

The Student Voice: Decolonising the Curriculum

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Abstract

This case study presents the importance of the student voice to decolonise the curriculum at a British university. The aim is to emphasise the increasing necessity and urgency for student input to the wider decolonisation process as a means to foster equality. It has been argued by some scholars that decolonisation of the curriculum in higher education institutions (HEIs) is closely connected to the racial awarding gap and the student voice plays an integral role regarding future decisions about pedagogy. The Student Voice: Decolonising the curriculum project did not ask Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students to spend time helping the university to decolonise the curriculum, rather it sought input from students who are experiencing the current curriculum. The process of decolonisation is often underestimated and not acted upon due to a lack of time. However, it is important as often the racial awarding gap reflects pedagogical practices which exclude BAME students. Student input to pedagogical decisions is an important step towards inclusivity. Critical conversations and co-produced resources such as websites can all contribute to an institution better equipped to deliver pedagogical practice contributing to narrowing the racial awarding gap and the wider aim to decolonise the curriculum.

Keywords

decolonising, curriculum, pedagogy, student voice

Introduction

Decolonising the curriculum is not a new phenomenon – it has a history. The timeline shows its origins in South Africa to the Rhodes Must Fall movement which was replicated at Oxford University to the NUS film ([Why is my curriculum white, 2019](#)) *Why is my curriculum white?* and Mariya Hussain's blog ([Hussain, 2019](#)) *Why is My Curriculum White?* A review of curricula to decolonise has been recognised by a range of universities, who under pressure from student unions have led the way. Although

decolonisation is understood in the context of colonialism, it is important to define what we mean by decolonising the curriculum. Keele University's definition is the most important as it takes in the institution, staff, and students:

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‘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.’

The current campaign to decolonise the university is a recognition that ‘forms of coloniality in their classrooms, curricula and campuses’ need rectification (Bhambra et al., 2018: 1). The discipline of development studies has been shown to exhibit coloniality which has survived colonialism (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) and ‘can be understood as the entrenched power dynamics and patterns of knowledge creation and use that have emerged from the accidental historical power relations of colonial domination’ (Cummins et al., 2022:66). Within social science, there have been challenges to how subjects such as Sociology are taught in universities, for example, in Connell’s work in *Southern Theory* (Connell, 2007) which is not without its critics (Bhambra, 2007, 2018). As proponents of this aim to decolonise the university, we can see that decolonisation requires concrete access to resources which actively support efforts of both students and staff towards this goal (Arday and Mirza 2018, Begum and Saini, 2019).

This article does not wish to focus on the teaching of Sociology, although it is useful to be mindful of the importance of decolonial reflexivity concerning the subject matter taught (Moosavi, 2022). As an academic, I have been favoured with the autonomy to create the curriculum, however, I also acknowledge that what I offer in my teaching is a partially decolonised curriculum concerning critical decolonised pedagogy, and the role my subjectivity plays in the process. My experience above explains the reasons for the research on decolonising the curriculum that includes the student voice because the process began with student activism.

The student voice coupled with the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the National Student Survey (NSS) is important particularly

with reference to finding out what is missing, creating awareness, and a sense of contributing a critical voice to their education. The inclusion of students as stakeholders has become increasingly popular since 2007 when the Department for Innovations, Universities, and Skills used it to indicate levels of student engagement and to improve the learning experience (QAA, 2018). With reference to research involving the student voice, Seale et al., (2014) show how participatory research can be inclusive, collaborative and non-hierarchical. Students can provide insights to issues such as decolonising the curriculum and the racial awarding gap, in other words, how they experience life at university, and the measures that can be taken in the form of policy or curriculum development and the creation of resources. This case study aims to provide the opportunity for the student voice to be heard and highlight their concerns, and to find out how the university community can contribute to decolonising the curriculum. The case study outlines the research carried out with students that prioritises their voices which led to the co-creation of a website and has fed into the equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) agenda of the university.

Decolonising the university/ curriculum

The currently mostly Eurocentric curriculum perpetuates white privilege and Western knowledge and education predominance (Arday and Mirza, 2018, Bhopal, 2018, Utt, 2018). It also includes prejudice about Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people and their cultures and, as taught to both black/BAME and white students, provokes different emotions and has a greater impact on some than others; some people feel that merely preserving their identity is a struggle (Keele University, 2018, Mpanga, 2019).

According to Keele University (2018:1), the students 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.’

The situation concerning engagement with the decolonising of the curriculum process is by no means generalised and uneven at best. In the Innovating Pedagogy Report, although decolonising the curriculum has been identified as the key to change to a ‘decolonising learning’ over the next decade which enables ‘students to explore themselves and their values and to define success on their own terms’ (Ferguson et al., 2019:4), The Guardian newspaper reported that only 25% of UK universities have made any attempt to engage with it (Batty, 2020). Given there is continuing ethnic diversification of the UK population, among the benefits of decolonising the curriculum is that students start gaining the skills to meet the challenges of a diverse world (Munoz, 2021).

Decolonisation of the Curriculum lies within the domain of a more general decolonisation of the university which, besides the aim of narrowing the racial awarding gap also has implications for progress toward a more equal and just society. In the UK education context, there is only consensus regarding a broad perception of decolonisation and the detail varies from staff to students to institution, and from institution to institution. Therefore, a range of approaches, interpretations, methodologies, and perspectives are linked to decolonising the university and the curriculum (Bhambra et al., 2018, Narayan, 2019, Saunders, 2017). For some writers and educationalists, the history curriculum in schools ‘operates as “epistemic violence” (Spivak, 1999) – a political and educational tool obstructing and undermining non-Western experiences or approaches to knowledge’ (Moncrieffe, 2018). This affects

students by marginalising their voices who view decolonising the curriculum as an understanding of their origins and identities (Maziarska, 2020, Teach First, 2020).

Although Moncrieffe (2018) states that ‘to be decolonial is to embrace epistemic discomfort’, there is by no means a universal acceptance that the idea of decolonising the curriculum is without problems and indeed there are some who point out that it may end up presenting BAME students negatively (Williams, 2017) and undermine the goals that it is supposed to achieve. Moosavi (2022) argues that it may contribute to exclusion and makes an important observation regarding the teaching of social theory and comments that subjects such as postcolonialism and race are not fully included in the Sociology curriculum which continues to be taught in a Eurocentric manner. Furthermore, he notes that there is resistance to decolonisation. It is not an easy task to decolonise the curriculum or the university but if we can at least take into account the marginalised voices of students, processes of discrimination and inequality can be brought to the fore. Indeed, the significance of the wider colonial project was amplified by the killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, leading to introspection by universities on the legacy of slavery, their historic identity, and the students’ experiences of structural inequalities experienced in wider society. Historical contextualisation informs us how institutions such as The London School of Tropical Medicine (1899), Imperial College (1907), and The School of Oriental Studies (1916) which became SOAS (1938) are embedded in the colonial project.

Decolonisation is not to be confused with inclusive education or diversity *and* it should go ‘further and deeper in challenging the institutional hierarchy and monopoly on knowledge, moving out of a western framework’ (Akel, 2020). If we accept that freedom from colonial ideology and the ability to critique dominant culture and power form part of the mission of decolonisation, then we can incorporate

critical pedagogy into the equation. As stated in 1970, critical pedagogy involves more than the ‘false generosity’ of those in positions of power borne out of ‘threat to its source’ (Friere, 2005: 44) to combat, for example, the racial awarding gap.

The racial awarding gap

The Office for Students (OfS) and The Race Disparity Audit have already shown that the reasons for the racial awarding gap are varied and complex (Cabinet Office, 2017). Only 14% of HEIs in 2017–18 referred to the racial awarding gap and only 16 universities were reported to have set a specific target to remove the racial awarding gap (OfS, 2018). In 2019, Universities UK reported that there was uneven development related to addressing the gap. The racial awarding gap in HEIs has its roots far earlier in the education system and can be seen from the so-called ‘underachievement’ of black children in comparison to other minority ethnic groups and white students ‘regardless of economic disadvantage’ (Cabinet Office, 2017). Research shows that the reasons are complex (Demi and McLean, 2015:2). In HEIs, the reasons put forward include the underrepresentation of BAME and particularly Black lecturers in teaching staff numbers (Arday, 2017) and experiencing racism (Singh, 2011, Smith et al., 2013, Truong et al., 2016). Despite or possibly because of these conditions, research shows that BAME students are more likely to go into higher education to improve their opportunities for social mobility (Wright, 2013).

According to the [AccessHE Report \(2021\)](#), there are considerable disparities in the university experience of BAME and white students and it begins at the application stage (Atherton and Mazari, 2021). The Office for Students (OfS) data over 5 years show the disparity in attainment particularly for home Black students compared to students from other minority ethnic groups (Adams, 2019). The metrics do not take into consideration or account for the growing body of international students which brings to

the fore the question of responsibility to meet the needs of this group of students through the decolonisation process. Furthermore, the [AccessHE Report \(2021\)](#) shows that BAME students make up ‘51% of all students in London compared with 21% of UK students at all other HE providers outside of London [...] It is now the case that students entering HEIs from London are drawn predominantly from BAME backgrounds’. The rate of withdrawal from university is higher amongst BAME students with 86.8% continuing their studies compared to 91.3% of white students (ECU, 2019, Kausar et al., 2021). This may be connected to attainment before higher education (Petrie and Keohane, 2019) and makes it even more important for universities to investigate.

The student profile

There has been a substantial increase in the number of BAME students entering Higher Education institutions (HEIs), however, their progress and experience is another matter. Richardson (2010:39) called this ‘widening participation without widening attainment’. BAME students are still disadvantaged when compared to their white counterparts; they are less satisfied with their experience of HEIs and less supported in independent learning (Arday and Mirza, 2018, Havergal, 2016). To further complicate matters, there has also been a growing understanding that the grouping term ‘BAME’ is problematic as different minority ethnic communities have their specificities and needs. It is, therefore, a tool of limited use with reference to guiding policy ([AccessHE Report, 2021](#)).

The scale of the issue can be seen by looking at the Higher Education demographic from a purely numerical point of view with only 27% of students coming from BAME backgrounds (HESA, 2019/2020). The need for coherent policy and effective action is further evidenced by the ethnic disparities between London and other parts of the country. In London, BAME students (aged between 18 and 24) going into higher education accounted for over half of the

entrants with projections suggesting that this might increase to over 70% by 2030 ([AccessHE report, 2021](#)). This raises important questions for post-1992 universities in London.

Methods

The research is based on a case study of a British university to examine in detail the workings of the decolonisation process. The aim was to collect and analyse quantitative and qualitative data generated through a survey and focus groups with students in connection with the decolonising the curriculum. The reason for carrying out a case study is ‘to understand a real-world case and assume that such an understanding is likely to involve important contextual conditions pertinent to your case’ ([Yin, 2018:15](#)). Although generalisations cannot be readily made on the basis of a case study, attention has been paid to triangulate data collected in the interests of credibility through the use of the survey and focus group methods. Due to the low response rate, the data cannot be applied in the true sense, however, it provides insight to the student experience and understanding of issues related to decolonisation. The data collected is from participants who are representative of the student profile and forms a basis from which to launch further research.

The online survey was sent by email to all students in one faculty lasting 20 min and two focus groups lasting 30 min. The faculty was chosen on the basis of familiarity of decolonisation amongst the students due to curriculum content. The survey method was chosen as it is an effective instrument for collecting data particularly for a subject which can be deemed controversial and from groups who may otherwise consider themselves as marginalised, for example, in the co-production of a decolonised curriculum ([Khader, 2019](#), [Citro, 2010](#)). The survey was analysed through quantitative data coding.

Students for the focus groups were recruited from the online survey where they had expressed their interest. The focus groups were

used to foster engaged debate, to hear the students’ voices, values, opinions, thoughts, and personal views ([Barbour, 2005](#)), to complement the survey and to suggest potential answers to the research question. It also increases the validity, reliability, and credibility of the data collected. The participants (three students in one focus group and two students in the other) were recruited from the online survey where they had expressed their interest and the transcripts from the focus groups analysed using thematic analysis of qualitative data ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)).

Ethical approval to carry out the research was granted by the university and guidelines regarding data confidentiality and participant anonymity were followed. A participation information sheet was provided, consent was sought (written and verbal). The interviewer (research assistant) understood the subject of the decolonising concept and was, therefore, able to apply expertise within the area. The questions asked during the focus group sessions consisted of the following:

- What is decolonisation?
- Why do you think the curriculum should be decolonised?
- How do you think the curriculum can be made to be more inclusive and equitable?
- Do you feel that your lectures can relate to your culture and lived experiences?
- Who is your ideal, imagined lecturer?
- How do you think your voices can be better heard?

Case study

The decolonising and racial awarding gap action plan

This case study presents the importance of the student voice to decolonise the curriculum at a British university ([Arday 2017](#), [Bhambra et al., 2018](#), [Gopal, 2021](#)). The aim is to emphasise the increasing necessity and urgency for student input to the wider decolonisation process as a

means to foster inclusivity and equality. It charts my journey and that of the university up to the current time including initiatives that have been taken up institutionally. Since 2018, I have researched the ‘BAME attainment gap’¹ which has been taken up by the university as an institutional concern resulting in university-wide meetings and the Provost’s Research Fund (2019) for research into the racial awarding gap, launched during Black History Month. This gave rise to the first of my projects: ‘The Student Voice #1: the Racial Awarding Gap’², (see [Takhar and Aziz, 2023](#)).

Parallel to these projects were other funded research projects and a decolonisation mission that was co-produced with students and alumni resulting in a university decolonising plan, approved by the Academic Board (2022). The decolonising the curriculum project is part of the Academic Skills Framework, and the decolonisation vision consists of eight points that highlight how inequality and marginalisation operate *and* how processes and policies can be put into operation to tackle them. The first point of the vision importantly states that race and racism in HEIs requires attention which would move them towards becoming anti-racist institutions. The other points are equally important as they refer to decolonised approaches, sustainable structural change in policies and practices, tackling racism, the role of EDI, supporting colleagues, and recognising that they may be at different stages of engagement regarding the creation of an inclusive and/or decolonised curriculum.

The decolonising and racial awarding gap Action Plan was co-created with students and alumni and captured their needs with its implementation kept under review in a delivery plan by key leadership groups such as the Course Directors’ Forum, faculty EDI Leads, the Professoriate, and the Act for Change Racial Awarding Gap Advisory Group. The following actions recognise the overall decolonising vision of the University: student supported staff recruitment and training as part of academic development and mandatory training; financial

support for students through the hardship fund; leadership training for BAME students in the Skills Framework; embedding a culture of co-production to be formalised as guidelines; decolonising curricula and universal design for learning in Course Development Plans and the Research Fund; personal tutoring as part of the integrated student development framework supported by a new digital system and the creation of spaces to talk about race and racism. There is also room for supporting students by building on good practice in pre-university support, learning and teaching initiatives, personal tutoring, and induction activities.

Decolonisation: developments and furthering the agenda

With reference to research investigating decolonising the curriculum and the racial awarding gap, several projects have been funded, the most recent being the creation of a teaching toolkit in the humanities area. Currently, funded research is also being carried out on the BAME Postgraduate Research (PGR) experience which investigates the pipeline to research degrees and employment. Other developments include a publication on the racial awarding gap.² A scoping exercise of the different faculties by EDI leads shows that EDI issues are embedded in the humanities curriculum at all levels and in a range of general as well as specialist modules with inclusive reading lists and guest speakers. The scoping exercise included a greater number of student-facing activities and greater need for staff training and support was highlighted in student surveys. The university also hosts a range of research centres and advisory clinics with student placement opportunities.

Further to this, examples of decolonisation and how to improve academic performance are available on the university’s website in areas such as health, arts and humanities, STEM subjects, and architecture. There is also a decolonising the curriculum website³ which was

co-created with students as part of The Student Voice #2: Decolonising the Curriculum project. It was launched at the Teaching and Learning conference in January 2022.

In 2022, funding was made available for a permanent appointment for a Research Fellow to develop the agenda and to maintain the newly created website. This was the first of its kind at a British university. The research fellow has completed a mapping exercise that shows how work on decolonisation needs further coordination. A Decolonising Plan has been produced which includes investigating the university's colonial history; critical pedagogy workshops; reflexive workshops on racism and decolonisation; introduction to decolonisation workshops; documenting existing and ongoing work; setting up support structures and processes and to encourage cross-institutional collaborations to challenge racism in the academy. The research fellow is also working alongside the faculty EDI leads to run workshops on challenging whiteness during which it has been highlighted by participants that progress is slow and that support from the executive is critical. The research fellow has also made links with the students' union which recognises that the university should focus on decolonising the curriculum because students experience racism and are acutely aware of the lack of BAME people in leadership roles in British universities.

The student voice and research

It has been argued by scholars that the Eurocentric nature of the curriculum is a contributory factor to the racial awarding gap (Arday, 2017, Miller, 2017) and that decolonisation of the curriculum should have a positive impact. However, there is not enough evidence to show that this is the case, exemplified by Leicester University's introduction of a decolonising the curriculum toolkit (Xu et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the student voice can play an integral role in establishing the character of future decisions concerning pedagogy. The Student

Voice #2 Decolonising the Curriculum project did not ask Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic students to spend time helping the university to decolonise the curriculum, rather it sought input from students who are experiencing the current curriculum. The whole process of decolonisation is often underestimated and not acted upon due to lack of time and with its close link to the racial awarding gap, it is important to reflect on pedagogical practices that exclude BAME students.

The student voice is central to finding out what works in universities regarding decolonising the curriculum. At the heart of the university's educational framework is a commitment to deliver education that is transformative, highlighting academic skills, confidence building, and skills development to equip them for the world of work. Student input to pedagogical decisions and to institutionalise decolonisation of the curriculum are two important steps towards inclusivity. Critical conversations, reading and learning, and co-produced resources such as a website can all contribute to an institution better equipped to deliver the kind of pedagogical practice which may contribute to narrowing the racial awarding gap as part of the wider aim to decolonise the curriculum (Charles, 2019).

The Student Voice #2: Decolonising the Curriculum project was funded internally within the wider aim to decolonise the university. The aims and objectives of this research were to create an opportunity for students to voice their thoughts and experiences of the curriculum anonymously through a survey and focus groups. The proposed outcome is a contribution to gauge levels of understanding of decolonisation and this can be achieved by listening to the student voice. This project co-created with students, a digital platform/website as a resource that students and staff can refer to for the promotion of educational equality and awareness of issues related to race. To empower students, a follow-up project is to address curriculum redesign.

Online survey findings

The survey was sent to all students in one faculty with 30 students participating of which 22 were female, seven male with one undisclosed. The students were in the following age ranges: 18–24 years (17), 25–34 years (5), 35–44 years (4), and 45+ years (4). Half of the participants identified as BAME (a representative sample of the student profile of 52%) with 20 undergraduate students and 10 postgraduate. The sample size was small (2% of the total population of the faculty) due to the survey being carried out towards the end of the academic year and students possibly suffering survey exhaustion. Response rates for surveys with students remain low, for example, a recent Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO, 2022) found that even with an issue that concerns most students (financial well-being), the response rate was 5%. Although lower response rates mean that there can be sampling bias, the age and ethnic groups of the participants are representative of the student profile. The survey was also supplemented by two focus groups with 23 students stating that they were aware of decolonising the curriculum and the racial awarding gap. Half the group was aware of the term decolonising the curriculum and the Black Lives Matter movement before entering university. Over half of the students chose to study at the university because of its location closely followed by the course content and diversity of students. The students were asked closed questions on decolonising the curriculum, ‘being BAME’, staff training, safe spaces, and the university position on these issues.

Decolonising the curriculum. Most students (69%) agreed with using Keele University’s definition of decolonising the curriculum, 24% preferred other versions and a minority (7%) disagreed with the definition.

57% strongly agree that decolonising the curriculum is necessary, 30% agreed, 7%

disagreed, 3% strongly disagree, and 3% did not know.

The top two areas identified for decolonising the curriculum are inclusion (23%) and BAME staffing (20%) followed by BAME well-being (17%), diversity of role models (13.5%), pedagogy (13.5%), discussion spaces (10%), and diversity of resources (3%).

Most students (86%) wanted to be involved in shaping the process of decolonising the curriculum with a minority expressing no involvement or they did not know.

Most of the students (80%) wanted to have an equal voice in the decolonising of the curriculum dialogue, 17% did not want to be involved, and 3% did not know.

60% of students felt that the current curriculum is not sufficiently equitable, diverse, and inclusive, 27% stated it was, and 13% did not know.

The students were split between regarding the course/curriculum affecting their well-being positively (47%) and not knowing (46.7%). A minority stated that they had been negatively affected.

Most students had attended a decolonising the curriculum workshop online or in person within the last 6 months (80%), and were split evenly between attending within 12 months, earlier and never.

59% of students thought that they had a contribution to make to decolonise the curriculum, 17% did not, and 24% did not know. Most students (83%) thought that decolonising the curriculum can be inclusive, 7% disagreed, and 10% did not know.

63% of students did not know that their voice would be heard in the decolonising of the curriculum process, 23% agreed they would be heard, and 14% disagreed.

‘Being BAME’. Students were asked if they had faced or witnessed discrimination against BAME students with 71.6% listing the category ‘elsewhere’, in other words off campus. Discrimination was experienced in tutorials (14%), and equally in lectures, and halls of residence (7.2%). The main challenge to decolonising was

the staff mindset (17%), lack of staff training (11%), current curriculum (25%), university's inertia (18%), attitudes of students (11%), and other (18%) which was interrogated through the focus group questions. They were then asked questions about the curriculum with 57.7% reporting that they were not sure whether the curriculum would negatively impact BAME students. 26.9% thought it would impact somewhat and 15.4% did not know.

On narrowing the Racial Awarding Gap, 66% stated that decolonising the curriculum will help and were equally split between strong agreement and disagreement (17%).

Staff training. Of importance to decolonise the curriculum was the training of teachers (58.6%), student involvement (24.1%), improved communication (10.3%), and training of white staff (7%).

There was a split between those who believed that current lecturers are sufficiently prepared (46.6%) or not (40%) to teach a decolonised curriculum. Those in strong agreement or disagreement stood at 6.7%. 43% of students expressed that training should be done by BAME trainers and 57% opted for BAME and white trainers.

The main challenges to decolonising the curriculum were the curriculum (24.3%), followed equally at 17.2% by staff mindset, university inertia, and other. The attitudes of students and lack of staff training came in equally at 10.3% and relationships between staff and students at 3.5%

Safe spaces. Over half (53.8%) of the students did not know if the environment is conducive to constructive dialogue about decolonising the curriculum, 38.5% agreed, and 7.7% disagreed.

There was difference of opinion regarding who would be involved in the creation of safe spaces: joint committees (41.5%), students (34.5%), professors (20.6%), other teaching staff (3.4%).

The university position. On the question of whether the university should make regular statements of support about decolonising the

curriculum, 73.3% agreed, 16.7% disagreed, and 10% did not know.

On whether the university had addressed the racial awarding, 41.4% stated somewhat, 41.4% were not sure, and 17.2% did not know.

Focus group findings

To inform the study, two focus groups were conducted to listen to the students' opinions, provide deep insight, experiences, and better understand their perceptions regarding the advantages of decolonising the curriculum and to narrow the racial awarding gap. Several themes/areas emerged when the focus group interviews were analysed.

Interpretation of the term 'decolonisation'. There were different degrees of reflection among the participants, some considered the effect of decolonisation as part of an intellectual and reflective process whereas others considered its impact from a more observational point of view and the impact it might have on other people. A more specific opinion was that in the context of the research, decolonisation and decolonising the curriculum would improve teaching staff diversity and help BAME attainment.

Benefits of decolonisation. Many views concerning the advantages of decolonising the curriculum were covered such as inclusivity, history, interconnection, and interaction in society with mutual understanding. Although there was a consensus that it would be a beneficial process for all, there were considerable differences in the type of benefit identified, for example, the one-sided telling of history necessitated a re-situation in the modern context. A greater understanding that subjects are taught from a point of view would foster a better acceptance of the views of others. It was observed that this might prove uncomfortable for some. The positive implications for civilisation and society were also results of the decolonisation process and everyone would gain from it. Equality, diversity and inclusivity were all

considered to be among the direct benefits of decolonising the curriculum.

Lecturer diversity. The students saw a more diverse teaching pool as being beneficial regarding learning outcomes, progress, and development. One participant pointed out that it would enhance the university's image and others detailed the not-so-ideal lecturer. The importance of cultural awareness was such that it was perceived as being an essential component of the decolonising the curriculum process. Cultural awareness was seen as reaching more granular aspects such as family responsibilities, gender, and locality. One student recognised that there was no appreciable cultural or intellectual distance with their lecturers, thanks to a commonality of upbringing and source materials, and acknowledged that this was not the case for other students of different cultures and origins.

Curriculum content and delivery. Some participants considered that the curriculum could be enhanced through the use of wider source materials. One view was that certain kinds of lectures relating to minority issues should be made mandatory and that Black History month represents minor attention that is not sustained during the rest of the year. Apart from the idea of identity representation, diverse viewpoints were also perceived as desirable.

Expectations: Lecturers and students. The discussion revealed a misalignment between student expectations of academic life in a university setting and the lecturers' expectations of the students' preparedness for this. One participant related her experience with one lecturer when asking for help. According to their account, the lecturer offered her no support herself neither did she signpost the availability of support elsewhere. Other instances of varying expectations covered teaching styles and the struggle of those whose parents did not understand their child's expectations of university.

Some lecturers' expectations of the students were that they were already sufficiently

prepared to integrate into the academic environment whilst several students thought that they would be taught basic elements that might be considered to be part of prior education. It seemed to be left to the individual as some lecturers were more constructive and some students were more independent learners. Apart from the expectations of teaching, there were also non-learning needs. Some students whose parents had not studied for a degree level felt that the university did not support them. Some lecturers do not take into account the financial circumstances of their students, for example, being able to pay for books.

Lecturer approaches/attitude. Students highlighted the differing approaches of lecturers and compared these. One student cited the negative criticism from an experienced tutor who suggested that their learning skills needed improvement rather than teaching skills. The student went on to contrast the attitudes, mentioning a supportive lecturer who was happy to adjust her style of teaching to make the work accessible.

Privilege. Privilege was not the subject of a direct question but came up several times as being an important factor in the student experience. One student was aware of the privileges due to being white. One BAME student acknowledged this and affirmed that they did not have privilege. People with privilege, if conditions suit them, see no necessity for change. A recognition of one's privilege is required to be able to understand the situations of those who do not share this.

Financial privilege and disadvantage. A significant disadvantage is not being able to afford certain items and services that would enhance learning and progress. Examples of these are having a reliable and therefore possibly more costly Wi-Fi service which facilitates academic study or private tuition. The affordability of books can also be a significant issue and can make a difference in the degree awarded. The financial

disadvantage could be viewed as a lack of privilege which contributed to a widening of the awarding gap with the situation of part-time students mentioned as exacerbating disadvantage.

Intersectionality. Intersectionality is not a theme but the observation of one of the participants as to one of the possible effects of it being to amplify disadvantage and could well apply to a number of students at the university. Compounding the effects of disadvantage was observed by the students, for example, one student was at the intersection of ethnicity and disability (partial hearing).

Discussion

It can be seen from focus group responses that the impact of decolonial theory is evident on the movement to decolonise the curriculum in universities. Overall decolonial theory provides us with a critical lens to understand how the legacy of colonialism remains in British universities and why there is an urgent need to decolonise. The research therefore has been conducted and analysed within a decolonial framework which seeks to go beyond the inclusion of marginalised voices towards re-imagining education itself. Viewed from a critical perspective, we can situate the decolonisation of the curriculum within a broader project of decolonisation *and* social and political transformation (Fanon, 2001). Indeed Icaza and Vazquez (2018:112) ask an important question in their work on decolonisation:

‘Can university communities around the world understand how they are implicated in the constitution of the modern/colonial divide, in the production and reproduction of global epistemic inequality, in the silencing of the radical plurality of the world?’

The findings show that the students’ understanding of decolonising the curriculum and how this translates into a practical process varied widely. These disparities appeared to be a

consequence of a combination of factors which include ethnicity, culture, socio-economic grouping, prior education, and the level of parental education. Some saw it as being a mechanism for writing the wrongs of the past, others saw it as a part of progress toward a fairer society, a means of cultural or intellectual enrichment, or a reassessment and repositioning of Western Eurocentric thinking in a post-colonial world. Overall, the participants saw decolonising the curriculum as being of benefit to all students at the university, and more broadly to society.

Decolonising the curriculum is about how we view education, what is taught, how it is delivered and who has access to it. The themes that emerged from the data reflected the participants’ concerns with an interesting order of priority based on the amount of discussion on a topic. Though the importance of the decolonising project was seen as necessary and to a degree, unavoidable, the areas which were seen to require the greatest intervention were to do with teaching staff followed by the content and delivery of the curriculum. Besides these areas, the misalignment of student and lecturer expectations was evident. Both students and lecturers were seen as expecting too much of each other. Most recent figures show that BAME academics make up approximately 22% (2020/21) of employees in the faculty. [Advance HE statistics \(2021\)](#) show that between 2003/04 and 2019/20, the proportion of white staff has decreased from 91.4% to 84.6%, while the proportion of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic staff members has nearly doubled, from 8.6% to 15.4%. Cultural awareness of lecturers was given particular attention and there was a perception that it was not possible to be a ‘good’ lecturer without being culturally aware. Connected to this were the perceived attitudes of lecturers toward students where failure or success could hinge on the emotional quality of their interaction.

Decolonising the curriculum therefore involves how we understand pedagogy, how it involves resistance, oppression, opposition, and ‘socio-political struggle’ (Dennis, 2018:198). Its aim is to liberate the mind and to begin a reparative process for institutions in the

developed world rather than a meaningless gesture borne out of ‘false generosity’ (Freire, 2005: 44). Despite this, universities are involved in reform rather than any radical change as they continue to operate within the existing power structures evidenced through the introduction of reading lists that include writers from the global south. Decolonisation is not an easy, quick, or straightforward process particularly because British universities have invested in a form of banking knowledge (Freire, 2005). This is of particular importance given the concerns of the students.

The recommendations put forward by students include that decolonising the curriculum should be appropriately executed, and it was essential for students to be actively involved, either as actors in the process and oversight of the project or as voices to be heard and listened to. Some suggested a student panel with students, lecturers, and observers with involvement from the leadership of the university. This involves a move away from oppressive practices towards critical pedagogy (Freire, 2005) echoed by Kehinde Andrews (Andrews, 2018:216) who states that ‘universities are a central part of the system that oppresses Black communities’. Above all, decolonisation should not be just considered a buzzword or a tick-box exercise, rather it must be beneficial by engaging critically with the curriculum, pedagogy, and race issues to reflect the increasingly diverse student body in metropolitan areas such as London and particularly in post-1992 universities (Bhambra et al., 2018).

Privilege was another area that was discussed at some length by the students in one way or another with it being broken down into ethnic privilege, where belonging to the white group conferred considerable advantage on its members. Also addressed were educational privilege and economic privilege, where culture, prior education, and financial means also disadvantaged those without it and influenced student progression and outcomes (Bhopal, 2018). White privilege operates at individual and systemic levels and is deeply embedded in cultural and social structures, therefore the

process of decolonisation of the university is central to dismantling it. To recognise white privilege due to its invisibility is a challenge in most universities, however, decolonising the curriculum presents an opportunity for deconstruction, removal of elitism, for more informed ways of knowing *and* to learn how knowledge is constructed and legitimised (Arday and Mirza, 2018; Moncrieffe et al., 2018).

Linked to the issue of privilege is intersectionality where a compounding effect amplified privilege or discrimination and disadvantage. Intersectionality is a concept that was developed by Kimberley Crenshaw (1990) and its importance lies in the centring of groups who are marginalised and experience racism. Although intersectionality continues to be debated regarding whether it is a methodology or theory, it allows us to understand how identities are co-constructed within the framework of historical and social factors (Brah and Phoenix, 2004). Intersectionality is a powerful intellectual project to understand inequality, power, complexity, social justice, and privilege because students experience oppression and marginalisation in a multidimensional way based on gender, race, sexuality, class, disability, and other social categories (Arday and Mirza, 2018, Bhopal, 2018). Using intersectionality also means we can employ our agency to challenge exclusion. It is important to note that decolonisation is often intertwined with race and to create a decolonised educational system means removing colonial oppression. Although decolonisation should not be viewed as a racialised issue, rather as beneficial to everyone, it continues to be seen in this way. If students at the intersection of race, class, and gender are to thrive in an institution, complex challenges such as institutional racism and access to resources need to be recognised.

Conclusion

Decolonisation is not an easy task and to dismantle hundreds of years of physical colonialism and colonialism of the mind will take time.

However, the #Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 forced some universities to respond with statements of support and then examine links to historical practices such as slavery. Despite the cultural wars of recent years and the undermining of actions as ‘woke’ by both the public and the government should not deter universities to progress the decolonisation agenda, to decrease the racial awarding gap and to acknowledge that racism and white privilege operate at individual and institutional levels. Race literacy can only be achieved within an intersectional framework and is far preferable to proving one’s race credentials by completing courses on unconscious bias.

Universities as centres of knowledge have a responsibility to intellectually engage with the decolonisation project because they are ‘contradictory space[s] where knowledges are colonized but also contested’ (Talpade-Mohanty, 2003: 170). This is important for all universities although it is of great significance in universities with a higher intake of minority ethnic students who are cognisant of these developments (Housee, 2022). There are many factors that will affect to what extent decolonisation of the curriculum can be achieved in universities including how dominant groups view the process and the current neoliberal climate. The most important point is that our voices need to be heard which has been the aim of the research above with students. The student voice is crucial to what needs to be done and what works is important to create an anti-racist institution that takes into account, at institutional, faculty and departmental levels, role models, and critical pedagogy through decolonising the curriculum.

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Notes

1. Now referred to as the racial awarding gap.
2. Takhar, S. (Takhar and Aziz, 2023) ‘The Student Voice: the Racial Awarding Gap’ in Martin, N. (ed.) *Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education: Post 2020*, Critical Publishing.
3. <https://decolonisingthecurriculumlsbu.com/>

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