Diversity or decolonization? Searching for the tools to dismantle the 'master's house'

Aminah Arshad, Rachel Dada, Cath Elliott iD, Iwona Kalinowska, Mehreen Khan, Robert Lipiński, Varun Vassanth, Joseph Bhandal, Monica de Quinto Schneider, Ines Georgis and Fiona Shilston

How to cite this article

Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymized during review.

Copyright

Open access

The *London Review of Education* is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Diversity or decolonization? Searching for the tools to dismantle the 'master's house'

minah A, had, Rachel Dada, Ca h Ellio *, I e a Kalino ka, eh, een Khan, Robe, Lipiń ki, Va, n Va an h, Jo ep, ee Bhandal, onica de Q in o Schneide,, Ine Geo, gi and Fiona Shil on   *UCL, UK*

Abstract

Within the literature on decolonizing the curriculum, a clear distinction is frequently made between diversity and decolonization. While *decolonization* entails dismantling colonial forms of knowledge, including practices that racialize and categorize, *diversity* is a policy discourse that advocates for adding different sorts of people to reading lists and the staff and student body. As a team of staff and students, we are committed to decolonization, but we are also aware that within our discipline of political science, calls for diversity are more likely to be understood and accepted. We therefore bid for, and obtained, funding to conduct a quantitative review of our department's reading lists in order to assess the range not only of authors, but also of topics and ideas. We found that male White authors wrote the majority of the readings, with women of colour authoring just 2.5 per cent of works on our curriculum. Our reading lists also featured disappointingly little theoretical diversity, with very little coverage of feminist, critical race or queer theory approaches, for example. We therefore used the standard methodologies and approaches of our discipline in order to point towards the silences and gaps that a decolonizing approach would seek to remedy. In this article, we explain our approach and ndings. The project has been educational in the best sense and has disrupted hierarchical relationships between staff and students. It has helped us think more deeply about how data and research inform, and sometimes limit, change, as well as how the process of learning about how knowledge, including reading lists, is generated can support decolonization in itself.

Keywords: decolonization, curriculum, diversity, syllabus, reading list

Audre Lorde's (2017: 19) famous statement from 1979 that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' was made in the context of a demand for inclusion of poor, Black, Third World, lesbian and other excluded voices at conferences, and in reading lists and journals. For her, the 'master's house' represents the multiple structures of power and oppression which marginalize and exclude certain people and experiences from the apparatus of knowledge production and dissemination. Forty years later, these demands still have to be made. Students and academics around the world have in recent years been campaigning for a curriculum that challenges the systems that have oppressed and marginalized some students, notably including the Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa and at the University of Oxford in the UK, and the National Union of Students' campaign asking 'Why is my curriculum White?' (Bhambra et al., 2018: 1). These are campaigns that go beyond demands for more diversity and instead want to focus on dismantling the systems, including systems of knowledge production, which exclude and minoritize certain students in the rst place.

*Corresponding author – email: cathy.elliott@ucl.ac.uk

This article is an account of a joint staff–student research project in the Department of Political Science at UCL, UK, where around ve hundred master's students and a similar number of undergraduate students study at any one time. The project treads a slightly uneasy path between demands for straightforward diversity and calls for a deeper transformation associated with challenging the colonial heritage of the university curriculum. The project responds to, and hopes to further, campaigns for decolonization by providing evidence of the gaps, silences and missing voices on our own curriculum and by showing where transformation needs to occur. This was achieved by conducting a content analysis of the current curriculum and producing descriptive statistics to show the problems and exclusions. We went further than similar pieces of research, which have mainly focused on diversity of authors, and instead tried to develop a fuller picture of how far our curriculum needs to be decolonized in terms of the theoretical approaches, topics and examples it contains. However, in doing so, we found that we had tacitly to accept some key premises that we also want to disrupt. This article therefore not only straightforwardly reports our methods and ndings, but also re ects on the usefulness and pitfalls of the research, including the collaborative nature of the work we did together.

We begin by explaining why, and then how, we went about the research, and what we found. We then ask how effective it is to challenge an overwhelmingly White and mainstream curriculum using the standard methods of that same curriculum. In conclusion, we explain that the project's most important contribution is to show how the practical experience of working on such a project can demystify the curriculum and enable students to develop their own critique, beginning the work of decolonization.

Decolonization and diversity in the higher education curriculum

In making her demand for representation, Lorde (2017) is excoriating about the tendency for inclusion to be made contingent on the ability to conform to dominant structures, and insists on differences in experiences and forms of knowledge as a key to making common cause for justice. Movements for decolonization similarly seek to go beyond the call simply for more 'inclusion'. Ideas about inclusion and diversity imply the grudging acceptance of the 'other', while failing to challenge the othering practices inherent to dominant knowledge regimes, which can be traced back to the colonial purposes and histories of the modern university (Albayrak, 2018). While diversity may well be needed to provide opportunities for minoritized students and academics, without structural change, the lives of those 'diverse' scholars can be made intolerably dif cult, working within structures that promise to accept and tolerate them, rather than promoting the critiques that would challenge systematic oppressions and exclusions in the rst place (Begum and Saini, 2019).

We take seriously the view that decolonization cannot be a 'metaphor' for diversity initiatives that leave colonial structures intact (Tuck and Yang, 2012). Rather, it must be a genuine engagement with discovering and challenging those parts of the curriculum that emerge from the colonial project of knowledge which sought to legitimize empire and control the colonized periphery (Bhambra et al., 2018: 5). In this vein, decolonial critiques have focused on the production of positivist knowledge as part of the heritage of colonial knowledge practices. As Dalia Gebrial (2018: 24) puts it, positivist approaches to knowledge appear simply to 'reveal facts … that are worth revealing, in a process removed from power'. If the facts that are worth teaching at university are simply 'out there' waiting to be imparted to students, then it does not

We therefore need to focus on why and how particular questions get asked, how data are gathered and interpreted, and so on (Walter and Andersen, 2016: 10). Not only is Indigenous quantitative research possible, they argue; it has unique advantages in positioning Indigenous researchers as 'knowers' who are able to unsettle the categories that have been used to oppress and erase Indigenous peoples. The Western reverence for numbers and statistics means Indigenous quantitative data cannot be easily rejected, enabling the research to be more effective in achieving positive change. A good example for our purposes is the Decolonising SOAS Working Group (2018: 5), which advocates the use of quantitative data to evidence racialized inequalities in degree attainment and staff seniority.

A decolonial and critical approach to quantification, therefore, pays particular attention at the level of conceptualization. Walter and Suina (2019) note, for example, that it is not good enough simply to add more survey items to a health survey focused on Indigenous deficit, but rather it is necessary to start from an awareness of the constitutive role of statistics, and to develop categories and conceptualizations that are meaningful to Indigenous communities from the outset. We support decolonization, and our project was aimed at opening up our curriculum to alternative knowledge practices. We are therefore committed to an ontology that assumes that statistics are among the practices that constitute reality and can impose racialized deficit narratives on marginalized and minoritized groups (Walter and Suina, 2019: 236). However, in practice, our study took 'gender' and 'race' to be static categories and aimed to produce a standard, 'factual' account of what we study and how. As we go on to discuss below, what is important here is what we learned from this about how the power that shapes everyday acceptance of these categories as 'facts' also shaped our ability to generate and communicate knowledge that might make a difference.

We started out by following in the footsteps of studies that have already used quantitative methods to ask related questions. Pflaeger Young et al. (2020), for example, demonstrate the relative under-representation of women in the discipline of political science in the UK, whereas Maliniak et al. (2013: 889) highlight the gender citation gap in international relations literature. Foster et al. (2013) investigated how many modules dealing with issues of gender and sexuality there were at the 16 'top-ranked' politics departments in the UK, finding that only 12 modules (out of 629) dealt with gender, and just 1 explicitly dealt with sexuality. Hardt et al. (2019) have put together an extensive database of PhD-level political science and international relations syllabuses from the United States, coded by the gender of the author, finding significant under-representation of women. A similar study by Colgan (2017) found that 82 per cent of readings in core graduate international relations syllabuses in the US were by men, although on syllabuses designed by women, this fell a little to 78 per cent. In line with these findings, in the UK, a study of all 2015/16 international relations syllabuses at the London School of Economics at undergraduate, master's and PhD level found that women had written around 20 per cent of the required and background readings assigned (Meibauer et al., 2018). Schucan Bird and Pitman's (2020) study, although small, used coding to compare reading lists in the sciences and social sciences on both gender *and* ethnicity, finding promising results on gender in the social sciences, where women and men were equally represented. However, they found that only 30 per cent of readings in the sciences were authored by women, and the majority of authors (90 per cent in the social sciences and 65 per cent in the sciences) were White. They use these findings to call for both a more representative and decolonized curriculum, but also for more clarity on what a representative or diverse reading list might look like in practice. We respond to that call by suggesting that descriptive representation, or the inclusion of more diverse authors,

will go on to write syllabuses of their own one day, reproducing the core disciplinary knowledge. There are many examples of groundbreaking work, crucial to the intellectual development of the discipline in its time, which were not cited or included in syllabuses, so that they ended up being forgotten or neglected (see, for example, the accounts in Vitalis, 2015; Shilliam, 2021). We therefore took the compulsory readings on our syllabuses as the focus of analysis.

First, we developed a coding scheme and associated set of decision rules. This was done jointly during regular team meetings in the summer term of 2019. We had a fairly good sense already of what we wanted to code for on the basis of prior research and our own theory-driven interests, so we constructed the coding scheme in a concept-driven, deductive way before looking at our data (see Schreier, 2012: 85). We were interested in aspects of diversity beyond authors' characteristics – such as types of topics studied – and in those cases we developed our coding rules from scratch.

After constructing an initial coding scheme, we conducted a pilot: all eight coders used this draft scheme to analyse the same reading list. This allowed us to check whether all coders had the same interpretation of the coding scheme. The reading list was well-known to Cathy, but not to the coders, which enabled some pedagogical input to clarify more complex categories. Any discrepancies were discussed during a team meeting, and coding instructions were made more specific. The resulting coding scheme included 5 sections and 24 variables (see Table 1). The scheme was translated into an Excel spreadsheet, and the non-open questions were programmed to allow only specified values.

For the purposes of this article, the most important variables we coded for each reading were: the gender and race of the author(s); whether or not the topics of race, gender, sexuality or disability were discussed; the geographical location of any case studies or significant examples; and theoretical approach. For papers with multiple authors, each author was categorized by race and gender, and we also coded for their position in the list of authors. Gender and race of authors were inferred from publicly available information including names, pronouns, photographs and interviews, where available (following Schucan Bird and Pitman, 2020). For case studies, we counted those instances when the reading contained a separate section with a geographical example or when the authors referred to examples used as 'case studies'. We coded the geographical location, aggregating to the country level.

The last category, on theoretical approach, requires some discussion. As explained above, it is important for students to be able to critique mainstream knowledge. A significant minority of students consistently report on student evaluations and in staff–student committees that our curriculum in the department is narrow compared to the discipline as a whole, and to what is on offer at other institutions, particularly so far as it enables students to critique or understand alternatives to positivist empirical work and analytical political theory ('analytical political theory' is generally contrasted with 'critical' or 'continental' approaches (see Blau, 2017: 6–7)). Looking at the various working groups and sections of the discipline's professional associations, for example, we find groups dedicated to: Colonial, Postcolonial and Decolonial; Critical Studies on Terrorism; Gendering International Relations; Interpretivism in International Relations; Post-Structural Politics; Marxism; Left Radicalism; Feminist, Post-Colonial, Queerly Interventions and many others (see BISA, n.d.; PSA, n.d.; EISA, 2021). Our hunch was that the theoretical approaches characterized by these groups are not well represented in our reading lists.

There is no incontestable way to capture narrowness of the curriculum, and it was also not our philosophical aim to construct impermeable boundaries between

Table 1: Coding scheme (Source: Authors, 2021)

Section	Variable

Section	Variable	Variable type	Input
Content of the Reading	Main Topic: Race/Ethnicity	Select one	1. Yes 2. No
	Main Topic: Gender	Select one	1. Yes 2. No
	Main Topic: Disability	Select one	1. Yes 2. No
	Main Topic: Sexuality	Select one	1. Yes 2. No
	Methods Used	Select one	1. Quantitative 2. Qualitative 3. Normative 4. Mixed 5. N/A (not applicable or not clear)
	Mainstream Approach	Select one	1. Yes (if the reading uses standard positivist or liberal approach to conduct research) 2. No (if the reading challenges familiar methods and uses non-mainstream approaches, for example: critical race theory, poststructural approaches, Marxist approaches, feminist approaches, queer theory or social model of disability)
	Number of Case Studies	integer	e.g. 2 Assume that a case study is where the authors dedicate an entire section to the discussion of one example or refer to a 'case study' in the text
	Case Study Country	open	e.g. United Kingdom
	Case Study Region	Select one	1. Europe and North America 2. Latin America 3. xt<FFb-SaharentAfa

'mainstream' and 'alternative' knowledges, which is impossible. Rather, we wanted to know whether we would find evidence that students are reading work within a narrow range of approaches, when they would like the option of encountering more theoretically diverse work influenced by thinkers as different as, for example, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Judith Butler, Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, Cynthia Enloe, Frantz Fanon, Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, Linda Tuhiwai Smith or the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation. We therefore defined 'non-mainstream' broadly to include any work that critiqued or went beyond the standard positivist or analytical work, and named critical race, feminist, Marxist, postcolonial, decolonial, queer theory, poststructural approaches and the social model of disability as possible examples. These examples were explicitly named for three main reasons. First, they capture some widely used approaches in the social sciences that have enabled marginalized, minoritized and/or colonized people to analyse and critique practices of exclusion and oppression. Second, they are the sorts of ideas that students in our department tend to mention when they advocate for a more expansive curriculum. Third, it was plausible that we would find *some* readings starting from these approaches on the syllabus, based on our group's personal experiences. Had we found any readings discussing Indigenous statistics or African philosophy, say, we would certainly have placed them in the 'non-mainstream' category, but it was not a surprise that we did not. There were, of course, some borderline cases, such as liberal feminist work, and readings about whether political or economic research can be value-free. In those cases, out of fair-mindedness, we coded these as 'non-mainstream', and therefore our final numbers may overestimate the amount of 'non-mainstream' work we found, at least in the judgement of more radically minded readers.

The coding of 'non-mainstream' work has been controversial. We have been criticized for the fact that the examples of 'alternatives' we identified had little in common and do not form a coherent body of work. It is difficult to respond this, as a diverse range of possible approaches is what we are hoping to show was lacking. We do not know how to look for theoretical diversity in a different way, and this criticism has tended to feel like a way of derailing the conversation, rather than offering practical alternatives. Others worried that we were simply advocating importing ideas from other disciplines, which our students would be welcome to study if only they changed degree and took world literature, say, instead. However, it is important to note that academic disciplines themselves emerge from colonial histories (Shilliam, 2021: 18) and that policing the boundaries between them has in the past served to consign work by important thinkers in political science, such as the Black scholars Alain Locke and Ralph Bunche, from politics departments (where they would be read by future lawmakers) to African American studies departments, where they are appreciated and understood, but confined to the margins (Vitalis, 2015: 13–16). In any case, as discussed above, we are trying to show that work that *is* being done in our discipline is not represented on our reading lists. Finally, some interlocutors said that they did not particularly find anything worthwhile in the alternative approaches we listed or that there were other more useful ways of teaching about race, gender, sexuality, disability and so on. This is clearly a question for academic debate, which we cannot solve here, but which therefore could usefully be the topic of discussion in classrooms. Our aim, then, is to give an empirically grounded sense of the narrowness of our reading lists that may give pause for thought to students and staff who care about theoretical diversity.

We next needed to select an appropriate sample of reading lists to code (Abbott and McKinney, 2013: 319). We considered coding all the department's reading lists, but the pilot showed that this would be too time-consuming. We therefore concentrated

on the department's 28 compulsory modules, because making a module compulsory signals to students that it contains foundational material and also makes the reading for that module mandatory for all students on a programme. The department runs 11 programmes in total, 10 at postgraduate and, in the relevant year, 1 at undergraduate level. Each programme has at least 1 core compulsory module (more for undergraduates), and students also take compulsory research methods modules. Of the compulsory modules, 3 were not coded, either because the reading lists were not available or because they did not specify required academic readings. In total, we

'male/female' gender binary, endeavouring to code all authors as they identify. To the

Conclusion: Finding the right tools

In summer 2020 – about a year after we compiled the original coding – there was a sudden uptick of interest in our project from students and staff in our department. This was related to the Black Lives Matter protests, which brought conversations about the problem of the White and colonial university to public attention. It was useful and strategic to have the data at hand to help us to challenge our department to make a change that will be measurable. The department has now made a commitment to repeat the study in 2021/2, and this signals a desire for things to improve, particularly in terms of diversity of authors and topics. As Sara Ahmed (2012) has argued, 'diversity' is a discourse that people use in order to do things, and some of the things we have managed to do tend in the right direction. We therefore agree with those scholars who suggest that quantitative methods do not have to be the 'master's tools'. It depends on how you use them and what you use them to do.

Yet, while there appears to be a growing acceptance that representation of women and people of colour on the curriculum needs to improve, it has been much more controversial and dif cult to make the case for real decolonization and a wider range of theoretical approaches. This shows, in Audre Lorde's (2017: 110) words again, that 'only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable'. Yet many of us had life-changing experiences when we rst read critical race, feminist, queer or poststructural theories, and we began to understand the processes that simultaneously maintain the ction of objectivity and also produce our own marginalization and exclusion. It is therefore discouraging that our university education limited the knowledges to which we were exposed: we would have liked to have been given the tools to do our own work of dismantling and critique. Yet this change cannot be

Such different gures as Mahmood Mamdani (2019: 17) and Kehinde Andrews (2018) have argued that we cannot abandon the university or lock ourselves out of its resources and opportunities. Rather, they suggest that we must use the privileges it affords to rethink it from the inside or transform it, putting its tools at the service of struggles for liberation. In this vein, Andrews (2018: 139) suggests that 'to truly dismantle the master's house means to overturn and not redeem it … The struggle becomes how to subvert the tools not how to abandon them'. Our project made those tools available to students, not only to use them in of cially sanctioned ways, but also to put them to the work of critique that we hope to have demonstrated here. There is no agreement in our team about whether we want to reform or overturn the university, how thoroughgoing the demolition would be, and what the replacement structure might look like, although recent endeavours to start a Free Black University look to some of us like a promising move.

We were hoping to dismantle homogeneous spaces where 'colleagues notably wince at the term "decolonise"' (Begum and Saini, 2019: 198) and to create an environment in which calls for decolonization are understood and accepted. We wanted this to start with reading lists, so that we could learn about the ideas that have been transformational, as well as seeing more authors who look like us, and learning about the topics that affect our lives. We know that our research is insuf cient to fully enact the change we want to see, and we feel ambiguous about the tools we have used, but not regretful, because doing this work together gave us (at least partly) the education we were longing for.

Ultimately, university classrooms are 'a microcosm of and impetus for broader societal transformation' (Le Grange, 2016: 3). It is only by disrupting the power relations between staff and students so that we can jointly develop and critique the curriculum that we will ultimately dismantle the master's house.

Acknowledgements

Notes on the contributors

Muminah Arshad graduated from UCL, UK, in 2019 with an MSc in Global Governance and Ethics. She was part of the original coding team and also contributed to the writing and research for this article.

Rachel Dada graduated from UCL, UK, in 2019 with an MSc in Public Policy. She was part of the original coding team and also contributed to the writing and research for this article.

Bhambra, G., Gebrial, D. and Nişancıoglu, K. (2018) 'Introduction: Decolonising the university?'. In G. Bhambra, D. Gebrial and K. Nişancıoğlu. (eds), *Decolonising the University.* London: Pluto Press, 1–18.

BISA (British International Studies Association) (n.d.) 'Working groups'. Accessed 25 March 2021. www.bisa.ac.uk/members/working-groups.

Blau, A. (2017) *Methods in Analytical Political Theory.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Butler, J. (2007)

P aeger Young, Z., Amery, F., Holden Bates, S., McKay, S., Miller, C., Billings, T., Hayton, R., Holt, M., Khatri, J., Marvin, M., Ogunsanya, L., Ramdehal, A. and Sullivan, R. (2020) 'Women in the profession: An update on the gender composition of the discipline and political science departments in the UK'. *Political Studies Review*, 19 (1), 12–36. https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929920905503.

Phelps, J.L. (2020) 'The transformative paradigm: Equipping technical communication researchers for socially just work'. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 30 (2), 204–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2020.1803412.

PSA (Political Studies Association) (n.d.) 'Specialist groups'. Accessed 25 March 2021. www.psa.ac.uk/specialist-groups.

Roelof, P. (2020) 'Decolonizing introduction to the practice of politics'. Accessed 2 September 2020. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Ned9zjuDLFTF9i1xHGE2ucSr9AG0yXlEV8M2iM4iWeo/edit.

Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Schreier, M. (2012) *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*. London: Sage.

Schucan Bird, K. and Pitman, L. (2020) 'How diverse is your reading list? Exploring issues of representation and decolonisation in the UK'. *Higher Education*, 79 (2), 903–20. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00446-9.

Shapiro, M. (1989) 'Textualising global politics'. In J. Der Derian and M. Shapiro (eds), *International/Intertextual Relations: Textualising global politics*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 11–22.

Shilliam, R. (2021) *Decolonizing Politics: An introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Tuck, E. and Yang, K.W. (2012) 'Decolonization is not a metaphor'. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, education & society*, 1 (1), 1–40. Accessed 6 May 2021. www.researchgate.net/publication/277992187_Decolonization_Is_Not_a_Metaphor.

Vitalis, R. (2015) *White World Order, Black Power Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Walter, M. and Andersen, C. (2016) *Indigenous Statistics*. London: Routledge.

Walter, M. and Suina, M. (2019) 'Indigenous data, indigenous methodologies and indigenous data sovereignty'. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 22 (3), 233–43. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2018.1531228.

White, K. (2011) 'The sustaining relevance of W.E.B. Du Bois to health disparities research'. *Du Bois Review: Social science research on race*, 8 (1), 285–93. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X11000233.