

## Representation in the Curricula (A2)

1. Background information		
Strand	A: Black British students	X
	B: Disability/Mental Health student	
Topic	Representation in the curricula (Black students' perspectives)	
Specific research question	How much choice should be given for students/supervisors to discuss and explore non-white centric material and ideas, and how much should be designed-in as core to the course for *all*?	
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2. Executive summary
<p>Our research objective was to generate discussions about Black scholarship within different Cambridge undergraduate degrees and highlight the level of choice that is given to students and supervisors to study material and scholars that are non-white centric. We conducted research to find out more about what students and staff thought about representation within the curricula and to see their own experiences with the level - as well as different types - of representation. Contrary to what has often been assumed, the previous efforts to decolonise the curriculum and increase the representation of Black thought and scholarship - whilst there has been some positive change - have not been enough to drastically change the Cambridge curricula in a positive manner. Our project findings indicate that there needs to be a particular focus on removing the disingenuity and tokenism within representation and that courses, in general, are in need of a top-down restructuring. Our recommendations include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A) Staff-student partnerships within Departments/Faculties to oversee the decolonisation and representation in the curricula efforts,</li> <li>B) Partnerships and coordination with existing networks, like the Decolonise Network and the Black Advisory Hub, for resources and support to effectively engage with the topics of race within supervision.</li> </ul>

3. Rationale
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This is an important topic to pursue, as the Black awarding gap is not an acceptable incident within the University of Cambridge. All students, no matter their background, deserve the right to the same standard and quality of teaching and educational experience at this university. We focused on choice and in-core content, to discuss the issues surrounding the expectation on students of colour and Black students to bear the burden of diversifying their curriculum. We also wanted to highlight that promoting work by people of colour should be something integrated within the curriculum, rather than viewed as a less important supplementary aspect, as there is intrinsic value that must be recognised. They should be studied by all students, rather than students who actively make the choice to do so. There are also issues with this choice, as students have struggled with feeling like their course is making it difficult or, at times, preventing them to focus on the areas they are interested in when they decide to focus non-white scholarship. These are issues that must be discussed and rooted out, to improve fairness within the university.

#### **4. Contextual information**

Decolonisation has been spoken about at length across the university, between students and sometimes involving Faculties. The Decolonise Network Assembly brings together students who are passionate about decolonising their curriculum across different subjects. We do not want to take over this role as we believe they are integral to our academic lives. To reinforce our “world class” education, we must ensure that it is inclusive and so we want to investigate whether these discussions are currently happening in the university.

We want to highlight the level of choice that is given to students to study material and scholars that are non-white centric in lectures but also in supervisions. We also want to focus on the type of representation Black people have within different degrees, i.e., to be truly representative, Black scholarship should include positive scholarship. Specifically, not just narratives which are traumatising for Black students. As co-researchers, we all study different degrees and are at different stages of our undergraduate studies. Among us, we have different experiences with representation within our courses.

#### **5. Generation of evidence**

To explore our research question, we decided that to each conduct research within our respective Tripos subjects: Education, English, and Human, Social and Political Sciences (HSPS). We all conducted focus groups with students who are studying or studied our subjects. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with members of staff.

**Education (co-researcher: Tyra)**

I conducted a focus group with five students currently studying the Education Tripos. Two of my participants have Black heritage and three of my participants were not Black. They were in various years and studied various tracks on the Education Tripos - Psychology and Learning, Policy and International Development and English, Drama and the Arts. I asked about how they thought race had come into their teaching so far, and where they saw gaps in what they have been taught.

I then conducted an interview with a member of staff at the Faculty of Education who not only lectures but also engages in Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion work in the Faculty. I asked about their take on the current state of Tripos and how representation of Black scholarship shows up across the various papers offered in the Education undergraduate degree.

#### **English (co-researcher: Mojola)**

I had a focus group with three students of Black and Black Mixed-Race heritage. One student was a first year, one was a second year, and the third was a student who recently graduated in 2020. All three students were studying English at the University of Cambridge. The focus group consisted of several questions to garner evidence from the students on how they found the course structure of the English Tripos, particularly in regard to the Faculty's approach to racial diversity, and how this may have affected their studies.

I also completed an interview with a member of staff employed by The Faculty of English. I presented questions that were similar to the focus group. Some questions were modified to focus on how the Faculty structures its teaching, whether students are encouraged to study non-white narratives, and what work must be done in order to diversify the content on offer within Tripos.

#### **HSPS (co-researcher: Kayinsola)**

I conducted a focus group with four students, three of whom were Black and one of whom was not Black. They were all first-year students that started their undergraduate degree in 2020 and studied different papers under HSPS - POL1 (The Modern State and its Alternatives), POL2 (International, Conflict, Order and Justice), SAN1 (Social Anthropology: The Comparative Perspective), SOC1 (Introduction to Sociology: Modern Societies I) and PBS1 (Introduction to Psychology) at the University of Cambridge. I asked about the way race had been incorporated into the curriculum so far and provided space to gain insight into the different Faculties' approaches to each subject.

I also completed an interview with two members of staff, one of whom is a senior Lecturer in the Department of Politics and International Studies and engages with African history research. The other member of staff is a fellow of Politics and International Relations. I asked about their take on whether students are encouraged to study non-white narratives and whether the type of representation in these non-white topics is important.

## **6. Small project research findings**

### **Education (co-researcher: Tyra)**

**Key themes:**

- Although there have been some efforts made to have more inclusive teaching in the Education Tripod, a lot of these efforts can seem disingenuous and performative. Those interviewed stated that sometimes, it felt as if race was included in a conversation in order to prove to students that staff knew about topics related to race, or because staff were trying to gain favour.
- Secondly, it was commented that conversations about race were never embedded in context. Whenever race was taught about, it seemed to be done in a tokenistic manner. Rather than being a part of all conversations, race was spoken about in one topic and one topic only (i.e., there would be a lecture *on* postcolonialism and so race would only occur in that space).

**Key points from students:**

- Both Black and non-Black students alike commented that it felt like whenever race was being discussed in lectures, it was almost as if the Black students had to carry that conversation. One of the Black students recounted an experience she had where a lecturer said after she put her hand up in a discussion about race “Yes, I was waiting for you to say something!”
  - Black students are being alienated in these conversations which are often traumatic.
- Students also remarked that they had to justify why they wanted to talk about race in their essays and supervisions to supervisors. One student stated *“Because I’m not usually perceived as being half Asian, I have to justify why I want to talk about race, when it should matter whether or not I’m a person of colour. We should all be talking about it.”*
- Whenever there were conversations about race, they were either happening for one lecture and one lecture only, or what was being discussed about race was not an actual conversation. Black people were *“merely a statistic”* or the representation was solely negative. Black people and their history were seen as something to add on in lectures with no context. For instance, a third-year student commented *“I remember in a second year lecture about class where all of a sudden there was a picture of Black people picking cotton in a field with no warning.”*
- Another student commented about how Black scholars (and non-white scholars as a whole) were expected to stand in opposition with an entire body of knowledge by white scholars. *“Arguments from people of colour are always seen as an add on to something a whiter person has said, or as an alternative line of argument, rather than being central.”*

**Key points from staff:**

- The main takeaway from my staff interview is that in presenting knowledge, we have to be cautious of making sure that we connect the past, present and future. Rather than thinking about racial liberation as something that happened in the past and is only relevant in the past, we have to understand that conversations about race are continuing and will always continue. We have a historical responsibility to engage in these conversations and make sure that we are actively trying to do better.
- It is also important that racial liberation is connected to other struggles for liberation, and so we have to be committed to having these conversations everywhere. As it pertains to race, disability, sexuality, class and so much more. Race cannot just be side-lined but has to be central.
- My member of staff also noted that efforts to have inclusive curricula in the UK are way behind other countries, and these conversations have been diluted and do not capture the true essence of what it means to decolonise and be inclusive. We have to do better and make sure that we are having genuine conversations true to what it means to decolonise.

## English (coresearcher: Mojola)

### **Key themes**

When studying on the course, it is possible to go three years without having or being expected to study a non-white author or narrative in depth. Opportunities to study texts by people of colour are most often not offered by the course structure, and students are expected to find these themselves. The onus is placed upon students of colour to note this issue and work to change it, often with little support from the Faculty itself.

### **Key points from students**

- The exploration of race and other cultures feels tokenistic and like a throwaway. Lecturers and supervisors do not prioritise it. This causes students to feel isolated, particularly when paired with supervision partners with differing interests. All the students noted that they felt othered during their education.  
Certain lecturers would bring up topics of race as a box-ticking exercise, using tokenistic explorations, such as Othello, Heart of Darkness, or Mansfield Park.
- One student recounted a particularly uncomfortable supervision where she felt she had to “defend” her right to write about a Black female author for almost the entire session and compare her to a canonical white male writer. She described the instance as traumatic, and another example of her constantly having to bat off racism in her determination to focus on her interests.
- Some students noted that even finding resources was near impossible, with certain texts not even being available in the UL or the Faculty Library. A student had to find a text she needed from the African Studies Library. There was a tension with getting the materials she needed when it is the fault of the library for not supplying those materials.
- Students were made to feel that there was an issue with them for seeing a problem with the curriculum. Their tastes are made to feel strange and eccentric, as non-white authors and narratives are not considered foundational knowledge within the faculty, as they are not part of the exclusionary established canon.
- As individuals, it is up to students to create the accommodation for non-white narratives themselves. However, when looking at racialised writers, supervisors often do not have the same specialist insight, and are unable to guide them.
- The Decolonised Reading Group is seen as an optional side thing, that is not very well advertised by the faculty. There is a short-term institutional memory within the Faculty.
- Students felt that people would judge them for wanting to write about Black authors, as though people made assumptions that it is the expected thing to do. There are undertones that they are studying these texts because of their identity, rather than because these texts have value within themselves.
- The student that recently graduated noted that she had a positive experience studying the postcolonial paper. It felt like something “*clicked into place*”, that her interests had valued, were important, and should be studied. This student felt that there was “*intellectual gaslighting*” during her degree, where she expected to not do well but finished her course with high marks. Most of her course felt very lonely.

### **Key points from staff:**

- The lack of racial diversity in the course gives a narrow sense of what literature could be.

- Even when reading primary texts predominantly by dead white men, the scholarship on those authors is written all over the world. How one reads and interprets is part of scholarship. This includes secondary literature, which should be set and does not have to be predominantly white. Areas, such as theatre, allow for different contexts aside from a British one. However, this is not centrally included within the faculty. There is a lack of concerted central effort to make sure of this.
- Fundamentally, there could be more racial diversity. The onus is put on those that feel the absence to notice, speak, understand its effects, and make the demand for it. The responsibility is unfairly placed upon racialised students, students of colour are expected to make that demand. This needs to be on the Tripos already.
- Authors of colour are not just interesting to students of colour; they should be interesting to everybody. Every country that was colonised has a connected history with Britain. The texts and authors of those parts of the world were given English as part of colonisation. It is the job of the Faculty to ensure better representation.
- From her experience on the postcolonial paper, almost every student of colour has commented how desperate they were to get to the postcolonial paper as they have not seen themselves, in one form or another. One student said that they had learned to trust their own voice, views, and perspectives. They had not felt able to do up until that later point, when they were able to study authors of colour and think about Black British writings in its complex contents. It is a shame that it is left so late for students to feel this way.
- Going three years without studying any non-white authors leads to an impoverished English degree. Many countries have English as an official language. Students read Chaucer in Middle English and we understand that as something that has to be read and learned. However, Creole, Pidgin 'English-es', are not regarded the same way. Can you say you studied English Literature when you have not studied a great deal of what is out there? Students need to address the whole breadth of the subject.
- Everyone that teaches the postcolonial paper is fully behind the Decolonised Reading Group. Any student initiative that seeks to broaden the curriculum, will find support from some people, though there are some that feel it is not the place of the students to set the curriculum. It is not easy to give a percentage of support.
- There is a long way to go before the Faculty can be said to be decolonising. More goes into this than adding a few non-white authors. Virtually every part of the nature of the course, including assessments and grading, would need to be rethought for it to be truly decolonised. There needs to be a commitment that lasts, and it cannot be done overnight. The actual work of decolonising is huge.
- Students may have individual tutors (perhaps supervisors that teach the postcolonial paper, or PhD students with an interest in this area) that might encourage students to study non-white authors and narratives. However, this is not central, unless students choose to take the postcolonial paper.

### **HSPS (Kayinsola)**

#### ***Key themes:***

Although there seems to be some efforts made to have more representation in the HSPS curriculum, there still seems to be major issues in the type of representation that are presented in all the papers. In my analysis of both the student focus group and the staff interview data, two key themes emerged.

These themes were:

- the implications of particular types of representation,
- the long-term consequences that arose from a lack of meaningful non-white representation.

Ultimately, for all of students and staff members, there was an agreement that there was a lack of exploration of non-white material and that it should be compulsory and should be treated with the same level of detail and respect as white material.

**Key points from students:**

- Both Black and non-Black students felt that Black and other non-white scholars were never viewed as crucial or important enough to stand alone as a primary topic, and were instead studied through a lens of whiteness, a sentiment which many students shared.
- One student shared that *“it is portrayed that real intellectualism comes from white people, and everyone else is in relation to and following that.”*
- Another key point that was also found from the focus groups was the effects of negative representation on student’s own mental health, an issue that was agreed on by all the Black students in the focus group. One student describes how the course showed them that *“Blackness cannot be associated with anything else but suffering... it’s really emotionally draining when as a Black student, that’s all you’re taught.”*

**Key points from staff:**

- The staff members also noticed that there was a lack of non-white narratives, within HSPS and that even when non-white topics were discussed, they were usually limited to certain topics and viewpoints even though they often have wider viewpoints that are integral to their wider work. One of the staff members who teaches African politics mentioned that often African politics was often presented as *“deviant”* despite there being lots of more positive aspects and progress that were ignored by the curriculum.
- Both members of staff believed that non-white narratives should be compulsory to study within HSPS and not just added on as an extra topic or a critique to white thinkers and white-centric topics. First year papers were also highlighted to be an important time in HSPS in which Black thinkers should be *“seamlessly embedded into the course”* as staff felt that a centring on white thinkers and topics would be detrimental to students’ learning.
- The staff interviews also showed that a lack of representation has an effect on academic interest, with one staff member describing how in the very white centric second year paper called ‘The History of Modern Political Thought’, *“the large majority of students, both white and non-white, seem not be engaged with the paper and just generally do not enjoy it leading to them not doing well in it in the long run”* highlighting that the issues with representation go further than just a moral issue.

## 7. Outcomes of research/implications for Cambridge practices and processes.

The student researchers undertaking this project consider the current practice to be unacceptable.

- The courses require top-down restructuring, with Faculties reviewing their stance and ensuring that non-white scholars and narratives are centralised and esteemed in the same way as white scholars and narratives.
- Although previous efforts to decolonise the curriculum have allowed for progress to be made in some areas, to truly achieve a diverse and inclusive curriculum, efforts must go beyond simply including Black thinkers in the syllabus.

- The concept of a core text must be reviewed across papers. Often students are having to go beyond the core texts and reading lists to insert a perspective of non-whiteness, with one student remarking how they “*have to do extra work to insert yourself in non-Black topics.*”
- If Black students are wanting to write about topics related to their lived experience, this appears to be made near impossible by academic standards and what is of “*value*” to Faculties.
- A lack of representation in the education can be traumatising for students who have to work extra to feel included in what they are being taught. The nature of representation is also crucial with Black joy, Black resistance, and Black strength never being portrayed, rather only the narratives surrounding slavery, colonisation, and pain endured by Black people.

In our research, we found that some students in both Education and HSPS, borrowed papers from STEM subjects. These students commented about the complete lack of Black and other non-white narratives in those STEM subjects with one student commenting that there is “*no Black narrative present*”. Often STEM is removed from the conversations about representation, meaning that Black STEM students may be ignored regarding their concerns about the lack of diversity in the curriculum. Therefore, for Faculties to address decolonisation within their teaching practices, we recommend that our research process be replicated across Faculties.

## 8. RECOMMENDED ACTION

### 1. Faculties need to appoint someone to oversee decolonisation and representation efforts.

We have identified four key ways to facilitate these efforts:

- a. **In-person paper reviews** for each Tripos and this should be made this standard across the university.
  - Student feedback matters.
- b. Scrutinise the idea of what a ‘**core text**’ is across all papers:
  - Black scholarship is not ‘additional’ or ‘alternative’.
  - Our courses should not be allowing for the “colonisation of the imagination” (Quijano, 2007).
- c. Reviewing where and how are **Black narratives** spoken about.
  - Be intersectional.
  - Platform more than just racial trauma.

### 2. Student advocates: develop partnerships between students and staff to review the process of developing representation in the curricula.

- This could be done by employing a student to assist a staff member to collect data about how students and staff members from each School (i.e., Arts and Humanities, Biological Sciences, Clinical Medicine, Humanities and Social Sciences, Physical Sciences and Technology) feel about representation in the curricula and ways to improve the process.
- This should be piloted for the duration of the University’s plan to improve the awarding gap (i.e., until 2025). With 1 student per school, this would mean 6 per year and 24 in



total until the piloting is done. If this is successful, we would like to see this become a permanent feature central to Cambridge teaching.