

Access and Participation Evaluation



UNIVERSITY OF
BATH

How does decolonising the curriculum support
students' sense of belonging?

Summary Report

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Access and Participation Plan 2024-28

The University's Access and Participation Plan (APP) outlines strategic commitments to reducing barriers, improving equality of opportunity, and ensuring that all students, regardless of background, can access, succeed in, and progress beyond Higher Education (HE). It identifies nine key risks faced by student groups at Bath (Figure 1) and sets out four intervention strategies to address them. Ten research projects, including this one, support the evaluation of these interventions and associated risks.

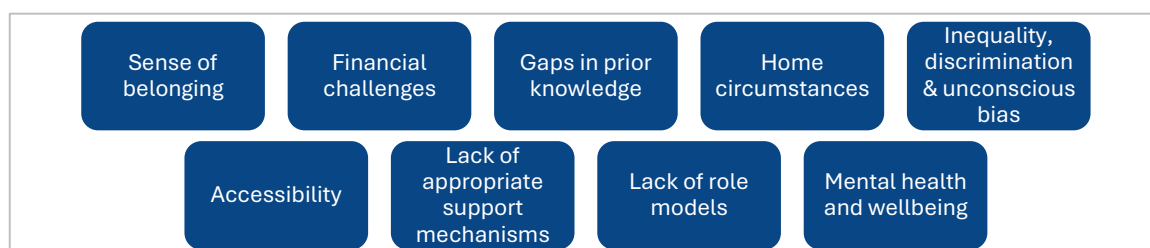


Figure 1: University of Bath's key risks to equality of opportunity across the student lifecycle.

The main associated risks this evaluation is designed to address are:

- Sense of belonging (Risk 1) the primary risk this evaluation addresses, and the lens through which decolonising-the-curriculum (DTC) activity is examined.

Project Background

This evaluation examined DTC activity at the University of Bath and its relationship to students' sense of belonging. It is one of ten research projects in Bath's Access and Participation Plan (APP) 2024–2028, commissioned to deepen understanding of systemic barriers to equality of opportunity. It is grounded directly in Bath's own performance data: a 9.8 percentage point degree-awarding gap between Black and White students the largest single ethnic-group gap in the University's data and a 3.1pp gap for students from Asian, Black, Mixed and Other (ABMO) backgrounds. The evaluation examines how DTC activity operates within Bath's specific institutional context, the mechanisms through which it shapes belonging and degree outcomes, and how Bath's current approach compares with practice elsewhere in the sector.

The evaluation used a realist evaluation framework built on the Context–Mechanism–Outcome (CMO) model, which asks not simply whether DTC “works”, but what works, for whom, and why. This Phase One report combines a review of theoretical and empirical literature on decolonising and belonging with three in-depth internal case studies; Decolonise Architecture, the Department of Psychology, and Library/Race Equality Taskforce resources, benchmarked against four sector comparators: Manchester Metropolitan University, University of Reading, Plymouth Marjon University, and De Montfort University.

The three internal case studies (Decolonise Architecture, Psychology, Library resources) were a deliberate, curated selection, not a comprehensive survey of everything happening at Bath. The report does mention other pockets of activity in Sciences, Management and Politics, Languages & International Studies (PoLiS), faculty guidance but doesn't examine them with the same depth. The trade-off was intentional to go into depth on the CMO mechanisms for a few cases, rather than spreading thin across many, so the report's picture of Bath's DTC landscape overall is illustrative, not exhaustive.

A proposed Phase Two would extend this with primary qualitative data collection (student focus groups and staff interviews); the findings below are based on Phase One's documentary and case-study analysis alone.

Key findings

- Bath has substantial grassroots DTC activity, but the strength of institutional evidence for its impact varies widely, from peer-reviewed, multi-perspective case studies (Decolonise Architecture) to undocumented grassroots campaigns.
- Across Bath's strongest cases, active staff effort to seek out and centre student voice, not reading-list content alone, is the clearest driver of improved belonging.
- Bath's best-evidenced initiatives currently rely on time-limited funding rather than durable, resourced institutional ownership, mirroring the early stages Reading and De Montfort were at before moving to sector-leading, structurally embedded models.
- The wider sector evidence base linking DTC to belonging is qualitatively consistent but lacks robust longitudinal or causal data, an opportunity for Bath to contribute more rigorous evaluation going forward.

Considerations

- Evidence strength largely reflects whether an initiative produced a discrete, authored artefact (e.g. a peer-reviewed paper or a funded guide) rather than the underlying quality or importance of the work itself; documentary analysis may therefore undercount genuine but undocumented activity, such as much of the library's contribution.
- All three internal case studies rely on self-reported institutional sources; no independent, outcome-level evaluation currently links DTC activity at Bath to belonging or attainment data (NSS scores, awarding-gap measures, or a validated belonging measure).
- The evaluation team sits within Bath's Recruitment and Admissions directorate, giving privileged access to institutional documentation but also a stake in the plan being evaluated; this is managed through transparency, cross-validation across sources, and ethical approval (received March 2026 from the Social Science Research Ethics Committee).
- Standard consultation methods (staff surveys, focus groups) may understate the problem: Bath's Psychology case and sector comparators both found that direct interviews, video testimony, diaries or zines surfaced experiences that conventional surveys missed.
- The sector evidence base used for benchmarking is itself uneven and definitionally contested; this evaluation does not attempt to resolve that, adopting instead a practical framing of decolonising as an ongoing process rather than a fixed, endpoint-defined programme.

Conclusion

The evaluation suggests that decolonising the curriculum operates through three recognisable mechanisms, representation and recognition, staff and student agency, and institutional legitimacy and that belonging is not a side-effect of this work but the primary mechanism through which it operates, driven more by pedagogy, classroom dynamics and who holds authority in a seminar room than by curriculum content alone. Bath has genuine, exportable grassroots activity in Architecture, Psychology and its central Library resources, but this currently depends on individual staff goodwill and time-limited funding rather than durable institutional infrastructure.

Sector comparators that achieved the greatest and most sustained impact were those that moved from grassroots enthusiasm to structural ownership, resourced governance and strategic alignment. Bath's task now is less about inventing new practice and more about building the infrastructure, funded, evaluated, and institutionally backed, to sustain and connect the strong practice that already exists.

Stakeholder Reflections

Cassie Wilson, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Student Experience) said:

“What stands out most clearly from this evaluation is that the University already has examples of innovative and impactful practice across our community. Our challenge now is to ensure that these strengths are supported by the institutional structures, resources and evaluation approaches needed to sustain and extend their impact, helping every student to feel valued, included and able to thrive at Bath”

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