Decolonisation 101

**Decolonisation defined**

In the classic sense, decolonisation is about a nation removing itself from another country, creating an ‘independent’ nation. In academia, decolonisation is the process of removing our prioritisation of, and reliance on, colonial and Eurocentric structures and knowledge.

**How is it any different than diversifying?**

Diversification is a useful step in decolonisation – but that’s all it is, one step. Diversifying, whether that is the curriculum, the student body or academic staff, is the process of adding the presence of voices or individuals who are typically in the minority or marginalised in society. Decolonisation requires us to confront and dismantle the system of exclusion and racism in academia – we need to reconcile with why and how certain voices were excluded from conversations in the first place.

**Why bother with all of this?**

Nationwide, universities are becoming more and more diverse, with all ethnic minority groups being more likely to access higher education than white British individuals. Despite this, Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) individuals remain more and more underrepresented as you get further up in academia – for example, only 0.7% of UK university professors are Black.

In a broader sense, it is a disservice to all students for the curriculum to be so closed-minded. All students miss out on a broad range of knowledge from global communities, and the narratives they are taught are incomplete as global influences are omitted in favour of Eurocentrism.

**What is already being done?**

The wider push for decolonising universities started with the Rhodes Must Fall campaign started in 2015 by students at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. This particular campaign, to remove a statue of imperialist Cecil Rhodes, spread to the University of Oxford. Elsewhere, students and students’ union officers at other UK universities have previously run NUS-backed “Why is my curriculum white?” campaigns.

Here at Hallam, colleges have implemented plans to decolonise the curriculum and are in the process of making your curriculum more and more diverse!

**So, is this just about teaching more Black history?**

Not necessarily! The decolonisation process should be about reorganising and adding relevant scholars into relevant areas of knowledge, not just blindly adding any and all BAME authors onto reading lists. Conversely, instead of adding a load of optional modules about “diverse” topics, more effort should be made to integrate relevant ethnic minority scholars into core modules so all students are exposed to their work, rather than just students with an invested interest. Additionally, lecturers may want to read more from BAME authors, so if students are particularly interested in their work, they can be more effective supervisors to projects and dissertations involving topics around ethnicity and global thought.

**Is it relevant to all courses?**

Absolutely! Much of the focus of decolonising the curriculum tends to be on introducing BAME theory and history to Humanities subjects, but it can, and should be applied across the board.

In healthcare and midwifery, students should learn about how conditions present themselves on darker skin and learn to address biases which lead to increased childbirth mortality rates in ethnic minority women. In sport, we need to remove myths surrounding Black athletes’ success in track athletics relating to racial genetics more so than training and skill, and work towards increasing representation and accessibility for BAME athletes in low diversity sports such as rowing and cycling. In architecture, influences for design can come from around the globe, and we should recognise the work of architects outside of the world’s richest countries.

**What more can universities do?**

Firstly, all universities should address the definition of decolonisation and make sure they are following it, rather than doing the “easy” work of simply just adding diversity. As great as it is for more students and staff of BAME backgrounds to enter into the higher education sector, they shouldn’t have to endure structural racism and microaggressions when they arrive.

Next, universities can make a deliberate effort to listen to or find out student’s perceptions of their university experience and curriculum. The NUS have advised that students play a role in shaping these initiatives, and its important that we centre student voices when creating alterations to their courses and other aspects of their university.

Finally, staff and students should have a heavy involvement in the decolonisation process, but it should be a universal recruitment. A lot of universities leave the hard work of dismantling racist structures to their BAME staff members – every staff member should be involved regardless of ethnicity and we especially should not be putting a disproportionate amount of extra work on the shoulders of ethnic minority colleagues.