

same conclusion as I did last year: for the higher education sector to reach its full potential, we must 'listen and include students' opinions on every key decision'.

## Resources

Barnett, R. and Coate, K. (2005) *Engaging the Curriculum in Higher Education*, Berkshire: Open University Press

Murphy, C. and Curran, R. (2020) 'Empowering curriculum leaders to innovate: an overview of an integrated curriculum design framework', *Educational Developments*, 21.1 SEDA.

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Parkinson-Kelly, N. (2020) 'The evolution of higher education', *Educational Developments*, 21.2, SEDA.

Ulster University's Integrated Curriculum Design Framework (<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/cherp/programmes-and-projects/icdf>).

Ulster University/UUSU Partnership Agreement (<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/partnership-agreement>).

**Nicole Parkinson-Kelly** was Vice President (Education) of the Ulster University Students' Union for the years 2019-2021.

# Diversifying the curriculum: Understanding students' approaches to reading lists and developing student curator roles

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This article reports on findings of two small projects aimed at decolonising reading lists and the wider curriculum at Northumbria University. The projects were funded by an internal Educational Quality Enhancement Fund (EQEF) and involved the collaboration of Criminology, and Computer and Information Sciences (CIS) departments, running concurrently. They assumed that reading lists are a fundamental part of the curriculum, and therefore a crucial tool for helping to ensure a diversity of voices in the literature that we share with our students.

The first project focused on decolonising the CIS and Criminology curriculum by working with students to understand how they view their readings lists. Online focus groups with students were run, utilising Stockdale and Sweeney's (2019) intersectionality matrix as a tool to help generate discussion and facilitate student perspectives on the diversity of their reading. The second project recruited two student curators from the CIS and Criminology departments to strengthen and develop areas of the curriculum where marginalised voices were less well represented.

These projects were not without challenges, particularly during the time of a global pandemic. There were some

common themes and also interesting differences between the two subject areas which we consider. This article will share our research findings, discuss challenges faced, and talk through some of the practical steps taken which we hope will be of benefit for those working to decolonise their curriculum.

## Introduction

Decolonising the university and enabling marginalised voices to be heard is more important than ever, particularly with the advent of 'Black Lives Matter', and an increased realisation that we need to reflect on how inclusive our systems and structures really are. Northumbria University is a member of the Race Equality Charter and has adopted a university-wide working group aimed at decolonising the university. Within this work it is recognised that 'decolonising' has multiple and varied dimensions which are in many ways interlinked: it has been widely established that there are deep structural inequalities in terms of who teaches, and the type of contract and promotion opportunities offered; who is able to access higher education, and the student experience when studying at university; and the content of degree programmes, both in terms of course structure and the teaching materials used. Our work to

decolonise the curriculum encompasses more than just racial inequality, and as such 'acknowledges the inherent power relations in the production and dissemination of knowledge, and seeks to destabilise these, allowing new forms of knowledge which represent marginalised groups – women, working classes, ethnic minorities, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) to propagate' as argued by Begum and Saini (2018, p. 198).

Decolonising practices is not a simple task and involves a whole university approach. However, one small step towards decolonising work and addressing inequalities is to examine student perspectives of their reading lists, thus enhancing understanding of the student experience as well as prompting reflexive thought around which voices/knowledge inform learning. We then look to address the 'gaps' in knowledge by working with students as co-creators to enhance and diversify their reading lists. Whilst recognising this is but one small aspect, Bird and Pitman (2019, p. 904) argue that reading lists have a key role to play as they are 'representation devices, serving to reflect particular perspectives and knowledge', and can therefore broaden and enhance the quality of student education, helping to

motivate and retain those who may feel marginalised (Begum and Saini, 2018). This article will consider our practical experiences of the research projects undertaken.

## Overview of the projects

Working together as staff within the Criminology and Computer and Information Sciences (CIS) departments we proposed two projects which would run concurrently. Building on Stockdale and Sweeney's (2019) exploration of the criminology curriculum, we posited that whilst one might expect social science students to have a broader awareness around structural inequality, this was not necessarily reflected in the way in which students may view and engage with their reading lists. Therefore, there was value in the project comparing Criminology and CIS students' views to help build insight as to whether, as educators, we need give greater priority to teaching critical information literacy within our programmes. The first project sought to understand Criminology and CIS student perspectives on their reading lists. The second recruited two funded student curators from the CIS and Criminology departments, who worked with the University Library to strengthen and develop areas of the curriculum in relation to Black Minority Ethnic (BME), LGBTQ+, disabled, female (and intersections of these) voices and experiences.

## Project 1: Working with students to understand their perspectives of reading lists

This project aimed to run focus groups during 2020/21 with separate groups of CIS and Criminology students in order to explore their perspectives of the key works and texts associated with their course. Stockdale and Sweeney's (2019) 'Inclusivity Matrix' facilitated the mapping of their course-related reading and helped to generate discussion.

### Methods

Focus groups followed a format originally developed by Stockdale and Sweeney (2019) in previous research. Participants were drawn from a variety of modules in both CIS and Criminology programmes and aimed to comprise a diverse range of voices, including BME, LGBTQ+, and female students.

Conducting research during a global pandemic was not without its challenges, and as a consequence focus groups were conducted online using Microsoft Teams. Uptake from student participants was lower than originally hoped, with N=5 criminology students and N=13 CIS students.

Focus groups explored the following key questions/activities:

- Introductory discussion about their reading
- Students were asked to name authors they were familiar with or they remembered from their course. They were advised there were no right or wrong answers, it was not a 'test' of their knowledge
- Students used Padlet to add 'post-its' with authors' names onto a shared virtual space thereby facilitating group discussion
- A further Padlet activity using Stockdale and Sweeney's (2019) 'Inclusivity Matrix' required students to add these names onto the matrix indicating whether they believed them to be White male, White female, BME male, or BME female (a non-binary option was also provided)
- The matrix also enabled further open discussion of class, and other intersections of marginalised voices i.e. LGBTQ+.

### Findings

The research largely mirrored findings of the previous research by Stockdale and Sweeney (2019): students saw a clear disparity that the key texts remembered from their course predominately were, or were assumed to be, 'White male'. If a person of colour was noted, this tended to be a male and not female, hence the importance of the intersectionality matrix.

Using the matrix helped students to see the unequal balance of reading list authors:

*'It's very white... yeah, it's bad! It doesn't reflect... everybody's experiences.'*  
[CIS]

*'Well, it's like very heavily male dominated and white males. Which is bad really... because then you are only getting like one main perspective on topics.'*  
[Criminology]

Some students found that using the inclusivity matrix triggered them to think about diversity, previously never considered:

*'I'm quite selfish as a student in that I just want the best information, I want the best sources. But from...thinking about like inclusion and things like that, it is definitely important, but to be honest it's not really something that crossed my mind until you organised this session.'* [CIS]

Most CIS students did not see the background of the author as important to their studies, and were more concerned by the quality of the resource:

*'For me it doesn't matter, it's all about the quality. If the quality is good, if what I'm getting out of it is good then it doesn't matter who wrote it. If the literature which I am using for my academic work is good then I go for it, I don't see really why it would matter who wrote it.'* [CIS]

However, some CIS students had mixed views and showed an awareness as to why representation might be important, albeit only for specific issues:

*'I completely agree I want to read the best...whoever is the best thinker in the field regardless I don't care about their backgrounds necessarily. However, I don't think you can have a really representative discussion on something like AI [Artificial Intelligence] unless you have minority and female voices in that discussion, because there have been so many issues of them not being included and huge ethical issues with AI coding and things like that.'* [CIS]

In contrast, most criminology students did think that engaging with texts written by authors from a range of backgrounds was important to their studies:

*'I think it's important yeah definitely, because you can't like fully understand an issue or a topic if you're not getting the full viewpoint and we are only getting the viewpoint of like white males. So, it's important to think about all those other people that you don't get to learn about.'* [Criminology]

Both groups of students however, thought it was important to think about diversity following the matrix activity, albeit some were more confident than others as to whether it would change their approach in the future:

*'I think it has raised my awareness, I'm not sure that it's going to change anything I do at the moment. I think the reason for that is that there is so much to do, I'm not sure I feel I have got the time to be worrying so much. That sounds awful, doesn't it?'* [CIS]

*'Throughout my university experience it's not something which I have really thought about, like I've never put in the time to look up who the person is behind the words. I have always just like judged on the character of their writing, but I think going forward if I was to do further research and studying, I would want to look for literature from people who not only have the academic capacity to tell you about topics but also authors who come from different backgrounds.'* [Criminology]

In addition, some students asserted that they would be looking more critically at the sources they use in the future and would actively seek out different viewpoints:

*'For me I would like to go and research female BME*

*background authors in my subject. Because I am quite astonished that I don't know any authors from that background.'* [CIS]

*'Yeah, I think I would try to look for more diverse authors to try and get like those different viewpoints but rather than just kind of sticking to what I'm being told.'* [CIS]

*'Yeah, I think you always have to look at who it is that has written the sources that you are using. I know that there are many academics who come from a diverse range of backgrounds who we don't really know about as much and I will try to include them and read their work more.'* [Criminology]

## Project 2: Working with student curators

The second project aimed to employ 'student led curators' from the Criminology and CIS departments to work with academic staff and library services to develop student-led resources including additional reading list material, publisher material, library displays, and virtual materials. The resources were intended to strengthen and develop areas of the curriculum in relation to marginalised voices and experiences. Curators were encouraged to define their own role, and work with the project lead and University library on the development of ideas and materials that best suited their own curriculum area and student population.

### Methods

We recruited one student-led curator for Criminology and one for CIS. The position was advertised across all year groups with eight students across the two disciplines applying for the roles.

### Findings

There were real challenges to this project due to the global pandemic, especially in relation to staff time to lead the project and work effectively with students. The impact on 'productivity' of academics (particularly those with caring responsibilities, those on precarious contracts, and those with underlying health conditions/disabilities)

during the pandemic has been well documented. It should also be acknowledged that the ability to think 'creatively' has been severely restricted by the pandemic. It was difficult to conceptualise library space and student resources, as due to UK lockdown restrictions these now occupied both physical and virtual space.

Interestingly, the student curators approached the project in very different ways; the CIS curator spent their time focusing on apps and web resources for students, whereas the social science student focused on developing a reading list resource that was populated with information about BME authors in the field. The student curators inevitably chose an approach that they felt most comfortable with.

Unfortunately, the ability to create coherent projects was hindered by an inability to meet in person due to travel and lockdown measures. This culminated in the CIS student being unable to see the project through until the end.

However, the social science student remained engaged and there were several key 'outputs' from her work. Firstly, the reading list resource created was shared with staff and will be incorporated into modules across the criminology programme. Secondly, library services are purchasing and creating a physical display of the texts compiled, and a blog post discussing the project will be shared online.

Crucially, the success of the project runs deeper than these 'outputs'. The following is written by Rajvir Kaur, the social sciences student curator, as she reflected on her role.

On the role of reading lists and resources, as experienced on her course:

*'Being a person of colour, race is something I always see, so I already knew that the reading lists and the module topics themselves weren't diverse enough. I always felt like racial issues and topics were left to the last few lectures in the semester...and voluntary modules. In terms of reading lists I felt like I saw a lot of*

*repeated names...year after year on my reading lists...So more books need to be added to the library and reading lists should always be made with diversity in mind.'*

On the things she has learnt in the curator role:

*'I've learnt a lot throughout the role around the acknowledgement within the criminology discipline that not enough BAME and LGBTQ+ voices are given the platform for their voices to be heard. I've learnt more effective ways to research books...I've also come to realise I myself overlook smaller communities and their struggles like indigenous people and their struggle throughout history and still today. Before this job I wouldn't have been able to name an indigenous writer, but now I know about Linda Tuhuwai Smith, a Maori woman who wrote "Decolonising Methodologies" in 1999 and her father Sir "Sidney" Hirini Moko Haerewa Mead, who is a prominent anthropologist, historian and Maori leader.'*

On the role of reading lists and resources, academic staff should consider:

*'I would say that more needs to be done to make sure the reading lists are diverse, not just in terms of race but also LGBTQ+. It may take some time to find more resources, but it will be worth it in order to provide a more diverse and open-minded approach to criminology. This will also encourage white students to think more about race.'*

Advice to other students:

*'Be critical of the resources handed to you, of course we should never rely on just the reading lists but I would also urge students to look for their own books on even the basic topics, we need to be aware*

*that it's up to us to shed light on topics not mentioned by our lecturers...that extra time to research and think of the topics through the lens of BAME and LGBTQ+ people and how they would be impacted could make all the difference in your grade, we can't trust that our lecturers will mention the significance of these issues.'*

## Concluding thoughts

This project is just the start of wider work relating to decolonising the curriculum: developing students' critical information literacy skills so that they can begin to question the sources and resources that they use when learning and working with students to co-create more diverse material that can be used in teaching and learning. We recognise that this work is only one small step, but within it there are a range of broader debates; for example, as an academic team we have questioned our own use of the term BME and the dichotomous presentation with White. However, the research suggests that student knowledge is so rooted in White/male work that by visibly showing the lack of 'other' creates space for further discussions to be had.

The matrix was also used as a practical tool to discuss why indigenous and/or LGBTQ+ and/or working-class voices were absent or marginalised, and served well as a catalyst for thought and discussion.

Furthermore, once the bias within course reading lists is visible then the question arises 'what other texts and resources should be incorporated'? Working with student curators to identify such texts and resources is an important next step. From our experience we recommend that work to develop students' critical information literacy around their reading lists should be embedded first (ideally this would

build over the course of the degree programme), and curator roles would develop from there.

This work might vary across different disciplines: we found the cognitive shift for the CIS students, whose programmes tend to be less theory-based, was perhaps more challenging. For many, ideas about using the 'best' source materials prevailed, with little recognition of the deep-rooted imperialism and wider structural inequalities that lead to this sort of classification. Students placed a great emphasis on the texts on their reading lists being the 'best'. As educators we need to commit to reflective practice in relation to the source material we use. It takes time to redevelop our programmes and courses. However, we can start the process by acknowledging the issue, reflecting on the range of resources we use and encouraging our students to do the same, thereby collaboratively working towards a more inclusive and diverse curriculum.

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