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Cross-disciplinary, collaborative and student-led: developing a change process for diversifying reading lists

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Abstract

Increasingly across many UK higher education institutions staff and students are questioning and challenging systemic inequalities that affect racially minoritised groups in their learning and sense of belonging within the curriculum. Students are calling for inclusion of diverse sources of knowledge and perspectives, especially from scholars of colour and from the Global South, to enrich what is currently perceived to be a Eurocentric canon. One way to promote more culturally aligned pedagogy is through diversifying reading lists. This article presents findings from two pilot studies that explored the reading lists in one department in social sciences and one in the humanities at the University of Kent, UK.

Applying critical race theory as a guiding framework, the first part of the article examines the ways in which a diverse curriculum must include the voices of the marginalised. It then describes the methods: a desk-based review of the reading lists, interviews with academics to inform the work, disseminate the findings, instigate further action and identify future needs, and student focus groups. Crucially, the project resulted from the collaboration between students and staff, and across departments and disciplines. We found that reading lists in both departments overwhelmingly comprised items by White male authors. Students and staff both reflected on the importance of not only curriculum diversification but also barriers to diversification and decolonisation. The article discusses the impact of this project, which has led to a Diversity Mark process, and the Diversity Mark Toolkit, which can be used in any discipline when putting together reading lists to create a more culturally competent curriculum. It concludes by considering other systemic changes needed, with particular attention to changes needed in library services and collections.

Keywords: decolonising; reading lists; race; critical race theory, higher education

Introduction

Postcolonial and decolonial scholars continue to pave the way to a more truthful foundation of knowledge production and education (Meghji, 2020). Scholars from Africa's decolonial tradition, such as Frantz Fanon (1963), Kwame Nkrumah (1968), Ngũgí wa Thiong'o (1987) and Chinweizu Ibekwe (1975), as well as from India's (see Chakrabarty, 2000), have argued that the Global North has controlled social and political systems through Eurocentric epistemologies and ideologies. The so-called 'decolonial turn' (Grosfoguel, 2007: 11) has built on the work of these Global South scholars.

Decolonisation of higher education (HE) has been slower to take root in the UK, where this study was set, but it has gained traction recently. Student movements such as Rhodes Must Fall, a 2015 student protest directed against the statue of slavery tycoon Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town, which gained global university attention, #LiberateMyDegree in 2016–17, in which Goldsmiths Student Union ran a campaign that highlighted some of the current issues in UK HE, notably the lack of diversity in university curricula and how diversity, equality and discrimination were not reflected in the majority of programmes, and Why is My Curriculum White? at UCL in 2016 created a wave of uprising against 'whiteness', Eurocentric domination and lack of diversity in the curricula, with recent launches in Bristol, Birmingham and Manchester, along with a strong online presence, which have fuelled efforts to decolonise curricula by challenging the Eurocentric pedagogy that has dominated English HE (Bhambra et al., 2018; Peters, 2018; Thomas and Jivraj, 2020; Ahmed, 2012). Since the Black Lives Matter movement, in particular, there has been increased pressure on English universities to confront their colonial legacy.

Diversifying reading lists is one component of the agenda to decolonise the curriculum (Schucan Bird and Pitman, 2020). In this article, we analyse a cross-disciplinary, collaborative, student-led project at the University of Kent (UoK) that responded to local calls from students for a more diverse curriculum. UoK is a historically White-dominated institution that has seen a surge in the number of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students since the 2010s. (We realise that the term 'BAME' has been subject to critique, but as it is used in HE statistics in the UK, we use it to be consistent with standard terminology in the sector.) Currently, 37 per cent of undergraduate students are of BAME backgrounds, although staff are still primarily White. The empirical project we report on here led to an award-winning, university-wide initiative called Diversity Mark, which involves students, the library, academic subjects and the central Student Success Team. This initiative is creating change across the institution, leading to diversification of library collections and reading lists. We consider the outcomes of this pilot project in the discussion section.

Students at UoK, like their counterparts elsewhere in the UK, have been calling for an inclusive curriculum for some time. In the BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) Student Voices Project (2016), students

asserted that UoK is centred on Eurocentric ideals, with a lack of BAME authors being taught. The UoK Union's Diversify My Curriculum campaign also called for a globally diverse list of study resources. Finally, in 2019, a Decolonise UoK student collective presented a manifesto to the university that included demands for curricula that featured BAME authors and perspectives (Decolonise UKC, 2019).

The aim of this pilot project in two departments at UoK was to develop collaborative staff–student methods for interrogating the diversity of HE reading lists, gather empirical data that would support truthful conversations about the curriculum, engage academics in critical reflection on their own teaching and highlight the impact of curriculum diversity on BAME students. Ultimately, we hoped to develop a process that could be rolled out across UoK and beyond and would stimulate further efforts to decolonise curricula. This article presents the conceptual framework that we came up with and the methods and findings of the pilot project, before it offers a substantive discussion of the impacts of the project at UoK and the implications for other universities which may wish to adopt a similar process.

Conceptual framework: critical race theory

The project was guided by critical race theory (CRT) as it has been articulated in the US (Ladson-Billings, 1998) and, subsequently, in the UK (Hylton, 2012; Gillborn et al., 2018a). CRT explores how systemic forms of racism within education have failed to acknowledge epistemological scholarship of Global South authors, Indigenous authors and Global North authors of colour (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002; Hylton, 2012; Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). CRT focuses on the experiential knowledge of ethnic minorities with respect to race and race relations (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Ensuring that this project was rooted in this firsthand experience, the first author is a Black British woman of Caribbean heritage and the student researchers are also all racially minoritised students mentored by the first author. CRT holds that people of colour are creators of knowledge and have a deeply rooted sensibility to name racist injuries and identify their origins, or, as Gillborn (2015: 284) puts it, the 'personal or autobiographical primacy of race'. Deconstructing the narrowly defined knowledge-production processes that have traditionally existed in HE provides scholars with the opportunity to carve out a more universal space in academia to actively engage in scholarship that respects and learns from sources of knowledge outside the Eurocentric walls of the academy.

In this article, CRT's theoretical framework informs the research questions we ask, the methodologies we employ and the ways we analyse data (Gillborn et al., 2018a). First, CRT informed the methodology of a reading list review (Schucan Bird and Pitman, 2020). Applying CRT enabled us to challenge the whiteness of the reading lists, and the absence of authors of colour, in order to challenge the systems that reproduce colonialism. Reading lists typically represent and implicitly sanction key ideas and scholars in the discipline. Thus, to challenge them is to raise questions about the discipline as a whole, its historical roles, how that knowledge is created and by whom. Decolonising a field, then, involves decolonising researchers themselves (Datta, 2018) and overturning a system of academic dependency that leaves researchers from the Global South beholden to the research agendas, theories and methods of the Global North, keeping them at the periphery (Alatas, 2003). Applying CRT in HE learning interventions led us to work jointly with students of colour to collectively gather and analyse data and disseminate findings. The voices of BAME students as agents of change are vital in capturing the various permutations of racism and dominant ideologies through storytelling in CRT.

Second, CRT helped to inform the analysis of post-review interviews with academics. The reading list review findings raised some important questions about how the predominantly White module convenors thought about the positionality of authors on their reading lists, and whether and how they considered their own White privilege. Gillborn (2014: 27) shows that 'neoliberalism typically works through colour-blind language that dismisses the saliency of race-specific analyses' and is shaped by the interests of the dominant White population. Thus, CRT according to Gillborn (2014) helped to challenge neoliberal ideologies by centring race underpinned by a social justice agenda.

In presenting findings to the 'module convenors', a term used at UoK to refer to the academic staff member responsible for the administration and content of the year-long unit of study, namely a module, we aimed to develop a conversation about the contents of the reading lists in the HE curriculum and their role in shaping the learning experiences and engagement of students, centring race. We aimed to prompt staff to reflect on their content, and the way they present it to their students, with the aim of encouraging them to make immediate changes to diversify their reading lists, and to critically re-evaluate their reading lists in the longer term, following the Diversity Mark process reported on in this article.

Third, following the key tenets of CRT, we applied the method of counter-storytelling (Ladson-Billings, 1998; DeCuir and Dixson, 2004; Parker and Villalpando, 2007), gathering lived experiences of racialised minority groups through focus groups with BAME students. Their stories shed light on institutional power (Arday et al., 2021) and how it is manifested by the curriculum, marginalising and even ignoring 'raced' realities that devalue the BAME student experience.

Research questions

The first research question, which we assessed through a review of reading lists, was: To what extent are reading lists composed of diverse authorship? Based on CRT according to Ladson-Billings (2000) and Hylton (2012), we hypothesised that the sources would be predominantly White, European and male (Schucan Bird and Pitman, 2020; Arshad et al., 2021; Hall et al., 2021). Based on the demographic composition of the academic staff that convene the reviewed modules, we also expected the sources to be primarily British. The second research question, which we addressed through staff debriefing interviews was: How do staff think about diversity in their curricula? A central idea of CRT is that racism is deeply embedded in systems such as reading lists and curricula, and that users of those systems are not typically conscious of this. This question explored to what extent staff were aware and able to address this bias. In particular, we wanted to explore how they used diverse sources and how they taught about race, their response to the reading list review, and barriers they perceived to making changes. The third question, which we assessed through student focus groups, was: How do BAME students experience the diversity (or lack thereof) in their reading lists? The 2019 Universities UK and National Union of Students report showed that for 87 per cent of their respondents the most significant factor contributing to a lack of belonging for BAME students was a lack of role models from BAME backgrounds. Curriculum delivery, curriculum design and lack of diversity among senior staff were all cited by over 75 per cent of respondents. Thus, we expected that the dominant whiteness of scholars on the reading lists would promote disengagement by BAME students and prompt a sense of unbelonging (Doku, 2019). Disengagement and unbelonging can result in students feeling excluded, thus participating less enthusiastically in discussions or assignments, contributing to awarding gaps.

Methods

We used a mixed methods design that involved: (1) a review of reading lists in two departments; (2) debrief interviews with staff whose modules were reviewed and (3) focus groups with students. These three methods first explored how diverse the authorship of reading lists is, and then to what extent staff and students (the users of these systems) are able to perceive and address these absences as biases. A CRT lens enabled us to examine the rhetoric of shared 'normative' values, paradigms, principles and practices upon which reading lists may be formed, as well as the discrediting of epistemologies and scholarship of people of colour in HE (Ladson-Billings, 2000). The project received ethics approval, and we obtained informed consent from participating students and staff. In this section, we provide some context before we describe each of the three methods.

The study was conducted in two participating departments at UoK: the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research (SSPSSR), which is split between Canterbury and Medway, and the

Department of Religious Studies within the School of European Culture and Languages in Canterbury (SECL). SSPSSR Medway has undergraduates studying sociology, social policy, criminal justice and criminology or social work, and the Canterbury campus offers 36 different social science degree programmes. Religious Studies students take religious studies, Asian studies or global philosophies (often in a joint honours combination). The number of students and the proportion of students who identify as BAME in each of these two departments are shown in Table 1.

Of staff teaching the modules reviewed in SSPSSR, 69 per cent were White (determined via their staff profiles), and in Religious Studies, the head of department reported that all teaching staff were White.

The SSPSSR Medway pilot took place in 2018/19, and the two Canterbury projects ran in 2019/20. In both departments, the work was led by an academic member of the university's Student Success Project, based within the relevant school alongside the Information Services Academic Liaison team. BAME student researchers reviewed reading lists, ran focus groups and presented findings.

Reading list review

The project began with a review of reading lists of selected modules. In SSPSSR in Medway, the smaller campus, all 17 Stage 1 undergraduate modules were reviewed. ('Stage' is broadly synonymous with 'year of study', but it is used as a distinct term to allow for such options as part-time study, a year abroad or in industry between Stages 2 and 3, and other interruptions.) In SSPSSR in Canterbury, a much larger campus, ten core large-cohort Stage 1 modules were selected for review, as these were deemed to have the greatest impact on the student experience, along with nine Stage 2 modules. In SECL, all 24 undergraduate modules at all stages in the Department of Religious Studies were reviewed. The SSPSSR student researchers trained the Religious Studies researchers, ensuring consistency of methods in both departments.

The reading lists were analysed by means of desk-based research, where the demographic identity of the author (ethnicity classified as Asian, Black, White, Other or Unknown, and which continent they originated from, where known) was obtained from the public domain, such as academic web pages, social media presence, publishers' web pages, conference/workshop papers or media websites. We acknowledge that there are drawbacks to this method (Schucan Bird and Pitman, 2020). The main concern is the potential for miscategorisation, and indeed the deeply problematic assumptions that may be made in judging someone's identity based on an image, as very few people indicate their self-identification in biographies. This means that we may have made assumptions based on skin colour, and racialised some authors in ways they would not accept. Clearly, this is problematic, and it is a dilemma to be resolved in future work. However, the large number of authors (n = 3,510) included goes some way towards mitigating this problem, because only a small percentage are likely to be miscategorised. From an ethical point of view, we have been careful to point out this limitation whenever we present results of this work, and it is important that this limitation is noted if the method is adopted elsewhere. We acknowledge these issues, but we feel it is nevertheless important to do the work in addressing racial disparities.

Table 1: Number of students and the proportion who identify as one of the BAME categories in each department (Source: Authors, 2022)

Department	Campus	Number of students	Number of BAME students (self-identified)
SSPSSR	Canterbury	875	499 (57%)
SSPSSR	Medway	303	118 (39%)
Religious Studies	Canterbury	110	32 (29%)

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Debriefing: conversations with staff

Following the review, results were presented to module convenors in the form of an infographic for their own modules, with number of authors by ethnicity, geographic location and gender, and the date of publication and format of the items, alongside a presentation led by the student researchers detailing the methods and findings and a set of suggestions for how to diversify the curriculum. Infographics offered a visual medium illustrating the inequities for authors and materials from the Global South. They proved impactful when presenting results visually, as the results were immediately apparent and were used effectively to open dialogue between staff and students in relation to curriculum change. They conveyed the information in a concise, eye-catching way with which staff immediately engaged on receiving their own data. Module convenors were then asked four open-ended questions focusing on their perceptions about the function of their reading lists, challenges in developing a more inclusive curriculum, and ideas for doing so that are sensitive to their cohort.

In SSPSSR Canterbury, five teaching staff who were sent their reading list data agreed to be interviewed. (These interviews were conducted just before the COVID-19 pandemic, so it was very difficult thereafter to arrange further interviews due to the transition to online teaching.) In Religious Studies, we took advantage of the location of the department within a multi-subject school, and we invited all staff (academic, management, professional services and technical, including graduate teaching assistants and fixed-term staff) to take part in interviews. This allowed us to identify themes that are common across disciplines and role types. In total, 84 staff participated from all of the role types listed above, around 75 per cent of the total staff.

A critical reflexive framework was used to construct the interview, with CRT as a theoretical framework for analysis and evaluation. The interviews provided a space for module convenors to discuss their views of sense of belonging of their BAME students, and the practical use of their reading lists. Module convenors were invited to consider their practice and the construction of their reading lists in a non-threatening way, where they questioned their own assumptions and reflected on their actions in relation to diversity in the curriculum.

Student focus groups

The focus groups used the CRT method of storytelling as an analytical tool to interrogate the centrality of race and provide counter narratives (Hylton, 2012; Gillborn et al., 2018b).

The student researchers conducted two focus groups with a total of 16 undergraduate students in SSPSSR (with a total of 19 students that specifically addressed the topic of reading list and curriculum diversity), and two focus groups with a total of 7 students in SECL. Potential respondents were invited to take part in the research through flyers or emails, or were contacted directly by the researchers. Invitations sought students who were undergraduate students studying the reviewed discipline and who self-defined as from a racially minoritised background.

Participants in the focus groups were invited to share their stories and their experiences as people of colour, which CRT holds to be crucially important (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). The focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and then thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The focus groups enabled us to analyse critical concepts introduced by participants in the course of their storytelling in order to develop key themes, such as dominance of White authors, lack of curriculum representation, and feeling marginalised.

Findings and interpretation

In this section, we report findings from each of the three methods separately, blending discussion of relevant literature and interpretation throughout, consistent with CRT approaches that emphasise storytelling (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002).

Reading list review

The findings of the reading list reviews were in line with our hypotheses. Tables 2 and 3 show the number of authors in each school's reading lists by gender and ethnicity. Especially striking is the lack of Black authorship: in Religious Studies, there were just five Black male authors among the 1,655 total items, and not a single Black female author.

Figure 1 presents the proportions of male and female White and BAME authors as a percentage of the whole, while Figure 2 presents the proportions of BAME and White authors as a percentage by gender.

Table 2: Proportion of authors by gender and ethnicity in Religious Studies (Source: Authors, 2022)

	BAME	White	Total (gender)
Female	32 (0.1%)	205 (12%)	237 (12.1%)
Male	138 (8.3%)	1,235 (74%)	1,373 (82.3%)
Total (ethnicity)	170 (8.4%)	1,440 (86%)	

Note: the total number of authors, including those classified as 'other' or 'unknown', is 1,655.

Table 3: Proportion of authors by gender and ethnicity in SSPSSR (Source: Authors, 2022)

	BAME	White	Total (gender)
Female	51 (2.68%)	506 (26.63%)	557 (29.3%)
Male	39 (2%)	1,304 (68.69%)	1,343 (70.7%)
Total (ethnicity)	90 (4.6%)	1,810 (96%)	1,900 (100%)

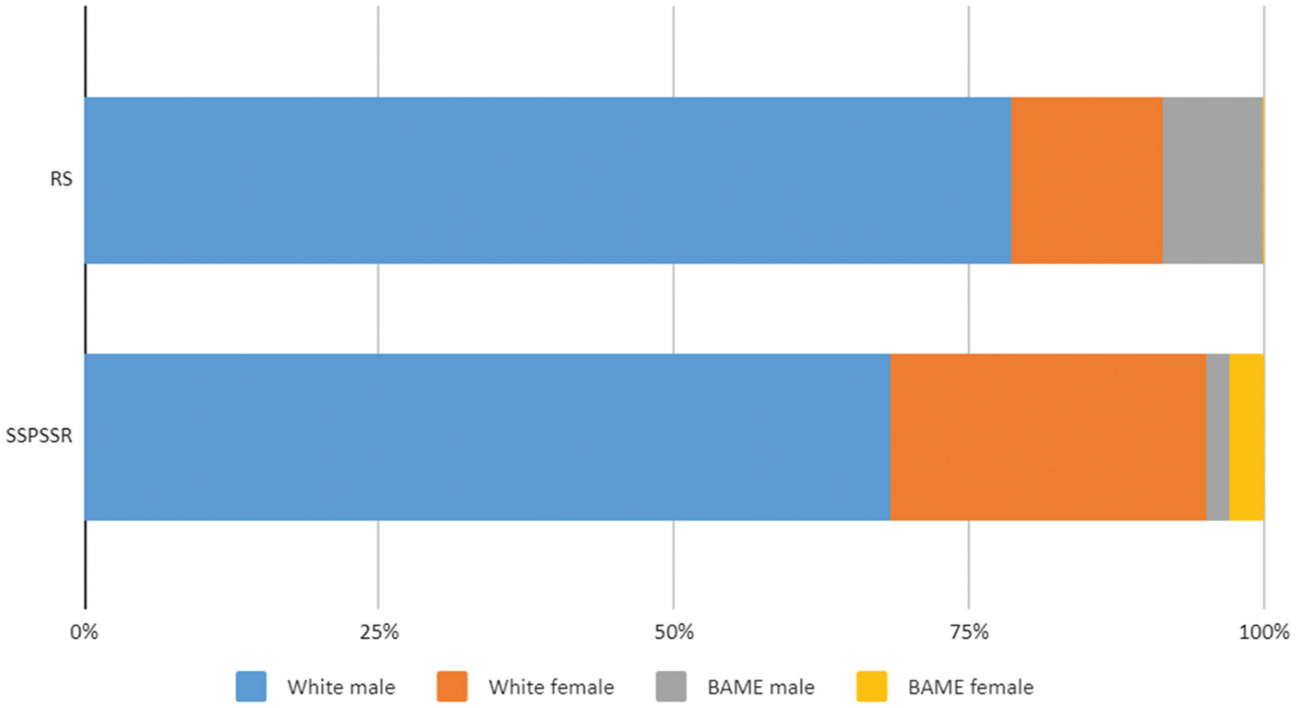

Figure 1: Proportion of authors by gender and ethnicity (Source: Authors, 2022)

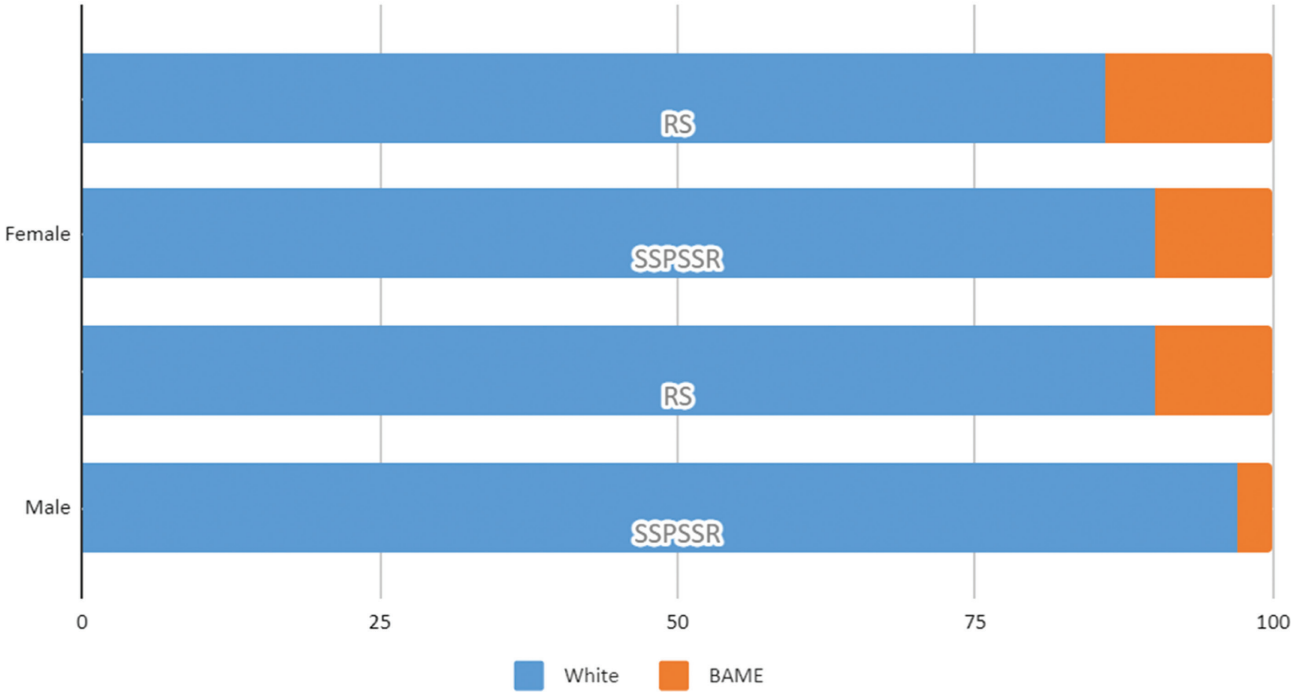

Figure 2: Proportion of White and BAME authors by gender (Source: Authors, 2022)

These proportions of BAME authors are much smaller than the proportion of BAME students, which was 57 per cent in SSPSSR in Canterbury and 29 per cent in Religious Studies. Lower representation of UK BAME authors on the readings lists reflects the 'leaky pipeline' through UK academia, where White students are more likely than their BAME counterparts to gain the degree result needed for postgraduate study, White postgraduates are more likely to complete their course, and White PhD holders are more likely to gain employment (Alexander and Arday, 2015; Arday, 2017). In 2017/18, only 16 per cent of all academic staff with a known ethnicity were BAME (UUK and NUS, 2019). Our findings of 8 per cent and 5 per cent BAME authors on reading lists are therefore a particularly stark example of the more general lack of BAME representation in academia.

The acute under-representation of BAME scholarship suggests that much more needs to be done to improve the demographic diversity of reading lists and curriculum content. Addressing the lack of BAME staff, and providing support for BAME postgraduates and early career researchers, is clearly something for universities to address, but tackling undergraduate reading lists and curricula would help to address the issue from the bottom up, helping to seal the leaky pipeline.

Staff feedback

Awareness of the issue

White identities predominate not only in the curriculum but also in representation of teaching staff. On reflection, most convenors observed that more needed to be done to include more authors of colour in their curriculum. Some had a sense that something was 'not quite right', but they were not sure about the overall effects on the curriculum: 'We know there are issues about engagement with the students. How far is the curriculum the issue?'

Some staff members talked of recent concerns in their subject about gender inequality when they were asked about representation on their reading lists, which may be indicative of the way that diversity is

typically defined very broadly as 'difference', but conceptualised on one dimension (Bell and Hartmann, 2007).

Some staff cited the trope that they include work because of its merit, not because of the author being BAME: 'We look at content, and if it happens to be from a particular community, great. And if it's not, it just doesn't happen to be.' This may reflect the unconscious belief that the work would already be well-known if it was good enough, revealing a lack of understanding of systemic bias in academia. However, for some, when they were presented with their module reading list data, the revelation that their reading list was overwhelmingly – and in some cases exclusively – White and male was a turning point:

> For me, the crux point was back in the autumn when we had the [debriefing] meeting, where all of our reading lists were divulged. And it was very clear just how awful, [with my module at] near 100 per cent male European authors … So it made me teach the module in a different way. So I was really glad about that. (staff member)

Teaching practices

The way in which the curriculum was taught was another key issue tied to reading lists. Module convenors often did not know how to handle discussions about race. Some admitted complacency and felt that they should take more responsibility to listen to their BAME students' counter-stories. One convenor related: 'Staff and students of all backgrounds feel uncomfortable talking about race; there is a feeling of awkwardness. Due to the colonial past there are certain beliefs and feelings that are not explored about empire.' Another lecturer pointed out that, although difficult or offensive topics can be avoided, it would be better to learn how to handle those discussions in class without causing offence or trauma. A convenor in SSPSSR noted:

> You are conscious of your own racial identity, and you are conscious that other people see that, whether you like it or not. It's seen as a learning curve and sometimes you need to lean into your own discomfort. I do think the issue of speaking with authority on things to do with race is something that … You actually have to be very careful about it because it happens too much with people who haven't had that life experience prevaricating about how awful it is. I'm not sure that that's our place really.

Some convenors reflected on the fact that they had been able to include more diverse content, and that when they did, students seized the opportunity:

> Students are writing more about their own social experiences, and understand how to bring the theory and other course materials together and write very good essays. You see that more when they explore race; they do that more because the education system does not explore it well enough.

Other convenors reflected on the way in which they approach the works on the list, explicitly discussing issues of authorship that are not evident from a reading list review, either because they dealt with complex discussions around, for instance, Kant and racial theory, or anti-Semitism, or because the list did not fully represent the range of ideas discussed:

> Those kinds of moments would be really central to some of the agendas. But, of course, they wouldn't show up just in a reading list thing … Sometimes I would talk about this stuff, but I wouldn't actually have the authors represented, you know, I was sort of using a lot of the kind of classic standard authors.

Given academics' discomfort with discussion of race, it may be useful to include explicit dialogue on race in university teacher training, particularly so that White teachers can better understand the everyday experiences of racially minoritised students.

Structural limitations

Convenors pointed to standards within the discipline and how it is defined that act as barriers to change: 'It is typical to find that the curriculum is largely imported from the Euro/American literature, and the publishing industry is largely Anglophile.' It is worth noting, however, that there is a growing body of decolonial literature in both sociology and religious studies which convenors could access. We take up some of these points in the discussion about library services.

Staff highlighted structural issues within UK universities which present barriers and challenges in doing sustainable and effective diversity work. A major factor in making change in HE is the lack of control that many staff face over what they teach, due to a range of limitations. These include the position they hold, planning and resourcing, slow module modification processes and lack of support from the institution.

In large departments, such as SSPSSR, there are over 150 students on a single module, so convenors may rotate or share responsibility. As modules that rotate convenors, or those that are team-taught by staff on short-term contracts, do not 'belong' to anyone, no one has the time or incentive to put in the considerable work of addressing reading lists. Furthermore, short-term planning (for example, hiring on short-term contracts) affects the content of the curriculum and prevents it from being altered to reflect the current social and political narrative (Ahmed, 2018). Staff members' reflections on their need for greater cultural competence cannot be met under these conditions. Similarly, their observations about the much greater extent to which students respond to diverse content are moot without the resources and support to change the curriculum and assessment practices.

Teachers' desire for change therefore will not translate into actual change unless supportive structures are put in place in the institution. Staff recognised that the change needs to be deeper than individual reading lists:

> Including BME authors (or more women, or more disabled authors) is great, but it doesn't change the fact that the university is, historically, an institutionally racist space. Changing institutions is more difficult than adding authors to a reading list and claiming it is inclusive. It requires unseating people at the top, unsettling processes that perpetuate inequalities, and constant agitation and questioning of the status quo.

Student perceptions

Students' reactions highlighted the normativity of whiteness in UK HE. They claimed not to think about the author's gender or ethnicity, but they were surprised when a BAME or female author's identity was revealed to them, suggesting that they assume whiteness and maleness. This White male default reflects their experience of school curricula, which continue to fail to fully incorporate new, diverse histories (Atkinson et al., 2018; Arday, 2018).

No students reported searching for the identity of authors online. Thus, their assumptions of whiteness were perpetuated, even if an author happened to be racially minoritised. Because the ethnicity of authors cannot be determined from their names alone, students agreed that a simple action such as showing a visibly BAME author's image would help to highlight the presence of BAME authors in the field. It appears that this kind of visual showcasing rarely happens.

During the focus group discussion, students were shown images of White and BAME scholars, and they were asked to name as many as they could. They were able to identify White scholars commonly taught from the 'classic texts' (Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim, both of whom are Jewish authors and thus also minoritised, but racialised as White by focus group participants), but they struggled to name any renowned BAME scholars, including Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy. Students reflected on the notion that they are not given the opportunity to learn about even very significant BAME authors. They concluded: 'We need a diversity of perspectives, particularly from scholars of colour and from the Global South, including access to reading lists from around the world.'

When included, BAME (and female) authors tended to be positioned at the end of the course and in separate units on race, rather than being mainstreamed across topics. For example, one convenor was perturbed by the fact that, without really noticing, he had relegated explicit discussion of race and gender to a single week. One student reflected on an optional event about Black British history featuring inspirational speaker Akala as part of Black History Month. He noted that it was attended by many Black students but few White students and said 'I think the most effective way would be to integrate it into my readings, so that everyone can see it.'

It appears that some students are reading between the lines and detecting the silencing of their voices in the curriculum. As one student explained, 'That's why I won't classify myself as a feminist … most of the theories and perspectives are from White feminists, and you can't really say that a Black female has the same experiences as a White female.' This student demonstrated a growing critical consciousness, consistent with the assumptions of CRT according to Ladson-Billings (1998).

Students felt that (lack of) representation on the reading list made a difference to how they saw themselves in their fields of study. One of the student researchers in SSPSSR said: '[This project] has enabled me to see that scholars and academics from around the globe are contributing to research, and this reinforced in me that academic status is attainable for people of colour.' Another student said: 'I do feel like [certain fields] are really gendered or racialised. I think it wouldn't put me off doing [the subject], but it might make me think, would they listen to me?' Our findings align with previous research (for example, Thomas et al., 2008; Pilkington, 2018; Arday and Mirza, 2019; Mahmud and Gagnon, 2020; Campbell et al., 2021) that has shown that increased content focusing on positive racial and cultural reinforcement has a positive impact on BAME students' identity, community and engagement.

In sum, analyses of student views illuminated the need for – and the potential impact of – decolonisation work. Students reinforced the invisibility and marginalisation of BAME authors in their curriculum, as documented in the reading list review. Their comments also suggest that this invisibility contributed to their lack of a sense of belonging in these two subjects. As one student said, 'I can't imagine what their [White students'] educational experience is like, because nothing's come straight to us like that. I feel like it's hard to find a home for yourself, you have to work harder.'

Discussion

Our hypothesis that the reading list sources would be predominantly White, European and male was confirmed. Although the two disciplines in this study lend themselves well to a decolonised curriculum in terms of their focus on postcolonial theory and globalisation, our review of the reading lists in these subjects showed that this was not yet the reality at UoK – a situation common to other UK universities. Reading lists in both schools were populated primarily by authors who are White and male, and overwhelmingly from the UK and USA. Very few authors from the Global South were present, and this was particularly striking in respect to contemporary contributions of BAME authors.

We then found that presenting the results to module convenors raised their awareness of the lack of diversity in their reading lists, which, for some, prompted reflection and a commitment to the difficult work of diversifying their curriculum more broadly. Some staff interviews developed into discussions of how the module content and the texts are critically taught in a more nuanced way than the reading lists imply, and this in turn prompted some staff to consider new ways of presenting their reading lists. However, interviews with staff also highlighted various barriers, including structures within the institution.

Finally, student focus groups and reflections by student researchers suggested that BAME students do not see themselves in the curriculum, reinforcing that the absence of BAME authors on their reading lists translates into an invisibility and marginalisation of race in their fields of study. Some students were more critically aware of these absences than others, such as this student who was able to reflect on the complex interlinking factors leading to the focus on White women in their criminology curriculum:

> So I think for me, it is more to do with how race, power, economic condition interlinks with how the criminal justice system is portrayed, particularly within the media (mainstream media), it does not highlight Black people's issues, and particularly Black women.

The project, then, met its immediate aims of developing collaborative staff–student methods for interrogating the diversity of HE reading lists and gathering empirical data that would support critical conversations about the curriculum. This process can be adopted or adapted by other universities seeking to make their curricula more racially inclusive. As the pilot project was showcased across the institution and beyond, it had a much wider impact across UoK, and it continues to stimulate further efforts to decolonise curricula. Here we reflect on some of the main impacts of the initial project on the institution and the work remaining. We embed considerations about next steps for research and practice within these sections, to inform potential actions for other institutions with similar aims and challenges.

Broader impact across the institution

Diversity mark

The pilot reading list review project has gained national recognition and has led to an institutionally established and funded intervention known as Diversity Mark. The Diversity Mark initiative includes three concepts: library engagement, academic process and curriculum change, with planned outputs and indicators to guide progression. Here we focus on engagement with the academic process and curriculum change. In the next section, we focus on impacts and initiatives within the library. Students are central to the reading list review process and, as in the pilot, they have opportunities to express views through focus groups or equivalent channels, and to suggest and research materials from under-represented authors and perspectives.

Nine schools have so far committed to the Diversity Mark framework. Key prerequisites include space to discuss diversity within reading lists, proportionate increase in diversity of current reading lists and action plans for future practice with implementation timescales. Schools who sign up to the process are expected to oversee and monitor progress and commit to keeping Diversity Mark on their internal education agendas. To avoid an 'othering' experience or 'tick box' exercise, we have found that support to schools should include critical and reflective instruction. At UoK, cross-departmental reading list retreats create spaces to develop staff understanding, share promising practices and create action plans.

Schools are also provided with a Diversity Mark 'toolkit' with guidance for interrogating current practice, considering other perspectives and opening up the debate around the curriculum, including practical ways to approach diversifying reading lists, reviewing internal library collections, and external examples and methods to emulate. Visits to the toolkit since its launch have been steadily increasing internally and externally to UoK. The aim is to crowdsource expertise and knowledge to continue to evolve the toolkit, supporting awareness of bias in reading list curation and positive curriculum change (Adewumi and Mitton, 2021).

Further indicators that academics are engaging with the Diversity Mark initiative include increases in enquiries from staff, training retreats with schools and an increase in diversity of titles in library collections. In the longer term modules that go through a reading list review process and make subsequent changes will gain a Diversity Mark Award, a badge visible via the virtual learning environment. Details of the process of badging and subsequent review of Diversity Mark modules are still being refined.

We are also taking Diversity Mark forward in two further ways. First, we are evaluating the process and impact of diversifying reading lists on students' engagement and attainment in partnership with Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in HE (TASO, n.d.). Second, we are going beyond reading lists to conceptualise and develop measures to interrogate other aspects of curriculum, teaching and assessment practices that could be made more racially inclusive (Campbell et al., 2021; Thomas and Quinlan, 2021).

'See yourself on the shelf'

'See yourself on the shelf' was developed by Information Services at UoK to promote representation in collections. The inclusion of library perspectives on curricular change makes an important and unique contribution to educational literature and practice on decolonising curricula.

As a teaching-focused university, student reading lists drive the library collections at UoK. Diverse reading lists therefore create more diverse collections and enable students of colour to recognise themselves within the collections, which may help them feel empowered and engaged (Museus, 2014). As a student in the focus groups reflected, '[If my modules had a diverse reading list,] I'd take so much pride in my studies and be so happy. I'd just be soaked in my studies.'

Inviting input from students in discussions of sources is important for broadening that scope, as noted by students in focus groups. Engaging students as partners has created space for multiple voices to debate how the curriculum should be experienced. Student partnerships can help to enhance democracy, diversity and decolonisation of reading lists (Gabriel, 2019), and with the right processes in place they can be transformative. Thomas and Jivraj (2020) provide a list of considerations for engaging student partners in decolonising work.

Information professionals regularly guide students in the use of resources and how to structure effective search strategies, but this instruction often lacks the acknowledgement of algorithms in discovery platforms (Noble, 2018) and inherent biases which lead to recommendations of traditional sources over alternative media that feature marginalised voices. More needs to be done to incorporate a critical perspective into information literacy training and education (Stockdale and Sweeney, 2019). These biases built into search system algorithms were a revelation to our student researchers, who had not questioned the dominant voices that prevailed in their search results, again reflecting student perceptions around normativity of whiteness (Agyeman and Konadu-Mensah, 2020). They found that carrying out the reviews of reading lists gave them a sharper focus and agency when undertaking their own research, in line with the ideas of CRT, considering aspects of identity, and geographical and legacy biases of search results.

A key challenge is to disrupt or question the dominance of Eurocentric and Global North perspectives and to look to independent means to diversify collections (Crilly, 2019). Systems and tools that promote discovery of diverse resources is an area in which we are starting to implement change in collaboration with internal and external stakeholders. These conversations have led to enhancements such as tagging collections with indicators of diverse perspectives and visual displays of preselected titles celebrating liberation month themes.

Library staff are interrogating acquisitions work with publishers and suppliers. Common perceived barriers across the information sector are the dominance of Eurocentric and Global North perspectives, and the limited availability of Global South perspectives. We are also examining existing content and reviewing new resources for coverage, reviewing equality, diversity and inclusivity statements and considering the composition of editorial boards and places of publication. These changes to our acquisitions process are in their infancy, but we hope to see further developments and an increase in diversity and representation in collections over time. These steps can be introduced at other universities with similar goals.

Conclusion

We have discussed the development of a process for critically engaging staff and students with reading lists, which provided vital information about the lack of diversity in students' curricula and, in turn, in library collections. A key feature of the initial project and the subsequent Diversity Mark and 'See yourself on the shelf' initiatives is their collaborative nature. Methods of data collection and stakeholder engagement, as well as institutional processes and guidance, were developed in collaboration with students and academic staff working alongside library staff and the university-wide Student Success Project. Our collaborative, cross-disciplinary approach had several benefits: the students exercised agency, it decentred whiteness

in the curriculum, and it contributed towards addressing institutional racial inequalities. Under the banner of Diversity Mark, the initial pilot project has led to embedding of institutional processes and resources. However, its success depends on the recognition of BAME staff and scholars' contributions in disciplines, and the preparedness of academics to reflect on their own subjectivities, cultural competence and positioning in academia to make the curriculum, assessments and pedagogical practices more racially inclusive.

Despite teachers' desire to do the work, and evidence of its importance, interviews with module convenors also emphasised the practical problems faced in putting inclusive ideas into practice (Adewumi and Mitton, 2021). Perennial problems of time to do the work, sustainability, competing priorities and workload recognition persist, and will continue to do so unless the importance of this work is recognised and embedded at a structural level, such as promoting staff members' longer-term sense of ownership of core modules. Thus, these findings emphasise the need to examine not just curricula, but the institutional processes that support or impede curriculum reform. Collaboration with library staff, for example, revealed various systems that need to be reconsidered to diversify reading lists and collections.

CRT is positioned in this reading list review project through its eclectic methodology, theory and epistemological underpinnings, where race remains front and centre in our research. CRT was applied as a framework that explains issues and isolates realities in a way that many critical theories struggle to achieve (Tyson, 2003: 20). We have found it to be a way of expressing students' agency that helps to dismantle dominant Eurocentric ideologies.

The project has begun to unsettle the dominance of whiteness in HE reading lists by prompting academics and students to critically reflect on the content of their curricula and to acknowledge and include scholarship from people of colour, including scholars from the Global South. Much more work remains, however, to decolonise HE curricula.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Ethics statement

The project received ethics approval from the University of Kent Research Ethics Advisory Group.

Consent for publication statement

Written informed consent was obtained from participants for their anonymised information to be published in this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently blind the author during peer review of this article have been made.

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