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Diversifying and Decolonising the Department of Psychology

A toolkit for colleagues

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# Introduction

## Preamble: Why now?

The reactions to the murder of George Floyd in Minnesota on May 25th, 2020 has sparked a moment with potential for profound international significance. The Black Lives Matters protests signify a global focus on race and racism. In the UK, the toppling of the statue of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol has afforded a national re-examination of institutions and assumptions. Whilst the Department of Psychology already prides itself on its valuable community contributions and on the diversity of its student body, this is an appropriate time to re-examine our own teaching and learning with a focus on diversity and decolonising.

## Diversifying and Decolonising the Department of Psychology

This toolkit is intended to support colleagues in the Department of Psychology in discussions around the design and continuous development of unit-level teaching and learning. Diversifying and decolonising are two distinct processes. **Diversification** is a process of ensuring that our teaching and learning best reflect and support the breadth of our student cohort. It is a commitment to diversify perspectives and representation within curricula on a range of subjects (whilst maintaining our core academic principles).

**Decolonising the curriculum** is a larger project. The history of Psychology is one inextricably linked with imperial and colonial legacies. Whilst these dark shadows of our discipline’s past are antithetical to the values of the Department of Psychology and our teaching and learning, the ‘Decolonising the Curriculum’ movement demonstrates the value of reflecting on our teaching; asking us to re-examine assumptions about how the world is, and the legacies of Western colonialism and empire on knowledge, education and professions, especially around race and racialisation.

Decolonisation also signifies something about space, whereby the meanings of spaces are disrupted. One way of thinking about this in the current context might be in considering how our curricula affords space(s): for bodies, for (alternative) ideas, and for voices, views and experiences less often heard.

## The pedagogy of the Toolkit

This document acknowledges that all learning and teaching, including decolonisation, is a profoundly reflective process that is never really completed, as new people and knowledge shape the learning community. Incorporating global and cultural diversity into the curriculum, and ultimately decolonising it are activities which will involve bringing new, challenging and critical perspectives into the curriculum.

This document is designed to be supportive and not prescriptive. Diversifying and decolonising the curriculum are ongoing processes, they involve resources and challenges of perspective for many of us. Whilst the questions and resources here are offered as ‘starters’, our department and the wider university will be required to support us on this process ([link to Manchester Met Annual Report on Equality and Diversity](https://mmuintranet.mmu.ac.uk/Interact/Pages/Content/Document.aspx?id=3268)).

The authors of this document have to be open with our colleagues; we can offer no straightforward ‘solutions’ to the questions posed by diversification and decolonisation, and we are facing the same challenges. There is often conflicting evidence over ‘what works’. The toolkit attempts to support us to remain open-minded about what we consider useful or effective, and support continuous discussion, reflection and development in this area.

In future editions of this document we would ~~’d~~ like to include examples from colleagues of diversification and decolonisation in their own teaching and learning. Please contact r.lowe@mmu.ac.uk if you have practice you wish to share (or complete [this anonymous online survey form](https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/85FVXD2)).

## Categories and Content

This document uses the categories ‘Curriculum Philosophy’, ‘Teaching and Learning Methods’ and ‘Unit Materials and Resources’ based on the Manchester Met UTA toolkit for Inclusive Curriculum design. This asks colleagues to consider the learning objectives of units, the methods we use for teaching, assessment and academic support, and the resources that we use in facilitating the learning of our diverse body of students.

Each section is in three parts:

* + ‘Reflexive questions to ignite thinking’
	+ ‘Suggested adaptations’
	+ ‘Starting points’.

We also include a [Padlet Link](https://padlet.com/rlowe16/Resource_List) to a wider range of resources (with annotations). The intention is that this ‘resource set’ can be extended as we all continue to engage with diversifying and decolonising.

## Language and terminology: A ‘trying’ project

In developing this tool, and in speculating about how it might be used and amended in future, we start from the position that language is not neutral; it signifies, codes and concretises meanings. However, language also shifts and can be contested. We adopt this (dis)orientation to language in our use of terminology in this document: it is immanently flawed and simultaneously open for (re)negotiation. For example, in the context of diversity and decolonisation, we adopt the term students of ‘Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic' background but recognise that this term is imperfect and will need to be constantly interrogated and changed as we, collectively, make interventions to diversify and decolonise our curriculum across our psychology programmes.

In our developing list of further resources, we include links to debates about the language of diversity and decolonising.

# Section One: Curriculum Philosophy

## Reflexive Questions to ignite thinking:

* To what extent does the content of my syllabus presume a particular profile / mindset of student and their orientation to the world?
1. What are the characteristics of this profile?
2. Who is represented as an ‘Other’ in my teaching and how?
3. Is this potentially problematic and for whom?
4. Are there ways of thinking about the material or subject matter from different perspectives?
* In what ways does the curriculum in my unit reflect the colonial and racist histories of the discipline?
1. In what ways is the content of my syllabus pushing against the western canon for (your subdiscipline in) Psychology?
2. In what ways have issues of race and culture been addressed by me in developing the curriculum?
3. Are there any parts of my syllabus that particularly lend themselves to 'decolonizing the curriculum'?
* In what ways and to what degree do I adopt an actively anti-racist approach for my curriculum?
1. In what ways have I adopted a Critical White Studies, Critical Black Studies, or other critical lens in developing my curriculum?
2. In what ways does the content of the syllabus – and especially the ways that I facilitate learning – acknowledge the racial biases of wider society?
3. In what ways and to what degree do I adopt an active anti-racist approach in facilitating learning for my racially and culturally diverse students?
* In what ways does the content of my syllabus assume a ‘colour neutral’ approach?
1. In what ways does the curriculum (learner, teacher, materials) assume the centrality of whiteness as a default?
2. How does this ‘colour neutral’ approach reinforce inequalities of race and its intersections with other marginalities?
* To what extent does the content of my syllabus acknowledge / cultivate an appreciation for diverse perspectives?
1. In what ways does the content actively help raise awareness of racially diverse lives/perspectives.
2. In what ways do I facilitate students having access to specialists/experts/knowledge from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities and cultures as part of my curriculum?
3. In what ways does the syllabus enable students of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds to draw on their prior experience as valuable contributions to the curriculum?

## Suggested adaptations

* Re-organise material in your syllabus to bring different issues to prominence; in particular through bringing various kinds of critical perspectives to the earlier sessions
* Talk to colleagues in the discipline who specialise in different research areas to get further recommendations
* Read articles about pedagogy in your field which speak to questions of diversity, coloniality, inclusion and critical thinking (e.g., see below and [resource list](https://padlet.com/rlowe16/Resource_List))
* Talk to students about what kinds of content they would like to see addressed
* Keep open some spaces in the course to teach around topics identified by students in that year
* Teach ‘controversies’ around key issues in the field or think about how to engage topics dialogically
* Teach through the juxtaposition of material from different cognate areas
* Contextualise your subject in its historical moment, making explicit the kinds of research programmes, assumptions and aspirations that generated it. Such information, if absent, could be introduced into core or introductory material

## Where next? Possible starting points

### *When psychology speaks for you, without you: Sunil Bhatia podcast on decolonizing psychology*

This is a podcast and article of an interview with Sunil Bhatia. He is a professor and chair of the Department of Human Development at Connecticut College. His book *Decolonizing Psychology: Globalization, Social Justice, and Indian Youth Identities* received the 2018 William James book award from the American Psychological Association.

<https://www.madinamerica.com/2020/05/sunil-bhatia-on-decolonizing-psychology/>

### *SOAS: Decolonising SOAS Learning and Teaching Toolkit for Programme and Module Convenors*

This document was used to inform this tool and some of the suggestions have been incorporated here. It provides background information on why decolonisation is necessary within HE and gives example case studies of academic staff decolonising their curriculum. Pages 8-13 in particular focus on curricula.

<https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/decolonisingsoas/files/2018/10/Decolonising-SOAS-Learning-and-Teaching-Toolkit-AB.pdf>

# Section Two: Teaching and Learning Methods

## Reflexive Questions to ignite thinking:

* What are the attainment levels of all students on my unit? Are there Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic differentials for student grades for this unit? (this data is not yet available but university is working on how to provide this).
* In what ways do the learning activities in my unit promote inclusion and expose students to a range of culturally challenging views, opinions and contexts (e.g. setting groups that mix students from a range of backgrounds, cultures, ages etc. and encourage cultural exchange)?
1. In what ways do your chosen teaching methods actively include the experiences of students of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds?
* How does my unit support and incorporate student feedback for curriculum development?
1. Is there a clear statement about, and process for students to make complaints/ suggestions or raise issues, relating to racial and cultural diversity?
* Are there clear (and impartial) ways that students can raise contentions about the learning materials/space that you are creating for the unit?
1. Are these clearly set out at the beginning of the unit?

## Suggested adaptations

* Define learning outcomes in ways that allow students to engage in a variety of ways with the learning materials and with the assessment
* Teach the material in ways that allow students to make connections to their existing knowledges and experiences (and if these are not clear to you, ask the students)
* Manage the classroom in order to generate participation and confidence amongst all students; proactively disrupt patterns of dominance emergent in classroom discussions by restructuring the conversation or workflow
* Schedule time for conversations with students about pedagogical matters and signal willingness to engage with issues related to inequalities and discrimination
* Have conversations about race and racism with colleagues and students

## Where next? Possible starting points

### *How ‘White Fragility’ reinforces racism film: Talking about ‘Race’*

Sociologist Robin DiAngelo explores why white people should stop avoiding conversations about race because of their own discomfort, and how 'white fragility' plays a key role in upholding systemic racism.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2020/jun/26/how-white-fragility-obstructs-the-fight-against-racism-video-explainer>

### *SOAS: Decolonising SOAS Learning and Teaching Toolkit for Programme and Module Convenors*

This document was used to inform this tool and some of the suggestions have been incorporated here. It provides background information on why decolonisation is necessary within HE and example case studies of academic staff decolonising their curriculums. Pages 14-19 focus on pedagogy.

<https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/decolonisingsoas/files/2018/10/Decolonising-SOAS-Learning-and-Teaching-Toolkit-AB.pdf>

# Section Three: Unit materials and resources

## Reflexive Questions to ignite thinking:

* In what ways do your unit materials address the histories of colonialism in the development of the (sub)discipline?
1. Does your syllabus allow for/encourage a critical approach to received/authoritative texts as a central feature of study, and not just as supplementary add-ons?
* What is the demographic profile of authors on the syllabus?
1. Are all the authors on your reading list white and/or male. If so, why is this the case?
2. What is the effect of this (homogeneity of authors/sources) on the diversity of views with which the students are presented?
3. Is the profile of authors acknowledged and examined as part of the learning aims and outcomes of the syllabus?
4. Is there a wide range of journals or textbooks located in the global South which may help capture different debates or perspectives? (Does these sources reflect diverse Black, Asian, global perspectives?)
* Could readings on your syllabus be potentially traumatic or painful to students either in general or in particular?
1. In what ways should this be acknowledged/ managed?
2. In what ways do you signal/ confront issues that may arise around potentially distressing topics?
* In what ways are your unit materials ethnocentric?
1. To what degree and in what ways does the unit incorporate examples/ imagery/ case studies/ literature that reflect Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and majority global perspectives?

##

## Suggested Adaptations

* Consult a wider range of journals or textbooks for source materials, particularly journals located in the global South which may help capture different debates or perspectives
* Decolonise and diversify the kinds of source material that come into you classroom; intelligent writing or comment on particular issues might well be available online in non-academic form
* Find ways to give students a wider circle of contacts or experience within your syllabus design through visits, engagement with people outside university or new kinds of material

## Where next? Possible starting points

### *Black, Indigenous, and People of Color authored papers Psychology Database*

Initiated by Erica Wojcik, Skidmore College, US. Twitter@ewojcik, this ongoing project is a list of papers authored by psychologists of BIPOC (a US-associated term) background. It is particularly useful as it categorised by psychology sub-field (including cognitive, quantitative, social, sensation/perception etc).

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1i7Eacoyv9VVg2lBbCV-KJZg4nSGvR_VZFOysOyOGG8g/edit#gid=666010790>

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# Where next? Interactive resource List

As set out in the introduction, this document is intended as a starting point to stimulate thinking and discussion. It is by no means exhaustive, nor perfect in its language and iteration. Instead of a long list of materials in the form of an appendix, we have created a ‘live’ platform, in the form of a PADLET, to which we hope people will contribute. The vision is to create a dynamic hub of resources and readings that staff can use to inform and educate themselves and their teaching. Please find a link here:

<https://padlet.com/rlowe16/Resource_List>

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| FeedbackWe encourage any feedback or comments on the tool. Please contact the authors via r.lowe@mmu.ac.uk (or complete this [anonymous online survey form](https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/85FVXD2)). |