KEELE DECOLONISING THE CURRICULUM NETWORK

Why is My Curriculum So White?

You might have heard us talking about decolonising the curriculum at Keele. But what we do mean? The Oxford Dictionary summarises 'decolonisation' as "the withdrawal from its colonies of a colonial power; the acquisition of political or economic independence by such colonies". The term refers particularly to the dismantlement, in the years after WW2, of the colonial empires established prior to WW1. However, decolonisation not only refers to the complete removal of the domination of external forces within a geographical space, but it also refers to decolonisation of the mind from the colonisers ideas – ideas that made the colonised seem inferior.

Expand All

Keele Manifesto for decolonising the curriculum

Decolonization involves identifying colonial systems, structures and relationships, and working to challenge those systems. It is not "integration" or simply the token inclusion of the intellectual achievements of non-white cultures. Rather, it involves a paradigm shift from a culture of exclusion and denial to the making of space for other political philosophies and knowledge systems. It's a culture shift to think more widely about why common knowledge is what it is, and in so doing adjusting cultural perceptions and power relations in real and significant ways.

One of the most significant problems relating to gaps in the curriculum in higher education is the lack of representation of black and minority ethnic groups. This is commonly referred to as the colonisation of the curriculum. The content of the curriculum in our universities continues to reflect and maintain a colonial legacy through the presentation of a white, western intellectual tradition as not only superior to other forms of knowledge but as universal. Since the end of the colonial period, epistemologies and knowledge systems at our universities have not changed considerably; they remain rooted in colonial and Western-centric worldviews. The curriculum remains largely Eurocentric and continues to reinforce white and Western dominance and privilege, while at the same time being full of stereotypes, prejudices and patronising views about non-white people and cultures. The academic space has been one of the key platforms that remind us of the legacy of the colonial past. Practically all academic disciplines have been influenced by a history of colonial thinking where western attitudes have dominated academic narratives and practices. For too long, teaching in universities has encouraged a 'traditional' and 'canonical' approach that privileges the work of selected authors. If we mainly cite white men in our work, we recreate a world where only knowledge produced by them is considered important, having the effect of marginalising the knowledge produced by others. Even where the curriculum includes the intellectual work of people racialized as other-than-white, it can still operate as a white curriculum. Those non-white writers are often presented as offering a response to 'mainstream' (i.e. white) thought, rather than as thinkers who themselves demand response. The white curricula not only compromises the quality of education, it also asserts irrational and unjust practices and has detrimental effects on both staff and students. Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students are the first to feel the effects of a white curriculum. They find themselves under-represented and under-stimulated by the content of their curricula, with their histories, narratives and experiences omitted from mainstream discourse. The white curriculum feeds into the feeling of isolation, marginalisation, alienation, and exclusion which is internalised as these students live under the burden of the negative stereotypes regarding their communities and do not wish to reinforce them. As a consequence BME students may not feel confident to speak up or to call this out, as much like their white counterparts, they have been socialised to see the institution as the gatekeeper of worthwhile knowledge. Our curriculum, like other university curricula in the UK, is centred on the 'pale, male and stale', and does not benefit nor capture the interest of a diverse staff and student body. Decolonisation has become particularly important since the recent managerial turn in university systems (auditing, benchmarking, ranking through REF and TEF, and non-stop complete strategic planning) has narrowed, not enriched, the domain of knowledge increasing pressure to teach and research for short-term profit.

The university curricula will not decolonise itself. It will not happen through the bureaucratised curriculum design reviews. Major curriculum reform cannot be achieved without greater democratisation of the university as an institution, and its relation to wider society. It is not something that happens overnight, it requires a sustained and serious commitment as well as ownership by all members of the university - staff and students, white and non-white.

WHAT WOULD IT MEAN TO DECOLONISE THE UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM?

1. Decolonising the curriculum means, first of all, acknowledging that knowledge is not owned by anyone. It is a cumulative and shared resource that is available to all. Knowledge (and culture) is collectively produced and human beings of all races, ethnicities, classes , genders, sexual orientations, and disabilities have as much right as elite white men to understand what our roles and contributions have been in shaping intellectual achievements and shifting culture and progress.
2. Decolonising the curriculum is to recognise that knowledge is inevitably marked by power relations. Our universities exist in a global economy of knowledge, with a definite hegemonic centre, reflecting hierarchies of race, class and gender. At the top of this hierarchy sit the knowledge institutions of the global North, databanks and research centres supported by the wealth of European and North American powers. This hegemonic position is not just a matter of the wealth of the global North. Our world is still shaped by a long colonial history in which white upper class men are at the top of social hierarchy, most disciplines give disproportionate significance to the experiences, histories and achievements of this one group.
3. Decolonising is about rethinking, reframing and reconstructing the current curriculum in order to make it better, and more inclusive. It is about expanding our notions of good literature so it doesn't always elevate one voice, one experience, and one way of being in the world. It is about considering how different frameworks, traditions and knowledge projects can inform each other, how multiple voices can be heard, and how new perspectives emerge from mutual learning.
4. Decolonising is not just about bringing in minority ethnic writers and texts, but also how we read 'traditional mainstream' texts. Decolonising is far more nuanced than just replacing authors, and it is more than just the topics covered in a course. It concerns not only what is taught and how it is critiqued, but how it is taught, which gives rise to an understanding of decolonisation that addresses how academic literacies are experienced.
5. Decolonising means identifying ways in which the university structurally reproduces colonial hierarchies; confronting, challenging and rejecting the status quo; and reimagining them and putting alternatives into practice for the benefit of our academic integrity and our social viability.
6. Decolonising the curriculum means creating spaces and resources for a dialogue among all members of the university on how to imagine and envision all cultures and knowledge systems in the curriculum, and with respect to what is being taught and how it frames the world.
7. Decolonisation is not a project over which one group can claim sole custodianship. Non-white and white academics and students are in this together. This will involve conscious, deliberate, non-hypocritical and diligent interest by both non-white and white members of the university in all knowledge systems, cultures, peoples and languages.
8. Decolonising requires sustained collaboration, discussion and experimentation among groups of teachers and students, who themselves have power to make things happen on the ground and think about what might be done differently. The change will take different forms in different universities and disciplines. There is no one-size-fits-all solution.
9. Decolonising is thinking about how students experience the university differently. Race, gender, disability and class all demonstrably impact student attainment and experiences of exclusion from the university environment. These are linked to the university's historic identity and mission, as well as wider structural inequalities within society.
10. Decolonising requires the courage to admit that any knowledge could and should be open to challenge and question; regardless of its original power relations. This is the only way to avoid the mere 'displacement' of one curriculum coloniser by another.
11. Decolonising is about how we can ensure a system where all those who engage with the university to make their living, or to study, can do so under conditions of dignity, respect and security.

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