge (Innerarity, 2013; Seppälä et al., 2021). In this configuration, knowledge becomes a “private good”, commodified through intellectual property, patents and gated digital platforms (Brennan et al., 2018).

Since the 1990s, EU and national policies have repositioned universities as entrepreneurial actors, valued less for their critical and social contributions and more for their role as engines of innovation and labour-market responsiveness (Filippakou & Williams, 2014; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Consequently, education has now become both marketised and “servitised”: HEIs increasingly function as service providers competing globally for students, funding, and prestige (Marginson & Yang, 2020). Schools and universities can be seen as services, shaping what knowledge and type of education is legitimised and positioning students as “consumers-investors” gaining or purchasing access to knowledge, credentials and networks (Brancaleone & O’Brien, 2011; Ng & Forbes, 2009). Neoliberal policies, in fact, have redefined the role of students as both consumers and primary service users, placing their satisfaction and experience at the heart of programmatic and institutional planning (Brennan et al. 2018; Hall, 2017; Toderoiu, 2021). As such, HE has transitioned from a public-good model to a private-good, service-dominant logic, in which universities sell knowledge and co-create value with and for student-customers (Ng & Forbes, 2009; Suoheimo & Määttä, 2024; Vargo & Lusch, 2006). While marketisation and servitisation have brought certain benefits - such as increased responsiveness to student needs and more participatory education models - they have also narrowed the mission of HEIs and subordinated knowledge to market imperatives (Hall, 2017).

SDSI’s partner institutions - EKA, LMA and ULAP- all operate within this neoliberal, market-driven system, which (1) sustains an artificial, global hierarchy of knowledge that marginalises Global South experiences, traditions and epistemologies, (2) reframes knowledge as a private asset, and (3) turns HE into a market-driven, competitive enterprise (Brennan et al. 2008; Smith, 2012; Williams, 2016). In this process, all 3 institutions have adopted “internationalisation” agendas (EKA, n.d-c; LMA, n.d. ULAP, n.d-c; ULAP n.d-d), which include the development of English-taught programmes, the introduction of tiered

tuition fees for non-EU students, the constant pursuit of external research funding, and efforts to improve rankings and performance metrics. These internationalisation agendas have, amongst other things led to (1) a growing diversification of student bodies across age, ethnicity, gender, religion, and other intersecting identities, and (2) the reconceptualisation of students as primary “users-learners-consumers-investors” in academic programmes. This demographic diversification and market orientation have, in turn, led to “the emergence of a generation of students willing to ask questions about the provenance of their curricula and demanding that the more egregious absences of non-white voices and other lacunae in knowledge be redressed” (Gopal, 2012, p. 877).

Importantly, the SDSI programme itself teaches a range of academic disciplines (i.e. business, technology, (service) design) that are historically shaped by Eurocentric and capitalist logics. As such, the marketisation and servitisation of knowledge not only shape the institutional functioning of SDSI’s partner universities but also deeply influence the epistemologies and pedagogies embedded within the programme.

3.5. Decolonising (service) design education

Like other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, design is not immune to the coloniality of knowledge (see Figure 2). Design - broadly understood as the process of creating “courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones” - has always existed (Simon, 1982, p. 55). Though relatively young as a formal profession and academic discipline, design predates institutionalised education and even the emergence of Homo sapiens (Manzini, 2015). The impulse to design, assess, imagine, and improve situations has its roots in pre-human tool making over 2.5 million years ago (Manzini, 2015). Urban design and architecture emerged approximately 10,000 years ago in Mesopotamia, alongside interior and furniture design, while graphic design dates back to Sumerian cuneiform (Jones, 2018; Urban Design Lab, 2022). Over time, design has developed a rich, global history - shaped by diverse cultures across continents - playing a central role in creating the material and social world we inhabit today (Design Council, n.d.-a). However, despite this rich and plural history, the professionalisation and institutionalisation of design in Western nations have imposed a narrow, Eurocentric narrative on the discipline’s history and practices that marginalises diverse contributions (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a; Midal, 2019).

The dominant trajectory of mainstream Western design has been driven by the values of “modernity” - rationality, efficiency, linearity, scarcity, ownership, and individualism - mirroring broader colonial-capitalist ideologies that are anything but neutral (Escobar, 2018; Meherally & sahibzada, 2024b). As a result, design has often accelerated industrialisation, commodification, and capitalist extractivism, disproportionately harming and neglecting marginalised communities and perpetuating both material and epistemic inequalities, especially in the Global South (Akama et al., 2025; Fry, 2020; Tlostanova, 2017). This dynamic is captured by Khandwala (2020, para. 14), who observes that “sometimes design is an instrument of colonization, [and] sometimes it’s design that has been colonized”. This duality challenges the assumption of design as a neutral or inherently progressive force. It reminds us that design has historically enabled colonial projects - through logics of optimisation, commodification, and extraction - while also being shaped by the (neo)colonial systems in which it has been institutionalised, particularly in Western academic contexts (Tunstall, 2023). Understanding design as both colonising and colonised compels us not only to critique its complicity in systemic violence but also to recover suppressed, subaltern, and community-rooted design knowledges (Khandwala, 2020).

Indeed, the Industrial Revolution further ingrained Eurocentric design norms. While it promised technological progress, its (colonial) applications largely failed to improve the lives of the masses and devastated Indigenous, Black, Brown, and other marginalised communities (Chatterjee, 2021; Tunstall, 2023). Industrialisation prioritised profit over well-being, embedding efficiency and productivity as core design values and cementing design’s role as a servant to capitalism, with designers directly serving Western industry interests (Midal, 2024).

Racism, segregation, and discrimination were also woven into the fabric of “modernity”, which promoted a “universal humankind” that erased ethnic and national identities in favour of a singular ideal (Tunstall, 2023). This ideal was, and still very much is, implicitly modelled on white, European, middle-class, male, Christian, and able-bodied standards (Tunstall, 2023). The exclusionary nature of this standard is evident in goods and services such as clinical trials, medicines, and facial recognition algorithms, which systematically exclude or discriminate against women and ethnic minorities (Amnesty International, 2023; Jackson, 2019; Najibi 2020; Westervelt, 2015). This universalist framework extends beyond material goods to design thinking itself, which is often framed as a “progressive narrative of global salvation” while ignoring alternative ways of knowing (Khandwala, 2019, para. 4).

As Victor Papanek (1971) famously argued, in fact, design can be “the most harmful profession”. Since the 1970s, this critique has resonated widely in the design community. Design (and designers) directly and indirectly shape products, services, processes, systems, possibilities, and even societal futures (Manzini, 2015). These impacts extend well beyond the intended users/consumers to include all those involved in planning, production, implementation and evaluation, as well as those indirectly affected by (unintended) consequences (Papanek, 1971; Manzini, 2015). These consequences frequently and disproportionately fall on those with less power or visibility, such as marginalised communities, animals, and the natural environment (Denscombe, 2024; Manzini, 2015; Kovach, 2021). Given the immense power of design in shaping our world and its embedded responsibility towards society and the planet, critically interrogating the discipline’s inherent coloniality and complicity in reproducing structural, material and epistemic inequalities is a necessary part of broader decolonisation efforts and futures (Escobar, 2018; Noel et al., 2023). Yet, design education and practice continue to prioritise Anglo-Eurocentric perspectives and market-driven innovation, largely ignoring:

“the nature and consequences of design-as-politics today. This narrowness of horizons and deficiency in criticality is a reflection of the limitations of the institutions within which design is studied and practiced, as well as of the larger socio-political systems that design is institutionally integrated into” (Abdulla et al. 2019, p. 130).

Design, in fact, is multidimensional - shaped by material, cultural, political, epistemic, and ontological forces - and deeply embedded in institutions that govern labour, resources, funding, partnerships and knowledge production, ultimately influence our social systems and collective futures (Escobar, 2021; Valade-Amland, 2024). I share Abdulla et al.’s (2019, p.129) concern that “design theory, practice, and pedagogy as a whole are not geared towards delivering the kinds of knowledge and understanding that are adequate to addressing long-standing systemic issues of power”. The impetus to decolonise design is gaining momentum catalysed by calls for pluriversal futures (Escobar, 2018) and the work of the non-institutional, transnational web-based collective called Decolonising Design Collective, which was launched in 2016 (Abdulla et al., 2019).

A growing body of literature now addresses the decolonisation of various design sub-disciplines, including graphic design (Holmes-Miller & Robinson, 2025; Mensah Bonsu et al., 2025; Rogal, 2015; Sidogi & Rasedile, 2017), fashion design (Ahmed, 2022; Clark, 2025; Jansen, 2019; Mazzarella & Mirza, 2024), industrial design (IDSA, 2021; Torretta et

al., 2024), human-computer interaction (Bidwell, 2016; Lazem, 2021; Wong-Villacres et al. 2020), and participatory design and research (Seppälä et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2020; Udoewa, 2022). While many design-related fields are making efforts to examine their colonial legacies, SD remains relatively underexplored in the literature.

SD (defined in the Glossary on page 16) is both a human-centred approach to problem-solving and a young, transdisciplinary academic discipline, situated at the intersection of business, technology, and social research - disciplines which carry their own colonial baggage. Emerging from Anglo-Eurocentric contexts, SD was institutionalised only recently. “Since its emergence as an academic program at the Cologne University of Applied Sciences in the early 1990s, SD has developed as a full course of study in more than eighty colleges and universities” (Mager et al., 2023, p. 214). Despite increasing interest in decolonising design education, particularly from scholars and practitioners outside Europe (Abdulla, 2025; Moalosi et al., 2017; MacGill, 2023), scholarship focusing specifically on decolonising SD education within European HEIs remains limited. This absence underscores the urgency and necessity of further research and dialogue in this area.

3.6. Summary

This chapter has explored the theoretical and historical foundations informing this research, tracing the development of decolonisation as a concept and praxis, and examining its intellectual and affective dimensions. Drawing on decolonial theory and affect theory, I have argued that decolonisation in HE, and particularly in (service) design education, must go beyond inclusion or representation to interrogate the structural, ideological, and emotional attachments that sustain coloniality. Through a critical review of the evolution of European universities and the commodification and servitisation of knowledge, I have situated the SDSI programme within broader neoliberal, Eurocentric, and market-driven dynamics. Finally, I have highlighted a significant research gap: the limited engagement with decolonisation in SD education, particularly within European HEIs. In the following chapter, I outline the research design and methodological framework guiding this study.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

“The very concept and construct ‘research’ is born from the coloniser’s language” (Blair, 2015, p. 475)

4.1. Overview

This chapter provides a detailed account of the research design of this interdisciplinary study. Research design refers to the overall blueprint or plan, underpinned by specific philosophical assumptions, used to devise and implement a research study (Creswell, 2013). This plan typically sets out the approaches and strategies used to gather information, select knowledge co-creators, analyse data, and generate valid, precise, and relevant answers to the research questions posed in a given study (Creswell, 2013). A well-thought-out research design serves as a compass that guides the entire research process - from framing research questions to data interpretation - and ensures that methodological choices match the research objectives (Bhandari, 2025). This chapter begins by situating the study within the fields of design and social sciences. It then introduces Saunders et al.’s (2019) research onion framework, through which this study was assembled. Further, each methodological choice is explained in detail according to the layers of the research onion framework, demonstrating how they support the overarching aim and research questions presented in Section 2.5. The chapter also outlines data collection methods, provides information on knowledge co-creators, discusses ethical considerations, and addresses the trustworthiness of this research.

4.2. Research into design

This interdisciplinary study sits at the intersection of design research, decolonial studies, and organisation studies. It applies a decolonial lens to the study of SD education within the organisational context of the SDSI programme. This is achieved by combining critical realist and interpretivist paradigms in the social sciences to explore both the subjective experiences and understandings of SDSI stakeholders and the systemic forces shaping those experiences. Thus, in line with Frayling’s (1993, p.4-5) typology of design research, this study follows a “research into design” orientation: an externally situated, perceptual analysis that investigates design practices through theoretical and interdisciplinary perspectives (Crouch & Pearce, 2012). This research, in fact, critically examines SD teaching and learning through the lenses of decolonial theory and HE scholarship, as applied to the institutional and organisational setting of SDSI. Drawing from Cross’s (1999, p.6) perspective, this thesis also contributes to both “design epistemology” (i.e. the study of designerly ways of knowing)

and “design praxiology” (i.e. the study of design practices and processes). It interrogates how SD knowledge is generated, legitimised, and enacted in HE, while analysing how curricular and pedagogical practices shape the student and faculty experiences.

Design, at its core, is fundamentally the process of creating “courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones” (Simon, 1982, p. 55). As such, research in the design sciences is inherently pragmatic, oriented toward action and problem-solving (Hogue, 2013; Simon, 1982). As Fehér and Hallimäe (n.d., para. 3) note, design “has the capacity to initiate change and it can be used as an intermediary, mediator or connector between agents to create situations, thus allowing change to happen”. This aligns well with decolonial praxis, which calls not only for critical reflection but also for concrete action, as “we cannot only dedicate ourselves to thinking about decolonizing; we must act to decolonize” (Belfi & Sandiford, 2021, para. 9). In this spirit, this study is action-oriented, seeking to “create situations” and reflective, participatory spaces that support incremental and relational change within SDSI, contributing to wider debates around decolonising SD education.

Given that HE is increasingly understood as a service - and SD is often embedded in and applied to organisational contexts including universities and academic programmes (Akgül et al., 2021; Joshi & Alavaikko, 2020; Madden, 2015; Ng & Forbes, 2009; Wolfe, 2020) - this study further bridges design with organisation studies. Organisational and educational research is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing from sociology, anthropology, psychology, and business - all disciplines that share with SD an interest in institutional change, power dynamics, conflict, and learning (Clegg & Bailey, 2008; Contu, 2018; Hatch, 2018).

In parallel, decolonial studies have long critiqued the role of universities in upholding Eurocentric epistemologies and legitimising colonial knowledge hierarchies (Bhambra et al., 2018; Mbembe, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Decolonial studies are concerned with both “historical re-search” and “the growth and expansion of the conceptual and theoretical baggage of (de)coloniality” (Quintero et al. 2019, p. 6). Universities are viewed not only as empirical institutions but also as socially constructed entities that reproduce global power asymmetries (Hoyos Ensuncho, 2023). There is therefore an urgent need to critically examine HEIs, including design programmes, as sites that perpetuate the colonial matrix of power (Hoyos Ensuncho, 2023; Quijano, 2000; Quintero et al., 2019). Indeed, decolonisation is not a project that can be reduced to a checklist or completed within the timeframe of a master’s thesis. It is a long-term, relational process that requires structural transformation,

critical introspection, and sustained engagement from all organisational and institutional actors (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Bhambra et al., 2018; Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a). Thus, true decolonial efforts must move beyond symbolic gestures or performative inclusion to fundamentally acknowledge, interrogate and challenge the deep-rooted colonial logics within knowledge systems, institutional cultures, and everyday academic practices (Smith, 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Logically, these efforts cannot rely on the kind of fast, outcome-driven, and short-term models that underpin many SD projects.

In line with decolonial studies and unlike traditional SD research models commonly used in the SDSI programme (e.g. Double Diamond by the Design Council (n.d-b) - which favour structured, solution-driven processes - this study resists offering quick fixes and ready-made answers to the challenge of decolonising SDSI (Andreotti et al., 2015). Instead, it embraces discomfort, reflexivity, and slowness, offering a situated, critical analysis of the programme's institutional history, curriculum, and pedagogy, as seen and experienced by students and faculty. The goal is not to present pre-packaged solutions but to identify areas of tension, exclusion, and potential that could form the foundation for future, long-term, co-design efforts, co-created interventions, and institutional and organisational transformation. These future efforts will require collective, cross-hierarchical engagement, institutional will, and the (pro)active participation of all stakeholders: SDSI funders, administrators, leadership, students, permanent and temporary faculty, support staff, and industry partners alike.

4.3. Research onion framework

Conducting rigorous, empirical research requires a coherent and well-justified design that aligns with the study's aims and research questions, acting as the golden thread running through all the elements of the project (Creswell, 2013, Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

This study adopts the so-called "research onion" framework by Saunders et al. (2019), illustrated in Figure 5 below, to systematically build its research design. The framework includes 6 key elements: research philosophy (4.3.1), approach to theory development (4.3.2), methodological choice (4.3.3), research strategy (4.3.4), time horizon (4.3.5), and data collection and analysis techniques (4.3.6). Each element is essential and must work in complement with others to ensure rigorous research. The following sections describe each element in turn.

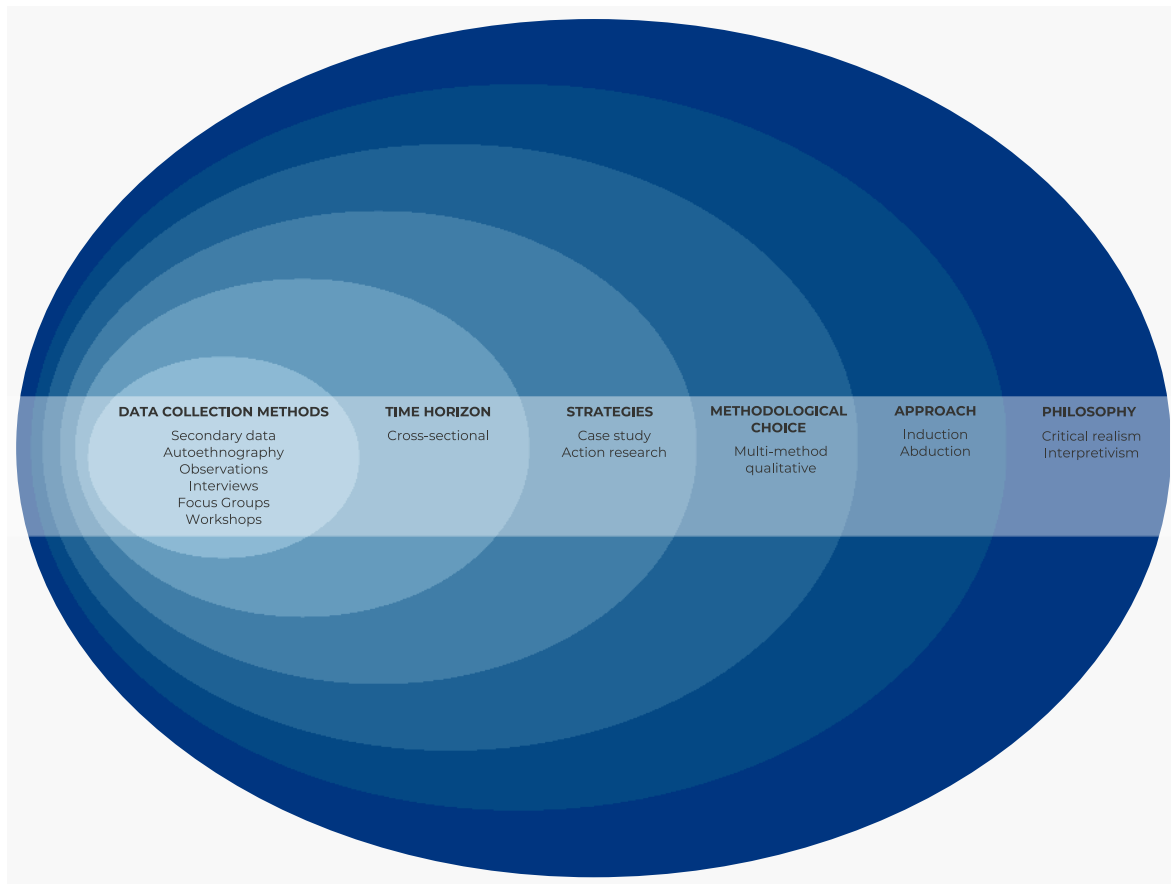


Figure 5. The research design of this study
 Note: Adapted from Saunders et al. (2019, p. 130)

4.3.1. Research philosophy

The first step in any research process is to identify and clarify the researcher's ontological, epistemological, and axiological stance - that is, the set of beliefs and assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology), what counts as knowledge and how knowledge is generated and justified (epistemology), as well as the values that underpin inquiry (axiology) (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Saunders & Tosey, 2013). This study adopts a hybrid interpretivist and critical realist philosophy, informed by feminist, postmodern, and decolonial perspectives. These paradigms shaped the formulation and refinement of my research questions (see Section 2.5), as well as the methodological choices, and data collection and analysis techniques described in the following sections.

In line with interpretivism, I assume that reality is not objective or singular but socially constructed, multiple, and context-dependent (Crouch & Pearce, 2012). From this viewpoint, phenomena cannot be discovered as fixed truths; rather research seeks to understand how people interpret their experiences, construct meaning, and engage with their environments

(Crouch & Pearce, 2012; Lather, 1991). Researchers are not neutral observers but co-constructors of knowledge alongside participants, and subjectivity is embraced as a resource, rather than a limitation (Creswell, 2013; Lather, 1991). This interpretive lens is particularly suited to education-oriented research, where the goal is to understand lived experiences and meaning-making processes (Crouch & Pearce, 2012). In terms of practice, interpretivism calls for: (1) the researcher's (self-)reflexivity, (2) thick description and literary styles that favour "I" over third-person narration, (3) inductive approaches that allow meaning to emerge from the ground up rather than being imposed by theory, and (4) open-ended, qualitative questions that enable knowledge co-creators to construct meaning through dialogue within their specific socio-cultural and institutional settings (Creswell, 2013).

In line with critical realism, I recognise that reality is shaped by struggles over power and identity and is "characterised by inequalities because the lifeworld is systematically colonised" (Crouch & Pearce, 2012, p.60). I assume that while reality exists independently of our perceptions, our understanding is always mediated by social structures, ideologies, privileges, and identity-based dynamics (Crouch & Pearce, 2012; Lather, 1991). From this perspective, knowledge is value-laden, partial, situated, and constructed within specific historico-temporal, geographical and institutional contexts (Crouch & Pearce, 2012; Lather, 1991). Knowledge is also a source of power, with those in power using their "version of knowledge to exercise control over those who lack power" (Denscombe, 2024, p. 232). Hence, research should not only interpret the world but also expose structural inequalities and catalyse social change (Creswell, 2013). In practice, critical realism entails (1) acknowledging intersecting forms of privilege and oppression, (2) pursuing an action-oriented agenda to improve the lives of knowledge co-creators and the institutions they inhabit (Creswell, 2013), (3) critically interrogating values, methods, and the nature of research itself, (4) co-designing research aims, questions, findings, and/or final outputs in partnership with knowledge co-creators (Creswell, 2013), and (5) employing emancipatory, collaborative, and trauma-informed approaches that centre marginalised voices and encourage care and critical dialogue (Arday et al., 2021; Bhambra et al., 2018; Fathallah, 2024; Creswell, 2013).

While critical and interpretive paradigms differ in their main purpose - with interpretivism focusing on understanding meaning and critical approaches aiming to expose and challenge structural inequalities - they share many foundational commitments. Both reject positivist assumptions of objectivity, universality, and value-neutrality in research (Crouch & Pearce,

2012). Both emphasise reflexivity and positionality, and both recognise the situated, contextual nature of knowledge and the power relations inherent in its production (Crouch & Pearce, 2012).

These paradigms are not only compatible but highly complementary, and their integration in this research project is intentional. Decolonising SD education requires attending both to the subjective realities of students and faculty, and to the historical, systemic, and institutional, forces influencing those realities (Chen & Lin, 2023; Morreira et al., 2020; Pillay et al., 2024). Interpretivism offers tools to explore how SDSI stakeholders navigate the programme and how they make sense of and emotionally relate to decolonisation. Critical realism situates these individual narratives within larger colonial histories, educational structures, and institutional dynamics of power and inequality. Combining these paradigms supports a more nuanced and ethically grounded inquiry; one that neither abstracts human experience from its socio-political context nor loses sight of the human voice within systemic critique. Such approach is essential in decolonial research, where meaning, power, and resistance are deeply entangled (Darder, 2019; Denscombe, 2024; Smith, 2012). Additionally, according to Crouch and Pearce (2012), these two paradigms typically employ the same logical reasoning approaches and methodological tools, reinforcing their practical and philosophical compatibility.

4.3.2. Approach to theory development

When approaching theory development, and to support the analysis and conclusions of this study, this research adopts a hybrid inductive and abductive approach to logical reasoning. Inductive reasoning (or induction) is a logical approach to making inferences and conclusions that moves from specific observations to broader generalisations (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-j). It is closely aligned with the interpretivist paradigm outlined above (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) and is well suited to this study's goal of uncovering the feelings, understandings, and perceptions of SDSI students, faculty and programme founders regarding decolonisation; phenomena that are not immediately apparent. This bottom-up approach, which we often use in day-to-day life situations, involves collecting data and making observations as a first step in the research process (Bhandari, 2023; Barrett & Younas, 2024; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Hence, it serves itself well for qualitative and exploratory inquiry, whereby observations and data from participants are collected within the natural context in which participants live, study, and work. From there, patterns, categories, and themes emerge organically without relying on preconceived hypotheses or

theories (Creswell, 2013; Barrett & Younas, 2024). These patterns are organised into progressively abstract units until general themes are established (Creswell, 2013). From such themes, general conclusions can be drawn, leading to hypotheses or a theory of the phenomenon under study (Bhandari, 2023; Barrett & Younas, 2024).

While inductive reasoning is a logical fit for this study, it is not universally accepted (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Barrett & Younas, 2024). A growing body of post-structural and decolonial scholars has questioned the dominance and reliance on induction logics in qualitative research. They argue that, although less rigid than positivist deduction, induction still rests on Western assumptions of linearity, objectivity, and generalisability, which conflict with Indigenous and alternative ontologies (Blair, 2015; Darder, 2019; Roulston, 2014; Smith, 2012; St. Pierre 2011). These scholars emphasise that induction is linked to the Eurocentric value of quantification, which ignores the value of context, storytelling, and knowledge as situated, fluid, relational, and embodied; characteristics that resist neat categorisation or bounded analytical steps (Blair, 2015; Darder, 2019; Roulston, 2014; Smith, 2012; St. Pierre, 2011). To respond to this critique and align with design thinking, this study also employs abductive reasoning.

Abduction, which remains relatively uncommon and underexplored in the social sciences, not only aligns with my decolonial stance and critical view of conventional academic research but it is also considered a designer's "secret ingredient" (Forshaw, 2024, para. 17). Described by Peirce as "intelligent guessing" (as cited by Lu & Liu, 2012, p.143), abduction is widely practiced in design research and resonates strongly with Indigenous and alternative ontologies and epistemologies. (Service) designers, in fact, are strong proponents of "creative leaps" in qualitative research - insightful interpretations that extend beyond the constraints of inductive reasoning (Forshaw, 2024; Kolko, 2010; Koskinen et al., 2011; Norman, 2013). With abduction, meaning and ideas are generated from the available information, not by following fixed procedures but by creatively recognising patterns and constructing plausible interpretations (Norman, 2013; Kolko, 2010). This involves process of idea discovery and human creativity, where data is transformed into generalised units of information through "educated guesses based on incomplete information...informed by our best interpretations of available data" (Forshaw, 2024, para. 12). It is an open-ended, intuitive, iterative, and participatory approach that prioritises collaborative synthesis over rigid categorisation, and privileges relationality, contextual understanding, and the co-construction of meaning with stakeholders (Forshaw, 2024; Stickdorn et al., 2018). This

approach resonates with decolonial critiques that reject the extractive logic of segmentation and thematic categorisation, favouring emergent and situated ways of knowing (Blair, 2015; Escobar, 2018). Although abduction is essential to design thinking and design-oriented research, its use as a sole form of reasoning remains debated (Barrett & Younas, 2024). Therefore, in this study, abduction and induction are combined to ensure rigour and trustworthiness in the analytical process.

4.3.3. Methodological choice

As outlined above, interpretivism as well as inductive and abductive reasoning lend themselves well to qualitative and exploratory inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Yock, 2024). Accordingly, this study adopts a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research is a widely recognised and valued mode of inquiry in the social sciences and applied fields such as design and education (Crouch & Pearce, 2012, Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Muratovski, 2022). It is typically exploratory or descriptive in nature and is used to understand the social world through the meanings that individuals or groups assign to social phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Qualitative inquiry is a pragmatic, situated activity that begins with an interpretive framework and involves material practices such as notes, conversations and recordings that make the participants' perspectives visible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). To study social phenomena, qualitative researchers collect data in naturalistic settings, with attention to the individuals and the specific context under exploration (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

This methodology is particularly appropriate for this study for several reasons. First, quantitative measures and statistical analysis do not align with either the research topic or my decolonial stance on quantification. Qualitative research is conducted because “a problem or an issue pertaining to a group needs to be explored...and because we want to empower individuals to share their stories while understanding the context in which participants address the problem or issue” (Creswell, 2013, p. 47-48). This perfectly reflects my research questions, which centre around lived experiences, feelings, meanings, and understandings of decolonisation among SDSI students, lectures and founders, within shared educational spaces and classroom settings (Darder, 2019). Moreover, this methodology is well-aligned with the interpretivist paradigm in that it: (1) recognises the researcher as a key instrument in data collection, (2) embraces a flexible and emergent research design, (3) is inherently reflective and iterative, and (4) allows for literary and flexible styles of writing (Creswell, 2013). In particular, this research qualifies as “multimethod” because it

incorporates various data sources and collection techniques in order to ensure triangulation and address research questions in a more comprehensive and nuanced way (Saunders & Tosey, 2013). The specific data collection techniques used in this study are described in detail in Section 4.3.6. below.

It is important to note, however, that traditional qualitative research has not been without critique. Critical, feminist, and decolonial scholars have stressed its historical tendency to assume researcher neutrality and to portray society as inherently structured and orderly (Darder, 2019; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Smith, 2012). Recognising these critiques, the research strategies adopted in this study (detailed in the following sections) seek to respond to and balance these concerns.

4.3.4. Research strategies

The most frequently used research strategies in design-oriented and social science qualitative research include ethnography, grounded theory, action research, and case study (Creswell, 2013; Crouch & Pearce, 2012; Muratovski, 2022). This research employs a combination of action research and case study strategies.

4.3.4.1 Action research strategy

In line with the critical realist and interpretivist paradigms underpinning this study, an action research strategy is adopted for its commitment to reflexivity, collaboration, contextual inquiry, and transformative action in organisational, community, and institutional settings (Crouch & Pearce, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). As previously discussed, this research is rooted in a decolonial ethos and seeks to interrogate and shift dominant ways of knowing, thinking, and doing within SD education. Action research is particularly well-suited for this aim because it: (1) opens up possibilities for change, (2) involves those most affected by the issues under study as active co-researchers, (3) challenges claims of neutrality and objectivity in research, and (4) aims to embed inquiry into the culture of a given organisation or community (Crouch & Pearce, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Fine & Torre, 2021).

Described as “perhaps the most powerful and liberating form of research available to practising designers” (Crouch & Pearce, 2012, p. 143), action research, enables the exposure of “injustices, silencing, alienation, and barriers to participation” (Crouch & Pearce, 2012, p.143). Hence, it is closely aligned with the objectives of this study, which are as much about understanding experiences and meanings of decolonisation as they are about initiating conversations and meaningful change. My research, in fact, seeks to support incremental, collaborative transformations within SDSI by surfacing embedded patterns of coloniality in

curriculum and pedagogical practices. Thus, action research was selected because it is “an act of optimism, beginning with the premise that ...people’s practices are not fixed...[they] can and should be changed...to produce more ethical, socially just or sustainable outcomes” (Crouch & Pearce, 2102, p. 143; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). This resonates with my intent to identify how SDSI’s curriculum and pedagogy can evolve to better reflect the realities, needs, and aspirations of its increasingly diverse student body.

Action research typically deals with localised, real-world issues (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), making it especially relevant to SDSI’s specific institutional and cultural context. Unlike conventional research models that prioritise objectivity and generalisability, action research maintains a commitment to local settings, situated knowledge, and acknowledges the importance of relational and ethical responsibility (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Smith, 2012). Drawing on participatory traditions, this study also incorporates principles of participatory action research, embracing the ethos of “no research on us without us” (Fine & Torre, 2021, p. 3). Rather than positioning participants as passive subjects, SDSI students, faculty, and programme founders are engaged as knowledge co-creators, shaping both the research direction, the research questions and the data itself. These participatory elements echo the relational, co-productive, and emancipatory values at the heart of critical realism, and feminist and decolonial traditions (Crouch & Pearce, 2012; Smith, 2012; Fine & Torre, 2021). Fine and Torre (2021)’s ethos also aligns with my position as a participant-researcher in this study. In action research, blurred boundaries between researchers and participants are not only accepted but also encouraged (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Therefore, as a current student, research can and should also include my views.

The reflective and cyclical nature of action research, entailing phases of observation, reflection, planning, and action, mirrors the exploratory and iterative processes of both SD and decolonial-oriented inquiry (Denscombe, 2024; Smith, 2012; Swann, 2002). This methodological fit allows this research to remain flexible and responsive to the evolving needs, interests, and concerns of SDSI students, faculty, and programme founders (Swann, 2002). Action research also calls for the individual and collaborative examination and evaluation of my own research and design practices through reflexivity (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). The open-ended and adaptive nature of action research makes this strategy especially suitable for research in educational settings, like SDSI (Crouch & Pearce, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 1999), and for inquiries where the outcome is not predetermined

but co-developed through dialogue (Swann, 2002). A visual representation of the 4 key action research cycles used in this study is provided in Figure 6 (Section 4.3.5) below.

In summary, action research was selected for its closed alignment with the praxis-driven, cyclical, and transformative logic of both SD and decolonial work. It enables the research to act not only as an exploration of lived experience and systemic barriers but also as a modest intervention - an opening toward deeper reflection, critical conversations, and context-sensitive change within SDSI.

4.3.4.2 Case study strategy

In tandem, the research also adopts a case study strategy. This was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, case studies are particularly effective when “a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control” (Yin, 2003, p. 9). The main research question of this study - “*How do SDSI students, faculty, and programme founders perceive the idea of decolonising the programme’s curriculum and pedagogical practices?*” - fits this criterion. Specifically, a single-case design is chosen, as it is the preferred option “when the case represents an extreme or a unique case” (Yin, 2003, p. 40).

As discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.4.), SDSI is indeed a unique case compelling for decolonial inquiry due to its institutional and cultural positioning. SDSI is selected deliberately because it is a relatively new international master’s programme, marked by growing student diversity, low organisational maturity, and limited engagement with transformational and decolonial curricula and pedagogies. Secondly, in line with Saldaña et al. (2011), SDSI was also selected for pragmatic and strategic reasons. My lived experience as a current, final-year student provides direct, in-depth knowledge of the SDSI’s people, structures and culture, enabling easier access to internal resources and more trusting, relational engagement. This makes this study both feasible and ethically grounded, as the relational dynamics are built on familiarity and shared experience.

Thirdly, case studies are ideal for investigating complex social phenomena in real-life contexts, especially when a set of decisions or organisational processes are to be examined in the setting in which they occurred, and “when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2003, p. 13). This strategy enables the study of curriculum and pedagogical decisions while engaging with SDSI’s broader institutional and cultural landscape - both essential to exploring the phenomenon of decolonising SD education. As Yin (2003, p. 2) notes, case studies allow researchers “to retain the holistic

and meaningful characteristics of real-life events,” making them especially suited for exploratory research where outcomes are not predetermined (Yin, 2012). This study thus qualifies as an exploratory case study, seeking to determine whether decolonisation could offer a useful framework and path forward within the context of SDSI (Yin, 2012).

Following Stake (2008, p. 119), case study is “a choice of what is to be studied” rather than a specific methodology. In this research, SDSI constitutes a “specific, unique, bounded system” (Stake, 2008, p. 121), with its curriculum and pedagogical practices serving as the primary units of analysis (Yin, 2003). In line with Stake’s (1995) definition of an instrumental case study, SDSI is used to gather insights and help illustrate the broader issue and external phenomenon of decolonising SD education.

Finally, the case study strategy is adopted as a decolonial stance. In alignment with decolonial thought, this research resists dominant, Western-centric assumptions that position case studies as less rigorous or desirable than positivist methodologies (Yin, 2003; Simons, 2009). Instead, it affirms the value of situated, context-specific inquiry, reinforcing the legitimacy of qualitative research in producing transformative and relational knowledge for SDSI.

In short, the case study strategy allows for a deep, situated, and relational engagement with the unique, bounded context of SDSI, enabling a holistic and nuanced exploration of how decolonisation is perceived, resisted, or embraced within SD education. It supports both personal and institutional perspectives, while resisting extractive, universalising tendencies common in mainstream research.

4.3.5. Time horizon

This research adopts a cross-sectional time horizon, that is, data was collected at a particular moment in time to provide a snapshot of the SDSI programme in relation to the phenomenon of decolonising its curriculum and pedagogical practices (Saunders & Tosey, 2013). Cross-sectional studies are particularly well-suited to case study strategies according to Saunders & Tosey (2013), and they align with critical, feminist and decolonial perspectives that stress the situatedness, fluidity and time- and context- specific nature of knowledge production and decolonial-oriented inquiry (Darder, 2019; Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a; Smith, 2012).

Findings originating from this research are specific to SDSI and bounded by temporal, geographical, and institutional limitations. SDSI does not exist in a vacuum; it is a continuously evolving transnational programme, shaped by the Baltic and Northern

European institutions in which it is embedded, and the socio-political contexts of the countries where those institutions operate. This study captures a temporal snapshot of SDSI during a distinct phase of its development (2023-2025) - a period marked by significant organisational growth and pedagogical experimentation. Consequently, research findings reflect perceptions and dynamics relevant to this moment, rather than offering timeless or generalisable conclusions.

From a critical and decolonial standpoint, this specificity and temporally bounded scope is not a limitation, but a strategic necessity. For decolonisation efforts to be meaningful, they must always be anchored in local histories, epistemologies, and power structures, and must proactively resist universalising or standardised approaches (Bhambra et al., 2018; Le Grange, 2016; Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a). This approach resonates with the ethos of SD, which values deep contextual immersion to discover and address the challenges of specific communities in a tailored, nuanced, and meaningful manner (IDF, n.d.; Stickdorn et al., 2018).

Although the origins of this research project and its preparatory efforts span from 2023 to 2025, with 4 major action research cycles (see Figure 6 below), the key period of primary data collection occurred between October 2024 and March 2025. Given the evolving nature of the SDSI programme and the fluid discourses surrounding decolonisation, the perspectives captured during this window reflect a particular moment in time, and future inquiries may yield different insights and results. This approach reflects a decolonial understanding that knowledge is always situated and in flux, and that both knowledge and research must be understood as iterative, context-sensitive processes embedded in the temporal and institutional realities in which they are produced (Crouch & Pearce, 2012; Smith, 2012).



Figure 6. Action research cycles across the time horizon of this thesis

As illustrated in Figure 6, the first two action research cycles occurred between September 2023 and June 2024. These initial, preparatory cycles broadly align with a design thinking-oriented discovery phase (Design Council, n.d.-b), which helped identify key curricular and pedagogical issues among SDSI students and informed the topic, orientation, and research question of this thesis. The third cycle, from July to December 2024, involved the development, review, and approval of the research plan by my main thesis supervisor. This cycle also marked the beginning of primary data collection and field research. The fourth and final cycle, conducted from January to March 2025, constituted the core phase of data

collection and produced the main dataset analysed in this thesis. These activities are described in more detail in the following sections.

4.3.6. Data collection and analysis techniques

Case studies typically rely on “multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion” (Yin, 2003, p. 14). As a multimethod qualitative study, this research drew on a wide range of data sources and data generation techniques commonly used in SD and education-oriented research, including observations, personal journaling, internal and external documents analysis, and both individual and group conversations (Crouch & Pearce, 2012). According to Yin (2012, p.10), these are among the most frequently used sources of evidence in case study research.

4.3.6.1 Preparatory data collection techniques (cycle 1 & 2)

During the preparatory phase of this study (i.e. action research cycle 1 and 2, as shown in Figure 6 above), preliminary data was generated through 4 main techniques: (1) unstructured classroom observations, (2) informal and opportunistic conversations with students, faculty, and founders, (3) a reflective journal capturing field notes and personal insights, and (4) review of internal and external SDSI documents and marketing collateral (i.e. brochures, syllabi, websites, presentation slides, Miro boards, and emails). These early observations, reflections, and document reviews were instrumental in identifying the research problem and shaping the first iteration of my research proposal and questions. While this initial discovery and problem identification phase (September 2023-June 2024) played a crucial role in setting the direction of this study, it is not elaborated on in detail or systematically analysed within this thesis. Instead, the focus here is on the data collection activities undertaken during action research cycles 3 and 4, which formed the core field research, following the formal approval of the research scope and questions by my thesis supervisors. Nevertheless, a brief justification for using these early data generation techniques is provided below.

As a participant-observer, unstructured observations enabled me to immerse myself in the SDSI environment and experience the programme’s curriculum and pedagogy through both my own lens and that of my peers - free from preconceived notions. Observation is a well-established technique in education research (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) and is also commonly used in SD’s discovery phase (Design Council, n.d.-b; Stickdorn et al., 2018). My observations were documented as field notes in a personal, reflective journal, noting classroom dynamics and interactions related to curricular and pedagogical delivery. Rather

than relying on pre-structured checklists or categories, this open-ended approach allowed emergent tensions and themes to surface. As Marshall and Rossman (1999, p. 107) note, “this method assumes that behaviour is purposeful and expressive of deeper values and beliefs”. Each journal entry included descriptive notes (e.g. date, time, class title, name of lecturer/facilitator, event or activity that caused tension), along with analytical reflections.

To complement these observations, I engaged in informal, opportunistic conversations with students, faculty, and programme founders. Opportunistic conversations have a long-standing tradition in ethnographic research, dating back more than a century (Davis & Brown, 2024). More recently, scholars have emphasised their ability to yield naturalistic, context-rich data, often more candid and insightful than structured interviews (Davis & Brown, 2024; Swain & King, 2022). From a decolonial viewpoint, their relational, unstructured nature helps build trust, minimise power asymmetries, and capture situated perspectives in a more respectful and non-extractive manner (Smith, 2012; The River and Fire Collective, 2021; Castillo, 2018). Insights gathered through these conversations were also recorded in my reflective journal.

Observations and conversations were also supplemented by document review. Document analysis is an “unobtrusive method, rich in portraying the values and beliefs of participants in the setting” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 116). I reviewed multiple internal and external programme documents, including curricular materials, marketing collateral, and institutional communications. Notes from this review were added to my reflective journal, particularly when specific documents or information surfaced in conversations or created tensions in classroom settings.

My reflective journal, containing notes from observations, conversations, and document reviews, served as a key tool across Cycles 3 and 4 (see Figure 6 above). It supported the identification of emerging problems, informed the (re-)framing of research questions, guided the design of interview and focus group guides, and contributed directly to the development of my autoethnographic analysis described in a later section.

4.3.6.2 Key data collection and analysis techniques (cycle 3 & 4)

The full dataset considered in this study (in chronological order), consists of: (1) a course co-design workshop, (2) an autoethnography, (3) a scoping and relational literature review, (4) 11 semi-structured interviews, and (5) 2 hybrid focus groups/workshops (see Figure 7 below).

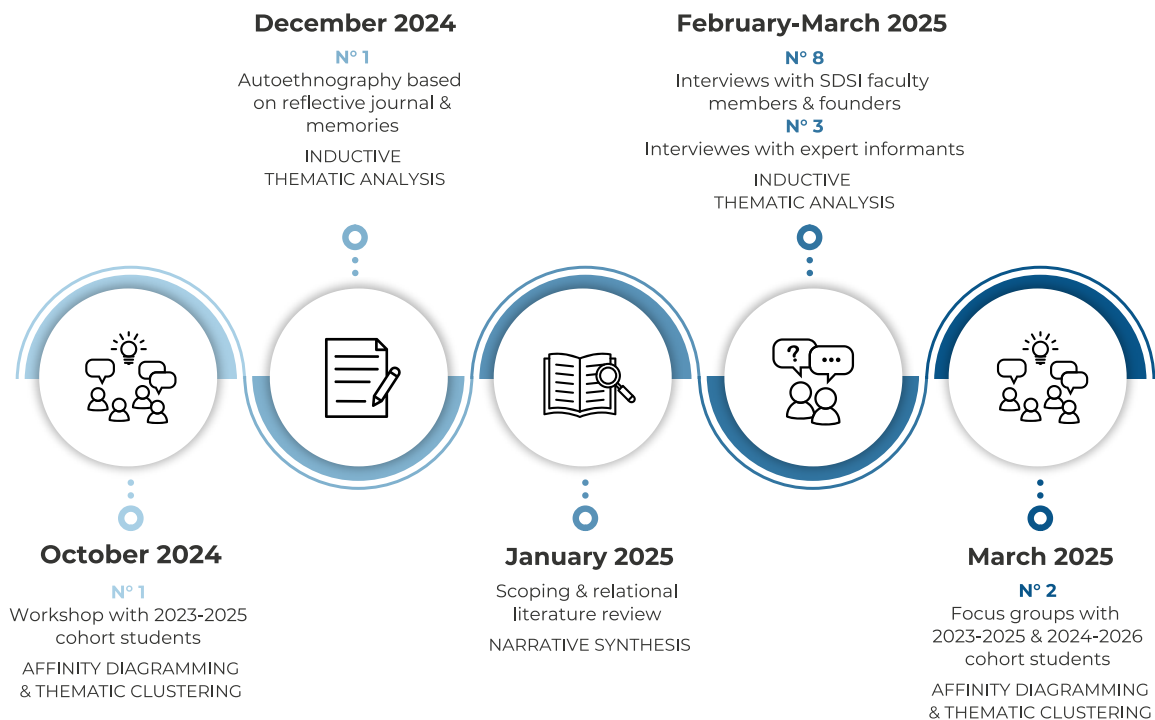


Figure 7. Key primary data collection and analysis techniques

4.3.6.2.1. Co-reflection and co-design workshop

A three-hour hybrid co-reflection and co-design workshop was conducted on 30 October 2024, forming a central component of this study’s participatory and action research approach. Workshops are recognised within action-oriented research as effective tools for producing “reliable and valid data about...organisational change and design” (Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017, p. 73). They are inherently collaborative spaces that promote shared meaning-making, empathy-building, and creative problem-solving; all essential conditions for surfacing marginalised voices and challenging dominant narratives (Hamilton, 2016; Stickdorn et al., 2018).

The workshop was hosted during the first session of the *Strategic Service Design course* (SDSI1008V24-3002) at the University of Lapland (ULAP), with logistical support from my main thesis supervisor. I facilitated the session remotely from Estonia, while participants (i.e. students from the SDSI 2023-2025 cohort) gathered in person in the Service Innovation Corner at ULAP. In total, 13 students from the 2023-2025 cohort - who were spending the autumn/winter semester at ULAP - participated, alongside one lecturer who attended as an observer. Please see Section 4.4 for more details about recruitment and sampling.

The workshop had 3 interrelated objectives: (1) to co-reflect and gather timely qualitative feedback on the recently completed *Digital Service Design course* (SDSI1007V24-3002),

(2) to co-design ideas for improving the *Strategic Service Design course* about to begin, (3) to explore an alternative, participatory, qualitative approach to course evaluation, contrasting with SDSI's prevailing reliance on surveys. As a co-design space, the workshop invited students to act as active contributors in shaping curriculum and pedagogy (Stickdorn et al., 2018). As a co-reflective practice, it enabled dialogic inquiry into prior and ongoing learning experiences, encouraging collaborative reimagination of course delivery in alignment with students' needs and aspirations (Freire, 2005; Heron & Reason, 2001). Moreover - as an exploration of an alternative course evaluation method - it served simultaneously as a data collection method, a feedback mechanism, and a modest intervention embedded within action research cycle 3 (see Figure 6 above). A key insight from the observations and conversations in the preparatory phase of this study (see Section 4.3.6.1), in fact, was the inadequacy of SDSI's reliance on anonymous, standardised, and primarily quantitative surveys (distributed via SurveyMonkey in Year 1 and institutional tools from EKA and ULAP in Year 2). These surveys often failed to generate meaningful outcomes due to survey fatigue, limited transparency, and lack of insight into the reasoning behind students' feedback.

The workshop drew on principles from Hamilton (2016), Fitzpatrick (2019), and Stickdorn et al. (2018), who emphasise the value of workshops as generative spaces for empathy, dialogue, and co-creation. Consistent with decolonial practices I observed during Pause+Effect's webinar and training (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a; 2024c), the session opened with a grounding mindfulness and conscious breathing exercise, followed by the co-creation of shared values to guide engagement - emphasising care, honesty, confidentiality, and constructive intent. In line with Fitzpatrick's (2019) emphasis on psychological safety, periodic check-ins were conducted to assess knowledge co-creators' well-being, mood, and energy level, as recommended by Stickdorn et al. (2018).

Participants used analogue tools (i.e. sticky notes, markers, and flipchart paper) to encourage interaction, strengthen group cohesion, and support the visual organisation of ideas. These tools are widely recognised for promoting inclusive participation, enabling knowledge co-creators to visualise part-whole relationships in idea development, and facilitating collaboration through shared visual focus and fluid turn-taking (Gibbons, 2018; Ball et al., 2021). In parallel, a digital Miro board (i.e. a collaborative digital whiteboard tool) was prepared to allow asynchronous contributions and ongoing documentation, including ground rules, task instructions, reflection prompts, and photo uploads of the flipcharts.

The workshop was structured in 2 main segments. First, students reflected on the *Digital Service Design course* using the KISS framework (Keep, Improve, Stop, Start), credited to Philip Daniels as cited by Biancuzzo (2024). They worked individually with sticky notes before moving into small groups to cluster, interpret and present their insights to the room. Incorporating individual, time-boxed, silent reflection (i.e. brain writing) provided students with a structured opportunity to generate ideas independently (Stickdorn et al., 2018). This approach not only encourages creative thinking but also increases inclusivity and productivity by minimising social anxieties and the dominance of outspoken participants (Benedikt, 2024). Small group works complemented brain writing by promoting trust and confidence, as ideas and contributions became shared efforts.

Second, new groups were formed to discuss the *Strategic Service Design course* using the CCTA framework (Context, Content, Teaching, Assessment) by the University of Waterloo (2024). Each group focused on one framework dimension, brainstorming suggestions and open-ended questions using sticky notes and prompts (part of the framework) on the shared Miro board. After presenting ideas, groups rotated to other flipcharts in a World Café-style process (Brown & Isaacs, 2005), adding contributions and voting with adhesive dots - a quick and democratic technique to streamline decision-making and surface the most favoured and popular ideas (Dalton, 2018). Finally, each group returned to their original flipchart to review new contributions and cluster similar ideas, identifying key themes and the most popular suggestions. This iterative process supported co-reflection and helped surface shared priorities for course improvement.

By adopting this participatory approach, the workshop positioned student not as passive recipients of education but as co-creators of their learning environment (Freire, 2005; Heron & Reason, 2001). This aligns with the emancipatory goal of action research and the decolonial imperative to centre student voice in curriculum and pedagogy development (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Takhar, 2023). The workshop supported dialogic inquiry into lived experiences of learning and teaching, enabling students to surface systemic barriers, and to engage in critical imagination toward improved curricular and pedagogical futures (Hamilton, 2016; Stickdorn et al., 2018). More details about the workshop's agenda, tools, and activities - including links to the presentation slides and the Miro board - can be found in Appendix 2.

In line with a decolonial lens that challenges Eurocentric norms of validity and rigour in research, data from the workshop was analysed by the knowledge co-creators themselves.

They employed affinity diagramming and thematic clustering as legitimate, abductive techniques for data analysis (Luma Institute, 2013). Rooted in design research, these methods prioritise collective sense-making, synthesis over segmentation, and emergent pattern recognition (Hartson & Pyla, 2012; Holtzblatt & Bayer, 2015). They allowed students' voices to remain central, avoiding the imposition of predetermined analytical frames. Affinity diagramming (which sorts insights organically based on perceived relationships) and thematic clustering (which identifies emergent themes through visualisation) are closely aligned with abductive reasoning - a logic that privileges intuition, creative leaps, and iterative hypothesis formation (Forshaw, 2024; Luma Institute, 2013; Koskinen et al., 2011; Stickdorn et al., 2018). These practices are particularly appropriate for decolonial and action-oriented research, as they honour relational, participatory epistemologies and resist hierarchical and linear Western coding models (Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2012). Accordingly, affinity diagramming and clustering were employed as inclusive and democratic acts of situated theorising, allowing knowledge to be interpreted directly by those who produced it. I then compiled and summarised the data synthesised by the students into a written report containing key feedback and clear, student-endorsed recommendations for improving the *Digital Service Design* and *Strategic Service Design* courses. Before submitting the final report to the SDSI faculty and staff members at ULAP, a representative from each workshop group reviewed, edited, and formally endorsed the recommendations. These recommendations were subsequently used as a data point to answer sub-question 4 of this study (i.e. What changes do knowledge co-creators suggest making the SDSI curriculum and pedagogical practices more inclusive, critical, or decolonial?).

4.3.6.2.2. Autoethnography

Autoethnography was employed in this research as a core data generation method to critically reflect on my lived experience as a student-researcher within the SDSI programme. Rooted in qualitative and decolonial research traditions, autoethnography blends elements of autobiography, narrative inquiry, and ethnography, emphasising pivotal life events and personal storytelling (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Creswell, 2013). It values the researcher's subjectivity as a valid and powerful source of knowledge, connecting personal experiences with broader socio-cultural and institutional structures (Chang, 2008; Creswell, 2013).

Drawing on my reflective journal (see section 4.3.6.1 above), personal memories, and timeline-building exercises, I composed a 16-page autoethnographic essay. This narrative surfaced key anecdotes and tensions related to curriculum and pedagogy, while also

engaging critically with theory and examining the colonial legacies embedded in SD education. Autoethnography proved crucial in advancing my positionality work, identifying patterns of power and conflict, and amplifying underrepresented perspectives in ways consistent with decolonial, feminist, and critical theories of knowledge production (Adams et al., 2015; Pillow, 2010). Hence, in this study, autoethnography functioned not only as an analytical lens but also as a deliberate method for generating empirical material. The process of (re-)writing, reflecting, and organising lived experience into narrative form served as a structured, self-reflexive approach to producing original data grounded in personal insight.

The autoethnographic essay was developed as part of the elective *Applied Anthropology course* (DT7017) I took at EKA and was reviewed and graded by an external anthropology lecturer unaffiliated and unfamiliar with SDSI, its people, or its processes. The essay served 2 main purposes, it: (1) supported the development of a robust positionality statement (see Chapter 1), and (2) it provided a data point to answer the sub-questions of this research from a student-researcher perspective.

The essay was analysed using inductive thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was selected for its flexibility and interpretive nature, making it suitable for the discovery of meaning through immersive, iterative engagement with data (Alhojailan, 2012). Given that the autoethnography constituted a smaller portion of the overall dataset on student perceptions, thematic analysis allowed for integration with broader findings from faculty interviews, expert conversations, and student workshops - ensuring analytic consistency while remaining attuned to nuanced, situated insights. Inductive thematic analysis provided a flexible and consistent analytical strategy across these diverse sources, enabling the identification, organisation, and interpretation of patterns of meaning without imposing predefined codes or frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Its emphasis on flexibility, context sensitivity, and the discovery of shared meanings aligns closely with the study's decolonial orientation and its aim to capture nuanced, situated experiences within design education.

4.3.6.2.3. Scoping and relational literature review

Initially, I conducted a rapid scoping literature review to systematically chart existing research at the intersection of decolonisation, SD, and HE, with the aim of identifying well-defined research gaps and developing a theoretical and methodological framework for this thesis. In January 2025, I carried out a comprehensive search across 3 major databases: ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), ProQuest Art, Design & Architecture Collection,

and Google Scholar. The search strategy combined core concepts and keywords aligned with the research objectives, using the following combinations:

decolon* AND (“service design” OR “design thinking”) AND (“higher education” OR universities OR academia) - 1,170 results

decolon* AND (“service design” OR “design thinking”) AND (curricul* OR pedagog*) - 884 results

(decolon* AND pedagogy) OR (decolon* AND curriculum) AND (“design education” OR “higher education”) - 23,400 results

Following standard review protocol, duplicates were removed, and articles were screened based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025, (2) studies addressing decolonisation, SD, and/or pedagogy in HE, and (3) full-text articles available in English. Exclusion criteria included: (1) articles unrelated to HE or SD, and (2) studies lacking explicit reference to decolonial or inclusive practices. Rather than applying thematic coding, I used a narrative synthesis approach (Lisy & Porritt, 2016), iteratively reviewing texts to identify connections, tensions, and conceptual gaps to inform and situate the research problem.

However - as I screened titles, abstracts, and compiled studies into an Excel sheet - I realised that this conventional, systematic method grounded in Western academic traditions was at odds with my decolonial lens. As Tynan and Bishop (2022, p. 499) advocate, relational literature reviews seek to “graft Indigenous relational processes onto the Western academic convention of the literature review”, challenging extractive and decontextualised models of knowledge collection. Following the guidance of Tynan and Bishop (2022), Legault et al. (2024), and Yunkaporta (2021), I recognised that knowledge is not only generated through solitary engagement with peer-reviewed English texts published beyond a paywall but also through collective relational processes (e.g. conversations with others, and engagement with the Land). Accordingly, I shifted toward a relational literature review approach. As part of the *Reimagining Research* learning experience offered by Pause+Effect (n.d.-b), I engaged in group conversations and knowledge exchanges within a community of practice. This process led me to discover non-traditional resources, including grey literature, books, podcasts, zines, and artistic works that offer profound insights into decolonising education but are often excluded from formal, academic databases. In this way, I honoured alternative epistemologies, collective sense-making, and embodied knowing. This transition moved the

literature review away from the logic of extraction and codification toward participatory, situated, and ethical practices of knowledge engagement (Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021). It affirmed that valid and transformative knowledge emerges not only from peer-reviewed publications but also from community practices, lived experience, and dialogic exchange.

4.3.6.2.4. Semi-structured interviews

A total of 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted: 2 with founding members of the SDSI programme, 6 with faculty members, and 3 with expert informants. Faculty interviews included representatives from each of the 3 partner institutions delivering the SDSI programme: 2 from LMA, 2 from EKA, and 2 from ULAP. Further details on recruitment, sampling, and representation are provided in Section 4.4 below. The expert informants comprised: (1) a policy design expert commissioned to conduct an external evaluation of SDSI, (2) a seasoned strategic designer and current SDSI student, and (3) a decolonial researcher and designer. All interviews, except those with faculty members based in Rovaniemi (Finland), were conducted online via Zoom for reasons of mutual convenience and to minimise travel-related carbon emissions. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, which was obtained prior to the interviews. More information on my ethical practices is below in section 4.5.

The use of semi-structured interviews was guided by 3 primary considerations. First, based on observations and reflections during the preparatory phase (see Section 4.3.6.1), the topic of decolonising curriculum and pedagogy emerged as both sensitive and under-discussed among SDSI faculty. It was therefore important to create confidential, one-on-one reflective spaces in which knowledge co-creators could share their perspectives and reservations freely. Semi-structured interviews offer the ideal balance of consistency and flexibility, allowing responsiveness to the natural flow of conversation (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Creswell, 2013).

Second, given the geographical dispersion of SDSI faculty, founders, and experts across different countries - and the fact that many of them were unfamiliar with one another - individual online interviews were preferable to group formats. This approach facilitated deeper engagement with each participant's unique (institutional) positioning and pedagogical values, while also offering emotional comfort and spatial distance in a setting of their choice.

The semi-structured interviews had both exploratory and emancipatory aims. While they were mainly designed to gather insights into founders and faculty members' perceptions of decolonisation, they also functioned as a form of action within action research cycle 4 (see Figure 6 above). This dual role was informed by observations and conversations from the preparatory phase (see Section 4.3.6.1), which revealed (1) limited faculty awareness of cultural competence (see Glossary, page 12), (2) minimal discussion of equality, diversity and inclusion within SDSI, and (3) an absence of references to decolonisation in SD. By introducing and discussing the concept of decolonisation, in fact, the interviews stimulated founders and faculty's critical reflection, surfaced new perspectives, and challenged their existing assumptions about the SDSI curriculum and pedagogy (Crouch & Pearce, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). These conversations worked to raise awareness, push knowledge co-creators out of their comfort zone, plant seeds of critical thought, and open pathways for action (Crouch & Pearce, 2012; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Thus, the interviews became both a data collection tools and intentional interventions, aligned with decolonial and participatory research practices (Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2012).

In addition to these emancipatory aims, each interview with founders, faculty, and experts had different but complementary exploratory objectives. Interviews with founders aimed to explore: (1) the origin, history, and evolution of the SDSI programme, (2) consortium relations and academic culture across partner institutions, (3) constraints and requirements related to Erasmus Mundus accreditation and funding, (4) curriculum design and decision-making processes, (5) hiring and retention challenges in Year 1, and (6) personal understandings and perceptions of decolonisation.

Interviews with faculty members focused on: (1) personal understandings and perceptions of decolonisation, (2) individual and institutional practices, experiences and decision-making processes related to curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, and course implementation, (3) reflections on knowledge systems and dominant narratives in design, and (4) recommendations for curricular and pedagogical development.

Interviews with experts varied according to their positionality. They were more opportunistic than planned and adapted to fit each expert's experience. The external evaluator was asked questions similar to those posed to faculty members. The strategic designer and SDSI student responded to prompts aligned with the student focus groups, and the decolonial researcher, shared expertise and practical advice on decolonial approaches in design.

Detailed interview guides were developed for each interviewee, containing key topics, open-ended core questions, and potential probes (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Creswell, 2013). These guides were pilot tested with 2 peers and iteratively refined based on feedback after each interview. Guides used for founder and faculty interviews are available in Appendices 3 and 4, while the list of questions posed to experts is included in Appendix 5.

All interviews were audio-recorded via Zoom and automatically transcribed using the software Transkriptor, then manually checked and corrected. Further information regarding the use of Zoom and Transkriptor is provided below in Section 4.5. As for the ethnographic essay (see Section 4.3.6.2.2.), interview transcripts were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). This approach was chosen for its alignment with interpretivism and its suitability for areas of inquiry where theoretical development is still emerging and where the aim is to understand a phenomenon directly from participants' perspectives without imposing a priori frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Inductive thematic analysis allowed codes and themes to emerge organically from the data - a necessary strategy given the fluid, contested, and contextually embedded meanings of "decolonisation" in (service) design education.

4.3.6.2.5. Hybrid focus groups/workshops

Two 2-hour online, hybrid focus groups/workshops were conducted on 17 and 21 March 2025, as a key component of this study's approach to centre student voices. Both sessions were hosted online via Zoom and facilitated by me, allowing students from the SDSI 2023-2025 and 2024-2026 cohorts to join remotely and comfortably from their respective locations across Europe. The first session (17 March) brought together 15 students from the 2023-2025 cohort, while the second one (21 March) included 11 students (of which 10 from the 2024-2026 cohort and 1 from the 2023-2025 cohort). For details on recruitment, sampling, and representation, see Section 4.4 below. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Ethical considerations are discussed in Section 4.5.

Focus groups are recognised as a valuable method for eliciting insights into shared experiences and collective meaning-making (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Research suggests that 2-3 focus groups can identify up to 80% of the most prevalent themes in a dataset (Guest et al., 2016). Like co-design workshops, focus groups create a space conducive to surfacing diverse perspectives, building empathy, and encouraging critical co-reflection - all essential elements for exploring contested concepts such as decolonisation within HE (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Focus groups were also chosen

because they were used effectively in recent studies on decolonising HE that prioritised student voices by Chinyamurindi (2023), Takhar (2023) and Tamimi et al. (2024).

These sessions, however, diverged from traditional focus groups formats - which typically involve 6-8 participants engaging in a structured discussion around 5-6 set questions (Puchta & Potter, 2004) - by adopting a hybrid model that blended workshop elements into the structure. This approach allowed all interested students to participate, even if it meant exceeding recommended focus group sizes. In addition to verbal discussion, knowledge co-creators were invited to engage with prompts and activities in writing, individually or collaboratively, providing multiple modes of participation. This design choice reflected a decolonial, trauma-informed, and participatory ethos, respecting diverse communication styles, and creating safer, more democratic spaces for students uncomfortable with speaking in groups. By blending elements of workshops into the focus group structure, the sessions supported relational, situated knowledge-building while addressing power imbalances often inherent in traditional research settings.

Much like the semi-structured interviews, the focus groups served both exploratory and emancipatory purposes. They invited students to co-reflect, co-construct meaning, learn more about decolonisation, and interrogate their own biases and assumptions. These sessions formed an integral part of action research cycle 4 (see Figure 6 above), and aimed to: (1) explore SDSI students' emotional and cognitive responses to the notion of "decolonising (service) design education", (2) critically examine students' lived experiences with SDSI's curriculum and pedagogy through a decolonial lens, and (3) co-develop ideas, critiques, and opportunities for making the curriculum and pedagogy more inclusive, equitable, and representative.

Students engaged interactively via the digital whiteboard tool Miro, which enabled real-time collaboration, individual reflection, and group discussion. Miro's visual co-creation features (e.g. sticky notes, voting dots, collaborative mapping) facilitated both verbal and non-verbal contributions, ensuring inclusive participation. The Miro board remained accessible for asynchronous contributions until mid-April 2025, offering knowledge co-creators extended opportunities to reflect and add insights over time.

Sessions were designed with psychological safety and constructive engagement in mind, informed by best practices in participatory action research (Fitzpatrick, 2019) and experiences from Pause+Effect's decolonial training (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a,

2024c). Each focus groups began with a grounding mindfulness and breathing exercise to support somatic awareness and emotional reflection. Activities included: (1) an icebreaker using metaphors and images to describe students' SDSI learning journeys, (2) an emotional tuning exercise with silent reflection on emotional reactions to the terms "decolonising education" and "decolonising design", (3) a collaborative brainstorm of keywords and definitions associated with decolonisation, (4) a Google search exercise to explore how decolonisation is conceptualised in students' native languages and cultures, (5) a positionality spectrum activity to gauge perceptions of curriculum and pedagogy, (6) Group discussions through open-ended storytelling prompts exploring inclusion, exclusion, agency, and equity within SDSI, and (7) a solution-focused dialogue where students proposed ways to enhance inclusivity, epistemic justice, and student agency in SDSI's curriculum and pedagogy.

The activities were designed to be trauma-informed, multilingual, and multimodal, encouraging students to express themselves in English or their native languages, and either verbally or in writing. Emphasis was placed on self-reflection and collective learning, aligning with decolonial and participatory research ethics (Smith, 2012; The River and Fire Collective, 2021). The focus groups simultaneously functioned as data collection methods, pedagogical interventions embedded within action research cycle 4 (see Figure 6 above), and as an activation of student agency in educational transformation processes. Further details on the focus groups' agenda, tools, activities, and prompts can be found in Appendix 6. For the same reasons described for the co-reflection and co-design workshop (see Section 4.3.6.2.1), the hybrid focus groups/workshops used affinity diagramming and clustering as legitimate, abductive, inclusive and democratic methods of data analysis (Forshaw, 2024; Holtzblatt & Bayer, 2015; Stickdorn et al., 2018).

4.4. Research target and sampling

As outlined above, the knowledge co-creators for this thesis consisted of current SDSI students, faculty members, and founders - key internal stakeholders within the SDSI programme - as well as a few expert informants. Students, as the primary users of the service offered by SDSI (i.e. SD education), are at the centre of this research. Faculty members are instrumental in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of the curriculum and pedagogical practices. Founders act as key decision-makers, shaping both the academic (curriculum and pedagogy) and business (funding, partnerships and projects) dimensions of the programme. Expert informants were included later in the research process when relevant opportunities

arose (i.e. an external evaluation of the SDSI programme, direct interview requests, and encounters during extra-curricular training).

Given the nature of this study and my close connection to many knowledge co-creators (i.e. my lecturers, classmates, programme founders), I have chosen not to disclose detailed characteristics about research participants in this thesis. Considering the small size and recent establishment of the SDSI programme, providing demographic information could risk compromising individual anonymity. In alignment with data minimisation principles, in fact, I did not collect demographic data (e.g. age, gender, nationality). As I already had access to basic identifying information (e.g., names, roles, and contact details), additional demographic collection was deemed unnecessary for the purposes of this qualitative research, which does not aim to analyse differences across demographic groups.

Knowledge co-creators were recruited using a combination of non-probability sampling strategies aimed at effectively identifying the actors with the greatest potential to yield deep insights into the SDSI case study and the broader phenomenon of decolonisation (Marshall and Rossman, 1999; Patton, 1990). To recruit SDSI founders and faculty members across the 3 institutions jointly delivering the programme, I employed purposive sampling. This is a widely used technique in studies involving small, specific populations and culturally or institutionally distinct contexts, such as SDSI (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 1990). The logic of this approach rests on the researcher's ability to define the kind of information needed and intentionally select individuals who are both knowledgeable and willing to share their experiences (Patton, 1990).

Efforts were made to ensure the sample included at least 2 faculty members per institution, as well as gender balance (at least 1 man and 1 woman from each). The following selection criteria were used to guide recruitment: (1) faculty and staff members with demonstrable influence on curricular and pedagogical decision-making, (2) faculty and staff directly responsible for SDSI courses or student supervision at EKA, LMA, or ULAP, (3) faculty with a dual academic-practitioner profiles in the fields of design, innovation, or business, and (4) faculty actively teaching during the data collection phase of this study. This targeted sampling ensured that participants were well-positioned to reflect on the institutional, pedagogical, and systemic dimensions of the SDSI programme, particularly in relation to curriculum and pedagogy development.

In terms of sample representativeness, qualitative research aims to capture depth and diversity rather than statistical generalisability (Creswell, 2013). At the time of writing, 22 faculty members were officially listed as teaching in the programme (SDSI, n.d.-b), of whom I interviewed 7 - covering approximately 32% of the overall population. The sample included lecturers of varied ages, genders, backgrounds, and levels of seniority. Guest et al. (2006, p.78) suggest that “a sample of six interviews may [be] sufficient to enable development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations” in relatively homogeneous groups, such as lecturers teaching the same programme. Thus, interviewing 7 faculty members falls within a robust range for an exploratory and interpretive study, particularly given the diversity within the sample.

For the workshop and focus groups, students from the 2023-2025 and 2024-2026 cohorts were recruited using a mix of convenience and purposive sampling techniques. An open call was disseminated through established student communication channels (i.e. WhatsApp and Slack) to all students enrolled in the 2 cohorts, inviting voluntary participation. This approach aligns with convenience and voluntary response sampling, commonly used to engage readily available participants who are willing to contribute (Creswell, 2013). To increase diversity and relevance to the study’s decolonial and emancipatory aims, I followed up with individual invitations and reminders to students from non-European backgrounds and those who had previously demonstrated an interest in, or vocalised concerns about, issues of diversity, coloniality, and curriculum and pedagogy transformation. This second recruitment phase reflected a purposive and criterion-based sampling approach, wherein knowledge co-creators were selected based on specific characteristics or experiences relevant to the phenomenon under study (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 1990).

In terms of participation and representation, the workshop (see Section 4.3.6.2.1) involved 13 of the 16 students from the 2023-2025 cohort who were based at ULAP during the autumn-winter semester, representing different nationalities, ages, genders and backgrounds. The hybrid focus groups/workshops (Section 4.3.6.2.5) also demonstrated strong participation and representation. Given that each SDSI cohort consists of 30 students, the first session included 53% of the 2023-2025 cohort (16 students), and the second one included 33% of the 2024-2026 cohort (10 students). Such participation rates are considered strong in qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Creswell, 2013). In qualitative inquiry, representation focuses on capturing diversity and depth rather than achieving statistical generalisation (Creswell, 2013). Given the considerable diversity among students,

both the workshop and focus group samples were sufficiently diverse and representative to support credible, contextually grounded, and student-centred insights.

4.5. Ethical considerations

Qualitative research is inherently ethically complex, as it “probes the very personal, subjective truths of people’s lives”, exposing both researchers and knowledge co-creators’ “frailties, concerns, and questions” (Clark and Sharf, 2007: 399). The nature of qualitative inquiry involves “holding the meaning of people’s lives in our hands” and, consequently, brings a real potential for psycho-emotional harm (Clark & Sharf, 2007, p. 402-403). Moreover, research is “not only about something or someone, but for someone, and this renders it morally vulnerable” (Williams, 2010: 256). From a decolonial perspective, research is an inherently collaborative and relational practice - one with emancipatory and liberatory aims that requires deep care and accountability (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024c; Smith, 2012). This research involves (1) people who occupy multiple roles in my life: classmates, friends, lecturers, mentors, and/or supporters, (2) sensitive topics related to (de)coloniality, inclusion, equity, diversity, marginalisation, and oppression in HE, (3) inherent power asymmetries within academic settings, and (4) my dual position as a participant-researcher. Hence, ethical considerations are not ancillary in this study; they are central and foundational.

Resnik (2024) defines ethics both as the study of standards of conduct (through disciplines such as law, philosophy, and psychology) and as the process of making decisions in complex, ambiguous situations. In research, ethics offer a foundational framework for knowledge generation, supporting the pursuit of truth, the minimisation of harm, and the avoidance of error (Resnik, 2024). Ethics are a necessary condition for reliable research and integrity, guiding researchers in upholding honesty and transparency while enhancing the trustworthiness of findings (ALLEA, 2023). Trust, a key pillar of empirical research, is cultivated through practices that stress accountability, respect for all people, and a commitment to the public good (ALLEA, 2023). Ethics also align research with broader societal values, including legal norms, human rights, and environmental stewardship (Resnik, 2024).

As the sole researcher undertaking this master’s thesis at an academic institution based in Finland, I was fully responsible for ensuring the ethical conduct of this project. This included adhering to relevant legislation and guidelines, mitigating risks to myself and knowledge co-

creators, ensuring data integrity, and maintaining transparency. To this end, I studied and followed the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA, 2023), the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Commission & Council, 2016), the Finnish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (TENK, 2023), and the University of Lapland's policies (ULAP, n.d.-b). Additionally, I completed a month-long, doctoral-level *Research Ethics course* (TUKO1246-3017) offered to five Finnish universities, including ULAP. This course deepened my understanding of ethics not only as regulatory compliance, but as a mindset, must-have skill, and daily practice grounded in critical thinking, care, and creative problem-solving (Shamoo & Resnik, 2015). I have come to view ethics as an ongoing, iterative, and reflexive process that must be continually evaluated - not a checklist to be ticked (Shamoo & Resnik, 2015).

4.5.1. Key ethical principles

Guided by the above-mentioned guidelines, I developed a comprehensive ethical considerations and safeguards plan (see Appendix 1), refined throughout the research process through supervisor input, peer review, and ongoing self-reflection. I aligned my research with the internationally recognised principles of autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019).

The principle of autonomy pertains to informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality (Beauchamp, & Childress, 2019). To uphold this principle, I sought and obtained informed consent from all knowledge co-creators prior to interviews, focus groups, and the workshop. Participants received a detailed information sheet and consent form outlining the study's aims, potential risks and benefits, data handling procedures, and withdrawal rights. Acknowledging that written consent forms often fail to achieve meaningful comprehension or engagement (Parfenova et al., 2024; Perrault & Keating, 2018; Perrault & Nazione, 2016), I also verbally reiterated key information and sought verbal consent at the start of each research activity.

To ensure privacy and confidentiality, only minimal personal data (i.e. name and role) were collected. All names and roles were anonymised, and data was securely stored on my password-protected laptop during the retention period. Knowledge co-creators' identities were kept confidential, and the SDSI programme is the only named entity in this thesis - as approved by my main supervisor. Confidentiality was limited in the workshop and focus groups where knowledge co-creators heard each other's views. Hence, participants were instructed not to divulge any information shared in the group beyond the sessions.

The semi-structured interviews (Section 4.3.6.2.4) and the focus groups (Section 4.3.6.2.5) were conducted on Zoom using my private Zoom Pro subscription. Prior to data collection, I consulted Zoom's customer support and adjusted my account settings to ensure recorded video and audio in Zoom meetings would be compliant with the GDPR. This included, (1) changing my data residency settings from the USA to the EEA, (2) customising data centres for meetings, and (3) storing all recordings locally on my computer, rather than in the Zoom cloud. The hybrid co-design workshop (see Section 4.3.6.2.1) was hosted via Microsoft Teams, a platform endorsed by ULAP.

The paid version of Transkriptor - a productivity tool using automated speech recognition technology - was used to automatically transcribe audio recordings. Transkriptor claims to be GDPR compliant and to use an encrypted online system (Transkriptor, n.d). However, as many academic institutions do not recommend the use of transcription tools due to concerns about the processing of data outside of the EU, I ensured to delete all audio files from the platform right after transcription, and I manually corrected the transcripts by re-listening to the recordings.

The principles of nonmaleficence and beneficence concern avoiding harm and balancing risks and benefits of participation (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). My research did not involve any interventions affecting knowledge co-creators' physical integrity, nor did it expose them to strong stimuli, safety threats, or psychological harm beyond the limits of normal daily life. Therefore, after consulting with my supervisors, it was determined that no formal ethical review was required to carry out this project. Nonetheless, I carefully evaluated potential risks and benefits for each participant group (i.e. myself, students, faculty members, administrators), and transparently described these considerations in the informed consent forms. Additionally, special attention was given to creating a safe space for dialogue and sharing during the workshop, interviews and focus groups by establishing ground rules centred on care, respect, and voluntary participation. Knowledge co-creators were also signposted to emotional support resources and counselling services available at LMA, EKA, and ULAP. All questions and activities were framed as invitations rather than obligations, with knowledge co-creators given opportunities to review and revise their contributions. A full outline of mitigation strategies for managing emotional distress, reputational risks, and biases is provided in Appendix 1.

The principle of justice relates to equitable access to research benefits and fairness in data collection (Beauchamp, & Childress, 2019). To promote inclusivity, I actively sought out

diverse voices, framed participants not as problems to be studied but as co-creators of knowledge. Emotional labour was acknowledged and respected throughout the study, and knowledge were informed of available support resources before and after participation.

4.5.2. Decolonial approaches to ethics

Although research ethics guidelines provide a useful starting point, they often reflect colonial legacies and Eurocentric epistemologies, just like academic research more broadly (Smith, 2012; The River and Fire Collective, 2021). Ethics in SD remain notably underdeveloped and often overlook the designer-researcher's responsibility in shaping not just knowledge, but reality (Penin & Grimes, 2018). As researchers and/or designers, we hold significant power over the findings, conclusions, recommendations, and designs we introduce into the world (Tunstall, 2023). With that power comes great responsibility, especially in a world where most academic knowledge, ethical paradigms, and designs have historically been constructed by white, able-bodied, cisgender, upper-class men, whose positionalities, biases, and assumptions continue to dominate what counts as ethical, rigorous, or valid (The River and Fire Collective, 2021; Tunstall, 2023).

Traditional ethical frameworks tend to prioritise rationality, individualism, institutional liability, and procedural compliance at the expense of relational accountability, knowledge reciprocity, and community well-being (Castillo, 2018; Viswanath et al., 2023). They reinforce researcher-participant hierarchies and rarely accommodate Indigenous or relational worldviews (Decoloniality Europe, 2013; The River and Fire Collective, 2021). Current ethical standards and review processes in social sciences, in fact, are still largely modelled on biomedical protocols, which are lengthy, inflexible, dry and overly bureaucratic (Castillo, 2018; The River and Fire Collective, 2021).

Decolonial ethics advocate for a shift towards truly inclusive, care-infused, and context-sensitive practices that critically examine for whom, why and how research is conducted (Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2012). These practices require not only the avoidance of harm but the active promotion of equity, justice, and the empowerment of research participants (Castillo, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017; Smith, 2012). This necessitates a strong focus on positionality, (self-)reflexivity, fair and genuine partnerships, trust-building with participants, and the pursuit of mutually beneficial research outcomes (Smith, 2012; Pillow, 2010; The River and Fire Collective, 2021). In this study, I operationalised decolonial ethics by (1) embracing my position as a participant-researcher, (2) engaging participants as co-designers in various phases of the research, and (3) using trauma-informed, relational, and

care-centred methods that emphasised comfort and consent at every stage. These commitments are further described in Appendix 1.

4.6. Research trustworthiness

Ensuring credibility and trustworthiness, which is closely tied to ethical rigour, was a core priority throughout this research (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). While qualitative research, particularly from interpretivist and critical realist paradigms, embraces subjectivity as a valid and valuable source of knowledge (Creswell, 2013; Denzin, 1994; Lather, 1991; Pillow, 2010), it also demands the active acknowledgement and careful management of inherent researcher and participant biases (Bergen & Labonté, 2019; Galdas, 2017; Rajendran, 2001).

Given my dual role as both the sole researcher in this project and current student within the SDSI programme, I implemented several strategies to enhance the credibility of this study. Following recommendations by Saldaña et al. (2011) and Pillow (2010), I adopted (self-) reflexivity, positionality statements, methodological transparency, deep engagement with critical and decolonial literature, ethical safeguards, and methodological triangulation. Data collected during interviews, focus groups, and observations were either reviewed and analysed by knowledge co-creators or at the very least made available to them for revision, thereby increasing accuracy and minimising misrepresentation.

Throughout the research process, I remained attentive to centring other students' voices over my own, striving to balance objectivity with advocacy, and recognising that my strong support for decolonial principles could risk confirmation bias. Reflexivity was systematically embedded into the study design, from the development of research questions to the data interpretation stages, in alignment with best practices for critical qualitative research (Pillow, 2010).

In terms of research validity and reliability, Yin (2003, p. 34) outlines 3 critical tests for case study research: (1) construct validity (i.e. the degree to which the study accurately measures the concepts it intends to research), (2) external validity (i.e. the extent to which findings can be analytically generalised to broader theory or other similar contexts), and (3) reliability (i.e. the consistency and replicability of the research process).

Construct validity was strengthened through methodological triangulation by combining multiple data sources and research methods (i.e. faculty interviews, expert interviews, student focus groups, informal conversations, classroom observations, autoethnography, and

document analysis). This approach ensured that diverse experiences and realities were accounted for and cross-validated (Stake, 2008).

External validity was addressed through analytical generalisation (Yin, 2003, pp. 37-38). While the findings of this single instrumental case study are not statistically generalisable and do not intend to produce universal claims applicable to all SD master's programmes, they contribute valuable, context-specific insights that complement and extend existing scholarship on decolonising SD education. This study also complements the SDSI external evaluation carried out in spring 2025 by independent consultants. The patterns and themes identified here many serve as comparative points in broader discussions around curricula and pedagogy transformation, while remaining bounded by the specific temporal, socio-cultural, and institutional setting of SDSI (Mills et al., 2010).

Reliability was enhanced through consistent and transparent documentation of my research process. This included maintaining detailed field notes, systematically designing and refining interview guides, and ensuring consistency in data collection and interpretation methods. In addition, all methods and key research decisions have been described in detail throughout the thesis and in relevant appendices to promote clarity, transparency, and potential replicability.

5. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

“We started out our study expecting to learn a great deal about human aggression. We did not know how much we would learn about altruism, empathy, hope and resilience” (Apfel & Simon, 1996: ix)

5.1. Introduction

This thesis seeks to answer the core research question: *How do SDSI students, faculty, and programme founders perceive the idea of decolonising the programme’s curriculum and pedagogical practices?* This overarching question was broken down into 4 sub-questions, focused respectively on feelings, meanings, narratives, and recommendations (see Section 2.5), which guided the data collection efforts throughout the study. The purpose of this chapter is to present the analysis of the data gathered through 4 primary methods: the co-design workshop (see Section 4.3.6.2.1), the autoethnography (Section 4.3.6.2.2), the semi-structured interviews (Section 4.3.6.2.4), and the focus groups (Section 4.3.6.2.5). These methods were employed to answer the sub-questions and offer a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

The chapter is organised into 6 sections. The first section provides contextual background on SDSI, the Erasmus Mundus programme that serves as the case study for this research. The subsequent 5 sections present the analysis of data collected in relation to each sub-question, organised by participant group (i.e. founders, faculty, students, experts). Specifically, Section 5.3 discusses the founders’ feelings, meanings, narratives, and any recommendations they provided regarding decolonisation. Section 5.4 examines faculty members’ perceptions. Section 5.5 analyses students’ perceptions, offering insights into their understanding and experiences of decolonisation within the SDSI programme, and Section 5.6 reports insights from the expert informants. The final section summarises key, cross-group findings for each sub-question.

5.2. Case study presentation

This section provides background information on the EMJM programme SDSI, which is the case study for this research. It focuses on student and faculty profiles, curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, student support structures, and the programme’s monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Information presented below was triangulated from publicly available documents, internal materials, and interviews with programme founders and faculty members.

5.2.1. Programme overview

SDSI is a two-year, interdisciplinary EMJM programme, co-funded by the European Commission since 2022 (European Commission, 2022). It integrates cross-specialisation in SD, management, business, and the social sciences. The programme is delivered by 3 partner institutions: the lead coordinator Art Academy of Latvia (LMA) in Kuldīga, the Estonian Academy of Arts (EKA) in Tallinn, and the University of Lapland (ULAP) in Rovaniemi. Additional support is provided by the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga (SSE Riga) and the Kuldīga Municipality (SDSI, n.d.-d) as associate partners.

Launched in 2021 with a small number of fee-paying students, SDSI was awarded Erasmus Mundus accreditation and funding in September 2022. This milestone enabled the programme to expand its reach, offer competitive scholarships, and attract a diverse, international student body (European Commission, 2022). The EMJM framework mandates that students complete study periods in at least 2 countries different from their country of residence (SDSI, n.d.-a). I am part of the first SDSI cohort enrolled under the Erasmus Mundus framework (2023-2025 academic year).

5.2.2. Programme origins, history, and foundational values

SDSI did not emerge from institutional planning but rather from a personal initiative. According to its co-founders, the idea for SDSI was sparked in 2016 during a serendipitous encounter at an arts event in Kuldīga, where they were introduced to each other and encouraged by the Mayor of Kuldīga to develop a project in the field of creative industries for the town. In its early stages, the project was informal without a clear vision, formal support, or funding from any academic institutions. In fact, there was no plan for it to necessarily become an academic programme. Once the concept of an academic programme took shape, the co-founders focused on creating a programme that would generate socio-economic value for Latvia.

Although initially conceived as a local initiative, SDSI was rooted in the ambition to build SD capacity across public and private sectors, and to formally establish the discipline within Latvia. As one founder put it, SDSI was created “*for us and for Latvia*” - not for the global education market. The programme’s development relied heavily on the founders’ personal networks, which proved essential in building the curriculum and securing partnerships despite limited expertise and institutional resources. As another founder remarked, the programme stemmed from “*a shared ambition to do something everyone told us was impossible*”.

LMA was the first institution to endorse the project, and SSE Riga became the first associate partner. While the Köln International School of Design (KISD) contributed for 2 years during the early planning stages, it ultimately did not join as a partner. Later, EKA and ULAP were approached and joined as full partners. Securing institutional partners and receiving national accreditation through the Latvian Ministry of Culture marked SDSI's first major milestone. However, the programme's operational costs remained high and challenging. Consequently, the programme's focus shifted from a national to an international orientation, driven largely by financial necessity. Erasmus Mundus funding (see section 5.2.3) was pursued primarily to ensure long-term sustainability.

Despite this pivot, SDSI's foundational vision remains deeply anchored in its Baltic and Northern European roots. According to the co-founders, the programme aspires to share regional knowledge internationally, while also enhancing the global visibility of its partner institutions. Today, SDSI's stated mission is to educate "versatile service innovator[s] who can enable change in public and private organisations through strategic design, management, and creative leadership" in their countries of origin or residence (SDSI, n.d-c, para. 3).

5.2.3. Erasmus Mundus framework

EMJM are prestigious international programmes designed and delivered by consortia of HEIs from at least 3 different countries, promoting academic excellence through international collaboration (European Commission, 2024a). EMJM programmes are supervised by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). SDSI is one of the 214 EMJM programmes currently funded and is the only one specifically focused on SD (EACEA, n.d.).

In September 2022, SDSI secured a €4.9 million grant (Project No. 101082388) covering the period October 2022-November 2028 (European Commission, 2022). Of this, €2.7 million was allocated to student scholarships (European Commission, 2022). SDSI is authorised to award 81 scholarships during this period (SDSI, n.d-d). Each scholarship covers full tuition and living expenses, offering students a monthly stipend of €1,400 for 24 months, along with private health insurance (SDSI, n.d-d). However, students must independently cover upfront costs such as travel, visa, vaccinations, and settlement expenses - something that not all prospective students might be able to afford. Although SDSI lacks dedicated funding for students with special needs, all partner institutions have committed to offering reasonable accommodations based on available resources (SDSI, n.d.-d). In short, SDSI organisational structure mirrors that of other Erasmus Mundus programmes: it is open

to students of all ages, backgrounds and corners of the world, operates across multiple countries and institutions, prioritises student mobility, and awards merit-based scholarships to top applicants (European Commission, 2024a).

Erasmus Mundus funding comes with specific obligations, including: (1) meeting key performance indicators (e.g. student numbers and country diversity), (2) implementing actions and submitting deliverables (e.g. annual conferences, external evaluations), and (3) communicating “European values” (i.e. human dignity, democracy, equality and human rights) while promoting “European education” globally (European Commission, 2024b). According to one of the founders, these obligations have subtly shaped how the programme is framed and presented.

5.2.4. Student body composition and challenges

SDSI is marketed globally and open to applicants of all nationalities, ages, and academic or professional backgrounds, provided they hold at least a bachelor’s degree (or a second-level professional HE diploma) and demonstrate sufficient English proficiency (SDSI, n.d.-e). Prospective students apply online, free of charge through the DreamApply platform (DreamApply, n.d.). Prior to receiving Erasmus Mundus funding, the programme graduated 15 fee-paying students (SDSI, n.d.-f). Following Erasmus Mundus accreditation, both student numbers and cohort diversity increased rapidly, bringing new cultural, curricular, and pedagogical opportunities, as well as challenges. At the time of writing, SDSI hosts approximately 60 students across 2 Erasmus Mundus cohorts (2023-2025 and 2024-2026), with each cohort comprising around 30 students, of whom 20 are scholarship holders. Students range in age from their early 20s to late 40s and represent a wide range of nationalities, disciplines, and professional backgrounds. While a significant portion of students come from design and creative fields, many have no prior experience or formal education in design or related disciplines.

In addition to the heterogeneity of the cohorts, all faculty members commented on the distinctive nature of SDSI students, particularly compared to local students. SDSI students were consistently described as more proactive, engaged, vocal, emotionally expressive, creative, and demanding - qualities that bring both richness and complexity to the classroom environment. During the focus groups (see Section 4.3.6.2.5) and the workshop held by independent consultants as part of SDSI’s external evaluation on 17 February 2025, students reported a range of recurring challenges. Non-EU students frequently encountered bureaucratic difficulties related to visas, residence permits, and well-being support. While

the informal, hands-on learning style of SDSI was widely appreciated, concerns were raised regarding the lack of theoretical grounding, inconsistent teaching quality, and limited feedback on research practices. The curriculum was perceived as overly broad, with insufficient depth in key areas such as design methods, research ethics, and emerging topics like systems thinking. Students also highlighted an over-reliance on protracted group work. While collaborative learning and teamwork was valued, it often resulted in emotional fatigue and interpersonal conflicts, especially in the absence of structured support for collaboration and conflict resolution. Finally, some students of colour reported experiences of racism and discrimination outside the university, with limited institutional support or response. These concerns - alongside reported gaps in wellbeing support, industry readiness, and portfolio development - point to a need for more inclusive structures, clearer communication, and greater alignment between the programme's ambitions and the actual student experience.

5.2.5. Faculty composition and challenges

At the time of writing, the SDSI faculty encompasses 22 members, predominantly white, cisgender, able-bodied practitioners and academics from the Global North (SDSI, n.d.-b). Specifically, 21 out of 22 (95%) are white European (except for one Canadian), and 9 out of 22 (41%) are women (SDSI, n.d.-b). Interviews with founders and faculty (see Section 4.3.6.2.4) revealed that faculty hiring practices for Year 1 in Latvia are largely ad-hoc. Most educators are recruited through personal networks, prior collaborations, or local connections rather than formalised or diversity-conscious procedures. Founders cited the limited local talent pool in SD, financial constraints, and Kuldīga's rural location as major barriers to hiring and retaining faculty.

The current teaching staff is primarily composed of founders' contacts (12 people), supplemented by lecturers from SSE Riga (6 people), EKA (1 person), and ULAP (2 people). Most faculty are practitioners with full-time jobs elsewhere, and are engaged on short-term, per-course, hourly contracts, making long-term retention contingent on their personal flexibility and continued interest in returning the following year. Both founders, in fact, noted contractual and logistical challenges related to faculty hiring and retention. With Kuldīga located in the western countryside of Latvia, 143 kilometres away from Riga international airport (approximately a 2-hour drive by car or 3-hour journey by bus), managing (international) lecturers' travel and accommodation is both logistically and financially taxing.

Founders reported that the selection of faculty is based on perceived ability to support student development, rather than on academic qualifications or publication records. Co-founders prefer hiring practitioner-experts over pure academics, valuing the ability to engage students the most, regardless of formal training or academic title. Formal pedagogical training is neither required nor commonly pursued. In fact, none of the faculty interviewed for this study had completed formal pedagogical training, and only 2 interviewees had attended sessions, workshops or events related to diversity, inclusion, or equity in HE. Notably, none reported prior experience with (de)coloniality in education or design. In addition, no dedicated budget currently exists within SDSI for faculty training or development.

In Year 1, reliance on multiple visiting lecturers - many of whom are quite unfamiliar with the programme and with one another - has led to recurring issues with teaching consistency, misalignment of course content, and lack of continuity across the curriculum. Several faculty members expressed difficulties in tailoring their teaching to an extremely diverse cohort in terms of nationality, age, and academic background and level, particularly in the absence of a clear understanding of students' prior learning. Gaps in communication among lecturers, exacerbated by limited time and lack of coordination structures with each other, have contributed to overlapping content, pedagogical inconsistencies, and unmet student needs. Moreover, faculty are increasingly expected not only to deliver course content and manage external partnerships but also to provide student well-being and group dynamics' support - demands that often exceed both their competencies and the time available to them.

5.2.6. Curriculum focus and design

According to one founder, the original curriculum structure for Year 1, delivered in Latvia, was personally designed by them, based on their individual visions and initial research into other European SD programmes and professional standards. A definition of curriculum is provided in the Glossary (see page 12). A comparative analysis of existing programmes informed these early curriculum decisions, with particular inspiration drawn from the UK's professional SD standards. Emphasis was placed on leadership skills over technical design execution. Significant input was also provided over 2 years by Professor Birgit Mager and her colleagues at the Köln International School of Design (KISD), alongside contributions from LMA and SSE Riga.

The curriculum was first accredited nationally in Latvia before Erasmus Mundus funding was sought. According to one founder, Erasmus Mundus did not impose specific curricular

requirements but evaluated and accepted the curriculum based on the consortium's own educational vision. However, the other founder observed that there is an implicit expectation from the European Commission to promote EU values to students within the programme.

Students complete 120 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) over 2 academic years. The programme is designed to offer foundational, broadly recognised and state-of-the-art tools and methods in SD, acting as a starting platform for diverse students from various backgrounds to build upon independently and adapt to their own contexts.

The current Year 1 curriculum delivered in Latvia encompasses 18 courses, combining interdisciplinary learning across SD, business, management, leadership, technology and the social sciences - delivered with a strongly Eurocentric perspective (SDSI, n.d.-c). During Year 1, students also have access to free, optional, A1 Latvian language classes, drawing classes, and counselling sessions.

In 2024, the Year 2 curriculum for the 2023-2025 cohort included 1 core mandatory course and a selection of electives at EKA, or 2 core courses and electives at ULAP, depending on students' mobility pathways. The new, core mandatory course at EKA was independently designed by the main lecturer with limited guidance from the Faculty of Design and no feedback from LMA, reflecting a focus on creative freedom, autonomy, and trust. The lecturer proactively sought feedback from colleagues at EKA and abroad to enrich the course content, methods, and theoretical framework. An external lecturer was also invited to cover topics beyond the main lecturer's area of expertise. At ULAP, the core courses were initially designed by the Dean of the Faculty of Art and Design and the initial team involved in SDSI and were then handed over to the current lecturer to be delivered. The current lecturer slightly adapted the content, assignments and timelines based on his knowledge, interests and contacts.

Since its original conceptualisation in 2016, the overall curriculum structure of SDSI has remained relatively stable. While minor yearly adjustments are made at the founders' discretion, major changes require external review and supervisory board approval - a bureaucratic process that can take up to 2 years. Each institution designs its own courses independently, with limited coordination and no feedback from other partners. This autonomy - intended to support trust, freedom and local contextualisation - has nevertheless resulted in known overlaps between courses (especially at LMA and ULAP), leading to frustration among both students and faculty.

The Western/Eurocentric orientation of the programme's content, topics, reading lists, examples, and case studies is acknowledged by the founders and associate partner SSE Riga, but not viewed as a limitation. They resist the idea of creating a fully internationalised programme with a global outlook, instead affirming their commitment to maintaining a regional identity and aligning with Erasmus Mundus' mission of promoting European educational values globally. The founders emphasised that the programme teaches what the faculty knows, supplementing gaps - when necessary - by bringing in external experts. One faculty member noted that "*the programme is in Europe, the faculty is based in Europe, and we are providing Europe's experience and Europe's tools, which are the most used and the most useful in Europe*". Recognising the need for greater thematic depth and flexibility, SDSI is currently considering expanding the curricular offer for Year 2 by securing new institutional partnerships and offering students new, specialised pathways based on specific interests, such as a potential policy design track.

5.2.7. Pedagogical practices and academic support

SDSI's pedagogical practices and teaching styles combine theoretical learning with project-based work, both delivered in person. A definition of pedagogical practices is provided in the Glossary (see page 16). During Year 1, in Latvia, classes are typically held 3 times a week (Wednesday to Friday, 10am-2pm), with Mondays and Tuesdays reserved for independent study, extracurricular activities, or personal commitments. Once a month, students participate in an "intense week" with lectures from Monday to Friday (10am-5pm). This schedule allows students to work part-time, travel, or engage in volunteering and extracurricular projects. In Year 2, the schedule becomes more personalised, depending on the elective and optional courses students select. Prior to receiving Erasmus Mundus funding, teaching was predominantly online, supplemented by 4 intensive in-person weeks per year.

Founders and faculty view SDSI as a platform for introducing foundational SD skills, expecting students to build on these independently based on their individual goals and interests. Faculty members are encouraged to teach from their own professional practice, prioritising local expertise and experience. Students are thus invited to take ownership of their learning journey, without expecting the programme to cater to every individual need.

SDSI promotes a dynamic, informal, and student-centred learning environment. Faculty are encouraged to act as facilitators rather than authority figures, minimising hierarchical dynamics and teacher-centred approaches. Pedagogy is built around practical exercises,

hands-on tasks, and group work. The curriculum's strong emphasis on leadership and teamwork skills, in fact, is complemented by engagement with real-life service challenges and projects. Students work on 2 long-term group projects in Year 1 and 1 or 2 team projects in Year 2. There is no formal examination period at the end of each semester, and no lengthy essays are required. Instead, assessment relies on a combination of individual and group assignments, with group deliverables playing a particularly prominent role.

Pedagogical intent and educational philosophy vary across SDSI's teaching team, particularly in how students are perceived and supported. Some lecturers adopt a personalised, relational approach, treating students as individuals with unique learning needs and aspirations. While this supports student motivation and satisfaction, it raises concerns around lecturers' time management and equitable support. Other educators conceive students more as "outcomes" or "products" of the programme, focusing on ensuring that all students meet learning objectives and competencies while overlooking individual needs and reinforcing a transactional model of education. Several faculty members noted that these divergent pedagogical perspectives are highly individual and deeply rooted, making alignment across the teaching team challenging.

Unlike many other Erasmus Mundus programmes, SDSI does not currently offer formal internships. However, it supports students' professional development in other ways, such as covering membership fees for the Service Design Network (SDN, n.d.) and providing free access to the SDN Youth Conference (SDN Young Talent Board, n.d.). Additionally, students receive a welcome pack (including a copy of Stickdorn et al.'s (2018) book, a branded hoodie, and a canvas bag) to promote a sense of belonging, community and pride.

Beyond faculty members, administrative and personal support is provided by 3 so-called "coordinators", one at each partner institution. These key staff members assist faculty with administrative and logistical tasks and serve as the main point of contact for SDSI students before, during, and after their mobility semesters. Their responsibilities include visa support, accommodation arrangements, issuing student cards, booking university rooms, and notifying students of institutional communications.

5.2.8. Consortium dynamics

Collaboration among academic consortium partners - LMA (coordinator), EKA (full partner), ULAP (full partner), and SSE Riga (associate partner) - is generally positive and collegial. However, each institution has different objectives, funding structures, institutional cultures, and motivations for being a part of SDSI, which do not always align. Staff at LMA

and ULAP both reported stronger collaboration with EKA (Estonia). LMA and ULAP tend to work more independently from each other, with opportunities to increase transparent and collaborative communication efforts between them. LMA has close ties with SSE Riga, due to geographical proximity and long-standing collaboration dating back to the programme's early development.

Monthly online coordination meetings are held with representatives from all partner institutions to discuss administrative matters, upcoming activities, and urgent faculty or student issues (e.g. leave requests, emergencies, visa complications). Levels of engagement in these meetings vary by institution and course content and academic matters are rarely discussed. Moreover, SDSI faculty meet at least once a year at an in-person faculty workshops (usually held in Kuldīga) to discuss broader challenges, student feedback, and academic matters.

Inevitably, as in many programmes and HEIs, silos exist both within and between partner institutions. These were recognised by both founders and faculty members, especially in relation to curriculum design and pedagogical coherence. Notably, internal silos within institutions are often exacerbated by the fact that SDSI is a “special” programme that does not formally belong to any single partner institution. Instead, it operates as a transnational initiative situated above institutional boundaries, enrolling students who do not officially part of any single university's faculty and who are subject to different rules and procedures than local students or Erasmus+ exchange students.

5.2.9. Monitoring, evaluation and feedback mechanisms

SDSI has formal feedback mechanisms for students, primarily in the form of end-of-course and end-of-semester surveys. Yet, founders shared that response rates are generally low, and anonymous feedback is often difficult to act on in a meaningful way. One founder admitted that the culture of critical feedback within art and design education remains underdeveloped, and that there is a general reluctance among faculty and consortium partners to openly seek or receive feedback on the curriculum and pedagogical approaches. Each partner institution is responsible for its own courses, with virtually no cross-institutional feedback or peer review aside from discussions held at the annual faculty workshop in Kuldīga. Even then, not all faculty members attend these annual workshops, further limiting opportunities for shared reflection and collaborative improvement.

In addition to surveys, a few informal class meetings with one of the co-founders were held during Year 1 of the 2023-2025 cohort to collect qualitative feedback and address student

complaints. In Year 2, the EKA lecturer delivering the core mandatory course for SDSI students sought qualitative feedback informally at the end of their course, and I facilitated the co-reflection and co-design workshop (see Section 4.3.6.2.1) to gather student feedback on the 2 core courses offered at ULAP, supported by my main thesis supervisor.

In spring 2025, a formal external review of the programme was conducted by independent SD experts commissioned by SDSI. The evaluation provided a report to the SDSI leadership to be submitted to the European Commission, offering valuable insights into the programme's strengths, weaknesses, and growth opportunities. This thesis complements that evaluation by offering deeper and more nuanced accounts of students' experiences and stakeholders' perceptions of decolonisation.

One of the founders shared that SDSI plans to track graduate outcomes over the long term to assess employability and programme impact on alumni's careers. However, challenges around collecting post-graduation data are anticipated, as alumni often disengage from institutional communications. In addition to graduate employment metrics, SDSI also measures its success through the number and quality of real-world industry projects and collaborations. These partnerships - ranging from projects with Riga international Airport and the Strategic Management Office of the city of Tallinn - are viewed as key indicators of the programme's practical impact and relevance.

5.3. Founders' perceptions

This section presents an analysis of the 2 SDSI founders' perceptions of decolonisation and their reflections on the programme's curriculum and pedagogy, based on data collected through semi-structured interviews (see Section 4.3.6.2.4).

5.3.1. Overview

The founders' perceptions of decolonisation were marked by strong emotional responses, initial scepticism, and a gradual (but limited) evolution in understanding over the course of the interviews. Both founders exhibited confusion, discomfort, scepticism, and defensiveness when first confronted with the concept of decolonising SDSI, often expressing concerns about protecting the programme's Baltic and Northern European identity. Their initial framing of decolonisation was rooted in historical-political experiences of occupation in the Baltic region, rather than epistemological critiques of knowledge production.

Both conflated decolonisation with broader notions of diversity, accessibility, and globalisation, reflecting a limited familiarity with decolonisation as a systemic or epistemic

concept. There was a consistent emphasis on localism and the preservation of distinct cultural and knowledge systems, with decolonisation perceived as a threat to cultural wholeness and identity.

However, over the course of the interviews, emotional trajectories emerged. One founder, through dialogue and critical reflection, showed conditional openness and growing curiosity toward the intellectual dimensions of decolonisation, particularly in relation to inclusion and cultural diversity. The other remained more resistant, prioritising cultural protection and viewing global influences as potentially diluting the programme's original vision.

Several dominant narratives shaped their responses: a threat narrative (decolonisation seen as undermining local culture), a founder intent narrative (defending the programme's original mission), a cultural protection narrative (using metaphors of colour, travel, and food to argue for preserving local uniqueness), a trend/scepticism narrative (viewing decolonisation as a new and unfamiliar trend), and an emerging opportunity narrative (tentative recognition of the value of broadening epistemic horizons).

Despite their resistance to SDSI's systemic or epistemological decolonisation, both founders acknowledged the importance of encouraging critical thinking about tools, theories, and cultural assumptions. They supported improvements such as strengthening peer-to-peer learning, improving feedback mechanisms, offering clearer curricular explanations, and encouraging lecturers to acknowledge their positionality to promote greater epistemic transparency. Discussions also revealed a forward-looking intention to expand Year 2 study pathways, allowing students more choice aligned with their interests.

5.3.2. Emotional responses

Both founders exhibited strong, mostly negative emotional reactions when confronted with the idea of decolonising SDSI. Their initial emotional landscape conveyed through words and non-verbal cues was characterised, in no particular order, by:

Confusion (6 occurrences): Both expressed confusion around the term “decolonisation” and sought clarification, reflecting difficulty grasping the concept's implications:

“I don't know if I understand this word”

“But can you give me some specific examples?”

“I don't know anything [about student movements to decolonise the curriculum]”

Discomfort/unease (5): They conveyed unease regarding the political charge of the term decolonisation, coupled with a protecting impulse towards local identity:

“I can imagine what you think about, but I don’t feel it”

“I start becoming like, 'don't go there,' because we are ourselves those who need to protect our wholeness”

Scepticism (6): Both founders expressed scepticism about the relevance and applicability of decolonisation for SDSI context:

“I don't really understand why this word is used for SDSI”

“I don't think this is wrong. I don’t think that we should be introducing some other perspectives in SDSI”

Defensiveness/resistance (7): Both felt decolonisation as a potential threat to SDSI’s regional identity. One founder’s first reaction was to use a defensive anticipation of disagreement before the conversation started:

“Probably I don't agree with what I imagine that you think”

“The first thing that comes to my mind is protection. Like to protect ourselves, our culture, our identity”

Conditional openness/gradual curiosity (8): Both founders showed a trajectory of emotional evolution during the interview - from resistance to partial openness of the idea that the programme could benefit from more critical reflection on its epistemic foundations. One founder expressed a genuine intellectual and emotional interest in learning more about inclusion and cultural diversity:

“I think I'm starting to understand what you mean. And it makes sense. I do agree”

“Maybe there is something... and some researcher will come from Asia and will do some research about it, I will read it and I will try out”

5.3.3. Understandings and meanings

The founders’ initial understandings of decolonisation were rooted in their lived experiences of colonisation in the Baltic region and gradually expanded (albeit partially) through dialogue.

Historical framing (2 occurrences): Both founders initially associated decolonisation through the historico-political lends of Latvia’s independence struggles:

“It’s about history, it’s a historical process”

“Latvia, you know, Baltic states under the Swedes and Russians and Germans”

Unclear understanding (6): Both openly admitted not understanding the term “decolonisation” clearly:

“I don't know how I understand. I can just imagine what you think”

“But can you give me some specific examples?”

Substitution with diversity and accessibility (4): Both conflated decolonisation with broader inclusion and accessibility efforts:

“We had a course in Italy, and we talked about accessibility”

“There is this new initiative from European Commission to ensure that websites are accessible”

“I wanted to talk all the time about the cultural diversity of students to understand how we should work with them and maybe better understand”

Substitution with globalisation (4): One founder equated decolonisation with globalisation introducing a strong discourse about rejecting the homogenisation of cultures:

“I don't hear anything [at university] about these global things, globalisation and decolonisation”

“Actually, I don't like globalisation in general”

Localism as epistemology (6): Both founders, implicitly recognising the value of local and context-specific epistemologies (a decolonial aspect), emphasised the importance of preserving unique local identities and knowledge systems:

“I think that we have our own value, and we have these bright colours of our own nations and peoples”

“When you mix different colours together, then there is just brown”

“If you want to do it differently, then it's [SDSI] anymore and we are destroying it”

“I think that we have to think locally”

5.3.4. Narratives and framings

Several dominant narratives emerged shaping the founders' perceptions:

Threat narrative (6 occurrences): Decolonisation was perceived as a potential threat to Baltic cultural wholeness:

“Actually, I don't like globalisation in general because I think that we have our own value”

“Protect ourselves, our culture, our identity”

“When you tell me this word to “decolonize SDSI”, I realise I start thinking “don't go there”

Founder intent narrative (4): Both founders strongly defended SDSI's original vision of a local, Baltic/Northern European-serving programme against serving global diversity agendas:

“We did it for us...We wanted it for Latvia”

“It's specifically written in the grant agreement that we have to communicate European values to students”

Cultural protection narrative (5): Drawing on metaphors of colour, travel and food, founders argued that entering a different educational culture demands adaptation, not transformation:

“When you have different colours, you mix them together and then there is just brown colour. No”

“If I go to China, I would embrace their education, I don't expect them to change it for me. I don't go to China to receive European education”

“If I went to Morocco and said that I wanted their cuisine more European and that I wanted pork...that would not help in any way”

Trend/scepticism narrative (5): Both acknowledged that decolonisation is a new and unfamiliar concept in Latvia:

“Not really, no. I don't hear about it”

“Maybe it's a new thing”

“In my career before SDSI this topic was not addressed at all, and it was not popular”

Opportunity narrative (3): One founder expressed conditional openness to new knowledges, framed as expanding understanding if credible research emerges. The other framed Eurocentric education as a catalyst for innovation in international student's home countries:

“If someone from Asia does research... I will read it and try it”

“Maybe students from other parts of the world learn some tools, thinking, approach concepts... and they become innovators back at their homes”

5.3.5. Recommendations

Six concrete recommendations to improve the curriculum and pedagogy emerged from the interviews, some raised by the founders and others offered by me and discussed with them:

1. **Critical thinking:** One founder stressed the importance for faculty to foreground critical thinking about theories, tools and methods presented in class, as well as their assumptions and need to be adapted:

“Students really have to understand that there is no perfect way to apply a tool. You have to adapt it to your context”

“I think the most important thing is critical thinking. In every context and for any tools, methods or whatever. This is a golden word”

2. **Peer-to-peer learning:** Both suggested asking faculty to encourage and facilitate open discussions where students bring diverse experiences and knowledge from around the world rather than requiring faculty to artificially globalise content or do tokenistic curriculum changes:

“I cannot ask faculty “hey listen, now you have to take some case studies from Pakistan or somewhere”. It would really be fake. But I can ask faculty to say “hey, let's raise this question and let's have a very nice discussion in the class with the students”, then I think this is very nice”

“Peer-to-peer learning enhances the sharing of content and experience of students from different regions with the class. We value peer to peer learning”

3. **Feedback mechanisms:** One founder suggested rethinking current feedback mechanisms (e.g. mandatory versus voluntary, anonymous versus open, quantitative versus qualitative) to increase students’ input and ensure meaningful dialogue and change:

“Since students are not very into feedback giving it's really hard for me to evaluate [courses and teachers]”

“We are struggling with this. We don't get feedback. For some courses, we get a bit more but for others it is much less. Our hypothesis is that if you have complaints, you

give feedback. If you are happy, you don't. But I don't know, because this might not be true, and it's just that students don't reply"

4. **Curricular explanations:** Founders agreed with my suggestion to offer a clearer explanation of the programme's curricular and pedagogical structure, aims, and limitations at the beginning of new students' studies to be transparent and ensure they can trust the process and zoom out in their journeys:

"That's true. I probably just have to find the best words and explanation to assure students why [the curriculum] is the way it is"

"Yeah, true, true"

5. **Positionality acknowledgments:** One founder agreed with my suggestion that lecturers should explicitly acknowledge their positionality and epistemic assumptions during their classes to avoid presenting Western narratives as universal and to invite alternative worldviews into classroom discussions:

"I understood your idea about those disclaimers. I think they make sense"

"We can ask lecturers to have this disclaimer that this is not the full history of design but a European take and angle on it"

6. **Specialisation pathways:** Founders are considering expanding SDSI's second-year course options by collaborating with more partner institutions in different countries, allowing students to pursue diverse specialisations (e.g. policy design) and career pathways.

"In the future, we are considering adding more partner universities, so that second-year students would have the possibility to choose different partners. For example, if you are interested in policy design or something similar, you would be able to follow a different path"

5.4. Faculty members' perceptions

This section presents an analysis of SDSI faculty members' perceptions of decolonisation and their reflections on the programme's curriculum and pedagogy, based on 6 semi-structured interviews conducted between February and March 2025.

5.4.1. Overview

Faculty members demonstrated a broader range of perspectives and more epistemically nuanced interpretations of decolonisation compared to the founders. Although many initially shared the founders' unfamiliarity or scepticism, they often moved beyond defensiveness and engaged in active critical reflection, particularly regarding pedagogy and knowledge systems.

Emotional responses varied and, in several cases, evolved over the course of the interviews toward curiosity and constructive engagement. Initial reactions included confusion and mild discomfort, especially due to the term's political charge or its perceived incompatibility with SDSI's regional mission. However, faculty often expressed a tone of intellectual humility, acknowledging their limited familiarity without defensiveness.

Rather than perceiving decolonisation as a threat to local identity, most faculty exhibited an emerging epistemic awareness, recognising the dominance of Eurocentric tools and theories in design and business education. Several interpreted decolonisation through lenses of participatory learning, social justice, accessibility, and inclusion, underscoring the diversity in how its relevance was perceived.

In addition to the narratives identified by the founders, faculty introduced new frames: opportunity frames (viewing decolonisation as a chance to innovate education), structural critique (acknowledging institutional barriers, including time, language, and autonomy), and critical reflexivity (recognising the Western roots of the curriculum). Notably, no faculty member fully rejected the relevance of decolonisation, although several raised important caveats, such as the risk of superficial engagement or the need to maintain curricular clarity and coherence.

On balance, while systemic transformation remained an aspirational goal for most, faculty exhibited a markedly more open stance toward decolonisation than the founders. They expressed a clear commitment to evolving both pedagogy and curriculum in more inclusive, participatory, and critically reflective directions.

5.4.2. Emotional responses

Faculty responses revealed diverse and evolving emotional landscapes that leaned towards constructive engagement:

Confusion / intellectual humility (22 occurrences): All faculty expressed unfamiliarity with the term "decolonisation" in academic, pedagogical and/or SD contexts. Yet, this was typically framed with openness and reflective humility rather than resistance.

“I haven't dug deep into this academic concept so far”

“Maybe some people have done research on that, but I don't know”

“It is a very abstract word for me”

“I haven't really thought about it in relation to service design”

“It's not a concept that I'm familiar with”

Discomfort / unease (11): Most faculty members showed signs of somatic or emotional discomfort, especially when confronting their own positionality or potential complicity in epistemic exclusion.

“It made me uncomfortable, but I realised my reading list was 100% white authors”

“I feel like I'm not equipped to talk about this... but I want to be”

“It's hard to admit how little I thought about this before”

“I have mixed emotions when you mentioned decolonisation, a part of me feels uneasy”

Scepticism (13): All faculty voiced some doubts regarding the conceptual clarity, historical relevance, or local applicability of decolonisation. For some, this was due to perceived misalignment with regional or disciplinary contexts.

“I would not even consider it if you hadn't asked me for an interview”

“Looking at universities in the USA or France would be more accurate”

“I don't feel that design was so much colonised”

“Maybe it's more relevant in contexts with clear colonial history”

“Honestly I cannot really link it to SDSI”

Defensiveness / resistance (5): One faculty member articulated a strong emotional and political resistance to framing SDSI or the Baltic context within a coloniser-colonised binary.

“We have been colonised and occupied... That's why I don't think SDSI needs to be decolonised.”

“I don't think that SDSI has tried to colonise something”

“What are you trying to achieve using this term?”

“Do you mean that you actually believe and can prove that SDSI is colonised?”

Curiosity and intellectual openness (28): All faculty, regardless of scepticism, ultimately expressed interest in learning more about decolonisation, especially as an epistemic and pedagogical tool.

“I’m curious to see where you’re taking this”

“If someone recommends a great theoretical model from Asia or Africa, I’d always be open to trying it”

“This is an important discussion. I haven’t thought of it in this way before, but it makes sense”

“I think it’s something meaningful and developed from the student perspective”

“Design is not fixed. It should evolve with the world”

“As educators, we have the responsibility to introduce alternative models and tools”

5.4.3. Understandings and meanings

While some faculty members shared the founders’ historical framings, many articulated deeper reflections on knowledge systems, pedagogy, and global justice:

Historical framing (13): Like the co-founders, several initially understood decolonisation in geopolitical terms, relating to historical national struggles.

“Latvia and Estonia were colonised”

“What comes to my mind is one country invading another country”

“Our system still carries legacy from Japanese colonisation”

“It brings to mind countries colonised by others like India and Australia”

“Protests in support of Palestine can also be framed as decolonisation”

Unclear understanding (13): Most faculty candidly admitted not fully grasping the term or its theoretical grounding in design or education.

“Not sure. I haven’t dug deep into this academic concept so far”

“Is that really the right term?”

“No, I don’t understand student movements calling for decolonisation”

“It does not resonate, no”

Epistemic awareness (20): Most, identified the Eurocentrism of dominant knowledge systems and the need to question it - an epistemic shift largely absent from the founders' accounts.

"I recognise that what I read, know and teach come predominantly from European or Western writers"

"Design is very embedded in capitalist assumptions"

"Innovation and sustainability mean different things across cultures"

"Western education practises do not work in the South African context"

"We all bring our cultural biases in what we teach, of course"

Substitution with representation, diversity, inclusion and accessibility (19): Half of them interpreted decolonisation through more familiar concepts of diversity, inclusion, or accessibility.

"Accessibility of websites and services is part of what we are required to do now"

"In design, we talk about inclusive and barrier-free design"

"We need more diversity in the profession of service design"

"It's about representation in conferences, in teaching and in the board of a company"

"Like using the correct pronouns for people who do not identify with traditional gender binary"

Substitution with social justice (9): A few framed decolonisation as linked to economic, environmental, or social equity.

"It's a big topic due to climate change and the persistent global inequalities"

"Like the commons"

"It is about social sustainability"

"Bridging financial gaps among students"

Substitution with participation (9): A few framed decolonisation as strictly connected to participatory processes.

"Create these participatory processes with multiple languages and ethnicities"

“Participatory design is very close to decolonising practices”

Substitution with other adjacent framings (7): Several invoked adjacent framings relating to globalisation, racism and Indigeneity.

“It’s anti-racism”

“Covering all the globe and all the cultures”

“Like research about the Sámi people in the Arctic”

Localism as epistemology (5): Echoing the founders, 3 faculty members defended the value of contextuality and local knowledge systems, often reframed as a strength rather than resistance.

“We are providing Europe’s experience and tools”

“Design consider the local context and culture”

“Service design tools are iterative and adaptable across cultures”

“Students’ experiences from Global South show that innovation, design and sustainability are perceived differently”

5.4.4. Narratives and framings

Faculty narratives were notably richer and more reflexive than those of the founders, often balancing self-critique, pedagogical values, and structural awareness.

Threat narrative (4): One faculty echoed founders’ concerns that decolonisation seems to undermine Baltic postcolonial identity.

“It really aches in the heart to be implied as a coloniser”

“Loaded historical connotation... doesn’t fit at all here”

“SDSI hasn’t tried to colonise anything”

Founder intent narrative (3): One faculty defended SDSI as a programme of regional empowerment and cultural specificity, not one aiming for global epistemic pluralism.

“SDSI was created to share Europe’s experience”

“We are taking faculty from this region. And we are white people here”

“I don’t think SDSI is trying to claim that we are covering the whole world. It would not be possible”

Cultural protection narrative (3): Emphasis was placed on preserving SDSI's European educational distinctiveness.

"I think students come here for this. To learn about our countries and what we have here"

"We are providing Europe's experience and tools which are the most useful in Europe"

Scepticism / trend narrative (8): Decolonisation was sometimes framed as a trend or buzzword not yet embedded in mainstream design education.

"Sometimes it feels like a trend more than a practice"

"In this country, it is not so relevant, I think"

"It seems to be linked to the woke culture"

"Decolonisation is not really a priority"

Critical reflexivity (15): Faculty demonstrated awareness of their own assumptions and advocated for embedding critical consciousness in curriculum and pedagogy.

"I always critically reflect on the assumptions behind buzzwords like sustainability and circular economy"

"Lecturers should be critically conscious of what terms and tools they use"

"Service design allows you to ditch the method if it doesn't fit culturally"

"It is really crucial to test our tools with participants first"

"Design, innovation and even the SDGs are embedded in capitalism"

Opportunity narrative (24): This was the most dominant frame, In this framing, decolonisation was seen as a catalyst for more inclusive, innovative, and responsive education.

"Opening ourselves to diverse perspectives could improve education quality"

"If someone recommends a great theoretical model from Asia or Africa, I'd always be open to trying it"

"We need to have new and radically different narratives in design"

“Design can be the tool through which decolonisation becomes practical instead of only a theory debate”

Structural constraint narrative (16): Most faculty acknowledged systemic limitations, such as time, institutional inertia, training gaps as barriers to transformative change.

“We need support to do this well. It can’t all be individual responsibility”

“You can do all the workshops you want, but without legitimacy, no change happens”

“There is always political power conflict which stops change in society”

“Education requires support systems and structures. Without it, not everyone can benefit”

Co-option narrative (2): One faculty member highlighted the need to remain critical of how epistemic shifts are implemented, raising questions about cultural authenticity and innovation.

“I read service design literature from India and thought, is that kind of a follow up on the kind of Silicon Valley culture just exported to India?”

“I often wonder if Asian literature on service design has developed by itself or is just you know, continuing the train of thought that came from Western countries? I don’t know”

5.4.5. Recommendations

Eight concrete recommendations (ranked from most to least mentioned) to improve the SDSI curriculum and pedagogical practices emerged from interviews with faculty members, echoing some of the founders’ insights while also introducing new perspectives:

1. **Service design approach to curriculum development:** Four faculty members suggested that SDSI leadership should adopt SD principles (prototyping, testing, iterating) in the continuous development of the programme’s curriculum and pedagogy, thereby co-creating value together and aligning management practices with the principles taught to students. Faculty advocated for including students in curriculum and course design and for increasing collaboration among partner universities.

“I think Latvia should apply more service design in what they do while leading the programme”

“We should ask students: what are your goals and needs? What do you want to learn from the courses?”

“Apply service design for courses - prototype, test, adapt, repeat”

“I think we should give space not only about what SDSI is offering, but also what the students are expecting”

2. **Faculty dialogues, feedback sessions and reflective spaces:** Three faculty called for more formalised spaces for internal faculty reflection and idea exchanges about curriculum and courses co-design both within and across partner institutions to ensure shared pedagogical intent and richer interdisciplinary integration. Alignment on pedagogical intent and teaching philosophy was also emphasised.

“What I miss is the opportunity and collegial space to bounce ideas off with colleagues”

“Everyone is always so busy, but we need times for pausing and reflection with others”

3. **Cultural and intercultural teaching competence:** Recognising the diversity of SDSI’s student body, 3 faculty proposed receiving formal training in cross-cultural communication, conflict management, and/or psychological first aid. This would help faculty members perfect their cultural competence (see definition in the Glossary on page 12), equipping lecturers to navigate group dynamics and support students from different cultural and socio-politico-economic backgrounds.

“Different kinds of conflict always arise, especially in the student group work. And we don’t have time or the skills necessary to actually help with group dynamics”

“I would really like training on handling difficult situations with students who struggle with some kind of emotional or psychological issue”.

4. **Feedback culture and student co-creation:** Three faculty members highlighted the importance of moving beyond passive, end-of-course and end-of-semester surveys toward more proactive, dynamic, participatory and qualitative feedback sessions where lecturers are present. They also suggested involving students earlier in course planning through co-creation workshops or brainstorming sessions to better align course delivery with students’ goals, expectations, and prior knowledge. Meaningful and timely exchanges between Year 1 students, EKA and ULAP were suggested.

“I can imagine having like a testing session of what we plan to teach, and then have a co-creation session with students”

“The feedback systems now are too passive. I like informal discussions with the students. It’s better. Because it gives a lot more than numbers and figures”

“Student-faculty knowledge exchanges for year 2 should happen earlier”

5. **Critical thinking and design mindset:** Two faculty emphasised the need to encourage critical thinking by engaging students in questioning the assumptions behind widely used tools, methods, and frameworks, particularly in areas like innovation, sustainability, human-centred design and futures. They stressed that tools should be presented not as neutral, universal solutions, but as context-dependent and value-laden frameworks that must be critically adapted and iterated upon to instil a (service) design mindset in the students.

“We didn’t go very deep, but we should have asked why is sustainability not so important for some students? Or what does sustainability really mean for them?”

“It seems to many that many students think and use the tools as something fixed, to follow like a dogma. The design mindset must be taught better”

6. **Peer-to-peer learning and teaching:** Three faculty advocated for participatory learning structures and dialogue-based teaching approaches that can be combined by making structured and greater use of peer-to-peer learning and class discussions that make full use of the students’ diverse perspectives without overburdening faculty. This approach was seen to leverage student diversity, decentralise expertise and democratise knowledge production within SDSI, allowing students to bring their own histories, knowledges and alternative frameworks into the classroom

“The knowledge should come from the students, not always from the teacher.”

“The students have so much to teach us.”

“Peer-to-peer exchanges could improve the curriculum”

7. **Systemic and transition perspectives:** Human-centred design is important, but it is becoming old and obsolete. Today’s polycrises, services and future scenarios necessitate a planet-centred and systemic approach that goes well beyond user-centricity. SD, systems-oriented design and futures design should be introduced to students early in the SDSI programme and applied together. A few faculty members

stressed the need to integrate futures' thinking, systemic perspectives, and reflective practices into the curriculum to equip students with the cognitive flexibility needed to tackle contemporary global issues.

“We should think how to connect different methods and big disciplines like the systems thinking, the future thinking and the service design together and how to apply it in a very practical way so that the students get the best value out of it”

“Human-centred is just not good enough”

8. Transparency about curricular structures and positionality acknowledgments:

The faculty endorsed making epistemic assumptions explicit by encouraging lecturers to present positionality statements at the beginning of their courses. This was seen as a trust-building mechanism that could promote critical reflection and relational ethics in the classroom.

“Be transparent about where the knowledge comes from. Students can handle it”

“We have to say: this is a European lens”

“Faculty should be encouraged to share their backgrounds and the limitations of their knowledge”

5.5. Students' perceptions

A summary of the perceptions of the 26 SDSI students (15 from the 2023-2025 cohort and 10 from the 2024-2026 cohort) who participated in the focus groups (see Section 4.3.6.2.5) is provided below. Recommendations were drawn from both the focus groups and the co-reflection workshop (see Section 4.3.6.2.1).

5.5.1. Overview

Students' perceptions were diverse, emotionally layered, and often deeply personal. Unlike the more defensive or institutionally cautious reactions observed among founders and some faculty, students approached the concept of decolonisation with a blend of curiosity, vulnerability, internalised tension, and critical imagination. Their understandings spanned from systemic critiques of Eurocentrism to calls for epistemic plurality, participatory learning, and contextualised education. Emotional responses ranged from hopeful and empowered to confused, anxious, and even repelled, demonstrating the political and psychological weight of decolonial discourse. While there was no single unified student voice, 4 overarching patterns emerged: (1) intense identity reflection and emotional

ambivalence, (2) sophisticated conceptual engagement with epistemic and structural injustice, (3) emergent narrative framings around systemic critique, internal conflict, and ethical responsibility, and (4) practical recommendations centring on inclusion, transparency, dialogue, and epistemic openness.

5.5.2. Emotional responses

Student emotional responses to the concept of “decolonisation” were richly varied, and often conflicted. Over 30 unique feelings were identified and grouped into 7 overarching emotional categories, based on both the quantitative frequency (gathered through written sticky notes) and the qualitative expressions from the open, focus group discussion.

Table 1. Overview of student emotional responses to decolonisation

Emotional category	Representative feelings	Frequency (approx.)
Curiosity & openness	Curious, hopeful, empowered, inspired, excited, optimistic, happy	~40
Confusion & uncertainty	Confused, overwhelmed, shocked, hesitant	~20
Discomfort & fragility	Uneasy, fragile, inferior, anxious, isolated, repelled, apathetic, inferior, stressed, numb, helpless, fatigued	~15
Scepticism & cynicism	Sceptical, annoyed, apathetic, disillusioned, judgmental	~12
Anger & provocation	Angry, frustrated, provoked	~10
Guilt & shame	Guilty, ashamed, victimised	~8
Sadness & grief	Sad, hopeless, excluded, helpless	~8

Below I elaborate further on the top 4 emotional themes:

Curiosity and openness (~40 occurrences): Most students expressed a strong sense of intellectual curiosity, emotional openness, and even inspiration when thinking about decolonisation as an opportunity to broaden perspectives and reshape educational norms. This was often accompanied by hopeful or empowered emotions.

“I felt curious, responsible, and connected. It’s a conversation that feels overdue”

“It’s like a whole bunch of excitement for what’s possible”

“This topic feels radical and needed. I feel hopeful something can change”

Confusion and uncertainty (~20): Many students reported feeling confused, reflecting both the conceptual ambiguity of the term and their difficulty situating themselves within it. Some students felt emotionally distanced, rolling their eyes at what they perceived as the overuse or politicisation of the term in activist or political discourse.

“Sometimes I roll my eyes when I hear the word... I don’t even know what it means anymore”

“In my country, it’s used in such a populist way. It’s hard to take seriously”

Discomfort and fragility (~15): Several students described feeling inferior, excluded, or fragile when encountering decolonial discourse, particularly those from historically marginalised or colonised regions. Others acknowledged how their educational or migratory choices contributed to Eurocentric systems, leading to deep self-reflection.

“Even though I might be a victim of colonial history, I’m also contributing to Eurocentrism by being here. That’s hard to reconcile”

“When I hear decolonisation, I put myself in the lower rank automatically. I feel inferior”

Scepticism and cynicism (~12): A small but important minority described feeling disengaged or repelled by the term, viewing it as politically loaded or emotionally manipulative. These reactions mirrored similar resistance seen in some faculty and one founder.

“The word carries so much heaviness and judgment that it just alienates people”

“It feels like it’s used to guilt-trip the Global North”

5.5.3. Understandings and meanings

Students’ conceptual understandings of decolonisation were more expansive and epistemically aware than those of most faculty and founders. Over 35 concepts were identified and grouped into 6 overarching conceptual categories, based on both the quantitative frequency (gathered through written sticky notes) and the qualitative expressions from the open, focus group discussion.

Table 2. Overview of student understandings and meanings of decolonisation

Conceptual category	Representative feelings	Frequency (approx.)	Student interpretation
Pluriversality /epistemic diversity	Pluriversality, Indigenous wisdom, lost knowledge, alternative worldviews, multiple perspectives, decentralisation, distribution, re-centring	~30	There's more than one truth or history; time to (re-)centre other knowledge systems and make them visible.
Inclusion, diversity and representation	Inclusion, diversity, representation, co-creation, participation, respect, empowerment	~24	Not just about demographics but validating multiple experiences and perspectives.
Power, oppression and historical legacies	Power imbalance, history, hierarchy, dominance, victimisation, exclusion, Eurocentrism, injustice, intergenerational inferiority,	~19	Colonisation left deep systemic legacies, which are hard to reverse without addressing embedded inequities.
Systemic critique and structural change	Anti-capitalism, complexity of structural change, utopia, freedom, abstractness, difficulty, injustice	~15	The term is loaded, complex, and hard to grasp. Decolonisation is linked to larger structural critiques, and not necessarily attainable.
Ethics and responsibility	Empathy, responsibility, ethical tension, values, moral action, justice, equality	~8	Calls for care, humility, and emotional attunement in how we engage decolonial ideas.
Internal conflict and positionality	Personal complicity, inferiority, identity tensions, migration as participation	~5	Several students feel both implicated and oppressed, leading to deep personal reflection.

Below I elaborate on the 4 most common categories:

Pluriversality and epistemic diversity (~30 occurrences): The most dominant conceptual cluster was pluriversality, the idea that there are multiple valid ways of knowing, being, doing and designing. Students expressed a strong sense that decolonisation involves the acknowledgment and inclusion of different perspectives within design education.

“We only study one history of design because it's the one published and institutionalised”

“Only the Western history of design is written. What about the knowledge that was killed or never recorded?”

“Design is natural, is human. It's everywhere..... it just hasn't been written down the same way”

Inclusion, diversity, and representation (~24): A significant number of students interpreted decolonisation through a diversity and inclusion lens, framing it as equitable access, diverse representation, and mutual respect in classrooms, curricula, and discourse. They expressed a need for greater inclusion of underrepresented voices, and framed inclusion as a more digestible and less charged alternative to the word decolonisation.

“Decolonisation feels too heavy. Inclusion might make me feel less overwhelmed”

“We’re trying to make something better, not just for this part of the world, but the world in general”

Power, oppression, and historical legacies (~19): Many students associated decolonisation with historical structures of domination, erasure, and systemic inequality, both in terms of knowledge systems and broader societal institutions. They acknowledged how colonisation shaped what knowledge is legitimised (e.g. Bauhaus vs. lost Indigenous design systems) and how these hierarchies are difficult to dismantle.

“Once this imbalance of power begins, it's very hard to bring equity back... it gets ingrained into generations”

“If the history of design is only what’s written down in the West, how can we compare it to Indigenous knowledge that was lost or erased?”

Systemic critique and structural change (~15): Some understood decolonisation as a critique of the systems underpinning design education, like capitalism, Eurocentrism, and globalised inequality. Others felt that decolonisation is a utopian and elusive goal. The sheer complexity of what it involves erasing or overhauling deeply rooted norms left them unsure whether it is even feasible.

“Education is just moving me towards amplifying this vision [of Eurocentrism]”

“It’s like fighting capitalism. How do you even start doing that?”

“I don’t want a European education to be decolonised... because I chose it. But I know that’s part of the problem”

5.5.4. Narratives and framings

Across both discussions, students framed decolonisation through the following interrelated narratives:

Conflict and contradiction: Decolonisation was not seen as a binary or clear-cut process but as something fraught with paradoxes between critique and complicity, hope and scepticism, ethics and action. This mirrored faculty narratives of internal conflict and structural constraint.

“I want change, but I don’t know how. And maybe I’m part of the system I want to fix”

Resistance to terminology: Some students felt that the term “decolonisation” itself was alienating or too charged, even if they agreed with its underlying principles. This echoes similar linguistic discomfort among faculty and founders.

“It’s victimising both sides for no reason. It just doesn’t help me”

Decolonisation as repair and pluralisation: Others viewed decolonisation not as negation or reversal, but as a practice of repair, restoring erased knowledges, opening space for multiplicity, and enabling epistemic justice through design.

“Take what’s good from every culture and build something more balanced. It’s not about one replacing the other”

Student positionality as lens: Many narratives were shaped by students’ own histories, migration, religion, or colonial legacies. This led to highly personalised understandings, in contrast to more theoretical or structural framings seen in faculty interviews.

“Because I’m Asian, a woman... I put myself on the other side of power, automatically.”

5.5.5. Recommendations

Student recommendations, derived from the co-reflection workshop on Year 2 *Strategic Service Design* and *Digital Service Design* courses (see Section 4.3.6.2.1), reflect a strong desire for clarity, flexibility, relevance, and inclusion within SDSI’s curriculum and pedagogy. These proposals complement and expand those made by faculty and founders, emphasising both practical enhancements and pedagogical reflexivity. The following key recommendations emerged:

- 1. Curriculum content clarification and contextualisation:** Students asked for clearer articulation of the distinctiveness and scope of specific design fields (e.g. strategic SD vs. consultancy) and called for stronger framing of courses within the wider design ecosystem. They suggested beginning courses with comprehensive overviews to help them understand how the course contributes to their academic and professional trajectory.

“Begin the course with a comprehensive overview of strategic SD and case studies that show its value in organisations”

“Coordinate effectively with the SDSI faculty in both Latvia and Estonia to prevent redundancy and duplication with Year 1 courses”

- 2. Context sensitivity through case studies:** Students requested a broader range of practical and real-world case studies from contexts, including examples from both the Global North and South. These should serve not only to apply theory but to surface and critically discuss differing epistemologies and practices in SD.

“Include industry case studies and real-life SD examples to illustrate key frameworks and theories discussed in lectures”

“Explore linking the course to existing partnerships and EU-funded projects in the wider Art and Design faculty, breaking institutional silos”

- 3. Peer-to-peer learning:** Echoing faculty and founder suggestions, students proposed expanding peer-led sessions, particularly for software, tools, or region-specific practices, allowing students from different backgrounds to act as knowledge contributors.

“Organise and formalise a schedule for peer-led sessions on relevant tools or topics”

“Utilise students’ expertise smartly by engaging them as co-facilitators or teaching specific tools or topics they know very well”

- 4. Critical thinking and reflection:** Students requested structured time within lectures to critically reflect, ask questions, and challenge dominant models presented. Reflection was seen as vital not only for comprehension but for surfacing assumptions embedded in the curriculum.

“Present AI topics in moderation; introduce critical discussions about its limits and go beyond AI”

“Incorporate structured pauses in lectures for reflection and questions, and add brief recaps throughout”

“Integrate regular, fun quizzes to reinforce learning and encourage recall of core concepts”

- 5. Clearer and inclusive assignments:** Students highlighted the importance of detailed and timely assignment briefs, as well as opportunities for both group and individual assessment, enabling personal growth alongside collaboration. This aligns with calls from founders and faculty to encourage both autonomy and inclusion.

“Share detailed assignment instructions/briefs from the first class, outlining expectations, formats, and deliverable guidelines”

“Introduce individual assessment components within group projects, using peer feedback or self-assessment”

- 6. Pedagogical coherence and alignment:** Given SDSI’s consortium model, students called for more consistency in teaching quality, methods, and communication across universities (Latvia, Estonia, Finland), with some proposing sharing best practices among faculty.

“Promote cross-consortium sharing of successful teaching methods and tools (e.g., Miro boards) among Latvian Academy of Art, Estonian Academy of Art and University of Lapland”

- 7. Safe spaces for feedback and exchange:** Students consistently stressed the value of open feedback and safe classroom environments. They proposed institutionalising feedback loops, energisers, and rotating team roles to support inclusivity and trust.

“Establish regular open feedback sessions to encourage honest sharing, reinforcing a safe and supportive classroom culture”

“Implement mixed-group activities and rotating roles (e.g., Round Robin & Six Thinking Hats) to encourage fresh thinking and diverse input”

5.6. Experts’ perceptions

While this study’s central research question focuses on the perceptions of SDSI students, faculty, and programme founders, 3 interviews with expert informants were conducted to contextualise, complement, and critically extend the primary dataset. These experts (i.e. an external evaluator commissioned to review the SDSI programme, a decolonial scholar and designer, and a strategic designer who is also an SDSI student) were interviewed opportunistically. Their insights were analysed inductively and were not coded the same way as the rest of the data, but they serve an important complementary function: offering interpretive depth, validation, and critical reflection on the core findings.

5.6.1. Overview

The external evaluator provided a pragmatic and reflective account of SDSI as an emerging educational programme. Although unfamiliar with decolonisation as a formal academic

discourse, they¹¹ acknowledged its relevance and expressed openness to its core concerns, particularly the critique of dominant design ideologies and Eurocentric curricula. They emphasised the structural tensions between critical aspirations and institutional imperatives, such as employability, funding constraints, and stakeholder expectations. From their perspective, introducing decolonial thinking in SDSI may require strategic framing, embedding decolonial ideas under more widely accepted concepts like inclusive design, sustainability, or responsible innovation to avoid polarisation.

The decolonial researcher and designer offered a more radical epistemic and pedagogical critique. They framed decolonisation not as a checklist of inclusive practices or diverse reading lists, but as an ontological and political reconfiguration of who counts as a knower, what counts as knowledge, and how education is structured. They stressed that decolonisation must be situated in specific historical, geographic, and institutional contexts - there can be no universal model or blueprint. They cautioned against conflating decolonisation with diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), highlighting that superficial reforms often reproduce the very systems they claim to disrupt. Crucially, they argued that decolonisation should start from the pedagogy and then move on to the curriculum. Institutional cultures, such as grading systems, academic hierarchies, and Eurocentric citation practices, must be interrogated. In their view, meaningful change begins with relationships and habits: cultural transformation requires a “counterculture of care” where educators and students are not merely transmitters of knowledge but co-creators of more humane, pluralistic, and accountable institutions.

The strategic designer and SDSI student, bridged the perspectives of practitioner and insider. They echoed many of the points raised by students and faculty, particularly the need for plural epistemologies, local knowledge integration, and pedagogical humility. This expert saw decolonisation not as a distant ideal but as a practical opportunity to reframe design education through co-creation, accessibility, and critical self-awareness. They challenged SDSI to apply SD methods inwardly, suggesting that the programme itself had yet to undergo the reflective, co-creative practices it advocates externally.

¹¹ In this section, the singular “they” is used as a gender-neutral pronoun in place of “he/she” to promote inclusivity and avoid assumptions about individuals’ gender identities. This aligns with inclusive writing practices and supports respect for diverse and non-binary identities.

5.6.2. Recommendations

Across all 3 expert interviews, a consistent set of pedagogical, epistemic, and institutional recommendations emerged. These align closely with the aspirations of students and faculty, while pushing further toward systemic and cultural transformation:

1. **Prioritise pedagogical transformation over symbolic curriculum change.**

“If we’re truly talking about decolonising education, the first thing to be decolonised is pedagogy, not curriculum”

“They teach service design but don’t apply it to the programme”

2. **Encourage a culture of care and community within institutions.**

“There’s no culture of care in institutions. Everyone’s burned out. We need a counterculture of care”

“We think systems are abstract, but they’re not. They’re people. Institutions are people. Change starts with every student or professor”

3. **Decentre Western epistemologies and diversify lived knowledge.**

“Less Silicon Valley white guys. More Indigenous community organisers. More Sámi activists. More scientists”

“Bring in diverse guest speakers from around the world to present real examples of how service design is used in different contexts”

4. **Create embodied, localised, experiential learning opportunities.**

“We should be out there... doing overnights with digital recorders, sketching, hiking... embedding with Latvian families”

5. **Encourage open, reflective dialogue rather than prescriptive reform.**

“Organise open debates: non-confrontational spaces for reflecting on diverse perspectives”

“Provide practical case studies showing the benefits of applying decolonising approaches”

5.7. Summary of findings

This section synthesises the key findings across all knowledge co-creator groups (i.e. founders, faculty members, students, and expert informants) by revisiting the 4 sub-

questions that guided this study. While each group engaged with the concept of decolonisation from their own positionality and institutional role, important patterns, divergences, and convergences emerged. The synthesis aims to distil these cross-cutting insights to offer a holistic view of how decolonisation is emotionally experienced, intellectually understood, narratively framed, and practically envisioned within the SDSI's ecosystem.

5.7.1. Emotional responses

The first sub-question of this research is: *What feelings or emotional responses arise when knowledge co-creators engage with the idea of decolonisation in service design and SDSI?*

Across all knowledge co-creator groups, the concept of decolonisation evoked a wide range of emotional responses, often marked by tension, contradiction, and gradual evolution. While initial reactions ranged from confusion and discomfort to scepticism and resistance, most people (particularly faculty and students) displayed growing curiosity and openness when given space for dialogue and reflection.

Founders generally expressed strong, mostly negative emotional reactions. Their responses were dominated by confusion, unease, scepticism, and defensiveness, reflecting concerns about how decolonisation might threaten the cultural integrity and Baltic identity of the SDSI programme. However, both founders also showed moments of emotional evolution, shifting toward conditional openness and curiosity when conversations turned to inclusion and cultural diversity.

Faculty members exhibited the most emotionally varied and reflective reactions. While initial confusion around the academic framing of decolonisation was common, it was rarely defensive. Instead, many expressed intellectual humility and willingness to learn. Discomfort arose when acknowledging personal complicity in Eurocentrism, and scepticism surfaced when questioning decolonisation's applicability to the Baltic or SD contexts. Nonetheless, curiosity and intellectual openness dominated, with all faculty ultimately expressing an interest in exploring decolonisation as an epistemic and pedagogical opportunity.

Students' responses reflected a highly emotional and often contradictory spectrum. Curiosity, hope, and empowerment coexisted with feelings of guilt, inferiority, frustration, and overwhelm. Many expressed a strong sense of curiosity and empowerment, especially when decolonisation was framed as a chance to challenge dominant narratives. At the same

time, many others felt overwhelmed, excluded, or cynical, particularly those grappling with internal conflicts between their cultural identities and their roles within a Eurocentric educational institution. Some felt sceptical of its politicisation or overuse.

On balance, emotional responses to decolonisation revealed both individual discomfort and a collective willingness to reflect critically and engage more deeply with the topic, especially when approached through inclusive and dialogic pedagogies.

5.7.2. Understandings and meanings

The second sub-question of this research is: *How do knowledge co-creators understand or define the concept of decolonisation in the context of service design education and SDSI?*

Understandings of decolonisation evolved across groups, generally shifting from historical or metaphorical interpretations toward more epistemic and systemic perspectives. Students and experts articulated the most expansive definitions, while faculty occupied a reflective middle ground. Founders largely struggled to conceptualise the term in both its educational and systemic dimensions.

Founders mainly understood decolonisation through a historical-political lens, linking it to Latvia's past under occupation. They often substituted the concept with more familiar notions like diversity, accessibility, or a rejection of globalisation. Though they emphasised the value of local knowledge systems, they did not explicitly connect this to decolonial discourse.

Faculty demonstrated more varied and reflective interpretations. While several admitted limited understanding, most came to recognise the dominance of Western epistemologies in SD education and acknowledged the need to diversify perspectives. Several equated decolonisation with broader concepts such as inclusion, participation, or social justice, indicating partial but evolving engagement with the term.

Students presented the most critically engaged and complex definitions. Most saw decolonisation as a challenge to Eurocentric knowledge systems and a call for greater epistemic plurality. Some framed it as a structural critique, while others preferred the language of inclusion over decolonisation due to its perceived politicisation.

Overall, understandings ranged from unfamiliarity to robust epistemic critique, with students and some faculty pushing toward more transformative and systemic interpretations.

5.7.3. Narratives and framings

The third sub-question of this research is: *What dominant narratives or framings emerge in how knowledge co-creators discuss decolonisation (e.g. as critique, opportunity, threat, trend)?*

Knowledge co-creators framed decolonisation through diverse, often overlapping narrative lenses, shaped by personal histories, institutional roles, and levels of epistemic engagement. While some saw it as threatening or irrelevant, others viewed it as a long-overdue opportunity for educational innovation and transformation. Narratives ranged from protective and sceptical (founders and a few faculty) to transformative, participatory, and epistemically radical (students and several faculty).

Founders primarily framed decolonisation as a threat to SDSI's cultural integrity, prompting protective and regionalist framings. The founder intent and cultural protection narratives emphasised SDSI's original mission to serve Baltic contexts, not global diversity agendas. At times, decolonisation was treated as an externally imposed, unfamiliar trend. However, a tentative opportunity narrative also emerged, positioning critical thinking and SD as possible catalyst for innovation in students' home contexts.

Faculty offered a more diverse narrative landscape. Most demonstrated critical reflexivity, questioning dominant pedagogical assumptions. The most common was the opportunity narrative, with many seeing decolonisation as a catalyst for inclusive, adaptive, and more contextually grounded design education. A strong structural constraint narrative also emerged, emphasising systemic limits, such as institutional inertia and resource scarcity. Some also expressed concern about co-option, urging vigilance about superficial or uncritical adoption of decolonial discourse.

Students constructed their narratives around pluralisation, personal identity and ambivalence. Some expressed resistance to terminology, finding the word "decolonisation" emotionally charged or alienating, despite agreement with its aims. Others framed it as a process of repair, advocating for epistemic pluralism. A prominent theme was internal contradiction: many students recognised their own complicity in Eurocentric systems even while calling for alternatives. Unlike faculty, their narratives were deeply shaped by lived experiences of migration, marginalisation, and (neo) colonisation.

Collectively, these narratives revealed divergent vocabularies, sense of urgency, and stakes, but a shared concern with making education more inclusive, pluralistic, and critically self-aware.

5.7.4. Recommendations

The fourth sub-question of this research is: *What changes do knowledge co-creators propose to make the SDSI curriculum and pedagogical practices more inclusive, critical, or decolonial?*

Across all knowledge co-creator groups, the most cited recommendation was to promote critical thinking - not only about SD tools and frameworks, but also about the underlying cultural assumptions, value systems, and limitations embedded within them. Founders, faculty, and students all emphasised that students should be encouraged to adapt, not adopt, methods uncritically. This was closely linked to another widely supported recommendation: cultivating peer-to-peer learning. Rather than expecting faculty to artificially globalise course content, SDSI stakeholders proposed creating participatory classroom structures in which students share their own knowledge systems and lived experiences, enriching the programme from within.

Another prominent theme was the call for transparent curricular communication. Both students and faculty recommended clearer explanations at the outset of each course regarding its scope, purpose, and epistemic assumptions, so that students can better contextualise their learning journey. Founders and faculty also supported acknowledging positionality, encouraging lecturers to avoid universalising Western perspectives and openly disclosing the geographical, cultural, and disciplinary lenses through which they teach.

Faculty further recommended applying a SD approach to SDSI's own curriculum development, embracing prototyping, iterative feedback loops, and co-design workshops with students. Students echoed this, calling for more participatory roles in shaping course content and teaching methods through regular and dynamic feedback sessions. Both groups stressed the need for improved and more frequent cross-consortium coordination to ensure pedagogical alignment, clarity, and consistency across SDSI's partner institutions.

Students added practical and experiential suggestions: more culturally sensitive case studies from diverse geographies and epistemic traditions, clear and inclusive assignment briefs, and varied forms of assessment that respect individual learning styles and promote autonomy. Many highlighted the importance of psychologically safe learning environments that support

vulnerability and open dialogue, especially when navigating sensitive topics like identity and power.

In short, the most widely shared recommendations focused on (1) encouraging critical thinking about epistemic assumptions, (2) expanding peer-to-peer and participatory learning and teaching structures, (3) ensuring curricular transparency and positionality awareness, and (4) creating inclusive, reflective, and dialogic learning spaces for both faculty and students.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

“Decolonizing is about unearthing, shifting the glance, de-centering, giving agency, being vulnerable, making mistakes, ideation, thinking about our communities, and not so much design” (Khandwala, 2020, para. 10)

6.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the key findings presented in chapter 5, why they matter, and how they might inform action. It synthesises insights from across the data and connects them back to the literature to answer the core question of this research. This chapter also outlines implications for curriculum, pedagogy, identifies areas for further research, and proposes a series of interventions that SDSI could implement between 2025 and 2027.

6.2. Revisiting the main research question

This study set out to explore: *How do SDSI students, faculty, and programme founders perceive the idea of decolonising the programme’s curriculum and pedagogical practices?*

Through 4 sub-questions exploring emotional responses, conceptual understandings, dominant narratives, and recommendations for change, the research reveals a complex, evolving, and at times contradictory set of perceptions across different knowledge co-creator groups.

In terms of emotional responses, confusion, scepticism, and discomfort were common across all groups, though the reasons varied. Founders and some faculty members perceived decolonisation as a potential threat to SDSI’s regional identity, while many students expressed emotional overwhelm, fragility, or cynicism. Despite these tensions, curiosity and intellectual openness were strong across the board, especially among faculty and students, indicating that even when the term felt alienating or contested, its underlying intentions (e.g. critical reflection, epistemic inclusion, and cultural responsiveness) were generally embraced.

In terms of understandings, meanings attributed to decolonisation ranged from historical and geopolitical interpretations (especially among founders and some faculty) to deeper epistemic critiques (primarily among students and faculty). In particular, students articulated rich definitions of decolonisation grounded in concepts of pluriversality, epistemic justice, and structural critique, often drawing from their own positionalities. While founders and some faculty equated decolonisation with globalisation, diversity, or accessibility, others

showed growing awareness of the Eurocentric roots of dominant (service) design education and the need to broaden its knowledge base.

Narratives were equally diverse. Threat and protection narratives dominated the founders' framing, while faculty and students advanced opportunity, critical reflexivity, and structural constraint narratives. Notably, students framed decolonisation not as a negation of SDSI's foundation but a repair-oriented process seeking to pluralise, re-centre, and co-create knowledge. This framing reflects a nuanced awareness of both systemic injustice and students' own positionality within global educational structures.

Despite tensions, all knowledge co-creator groups offered meaningful recommendations for making SDSI's curriculum and pedagogy more inclusive and reflexive. Common proposals included: (1) strengthening critical thinking, (2) enabling peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, (3) increasing transparency and positionality awareness, and (4) improving feedback and co-creation mechanisms. Faculty additionally called for (5) applying a SD mindset to curriculum development, while students emphasised (6) clarity, cultural sensitivity, and psychological safety in learning environments.

Together, these findings suggest that while decolonisation remains an ambiguous and contentious term, SDSI stakeholders are increasingly open to conceive it as a potential catalyst for rethinking SD education in more inclusive, pluralistic, and reflexive ways.

6.3. Situating findings in the literature

This study's findings resonate with, and extend, existing strands within decolonial and affect theory, affirming their relevance in contexts beyond the Global South. As argued in Chapter 3, decolonisation in HE is not merely a matter of diversifying content or increasing representational visibility; it is an epistemic and structural intervention that challenges the very foundations of what is considered legitimate knowledge, who produces it, and how it circulates (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Quijano, 2000; Woldegiorgis, 2021). Findings from SDSI confirm that while stakeholders varied in familiarity with the concept of decolonisation, there was a shared intuitive recognition - particularly among students and faculty - that Eurocentric and capitalist logics dominate current knowledge systems, and that more pluralistic, contextual, and participatory approaches are needed.

Students articulated decolonisation not as symbolic inclusion but as a call for epistemic justice (Woldegiorgis, 2021) and pluriversality (Escobar, 2018), aligning with critical calls in the literature to resist superficial, "additive" approaches in favour of deep, systemic

transformation (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Their reflections also engaged with intellectual decolonisation, as outlined by Grosfoguel (2007), Kovach (2021) and Smith (2012), which entails dismantling Eurocentric epistemologies and recentring suppressed or marginalised knowledge traditions. Importantly, student reflections showed an awareness of their own complicity in global knowledge hierarchies, supporting Woldegiorgis's (2021) argument that decolonisation is relevant not only for previously colonised contexts but also in contexts without a formal colonial past.

Among faculty and founders, the findings confirm existing critiques that in Global North HEIs, decolonisation is frequently misunderstood or substituted with more institutionally palatable discourses of diversity, inclusion, or accessibility (Bhambra et al., 2018; Zembylas, 2023). This dilution reflects Ahmed's (2012) critique of non-performative diversity and connects with broader concerns about the marketisation and servitisation of knowledge in neoliberal HE (Hall, 2017; Jacob, 2003; Ng & Forbes, 2009). In this context, students are positioned as "customers", academic programmes compete for international visibility, and curriculum innovation is often shaped by branding and competitive positioning, rather than a commitment to social justice (Marginson & Yang, 2020; Brennan et al., 2018). These dynamics help explain SDSI's reluctance to explicitly engage with decolonisation, despite its otherwise progressive ethos.

A unique contribution of this study is its focus on affective decolonisation, an area underdeveloped in both the literature and institutional practice (Kruger & Zembylas, 2024; Millner, 2023). The emotional and relational dimensions of epistemic change emerged strongly in this study, underscoring that decolonisation is as much an emotional as an intellectual process. Knowledge co-creators, in fact, expressed a range of affective responses, from curiosity, hope, and solidarity to discomfort, resistance, and fatigue, highlighting the emotional labour, identity dissonance, and vulnerability involved in challenging entrenched norms. These findings reinforce Zembylas's (2023) claim that affective attachments to dominant knowledge systems influence how educational actors respond to curricula and pedagogies. Moreover, the emotional atmospheres identified (i.e. fragility among faculty, frustration among students, and institutional silence), reveal how emotions are structuring forces that sustains or disrupts coloniality within educational spaces and institutions - not just at the individual level (Zembylas, 2022; Sathorar & Geduld, 2019). By attending to these affective currents, this study extends affect theory's utility in HE

research and supports calls for pedagogical frameworks that address not only cognitive change, but also emotional and relational transformation (hooks, 1994; Freire, 2005).

Finally, this thesis contributes to the under-examined area of decolonising SD education in Europe. As discussed in Chapter 3 - while design subfields like graphic, fashion, and participatory design have begun confronting colonial legacies - SD remains largely untouched by decolonial critique (Abdulla et al., 2019; Ahmed, 2022; Udoewa, 2022). This is particularly true within European HEIs, where the colonial-capitalist underpinnings of SD are rarely interrogated (Meherally & sahibzada, 2024a). Echoing Khandwala's (2020, para. 14) insight that "sometimes design is an instrument of colonisation, [and] sometimes it's design that has been colonised", the findings here suggest that even in an academic programme built on co-creation and internationalisation, critical discussions around power, epistemology, and complicity remain peripheral. In surfacing these silences and affective tensions, this research not only confirms the relevance of decolonial and affective theory to SD education but also helps expand these theoretical frameworks into the heart of European design pedagogy and curriculum design.

6.4. Practical implications for SDSI

This research offers several practical insights for SDSI as a transnational programme operating at the intersection of design, innovation, and regional identity. Firstly, there is a clear need to clarify and communicate the historical, geographical, and epistemic roots of its current curriculum. Transparency about SDSI's purpose, limitations, and worldview would help students better contextualise their learning journeys and reduce misunderstandings.

Secondly, SDSI should build on its strengths in collaborative and design-led thinking by embedding critical reflection, co-creation, and peer-to-peer learning more systematically into curricular and pedagogical structures. This could involve co-designing courses with students, creating reflective spaces for faculty, and explicitly acknowledging positionality in the classroom. The integration of futures, systems, and transition design approaches - as suggested by both faculty and students - can help SDSI evolve beyond user-centred frameworks toward planetary and societal responsibility.

Thirdly, the diversity of the student body is a pedagogical asset. Rather than diluting SDSI's European focus, this diversity can be leveraged to enrich discussions, surface assumptions, and build collective, pluralistic knowledge. Achieving this requires training faculty in

cultural competence (as defined in the Glossary on page 12) and designing psychologically safe, inclusive learning environments.

Finally, greater consortium alignment and regular opportunities for faculty reflection and coordination would support a more cohesive and inclusive learning experience. While the above recommendations point to concrete changes to improve SDSI's inclusivity and epistemic reflexivity, many students also called for more systemic and transformative shifts that necessitate further research. Responding to this call, and drawing from this research's findings and theoretical commitments, the following section outlines a 12-month participatory roadmap toward a more plural, and reflexive SDSI. This roadmap is not a prescriptive solution, but an actionable invitation to co-design a more caring, complex, and just future for the programme.

6.5. Towards a pluriversal SDSI

Reimagining SDSI through a pluriversal lens demands more than symbolic gestures or minor adjustments. It requires grappling with the epistemic hierarchies, market logics, and structural inequalities embedded in HE - even within institutions like SDSI's partner universities, which do not carry direct colonial histories (Woldegiorgis, 2021). As decolonial scholars remind us, coloniality persists not only through history but through everyday structures and practice such as curriculum design, pedagogy, institutional governance, and knowledge validation (Stein et al., 2021).

Although SDSI originated as a regionally grounded and locally motivated initiative in Latvia, it now operates within the globalised and neoliberal logic of international education, particularly those shaped by the Erasmus Mundus (European Commission, 2024a). These systems tend to prioritise mobility, academic excellence, and employability over epistemic diversity and critical reflexivity. As this study's findings suggest, superficial changes - such as adding token case studies or minor syllabus additions - risk becoming performative rather than transformative. As Stickdorn et al. (2018, p. 65) aptly warn, SD must move beyond "putting lipstick on a pig".

To avoid such pitfalls, the path toward a more pluriversal SDSI must begin with a participatory process of introspection, imagination, and institutional alignment, visualised in the 12-month roadmap in Figure 8 below. The following roadmap outlines 4 interconnected phases offering practical and speculative steps for evolving SDSI's curriculum, pedagogy, and governance toward more inclusive and contextually grounded futures. It draws

inspiration from this study's findings, student feedback, expert informant input, and the participatory transformation work undertaken by Soto Hormazábal et al. (2021) for the Master's Programme in Advanced Service Design at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile between 2015 and 2017.

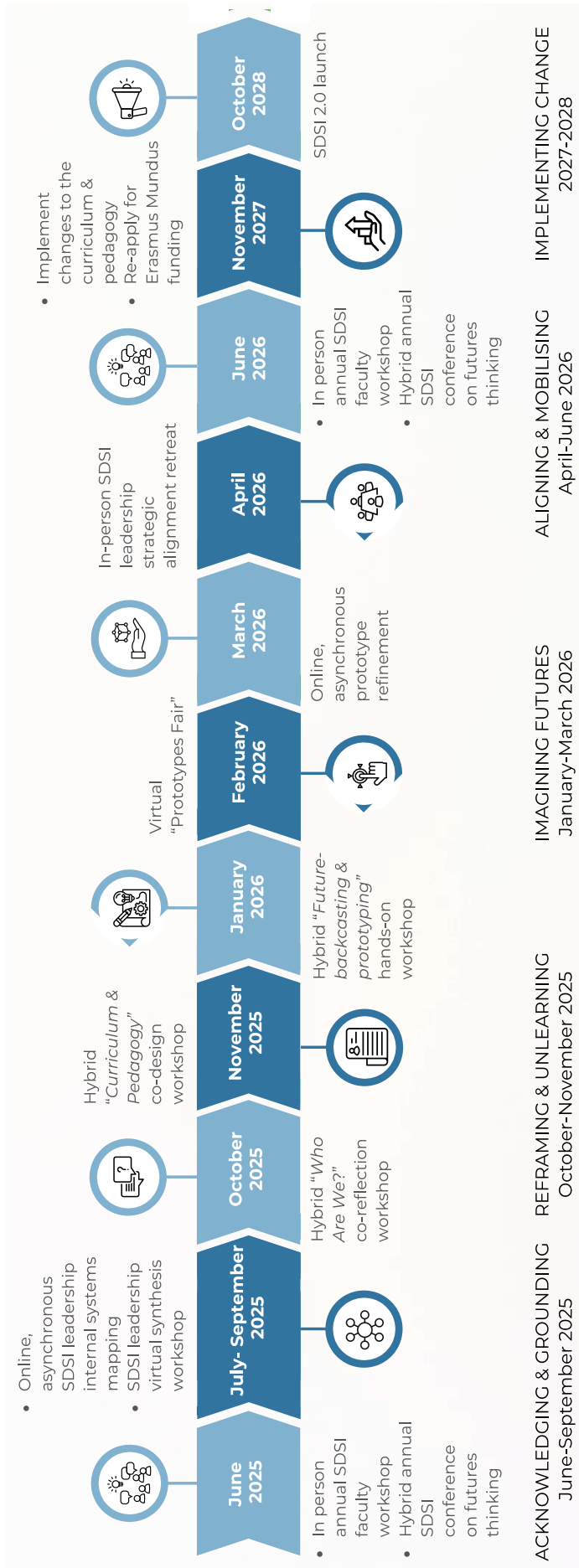


Figure 8. A participatory roadmap toward a pluriversal SDSI

6.5.1. Phase 1: Acknowledging and grounding

Goal: Build shared awareness of SDSI's current realities, tensions, and opportunities

To move beyond the reductive logics of colonial modernity, commodification, and competitive performance, HEIs and SD programmes must first confront their complicity in the (neo)colonial systems they inhabit (Stein et al., 2021). For SDSI, this means acknowledging how exclusion is reproduced through curricula that prioritise Eurocentric design canons, faculty hiring practices that lack diversity, and pedagogical models that prioritise speed and individualism over care and collectivity.

While SDSI is rooted in a Baltic and Nordic European context that resists simplistic North/South binaries, it nonetheless operates within broader global structures that privilege certain forms of knowledge and expertise. Therefore, this first phase would begin with introspection and grounding. A proposed starting point is the SDSI annual faculty workshop/meeting in June 2025, where founders, faculty, and administrators could collaboratively review the findings of both the external evaluation of the programme carried out by independent consultants and the findings of this thesis.

Throughout summer 2025, participatory tools, such as systems mapping and the iceberg model could be employed by the SDSI leadership to uncover the programme's underlying structures and hidden dynamics. Insights from this process, combined with data from the external evaluation and the annual faculty workshop, could be synthesised in a "*transnational synthesis*" workshop in September 2025. This session would support the development of a shared understanding across consortium partners, helping SDSI to clarify its current identity, highlight its core tensions, and surface strategic opportunity zones (e.g. identity formation, curriculum overlaps, pedagogical divergence).

This phase is about introspection and grounding to create (1) a shared understanding of where SDSI stands today, and (2) a safe, structured space for dialogue and critical debate around curriculum and pedagogy across the institutions delivering the SDSI programme - something which was highlighted by several faculty members in the interviews.

6.5.2. Phase 2: Reframing and unlearning

Goal: Co-create a shared identity, values, and direction for SDSI's curriculum and pedagogy.

Acknowledgement and grounding are necessary but not sufficient to initiate change. A second phase would involve actively unlearning many of the assumptions internalised through institutional academic socialisation (Stein et al., 2021). The neoliberal university

often teaches that success is individual, that speed is a virtue, that impact must be quantifiable, and that design education must adhere to Anglo-European traditions. In response, this phase invites the SDSI community to critically reflect on SDSI's identity and (re)imagine what it means to educate and nurture versatile, situated, and plural service innovators.

In October 2025, a first “*who are we?*” co-reflection workshop could bring together founders, faculty, students, alumni, and industry partners to explore SDSI's identity, core values, pedagogical intent, and institutional narratives. Design-based methods (e.g. personas, empathy maps, learning journey maps or value proposition canvases) could support stakeholders in identifying what SDSI is, how it feels to belong, and what impact (intended or unintended) it has - something which was explored by Soto Hormazábal et al. (2021). Outputs could include draft identity principles, a manifesto with clear values and commitments, visual artefacts, or a SDSI-as-learning-journey map.

This could be followed by a “*curriculum and pedagogy*” co-design workshop in November 2025, during which course structures could be mapped and assessed. Participants could co-develop medium and long-term curricular reform proposals, identifying blind spots, redundancies, and tensions to discuss. Throughout, the aim would not be to dismantle SDSI's existing strengths, but to build upon them centring complexity, locality, and epistemic justice (Escobar, 2018). By December 2025, outcomes from both workshops could be documented in a shared, internal, “SDSI identity and curriculum directions” report, that students and faculty could give feedback about and refine.

6.5.3. Phase 3: Imagining futures

Goal: Prototype and visualise plural futures for SDSI.

Transformation demands imagination and experimentation. In this phase, the SDSI community could explore what the programme might become if designed around the lived experiences and aspirations of students and educators, especially centring the voices of those from historically marginalised backgrounds.

A “*future-backcasting and prototyping*” workshop in January 2026 could prompt participants to envision SDSI in the year 2030. Questions might include: What does an SDSI graduate look like in 2030? What new teaching roles, tools, partnerships, or evaluation systems would support this vision? From these prompts, smaller working groups could be formed to develop SDSI 2.0 prototypes for specific aspects of the programme (e.g. student

admissions, faculty hiring, elective pathways, evaluation methods or consortium collaboration). These could then be shared publicly during a virtual “*prototypes fair*” in February 2026, where external reviewers (e.g. EU commission representatives, employers, SD experts) would be invited to offer feedback, assess feasibility, and suggest refinements. Finalised prototypes could be refined throughout March 2026, resulting in a dynamic portfolio of actionable proposals for SDSI 2.0.

6.5.4. Phase 4: Aligning and mobilising

Goal: Build institutional commitment and readiness for SDSI 2.0.

In the final phase, the focus would shift from ideation to alignment and mobilisation. A “*strategic alignment retreat*” in April 2026 could bring together decision-makers from all SDSI partner institutions to consolidate the outputs of the previous phases. This retreat would aim to articulate a shared Theory of Change for SDSI 2.0, align governance strategies, and prepare the groundwork for the 2027 Erasmus Mundus reapplication.

In June 2026, the 12-month participatory process could culminate in the annual SDSI faculty workshop and SDSI Conference, possibly themed around “*pluriversal futures of service design education*”. These events would serve as public platform for presenting the SDSI 2.0 vision, launching a draft SDSI 2.0 manifesto, showcasing prototype outcomes, and initiating wider regional and global conversations on the future of European design education beyond colonial-capitalist constraints.

6.6. Future research

This thesis opens several pathways for future research at the intersection of SD education, (de)coloniality, and affective and critical pedagogy. While it offers an in-depth, cross-sectional exploration of perceptions of decolonisation within the SDSI programme, it is inherently limited by its single-case and time-bound nature. Future research could expand, deepen, and operationalise its findings in several directions, both within and beyond SDSI.

As a cross-sectional case study, this thesis captures a snapshot in time. A natural next step would be to conduct longitudinal research tracking how perceptions, narratives, and institutional practices evolve over time. This would be especially valuable if SDSI undertakes curricular or pedagogical reforms inspired by this research, allowing future researchers to assess impact and institutional learning over several years. Moreover, this thesis could serve as a pilot case for a multi-case comparative study of other comparable programmes, particularly within the Erasmus Mundus framework. Such comparative work

could examine how decolonial conversations manifest across different geographies, academic disciplines, and institutional settings, thereby generating cross-cultural insights into the applicability and limitations of decolonial frameworks in internationalised HE.

The research findings and proposed roadmap (see Figure 8 above) also provide a springboard for applied SD research on curricular and pedagogical transformation, following precedents set by Scoresby et al. (2018). Future SDSI students or faculty could build on this thesis, entering the second “diamond” of the Double Diamond framework (i.e. developing, prototyping, and testing new curricular and pedagogical models through co-design) (Design Council, n.d.-b). Workshops, speculative design sessions, or rapid prototyping initiatives could be held to develop conceptual frameworks, student personas, and journey maps that reflect a more plural, inclusive SDSI experience. This line of work could also extend to larger questions such as: (1) How might SD be leveraged to decolonise not only curricula and pedagogies, but also institutional cultures and governance models in HE? (2) What does a pluriversal design education feel like, and how do students, faculty, and staff co-create its rituals, values, and everyday practices?

Based on the proposed roadmap (see Figure 8 above), a “SDSI 2030” project could be developed, using tools such as ethnography, speculative design, or participatory foresight to surface collective imaginaries and scenarios of what SDSI could become. Such a project could offer both practical direction and symbolic grounding for long-term institutional transformation.

6.7. Concluding remarks

“All that you touch, / You Change. All that you Change, / Changes you. / The only lasting truth is Change” (Butler, 2000, p. 79). These words echo the spirit and aspiration of this thesis: a collaborative, iterative, and necessarily unfinished inquiry into the potential for decolonising SD education within a European HE context. This research identified a significant gap in the field: while calls for more inclusive, reflexive, and socially just design education are growing, decolonial theory remains largely peripheral in SD discourse, especially within European HEIs. The aim of this study was to critically examine and intervene in the SDSI programme by exploring whether the powerful and often misunderstood concept of (de)coloniality could inform more inclusive, just, and culturally responsive pedagogical and curricular practices.

Through an exploratory case study rooted in interpretivist and critical realist worldviews, this research engaged SDSI students, faculty, and programme founders in a reflexive and relational process of knowledge co-creation. This process revealed a complex landscape of tensions, aspirations, misunderstandings, and transformative possibilities within a rapidly evolving transnational programme. SDSI students and most faculty members expressed a clear desire for more pluralistic, caring, and contextually grounded forms of teaching and learning. Yet, structural, epistemic, and emotional barriers persist. The findings of this study affirm that decolonisation is not simply about representation or critique; it is a call to reconfigure how we teach, learn, feel, and relate.

This thesis did not set out to offer definitive solutions. Rather, it asked whether (de)coloniality - as a concept, a critique, and a commitment - could serve as a generative force for transformation within SD education. It argues that pluriversal SD education, and the pluriversal university more broadly, is not a polished alternative to neoliberalism or mainstream SD education. It is a radically different project: one that asks us to question inherited tools, dominant logics, and extractive pedagogies, and instead co-create knowledge with humility, reciprocity, and relational accountability. As Savransky (2017, p. 18) reminds us, decolonising requires “risking an entirely different relationship between knowledge and reality” - one that decentres certainty and invites imagination. It means, as Audre Lorde (1983, p.98) insisted, refusing to (re)build our futures with the “master’s tools” and instead collectively repurposing what we have in service of justice, joy, and love.

As long as HE remains entangled in marketisation and commodification, and as long as HEIs treat knowledge as a private good for individual advancement within capitalist systems, they will fail to prepare (service) designers capable of confronting the intersecting crises of our time: ecological collapse, inequality, racism, and extractivism. And so, we must keep asking: What kinds of universities and (service) design programmes do our plural worlds require? What kinds of designers should we be nurturing - not only for the labour market, but for care and systemic repair?

As shown in this thesis, the emotional landscape surrounding decolonial work - which is marked by hope, confusion, resistance, and care - reminds us that decolonisation is not only structural, but deeply affective (Zembylas, 2023). It demands that we rethink not only what knowledge is taught, but how we hold space for one another in the processes of learning, teaching, and researching. This thesis, then, is not a product, an artefact, or a final

deliverable. It is a relational offering: an invitation to move from critique to commitment, from diagnosis to co-creation.

In Maya Angelou's words, "[p]eople will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel" (as cited by Angelo, 2014, para. 7). I hope that this research, however partial and imperfect, has helped you feel the urgency, complexity, and possibility of designing otherwise. The insights shared in these pages were not born in solitude but emerged through the presence of community both within and beyond SDSI. To the staff, faculty, students, and expert informants who walked this journey with me: thank you. And to the brilliant community educators who shaped this work, especially Sabrina Meherally and sahibzada mayed of Pause + Effect, your teachings on love, care, and reciprocity have influenced not only this thesis, but the way I aspire to live, relate, and design. There is still so much left to say, and even more to do. And so, the work continues, and evolves, just as I do. May this research serve as a small springboard toward the many worlds otherwise that we are all invited to (re)imagine and (re)build together.

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APPENDIX 1

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND SAFEGUARDS PLAN

The plan below - developed, discussed, and reviewed with other students as part of the *Research Ethics* course (TUKO1246-3017), offered at the University of Lapland and four other Finnish institutions - outlines the key ethical questions and dilemmas at each stage of my research process. Many ethical issues do not arise in isolation; they often emerge at multiple stages simultaneously or persist throughout the entire research process. Therefore, the 13 ethical concerns listed below are not categorised by research phase but are instead ordered from most cross-cutting to least cross-cutting.

Ethical issue	Who's concerned?	When does it arise?	How will I address it?	Any alternative approaches?
1) Structural power imbalances & institutional resistance, defensiveness and/or critique identified by Tunstall (2023) in her long experience decolonising design faculties in different countries.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Myself (the researcher) -All research participants -Head of programme -Faculty members -Dean of the arts & design faculty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -During research planning, as I am a current student in the SDSI programme, and the topic of my project is institutionally sensitive. -During data collection, if faculty members and students hesitate to participate or self-censor themselves due to feeling judged/scrutinised or due to fear of negative repercussions. -During analysis, if there is institutional pressure to "dilute" my findings. -During dissemination, if the head of the programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Acknowledge structural power imbalances in the thesis write-up and discuss how they were mitigated. -Decentre institutional power and centre student voices, especially marginalised ones to prevent dominant narratives from overshadowing lived experiences. -Avoid ideological critique and ensure a balanced, constructive and solution-oriented stance throughout the research process and write-up. -Ensure transparency by clearly stating in the informed consent form that the research aims to improve the SDSI programme and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Seek external support (from committed academics or practitioners in other universities or countries), if internal resistance arises. -During data collection, make key faculty members co-researchers in certain phases of the study, so they feel involved in the process instead of just being judged. -During analysis, facilitate a workshop or participatory discussion where faculty and students can review interpretations of their input and co-interpret findings, ensuring power imbalances are addressed appropriately by

		and/or affiliated universities resist or ignore my recommendations.	its affiliated universities, not to criticise or attack them. -When recruiting faculty for interviews, build trust and explain clearly that my research is not an evaluation of individual teaching practices or module design but seeks to explore structural and systemic issues. -When recruiting students for focus groups, build trust and reassure them that their contributions will not be judged or be identifiable, allowing them to speak freely and honestly.	giving equal speaking time and opportunities to contribute anonymously. -Co-author recommendations with students.
2) Subjectivity and positionality as a white, cisgender, middle-class student researching decolonisation as discussed by Eriksen (2022), Le Bourdon (2002 and Mellor (2022), amongst others.	-Myself -Students and faculty from marginalised backgrounds	-Throughout all research phases, from planning to write-up due to my intersecting identities, values and core beliefs.	-Begin my thesis with a “positionality statement”, clearly acknowledging my positionality. -Use self-reflexivity to interrogate my biases and assumptions. -Prioritise participant voices over my own interpretations.	-Discuss with and get work reviewed by researchers from marginalised backgrounds and/or experts in decolonial studies.
3) Minimising bias and confirmation bias due to my strong	-Myself -My supervisors	-During planning, when defining the research scope and focus.	-Ensure balanced and well-substantiated arguments and	-Conduct collaborative analysis sessions with participants to validate my interpretations

<p>support for the decolonisation movement</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -During data collection, ensuring unbiased question framing. -During analysis, ensuring balanced and non-selective interpretation. -During dissemination, avoiding exaggeration when presenting critiques and recommendations. 	<p>representation of participants' viewpoints.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Highlight solutions (not just problems) to encourage constructive dialogue. -Use triangulation (i.e. cross-check findings from multiple sources). -Engage in supervisor and/or peer debriefing (external review for fairness). -Explicitly acknowledge scope and limitations of the research. 	<p>from interviews and focus groups.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Use a neutral co-facilitator for the focus groups. -Use a neutral co-reviewer to validate my analysis of the curriculum. -Use case studies of other universities that have successfully decolonised curricula.
<p>4) Minimising the risk of engaging with decolonisation superficially (e.g. co-opting or bending the decolonisation discourse to fit Eurocentric constraints) as discussed by Kadiwal and Moghli (2021) and Opara (2021), amongst others.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Myself -Supervisors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -During planning, ensure my very own research methods are genuinely decolonial and that my understanding of the decolonial project goes beyond trends and its co-optation by mainstream academia. -During data collection and analysis, avoid superficial interpretations and researcher dominance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Engage actively with decolonial scholarship. -Use participatory and co-design methods. -Ensure findings benefit students, not just the programme or academia. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Consult and/or interview experts in decolonial research and design. -Adapt standard informed consent forms to include aspects of care, reciprocity and relationality. -Use storytelling and participatory, dialogue-based methods instead of Western interview and focus group structures.

<p>5) Potential institutional and/or reputational repercussions on participants identified by Tunstall (2023).</p>	<p>-All research participants, especially those critiquing the programme</p>	<p>-When recruiting and seeking participation, as my population is well-defined, and I am afraid it will be quite easy to figure out who said what.</p> <p>-During data collection, when discussing sensitive issues and or institutional and programme-related critiques.</p> <p>-During dissemination, when sharing findings publicly.</p>	<p>-Communicate transparently about research objectives and the decolonisation project.</p> <p>-Ensure strict anonymity and confidentiality to protect participants from potential backlash and harm.</p> <p>-Allow participants to review transcripts and remove or revise statements, if they wish.</p>	<p>-Use blended narratives instead of direct quotes to protect participants' identities.</p> <p>-Students will be given opportunities to review interpretations of their input, ensuring they feel their perspectives are accurately represented</p>
<p>6) Expectations of short-term change and reform within the SDSI programme</p>	<p>-Myself</p> <p>-Research participants, especially those who feel decolonisation is an important matter to be addressed.</p>	<p>-During planning, as I am eager to contribute to improving the programme for future students.</p> <p>-During data collection, when discussing the research objectives and aims with participants.</p> <p>-During dissemination, when sharing findings with the head of the programme and/or dean of the faculty.</p>	<p>-Communicate the research objectives in a realistic way.</p>	<p>-Do not put too much pressure on myself to affect short-term change.</p>
<p>7) Power imbalances stemming from participants knowing my strong</p>	<p>-Myself</p> <p>-All research participants</p>	<p>-During data collection, participants might feel triggered by the topic and/or</p>	<p>-Build trust and be transparent.</p> <p>-Implement strict</p>	<p>-Use a neutral co-facilitator in focus groups to balance power dynamics.</p>

<p>commitment to decolonisation, potentially influencing their responses (i.e. feel pressured to align with my views or react with resistance due to internalised colonialism, white fragility etc.)</p>		<p>pressured to give expected responses.</p> <p>-During analysis, if faculty feel personally judged and/or scrutinised.</p>	<p>confidentiality measures to ensure participants' safety.</p>	
<p>8) Potential psycho-emotional harm to researcher and participants</p>	<p>-Myself</p> <p>-Students and faculty especially those from marginalised backgrounds</p>	<p>For researcher (myself):</p> <p>-Throughout the research process - from planning, where institutional resistance and self-censorship may occur; to data collection, where discussing colonial legacies can be emotionally and professionally challenging; to analysis and dissemination, where navigating power dynamics, institutional pushback, and potential reputational risks can take an emotional and cognitive toll.</p> <p>For participants:</p> <p>-During data collection, when discussing colonial legacies, oppression,</p>	<p>For researcher (myself):</p> <p>-Build a support network and share my challenges and concerns with peers, mentors or external decolonial scholars during regular check-ins.</p> <p>-Prioritise self-compassion and acknowledge that I do not have to "fix" everything or carry the emotional weight of decolonisation alone.</p> <p>For participants:</p> <p>-Explicitly acknowledge potential risks and benefits in the consent forms.</p> <p>-Set "ground rules" for the focus groups to avoid participants causing unintended harm to each other.</p>	<p>For researcher (myself):</p> <p>-Share responsibility and authorship with other students or scholars in order to reduce individual burden.</p> <p>-Recognise that institutional change is a long-term process and manage my own expectations accordingly.</p> <p>For participants:</p> <p>-Offer pre-discussion and/or post-discussion debriefing sessions to help participants prepare emotionally and/or unload after the focus groups/interviews.</p> <p>-Provide links to mental health support resources.</p>

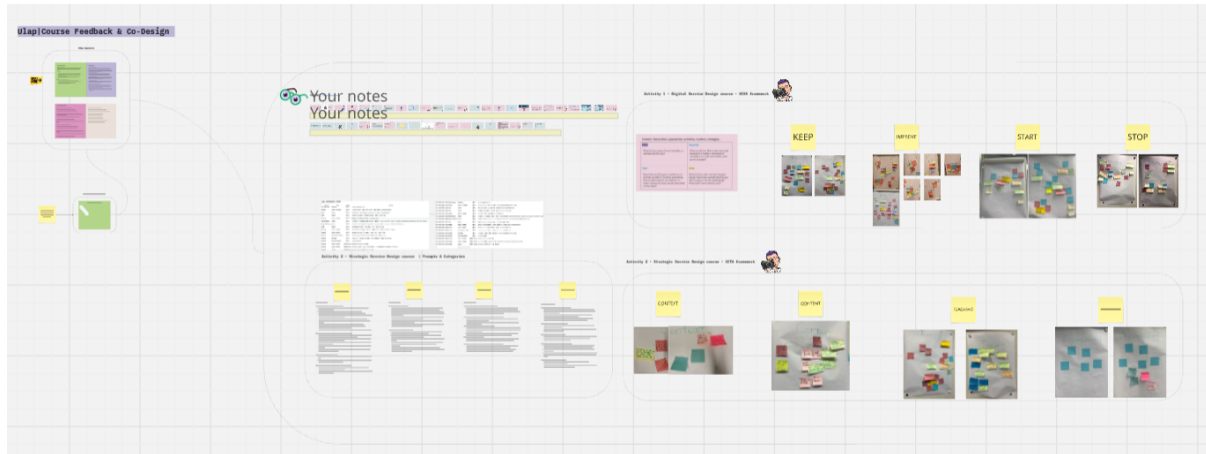
		<p>marginalisation and related topics that might trigger trauma.</p> <p>-During analysis and dissemination, when framing sensitive narratives.</p>	<p>-Remind participants they can skip questions or withdraw at any point.</p> <p>-Use gentler, dialogue-based approaches instead of direct questioning.</p> <p>-Include contact details for the university counsellor and other sources of emotional support in the research information sheet and verbally share this information at the beginning and at the end of the focus groups/interviews.</p>	
<p>9) Potential autoethnography's blindspots as discussed by Walls (2008)</p>	<p>-Myself</p> <p>-All research participants</p>	<p>-During data analysis and dissemination, ensuring accurate and fair representation of the programme.</p>	<p>-Avoid overgeneralising my personal experiences in the programme as representative of the overall reality.</p> <p>-Obtain consent for disclosing the stories and personal experiences of others and do so in an anonymous way.</p>	<p>-Validate findings through participants' review.</p> <p>-Give the option to participants to delete or rephrase sections of my autoethnography that are about them.</p>
<p>10) Data protection according to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)</p>	<p>-Myself</p> <p>-All research participants</p>	<p>-During data collection & analysis, protecting participant confidentiality.</p>	<p>-Collect only the minimum amount of personal data necessary for the accomplishment of my research.</p> <p>-Obtain explicit informed consent in writing through consent forms as</p>	<p>-Use pseudonymisation so that even if someone gains access to the data, pseudonyms prevent linking responses to specific individuals.</p>

			<p>well as repeat key information verbally.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Use a GDPR-compliant online form software to collect personal data (e.g. Webropol or Microsoft Forms) -Adapt Zoom settings to ensure recorded video/audio in Zoom meetings is GDPR compliant (e.g. (1) change data residency settings from the US to the EEA, (2) customise data centres for meetings & (3) configure Zoom to store all meeting recordings locally on my computer, rather than in the cloud.) -Store data securely on the desktop of my password-protected computer or on the university server. -Delete all data after the retention period stated in the informed consent form. 	-Plan for potential data breaches and appropriate ways to notify affected participants
11) Accessibility and impact of the dissemination of the institutional recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Myself -Head of programme -Faculty members -Dean of faculty 	-During dissemination, ensuring recommendations are framed constructively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Present research findings in an actionable and solution-oriented way. -Present research findings in more accessible formats (e.g. 	-Share findings with the head of the programme and/or dean of the faculty in an online or in-person meeting, rather than just the thesis write-up.

			infographic) in addition to thesis write-up.	-Engage directly with the head of the programme and/or the dean of the faculty in discussions about actionable changes.
12) Publication and public accessibility on Lauda (Lapland University's institutional repository)	-Myself -All research participants	-During dissemination, ensuring sensitive findings are responsibly shared.	-Anonymise and redact sensitive details.	-Discuss restricted sections with my supervisor to check if some parts of the thesis can be withheld from public view. -Delay the public release of the thesis to allow further review of sensitive information before publication on Lauda.
13) Research fatigue, credit & acknowledgment of co-design contributions	-Myself -All research participants	-During data collection, as participants (students & faculty) might already be engaged in multiple studies, student theses, or discussions about SDSI and its curriculum and pedagogy. - During dissemination, ensuring all contributors to my thesis are properly acknowledged	-Practice reciprocity by offering in-kind support or a small, non-monetary token of appreciation to each research participant.	-Mention everyone who contributed to my research project at any stage in the "Acknowledgments section" of my thesis (unless they prefer not to). -Involve participants in finalising recommendations before submitting the thesis

APPENDIX 2

CO-REFLECTION & CO-DESIGN WORKSHOP – 30 OCTOBER 2024



Tools

Miro Board: <https://miro.com/app/board/uXjVLMf1hq5=/>

Presentation slides:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1WvmXz6wrfLtEo5PsSs_BroYKXzrouGjQQeMcgakJh10/edit?usp=sharing

Agenda

13:00 | Welcome, introduction and meditation (15 mins)

Activity 1: Digital Service Design course

13:15 - 13:20 | KISS framework introduction (5 min)

13:20 - 13:30 | Individual brain dumping (10 mins)

13:30 - 13:33 | Group division (2-3 min)

13:33 - 13:48 | Group discussion, additions & clustering (7+7 mins)

13:48 - 14:00 | Comfort break (10 mins)

14:00 - 14:25 | Group share and outcomes (25 mins)

14:25 - 14:30 | New group formation (5 mins)

Activity 2: Strategic Service Design course

14:30 - 14:37 | Overview of the Strategic Service Design course (7 mins)

14:37 - 14:42 | CCTA framework introduction (5 mins)

14:42 - 14:52 | Pair discussion (10 mins)

14:52 - 15:00 | Comfort break (8 mins)

15:00 - 15:10 | Group discussion (10 mins)

15:10 - 15:40 | World Café rounds (30 mins)

15:40 - 16:00 | Group share and outcomes (20 minutes)

Frameworks

1. KISS framework (Keep, Improve, Stop, Start), credited to Philip Daniels as cited by Biancuzzo (2024).

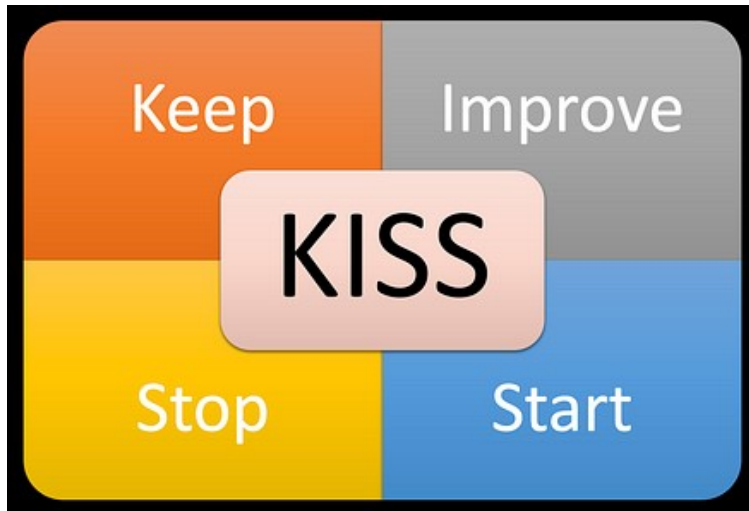


Figure 9: KISS framework infographic

Note. From Biancuzzo (2024). Copyright 2024 by Marie Biancuzzo

Content, interactions, approaches, activities, routines, strategies..

Keep What did you enjoy, found valuable, or worked well for you?	Improve What would you like to see improved because it's helpful, enjoyable or valuable but could work better with some changes?
Start Was there anything you wanted us to do that we didn't? Is there something that worked well for you before / in other classes that you would have liked in this class?	Stop What did you wish we had stopped doing? Was there something that you didn't enjoy or found challenging? What didn't work well for you?

Figure 10: KISS matrix

From author (2025) based on Biancuzzo (2024)

2. CCTA framework (Context, Content, Teaching, Assessment) by the University of Waterloo (2024).

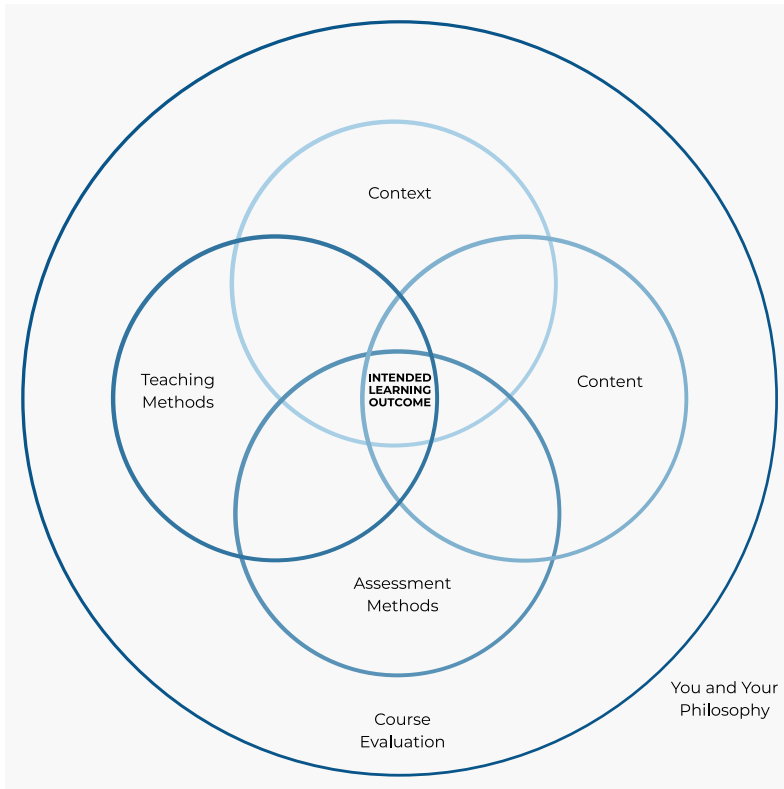


Figure 11: Model of the components of course design
Adapted from University of Waterloo (2024)

1 idea, 1 sticky note | Be constructive | Be specific

<p>Context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yourself as students (interests, needs, goals, expectations) • How course fits into SDSI programme • Course practicalities 	<p>Content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding/using resources • Organising content week by week
<p>Teaching methods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiar/new teaching methods • How methods support learning • Classroom environment • Learning preferences 	<p>Assessment methods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment type & goals • Alignment assessment & learning • Timing & workload • Results + reflection




Figure 12: CCTA matrix
From author (2025) based on University of Waterloo (2024)

APPENDIX 3

INTERVIEW GUIDE – SDSI FOUNDERS

Duration: ~45-60 minutes

Format: Semi-structured, conversational interview

Introduction and relational framing (5 min)

3. Thank you sincerely for taking the time to e-meet with me.
 4. To offer some context: I am researching how service design education can become more inclusive, relational, and better reflect international students' diverse experiences. My project focuses on the SDSI programme: exploring perceptions of decolonising the curriculum and pedagogy, and the potential implications for curricular and pedagogical development.
 5. Your perspective, grounded in your experience in *[tailored to interviewee, e.g., design thinking, organisational development]* and your role as co-founder, is incredibly valuable to this conversation.
 6. Please note:
 - This interview is not an evaluation of SDSI or your individual practice. It is an exploration of broader systemic structures in service design education.
 - I invite this to be a relational conversation; please feel free to ask me questions too.
 - In the spirit of relational ethics and reciprocity, I would like to offer something back in-kind to acknowledge the time, care, and knowledge you are sharing with me today. (e.g., supporting future programme development - this can be discussed.)
 - You will receive a verbatim transcript of our conversation within 24 hours for your review. You will have the opportunity to edit, remove, or clarify any part of it before it is included in the analysis.
 - Your responses will remain confidential and anonymous.
 7. Is it okay if I start audio recording our conversation?
-

Meanings and understandings of decolonisation (8 min)

Q1. When you hear the phrase “decolonising service design”, how do you understand it?

(Offer explanation if needed: challenging the dominance of Western/Eurocentric perspectives, uplifting diverse ways of knowing, and rethinking power dynamics within teaching and learning.)

Decolonisation in practice (5 min)

Q2. In your experience in/ within [*tailored to interviewee, e.g., design thinking, organisational development, industry, academia*], have conversations about decolonisation emerged? If yes, in which contexts (e.g., academic, professional)?

SDSI origins, vision, and evolution (8 min)

Q3. Could you share the story of how the SDSI programme came into being?

Q4. What were your initial hopes and objectives when founding SDSI?

Q5. Have these objectives evolved since receiving Erasmus Mundus funding?

Q6. What are the current key goals and KPIs for SDSI (2022-2028)?

Q7. How is SDSI monitored and evaluated to meet these goals? (e.g. internal processes, external EU evaluations)

EU requirements and constraints (5 min)

Q8. What requirements does the Erasmus Mundus programme place on SDSI? (e.g., deliverables, allocation of scholarships, centring EU values).

Consortium relations (5 min)

Q9. What have been the biggest challenges and learnings when coordinating SDSI across three institutions and countries?

Q10. How are decisions made collaboratively between LMA, EKA, ULAP, and SSE Riga?

Curriculum design and development (7 min)

Q11. Can you walk me through the process of developing SDSI Year 1's curriculum? Who was involved? What were the main priorities and considerations? How were consortium partners engaged?

Q12. What have been the major challenges in designing and adapting the curriculum?

Q13. Are there any policy, funding, or structural constraints that limit curricular flexibility?

Faculty hiring and development (5 min)

Q14. How are faculty members hired and selected for teaching in SDSI Year 1?

Q15. What are the main challenges in faculty recruitment and retention?

Q16. Does SDSI offer pedagogical development or training for faculty?

Future reforms and recommendations (7 min)

Q17. In your view, how could SDSI better balance its Northern European foundations with the global and diverse backgrounds of its students?

Q18. In your opinion, what kind of outputs or findings from my thesis would be most valuable to SDSI?

Closing (3 min)

- Is there anything else you would like to add, suggest, or ask me?
- Are there any other people (or organisations) you think I should talk to?
- Would it be okay if I reach out via email if further clarifications or insights are needed?
- You will receive a verbatim transcript of our conversation via email within 24 hours for your review and approval.
- Thank you deeply for your time, knowledge, and relational generosity.

APPENDIX 4

INTERVIEW GUIDE – SDSI FACULTY MEMBERS

Duration: ~45-60 minutes

Format: Semi-structured, conversational interview

Introduction and relational framing (5 min)

- Thank you sincerely for taking the time to e-meet with me.
- To offer some context: I am researching how service design education can become more inclusive, relational, and better reflect international students' diverse experiences. My project focuses on the SDSI programme: exploring perceptions of decolonising the curriculum and pedagogy, and the potential implications for curricular and pedagogical development.
- Your perspective, grounded in your experience in *[tailored to interviewee, e.g. design thinking, organisational development]* and your role as lecturer, is incredibly valuable to this conversation.
- Please note:
 - This interview is not an evaluation of SDSI or your individual practice. It is an exploration of broader systemic structures in service design education.
 - I invite this to be a relational conversation; please feel free to ask me questions too.
 - In the spirit of relational ethics and reciprocity, I would like to offer something back in-kind to acknowledge the time, care, and knowledge you are sharing with me today. (e.g., supporting future programme development - this can be discussed.)
 - You will receive a verbatim transcript of our conversation within 24 hours for your review. You will have the opportunity to edit, remove, or clarify any part of it before it is included in the analysis.
 - Your responses will remain confidential and anonymous.
- Is it okay if I start audio recording our conversation?

Meanings and understandings of decolonisation (8 min)

Q1. If I say “let’s decolonise [*tailored to interviewee – e.g. service design, education, business, people management*]” what does this mean to you? What key words, images, or associations come to mind?

(Offer explanation if needed: challenging the dominance of Western/Eurocentric perspectives, uplifting diverse ways of knowing, and rethinking power dynamics within teaching and learning.)

Decolonisation in practice (5 min)

Q2. In your experience practicing or working in/within [*tailored to interviewee, e.g., design thinking, organisational development, industry, academia*], has decolonisation ever come up as a topic of discussion or concern? If yes, in which contexts (e.g., academic, professional)?

Knowledge systems and epistemology in SDSI (8 min)

Q3. Many - if not all - (service) design/business/ HR frameworks, tools and theories we teach and learn at SDSI originate from Western (US/European) contexts. Based on your experience teaching students from diverse countries and cultural backgrounds, how adaptable do you think these frameworks/tools/theories are to different socio-cultural settings?

Q4. Could you share an example from a lecture/workshop/project where you needed to adjust your approach because the content did not resonate culturally or felt uncomfortable/inappropriate for your audience?

Decolonisation in institutional contexts (8 min)

Q5. How familiar are you with the global and European student movements advocating for the decolonisation of curricula? Where or how did you hear about these movements? What is your view of their aims and impact?

Q6. How does [*tailored to interviewee - name of institution they work for or are affiliated with*] engage with issues of decolonisation, if at all? Are there discussions among students and/or faculty members about curriculum change or decolonisation?

Q7. Have you, as *[tailored to interviewee – e.g. lecturer, PhD candidate, design professional]*, ever attended a course, seminar, or training session about decolonisation or inclusive teaching? If yes, where and what was the focus?

Q8. Have you ever received any formal or informal training in pedagogy or teaching? If yes, where and what kind of training was it?

Curriculum design and teaching practices (10 min)

Q9. Can you walk me through the process of how the *[tailored to interviewee – name of the course(s) they teach at SDSI]* was developed for SDSI Year 1/2? What steps were taken? Who was involved? Who made the final decisions? To what extent was *[tailored to interviewee – name of consortium partners]* involved?

Q10. SDSI students come from diverse cultural, linguistic, religious, and disciplinary backgrounds. What challenges have you experienced while teaching in such a context?

Q11. What kinds of feedback have you received from SDSI students regarding the *[tailored to interviewee – name of the course(s) they teach at SDSI]*? If helpful, you may share both positive and constructive feedback.

Future reforms and recommendations (8 min)

Q12. As someone with expertise in *[tailored to interviewee – e.g. design, business, strategic foresight]*, how do you think SDSI could better balance its European foundations with the need for more inclusive and decolonial perspectives?

Q13. How can students, faculty, and administrators collaborate more effectively to foster a more inclusive and critical approach to service design education?

Q14. In your opinion, what kind of outcomes, findings, or materials from my thesis would be most useful or valuable for you and for SDSI going forward?

Closing (3 min)

- Is there anything else you would like to add, suggest, or ask me?
- Are there any other people (or organisations) you think I should talk to?
- Would it be okay if I follow up via email if I need to clarify anything further?
- You will receive a verbatim transcript of our conversation via email within 24 hours for your review and approval.
- Thank you deeply for your time, knowledge, and relational generosity.

APPENDIX 5

EXPERT INFORMANTS' QUESTIONS GUIDE

EXPERT 1 – DESIGN EXPERTISE & EXTERNAL EVALUATOR OF SDSI

Meanings and understandings of decolonisation

Q1. When you hear the phrase "decolonising (service) design," what does it mean to you? How do you understand it theoretically and in practice? What key words, images, or associations come to mind?

Decolonisation in practice

Q2. In your experience practicing or working in/within [*tailored to interviewee, e.g., design thinking, organisational development, industry, academia*], has decolonisation ever come up as a topic of discussion or concern? If yes, in which contexts (e.g., academic, professional)?

Q3. Have you come across any organisations, institutions, programmes, or projects that you think are leading the way in decolonising service design?

Q4. How does the institution(s) you work for or are affiliated with approach decolonisation, if at all? What actions do they take in practice?

Knowledge systems and epistemology in service design

Q5. Based on your experience working across different geographical and cultural contexts: To what extent do you think design thinking and service design frameworks are adaptable to different socio-cultural settings?

Q6. Can you share an example where you had to adjust your approach, activities, or questions because they did not resonate, or were uncomfortable, inappropriate, or less meaningful to your audience?

Service design education and policy

Q7. How relevant do you think the project of decolonisation is within service design education?

Q8. Imagine you are advising the director of a Northern European, EU-funded service design master's programme marketed globally: What three key recommendations would you offer to help the programme balance its European foundations with the urgent need for just, decolonial, and plural perspectives?

Q9. How can students, faculty members, and university administrators collaborate more effectively to foster a more inclusive and critical approach to service design education?

EXPERT 2 – DECOLONIAL RESEARCH & DESIGN EXPERTISE

Meanings and understandings of decolonisation

Q1. When you hear the term “decolonising design education”, what does it mean to you? How do you personally understand it?

Q2. In many conversations, decolonisation is often reduced to diversity and inclusion efforts, which risks diluting its political, epistemic, and ontological significance. How do you communicate about decolonisation in a way that retains its political and epistemic depth, yet remains accessible and non-alienating for broader audiences?

Decolonisation the curriculum and pedagogy

Q3. What are your reflections on the global student movements advocating for the decolonisation of university curricula?

Q4. The learning experiences and training you offer at *[name of organisation]* feel very different - more positive, caring, and trauma-informed - compared to conventional university education. How do you intentionally create and sustain such relational and supportive learning spaces?

Working with universities

Q5. I read in your latest newsletter that you facilitated a workshop for *[name of university]*'s graduate programme directors and faculty. If you are able to share, how did the session go? What were the programme directors and faculty hoping to achieve? What key insights, challenges, or tensions emerged from those discussions?

Recommendation for transforming education

Q6. If you were advising the director of an EU-funded service design master's programme based in Northern Europe but marketed globally: What three key recommendations would you offer to help the programme balance its European foundations with the urgent need for just, decolonial, and plural perspectives?

EXPERT 3 – STRATEGIC SERVICE DESIGN EXPERTISE & SDSI STUDENT

Meanings and feelings around decolonisation

Q1. Keeping your eyes close, if I say "let's decolonise design education", what kind of feelings and emotions come up for you?

Q2. When you hear the term "decolonisation", what kind of keywords, images or concepts come up for you? How do you understand this term?

Decolonisation in practice

Q3. In your experience working at the intersection of design, strategy, and research, has decolonisation ever come up in projects you were or are involved in? If so, in what ways?

Q4. Thinking about the SDSI curriculum: What are your thoughts on the kinds of theories, frameworks, and tools currently presented and taught at SDSI?

Q5. What kinds of perspectives, approaches, or knowledge systems do you think are missing from the current SDSI curriculum?

Q6. What is your opinion about the business-focused courses offered during the second semester?

Community building

Q7. Have you been involved in the SDSI's "Local Buddy Programme" in Kuldīga, or have you heard feedback from students who participated? If yes, how do you feel it impacted their experiences?

Pedagogical approaches and learning experience

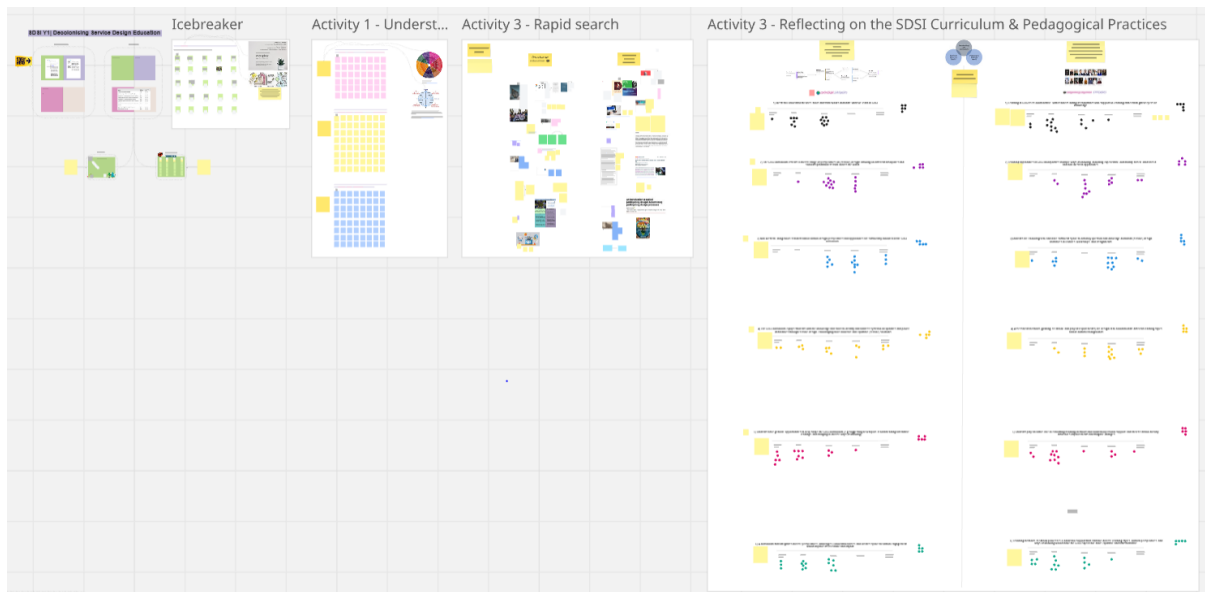
Q8. Thinking about Year 1 teaching: Which lecturer or facilitator brought something particularly different or distinctive to the learning experience? Was there someone whose approach especially resonated with you or the students?

Q9. What are your thoughts on the group work and collaborative projects during Year 1?

Q10. In your opinion, what could be improved to foster better group dynamics and collaboration among students?

APPENDIX 6

FOCUS GROUPS – 17 & 21 MARCH 2025



Tool: Miro Board

Agenda

14:00 | Welcome, introduction and ground rules

14:05 - 14:15 | Ice breaker – Metaphor for SDSI learning journey (10 min)

Activity 1: Understanding decolonisation - Feelings, meanings, definitions and metaphors

14:15 - 14:30 | Feelings about decolonisation – emotional reflection and sharing (15 mins)

14:30 - 14:45 | Meanings of decolonisation – keywords, concepts, definitions and metaphors (15 min)

Activity 2: Rapid search on decolonisation across languages and countries

14:45 - 15:00 | Multilingual and multicultural Google exploration on decolonisation (15 mins)

15:00 - 15:10 | Comfort break (10 mins)

Activity 3: Positionality spectrum - Curriculum and pedagogical practices at SDSI

15:10 - 15:20 | Positionality spectrum – SDSI curriculum (10 mins)

15:20 - 15:35 | Group reflection and discussion (15 mins)

15:35 - 15:40 | Positionality spectrum – SDSI pedagogy (5 mins)

15:40 – 15:55 | Group reflection and discussion (15 mins)

15:55 – 16:00 | Closing & wrap-up (5 mins)

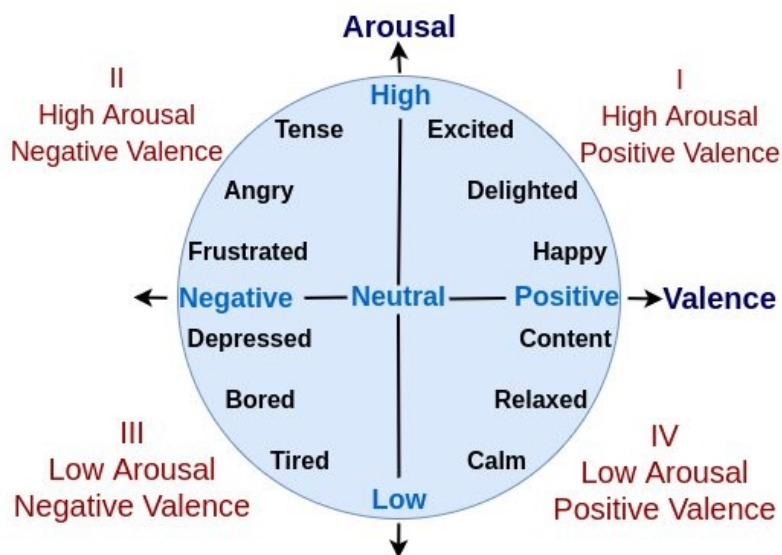


Figure 14: The valence-arousal space. Valence denotes the range of emotions from being very sad (negative) to very happy (positive) and arousal reflects the energy or intensity of emotions from very passive to very active.

Reference: Praveen, R.G & Cardinal, P. (2015)- Audio-visual fusion for emotion recognition in the valence-arousal space using joint cross-attention. *Journal of latex class files*,14(8), <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2209.09068>

- Subsequently, participants shared their emotions in an open discussion.
- The second part of the activity asked participants to write down any keywords, concepts, definitions that came to mind when thinking about decolonisation in education and design, followed by a sharing session.
- Finally, participants reflected on any metaphors or images associated with decolonisation and discussed them collectively.

Activity 2: Rapid search on decolonisation across languages and countries

Goal:

To diversify understandings of decolonisation across linguistic and cultural contexts, especially for non-native English speakers.

Instructions:

Participants conducted a rapid online search using their native (or most comfortable) language

for resources related to “*decolonising education*” and “*decolonising design.*” Each participant selected one short resource per topic, posted the links on the Miro board, and summarised key insights in a few words.

A brief discussion followed to highlight surprising findings, differences across contexts, or unexpected insights

Activity 3: Positionality spectrum - Curriculum and pedagogical practices at SDSI

Goal:

To critically reflect on participants’ personal experiences with SDSI’s curriculum content and pedagogical approaches, highlighting areas of agreement, contention, and opportunity for change.

Instructions:

- Participants engaged with two sets of 12 thematic statements: 6 related to curriculum and 6 to pedagogy (see all statements below).
- For each statement, participants were asked to position themselves along a spectrum from “*Strongly Agree*” to “*Strongly Disagree*” by dragging a voting dot on the Miro board.
- Clarifications were provided where needed. Participants were encouraged to also challenge and problematise the statements.
- Each set of statements was discussed after voting to deepen collective understanding and identify shared experiences or differing perspectives.

Curriculum thematic statements:

1. Western/Eurocentric theories, tools and frameworks dominate what we learn in SDSI.
2. The SDSI curriculum reflects a diverse range of perspectives on (service) design; drawing from different disciplines, scholars, practitioners across the world.
3. Critical design perspectives (e.g. Non-Western, Indigenous, feminist) and approaches are sufficiently included in the SDSI curriculum.

4. The SDSI curriculum equips students with the knowledge and skills to identify and address systemic inequalities and power imbalances through service design, encouraging more inclusive and equitable (service) solutions.
5. Students have genuine/meaningful opportunities to help shape the SDSI curriculum (e.g. suggesting new topics, recommending alternative readings, and bringing in diverse ways of knowing).
6. A curriculum that integrates diverse perspectives, challenges Eurocentric biases, and creates space for critical engagement would improve its relevance and impact.

Pedagogy thematic statements:

1. Learning in SDSI feels collaborative, with teachers acting as facilitators who support co-learning rather than gatekeepers of knowledge.
2. Teaching approaches in SDSI incorporate multiple ways of knowing (e.g. experiential, community-based, land-based).
3. Students have sufficient space to critically question and challenge dominant (service) design narratives in lectures, workshops, and assignments.
4. Assessment methods (grading, feedback, and project requirements) are designed to accommodate different learning styles and/or cultural backgrounds.
5. Students play an active role in evaluating teaching methods and academic/personal support, and their feedback directly influences improvements and tangible changes.
6. Teaching methods, feedback processes, and academic support that embrace diverse learning styles, cultural perspectives, and ways of knowing would make the SDSI experience more equitable and transformative.