



Initial steps to decolonising the curriculum in 2020-21



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Events of the past year have turned a spotlight on plans and promises to address racial inequality within academia. There has been a surge in publications highlighting racism in academia and calling for action, for example, from Advance HE, Universities UK, the NUS and high-profile science journals.

The Attainment Gap

One obvious and stark example of inequality within universities is the long-standing ethnicity awarding gap (more widely known as the Black Asian and Minority Ethnic Attainment Gap).

In July 2020 the Office for Students¹ reported that the percentage of home students who were awarded a good (first or 2:1) degree in England & Wales was 22 percentage points lower for black students than for white students.

Understanding and working to reduce this gap has been a focus for UK universities over the last 20 years but the gap is still very much apparent. In recent years, student movements have campaigned for a key action that can help address the gap:

to decolonise the curriculum

Why decolonise the curriculum?

Decolonising the curriculum is a concept developed from decades of social science research, particularly from researchers from the 'Global South' and one highlighted by the Higher Education Academy (now Advance HE) in 2008 in response to the ethnicity awarding gap. Currently, actions to decolonise curricula are widely supported by national organisations such as Advance HE, Universities UK, Higher Education Policy Institute and the NUS, with renewed calls gaining momentum in response to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Whilst there is much debate about whether universities in the UK, a country with a history of colonial oppression, can adopt a decolonial approach, it is an opportunity to re-examine what we teach and why, how we deliver it, and how we address inclusivity.

LJMU's Commitment

LJMU's commitment to embedding a decolonial approach in the curriculum is reflected in its Access & Participation Plan (2020-2025) that sets the goal of a de-colonised curriculum by 2025, over a five-year period.

How We Started: Actions in The School of Biological & Environmental Sciences

Viewing programme curricula with a decolonial lens is entirely subject-specific, and whilst development of generic teaching and learning material can support this, what's needed is action by every staff member to engage with a process of critical self-reflection and review their module content and pedagogical approach. Within the sciences, this is particularly challenging with many staff unfamiliar with this perspective.

Working with the LJMU EDI Manager **Moni Akinsanya** and her team, we started to increase staff and student awareness of decolonial thought in 2020. Strong support from our School Director, **Jason Kirby** underpinned our efforts to start evaluating what is taught and how it is delivered. School EDI Coordinator, **Nicola Koyama**, initiated activity with a departmental talk, then created a repository of subject-specific resources and organised a six-part [seminar series](#) with international, subject-specific speakers to foster the exchange of ideas.

How We Started: Actions in The School of Humanities & Social Science

In 2020, supported by Teaching & Learning Academy internships, **Dr Ross Dawson** led a full audit of the English programme, analysing the contents of each module in terms of race and diversity. This included surveying students and staff about their experiences of the English programme and its coverage of race and diversity. Data analysed showed racial attainment gaps both at LJMU and in higher education nationwide. Findings were presented in a Panopto presentation and a report with a list of recommendations.

The LJMU Decolonising The Curriculum Working Group

Recognising the need for wider awareness and support across the university, **Moni Akinsanya** and **Nicola Koyama** formed the LJMU Decolonising The Curriculum Working Group in 2021 a collective of academic staff to better coordinate activities, facilitate progress and share good practice. The group's vision is

“To spotlight privilege, inequality and to decolonise the systems of thought, working practices, curricula and cultures within the university”

We represent all Faculties and areas and coordinate across the university. Current key actions include:

- contacting and coordinating with all Heads of Department
- securing internship funding from the Teaching & Learning Academy to
 - design and construct a decolonising the curriculum microsite to increase awareness within and outside the university and to connect and support staff and students (**Kehinde Ross** and **Nicola Koyama**)
 - carry out whiteness in the curriculum audits (**Jon Bielby, Shaquil Chaudry, Denise Lee, Ian Sadler, Tori Sprung**)
- advising on the inclusion of decolonial approach in curriculum design guidance (Curriculum Design Policy and Inclusive Practice Policy) and in Programme Validation and Periodic Programme Review with the Teaching & Learning Academy and Academic Registry respectively
- developing a university repository of resources through creation of a dedicated module on Canvas
- monitoring associated workload and campaigning for workload recognition as we recognise that the burden of equality and diversity action can fall upon individuals from minority backgrounds

Moving Forward

An approach to decolonise the curriculum is not restricted to just what we teach and how we deliver material but should extend to developing an outreach strategy to target recruitment of underrepresented groups, ensuring those groups have visible role models, hiring diverse academic and operational staff, allowing students to see themselves reflected in their curricula, providing culturally-appropriate pastoral care in a fully inclusive environment and supporting progression within academia.

Going forward the Working Group will support all these areas and crucially, will campaign for positive action to increase the percentage of Black and Asian staff at LJMU.

References

1. [Office for Students \(2020\) Degree attainment: Black, Asian and minority ethnic students](#)
2. Moosavi, L. (2020). [The decolonial bandwagon and the dangers of intellectual decolonisation](#). *International Review of Sociology*, 30(2), 332-354.