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Decolonising the curriculum: A survey of current practice in a modern UK university

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Decolonisation is a socio-political movement which challenges Eurocentrism and post-colonial notions of power. This has numerous implications for higher education institutions (HEIs), where the content and delivery of curricula may be seen as products of colonial legacy. The decolonisation agenda has increasing support from students, the academy, and regulatory bodies, which together are invoking HEIs to act. This paper reports on research undertaken within a UK HEI, which benchmarked the extent to which programmes followed characteristics of (de)colonised curricula. A survey, based on existing open access resources, was completed by 99 staff and 290 students across four schools. Findings suggest differences in how curricula are perceived by staff and students, and between white and minority ethnic student groups. Given growing global interest in decolonisation and associated social justice themes, this research has important applications for other HEIs.

Keywords: word; Decolonisation, curriculum, representation, culture, belonging

Introduction

Colonisation is a historic, global phenomenon, whereby European nations (i.e. Great Britain, Spain, Portugal, France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Prussia), and later the United States, dominated countries across Africa, Asia, South America, North America and Australasia. Force, and narratives of cultural and racial inequality, were used to justify political, legal, and economic exploitation (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2017). Whilst these regimes have ended, the legacy of coloniality persists. It underpins modern-day phenomena, including neo colonialism, eurocentrism, structural racism, and economic and social inequality (Morreira et al., 2020). Decolonisation has emerged to recognise and critique colonial legacy. Whilst defined

differently according to context, there is consensus that decolonisation is about restorative justice through epistemic, cultural, psychological, and economic freedom.

The impact of coloniality in Higher Education (HE) has long been discussed in the global South (Mazrui, 1978), with notable recent traction in historic centres of colonial activity (Arday et al., 2020). In 2015, students at the University of Cape Town protested failures of post-apartheid decolonisation by questioning the appropriateness of a Cecil John Rhodes statue (Gopal, 2021). A global movement, with distinct local manifestations, has since ensued. For example, Canadian HE is attempting to move beyond settler colonial theory to achieve meaningful change in education (Attas, 2019). Whilst in Australia, efforts are underway to 'indigenisie' the curriculum using cultural interface theory (Nakata, 2007; Universities Australia, 2017).

In the UK, a historical centre of colonial rule, the HE sector shows continuing influence of coloniality. For example, organisational structures (ethnic representation of staff is 83% white, HESA, 2020; Liyanage, 2020), patterns of student participation and outcomes (NUS & UUK, 2019; OfS, 2020), and the curricula that are delivered, all reflect characteristics of colonial inheritance (Arday et al, 2020). This has generated calls to redress the 'extended shadow' of colonial legacy in UK HE (Dabashi, 2019). Student activism has been central, with protagonists calling the decolonisation of UK curricula an ethical and academic necessity (Prebble, 2018; Morreira et al., 2020). Several high-profile campaigns have emerged, including 'Why is my Curriculum White? 'Rhodes must Fall' (NUS, 2016), and 'Why isn't my Professor Black?' (UCL, 2014). The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests further resonated and motivated students seeking to challenge the sector over structural racism, Eurocentrism, and bias (Otobo, 2020). By response, within the academy interest in (de)colonisation of education, as a

field of study, has grown exponentially (Bhambra, et al., 2018; Liyanage, 2020), spawning new journals, conferences, and special interest groups e.g., the HE Race Action Group (HERAG), the Anti-Racism in Academia (AIRA) group, and the Race Equity Tools resource. Regulatory bodies have also weighed in. The Office for Students (OfS) registers, monitors, and develops effective practice in UK HEIs and since 2019 it has instructed the sector to eliminate existing ethnic disparities. To quantify this challenge, in 2020 74% of UK HE students were White (HESA, 2021), and in 2017-18 the proportion of Black students achieving 'good degrees' was 23.1% lower than White course-mates (OfS, 2020). Against this backdrop, HEIs are increasingly attentive to what is a persuasive literature linking structural racism, (de)colonised curricula, student representation, and belonging, with students' access to and outcomes from HE (Broecke and Nicholls, 2008; NUS & UUK, 2019; Stevenson et al., 2019).

Liyanage (2020, p. 14) highlights the importance of a planned, joined-up approach to decolonising practice: "meaningful engagement...requires reassessing curricula, attainment, and representation concurrently". For Liyanage, decolonising includes raising educator awareness of coloniality. Further manifestations of 'good practice' could include recognising decolonisation as academically rigorous; facilitating representation of ethnically diverse students, staff, and mentors; addressing belonging and cultural safety; representing culturally diverse knowledges; epistemic humility; awareness of power differentials in language; and careful critique of racialised data. From this non-exhaustive list, there appears the potential for decolonisation to be challenging, controversial, and divisive. This raises questions about HEIs best manage the process.

Like other pedagogic justice agendas, engagement with decolonisation is driven by context. At UK sector-level, student activism has been supported by the National Union of Students (NUS, 2016). However, at institutional level, most activity has been observed in HEIs with a diverse student cohort; typically, those in London and the Midlands. Many UK HEIs do not have diverse student cohorts to drive interest, diverse staff to contribute insight, or expertise to deliver support. Batty (2020) found that only 24/128 UK HEIs were actively pursuing decolonisation as an institutional priority, and 36/128 offered staff development in the field. Notwithstanding sectoral guidance on race equality (e.g., Advance HE, 2016), there is less support for educational developers and lecturers attempting to establish key features of (de)colonised curricula, identify its relevance to their discipline and students, and make evidence-informed changes to practice.

These conditions prompted the current work. The host HEI lies in an ethnically non-diverse region and has modest numbers of ethnic minority students and staff. It is developing a REC application and there are pockets of strong interest in decolonisation within the academic and professional services communities. Given the OfS mandate to eliminate attainment gaps, all academic staff would benefit from greater understanding of the reasons for decolonising curricula, and how to accomplish this. As a starting point, the current study benchmarked the extent to which current programmes exhibit characteristics of a decolonised curriculum, and the findings were intended to inform local and institutional conversations about decolonisation.

Method and materials

The study had two aims:

- To investigate staff and student perceptions of select curriculum characteristics associated with decolonisation.
- To establish if perceptions differ dependent on respondent identity (i.e., as a member of staff, or White or Ethnic Minority [ME] student).

The host institution, a medium-sized university in Southwest England granted ethical approval. According to the institution's Access and Participation Plan (2021-25), 90% of UK-domiciled students and 14% of staff are White. Comparable anonymous online surveys were developed to investigate staff and student perceptions (full wording on request). These were developed following internet searches for "decolonisation" AND "ac.uk". Whilst searches did not identify pre-existing surveys, several 'toolkit' resources were located (SOAS, 2018; UCL, 2020; Kingston University, n.d.), which guided practitioners on addressing colonisation in their curriculum. Examples of good practice from these resources were rephrased into questions, to ascertain the extent to which respondents perceived these features in the curriculum. The 17-questions set spanned six themes: Representation, Content, Peer Engagement, Assessment, Language and Communication, and Culture (Table 1).

The surveys were piloted and refined before dissemination to staff and students in four academic Schools using simple convenience sampling. Items had three response options: 'Not at all' (1), 'To some extent' (2), and 'Very much' (3), so that higher mean values indicated more positive perceptions. Atypically, item LANG1 probed poor practice, so scores were reversed. For each theme, an open text field allowed respondents to provide further explanation. Additionally, students' ethnicity (White or ME) was established using questions from UK Government guidance. More granular analyses were not feasible owing to low numbers of ME students. Students who

selected “prefer not to say” regarding ethnicity were excluded. Staff ethnicity was similarly recorded but not analysed given considerable homogeneity.

Using SPSS 24.0, responses to each item were subjected to two separate analyses: (1) a comparison of White students and staff, and (2) a comparison of ME students and staff. Analyses were Chi-square tests with 10,000 bootstrapped replicates, to counter effects of small samples. P-values of <0.05 indicated statistically significant differences. To interpret the magnitude of difference, Cramer’s V was calculated. For Chi-square with two degrees of freedom, V values of ≥ 0.07, ≥ 0.21, and ≥ 0.35 reflect ‘small’, ‘medium’, and ‘large’ effects sizes (Kim, 2017).

Limitations

In reviewing this approach several methodological issues warrant discussion. Akin to an estimated >90% of social science studies, the current research used convenience sampling (Bornstein et al., 2013) and alternative methods might generate more probing and generalisable findings. For example, a homogenous group of interest (e.g., ME students) could be tracked over time, to establish the impact of a given pedagogic intervention (Jager et al., 2017). Employing a mixed method approach including qualitative exploration of the themes investigated here, may also offer more understanding of the observed differences. Meanwhile, we would welcome formal efforts to test the construct validity of the surveys. Finally, future research should address the critique that categories such as ME and BAME over-generalise by combining different ethnic groups, although, more granular research remains difficult in context that lack diversity.

Results

Table 1 summarises the data. The survey was completed by 99 staff, (White, n= 93; ME, n= 6) and 290 students (White, n= 192; ME, n= 98). Responses were not compulsory, which explains variation in response rates between items. Group comparisons are expressed in Mean difference, with negative values indicating where student perceptions were less favourable than staff. Shading denotes statistical significance.

TABLE 1 HERE

Representation

REP1 probed whether third parties from diverse backgrounds featured in the course (e.g., guest speakers). No significant difference in perception was observed between staff and White students. Conversely, there was a significant, medium-sized effect whereby ME students were less likely to report this practice than staff. REP 2 enquired about the use of diverse alumni to inspire students. No significant differences were observed between groups. However, average scores were modest (1.88-2.08), suggesting that few respondents reported diverse alumni being used ‘very much’. REP3 explored awareness of departmental ME staff and their accomplishments. Analyses showed significant medium-sized effects, with both student groups less aware than staff. Across groups, average scores were modest (1.57-1.95), suggesting only a minority reported ‘very much’ awareness regarding ME colleagues. Open comments verified these findings and suggested that limited diversity in third parties, alumni, and staff, detracted from the perceived quality and aims of the curriculum.

‘Whilst the course tries to view things from a non-white/western background due to the nature of where we are, and the fact that the majority of lecturers are white and appear to come from a high middle-class background, then it is hard to emote and empathise with those not of your identity.’ (Male, White)

‘The speakers which have been invited are typically from a White British background, I believe this reflects a deeper issue in [names discipline] which we need to work on as we move forward. There are only a handful of BAME staff in the department and of those, I am unfortunately aware of very few of their achievements’. (Female, ME)

Content

CONT1 asked if diverse resources were used on the programme. There was no significant difference between White students and staff, whereas a significant medium-sized difference emerged between ME students and staff. Both student groups commented on a lack of diversity in resources:

‘It is very rare to see example pictures etc of non-white [names subject area] because of the underrepresentation in textbooks’. (Male, ME)

‘Course material is not representative of the diverse community and without the presence of learning opportunities to encourage this’. (Female, ME)

‘As a heterosexual, white woman, I feel that I am very well represented by the programme. However, I am fully aware that there are many students in my

cohort that are not represented, and a large number of women in our care that are also under-represented'. (Female, White)

CONT 2 probed if alternative ways of knowing were discussed. There were no significant differences between staff and either student group. However, average scores were modest across groups (1.80- 2.03), indicating that only a minority reported discussion happening 'very much'. Students commented that further coverage of diverse ways of knowing was welcome and would benefit their understanding and practice:

'No alternate 'ways of knowing' have been discussed. We are only taught the Westernised model and anything that challenges it has been disregarded and ridiculed'. (Female, ME)

'Some reference is made in the programme to other cultural [names disciplinary area] treatments and studies but feel this could be emphasised more for the future'. (Female, White)

'I feel that the programme is very much taught for White English students, of which I am one and everything different is maybe thrown out there as an afterthought such as race or ethnicity, I can't improve my practice if I am not aware of how presentation can differ for other races/cultures'. (Female, White)

Peer Engagement

PEER1 probed participants' opportunities for engaging with diverse peer groups. No significant differences were observed between staff and either student

group. Moreover, Mean scores were high across groups (2.36-2.43), suggesting that respondents felt these opportunities were "very much" evident. PEER2 examined whether programmes provided opportunities for peer engagement outside of class. Across groups, average scores were lower than for PEER 1 (1.64- 2.08). Analyses showed significant, medium-sized effects, whereby both White and ME students reported fewer out-of-class opportunities than staff. PEER3 results are particularly striking. Relative to staff, both student groups concurred that peer discussions were less likely to embrace topics relating to ethnicity and privilege. The effect amongst ME students was the largest observed in the study (V=.50).

Assessment

ASST 1 asked if students were able to draw personal experiences into assessment, including those pertaining to ethnicity and privilege. ASST2 examined if assessments featured real-world scenarios relating to ethnicity and privilege. Finally, ASST3 probed if students were allowed to draw in latest news and current affairs regarding ethnicity and privilege. These items were show a consistent pattern. In each case, no significant difference was observed between staff and White students. Conversely, for all items there was a significant difference between staff and ME students, whereby the latter reported fewer opportunities to address ethnicity and privilege within assessments. These differences were medium (ASST1) or large (ASST2, ASST3). Students used open comments to explain that ethnicity should be embedded in assessments rather than tokenistic.

> 'Assessments thus far have failed to acknowledge ethnicity and privilege in every shape and form. They are Euro-centric rather than diverse'. (Female, ME)

‘Assessments take into account ethnicity in that they include a range of names of ethnic (subjects) in scenarios, however the content/question is irrelevant and unrelated to the issues of ethnicity’. (Female, ME)

‘Even though we discuss diversity during our course, we don’t cover the topics on privileges at all’. (Female, ME)

‘Some scenarios for essays have included ethnically diverse patients but unless you already have an understanding of the issues around ethnic privilege and disparities which most people...don’t, then you wouldn’t be taught it during the module, so people probably pick different scenarios or not really know what to write’. (Female, White)

Language and Communication

LANG1 asked if slang words, stereotypes, or language that inferred the superiority of European culture was used. There were no significant differences between groups and average scores were high (2.64- 2.71), suggesting such instances were uncommon. LANG2 examined if staff and students mastered the pronunciation of names. There was no significant difference in perceptions between White students and staff. Conversely, a significant medium-sized effect occurred whereby ME students were less likely to report staff and fellow students as mastering names. Whilst students did not offer any relevant comments, staff described deliberate efforts to ensure correct pronunciation, albeit with difficulty:

> ‘Names are checked during induction and interview and correct pronunciation ascertained (including abbreviations and which is preferred. These are used during sessions and communications.’ (Female lecturer, White)

> ‘I check with participants if I have pronounced their name correctly - sometimes this is difficult for me to get right despite making the effort to do so’. (Female lecturer, White)

Culture

CULT1 asked if diversity issues were considered when learning activities were organised. Perceptions were consistent between staff and White students. Conversely, there was a significant, medium-sized effect showing that, relative to staff, ME students were less likely to think diversity had been considered. CULT 2 examined if students had developed and followed rules of conduct for class activities. There were no significant differences between groups and universally high averages scores (2.41-2.57), suggesting that programme participants do develop and abide by rules for respectful behaviour. CULT3 probed whether challenging behaviour was addressed head on and used as an opportunity to discuss issues relative to ethnicity and privilege. There were significant medium-sized effects whereby both student groups were less likely than staff to perceive that challenging behaviour was addressed in this way. This gap in perception was underscored in open comments, where some staff proclaimed their intolerance of challenging behaviour

> ‘It is made clear to students …that a zero-tolerance stance is adopted in relation to behaviours that are likely to undermine the self-esteem of peers. Students are

reminded that discussions must focus on the subject topic and not descend into personal attacks'. (Female lecturer, White)

Discussion

This study investigated staff and student perceptions of programme features associated with features of a '(de)colonised' curriculum. Substantial gaps in perception emerged. For most survey items, staff were more likely to report good practice as occurring, compared to one or both student groups. In particular, ME students held less positive perceptions than staff, with significant differences for 12/17 survey items. By comparison, staff and White students showed significant differences for only 4/17 items. These findings offer a valuable prompt for staff to recognise that their efforts may be received differently by students. They also echo reflections from writers including Trowell (2019) and Sibanda (2020), regarding the othering, silencing and inequalities that can be experienced by minority ethnic groups in higher education.

Related work demonstrates the integral role lecturers play in stimulating practices to decolonise curricular, (see Moncrieffe et al. (2019) for indicative examples). Their actions can create spaces through which marginalised voices may be represented, often supported by pedagogic change and development. This is not an easy process to engage with, however, and the focus on content often means other areas of change are overlooked. The data may indicate those elements of the curriculum where staff could enact most positive change. First, the single largest difference in staff-student perceptions related to opportunities for peer discussions about ethnicity and privilege (PEER3). This pattern may reflect a lack of confidence amongst lecturers to facilitate potentially complex and emotive discussions. Background factors could be

important here. Lecturers may be conscious that some of their students show 'fragility', defined in this context as:

> "A state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 54).

Some current student respondents made global comments – unrelated to specific items - that were indicative of fragility. In addition, lecturers may worry about effectively managing any challenging behaviour that occurs during peer discussions. To some extent, findings for CULT3 bear out this concern. Otobo (2020) reports that 51% of UK academics have no access to anti-racism training despite 82% believing they would benefit. Moreover, whilst inclusivity is frequently covered by the institutional continuing professional development (CPD) offer, the distinct aims of decolonisation are not (Liyanage, 2020). There appears a compelling argument for targeted staff development, to give individuals' confidence to embed peer discussion of ethnicity and privilege within courses to enable the development and articulation of critical consciousness around ethnicity (Moncrieffe, 2020).

Second, the sphere of assessment appears critical. Whereas White students' perceptions were consistent with staff, ME students gave less favourable responses for all three survey items. Decolonising assessment is integral to wider decolonisation efforts (Moncrieffe, 2021; Turner, 2022) and assessment drives student learning, determining teaching activities and the knowledge students engage with (Race, 2019).

Universities have often relied on assessment formats that require students to interact with specific knowledge bases and to represent that knowledge in a particular way. This reflects the universalisation of knowledge, whereby western modes of thought dominate (Liyanage, 2020). Scrutinising the type, subject and purpose of assessment practices can "open up and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis and thought" (Mingnolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 17). Universities that have sought to decolonise their assessment practices offer several recommendations. These include prompting students to cite diverse sources; introducing creative or non-traditional assessment methods; and co-creating assessments in partnership with students (Liyanage, 2020; Meer and Chapman, 2015).

Developing staff expertise in facilitating peer discussions on ethnicity, and decolonising assessment (amongst other areas highlighted in this study) appear laudable goals. Such work would be consistent with the clear regulatory and sectoral drive for decolonisation (NUS & UUK, 2019; OfS, 2018). Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge some of the deep-rooted obstacles to decolonisation. Questioning established epistemologies and pedagogies may compel staff to (re)consider their personal world view. For example, Asare (2019) describes lecturers' reluctance to accept they may harbour racial positions, and Jefferess (2012) how the insider white perspective forestalls exactly what decolonisation demands, the redistribution of power, authority, and resources. This is especially pertinent in education where restoring epistemic justice through decolonising curriculum does not automatically "divorce racism from its power sources" (Fatsis, 2021, p. 4). This suggests that lecturers require a range of perspectives, capacities and values including ontological pluralism (Ndlovu-

Gatsheni, 2016), allyship (Langdon, 2013), and pedagogical innovation as critical components of decolonising HE and staff development as crucial to achieve these; yet development of this kind is generally lacking across the sector (Morreira et al., 2020). Whilst the regulatory and sectoral motivations to promote decolonisation activity are clear, leading Solanke (2020, p. 4) to predict that "the decolonisation agenda is on its way to becoming embedded into institutional goals". There is evidence of a lag between this and institutional implementation and how this situation will be rectified is unclear. Liyangae (2020) describes how recent years have seen a continuous reduction of centralised funding for pedagogic development across the UK HE sector which is acutely relevant here where decolonisation constitutes essential transformative pedagogic reform.

Conclusion

This paper reports on an investigation into staff and student perceptions of characteristics associated with (de) colonised curriculum in a modern non-diverse UKHEI. The findings suggests that in this case, staff and White Students' perceptions were more closely aligned than those of staff and ME students. In this case, developing discursive approaches and assessments which provide scaffolding and opportunities to engage with issues of ethnicity and privilege, may offer a way to address this perception gap. In the host institution, the findings of the study have established a useful benchmark of current activity and are being used to stimulate conversations between staff, staff and educational developers, and staff and students about potential for change and future practice. This application has the potential to be used in other contexts to

support HEIs in their efforts to decolonise the curriculum and enhance the student experience.

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Table 1. Descriptives and group comparisons, stratified by role (staff/ students), and ethnicity (White/ Minority Ethnic).

Theme		Descriptives									Group Comparisons (χ^2)					
		All Staff			White Students			Minority Ethnic Students			White Students Compared with All Staff			Minority Ethnic Students Compared with All Staff		
		n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	Mean diff.	*p*	Cramer's *V**	Mean diff.	*p*	Cramer's *V**
Represent-ation	REP1	99	2.20	0.59	186	2.10	0.63	95	1.79	0.60	-0.10	.286		-0.41	<.001	.33
	REP2	100	2.08	0.66	186	1.98	0.66	94	1.88	0.69	-0.10	.502		-0.20	.114	
	REP3	100	1.95	0.70	185	1.62	0.74	94	1.57	0.61	-0.33	<.001	.26	-0.38	<.001	.28
Content	CONT1	104	1.87	0.67	191	1.98	0.65	97	1.63	0.63	+0.11	.311		-0.24	.040	.18
	CONT2	102	2.03	0.70	184	1.85	0.72	94	1.80	0.70	-0.18	.089		-0.23	.067	
Peer engagement	PEER1	105	2.43	0.55	192	2.36	0.64	98	2.37	0.65	-0.07	.135		-0.06	.144	
	PEER2	101	2.08	0.70	188	1.79	0.78	95	1.64	0.70	-0.29	.001	.22	-0.44	<.001	.31
	PEER3	101	2.25	0.64	189	2.01	0.75	96	1.53	0.66	-0.24	.004	.20	-0.72	<.001	.50
Assessment	ASST1	101	2.07	0.70	190	1.95	0.69	97	1.64	0.70	-0.12	.391		-0.43	<.001	.31
	ASST2	103	2.17	0.63	188	2.05	0.72	96	1.72	0.71	-0.12	.076		-0.45	<.001	.35
	ASST3	102	2.13	0.70	188	1.99	0.72	95	1.59	0.75	-0.14	.267		-0.54	<.001	.40
Language and communica-tion	LANG1	104	2.71	0.50	191	2.75	0.51	98	2.64	0.58	+0.04	.224		-0.07	.455	
	LANG2	102	2.32	0.62	184	2.27	0.62	94	1.95	0.59	-0.05	.793		-0.37	<.001	.30
	LANG3	94	2.06	0.73	178	1.93	0.68	95	1.86	0.63	-0.13	.170		-0.20	.027	.20
Culture	CULT1	104	2.12	0.66	187	1.94	0.72	97	1.69	0.67	-0.18	.056		-0.43	<.001	.31
	CULT2	101	2.57	0.59	184	2.57	0.62	94	2.41	0.63		.827		-0.16	.165	
	CULT3	98	2.30	0.65	178	2.07	0.74	92	1.83	0.69	-.023	.016	.17	-0.47	<.001	.34
* ≥.07= small effect; ≥.21= medium effect; ≥.35= large effect																