

Decolonising the curriculum at the University of Reading

Article

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Decolonising the Curriculum at the University of Reading

Dr Al Laville (University of Reading)

Summary

- From a series of listening exercises as part of the Race Equality Review (2021) at the University of Reading, it became clear that decolonising the curriculum is important to both students and staff.
- The aim of the decolonising the curriculum project was to create an effective resource to support colleagues to decolonise their curricula across a varied range of disciplines across the University.
- The key consideration points throughout the project were a) to make sure we established a clear vision of what decolonising the curriculum means for Reading students and staff, b) the resource provides guidance on how to consider decolonising the curriculum within your own practice, c) informs how other colleagues have engaged in decolonising the curriculum, and d) what additional learning can take place to advance your understanding of decolonising the curriculum.
- Challenges included balancing a call to action with a considered approach to encouraging personal reflection.
- The resources have received excellent feedback from students and colleagues, and received external recognition from colleagues working across the sector.

Reasons for introducing this teaching method

Rationale for the teaching practice:

Across the Higher Education sector, there has been much consideration of the importance of decolonising the curriculum. The profile of such initiatives has increased in recent years, particularly in light of the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd in June 2020. In the same month, the University of Reading's Vice Chancellor, Professor Robert Van de Noort commissioned the [Race Equality Review](#) (2021), which aimed to advance our understanding of race equality at the University of Reading. I co-led the review with Deputy Vice Chancellor, Professor Parveen Yaqoob OBE, with a focus on the following four themes: representation, student experience and attainment, staff experience and advancement, and culture.

From the review listening exercises including focus groups, stakeholder meetings and a survey, it was clear that taking action to decolonise the curriculum at Reading was important to students and colleagues. However, being aware that one cannot simply *define* decolonising the curriculum as "decolonising involves a multitude of definitions, interpretations, aims and strategies" (Bhambra, Nisancioglu, and Gebrial, 2018), one key part of the institutional work to decolonise the curriculum had to be to engage in creating our own institutional definition.

It was also important for me to include both students and colleagues in the future plans for decolonising the curriculum as I was cognizant of the work by Tate and Bagguley (2017) who suggest

that for an effective decolonising agenda, which moves beyond a dominant Eurocentric canon i.e., cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 2013), colleagues and students need to collaborate. I also felt it important that the institutional group included representation from our Student's Union, given that earlier drives to decolonise the curriculum in England have originated from such areas e.g., 'Why is My Curriculum White?' (Shain, Yildiz, Poku and Gokay, 2021). Lastly, as those involved in decolonising work continue to face institutional resistance (Chantiluke, Kwoba, and Nkopo, 2018), it was important to cement our commitment to decolonising work by creating an institutional recommendation for this work. Therefore, I created the following recommendation, which was published in May 2021:

Recommendation 10 - Development of a programme to decolonise the curriculum:

Establish a 'task and finish' group, which includes students, staff and Reading University Student Union (RUSU) Officers and leads on creating an institutional definition of 'decolonising the curriculum,' as well as preparing guidance on how to achieve it.

Description of the teaching practice including reflections:

Across summer 2021, I met with colleagues to plan the next steps on our decolonising the curriculum journey in order to avoid superficial 'tick-boxing' approaches, which are often seen in mainstreaming approaches to decolonising work (Shain et al., 2021). It became clear in early discussions that it was timely to revisit two key parts of the decolonising recommendation. Firstly, whilst the recommendation detailed a 'task and finish' group to ensure that the decolonising work would occur in a timely manner, colleagues stated that a 'working group' would align more closely with the notion that decolonising work is iterative. Secondly, an 'institutional definition' was interpreted as being potentially restrictive in nature and it was discussed that an 'institutional vision' might align better with our aims to incorporate a wide range of views on what decolonising means to our students and colleagues. Therefore, in autumn 2021, I issued a call for Expressions of Interest to join the institutional Decolonising the Curriculum Working Group, which was tasked to create an institutional vision for decolonising the curriculum and to prepare guidance on how to achieve it. The call was very successful and a working group of 22 members including students, colleagues, and RUSU Officers was established in January 2022.

To mirror the approach of the Race Equality Review (2021), I led a series of listening exercises between January and April 2022 in order to establish an institutional vision for decolonising the curriculum at Reading. The vision statement organically rose from the listening exercises and includes views from both students and colleagues, and is available [here](#) (pages 5 and 6). One of the key messages from the listening exercises was that colleagues will require guidance to decolonise their curricula, which was discussed at length within the working group. I wanted to avoid colleagues feeling as though they are being told what they must do and rather to support colleagues in considering what they might do as a first step on their own decolonising journey. From this viewpoint, we created a [question-led approach](#) (pages 13 and 14) to decolonising the curriculum, which encourages personal reflection focusing on three key areas: decolonising teaching content, teaching methods and assessment methods.

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I was also very mindful that whilst question-led approaches support colleagues to engage in reflective practice, we also needed to provide tangible examples of how colleagues have already completed decolonising work in their respective disciplines. To support this, the decolonising the curriculum resource includes [six case studies](#) from a range of disciplines including Economics, Law, Maths, Speech and Language Therapy, and Psychology (pages 15 to 24). To support further learning beyond the case studies, we included an [annotated reference list](#) to reflect how texts and movies have supported both colleagues and students in advancing their knowledge of decolonising (pages 25 to 27).

After compiling the resource, we engaged in a consultation phase with our [student Inclusion Consultants](#), which was extremely beneficial. Positive feedback from these students is included later in the student's perspective section however, here we detail the contribution of these students. Firstly, the Inclusion Consultants thought it important to highlight best practice examples of decolonising work from within their own classroom (page 8). These [best practice examples](#) included decolonising work in teaching content, teaching methods and assessment methods from a range of disciplines. Secondly, the Inclusion Consultants accurately identified that decolonising work might face some resistance, so creating an FAQ for staff on the benefits of decolonising the curriculum would be useful. My view was that the FAQ would be more powerful if it was written by students and we are very fortunate to have been able to include [this FAQ](#) in our resource (pages 9 to 12). The FAQ includes a number of useful questions to support reflective practice including 'I don't think this suits my subject, what can I do?', 'I haven't had any issues with my teaching before, why do I need to change my approach?' and 'I have too many important things to focus on to do this'.

Benefits

Feedback on the Decolonising the Curriculum resource has been very positive including from members of the University Executive Board:

This is a fantastic piece of work - I particularly liked the examples of good practice and the case studies and the style throughout has a really positive tone. I thought it would be challenging to ensure that the resources would be applicable to all disciplines, but you have absolutely done that.
Professor Parveen Yaqoob OBE, Deputy Vice Chancellor

Externally, we have received excellent feedback from colleagues at other HEIs:

Thank you so much for these resources - the booklet looks amazing, and I love the student answers to the FAQs in particular, and the examples of good practice from the students. This is so helpful. Dr Louise Taylor-Bunce, Principal Lecturer and National Teaching Fellow, Oxford Brookes University

It's such a great resource especially loved the case studies and the question-led approach to decolonising the curriculum. I have shared it within our department and wider. Taf Kunorubwe, Lecturer and Cognitive Behavioural Psychotherapist, University of South Wales

The resources have also received positive feedback from colleagues at external organisations via Twitter, such as Advance HE:

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Great piece of work from Reading University! Love the varied discipline case studies, reflections and the annotated reading list! Dr Helen Webster, Advance HE Senior Consultant for Student Success and National Teaching Fellow

Issues and future development

As discussed earlier (Bhambra et al., 2018), decolonising involves a multitude of aims and from our listening exercises, it was clear to me that we needed to theme the key aims and create a strategy for implementation. In the first phase of my decolonising work, I focused on teaching content, teaching methods and assessment methods. However, I am aware that other thematic areas need to be explored in order to develop a more holistic approach to decolonising. Therefore, from November 2022, I am leading the second phase of decolonising work at Reading, by focusing on creating resources for a) inclusive Teaching and Learning (T&L) spaces to support student sense of belonging, b) effective student-staff partnerships through funded decolonising projects to support student sense of academic community, and c) decolonising research to support research-informed teaching content. Alongside the phase 2 work, I will also monitor the impact of the current decolonising the curriculum resource on key University of Reading T&L initiatives such as the current learning design guidance including teaching methods and assessment methods.

Student's perspective

I have received positive student feedback throughout the decolonising process including on my approach to decolonising the curriculum (Laville, 2022a), which is discussed further in the dissemination and publication section. Specific student feedback includes:

Love this. So great to have someone like you that we can look up to Al! Congratulations. Martina, Final year student in Politics and International Relations

Diversity in Law case study is a great example [of decolonising]. Anonymous student feedback.

The STEM case study is good because among STEM disciplines, the often-heard objection that “there is nothing for us to decolonise”, and this example makes a great case as to the purpose behind decolonising attempts in the STEM field. Anonymous student feedback.

Dissemination and publication

At an institutional level, I disseminated my approach to decolonising the curriculum at the University of Reading Teaching and Learning Festival in September 2022, which was hosted by the Centre for Quality Support and Development. The session focused on inclusive curricula and the collaborative projects completed with the student Inclusion Consultants (Laville and Haine, 2022). Regarding dissemination at national level, I have shared our decolonising resource on my Twitter account, with the Tweet receiving 5,630 impressions. From this dissemination activity, our resource was shared by other HEI Twitter accounts including the University of Birmingham Higher Education Futures Institute. I presented my approach to decolonising work at the Advance HE EDI Colloquium: Decolonising Pedagogies (Laville, 2022a), which received good feedback. My approach to decolonising the curriculum has also been published by Advance HE to inform other HEIs on how they might want to approach decolonising work and my article is accessible [here](#) (Laville, 2022b).

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