



# **Decolonising the Curriculum in the Time of Pandemic: Collaborative Cluster Final Report**

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## The original aims for the project

‘One language is never enough [...]’  
‘It takes more than one tongue to tell a story’  
(Jackie Kay, Threshold, 2016)

The purpose of this Collaborative Cluster was to discover, develop and disseminate staff and student perspectives on decolonising the curriculum, as it is happening now, in our disciplines and academic practices. We started with the following working definition:

*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.*

We wanted to come together as a sector to share and learn from one another what works and what more we can do as individuals and as a learning community. Our aim was to be as open and inclusive to everyone in all disciplines and university roles across Scotland and the spirit of this Cluster was to foreground the multiplicity and diversity of voices, For the first phase of this project, we had three main aims:

- To create an inter-institutional network for Decolonising the Curriculum with diverse representation from staff and students as well as critical friends
- To run three cross- and intra-disciplinary online workshops involving all staff and students, to facilitate discussion of what decolonisation 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.

In the next section, we explore the outcomes of these aims before going on to evaluate their impact. However, it is worthwhile mentioning here how there were also some unexpected outcomes to this Cluster project that we will also highlight:

- The learning that took place within the Cluster group, which grew organically into the inter-institutional network
- The creation of a resource for and from the first workshop that has already had an impact in the sector
- The powerful impact of our student interns in the final stages of the project.

# **A summary of activity, including numbers of people reached and student engagement with the project**

## **Creation of inter-institutional network in Scotland**

The Cluster group was initially formed from colleagues in Scotland who had expressed an interest in being part of the group as well as invited participants, who we wanted in as critical friends in this work. As leaders of the cluster, we were aware of our own white, western perspective and privilege and were keen to ensure this would place the responsibility on us without closing down other, more useful and meaningful, perspectives in this work.

### **Cluster staff members**

Julie Blackwell-Young, Abertay University  
Lindy-Ann Blaize-Alfred, University of Sheffield  
Rayya Ghul, University of Edinburgh  
Heather Gray, Glasgow Caledonian University  
Jasmin Hinds, University of St Andrews  
Kevin Leomo, University of Glasgow  
Joan Ma, Queen Margaret University  
Rosemary McIlwhan, Heriot Watt University  
Paula Miles, University of St. Andrews  
Nathalie Tasler, University of Glasgow  
Melanie Smith, AdvanceHE Scotland

### **Cluster student interns (from June 2021)**

Rohama Nadeem, University of Glasgow  
Jasmine Millington, Edinburgh Napier University  
Nuzhat Torsa, University of Edinburgh  
Sumaira Ud-Din, University of Stirling

From an embryonic network of colleagues all interested in developing this work as well as their own learning in this area, the network grew to include all those listed above and developed perhaps in a more organic way than initially envisaged. We planned our first workshop (entitled 'The Gathering') and, in the process, professional and personal connections grew.

Following on from the first workshop, we were joined by four more members comprising two academic colleagues, one E&D colleague and one postgraduate student, each of whom had been affected by the discussions in The Gathering and each of whom was keen to be part of this emerging network. Their stories helped to shape the second workshop and enabled all of us to agree that 'urgency' was the theme we needed to focus on next.

Following on from our student intern recruitment process, the network was finally joined by four important and critical undergraduate students from four different institutions in Scotland (also listed above). Their voices shaped the final workshop, their powerful words informing both that event, and where this work goes next.

From our perspective, as leaders of this cluster, there are some interesting observations about the formation and development of this network to consider. Before we dwell on those, however, let us highlight the initial impact:

- Each member of this network has taken aspects of this work into their individual and institutional practice thereby fulfilling our initial aim of disciplinary dissemination. For example, the stimuli resource from the first workshop has been requested by attendees and used as a development tool in institutional working groups in this area.
- Connections have been made across and between members of this network that will develop this work in other ways. For example, delegates have shared contact details to learn more about one another's work; and others have started an inter-institutional Decolonising the Curriculum book group.
- Staff members have listened to student stories and students have reported feeling heard; and seeing that their passion for decolonising the curriculum might be something they can pursue in their career choices.

For us, as white academic developers, wary of falling into the trap of white saviourism, we were beginning to meet our responsibility to create spaces for conversation and connections but it was also noticeable how our own voices were quietened in the network as it developed and grew. Our role was to create the spaces then listen and learn as other voices in the network were amplified, challenging us all to examine our assumptions as well as our ways of working and even the aims and processes of the project work itself. In the paragraphs below, we explore in greater detail some of the data emerging from the workshops as well as some initial thoughts on their impact.

### **Workshop 1: The Gathering**

Aim: To bring together a group of people to share practice and questions

Number of colleagues signed up	94
Number of colleagues attending	50

The attendees were mainly academic colleagues in the disciplines who were keen to learn more about this work. There were also colleagues from professional services working within an E&D remit in their institutions as well as a small number of educational developers. There were a very small number of postgraduate students attending but no undergraduates as far as we know.

Ahead of the event, we created a Stimuli resource based on crowdsourced examples of curriculum decolonisation, or the need for it. It was designed to help people translate decolonisation from theory into practice. This document has already been requested by participants for use in their own practice and has been developed by the student interns as one of the project outputs.

### **Workshop 2: Urgency**

Aim: To support progression from practice-sharing to focusing on key actions for immediate work

Number of colleagues signed up	43
Number of colleagues attending	37

## Summary of provocations

Dr. Lindy-Ann Blaize-Alfred's provocation exposed the far-reaching, structural nature of colonial thought and practice in the academy. This included challenging the idea of scientific neutrality by pointing to the colonial thinking on which some disciplines are based, and which needs to be fully unpacked to avoid perpetuation of racist thought. She explored the danger of oppressive structures being replicated in 'decolonial' work in universities, and situated curriculum decolonisation as at least partly a process of contextualisation of dominant frameworks of knowledge. She concluded with reflective questions to provoke future action.

Dave Thomas's provocation, drawing on particularly extensive scholarship, focused on decolonisation in the context of broader questions about the aims and purposes of higher education. He then developed this discussion to explore how we can accept responsibility for social change through teaching, research and practice.

## Workshop 3: Representation

Aim: To consider the impact of a colonised curriculum on students; to explore representation and its myriad challenges, particularly from a student perspective

Number of colleagues signed up	72
Number of colleagues attending	45

## Summary of provocations

The four student interns gave a composite presentation, in which they all spoke from their own differing perspectives. Their contributions were framed by the metaphor of a sieve. They used this metaphor as a central point of coherence in their individual explorations of identity formation and adaptation in a colonised university system. The slides included original visual representations of the sieve metaphor by Jasmine Millington.

Rayya Ghul from the University of Edinburgh spoke about the work of the Palestinian-American postcolonial theorist Edward Said, and her own experience of growing up in the UK with Palestinian heritage. She used theory to reflect on experience, and vice versa. This was fully aligned with the cluster's ambition of making explicit what decolonisation of the curriculum means in practice.

## Key learning points and evaluation

As a Cluster group, we captured our thoughts on the workshops and on the process of organising them, on a Jamboard. This allowed for anonymous reflections on this complex topic to be shared and collated easily. We have organised these reflections below under three headings – one section exploring the learning points we can take from the Cluster work, the second highlighting the challenges and their implications and a final section considering overall engagement.

## Learning

One of the most obvious impact for those working within the cluster group, which became the institutional network, was the learning that took place for those individual members. From our evaluation Jamboard of the cluster group, the learning can be broadly grouped into three main areas: firstly, around awareness-raising for individuals in the group as well as the wider sector; secondly on learning around how to shape and develop this work and the

concomitant responsibilities; and thirdly on the ways in which the group itself created its own community. We'll now explore each of these points in further detail.

For one colleague, involvement in this group had really highlighted how much awareness-raising we need to do around this work:

'The shocking aspect of this work is how much racism pervades our higher education systems in Scotland - only now are we beginning to hear this spoken of openly. This project can raise awareness of this.'

The word 'shocking' is powerful here because even for those individuals involved in developing this work who don't have that lived experience, the ways in which racism is engrained in our university sector are continually being revealed. This revelation is ongoing, never-ending and emphasised how important work on decolonising the curriculum in Scotland is, particularly for those of us in learning and teaching roles. There is a sense from this quotation that actually by being part of this project, each individual can contribute to this awareness-raising with their colleagues, their students and indeed across their own institution. There is a feeling here that we can make a difference as an individual, which is empowering.

Each of our group members, including the cluster leads, have different experiences of decolonising the curriculum – some came with little knowledge or experience but a desire to do something to develop their understanding so they could enhance their practice. Others offered scholarly expertise, sometimes in combination with their own lived experiences and/or those of their colleagues and learners. Others came with a research and academic knowledge of this work already. The challenge for all of us at the beginning was how indeed we could as individuals on this project learn and offer useful and meaningful ways to develop this work:

'Whilst I can impact on my own practice and have done so, the hardest bit is yet to come which is influencing the practice of others. But I now feel better equipped to do so.'

This quotation tells us that there is still work to do but that by participating in planning and discussions on the project, their skills had been enhanced and they had a clearer idea how to approach this work. For this colleague, it was also about modelling an approach to educational development in this work:

'This collaborative cluster has been very insightful in terms of my view on how to run an event on decolonisation and how to get others to engage with events. I thought about events about decolonising the curriculum in a very 'jug into mug' way, knowledge dissemination, as opposed to joint knowledge construction, and just a reminder of the importance of just having the conversation, and the power in that.'

Indeed, the value and importance of 'having the conversation' is a recurring feature from both those on the group and also delegates attending. This kind of work requires an individual level of self-awareness but arguably the learning really happens when we are able to share our perspectives, listen to others, learn from them and think together about where we can go next.

Indeed, above all, it is the feeling of a community growing and developing that is the most heartening aspect of this work. We cannot do this as individuals, although that is where we need to start. Instead we need to create spaces for those conversations to take place. It's given a sense of community to this work, and that it is possible to have a safe/principled space - that we can be confident that creating these spaces is something we can and should do.

Learning from a colleague in the group, many of us were drawn to this idea of a 'principled space' that will ensure this work takes place openly and honestly. Our intention was to embody and develop spaces where some of the shocking and shameful aspects of how staff and students in our institutions in Scotland live racism in many forms both visible and invisible. Perhaps this is why being involved in this work has led one colleague to conclude that:

'This work is the most meaningful academic work in which I've ever been involved with. I think a lot of that might be about the people I've met. It brings together the very best qualities - care, integrity, authenticity and a desire to learn.'

## Challenges

One or two of the challenges highlighted by the group were focused on the workshops themselves:

'I am wary of this focus on the 'emotional' aspect of this; I think this can make it seem as though only certain people (e.g. 'people of colour') should be emotionally affected while others (white people) can maintain emotional distance.'

This comment suggests we were implicitly centring the emotions and personal experiences of people of colour in an unhelpful way. It is something on which we will reflect and seek further feedback.

There were other concerns about the dialogic process in the workshops:

'I still worry that I overstep or over-explain when I try to add points to a discussion but it's hard not to try again when someone responds with a wrong or inaccurate impression of what I intended. I know every project is limited by realistic limits like time and availability, but it's very demotivating when no-one is afforded the floorspace to make a complete point.'

It is true that the tension between the complexity and ambition of complex cultural change - particularly decolonisation which is structural and requires ongoing critical engagement - can be at odds with the pace and pressures of contemporary HE culture. This is perhaps compounded by the conditions of the pandemic. Though we did our best to maximise discussion time, this was still in the context of a short online session.

Several people raised, in different ways, the risk of tokenism:

'The hard aspect of this project to gauge is the 'so what' point... What are people learning and taking away? What difference is it making? Is it just feelgood academia? This is frustrating and I would like the work to do more.'

Another wrote:

'I think these workshops can be useful but can also fail to bring people who are ambivalent or opposed to 'decolonisation' within academia into the conversation.'

Suggestions were for longer-term and more discipline-specific projects. There was also scepticism about how and whether change would really be effected in a meaningful way that engaged people of colour in the process:

'I'm quite hesitant in who will implement the change. Due to fact the people at the top of education systems and other systems such as the labour market are occupied by straight

white males, I wonder who will be making decisions on who implements the change. People of colour deserve to make decisions on topics that have impacted them... not just being speakers.'

The possibility for people of colour to take the major decisions is not the same as taking on the full burden of the work, however:

'It's interesting that there is this type of work being carried out individually rather than actions coming from university Senior Management (despite decolonization featuring in an internal report and our L&T Strategy). Also it's important to note that often people doing this are precarious (GTAs, ECRs, etc.) and/or People of Colour! Not how the burden should be distributed.'

Issues of structural privilege need to be addressed, and in particular staffing at all levels, as part of meaningful change.

There was also a sense that progress within universities was frustratingly slow:

'Working on a project that affects many people in a lot of ways is very gratifying, but it can make lack of progress feel even more frustrating because it's not just me I want to succeed/do well for, it's everyone else too, in a much more heightened way than it is when just working on a research-focused project.'

'I feel limited by what actions I can take to implement the things I've learned from this project, because it feels like I've already pushed certain lines on my own, so pushing more without help or other people can feel like a bit of a risk to myself in my environment. It's not that I don't want to, but support to change things can feel flimsy or transparent.'

Reflecting the earlier concerns about tokenism, there was an awareness that the urgency explored in workshop 2 often seemed more of a concept than a reality. However, this frustration could also be seen in a positive light, in that people were better informed and better equipped to comprehend the scale of the work ahead.

## **Engagement**

### **Teamwork**

One of the highlights of the project for us as leaders, and for others, was the bringing together of a committed team from universities across Scotland. The space to explore practice and ideas with like-minded people was appreciated. It was clear we could achieve more together, and that there was a high level of motivation to engage. In a challenging and busy year, cluster group meetings were well-attended, and contributions were lively.

### **Student voices**

The voices of our student interns, and of the student participants in the workshops, were often some of the most challenging and informative. The project would have been incomplete without their insider understanding of university curricula from the perspective of critical learners. They also challenged us directly, facilitating deeper learning and reflection for us.



## Recommendations and next steps

Having evaluated the work of the Cluster to date, we would make the three following recommendations and suggestions as to how we can continue this work in the meantime.

### We need to learn how to deal with uncomfortable conversations

People need to be prepared to have uncomfortable conversations, and facilitators need to be prepared to facilitate these. However, there also needs to be a culture of learning where people open to doing so are invited and enabled to educate themselves. With our speakers Dr. Lindy-Ann Blaize-Alfred and Rayya Ghul NTF, we plan to produce a podcast exploring the barriers to decolonisation.

### There is a specific role for those in academic development

Most of those in academic development roles in Scotland are white and may be asking themselves questions such as:

- Is it appropriate for me to attempt to effect change in this area? If I don't, given the institutional responsibilities I have, who will do it instead?
- Throughout we have been conscious of our, at times, uncomfortable status as two white women running this project.

Given academic developers' pivotal role in universities, at the intersection of strategy and practice in learning and teaching, it is hard to see how decolonisation can progress without us. It will certainly progress more slowly if we do not engage. Making our first priority the development of a wider, diverse network to inform it was our way of dealing with this, in a national context. We also engaged with, and learned from, other projects with similar aims.

We hope the network will now be able to take work forward more collectively. In the context of individual universities, academic developers need to ask ourselves:

- Who is doing this work already, and what have they achieved?
- How can I ensure that the impact of them and their work is amplified?
- How can I ensure that people of colour in my university are not only heard but are making key decisions about decolonization?

### Importance of students in shaping this work

For the reasons given above, and in the previous section, it would have been ideal to engage students at an earlier stage, and this is something we would aim to do in future projects. Our student interns are currently curating the resources generated from the Cluster into a collated set of resources that should be useful to the sector.

### Leading decolonisation work

There is energy for this work at the moment. Race and decolonisation have come to the forefront of media discussion following the death of George Floyd. Whilst we hope this signals an enduring change, this is an important window of opportunity to establish conversations at institutional and sectoral levels. On the basis of our work, we would urge colleagues to support and amplify those discussions as much as they can. There is a caveat that commitment is needed to facilitating long-term rather than tokenistic change, and to maintaining a critical awareness of one's own positionality.

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