

Reviewing student-led and student facing activities to decolonise higher education: outcomes of a student-staff partnership

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Abstract

Decolonisation is a radical and transformative process that seeks to breakdown societal inequalities, challenge the status quo and question the dominance of Western European thought. Students have been at the forefront of such work, leading campaigns to ensure universities become representative of the students who inhabit them. In parallel, Higher Education (HE) providers are implementing curricular reviews, extra-curricular activities and supporting strategic developments to signal a commitment to decolonisation. However, much of this work is in the early stages. In many institutions, decolonisation is still finding a place alongside the competing discourses with which HE providers are required to engage. To support the University of Plymouth to engage students with decolonisation a student-led internship was implemented in summer 2021. Here we report the outcomes of this internship, which involved a review of activities both to engage students with decolonisation, as well as activities led by students to promote decolonisation. We conclude by presenting the recommendations developed to engage student with decolonisation, and reflect on the use of an internship to foster student-staff partnership working.

Introduction

The University of Plymouth is a large, publicly funded university in Southwest England. Most of its students are drawn from the local area, which is not an ethnically diverse region (ONS, 2012). This is reflected in the student body; in 2020 88% of the student body identified as white, almost 30% below the sector average (University of Plymouth, 2020). The number of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students are low (e.g. in 2018/19 471 students were drawn from this group, 105 identified Black) and are often clustered in certain disciplines. This can create circumstances where BAME students in some disciplines are underrepresented and therefore are at risk of feeling isolated and as though they do not belong (Kaiser *et al.*, 2021; UUK, 2019). Like many universities, a sustained attainment gap is recorded for BAME students, and actions are outlined in our Access and Participation Plan (APP) to address these. This has involved a programme of work centred on the mentoring of BAME students, personal tutoring support and work to decolonise the curriculum. Across the sector discussions of decolonisation are often framed around the attainment gap for students from a BAME backgrounds (e.g. UUK, 2019), and connections are increasingly made between Access and Participation and decolonisation (OfS, 2018; 2020). This resonates with the approach taken at Plymouth to stimulate cross institutional conversations around decolonisation. However, we are also mindful of Liyanage (2020), who suggested caution in considering decolonisation from the perspective of attainment, as this is too narrow a framing. Despite this, at the University of Plymouth, it proved to be a useful inroad into wider discussions, for some if not all.

Movements such as ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ (Chigudu, 2020) and ‘Why is My Curriculum White’ (Abou El Magd, 2016) have demonstrated that students are integral to the process of decolonising curricular. Whilst these represent high profile campaigns, many small-scale programme or institution specific interventions, or student-led activities, have emerged to promote decolonisation. Indeed, case studies of such work are featured in this, and related, journals (e.g. Ansley *et al.*, 2019; Bindra *et al.*, 2018; Davies *et al.*, 2021; Hall *et al.*, 2021). Here we report the outcomes of a student internship that sought to capture student engagement with decolonisation. As India undertook her work, she observed varying levels of student engagement in the agenda to decolonise curricular. An outcome of this internship included recommendations to support the university, and its’ students, engage with decolonisation in ways which could allow them to take ownership of decolonisation. In writing this article, we wanted to disseminate examples of good practice in supporting decolonisation, as well as reflect on the potential of student internships as part of the process.

Using a student internship to prioritise decolonisation

In response to COVID-19, and the challenges documented across the sector regarding students accessing work experience (Holt-White & Montacute, 2020), the University of Plymouth introduced a micro-internship scheme for current undergraduates. The scheme created opportunities for students to work remotely on a small, time limited project in collaboration with a local employer. As Educational Developers are traditionally staff, rather than student focused, the micro internship created an opportunity to work directly with a student. Given the focus of the proposed internship, in that we were attempting to redistribute power imbalances resulting from colonialism, and promote anti-racist pedagogies, adopting a staff-student partnership represented a small but significant step we hoped others could build upon.

The purpose of the internship was two-fold; it aimed to:

1. review student-facing decolonisation resources that are publicly available from other universities;
2. identify the format for a student-facing resource to introduce decolonisation, and activities that can support student engagement with decolonisation.

The Careers Service at the university recruited India, a second year Law student with an interest in social mobility and equality in education. India had previously worked as a School Representative, and through her participation in the university’s equality work, she became interested in decolonisation. India was presented with the brief for the internship and rationale for this work. Rebecca is an Educational Developer with an interest in inclusive practice, student voice and more recently decolonisation. Rebecca is involved in several parallel projects to support staff to engage with decolonisation. Prior to this internship, limited attention had been paid to student engagement with decolonisation. Rebecca encouraged India to identify the best way to achieve the aims of the internship enabling India to take ownership of the project and determine the focus of the review. We met daily over the duration of internship.

Undertaking the review

To achieve the aims of the internship and develop a comprehensive picture of practice from the sector, India identified the need to look at *all* UK universities. The GOV.UK Recognised Bodies of Higher Learning Institutions lists 137 higher education (HE) providers, representing 133 universities (including private and public providers) and four independent university colleges. To ensure a systematic approach, following an initial review of several provides, India developed a ‘traffic light’ rating system (see Table 1). As decolonisation is an agenda that could be led by an institution centrally, through student-led work affiliated to a Students’ Union, or both, India’s review was inclusive of public-facing provider and Student Union webpages. Finally, it is worth reiterating the scope of this review. The review was limited to those activities that were student facing or led by students; staff-focused / led work to decolonise curricular were not captured, as they often did not directly engage students.

Criteria	Definition / scope
Ease of access - number of clicks	The number of clicks from the main page to find student-led or student-focused resources using the search bar or drop-down options. A maximum of five clicks were made, the search did not continue beyond this.
Search terminology – HE providers	The most frequently observed terminology used by the institutions included ‘Decolonisation’, ‘Race Equality Charter’ (REC), ‘Race Equality’ and ‘Equality’. These are terms commonly used across the sector, so formed the basis of the terms used to search across all HE providers.
Search terminology: Students’ Union	Most Student Union decolonisation activities centred on specific areas individuals’ e.g. elected officers, or programmes of work, therefore the search of these pages centred on the following individuals or areas of activity: liberation work, campaigns, initiatives and blogs/news items.
Quality and quantity of student-led or student-focused resources	This paid attention to the currency of resources, the language used within the resource, who the resources were developed by and the intended audience.
Staff involvement	This captured activities focused on staff e.g. BAME mentoring schemes, buddying or leadership activities.
Charterships such as Athena Swan or Stonewall charters	It was noted whether HE providers had secured, or were in the process of obtaining, external recognition of their equality, diversity and inclusion work.

Table 1: Overview of the review criteria

Outcome of the review

Using these criteria each of the 137 providers were given a colour rating to classify their student focused decolonisation work.

- A **red** rating indicated providers who presented limited or no student-facing resources on their websites. Resources that were available were either hard to access, primarily staff facing (e.g. policies relating to areas such as equality and diversity or staff training) or dated, implying they were not being maintained. In total 82 institutions were allocated a red rating.
- An **amber** rating indicated a provider who evidenced active engagement with decolonisation that was inclusive of both staff and students. Often this included a clear statement around plans to engage students with decolonisation, though the focus of current work tended to be more staff rather than student centred. Amber institutions also reported outcomes of engagement with frameworks or activities such as Athena Swan or the Race Equality Charter that aim to accredit and transform practice around equality. Overall, 39 providers were given an amber rating.
- Those providers, and their students' union, rated **green** demonstrated sustained engagement with students around decolonisation. Systematic engagement with decolonisation was evident, for example, there was a position, and student union presence, on decolonisation, as well as a current and on-going programme of work to address this agenda. Decolonisation was also likely to feature in teaching and learning, as well as specific interventions reported to address decolonisation. Engagement with external accreditation schemes were also a common feature of those providers rated green. Overall, 16 provides were given a green rating.

Reflecting on the review

Though activities to support decolonisation are growing in prominence, as the number of amber institutions indicate, the extent to which they target, seek to engage or are led by students is limited, as the number of institutions classified as red suggests. Given the high profile and student-centred nature of some of the early decolonisation campaigns, this was an unanticipated outcome. However, it may also indicate the fact that decolonisation is still a largely staff facing, and centred on issues of equality, diversity or curriculum change. These observations align with the recommendations proposed by Liyanage (2020). Institutions and student unions need to consider explicitly the role of students with respect to decolonisation. They also need to consider where spaces can be created, potentially outside the formal curriculum, for students to engage in decolonisation. Drawing on examples identified from the review, we highlight successes, as well as potential limitations to current work, and consider lessons we can learn in order to ensure students are at the heart of endeavours to decolonise HE.

It often begins with staff

Most institutions, across all categories, reported a commitment to hiring a diverse staff-network, connecting with the narrative of the underrepresentation of BAME staff within HE (Bhopal *et al.*, 2015). In tandem, many have implemented mentoring systems to support minority staff to access senior positions. This connects with efforts to create academic role models for minority groups (UJK, 2019). Mentoring programmes often focused on pairing

BAME colleagues to create support networks for members of these communities. Whilst such approaches do have a positive impact on those involved (Bohpal, 2020), we felt it was unclear the extent to which they could foster a wider understanding of the challenges faced by members of these groups, and therefore lead to wider change. Middlesex University have developed a reverse mentoring programme through which BAME lecturers are paired with white colleagues to create a safe space to express their struggles and both learn about each other's life experiences. The purpose of this scheme is to create allyship which will influence change (Middlesex University, n.d.). This is an approach other institutions could build on, both for staff and students, and indeed success with reverse mentoring has been reported elsewhere (e.g. Peterson & Ramsay, 2021). The review also demonstrated that few universities include students in their academic mentoring schemes. This could be a powerful way of tackling issues of equality and decolonisation in institutions. Offering mentoring to minority students could increase the number of BAME individuals in academia, which over time, help decolonise the curriculum by adding different perspectives to the Eurocentric curriculum.

External recognition

Engagement with, or achievement of, an external award that signals a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion was often reported on provider webpages. Indeed, this was a common feature of those providers ranked amber. However, external recognition tended to be associated with staff or institutional focused activities that may not be explicitly connected to the student body. We know students are including in the application process and may benefit from the resulting action plans / activities that emerge from the recognition process. Indeed, it has been reported that engagement with the Race Equality Charter is recognised *“as part of a long-term process to address the lack of representation on BME staff at all levels”* and *“linked to real institutional change”* (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2018, p. 4-5). For students the REC process can lead to focused areas of work on agendas such as the attainment gap as well as a spotlight been placed on the lived experiences of BAME students (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2018). However, whether students are aware of a provider holding an equality award is unclear, particularly given the embedded nature of many activities that result from the REC status. It is also difficult to be certain what the implications of this award are for the student experience. This is an area institutions' who have either obtained, or are seeking external recognition, need to focus on, and steps should be taken to build such work into action plans, with involvement of student unions and part-time officers with a remit for representation.

Words matter

The UK has been changing the terms used to describe the diverse minority ethnic groups since the 1950/1960s. It is clear that when addressing identity words matter. This is evident from the discussions taking place around the use of BAME within the HE community; it was designed as an inclusive term but increasingly it is seen as exclusive (Katawala, 2021; Fakim & Macaulay, 2020). Likewise, it has been reported, that BAME is a word that white people use because they feel uncomfortable addressing people by their ethnicity due to historical implications (Mistlin, 2021). Increasingly therefore, many institutions are moving away from BAME as a title given to those working to represent minority ethnic groups. A number of students' unions and institutions have adopted the names such as 'Minority

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Officer' (Ravensborne University of London, Students' Union) , 'Diversity officer' (Plymouth Marjon University), 'Liberation officer' (used by the students' unions affiliated to University of Bristol, University of Manchester, Norwich University of the Arts and University of Nottingham), and 'Equality and Diversity Officer' (University of Sunderland Students' Union), all of which represent good alternatives to BAME. Understandably, student's unions are hesitant to change the name of their officers given the fluid nature of the language used in reference to issues of diversity and ethnicity. However, titles such as Equality Officer, Liberation Officer and Diversity Officer may offer more longevity. We recognise they are still broad titles that may remove individual identity, but they feel less problematic in terms of the naming of specific groups. More widely, student unions strive to be representative of all students, and key to this is using inclusive terms that students can form an affiliation with, while also preventing students feeling marginalised because they do not seem themselves reflected in the roles and people elected to support them.

Student Ambassadors

Several of the amber institutions have ambassadors that aim to foster a sense of inclusivity and develop inclusive practice. Their work often builds on the practice of Students as Partners, which aims to actively involve both students and academic staff in work based around shared values, attitudes and behaviours (Healey *et al.*, 2014). This work can address themes such as teaching, learning and assessment and curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy, and involve activities such as resource development, curriculum review and pedagogic innovation (Healey *et al.*, 2014; Hall *et al.*, 2021). Partnership working aligns with the principals of socially just pedagogies that underpin decolonisation of the curriculum. Although the use of student ambassadors to promote inclusion and representation is a relatively recent innovation, for those involved it leads to active participation of underrepresented groups in change initiatives. Despite the probability that student ambassadors may have resulted in increased levels of activity in this area, and a spotlight placed on aspects of decolonisation, it is too early to review their long-term impact, particularly in terms of whether it has been effective in fostering that sense of representation of minority groups or contribution to decolonisation activities.

Social media

Social media is firmly embedded in the life of many students; therefore, it is a medium that could be effectively used to engage students with decolonisation. Indeed, in the review we observed social media being used in several ways, and identified two successful, student-led social media campaigns that were student facing, which we felt others could build on. Exeter University and Leeds University have created social media accounts for equality initiatives which celebrate everything to do with equality and diversity, including decolonisation. These accounts serve to raise awareness about issues, share campaigns, disseminate information about equality and promote relevant events / activities. Putting information into a sphere where students naturally socialise means it is more likely to reach the student community. If done well, by students and for students, with good quality graphics and posts, it can have a positive impact, particularly as young people are becoming more passionate and active in fighting for issues concerning equality, diversity and decolonisation. Indeed, social media is often at the heart of such activism (Carney, 2016). Therefore, using social media to educate

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and raise awareness is a great way to tackle issues in education, and feels a natural way to engage students and support student-led work.

A number of amber institutions also used social media. They frequently posted blogs, news stories, and used their websites to disseminate student-led projects, often dissertations, that had a focus on equality, diversity and decolonisation on their websites. We felt this was a valuable way to both recognise the work students undertake in this arena as well as raise the profile of decolonisation. However, the focus of the use of social media was upon information sharing rather than engagement. It was also unclear the extent to which the outcomes of the student-led work presented in these blogs, or on university websites, was being acted upon or considered. Going forward, when such student-led work is selected for dissemination via social media or posting to a website, either the student who completed the work, the lecturer involved in supporting the student, or an institutional representative, could reflect on the findings and consider what it meant for the area it focused on. This would represent a step towards productive change and signal a commitment to engaging with students work in this area.

Student union led activities

From the review, we identified important student-led initiatives emerging from student unions. As student unions have previously been the focus of decolonisation activities and activism, this was not unanticipated. However, the breadth of activities reported by students' unions demonstrate the range of perspectives from which students can engage with, and take the lead, in decolonising HE. We documented an example of student unions creating (non-academic) reading lists by Black authors, lists of movies about or starring members of the Black community, and deals with local small businesses or Black owned business, all with the aim of engaging and representing minority groups. These activities ran in conjunction with, or alongside the representation work student unions support through named part-time officers, as well as cultural societies that may provide a space for minority groups to connect with peers. These were all examples of how students' unions can represent minority groups and create a space for their work.

Notable examples we discovered included the University of the Arts London hosting Black Yoga, and other types of exercise classes, along with activism classes and classes on allyship, for students to be more aware of other cultures and gain confidence in their activism. Several students' unions, including the University of West London, hold support sessions for people of all the liberation groups to discuss issues they might all face. We identified this as a positive way of helping those communities deal with the issues minority student groups are facing while also keeping them involved with their university. When students feel marginalised, they can become detached from the institution or segregation can form. Having support groups for students, alongside other initiatives such as the ones mentioned above can keep students from feeling marginalised by or apathetic toward their institutions.

Final reflections: pockets of activity versus institutional buy-in

A notable observation from the review was the differing approaches taken within institutions to engage students with decolonisation. Green Institutions adopted a more holistic approach to decolonisation of the curriculum that was inclusive of students. In parallel, there was a

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focus on student-focused or student-led within student unions affiliated with these institutions. For example, Sheffield University has an educational video they show every year to educate and tackle racism and issues of equality at University, it includes discussion of micro-aggressions and types of everyday phrases that are oppressive and offensive¹. The video is accompanied by two short quizzes, one before the video and one after to see if students are learning from what they saw on screen. This is a great way to directly make students aware of their actions and words and work towards equality. Institutions such as Durham have taken the approach that each School is responsible for their own equality, diversity and decolonisation, this can be a very productive approach as it means the work done is not only focused on students but also attentive to the issues within that discipline, which can be more personalised than a blanket university policy.

However, these institutions were in the minority. In most cases, decolonisation was concentrated in pockets, led by committed students or staff groups, or focused on specific agendas / activities. An observation we made in the course of this review was these isolated pockets were often led by well-intentioned staff, but did not often directly engage with students, or create a space for students to participate. Indeed this was an observation we made of our own institution. At the University of Plymouth, we have a number exciting and innovative developments in several of our departments where issues of representation, curriculum relevance and inclusivity are stimulating collaborative change led by students and staff. However, in other areas of the university students and staff can struggle to acknowledge the relevance of decolonisation to their practice; or the pressures of the past few years of COVID have left staff and students exhausted, and not in a position to lead or embrace further change. This situation is not uncommon. It reflects the nature of work in this area, in that it is challenging for individuals to engage with, and developing and enacting projects takes time (Liyanage, 2020). However, to ensure our universities represent an increasingly diverse body, both staff and students need to consider how we can open up spaces for decolonisation. It is essential that this space is inclusive of staff and students, and connects these isolated pockets to raise the profile of this work. This will necessitate a change in practice, working and thinking, and require sponsorship from student and academic leaders. This is not just true of Plymouth; it was an observation we made of many of the institutions reviewed and identified as amber or red institutions.

Social media accounts, campaigns, classes on activism and support groups for all the liberation groups could all be successful approaches. We at Plymouth, as well as other universities, could adopt to engage students with decolonisation as well as working to create a space for them to lead. Explicitly utilising representative networks to engage students would be a productive first step, as they can signpost students and discuss what the university is doing to decolonise the curriculum. Like many universities, we have an institutional-level programme of work which does not always enter students' consciousness. The key takeaway from our review is to ensure that students from across a university are involved with every initiative to guarantee it is going to work for all and that it does not end up only working for staff or a small minority of students. The worst outcome would be that decolonisation efforts end up being something to tick a box rather than make real change.

¹ <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/inclusion/race/how-were-improving>

Reflecting on the process

India:

Decolonisation is not an issue that is at the forefront of our minds while we are in education. During secondary school and A-levels we don't think about the impact of the information we are being taught. Only when we are critically analysing our sources do we think about the significance of the source. Until I was at university, and got stuck into my studies and charity work, I did not put in much thought about what my information it was truly saying, and the importance of the person who imparted the material's experiences. Now I understand the power of the information and how a lot of our mainstream educational material is Eurocentric and White. While this an important perspective, it is not the only one. It is vital to have a well-rounded and diverse education and that means fighting for decolonisation of our curriculum.

When I saw the opportunity to work on decolonisation advertised on the university's careers site, I thought it was an excellent opportunity to do some research on an extremely interesting and topical issue. At the beginning of the project, I was instructed to look at some other institutions and look at their student-led decolonisation resources. I made this my own and looked at all 137 major HE institutions in the UK. After the first day I truly thought I would not make it through the list, but I was engrossed in all the different projects and approaches different universities were taking. Speaking to Rebecca about my findings helped focus me as it was so easy to go down a rabbit hole. The research developed many suggestions which we put to the Students' Union and the Equality and Diversity team that could improve our decolonised curriculum and make a difference to the lives of students.

Rebecca:

As an educational developer with an interest in inclusivity and widening participation, my work is centred on the student experience. However, working primarily with academics in a central professional service, frustratingly I get little opportunity to work directly with students. Therefore, I relished the opportunity to work with student interns; India is the second intern I have worked with (the fourth hosted by our team) and I have found it a hugely productive and energising process. Student interns bring an important perspective to our work, they are not frightened to ask difficult questions, and they want their work to have an impact. For me this is refreshing and motivational. Indeed, the structure of daily meetings encouraged me to work on a related piece of work connected to decolonisation that connected indirectly with India's work, and which benefited from our daily conversation. More widely, the work India completed has far-reaching relevance. The review was comprehensive, meaning resulting recommendations were cognisant of what else was occurring across the sector. This not only informed our work within the team, but also resulted in recommendations for the Students' Union and the Equality and Diversity team at the university.

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