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Uncovering the Hidden Forces: Student–Staff Co-Inquiry to Decolonise and Diversify the Undergraduate Physics Curriculum

Abstract

Physics claims universality, yet our students showed how “universal” knowledge often speaks with a narrow accent. This project examines what changes when Stage 2 physics students act as co-investigators of curricular change. In 2024–25, within the Research Skills in Physics module, (PHYS5300), five students selected an optional strand Decolonising and Diversifying the Undergraduate Physics Curriculum project and, with light-touch scaffolding on ethics, design, and analysis, led a mixed-methods inquiry into inclusion, representation, and belonging.

Methods combined peer interviews, a survey, and audits of lecture artefacts using inclusion indicators, plus a descriptive snapshot of staff diversity from School-level data. Deductive and inductive analysis surfaced gaps: narrow author representation, limited signposting to diverse physicists and knowledge traditions, and few inclusive-teaching prompts. Outputs comprised a graded report and reflective essay, an oral presentation to peers and staff, and a public website curating resources and profiling under-represented physicists; the project received the 2025 Rob Butler Memorial Award.

Crucially, the work was embedded in routine programme structures, aligning with Access and Participation priorities and keeping students central to inquiry and change. Impacts included stimulated pedagogical reflection among colleagues, cultural signalling via a student-curated “living hub” for representation discourse and strengthened student belonging and leadership validating students as knowledge producers. The model is lightweight and transferable: embed partnership inquiry within existing modules, co-define tractable questions, use rapid methods, and mobilise findings. Attendees will gain insight for diversifying materials without diluting rigour, examples of student-generated knowledge mobilisation, and strategies to align partnership work with APP/EDI priorities.