

One month on from the online university-wide symposium ‘Decolonising the Curriculum at Sussex’

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One month ago, on June 30th, over 100 participants made up of a mix of teaching staff, senior leaders, students and professional service teams from across the University attended the online symposium ‘Decolonising the Curriculum at Sussex: Cross-Disciplinary Conversations and Decolonial Futures’. Organised by Dr Eva Sansavior, Academic Developer for the School of Media, Arts and Humanities, the half-day symposium is the first output in a new major collaborative university-wide project on decolonising the curriculum led by Professor Claire Smith, Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor, Education and Innovation. Across four panels, the symposium showcased concrete examples of research-led and co-created best practice in decolonising the curriculum at University of Sussex and Brighton and Sussex Medical School (BSMS) and was informed by insights drawn from research, educational policy and lived experience.

Symposium Introduction

The symposium was introduced by Professor Kelly Coate, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Education and Students and Professor Claire Smith, Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Education and Innovation. Kelly Coate’s introductory remarks highlighted the University’s commitment to mobilising the transformative potential of decolonising practices for both the curriculum and student experience. Centring the evocative metaphor ‘skeletons in the closet’, Claire Smith offered personal reflections on her own coming to awareness of the colonialist legacy that has shaped the field of human anatomy.

Panel 1: Cross-disciplinary conversations in decolonising the curriculum

Panel 1 brought together Dr Eva Sansavior, Dr Muna Al-Jawad, Senior Lecturer in Medicine and Lead for Curriculum Development, BSMS and Honorary Consultant in Elderly Medicine, Brighton and Sussex University Hospital and Dr Tam Cane, Lecturer in Social Work, School of Education and Social Work around a comparative discussion of the role of disciplines in providing the horizon of possibility for decolonising the curriculum practices.

Dr Eva Sansavior began her presentation by laying out the conceptual foundations for the symposium’s thematic focus on three key areas: disciplines, co-creation and approaches to enabling the wide-ranging cultural change that would make decolonising the curriculum ‘everyone’s business’. Drawing on her experience as a lecturer and researcher in the field of Francophone Postcolonial Studies and her interdisciplinary pedagogic work as Academic Developer for the School of Media, Arts and the Humanities, she argued for a multi-layered and culturally embedded approach to decolonising the curriculum. In this respect, Dr Sansavior highlighted the intrinsic connections between institutional and city-wide civic commitments to an anti-racist culture, a collective re-imagining of disciplinary epistemologies (what we teach), pedagogies (how we teach) and, ultimately, students’ ontologies (possibilities for belonging and attainment). Against this backdrop, Dr Sansavior reflected on the personally transformative experience of the decolonial school history curriculum that was central to her educational experience in Trinidad. Ending with a fine-pointed focus on the concrete actions that teaching staff can begin to take in their individual classrooms to cultivate the sense of belonging that has been cited in the 2019 Universities UK ‘Closing the Gap’ report as central to addressing the Awarding Gap, Dr Sansavior recommended approaching this work, “in community”, as an open and ongoing conversation between senior staff, teaching staff and students around “what we teach and how teach.”

Centred around the decolonising remit of her role as Lead for Curriculum Development at BSMS, Dr Muna Al-Jawad presented the lessons learned from the Inclusive Practice Partners (IPP) initiative. As part of this initiative, students were employed for two hours a week and tasked with reviewing a selection of modules spanning years one to four of the medical curriculum with a focus on identifying elements of content and pedagogy which could be collaboratively reformulated through a decolonising lens. In this respect, one of the key areas that was identified was the representation of diverse identities and bodies within clinical training materials. The IPP programme was, in turn, embedded within a programme of pan-curricular work including standing items on university-wide education and practice committees and refreshed module validation systems. Dr Al-Jawad reported, finally, that the success of this year's programme has meant that there are plans to continue the programme over the coming academic and to integrate its recommendations within the BSMS's quality assurance process.

Dr Tam Cane addressed the possibilities for decolonising social work through a critique of the colonialist foundations of knowledge and practice in the discipline which has historically privileged Western forms of knowledge. Reflecting on the evolution of the discipline, she noted the shift from "the ideas of care, control and cure" towards "surveillance, care, investigation, support, bureaucratic priorities as well as monitoring." Drawing on her own teaching practice, Dr Cane made the case for anti-racist and anti-oppressive approaches to teaching which equipped students with the critical tools in their social work practice with diverse communities to "challenge the biases and assumptions that emerge from the Eurocentric theoretical underpinnings of social work."

Panel 2: Co-creating the decolonised curriculum

Panel 2 explored approaches to co-creating the decolonised curriculum. The panel brought together Khadija Hossain, recently completed student in English and member of the student-led group, Decolonise Sussex, Dr John Masterson, Lecturer in World Literatures, School of Media, Arts and Humanities and two Law Connectors, Kieya Dadelahi and Simran Shah, recently completed students in Law and Law & Politics, respectively.

Khadija Hossain's presentation detailed the history of Decolonise Sussex, a student-led campaign which aims to "challenge the structures of racism within the University of Sussex and to create a platform for those who are marginalised to speak for themselves." In this respect, the presentation highlighted the importance of the Co-Producing the Curriculum pilot project in 2019 and the recent Sussex Anti-Racist Action Manifesto, both of which drew on the lived experiences and recommendations of BAME students and staff.

Dr John Masterson's talk explored some of the lessons learned from the inaugural year of 'Decolonising the Curriculum: Literature and Theory from the Global South.' It considered some of the tensions, productive or otherwise, between pedagogic theory and praxis, as well as how the original conception and aims of the module shifted against the challenging backdrop of the 2020/21 academic year. Dr Masterson noted that "engaging in more substantive conversations with students and colleagues, within and beyond this event, will be vital as I reconfigure the module for its second outing in 2021/22."

Kieya Dadelahi and Simran Shah, former 'Reading in Law Connectors', reflected on their experiences working as part of a group of five Connectors, noting that the project's focus on the diversity of reading lists was the starting point for a fruitful conversation within the School of Law on broader objectives related to decolonising both reading lists and course content. Projecting towards opportunities for

extending the decolonising impact of the work on this project, Kieya Dadelahi and Simran Shah called for an approach that was “transparent, deliberate, and relevant”, observing, finally, that was required was “not merely adding authors based on their background but recognising, and equally, giving agency to the different perspectives that their backgrounds or research, grant them.”

Panel 3: Partnership approaches: making decolonising the curriculum “everyone’s business”

Panel 3 examined the conditions required to facilitate institutional and cultural change. The panel brought together Mark Clark, Senior lecturer & Lead for Education and Students in Management, University of Sussex Business School, Ilyas Nagdee, Race Equality Charter Manager and Dr Richard Wragg, Collections Manager and Decolonising Lead for the Library.

Mark Clark’s starting position was that “whilst decolonising the curriculum is a vital part of anti- racism work, it will only have the necessary impacts if aligned to a cohesive and comprehensive strategy for decolonizing the institution (DCI).” His presentation reviewed the key findings of EHRC’s, ‘Tackling racial harassment: Universities challenged’, and the recommendations of race equity leaders such as Amatey Doku. Against this backdrop, parallels were explored with the findings of the awarding gap research co-produced with students in the Business school in 2020-21 which found that “the learning, cultural and support environments are key in shaping the *sense of belonging* experienced by our students.”

Ilyas Nagdee began his presentation by drawing attention to one of the key risks posed by partnership approaches: that of “co-option of the language of decolonisation” to present a “radical veneer” to work that was often very limited in scope and that left existing institutional power dynamics intact. Having set out this proviso, the presentation detailed the role of the Race Equality Charter in “tackling institutional racism and racial inequality” through a focus on three key areas: staff experience, student experience and institutional culture. Central to this focus is the combination of partnership approaches which bring staff of all levels of seniority and students into dialogue and the analysis of data sets which allow for the mapping of trends in staff and student experiences over time.

Dr Richard Wragg presented the Library’s programme of decolonising initiatives. Starting with a focus on work already underway such as efforts to identify and respond to problematic language in catalogue records as well as developing staff knowledge and engagement, the programme includes publication of a Decolonisation Statement which identifies the key areas of work that will be shaped by this commitment. These areas cover “the acquisition of library materials; cataloguing and classification; teaching and pedagogy (as it relates to the Library); display, interpretation and outreach in relation to library collections; user experience with regard to accessing collections, services and physical spaces.”

Panel 4: Plenary discussion

Featuring an open dialogue between participants, the final panel was chaired by Kelly Coate. Discussion was wide-ranging and inclusive drawing in diverse staff and student voices. Topics covered included the introduction of a decolonising focus to the extended, university-wide Connectors programme, approaches to developing and retaining BAME staff and students along with arrangements to support the dissemination of decolonising the curriculum best practices across the University. Dr Sansavior also contributed an overview of some of the follow-on events that are planned to build on the discussions undertaken in the symposium.

A programme of follow-on events and staff-facing resources will be made available from the start of academic year 2021/22.