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Decolonisation

How-to guide for teaching in Humanities and Social Sciences

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About this guide

Who created this guide?

This guide was a collaborative project at The University of Bath, led by the Department of Psychology with contributions from across the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (H&SS), including members of the Centre for Decolonising Knowledge in Teaching, Research and Practice (DECkNO) and the Decolonising Learning and Teaching Community of Practice.

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About this guide

Why did we create this guide?

Many people can be put off when they hear the word decolonisation - we get it! Decolonisation can often seem like an abstract and overly-intellectualised concept, with little clarity on what the end goal is. It can also be confronting when the status quo is being challenged.

Although there are a wide variety of guides available on decolonising curriculum, many people can find the information difficult to translate into teaching practice. Within our Faculty, there has been a call for practical tips and solutions that are context specific so that people delivering teaching know how to start or further develop their decolonising practice, and understand why it is important.

This guide draws upon existing knowledge and expertise from students and from across the Faculty, with an aim to provide clear, context specific, practical advice on decolonising the curriculum. The quotes in the purple boxes across this guide are insights from students and staff across our faculty. We hope these help everyone to start doing more to decolonise their teaching practice.

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Introduction

What do we mean by decolonising the curriculum?

We need to recognise that colonialism still has a big impact today. It shaped our politics, economy, and society in a way that gave power to White Western people and ideas - mainly from Europe and North America (sometimes referred to as the Global North).

Even when many countries are no longer 'colonies' because they achieved their independence, the ideas, attitudes, cultures that historically created racial and gendered difference are still at play. These are then reproduced via education, folklore, customs, habits, and social relations.

As a result, the way we learn and do research mostly reflects Western ideas and ways of thinking. People often treat these ideas as if they are the only right or neutral way to understand the world. Other ways of knowing and understanding the world have often been ignored, rejected, or seen as less important.

Decolonisation means taking a step back and questioning this. It's about looking carefully at what we teach and how we teach it. It asks educators and researchers to include many different ways of understanding the world and bring in voices that have been silenced. For example, this includes voices and knowledge from Indigenous and non-White communities, but also other marginalised groups like women, queer, and neurodivergent people.

Introduction

What do we mean by decolonising the curriculum?

In short, decolonising the curriculum means challenging the idea that Western knowledge is the only or best way. It's about recognising that other knowledge systems and ways of learning are equally valuable.

This is not something you do once and then you're done. It's a process that keeps evolving. It requires people working together, having open conversations, and always questioning what and how we learn. It's not just the job of experts - everyone's understanding and input matters.

> "Decolonising the curriculum is complex and means different things to different people. It is often conflated in peoples' minds as being almost exclusively about issues of race and racism. All this can make it daunting for colleagues and inhibits engagement"
>
> Robert Eaton, Centre for Learning and Teaching

Introduction

What decolonising is not

Decolonising is not another term for EDI (equality, diversity, and inclusion) - it goes beyond a sensitivity to diverse student's needs, and requires a deeper change to content or approach.

Decolonising is not another term for anti-racist - it challenges the lasting impact of colonialism and brings forward voices and knowledge from a range of marginalised groups that were pushed aside.

Decolonising is not 'cancel culture' - it is not a call for work by seminal or Western figures in the field to be removed or censored, but to bring in more critical perspectives and forms of knowledge.

Decolonising is not about removing or replacing European-originating theory or research in teaching - rather than removing one body of knowledge and replacing with the other, the curriculum and student learning becomes multi-perspectival and contextualised.

"Decolonizing can be a scary word because people immediately think about colonies and history, and why is that relevant now? But actually the legacy of that is completely relevant in terms of how society's structured, how various fields (like psychology) are thought about, what theories we teach. Decolonizing is really thinking about those assumptions and where our knowledge comes from"
Catherine Butler, Department of Psychology

'To me, it's not about trashing everything and throwing it all out, it's about understanding the origin, and the multiple'
Lizzi Milligan, Department of Education

Introduction

Why should we decolonise the curriculum?

We have a perpetuating model of Higher Education where students are passive recipients of a particular kind of material told in a particular way. There is unintentional harm being done to students and scholars.

Bringing together multiple ways of knowing and understanding the world enhances the rigour and richness of a curriculum, benefitting student engagement in participatory, critical, and inclusive learning. This empowers critical thinking and progressive future contributions to the social sciences.

What students think:

"European colonial thought has added to my identity crisis. I feel like coming to this university led me to have a breakdown of identity because I couldn't see myself in literature, I couldn't see myself in the lecturers, I couldn't see myself in what we were getting taught...I really did break down. I feel like decolonisation in Higher Education to me is about reinforcing who I am, where I belong, and seeing that"

Tlangi Nyathi, Department of Psychology

"It's not like the West **is** the centre of knowledge, we just made it to be the centre of knowledge...A lot of my undergrad, postgrad, whatever I read, it felt like it did not reflect the reality I saw around me. And I just kept questioning, is there something in the way that I observe that is incorrect? Or..is it that all the knowledge that we learn is just so deeply rooted in Western cultures?"

Shaili Kirti Kumar Palrecha, Department of Psychology

"Decolonisation is supposed to be uncomfortable. It's never comfortable because we're dealing with history that's not very nice to look back on...I come from a country that has a very, very complicated past with the UK, and there's still colonial hangover that we are reeling and recovering from"

Jane Amanda Kingsly, Department of Psychology

How to decolonise

Drawing on the expertise and experiences of H&SS colleagues, we have identified practical steps you can take to decolonise the curriculum and your teaching practice. These map onto the following six categories, which we will delve into in the rest of this guide:

How to decolonise

Decolonising teaching practice

The ways that we teach are entrenched in colonial approaches, including the methods we use and how we discuss and share knowledge with our students. Decolonising our teaching goes beyond simply considering the content but also thinking about how we can teach differently.

Teaching as a process: Decolonising isn't just about changing what we teach - it's about how we teach and share knowledge.

Active learning: Move away from one-way teaching where students just receive information. Instead, create space for discussion and shared learning based on everyone's experiences.

Reflection and perspective: Encourage both staff and students to question assumptions and look at ideas from many viewpoints. Begin and end sessions with time for students to reflect on where they're coming from and what they've learned

Emotion and storytelling: Treat stories, feelings, and real-life experiences as valuable sources of knowledge, just like data or theory. Allow time for silence, laughter, and emotion - these can deepen learning.

Being open and honest: When teachers show that they don't have all the answers and are learning too, it helps model decolonising in action.

"I adapt teaching to involve watching a video and engaging in open debate/discussion. I name with students my intention to move from banking model of teaching towards discussion, active involvement - it's less about memorising 50 years theory, but learning to take a critical perspective."
Maria Jose Ventura Alfaro, Department of Policy and Social Sciences

How to decolonise

Decolonising teaching practice

"At the start of class I invite students to share/discussion with person next to them about what they as people bring to the teaching today and or to the topic (feelings, ideas, assumptions, conflicts, curiosities etc.). This is important from a pedagogical point of view as effective teaching engages students experientially not just cognitively/rationally, and supports connections in the learning with background, heritage and cultural norms...

I might read them something narrative and ask what this evokes. For example, in a lecture on climate change I started with the story of a conservationist trying to save an owl, the story is told from the perspective of the owl. The owl resists... it reflects challenges within the field but I invite reflection that includes feelings, emotions, ideas but not application of theory yet. It's decolonising practice because storytelling as a way to access meanings important for the knowledge is a pedagogical tradition in the Global South (as opposed to for instance, only quoting statistics to set a context, which mostly stems from Global North and Eurocentric ways of 'doing' academia). I encourage emotional expression and curiosity of the emotions and experiences of others in relation to these quotes or excerpts. Then you could ask about parallels these stories remind us of in socio political life..."

Ana Cecilia Dinerstein, Department of Social and Policy Sciences

How to decolonise

Questioning 'universal' knowledge

As educators in HE, informed by our research knowledge, we may consider some of the constructs, terminology, theories, and research we teach to be 'universal'. Questioning our knowledge and bringing in a variety of perspective is an important part of decolonisation.

Challenge big claims: Ask where ideas come from and who they were designed for. Question the idea that some knowledge is neutral or universal. Notice whose voices are not represented in research and what impact that could have on the population that isn't represented.

Show where ideas come from: Explain the history, place, and culture behind theories and research. Don't present Western and decolonial ideas as opposing views - but instead discuss how there is room for many ways of knowing.

Value different kinds of knowledge: Include voices and perspectives from Indigenous, Global South, women, and queer thinkers as central, not as extras.
Include a diverse range of information sources, such as videos, podcasts, grey literature, to bring in voices underrepresented in the research.

Value different research methods that respect local knowledge systems: e.g. participatory action research, story work and narrative methodologies, etc.

How to decolonise

Questioning 'universal' knowledge

"In undergrad... we had to critically evaluate like a psychological assessment, and I did the Beck Depression Inventory. One of the suggestions I spoke about was translating it into some South African languages... I started looking into it and I was like... some key words don't have the direct translation in these languages, things like depression... It was how culturally like in these cultures, how mental illness is named, experienced, and understood. You know, there was no single word for it. I was so grateful for the task, for the opportunity to critique psychological knowledge, to have the space to see those gaps, to hold space for cultural nuance"

Tlangi Nyathi, Department of Psychology

"We must actively seek out and engage with the work of marginalised authors. Here, 'marginalised' extends beyond geography: it is not solely about incorporating scholars from the Global South or African perspectives. It also necessitates the deliberate inclusion of diverse viewpoints that have been historically sidelined: the voices of women in male-dominated discourses, the scholarship of people with minoritised racial, ethnic, or cultural identities, and works that emerge from non-hegemonic experiences. This approach honours a richer, more complex tapestry of knowledge."

Mercy Martins, Department of Education

"We had a first year module previously called 'understanding society' but we noticed there was an assumption of universality, a dominance of White Western European ideas of post industrialised society. Instead, we called it 'understanding modern society' and flagged tangible examples of colonialism in the course content. We noted that these were opportunities for more critical thinking, the language used, assumptions, assertions in key theories (which claimed and asserted universality of modernity, rationality and objective fact over a both/and balance). Throughout teaching we flagged this journey with students, asked them what they think the change was about and why, we told the story of the module or slide content being re-named, the additional thinking added.'

Maria Jose Ventura Alfaro, Department of Policy and Social Sciences

How to decolonise

Rethinking curriculum content

We might not always realise the extent to which the knowledge we teach predominantly comes from Western-centric perspectives. This upholds colonial legacies of what knowledge is seen as 'superior'. To decolonise, we can start to look at the content we teach to bring in different perspectives and knowledge-bases in a range of different ways.

Include many voices: Build reading lists and examples that show a range of cultures, ideas, and experiences - not as token additions but as key parts of the course.

Be open about change: Tell students when and why the content has been updated. Share what shaped those choices.

Engage critically with classics: Teach well-known thinkers but also talk about their context, limits, and the voices they may have left out.

Bring in global examples: Use case studies and stories from across the world as part of the main teaching, not as optional extras. Use stories, excerpts, and examples from many cultures to introduce topics.

Storytelling: This can access meanings important for the knowledge and can compliment the quoting of statistics to set a context. Both pedagogical approaches should be seen as valuable and interwoven in curricula.

How to decolonise

Rethinking curriculum content

"While teaching, flag [the decolonising] journey with students, ask them what they think the change is about, tell the story of the module or slide content being re-named and why"
Maria Jose Ventura Alfaro, Department of Policy and Social Sciences

"As part of curriculum transformation, they (economics curriculum task group) considered ways to make space for theory and approaches not traditionally considered. For instance, they added 'decolonisation in economics' content, 15 credits in year 1. So now 25% of teaching is based on that approach... and starting next year there will be added content of history to a third year module on Economic Thought"
Matteo De Tina, Department of Economics

"We (myself and linguistics colleagues) facilitated a 'field trip' style activity where PGT students went to meet english language learners, to really experience the pros, difficulties and challenges as part of the learning. This was linked to the decolonising principle of knowledge that is connected to contexts and communities, rather than at a scholarly distance."
Gail Forey, Department of Education

"In lectures I encourage students to look critically at theories... key questions I ask students to do this would probably be 'what isn't considered?', 'where was this developed, by who, to what end, what could this mean for the field, for us as learners/researchers?'"
Leda Blackwood, Department of Psychology

"I think it is a decolonising practice to include a variety of pieces of 'evidence', such as including sources, ideas or knowledge from indigenous groups. This is instead of such sources or comments coming at the end, or separate like a footnote, because we want to show students such knowledge is central, it's not seperate or an afterthought"
Maria Jose Ventura Alfaro, Department of Policy and Social Sciences

How to decolonise

Sharing power in the classroom

A central approach in decolonisation is to reduce power imbalances. The way we have traditionally taught in HE is to centre the power with the lecturer. There are lots of small ways to empower students in the classroom.

Reduce hierarchy: Small changes - like sitting with students, using first names, or joining in discussion - can make the classroom more equal. Introduce peer assessment, where students provide each other feedback.

Encourage conversation: Focus on shared exploration rather than lectures where only the teacher speaks.

Support different needs: Recognise that students come from different educational and cultural backgrounds and may engage in different ways.

Engaging students experientially, not just cognitively/rationally, is s decolonising practice because it sets a context where rationality and objectivity are not centred (and subjectivity is not a threat to learning).

Build confidence: Create assessments and discussions that reward curiosity and critical thinking instead of memorisation. Design assessments that link theory to students' own experiences or to global issues.

"I might sit in the same space as students, not at the front... though it can feel odd it produces laughter despite complex discussion! The humour is part of breaking down hierarchy which centres directive teaching where students just receive knowledge from lecturer"

Maria Jose Ventura Alfaro, Department of Policy and Social Sciences

How to decolonise

Sharing power in the classroom

"University classrooms bring together people from diverse geographical, cultural, and social backgrounds. Students and educators enter these spaces carrying different identities, histories, and lived experiences, all of which shape how they understand the world. A decolonising classroom recognises this diversity not as a challenge to be managed, but as a resource for learning. Sharing power in the classroom means creating conditions where these varied perspectives are welcomed and taken seriously, by approaching discussions of global and social issues relationally, recognising that knowledge emerges through dialogue, listening, and mutual respect. When students feel able to speak from their own experiences, and when educators remain open to learning alongside them, the classroom becomes more inclusive. In such spaces, learning is not defined solely by authoritative voices but is co-constructed through collective engagement. The classroom as a site of shared inquiry rather than one-way transmission."

Mercy Martins, Department of Education

"I'd say students need a bit of scaffolding , a good understanding of what's expected of them when discussing content related to colonial legacies and/or when the educator is encouraging taking a critical pedagogy in teaching. It helps to talk about it first, I acknowledge different conventions and expectations within HE in different cultures and backgrounds, and education experiences thus far. You can model discussion at first, take a position of multiple perspectives to encourage engagement."

Gail Forey, Department of Education

"I try to take a hands off position in debates or discussions. I name with students that sitting in silence or starting talking both are fine. Ask them how this lands for them, acknowledge discomfort and potential frustration of wishing to be 'told'. Often students develop in confidence and become more empowered in their learning by getting involved..or watching and learning as others get involved!'

Maria Jose Ventura Alfaro, Department of Policy and Social Sciences

How to decolonise

Listening to and working with students

Students are rarely included in the process of teaching design. Often they only have the opportunity to feedback on teaching in constrained ways that measure teaching quality on certain metrics. Therefore, discussing decolonisation approaches, getting feedback often, and working together on this with students can further tackle the power imbalance.

Students as partners: Involve students in shaping courses, readings, and assessments - especially those from marginalised groups. Review course materials and reading lists with students to identify gaps and make improvements together.

Respect lived experience: Understand that students' identities and experiences affect how they connect with topics.

Keep communication open: Ask for and act on feedback, and be honest about what's still uncertain or evolving.

Representation matters: Make sure women, queer scholars, and thinkers from the Global South are visible and central in your teaching.

"I ensure my own sources and reading lists are international and cross cultural but importantly, I ask students to find and report back on publications which they see as relevant to their own context, which could relate to their heritage language. This goes hand in hand in my own CPD attending conferences, support and involvement with educators and journals that embrace wider authorships"

Gail Forey, Department of Education

How to decolonise

Listening to and working with students

"The assignment asks students to apply learning to a social movement that's important to them. I have had assignments on Indian farmers, the abortion movement in Argentina, women organising in Columbia and so much more and I can use this material in lectures in subsequent years. I have learnt so much, I learn what students are connected to and feel more engaged as a lecturer."
Leda Blackwood, Department of Psychology

"Sending feedback links to students is really helpful, it can be difficult when you get conflicting feedback! But it's an exercise in openness and flexibility as a lecturer. It helped me adapt my teaching and gauge student views and assumptions for next time. There was one occasion where feedback led me to think about naming with students how complex topics can sometimes be presented comprehensively, sometimes simply. It's sensitive when student's identities and histories intersect with the material! I took forward an approach of naming clashes of ideology in academia, modelling critical but constructive discussion, explaining handling complex often politicised topics is not something you claim to 'get right' or a 'box ticked'. Students benefitted from this too. The feedback helped me to show my awareness of what is less spoken, topics that are relevant but less central in the canon at the moment and possible reasons, that any elephants in the room are known to be there"
Maria Jose Ventura Alfaro, Department of Policy and Social Sciences

How to decolonise

Building support across the institution

We recognise that the thought of decolonising can feel overwhelming when short on time and resources. However, decolonising should not be a fully individual effort. It is important to work together across teaching teams, programmes, faculties, and the wider institution. A joined up approach can mean the sharing of skills and expertise that can make big changes happen with much less individual effort.

Change from the ground up: Many decolonising efforts start with individual teachers or small groups rather than official policy.

Address barriers: Some people see decolonising as only about race or find it politically sensitive - clarity helps reduce fear and resistance.

Keep it clear and practical: Use plain language, real examples, and acknowledge that this is ongoing work, not something finished.

Work across subjects: Share ideas between departments so that approaches fit each discipline's needs.

How to decolonise

Building support across the institution

"Collaborating with others across departments, asking their views and ideas on how topics can be handled and opportunities for decolonising theory or content has been so interesting, it really helps, this is something I did with colleagues in criminology for a course for first year teaching"
Maria Jose Ventura Alfaro, Department of Policy and Social Sciences

"Within-department discussion and collaboration in research and teaching is an important way forward for enhancing practices related to decolonisation. We recognised with the research methods that, actually, that's a really good place to start in terms of decolonising, because it's where students learn to think about who they include in their samples, the kinds of research methods, the kinds of questions they ask - and all of these things are of course influenced by who is doing the asking! To be better researchers we need to consider the fundamental assumptions we make and why, and to what effect.."
Leda Blackwood, Department of Psychology

"When finding sources we look at how an author writes, or ideas they present. Research can present with diversity of author nationality and culture, but also ideas or assumptions from colonialism. In discussions with colleagues and in teaching I've found it's helpful not to present content or research in binaries, like 'this is the central and this is the alternative' or even 'this is decolonised and this is not'. Decolonising curriculum is a process, consistently appraising, critiquing the dominant with the use of varied ideas, sources and knowledges"
Lizzi Milligan, Professor of Education and Global Social Justice

What to do now?

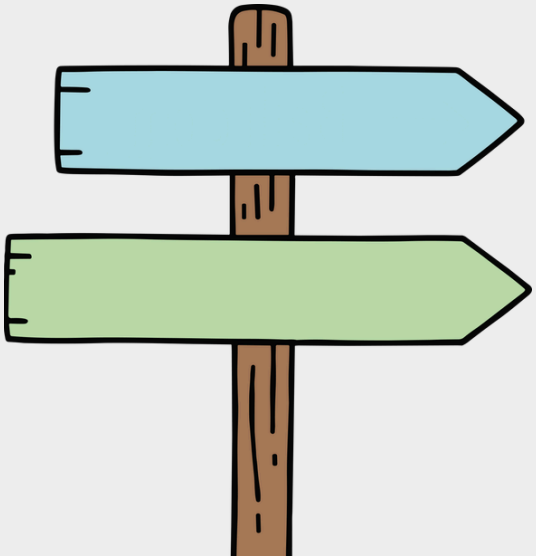
Conclusion

In this guide, your H&SS colleagues have provided a range of practical tips on how to start or enhance for your decolonisation efforts in education. There are a range of benefits to this, as decolonising practices engages all students, adds creativity to learning, improves critical thinking and acknowledges the misuse of power. This leads to more inclusive and equitable learning environments and better prepares students for global and multicultural contexts. We can all work together to strategically do this to make big changes despite our constrained time and resources.

Taking this forward

To start or enhance your decolonising practice, there are a few things you can do to get support with this and work with others

- Start decolonising conversations in your teaching teams to support each other, generate ideas to do this work and hold each other accountable.
- Hire a Research Assistant, or set an assignment, to audit your existing material and develop ways to decolonise it and include multiple perspectives.
- Undertake a self-audit to understand what you are already doing and what else you might be able to consider doing - this is a handy tool you can use.
- Work alongside your teaching leaders in your department to help consider creativity and flexibility, while keeping rigor in assessments.
- Join the University's Decolonising Learning and Teaching Community of Practice and/or Centre for Decolonising Knowledge in Teaching, Research and Practice (DECkNO) to share knowledge, resources, and best practice with others from across the institution.



What to do now?

Resources

Guides:

- DEI and decolonising: Is there a difference and what do we need to know?
- University of Bath Library diversifying reading lists staff guide

Toolkits

- Decolonising Philosophy Curriculum Toolkit, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
- Decolonising SOAS Learning and Teaching Toolkit for Programme and Module Convenors, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
- Decolonising the Curriculum Toolkit, Faculty of Science and Engineering, Manchester Metropolitan University

Books:

- Can Higher Education be Decolonized?: A Case Study of An Elite British University. Birdi, A., Gebremariam, E.B., Adebisi, F.I., Lalemi, L., Tikly, L.P., Krishnan, M., Gournet, M.A.M., Jackson, M., Walker, S. and Eichhorn, S.J., 2025.

Podcasts:

- Can Higher Education Be Decolonised? A Situated Case Study of an Elite University in the Global North

Videos:

- Decolonised education explained in simple terms - Dr Lwazi Lushaba, Political Scientist and Politics Department Postgraduate Committee member, University of Cape Town, South Africa.
- De-Colonising the Curriculum - Leon Tikly, Professor of Education and Academic Director, Perivoli Africa Research Centre (PARC) Global Engagement and Management, University of Bristol, UK
- Decolonising Psychology: Our approach - Department of Psychology, University of Bath, UK

Please get in touch if you have suggestions of additional resources that we can add.