

9.5 Decolonizing the Curriculum in Scotland

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Name and weblink of Higher Education Institution or NGO working in higher education

A collaborative project was created in response to an open call from QAA Scotland to bring together institutions from across Scotland to explore decolonizing the curriculum. This project was led by Edinburgh Napier University (then University of Stirling). It also included St Andrews University, University of Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian University, The University of Edinburgh, Queen Margaret University, Abertay University and Sheffield Hallam University.

<https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/about-enhancement-themes>

<https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/resilient-learning-communities/completed-projects/decolonising-the-curriculum-in-the-time-of-pandemic>

Main Contacts and Sources of Information

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<https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/resilient-learning-communities/completed-projects/decolonising-the-curriculum-in-the-time-of-pandemic>

Type of initiative

Decolonizing the curriculum across disciplines.

Introduction

National/local higher education landscape and context

The Scottish higher education system includes 19 institutions with degree-awarding powers. The current policy is to ensure that by 2030, 20% of students entering university come from Scotland's 20% most deprived backgrounds. Several initiatives (such as providing tuition-free education and financial support, notably for students with disabilities) are contributing toward this objective.

The initiative of decolonizing the curriculum is part of the effort to ensure student attainment. The initiative is a component of the "Enhancement Themes" of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework. The Enhancement Themes are coordinated by QAA Scotland, which is part of the UK-wide Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

The Enhancement Themes are owned by the higher education Scottish sector and aim to enrich the learning experience of students studying in Scotland.

The Scottish higher education sector identifies and agrees on a specific theme and works collaboratively to develop new ideas and models for innovation in learning and teaching.

Relevant background information on case study higher education institution(s): academic focus, size, student demographics, etc.

The Scottish higher education sector tends to be socially homogeneous, which can make the lived experience of students of color challenging. This theme was identified as being important, notably when COVID-19 was shown to have had a negative impact on students of color who were more at risk of suffering from financial hardship and limited access to digital resources. It also coincided with the aftermath of George Floyd's death in Minnesota as well as a growing need for Scotland to acknowledge the ways in which colonialism has shaped our higher education institutions.

This is also part of broader effort from universities in the United Kingdom to advance anti-racism and racial equity, given the growing awareness of the attainment gap for students of color, as demonstrated by a report published by the representative association of UK universities in 2019.¹⁰

Description of policy/programme/measures

Rationale for innovative equity initiative/policy/program/measures. What specific challenges did it aim to address (access, retention, financial, nonfinancial, several issues at the same time)?

The Theme is meant to increase access and retention by providing students with an environment in the classrooms that considers different social and political viewpoints and ethnic origins. It is also about acknowledging the way that colonialism has created institutional structures and shaped curricula. There is a need to question the assumptions about whose voices are (in)visible and how diverse perspectives can be brought in, regardless of the discipline.

How was the initiative designed (actors and process)?

The initiative was designed by two colleagues from Edinburgh Napier University in collaboration with eight higher education institutions, with the support and funding of QAA Scotland.

Core objectives of the initiative

The goal of this initiative was to ensure that the higher education environment in general and the classrooms in particular are sensitive to the social and political

¹⁰ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-07/bame-student-attainment.pdf>. For a full discussion, see also Felix, M. (2022), Anti-racism in UK Higher Education. *Centre For Global Higher Education Working Paper Series*, N° 83, June 2022. <https://www.researchcghe.org/perch/resources/publications/working-paper-83-1.pdf>

experience of students of color and international students and that account is taken from multiple points of view on historical events and on built-in structural inequalities in present-day society.

Implementation timeframe

The initiative was launched in January 2021 and will end in July 2023.

Detailed presentation of the implementation modalities of equity promotion initiative: target population, activities carried out, main actors within the higher education institution/NGO and outside partners, resources

A working definition of decolonizing the curriculum was adopted:

For the purposes of this project, decolonisation of the curriculum is the process of analysing and interrogating how disciplines have been shaped by colonial history, and the impact of this on individuals and communities. The decolonising process seeks to challenge and dismantle the ways in which the academy operates to privilege the needs of some groups and marginalise those of others.

The three main aims of the first project phase included the following:

- To create an interinstitutional network for decolonizing the curriculum with diverse representation from staff and students as well as critical friends
- To run three cross- and intradisciplinary online workshops involving all staff and students to facilitate discussion of what decolonization of the curriculum means in different disciplines and contexts
- To produce a concluding report on the work of the cluster, including evaluation of the work.

The activities included the following:

- Hiring five student interns to collect and curate anonymized stories of instances where students felt uncomfortable in classrooms and to audit programs to show biases.
- Developing case studies across disciplines and other types of resources
- Running events open to all to discuss the results of this work

The workshops have been instrumental in organically enlarging the initial cluster and disseminating resources across and within institutions.

How was the initiative financed (external and internal funding)?

The project has been funded by QAA Scotland. Individual members within the network have used the project as a catalyst for further work within their

own institutions, some of which has led directly to newly funded posts. For example, at Abertay University, there is now a dedicated colleague charged with developing anti-racist work explicitly as part of a new EDI¹¹ role.

Identification of linkages with national/regional/local policies

Are there official policies/incentives in support of this type of initiative, or was it an original idea from the higher education institution itself? How have official policies facilitated or constrained the initiative?

Issues of equality, diversity and inclusion have been high on the UK higher education agenda since at least the early 2000s. Initially, the issue was one of providing better access to students of color, notably in elite institutions.

More recently, the debate has moved to consider how the curriculum is shaped by the UK's past colonial history and how it continues to perpetuate structural inequalities. Furthermore, to address the attainment gap and gather useful institutional data about the experience of students of color, Advance HE led to the creation of a race equality charter¹². Advance HE – the UK's national body for learning and teaching in higher education focused on enhancing higher education – has also designed a Curriculum Review Tool to audit how each curriculum supports access and inclusion.

Obstacles encountered and mitigation measures during implementation

What difficulties arose during implementation? How were they overcome?

The first year of the project focused on awareness-raising and encouraging colleagues to understand the urgency and need for this work. The three workshops each featured mini 'provocations' from colleagues across the sector who have important research and stories to share. Attendance at these (virtual) workshops was high, but the challenge, as ever with these initiatives, is that those colleagues were self-selecting. There is a need to bring those who cannot see or will not acknowledge the need to decolonize curricula. In the second year of the project, the amount and diversity of work now going on in different institutions in this area is noticeable. The interconnected nature of this project, based on trust and exchange within an interinstitutional network, is a good way of sharing effective practices as well as exploring the challenges of developing such initiatives, particularly in the face of any misunderstanding.

Thus far, there has been no resistance to this specific project, although as indicated above, colleagues do support one another with the challenge of trying to change deeply embedded institutional and sector-wide practices that make it difficult to decolonize the curriculum. There is also awareness that there is a

11 EDI refers to equality, diversity and inclusion.

12 <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter>

great deal of focus on the topic in the UK media as the woke culture debate rages on. Therefore, it is important to focus on individual teaching practices within the disciplines as a way of supporting individual colleagues wanting to make change in their own context. Starting with student perspectives and experiences is a powerful way to begin the conversation, as colleagues are often horrified to hear of the microaggressions and other challenges their students have faced, totally unbeknownst to them. These stories are the most powerful tool for change.

Results of the innovative equity approach based on available information

Did the higher education institution(s) clearly define how the results of the initiative would be monitored and assessed when the initiative was designed and launched? What metrics/indicators were selected to evaluate the implementation (process, duration, resources), and the expected results?

The project has produced one evaluation report thus far (link above) with metrics focused on engagement through events and materials as a way of gauging impact. This year's evaluation draws on the resources and materials produced to develop a deeper understanding of how to reach beyond the converted in different disciplinary and individual contexts. What is emerging in this work is the importance of student-staff partnership – the diverse voices of the students in both the evaluation and development of this work have been essential. A focus for the coming year will consist of an evaluation of the evolving views of students and academics.

The final stage of evaluation will take place in the third year, where the project will take a creative storyboarding technique inspired by the work of Liz Austen and Stella Devitt-Jones (2019)¹³

What is the available evidence about the outputs, outcomes, and impact of the initiative?

Since their introduction in 2003, the Enhancement Themes have explored areas of emerging interest and value to the higher education sector in Scotland and helped drive positive change. By participating in Enhancement Themes projects, educators benefit from collaboration with peers outside their own institutions, explore enhancement-driven research in diverse fields, and help shape best practices. Students can directly contribute to Enhancement Theme projects and steer the theme through representation at committees. Student-led projects within each theme allow students to select and explore areas of particular interest to them and help enhance the student learning experience in Scotland.

With respect to this particular theme, the main outcomes of this work include the following:

13 <https://shura.shu.ac.uk/25964/1/guide-to-using-evidence.pdf>

- raising awareness of this issue;
- developing skills to approach the issue and address identified needs; and
- building a community of practice around the theme of decolonizing, which was formed primarily with colleagues in institutional learning and teaching roles rather than those affiliated with particular disciplines.

What lessons arise from these results?

Three key issues surfaced, which are linked to the ethnic profile of key staff in Scottish universities, who tend to be white:

- how to ensure buy-in from the university leadership and from a wider set of colleagues
- the specific role of those in academic development to further this agenda by identifying interested colleagues and ensuring that their work is amplified
- the importance of engaging with students

Most university principals in Scotland signed a declaration to tackle racism in 2020, indicating that there is strong support from the top.¹⁴ Two academics led the project, and its implementation worked differently in each institution, depending on the context and the progress achieved in each of them. Staff volunteered to join the network – this was not a top-down initiative. The seniority of staff ranges from professor to lecturer, as well as academic development colleagues in strategic institutional roles. Disciplinary colleagues are involved, although usually with a learning and teaching (L&T) remit (e.g., Director of L&T in Psychology).

Students, particularly those with lived experience of racism, are very keen to share their stories and to support and help this work. For this specific project, the only students involved in the work were the student interns. However, the project – now incorporated as a project of the QAA Scotland’s Anti-Racist Curriculum work – is going into its third year and will be reaching out to more students and more staff to capture their stories and experiences and create a digital artifact that will highlight the diversity and plurality of the Scottish university communities.

Assessment of potential for replication and scaling up

Is the initiative “embedded” throughout the institution? Has the initiative been replicated or scaled up? Is there potential for replication and/or scaling up?

The Enhancement Themes are supported by a committee structure that ensures their replication across the Scottish higher education sector and their embedding in each institution:

14 <https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/scotlands-universities-stand-united-against-racism/>

- A Theme Leaders Group (TLG) determines, supports and evaluates the work undertaken and leads their respective institution in embedding it. The TLG meets four times every academic session.
- A Theme Leadership Team (TLT), a small group of academic and student leaders and QAA Scotland officers directs the work of the TLG. It meets six-eight times during the academic year.
- The Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC), on which sit a representative from every Scottish institution, four student members and observers directs the overall work. SCHEEC meets three times during the academic year.
- QAA Scotland supports theme activities, including funding, depending on the needs of each specific activity. A team of quality enhancement specialists is available as needed, and an annual conference showcases the work that has been done.

In many institutions, postgraduate certificates in learning and teaching in higher education are now embedding inclusion and the theme of decolonizing the curriculum. These PG certificates (which often have a slightly different focus in each institution) are the qualifications on which most universities enroll their new lecturers to help them develop pedagogical knowledge and their teaching practices and to familiarize them with institutional learning and teaching policies. There is a growing group of program leaders who are working to decolonize their curricula so that new staff are aware of the importance of developing anti-racist curricula and diversifying the perspectives they bring into their teaching materials and reading lists.

What would be facilitating or constraining factors in the specific national/local context of the higher education institution(s) where the initiative took place?

Above all, for Western academic colleagues who have no lived experience of the challenges facing so many colleagues and students of color, this work requires starting with oneself. The only place to start is by exploring and acknowledging one's own privilege, one's own racism (see Saad, L., 2020) and the multiple identities one inhabits. Although it is challenging, it is essential to initiate conversations within module and programme teams even if they may make some colleagues uncomfortable. This requires good facilitation skills as well as an understanding of why it is important. This is where student voices and experiences play a powerful and important role.

There is a clear role for academic developers and those in learning and teaching roles to start these conversations. Advance HE's *Anti-racist Curriculum Project Guide* is helpful.¹⁵

15 <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/anti-racist-curriculum-project/project-guide>

From an institutional perspective, according to Felix (2022, p. 4)¹⁶,

Despite positive progress and examples of good work, there is a long road to travel. Major issues include improving the representation of staff of colour in senior academic positions, increasing the representation of students of colour particularly at higher tariff universities and in reducing awarding gaps, accelerating the efforts to decolonise research, and fostering greater compassion and intercultural understanding within the culture of universities.

Could this initiative be successful in other countries/contexts?

The colonial history of each of our European countries is similar and yet different – the French approach to colonialism and its ‘mission civilisatrice’ (civilizing mission) differed from the British approach, and yet the reverberations continue to be felt across Europe and the world today. Similarly, in other Western contexts, such as the USA, Australia and New Zealand, there is an increasing move to confront the past and acknowledge responsibility for the damage inflicted on people of color and indigenous peoples. Although this movement began in South Africa¹⁷, the context and educational systems are different.

Concluding Comments

What makes this initiative special?

The initiative relies on a tested methodology to develop, scale up, implement and embed Enhancement Themes in Scotland.

What is the main takeaway?

Success factors include:

- Identifying colleagues, including international colleagues, who are comfortable or willing to engage with the issue.
- Enabling academics to take ownership of the project. For instance, following one of the workshops, a reading group of academics from different institutions was formed to share good practices in relation to the theme.
- As a first step, focusing on the disciplines and on the language to use.
- Enlisting interested students and giving them responsibilities for some activities (research, running workshops).

16 Felix, M. (2022), Anti-racism in UK Higher Education. *Centre For Global Higher Education Working Paper Series*, N° 83, June 2022. <https://www.researchcghe.org/perch/resources/publications/working-paper-83-1.pdf>

17 Chantiluke, R., Kwoba, B., and Nkopo, A. (2018) *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of the Empire*. London: Zed Books Ltd.